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The distant eye and the ekphrastic image

Thinking through aesthetics and art for the senses (Western/non-Western)

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Introduction

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, the ideal of (fine) art as the non-utilitarian object of disinterested contemplation developed. Concomitantly, new sites of encounter with art, in the form of public museums and galleries, proliferated. And new ideas of how one ought properly to engage with or attend to art—emerging from flourishing discourses on aesthetics, cognition, and the senses—arose. Two interrelated notions emerging out of these developments, which continue to shape our contemporary modes of engaging with artworks, are particularly pertinent to this study: (1) the conception of artworks as objects rather than things; and (2) the privileging of viewing as the chief means by which we engage with art and, more broadly, aesthetic objects. Both of these ideas are confounded by ancient and non-Western arts (Sonik 2021a) and sensorial systems and experiences (Howes and Classen 2014: 3) that were constituted and regarded within very different ontological, ideological, and material frameworks.¹

The designation of artworks as (our) objects establishes them as belonging to and dependent on us; things, in contrast, may not only be acted upon but also act in and on the world as agents in their own right.² The objectification of artworks (transformed into art *objects*) was further established by the valorisation of viewing as the dominant mode of interaction with art:³ viewing is a distance sense distinct from seeing,⁴ one rendered further remote by an attitude of disinterested interest, a deliberately distant and disembodied form of attention (Guyer 1996).⁵

In its exploration of the senses in relation to aesthetics and art, this chapter begins by exploring the foundations of contemporary Western approaches to these: the intention is to render visible and explicit the ways in which these approaches, some of which seem natural and thus universal, are actually as culturally specific, mediated, contingent, and inculcated as those of other cultures (e.g., Howes and Classen 2014).⁶ They were constructed within the framework of the very specific social, economic,⁷ religious,⁸ scientific,⁹ gendered,¹⁰ and other developments of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.¹¹

Of particular interest is the manner in which the senses and corporeality were diminished and subjugated (cf. Hogarth's 1753 "hedonistic aesthetics"¹²)—tightly controlled and constrained—through the developing discourses of the *science* of sensuous cognition. The eye was singled out for particular attention as the noblest organ of sense, in part because sight (and, to a lesser extent, hearing) was regarded as a distance sense. It was capable of being both physically remote from and "least affected" by what it regarded (Kant 2006 [1798]: 4, § 19). This discussion lays the groundwork for the latter part of the chapter, a consideration of aesthetics and senses that emphasises alternative (e.g., ancient and non-Western) conceptions of the eye and seeing, with a case study from ancient Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia occupied the region of ancient Iraq and northeast Syria. From the late fourth millennium BCE, the world's first urban civilisation arose here, one that has, since its rediscovery by Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, straddled (albeit uneasily) the line between Western and non-Western. Though it was rapidly appropriated into the "story of art"¹³ (de facto Western *art*), Mesopotamia nevertheless occupied, and continues to occupy, an uneasy and marginal(ised) position within this narrative.¹⁴ Its material remains little conform to European conceptions of how art looks and how it should work (or, preferably, not work) in the world. At the same time, Mesopotamia cannot be wholly severed from the Western world or resituated exclusively among non-Western civilisations.¹⁵ Standing in the way are almost two centuries of historiography treating Mesopotamia as Western (or Western enough) and Mesopotamia's own historical connections to Greece and, later, Rome—which, even where they are not themselves characterised as Western, continue to be cast as the foundations of Western civilisation.

In acknowledgement of Mesopotamia's historically and historiographically equivocal position, this chapter does two things: (1) it deliberately examines Mesopotamia's arts and senses within the framework of the Western systems into which they have been appropriated; (2) it casts into high relief the very strangeness, artifice, and incongruity of these same Western systems for the analysis of Mesopotamia's—and other ancient and non-Western—arts and senses.¹⁶

The specific case study from Mesopotamia examined here takes the form of a striking *ekphrasis*, a vivid written description of a masterwork—in this case the (divinely perfected) body of the king Gilgamesh—that illuminates the culturally specific systems of art and aesthetics at work.¹⁷ The *ekphrasis* is selected in preference to any extant visual arts because the latter have frequently been not only fragmented and isolated (decontextualised) from their original cultural frameworks but also appropriated as Western art objects and recontextualised within Western systems of value. The *ekphrasis*, in contrast, offers a vital glimpse into how the inhabitants of Mesopotamia themselves engaged—a strikingly corporeal and sensual engagement—with masterworks and other aesthetic objects.

Confronting the legacy of fine art and disinterested aesthetics

The distant object: constructing the modern system of the arts

The "modern system of the arts," which is rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, came to regard (fine) art as an end in itself.¹⁸ Art, according to this view, was created by original and creative genius (Kristeller 1951; 1952; also Abrams 1985a; 1985b). And it existed "simply in order to be looked at or read or listened to with an absorbed, exclusive, and disinterested attention" (Abrams 1985a: 8). The arts created within this system, variously characterised as art by destination or art by intention (Malraux 1954: 65, 127; Maquet 1986: 18–23; 1979; Errington 1994: 203),¹⁹ were explicitly destined to be displayed in museums and galleries where they could be properly viewed and appreciated. But this system of the arts also came to encompass many

ancient and non-Western (and other) things that were never intended to be art-as-such (Abrams 1985a).²⁰ The “modern system of the arts,” importantly, did not accommodate non-Western or ancient things on their own terms.²¹ Instead, these were assimilated through diverse means that included their display as objects (suitably neutered), allowing them to be viewed with distanced and disinterested attention within institutional contexts like museums and galleries. Such objects have been termed art by metamorphosis or, more apt, art by appropriation (Errington 1994: 203). But the non-Western and ancient things so assimilated were rarely intended as (passive) objects to be (distantly) viewed. Their recontextualisation as objects negates their original roles as agents acting in and on the world.

The process of appropriating, displaying, and regarding ancient and non-Western things as Western-style art objects (by us, the contemporary art-loving public²²) has also changed the things themselves, in ways that range from subtle to savage (Sonik 2021a). These changes encompass (1) physical metamorphoses; (2) transformations in state and transfixions of time and motion; and (3) alterations in context and frame.²³

Physical changes inflicted on ancient and non-Western things to heighten their capacity to serve as collectible and display-worthy art objects include fragmentation or even amputation, of the type undertaken by 1920s dealers of African things, who stripped the latter’s “soft and fibrous parts rendering them starkly ‘modern’ looking and preserving or creating a particular aesthetic” (Errington 1994: 204); the addition of material, as on “restored” or even combined Classical sculptures;²⁴ and the alteration of material properties to lengthen a work’s lifespan, as through the gluing to canvas of (ephemeral) Navajo sand paintings to create Western-style paintings (Foster 1963; Classen and Howes 2006: 214).

Ancient and non-Western things may face, too, changes in state or in their relationships to time and motion: things may, for example, be precluded from showing damage, decay, or visible traces of refurbishment, or they may be materially altered or “restored” to preserve a *seemingly* changeless form.²⁵ They generally undergo also significant alterations in frame, not only through their alienation from their original contexts (in which they may have formed part of larger wholes), but also through their *recontextualisations*, often as isolated and autonomous objects, in very different types of physical (e.g., carefully designed museums and galleries)²⁶ and psychological space (Solso 1994: 101).

Once inside the institutions maintained for the purposes of selecting, displaying, and engaging with art objects, moreover, one is generally limited in one’s sensorial exercise to viewing the objects on display. This is a significant alteration from the types of engagement that occurred in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century collections, in which touch was a vital part of the encounter with the object. It is an even further alteration from the types of (multi)sensorial engagements that occurred in the original cultural contexts of many ancient and non-Western things (e.g., Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik 2015: 13–14, *passim*).²⁷

Touch as a means of engagement appears gradually to have declined when museums opened up to “the masses” rather than being restricted to elite audiences (see Chapter 4, this volume). The general public, encompassing diverse social classes and manners, was regarded as a threat to collections due to their (feared) rough handling or propensity to theft (Classen 2005b: 275–281). Increased public access was thus associated with the diminution of intimate tactile access and the privileging of (remote) viewing.²⁸

In his brilliant 1957 work of speculative fiction, *The Naked Sun*, Isaac Asimov drew a compelling distinction between viewing and seeing. Viewing was elucidated as a detached, unidirectional, and long-distance act. Seeing, in contrast, emerged as a mutual and interactive engagement replete with rich sensual and material possibilities (Asimov 1957: 63):

“You’re viewing me right now. You can’t touch me, can you, or smell me, or anything like that. You could if you were seeing me. Right now, I’m two hundred miles away from you at *least*. So how can it be the same thing?” Baley grew interested. “But I see you with my eyes.” “No, you don’t see me. You see my image. You’re viewing me.”

This was not to belie the seductiveness of viewing; indeed, the potency of the *imagined* access that viewing granted to the object viewed was one of the central conceits of the novel. But Asimov (1957: 260) recognised and asserted the poverty of viewing as a substitute for actual seeing, given the latter’s attendant material and multisensorial possibilities for interaction: “Without the interplay of human against human, the chief interest in life is gone; most of the intellectual values are gone; most of the reason for living is gone. Viewing is no substitute for seeing ... viewing is a long-distance sense.” This is as true for our engagement with things as it is for our engagement with persons (Sonik 2021a).

It is interesting, in light of the above elucidation, to find that it is precisely because of its remote nature that the eye (viewing)—and, to a lesser extent, the ear (hearing)—is most highly valued in some of the seminal works of Western aesthetics.²⁹ More interesting is the degree to which the eye continues to dominate our engagement with institutionalised art. Even when objects in museum and gallery contexts are viewed up close (though the digitisation of collections enables a much greater distance), engagement is deliberately distanced in other ways, as by placing objects behind glass. Distanced (and disinterested) viewing is permitted; other types of physical and sensorial encounter are not (Sonik 2021a).

To understand how the distant (and, more, disinterested) eye gained its prominent place in Western approaches to art and nature, we need to look briefly at key developments in Western aesthetics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—in no little part because they have ineluctably shaped the public institutions where we continue to house, display, and encounter ancient and non-Western things.³⁰

The distant eye: disembodied aesthetics and the denigration of sensual pleasure

Ideas and ideals that developed and circulated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe have indelibly shaped our contemporary (Western) understanding of aesthetics and related concepts like the “aesthetic attitude” and “aesthetic experience”—particularly in relation to the developing modern system of the arts. It is useful, consequently, to briefly interrogate and render explicit some of the ideas *we* might regard as natural and universal, having been thus culturally inculcated, before engaging with artworks and systems of aesthetics that diverge significantly from our own with respect to the roles and value of the senses, cognition, and corporeality.

Concomitant with the rise of the modern system of the arts was the establishment of aesthetics as a significant (Western) philosophical discipline.³¹ The naming of the discipline (in 1735) by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) is often characterised as “an adult baptism,” a nod to the fact that vigorous aesthetic discourse *in practice* even if not in name significantly precedes Baumgarten’s work, traceable at least as far back as to Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Guyer 2007: 353). In his *Aesthetica* (1750–1758), Baumgarten defined “aesthetics” as a combination of two things: (1) the science of sensuous cognition, which ought to be utilised to establish (2) a theory of art.³² But what, precisely, should we understand by “sensuous cognition”—within its original framework and otherwise? This question is inextricably entwined with several others: what specific cultural developments shaped aesthetics as the discipline emerged and developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? What is (and was)

the relationship between aesthetics and the senses? And how might we effectively examine these questions in cultural contexts which neither participate in the philosophical discourses that gave rise to Baumgarten's aesthetics—and, by extension, our own—nor supply their own explicit written discourses on the topic for us to mine?³³

As a starting point, it is important to emphasise the significance of Baumgarten's work, which laid new emphasis on the cognitive value of the senses. This challenged the prevailing Enlightenment era suspicion and denigration of the senses,³⁴ as well as its valorisation of rational cognition. This is not to say that Baumgarten's emphasis on the senses was unprecedented. In France during the preceding seventeenth century, for example, aesthetic formulations of taste "frequently all[ied] it with corporeality and sensibility ... offer[ing] an embodied experience of taste: the sense of beauty and propriety that taste afford[ed], far from surpassing sensuous experience, [wa]s firmly rooted in it" (Koch 2008: 180–181).³⁵ Nor did Baumgarten regard his work as a complete break with the prevailing rationalist system: rather, he regarded the methodical study of the acquisition and expression of sensory knowledge as advancing the cause of rational cognition (Moore 2006: 4; Hammermeister 2002: 3, 7).³⁶

If Baumgarten named the philosophical discipline of aesthetics, it was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) who firmly established its significance in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790)³⁷—and who shaped in vital ways the directions the discipline would subsequently take. But, prior to examining Kant's aesthetics, it is worth observing his assessment of the corporeal senses, as elucidated in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798).³⁸ Kant (1974 [1798]: 46, § 16) divided the five senses on cognitive grounds. Sight, hearing, and touch were ranked as higher senses because he understood them as *objective*, contributing "more to the cognition of the external object than they stir up the consciousness of the affected organ." And of these three, sight was deemed to be the noblest: "it not only has the widest sphere of perception in space, but also its organ feels least affected ... Thus sight comes nearer to being a *pure intuition* (the immediate representation of the given object, without admixture of noticeable sensation)" (Kant 2006 [1798]: 46, § 19). This left taste and smell as the lower subjective senses, contributing "more a representation of *enjoyment* than of cognition of the external object" (Kant 2006 [1798]: 46, § 16). These latter, tellingly, were further diminished as merely of "organic sensation ... like so many external entrances prepared by nature so that the animal can distinguish objects" (Kant 1974 [1798]: 46, § 16; also Kovach 1970).³⁹ This type of diminution of the corporeal and of sensation itself—in favour of the cognitive and spiritual—is evident throughout much of Kant's aesthetics.

Aesthetic judgement, for Kant, was not solely or even primarily concerned with art (though it has played a significant and longstanding role in this sphere) but was focused, rather, on nature (Hammermeister 2002: 21ff.).⁴⁰ It was also to be distinguished from rational judgement, with which it had little in common: Kant regarded aesthetic pleasure, the pleasure we take in beauty (whether in art or nature), as unrelated to insight and cognition (Hammermeister 2002: 28). The universal judgement of taste and the beautiful was indeed contrasted by Kant with the mere "corporeal sensibility and the aesthetic body that supply the gratification and enjoyment of the agreeable" (Koch 2008: 185).⁴¹ Kant further distinguished the pleasure we take in beauty from two additional types of pleasure: (1) the pleasure of the agreeable, and (2) the pleasure we take in the good. Both of these latter are characterised by what might be called "*interested* interest" in the existence of their object. The (wholly subjective) pleasure in the agreeable is associated with a strong interest in the existence of the object because one intends to use the object to satiate one's own desires. Pleasure in the good arguably impels similar interest in the existence of the object because one cannot imagine something good without desiring its existence (Hammermeister 2002: 28–29).

Aesthetic pleasure, in contrast, was characterised by "*disinterested* interest," an absence of desire for the existence of the object, which serves no function—being, rather, an end in

itself: "the pleasure of beauty frees us from all such longings and strivings" (Hammermeister 2002: 29).⁴² In addition to its severance from base human appetites and desires, aesthetic pleasure was also dissociated from mere agreeable sensation: it was regarded as ennobling the mind and elevating "above the mere receptivity to pleasure from sense perceptions" (Kant 1790: § 59; translation from Hammermeister 2002: 38).

The idea of disinterested interest was bound up, in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the conceptualisation of an aesthetic attitude, "a psychologically distinctive state of distanced contemplation" (Davies 2000: 201).⁴³ It denotes a particular state of mind adopted when one contemplates an (art or aesthetic) object, one unmotivated by self-interest, appetites, or desires. The object of one's disinterested interest, according to this concept, does not serve the viewer's ends: it is neither instrumental nor an object of desire. Instead, one attends to the object wholly for its own sake: it is an end in itself. The viewer in this scenario is distanced from his or her base appetites and corporeality, while the thing regarded is stripped of agency and use: it exists to be contemplated as an object—a diminution imperfectly masked by the idea that this is for its own sake.⁴⁴ This idea is both sufficiently striking and sufficiently pervasive in its effects on how we have learned to engage with art that its roots are worth examining more closely. For these, it is worth briefly looking to the works of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), which have been attributed with introducing the concept of disinterestedness into modern moral and aesthetic discourses (Cassirer 1903: 186, 196; Stolnitz 1961: 132; Guyer 2007: 360).⁴⁵

In the early eighteenth century, interest was closely associated with the possession of wealth and a type of mercenary and motivated self-love, which, taken to an extreme, might lead to avarice (Mortensen 1994: 633–634; Cassirer 1903: 195–196). Disinterested action, by way of contrast, was action absent a regard for one's personal benefit—whether in this world or any other (Mortensen 1994: 634). Applied to religion, Shaftesbury wrote that disinterestedness is "teaching the love of God or virtue for God or virtue's sake," uncompelled by servile or mercenary motive (Shaftesbury 1900b: 55).⁴⁶ Elsewhere, in a discussion of nature, Shaftesbury repudiated "covetous fancy," advocating instead a type of "pure contemplation of nature ... an '*amor non mercenarius*' (nonmercenary love)" (Cassirer 1903: 195–196). In other words, Shaftesbury was arguing that a distinction could be drawn between the sensually gratifying desire to possess and the non-sensuous and rational appreciation of beauty (Mortensen 1994: 638). It is the capacity for the latter that would come to be regarded as a defining feature of human beings; this is in opposition to the appetites and instincts driving (non-human) animals (von Mücke 2015: 3, 27–28). The religious aspects of disinterested interest as it emerged in Shaftesbury's work are clearly intimated here.

Within the realm of everyday life and popular religion, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were also witness to the rise of specific practices of attention and observation. Aimed at training the mental and emotional faculties, with the goal of achieving the spiritual development of the believer, such practices rendered this period fertile ground for the establishment of disinterested interest in philosophical aesthetics. In particular, von Mücke (2015: 6) has argued persuasively for the cultural influence of Johann Arndt's popular devotional guide on *True Christianity*, first published in 1605 and followed by multiple editions in different languages throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁷ She sees the influence of this illustrated guide as encouraging "the actual practice of attending to the human capacity of pleasurably experiencing a disinterested interest ... a particular kind of pleasure that is different from the gratification of the senses" (von Mücke 2015: 6). In undertaking the spiritual and meditative exercises in the guide, Arndt's many readers were trained in the type of observational and contemplative practice that would come to be bound up in aesthetic experience, attitude, and practice in the later

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (von Mücke 2015: 10–11, 19–20). These practices and ideas would prove foundational in the shaping of public museums and galleries in their contemporary and culturally specific form as sites for the distanced viewing, disinterested aesthetic contemplation, and even “worship” (Gell 1998: 97) of the objects therein. Such objects, from the beginning, included things appropriated from ancient and non-Western contexts.

The foundations of (Western) aesthetics are by no means limited to the contributions briefly considered here.⁴⁸ But the above discussion illuminates the degree to which the “science of sensuous cognition,” while foregrounding some of the senses in some ways (e.g., sight), has also explicitly derogated other sensory and corporeal experiences (i.e., interest, feeling, passion, desire). Moreover, it reveals the culturally and temporally specific social and religious developments that impelled this diminution. And yet many of these ideas *continue* to pervade our contemporary Western engagement with art, as well as our broader understanding of aesthetics in relation to the body and the senses: as Paige (2014: 170) has observed, “since Kant and Hegel, aesthetic appreciation, disinterested and spiritualised, has been construed as the very opposite of bodily experience; art for the senses might as well be pornography.”

It is important to render the above-outlined ideas and their roots visible—so that we may be aware of our own pre- and misconceptions. But this exercise also makes clear that there is no reason we should understand these ideas as natural or universal—or inherently applicable or appropriate to any other cultural context. The discussion below turns to a non-Western case study from ancient Mesopotamia to examine alternative but equally legitimate ways in which the senses (with an emphasis on seeing), aesthetics, and art might interact.

Ancient and non-Western art and aesthetics: other ways of sensing and seeing

The study of non-Western arts and aesthetics is by now a well-established one with a deep body of scholarship, though much of its academic containment lies not within art history or the philosophical discipline of aesthetics, but within anthropology. Exceptions to this primarily comprise large and literate civilisations like Egypt, which has long been detached from Africa and appropriated into the story of “Western” art and civilisation (O’Connor and Reid 2003), and India, which has a long-established aesthetic discourse of its own (Chaudhury 1965; Pollock 2016; Chakrabarti 2016). Otherwise, much of the vital work of elucidating art that *does* (e.g., Gell 1992; 1998) rather than art that *is*, as well on cross-cultural aesthetics (e.g., Ingold 1996; Morphy 1989; 1992; Coote 1992; Winter 2000, 2002), continues to be based in anthropology. If this state of affairs continues to marginalise the arts and aesthetics of significant parts of the non-Western world, ancient and modern, it has at least permitted the development of vital new approaches to art and aesthetics—and their relationships to the senses—that are less constrained or directed by the assumptions and priorities of Western tradition (e.g., Morphy 1989). The discussion and case study presented below takes as its focus ancient Mesopotamia, which straddles (as outlined above) the various lines drawn between Western and non-Western and which represents, consequently, a particularly interesting case study through which to explore other ways of looking at and thinking about art and aesthetics and the (embodied) senses.

The intimate eye: aesthetics and art for the senses in Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia, as the first known urban civilisation, has been integrated into the narrative of Western civilisation (with particular respect to history and art history) since the mid-nineteenth-century European (re)discovery and excavation of its remarkable material remains

(e.g., Sonik and Kertai forthcoming). And yet, its position within this narrative is both marginal and strained because it is still, in many respects, alien and unfamiliar. Its material remains, no matter how visually striking, were neither constructed within nor participated in the shaping of “the modern system of the arts,”⁴⁹ and they rarely conform to European conceptions of what great art looks like or how it works (or does not) in the world.⁵⁰ To a great extent, the status of Mesopotamia’s material remains as art—rather than mere artifacts—has relied on their transformation into Western-style art objects, neutered and stripped of agency and functionality, and displayed for the viewer’s disinterested aesthetic contemplation in museums (e.g., Sonik 2021a; 2021b). Fortunately, this has not precluded significant work by Near Eastern scholars themselves to re-situate and analyse such things within their original cultural frameworks (e.g., Bahrani 2003; 2008; 2014) or to reconstruct a system of Mesopotamian aesthetics (e.g., Winter 1995; 2000; 2002; 2003; 2012; Selz 2018). While it is beyond the scope of this study to detail in full the Mesopotamian system of aesthetics,⁵¹ I want to highlight and contextualise certain of its aspects as they relate (or do not) to Western aesthetics, to the senses (specifically seeing), and to corporeality.

In an important article on Yolngu aesthetics that laid groundwork for the study of non-Western aesthetics more broadly,⁵² the anthropologist Howard Morphy (1989: 21) confronted the difficulty of defining aesthetics outside of a Western philosophical framework and asserted that “aesthetics is concerned with how something appeals to the senses ... the visual effect [things] have on the person looking at them.” The specific aesthetic effect at issue was that intended by the artist for the original audience. In taking up the topic of aesthetics in Mesopotamia, the art historian Irene Winter (1995; 2002) preferred to speak of “visual affect,” which might be loosely characterised as the capacity to exert force on or elicit a powerful response in the viewer (see further below),⁵³ but similarly explored the ways in which things—masterworks of art, certainly, though this category might include also temples and other buildings, gods, and the bodies of kings (Winter 1996)—appealed to or made a potent impression on the senses. Saliently, Winter engaged with both traditional Western philosophical discourses on aesthetics and anthropological theory focusing on non-Western art and aesthetics, thus reflecting the equivocal status of Mesopotamia itself with respect to the narratives of Western art and civilisation (see also Chapter 10, this volume).

Several points are worth highlighting prior to examining the concluding case study: (1) the (unfortunately marginalised) embodied and sensual aesthetics of the English painter and critic William Hogarth actually offered space within which to accommodate Mesopotamian aesthetics (e.g., Winter 2002: 18–19 *passim*); (2) the extant written sources from Mesopotamia reflect the “necessary role of judgment in aesthetic experience, implying thereby an awareness of the inseparability of cognition from sensation” (Winter 2002: 18); and (3) the extant sources from Mesopotamia also reflect an emphasis on vision, which was associated not only with a “subsequent process of *assessment* through focused viewing” (Winter 2000: 26–27, *emphasis added*; Sonik forthcoming a), but also with cathexis, an “investment of emotional energy” in the object viewed (Winter 1995: 2577; also 2000: 24). The eye, in this case, is neither distanced nor disinterested. It is intimate, engaged, even interested, and the act of seeing something satisfying results in sensory and emotional satisfaction (Winter 2000: 29; 1995: 2577; Sonik 2015: 179–180). In some cases, too, seeing may be synaesthetic.

Certain types of looking, for example, possess a haptic aspect:⁵⁴ they have potent material and/or supernatural force. Images of *en face* monsters with frontal gazes, a common pictorial motif in Mesopotamia, possess a powerful capacity to arrest the attention of (as well as to be alert against and challenge) both human and supernatural threats (Sonik 2013). And some entities in Sumerian literary narratives—like the monster Huwawa in *Gilgamesh and Huwawa A* (GHA 123)

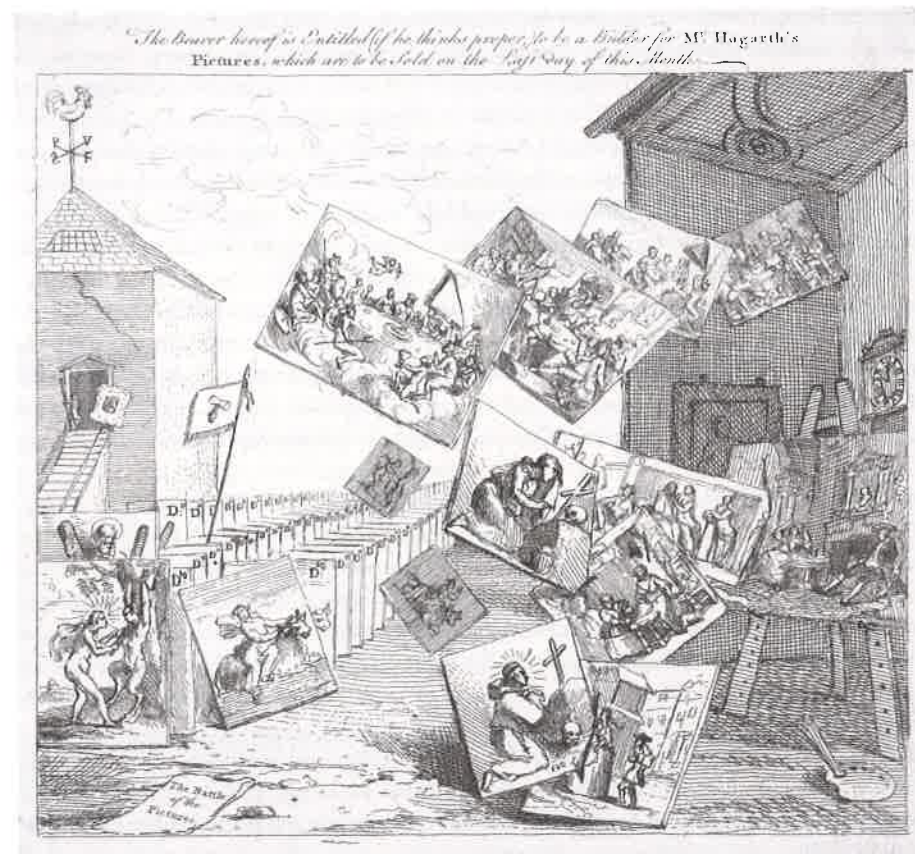


Figure 25.1 William Hogarth, *The Battle of the Pictures*, 1745. Etching and engraving; only state (20.8 × 21.2 centimetres). Commentary on art and aesthetic values, art market and (unethical) auction houses of the age. Hogarth's own paintings emerge from his studio (right) and are attacked and outnumbered by the Old Master paintings it is in fashion to collect. The auction house on the left has a cracked façade; the rows of identical pictures in front represent copies or forgeries.

Source: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

or the Anunna gods and the goddess Inana in *Inana's Descent to the Netherworld* (ID 168, 354)—are capable of levying the “look of death,” *igi mu-ši-in-bar* (Sonik 2013: 299–300).⁵⁵

The discussion above has highlighted the degree to which Western philosophical aesthetics fail to accommodate ancient and non-Western systems such as those of Mesopotamia. Hogarth's (1753) volume *The Analysis of Beauty* represents an exception to this rule (e.g., Winter 2002). It challenged key ideas, including that of “disinterested interest,” that would come to dominate Western philosophical aesthetics (Figures 25.1–25.3). It also offered an unabashedly sensual and embodied aesthetics: Hogarth (1753: 66), in a cheeky tweak of lofty (and purportedly disinterested) philosophical sensibilities, demanded, “Who but a bigot, even to the antiques, will say that he has not seen faces and necks, hands and arms in living women, that even the Grecian Venus doth coarsely imitate?”⁵⁶

Hogarth's work, moreover, offered examples that heavily emphasised not only aspects of human bodies but also mundane objects like corsets and candleholders. The privileging of the



Figure 25.2 William Hogarth, *Time Smoking a Picture*, 1761. Etching and aquatint; third state of three (23.5 × 18.4 centimetres; plate line trimmed away at bottom). Skewers contemporary connoisseurs and the fashion for collecting (“venerable”) Old Masters, regardless of quality. Winged figure of Time sits on broken sculpture whose mutilated head looks out at viewer, and whose severed hand points to Time's darkening varnish. Time himself blows obscuring pipe smoke onto canvas pierced by his scythe. The Greek text above the canvas reads “Time is not a great artist but weakens all he touches.” The text below the broken sculpture reads “As statues moulder into Worth.” Script underlying image reads “To Nature and your Self appeal, / Nor learn of others, what to feel.”

Source: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

human body “as a key site for the communication of meaning” is reflected also in Hogarth's prints and paintings (Figures 25.4 and 25.5), in which the body appears in such diverse roles as bearer of aesthetic and erotic expression and desire; iconic reference to an individual; and “articulation of diverse sexual, social, and cultural identities” (Fort and Rosenthal 2001a: 5). This represented a direct further challenge to prevailing aesthetic thought in that it presented the perception of beauty—residing in diverse and everyday bodies and things—as accessible to the ordinary (untrained) eye (Shiner 2001: 158–159; Erwin 2001: 387).

Hogarth's aesthetics were rapidly marginalised and have not been significantly integrated into the dominant strands of Western philosophical thought.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, they (already in the mid-eighteenth century) reveal the constructed and contingent nature of some of the key tenets of Western philosophical aesthetics. They also force us to confront our own culturally

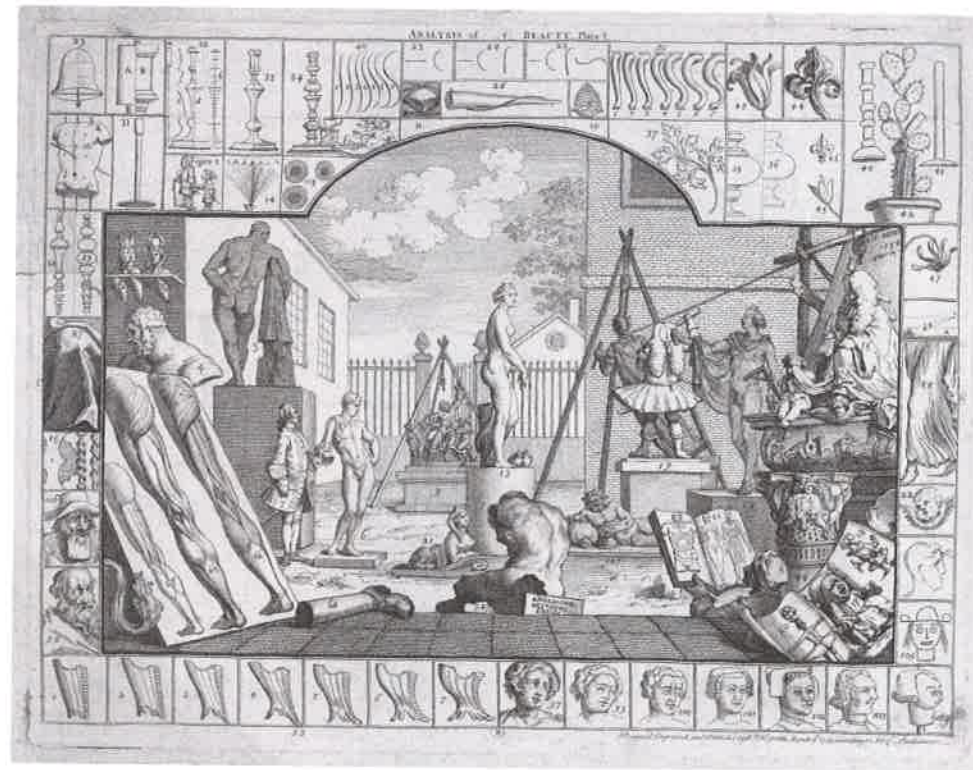


Figure 25.3 William Hogarth, *Analysis of Beauty*, plate 1, March 5, 1753. Etching and engraving; third state of three (39 × 50.5 centimetres). Sculptor's yard, possibly inspired by John Cheere's sculpture yard at Hyde Park Corner, containing varied copies of famous Classical "masterpieces," some mutilated, some whole, juxtaposed with contemporary figures and things: a dancing master (no. 7) propositions the statue of Antinous (no. 6), a boot (no. 68). The overall effect is part grotesque and part absurd, far from the purported dignity and edifying effects of Classical art.

Source: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

inculcated discomfort with sensuality and corporeality. This is a vital step before engaging with Mesopotamian aesthetics, within the framework of which things like the sensual and even explicitly sexualised body—as the perfect(ed) royal body (Winter 1996; Selz 2018)—may represent wholly legitimate, pleasing, and significant aesthetic objects.

In the concluding section below, a dramatic case study elucidating Mesopotamia's sensual and embodied aesthetics is presented. It centres on an *ekphrasis*, a vivid word picture of the body of the legendary king and culture hero, Gilgamesh. The royal body is here illuminated as an aesthetic object or masterwork—even a "made thing" as the king is described in various periods and contexts as physically and otherwise shaped or perfected by the gods (e.g., Winter 1989: 578; 1996: 93; George 1999: xlii; Pongratz-Leisten 2015: 220). But also, and fascinatingly, the royal body's aesthetic and affective properties are deliberately exploited to wage psychological warfare against the enemies of the king and his people. The *ekphrasis* offers, in other words, a vital glimpse into the primary and entangled subjects of this chapter: aesthetics, the senses, and cognition.



Figure 25.4 William Hogarth, *The Laughing Audience*, December 1733. Etching; fourth state of four (22.2 × 18.8 centimetres). Hogarth turns our gaze away from the performers and out to the diverse audience of a theatre production. At the bottom is a row of orchestra performers; behind is the pit, filled with commoners delighting in the performance (one sour-faced fellow in the back may be a critic); above is a private box where two upper-class fops attempt seduction and ignore the performance. The features of individual figures are cannily picked out and the marvellous variety of life in London is set on display.

Source: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The intimate image: ekphrasis and the sensuous (and affective) body

Ekphrasis is, at its most basic level, characterised as the written description of a work of visual art.⁵⁸ But studies of *ekphrasis* in recent decades have significantly expanded the scope of, as well as the array of approaches to, this complex concept,⁵⁹ and *ekphrasis* is here defined more broadly as "speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes" (Webb 2009: 1) in a sophisticated interplay of verbal with visual representation (Francis 2009: 11).⁶⁰ To the study of aesthetics and the senses, *ekphrasis* offers, "even at its most visual—when words grapple to represent images ... evocative resonances of the other senses: sound, smell, taste, and touch" (Bartsch and Elsner 2007: ii). Unlike a stilled and institutionalised art object (e.g., Sonik 2021a), the referent in an *ekphrasis* may reveal something of its movement, agency, and interaction.



Figure 25.5 William Hogarth, *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn*, 1738. Etching and engraving; second state of four (40.3 × 57 centimetres). Protests Walpole's Licensing Act of 1737, which sought to whitewash and censor British theatre. Actresses dressing as Classical goddesses prepare for a performance in a ramshackle setting: the tumultuous circumstances of the actresses are juxtaposed with the notion of the idealised goddesses they are meant to portray.

Source: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The specific *ekphrasis* selected for exploration comes from an early second-millennium BCE narrative, *Gilgamesh and Akka* (GA).⁶¹ This is one of five extant Sumerian narratives, all dating from the Old Babylonian period (c. 2000–1600 BCE), recounting exploits of the Mesopotamian culture hero Gilgamesh, legendary ruler of Uruk.⁶² It describes a conflict between the ancient cities of Kish and Uruk and their respective kings, Akka and Gilgamesh. The framework within which the conflict is analysed yields a new analysis of the nature of the action taking place in the narrative and the means by which the action is driven.

The narrative is a seemingly straightforward one (insofar as any Sumerian narrative may be regarded as straightforward)⁶³ and lacks the explicit mythological elements incorporated into other Gilgamesh narratives.⁶⁴ It opens with the dispatch of envoys from Akka, king of Kish, to Gilgamesh, king of Uruk: Akka demands that Uruk submit to the powerful city of Kish and that Uruk's inhabitants supply Kish with perpetual labour.⁶⁵ Gilgamesh, selecting his words carefully (GA 4), presents Akka's demands to Uruk's elders while indicating that he would strongly prefer battle to quiet submission (GA 8). The elders, with typical caution and, perhaps, an unwillingness to face the harsh ordeals of war, counsel Gilgamesh to accede to Akka's demands.⁶⁶ But Gilgamesh, youthful and vigorous, recoils at this counsel. He seeks out—and finds—the

company of likeminded young men who are as determined as he is to fight rather than submit (GA 18–29). Rejoicing in this likeminded company, Gilgamesh plans for battle (GA 41–47) as Akka marches towards and ultimately besieges Uruk (GA 49).

At this critical juncture, as his city of Uruk is under siege by a presumably superior and dangerous force, Gilgamesh evolves a crafty scheme, one incorporating psychological and aesthetic warfare as well as force of arms (GA 45–46), to defeat the enemy forces of Kish. Gathering his warriors, Gilgamesh lays out his plan to sow fear and confusion among the enemy (GA 43–47). He begins by enlisting an intrepid volunteer (GA 53–57), a royal guard named Birhurthera, to go forth from the city and face abuse and capture by the besieging soldiers *in order* to be taken before the enemy king, Akka (GA 58).⁶⁷ Gilgamesh's strategy seems to turn, in other words, on Birhurthera's deliberate capture by the enemy, which is soon achieved as the latter sallies forth from the city gate (GA 60): Birhurthera is caught by the forces of Kish (GA 61), beaten for his trouble (GA 62), and taken before the enemy king, Akka (GA 63).

The second phase of Gilgamesh's plan is then set in motion. Back inside the walls of Uruk, an anonymous official (*zabardab*) climbs up the city's ramparts and draws Akka's eye (GA 65–67). Akka demands of Birhurthera, whose capture appears to have been planned by Gilgamesh for this purpose, "Save, is that man not your king?" (GA 69; George 1999: 147). Birhurthera scoffs in response, "That man is not my king!" (GA 70; George 1999: 147). Then Birhurthera launches, unprompted, into a remarkable and anticipatory *ekphrasis* (GA 71–81; George 1999: 147):

Were that man my king,
were that his fearsome brow,
were those his bison eyes,
were that his beard of lapis lazuli,
were those his fingers fine,
would a myriad not fall, a myriad not rise,
would a myriad thereby not roll in the dust,
would all the nations thereby not be overwhelmed,
would the mouths of the land thereby not be filled with dust,
would he not cut down the horns of the boat,
would he not make Akka, king of Kish, a prisoner in the heart of his army?

Birhurthera's vivid and dramatic representation of Gilgamesh is critical to the narrative action: it is the point, indeed, on which the action turns.

The *ekphrasis* works on several levels. It encompasses a vivid verbal representation of the body of Gilgamesh that evokes not only the body's sensational nature and aesthetic appeal but also its affective power: Gilgamesh's "fearsome brow," "bison eyes,"⁶⁸ "beard of lapis lazuli,"⁶⁹ and elegant fingers⁷⁰ are bound up with the dread-inspiring aura or *melim* that emanates from him (discussed below). The convergence of aesthetic and affective features is such that the act of looking upon Gilgamesh—to some degree combined with the vigorous fighting of the brave young men of Uruk—will lead the enemy forces to fall, to roll in the dust, to be utterly overwhelmed.

Affects have been cogently characterised by O'Sullivan (2001: 126; 2006: 41–53), drawing on the works of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari, as:

Extra-discursive and extra-textual ... moments of *intensity*, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter. We might even say that affects are *immanent* to matter. They are

certainly immanent to experience. (Following Spinoza, we might define affect as the effect another body, for example an art object, has upon my own body and my body's *duration*.) As such, affects are not to do with knowledge or meaning; indeed, they occur on a different, *asignifying* register.⁷¹

The (affective) body of Gilgamesh viscerally works upon the audience—here both the forces of Kish and us—physically and sensorially and emotionally.⁷² It also, and crucially, works psychologically to create fear and confusion in the enemy. Birhurtherra, by verbally drawing the body of Gilgamesh before the eyes of the enemy through his *ekphrasis*, gives them something to dread (anticipatory anxiety and fear).

The soldiers of Kish respond by beating the insolent Birhurtherra a second time (GA 82–83)—but then the forces of Uruk begin to mobilise. Gilgamesh himself now climbs upon the wall and his *melim* (Akkadian *melammu*) or “terrifying splendour” (GA 84; Katz 1993: 45) envelops his own people, young and old: the able-bodied men are impelled to seize their weapons (GA 84–86) as Gilgamesh's companion, Enkidu, goes fearlessly forth from the gates of Uruk to meet the enemy (GA 88). And Gilgamesh, who stands on the rampart, raises his head. Akka catches sight of him and asks a second time of Birhurtherra (this time, one imagines, in trepidation rather than anticipation): “Slave, is that man your king?” (GA 91; George 1999: 148).⁷³ As the answer is returned in the affirmative, Birhurtherra's full prediction comes to pass: the enemy forces of Kish are cast into the dust and Akka himself is mortifyingly taken prisoner in the midst of his own army (GA 93–99). Victory belongs to Uruk and the narrative ends with Gilgamesh magnanimously freeing Akka in gracious acknowledgement of the latter's prior generosity towards him (GA 100–111).⁷⁴

Within this short and seemingly straightforward narrative, there are a number of interrelated forces at play. There is the aesthetically striking and affective body of Gilgamesh (GA 72–75), which is vividly and deliberately *represented* by Birhurtherra both for Akka and for the composition's audience prior to its actual appearance to the soldiers of Kish. Related, though distinct, is Gilgamesh's *melim/melammu*, his awe-inspiring or terrifying splendour (GA 85).⁷⁵ This *melammu* is a type of radiance in all of the latter term's dimensions.⁷⁶ It is an overwhelming aura that envelops and emanates from (especially) gods and kings⁷⁷—and that is both a source and signifier of their material, affective, and other powers. Aster (2012: 22, 30, 32), who has undertaken extensive study of the concept, describes it in more detail both as an alienable physical object or covering and as a visual and material means of representing abstract concepts like superhuman strength and power. It is capable, moreover, of generating significant psychological and emotional effects, in addition to physical ones, for those who look upon it—it has a haptic aspect.⁷⁸

Radiance generally, and *melammu* more specifically, were taken up by Winter (1995: 2575) in her discussion of Mesopotamian aesthetics: she observed that while “light and luster were viewed as integral components of visual effect, and as such provoked a positive aesthetic response,” additional qualities could also manifest as light but with “such an intensification of brilliance or radiance that the emanation has the power to provoke awe, dread, or terror,” presumably depending on the audience. Within the narrative, Gilgamesh's possession of *melim/melammu* seems to vitalise his soldiers (GA 85) even as it overwhelms both the young and elders of his own city (GA 84) and the enemy soldiers of Kish at his city gates (GA 90–97).

In addition to Birhurtherra's vivid representation of Gilgamesh's body for Akka and Gilgamesh's own deployment of his body and *melim/melammu*, there is Gilgamesh's underlying strategy, which utilises these to their most potent (and ultimately successful) effect to first demoralise and then devastate the enemy forces of Kish. He first uses misdirection to evoke dread in and

confound the reason and judgement of Akka (GA 55–81), and then he uses his own body and aura to instil overwhelming fear in the enemy (GA 89–99).⁷⁹ Gilgamesh's battle strategy in *Gilgamesh and Akka* reflects a nuanced grasp of the psychological and emotional effects of *ekphrasis*, as well as the sensorial, aesthetic, and affective properties of his own body and *melammu*.

Conclusion

There does not survive from Mesopotamia the sort of explicitly reflective philosophical discourse on aesthetics or the body or the senses such as is extant from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe or, for that matter, from ancient Greece. But this is hardly evidence—in the case of Mesopotamia or any other civilisation lacking such written discourses—for a failure to reflect. Indeed, *Gilgamesh and Akka* reveals something not only of a complex embodied and sensual aesthetics but also of a sophisticated understanding of its cognitive and physical effects and implications. It also highlights the *proximity* of the thing viewed—the masterwork of art, the divinely perfected royal body, the temple, the cult statue presencing the god—to the viewer in Mesopotamia: there are no long-distant or distanced or disinterested viewings or contemplations here.

The senses (especially sight), emotions, judgement and cognition, and bodily effects and affects are all intimately entangled. One's own intense looking at a person/thing may, for example, combine with (often very positive) assessment and evoke potent emotional and physical experiences in one's own person. Equally one's looking at a person/thing may also render one defenceless against the aesthetic, affective, and other potent features of that thing. In *Gilgamesh and Akka*, Akka and the enemy soldiers of Kish lay themselves open to the aesthetic and affective power of Gilgamesh (his body plus *melim/melammu*) merely by looking upon him—and the experience is utterly devastating (physically, sensorially, and emotionally): “a myriad did fall, a myriad did rise, / a myriad did thereby roll in the dust, / all the nations were thereby overwhelmed, / the mouths of the land were thereby filled with dust, / he cut down the horns of the boat, / in the midst of his army he [Gilgamesh] took prisoner Akka, king of Kish” (GA 94–99; George 1999: 148).

Notes

1. Though non-Western is used here in the absence of a better term, its shortcomings are numerous: it implies a false homogeneity of the very diverse cultures and things grouped under its rubric; it establishes a false diametric opposition with cultures and things Western; and it asserts the primacy of Westernness as the standard against which all other cultures/persons/things are judged. There is indeed little to recommend it *except* that it is less pejorative a term than others (e.g., primitive) that have been applied to things failing to conform to our contemporary (Western) expectations.
2. The corpus of scholarship on object and thing theory is large and growing, and the diverse definitions of object and thing are growing apace. I have discussed my own position on and definition of these terms extensively elsewhere (e.g., Sonik 2021a; 2021b; also, less programmatically, Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik 2015) and so will not elucidate these terms further here.
3. See, further, on objectification generally, Nussbaum 1995; on objectification with respect to ancient and non-Western things, see Sonik 2021a; 2021b.
4. “Viewing” is here distinguished from “seeing” in the manner articulated by Asimov (1957: 260) more than 60 years ago. His acute consideration of the sensual and sensorial, social, and other implications of remote viewing are particularly apposite to our current age, as we grapple on a worldwide scale not only with a pandemic but also with the consequences of remote viewing, social distancing, and (the attendant) sensory deprivation. See, further, main text below; Sonik 2021a.
5. The concept of disinterestedness, for example, as promoted by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, made virtue, as removed from considerations of profit or interest, the province of the elite, while leaving to the lower orders a religion of interest, that is, of rewards and punishments (Paulson

- 1995: 24): "Shafesbury replaced God with beauty, religion with aesthetics, and ... [showed] that one way of dealing with the God of rewards and punishments was an evacuation of religion and a reconstitution of it as art and, covertly, politics. A consequence was the rise of the new philosophy of aesthetics, which replaced worship of the deity with appreciation of beauty."
6. See, also, the numerous studies on culturally, temporally, and place- and other-specific ways of sensing (with an emphasis on seeing) that have been published over recent decades: for example, as just a small selection, Alpers 1991; Bynum 2006; Eck 1998; Kulvicki 2009; and, particularly relevant to this study, Winter's (2000) seminal study on cathected viewing in Mesopotamia.
 7. See, e.g., the discussion of taste, the virtuoso, and connoisseurship in Abrams 1985a: 15; the common role of works of fine art as "objects of connoisseurship" within the philosophy of aesthetics (Abrams 1985a: 26).
 8. See, e.g., the discussions by von Mücke (2015) of the (religious) contemplative and devotional exercises in which the general public was trained (from the seventeenth century especially), which laid a firm foundation for the types of contemplation bound up in the aesthetic experience and attitude.
 9. See, e.g., Carlson (2000: 3) for the role of British empirical thinkers like Addison and Hutcheson—who, like Kant, regarded nature rather than art as the object of (disinterested) aesthetic experience—in shaping a "mode of aesthetic appreciation that looked upon the natural world with an eye not unlike the distancing, objectifying eye of science."
 10. Classen (2005a: 228) observed that, "no matter how refined ladies' work might be thought ... it never rose above its shared sensory basis with housework. Both were linked with the supposedly lower, feminine senses of touch, taste and smell, rather than with the 'higher,' 'masculine' senses of sight and hearing." See, further, Messer-Davidow 1988; Howes and Classen 2014: 6–7; also Bohls' (1995) important work on women who challenged the founding assumptions of modern aesthetics, e.g., the generic perceiver, disinterested contemplation, and the autonomy of the aesthetic domain, Bohls 1995: 7.
 11. Abrams (1985b: 19), for example, emphasised the recent and radical nature of the ideas of attending to a work of human art "with a 'contemplation' that is 'disinterested,' and 'for its own sake alone'; or to identify the work as an object 'framed apart by itself' and regarded 'as being itself, as end not means'; see also Stolnitz 1961: 131.
 12. This pejorative-sounding designation, appended by Paulson (1995: 178) to describe Hogarth's sensuous and corporeal aesthetics, may be technically accurate (see, e.g., Hogarth 1772: 66) but indicates the degree to which Hogarth lost the aesthetics (and culture) wars.
 13. For the integration of Mesopotamia (Assyria) into nineteenth-century ideas of the great "chain of art" and into Western museums, see Sonik and Kertai forthcoming; Jenkins 1992.
 14. This marginalisation is shared (albeit to a much lesser degree) by Egypt, which was similarly but much more successfully appropriated into the story of Western art.
 15. See, further, Sonik 2021b.
 16. Mesopotamia is both ancient and non-Western, though it is frequently situated as neither: the term "ancient" continues to be used to refer exclusively to the Greco-Roman world and the term "non-Western" sits only uneasily on Mesopotamia's co-opted shoulders. See, further, Sonik 2021b.
 17. Narrative compositions are rarely recognisably depicted in Mesopotamia's visual arts, though scenes of Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying Humbaba are known; for the relationship (and mismatch) between text and image in Mesopotamia, see Sonik 2013; 2014.
 18. For the confrontation of the modern system of the arts with non-Western and ancient art, see, e.g., Errington 1994; 1998; Sonik 2021a.
 19. Fisher (1991: 88) described things made before the invention of the museum—but then appropriated into it—as *naïve* about the fate that post-museum (*self-conscious*) works explicitly address: "The work of the museum—effacing, aggregating, juxtaposing—already goes on inside the work itself. The act of seeing that will make up the consumption of the work by the public is already designed into the work itself ... it is aware of the community of objects and the system of access for which it is intended."
 20. Many Western *things* (e.g., tea services, furniture) on display in museums as art *objects* were also (in part because they were functional) not—in their original contexts—made to be or understood as *fine art*.
 21. The conjunction of non-Western and ancient here does not imply any equivalency between the two terms, and should emphatically not be regarded as implying that the non-Western is fundamentally "primitive"; see, e.g., Layton 1991: 1. Rather, the two categories of arts are discussed together because they address similar problems in their confrontation with the "modern (Western) system of

- the arts"—and because Near Eastern art specifically may be characterised as both ancient and non-Western; see, further, Sonik 2021a; Sonik and Kertai forthcoming.
22. See, further, Sonik 2021a; Gell 1992: 40, 42.
 23. Such changes and their implications are extensively examined in Sonik 2021a.
 24. In some cases, such "restoration" was followed by *de*-restoration in places like post-Second World War Munich and Copenhagen, revealing "surfaces where natural breaks in the ancient marble had been cut smooth in order to accommodate the additions" (Daehner 2011: 47).
 25. E.g., Alpers' (1991: 25) account of a crab as natural history (museum) specimen or "Operation Night Watch" at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum (begun July 8, 2019), the large-scale, technologically supported, and publicly displayed restoration of Rembrandt's 1642 painting, *The Night Watch (Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq)*; further, Sonik 2021a.
 26. For the perception of museums and galleries as temples of art, see, e.g., Wackenroder (1984 [1797]: 201), quoted in Ziolkowski 1987: 373. For the establishment of the rules of museum behaviour, including the most prominent "touch nothing!" and "do not talk loud," see *The Penny Magazine*, April 7, 1832.
 27. Research into the senses in Mesopotamia especially is burgeoning; among recent studies, see Nadali and Pinnock 2020; Hawthorn and Rendu Loisel 2019; McMahon 2013; 2019; Rendu Loisel 2016.
 28. Increasingly, moreover, diverse sensorial modes of engagement, as well as multisensorial simulations, are being provided in the modern museum (e.g., Dudley 2012: 9–10; Classen 2017; also, for historical views and roles of the senses beyond sight, Howes and Classen 2014; the contributions in Pye 2007).
 29. Moore (2006: 13) observes that "sight has always seemed self-evidently the most important and refined" sense in the philosophical history of the senses, and that this was "especially true in the age of reason"; see, further, Howes and Classen 2014: 1–4 *passim*.
 30. For the rise and establishment of the large public and national museums of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the vigorous debates over their forms, organisations, and social and scientific purposes, see, e.g., Sonik and Kertai, forthcoming; Whitehead 2005; McClellan 1994; Jenkins 1992.
 31. The Greek term *aisthanesthai*, from which aesthetics is derived, means "to perceive, sense, feel." Baumgarten named the philosophical discipline "aesthetics" on the first page of his 1735 master's thesis at Halle, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poëma pertinentibus*; see, further, for the framework within which Baumgarten's theory was developed, Grote 2017: 72, 102–146; Moore 2006: 1–2.
 32. The prolegomena to the volume opens with Baumgarten's (1750: § 1) definition of aesthetics: *aesthetica (theoria liberalium artium, gnoscologia inferior, ars pulcre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, "Aesthetics (as the theory of the liberal arts, as inferior cognition, as the art of beautiful thinking and as the art of thinking analogous to reason) is the science of sensual [variously rendered also as sensuous or sensory] cognition"; see Hammermeister 2002: 7; see also Moore 2006: 3, n. 5.
 33. Mesopotamia represents a particularly interesting case in this regard. It lacks the sort of explicit written philosophical discourse on aesthetics that may be attributed to ancient Greece and there are no living representatives of Mesopotamia from whom one might gain insight (e.g., Morphy 1989) in place of these written discourses. But Mesopotamia has left behind an enormous number of written texts of every other sort from which a system of aesthetics may be gleaned; see, e.g., Winter 1995; 2002; Selz 2018.
 34. The denigration of the senses represented another tradition in Western thought reaching back to Plato (Moore 2006: 3). But while this denigration might have a long-running presence in Western thought, it is by no means ubiquitous or unbroken. There is no singular tradition of Western thought stretching from the Classical world to Enlightenment Europe; see, e.g., Koch 2008: 180.
 35. While acknowledging that this stance diverges from formulations like those of Cassirer, Ferry, and Barnouw, which present seventeenth-century French discourses on taste as merely anticipatory to Kantian and post-Kantian aesthetics, Koch (2008: 179–180) argues persuasively that the development of taste is better understood as "a movement from literal taste as a corporal matter, a matter of sensation and correlative affect according to the valence of pleasure and pain, on the one hand, and metaphoric taste, which necessitates normative standards based on qualities of the object of delectation and the disposition of the subject." This transformation pits the corporeal (sensation and affect) against the mind (or spirit), and witnesses the rise of taste as a "normative matter ... that which is verifiable by norms" (Koch 2008: 181).
 36. But see also Gregor (1983: 358–360), who noted that traditional accounts presumed Baumgarten valued aesthetics as chiefly instrumental, a type of handmaiden to logic, while ignoring Baumgarten's own "assertion that his new logic of sense perception has as its end the perfection of sense knowledge *as such*" (Gregor 1983: 360; see also Moore 2006: 4; Herder 2006: 41–50).

37. Many of the notions pertaining to aesthetics disseminated and adapted by Kant did not originate with him; they drew rather on contemporary philosophical and intellectual discourses and ideas.
38. See, further, on the purpose of this work as offering “elements of empirical psychology in the service of pragmatic ends, including living an effective life domestically and in society,” Hatfield 2014: 38. For an explication of Kant’s discussion of the senses, see, e.g., Branco 2017.
39. Though see, among recent reconsiderations of smell and taste in Western aesthetics, Sibley 2001; Brady 2012; also Shiner and Kriskovets 2007.
40. This was likely due in part to Kant’s limited familiarity with the arts; Hammermeister 2002: 24. This limitation is rather striking given his significance to the field of art history; see note 9 above.
41. The comparative demigration of the corporeal as low(er) and primitive, associated with the (non-human) animal, with consumption/appetite, and of pleasures that are “agreeable to the senses” as *merely* agreeable, is a common theme in these early discourses on aesthetics; see also the discussion of Shaftesbury in the main text and notes. This is not to say that counters to these ideas did not exist. Herder, for example, argued that aesthetic response is “the heightened response of various of our senses to their appropriate objects ... [he] reject[ed] the traditional distinction between mind and body, arguing that mind is essentially connected to the bodily organs of sense, as well as rejecting any suggestion that aesthetic pleasures are essentially distinct from the other sources of our happiness and unhappiness” (Guyer 2007: 4), while the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–1797) developed a distinctly embodied aesthetics “affirm[ing] the intimate union of mind and body while claiming that mental contents are ultimately the product of sensations involving bodily effects” (Shusterman 2012: 148). See also recent work on Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) and somaesthetics; see, e.g., Shusterman 2018.
42. In his 1785 *Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten*, the German writer Karl Philipp Moritz (1756–1793) had introduced already the idea of beauty as predicated on non-utilitarianism: “The truly beautiful consists in a thing signifying itself alone, designating itself alone, containing itself alone, in its being a whole accomplished in itself” (Moritz 1962: 113; Todorov 1990: 5). He also articulated the idea of the autonomy of the art object, i.e., art as a self-sufficient totality, an end in itself to be contemplated disinterestedly for its own sake: “If a work of art has as its only reason for being the indication of something external to it, it would become by that very token an accessory; whereas in the case of the beautiful, the work of art is always primary” (Moritz 1962: 113; Todorov 1990: 5); see also Woodmansee 1994: 11. Moritz’ aesthetics have been described as sacralising art and as “displaced theology” (Erlin 2014: 140). Abrams, for example, observes that “Moritz has ‘translocated into discourse about art the religious terminology of the Quietist creed in which he had been brought up’ (1985b: 23; concurring on this point with Woodmansee but cf. Erlin 2014: 140 for a somewhat different view).
43. The aesthetic attitude as a philosophical concept today is limited—it has been described as having “little role in philosophy other than as a dummy set up in aesthetics courses to be knocked down by the onslaughts of George Dickie” (Rind 2002: 68)—but it retains a place in art historical discourse and, arguably, in ongoing approaches to artworks. See, further, on the aesthetic attitude, Langfeld 1920: 44–108; Osborne 1970; Schapiro 1977; Saxena 1978; Stolnitz 1961; 1978; 1984; Kemp 1999; cf. Dickie 1964; Coleman 1979; Snoeyenbos 1979; Carroll 2001: 5–19; Rind 2002. For the aesthetic attitude as a cross-cultural concept (or not), see Hungerland 1957; Bourdieu 1987; Ingold 1996; Cell 1998: 97; Coleman 2005. It is interesting, in light of the very specific economic, religious, gendered, and cultural framework within which the idea of the aesthetic attitude was developed, to see neuroscientists like Chatterjee (2011: 399) explore it as a potentially universal human capacity with “a self-contained reward system” as its neural basis. Chatterjee observes that a distinction has been drawn between liking and wanting (desire) in humans and (other) animals—e.g., Berridge and Kringelbach (2008: 458) have examined liking, “the actual pleasure component or hedonic impact of a reward,” as opposed to *wanting*, characterised as “motivation for reward, which includes both (1) incentive salience ‘wanting’ processes that are not necessarily conscious and (2) conscious desires for incentives or cognitive goals”—and suggests that the neural circuitry for liking is “co-opted within our reward systems, cleaved off related reward systems with clear utilitarian designs of satisfying appetitive desires. Perhaps it developed to allow humans to maintain some distance from the objects of desire and has now come to serve the aesthetic attitude” (Chatterjee 2011: 399). The ongoing entanglement of Western philosophical and art historical notions (which were constructed within particular historical frameworks) with neuroscience within the burgeoning field of neuroaesthetics is striking—and, I think, in need of careful (re-)consideration.

44. This seems to put paid to the ideal of the object “as an end in itself”: such an object demands a subject to attend to it, a point apparent in Ernst Gombrich’s concept of the “beholder’s share,” developing Alois Riegl’s idea of the “beholder’s involvement” (Gombrich 1960); see, further, Kemp 1999: 11. Kant (1790: 90, § 17) himself resolved the (seeming) contradiction of his idea of beautiful objects as an end in themselves with the idea of beautiful objects seeming to be designed for a particular function, namely, to incite pleasure in the viewer, by arguing that “beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, so far as this is perceived in it without any representation of a purpose.” In other words, though the beautiful object may *seem* to exist for our (the viewer’s) pleasure, this perception is *only a seeming*: “the beautiful object does not exist on behalf of its viewer; it is truly independent” (Hammermeister 2002: 32). I am not persuaded this reconciles the contradiction that emerges here.
45. On disinterestedness in Shaftesbury, albeit with particular attention to disengaging Shaftesbury from the concept of the “aesthetic attitude,” see Mortensen 1994: 633; see also Townsend 1982: 206; Rind 2002.
46. Shaftesbury (1900b: 55), writing of disinterested love of God as the “most excellent Principle,” acknowledged that, by “the indiscreet zeal of some devout, well-meaning people it had been stretched too far, perhaps even to extravagance and enthusiasm”; on the other hand, there were those who “had left so little of zeal, affection, or warmth, in what they call their rational religion, as to make them much suspected of their sincerity.”
47. By 1810, Arndt’s work would constitute not one but *Vier Bücher vom Wahren Christentum* (Four Books on True Christianity).
48. E.g., Johann Gottfried Herder’s (1744–1803) critiques of Kant and reconsideration of touch (Guyer 2007; Moore 2006: 14) or Hogarth’s (1697–1764) corporeal and sensual aesthetic theory (see Hogarth 1772; Paulson 1995; Richardson 2003; Costelloe 2013: 63).
49. The arts of Greece (and Rome), of course, did participate in the rise of this system and continue to be valorised for their role in the foundation of Western civilisation—but it is worth observing that the vision of the Classical world that prevailed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries bore a limited relationship to reality. One need only look to the controversy over Owen Jones’ infamous colouring of the Greek court at the Sydenham Crystal Palace (a colouring that was fully justified by the evidence extant even then, as Jones (1854) makes clear in his almost-as-famous “apology”) to get a sense of the degree to which false ideas of ancient Greek art and culture prevailed and, in some quarters, continue to prevail (e.g., Talbot 2018); see, further, Tanner 2006: 15.
50. This is not to diminish the role of Mesopotamian things in inspiring modern artists including Giacometti, Henry Moore, and Picasso (e.g., Evans 2012: 46–75; 2020; Seymour 2020) or its re-envisioning in Victorian Britain (e.g., Kertai 2021; McGeough 2021).
51. For short but foundational studies on Mesopotamian aesthetics, see Winter 1995; 2000; Selz 2018. Numerous other works have touched on or elucidated important related issues (e.g., Thavapalan 2020; Benzel 2015; among many others), such that the task of writing a new Mesopotamian aesthetics will be a book-length project.
52. For a useful review of social anthropological approaches to aesthetics, see Layton 2011.
53. The concept of visual and aesthetic affect in Winter’s work is rather more complex than this brief definition can convey (see, e.g., Winter 2010: xi, as well as Winter 1995; 2000; 2002; 2007), but suffices for the purposes of this study.
54. It may be helpful, as Neis (2013: 134) has done, to distinguish between intromission and extramission (terms drawn from theories of vision) for analyses of seeing in specific cultural frameworks: in the former, the gaze is receptive of visual objects; in the latter, the gaze transmits (e.g., what has been seen) to its object (and potentially changes it thereby). Neis’ particular case study deals with the assumed alteration or shaping of the foetus in response to the forms the mother has gazed upon or imagined in her mind’s eye, theorising impelled by the birth of so-called monstrosities, or at least of children that do not resemble one or both of their parents; for the attribution of this idea back to the Greek philosopher Empedocles (c. 494–434 BCE) and its occurrences into the Renaissance, see, e.g., Huet (1993: 4–6).
55. See GHA 123 (*igi mu-ši-in-bar igi uš₂-a-ka*) and ID 168 (*igi mu-ši-in-bar i-bi₂ uš₂-akam*), 354 (*igi mu-un-ši-in-bar igi uš₂-a-ka*); *ETCSL*. In both cases in ID, the “look of death” is accompanied by “the speech of anger”: looking and speaking together seem to accomplish the goal of terminating the object of the viewing/speaking. The line in GHA is constructed slightly differently: Enkidu describes Huwawa as possessing the “look of death” but Huwawa is not shown using it.
56. This is a direct response to Shaftesbury’s (1900a: 96) doctrine that “the best artists are said to have been indefatigable in studying the best statues: as esteeming them a better rule than the perfectest human bodies could afford”; see, further, Paulson 1995: 29.

57. This is perhaps unsurprising as Hogarth's aesthetics have been characterised as "anticlerical, iconoclastic, empiricist," and as culminating in an aesthetics "not of the ideal but of the flaw or blemish" (Paulson 2003: 173). This accounts, perhaps, for their striking humanity—which is strongly reflected also in Hogarth's artistic works; see, e.g., the contributions in Fort and Rosenthal 2001b.
58. Heffernan's (1991: 299) critical analysis of *ekphrasis*, for example, hews more closely to this definition than recent studies, though it refines it slightly to "the verbal representation of graphic representation."
59. For general studies on *ekphrasis*, see, e.g., Elsner 2007; Goldhill 2007; Francis 2009; Webb 2009; Zeitlin 2013, among many other works. With specific respect to *ekphrasis* in Mesopotamia, see Bahrani 2008: 143–145; Thomason 2004; Winter 2000. More recently, the volume by Johnson and Stavru (2019) offers important new perspectives on Mesopotamian rhetorical practices but also amalgamates (Johnson 2019) *ekphrasis* with concepts encompassed elsewhere by manifestation (e.g., Winter 1992) and presencing (e.g., Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik 2015).
60. This follows the definition taught to students studying rhetoric in the Greek schools of the Roman Empire. Quintilian, citing Cicero, describes it as *sub oculos subiectio*, "laying out the subject before the eyes" (Francis 2009: 2).
61. Editions of GA used include Cooper 1981; Katz 1993; *ETCSL*; also the translation in George 1999 and brief commentary in George 2003: 8–9.
62. These five compositions are *Gilgamesh and Akka* (GA); *Gilgamesh and Huwawa A* (GHA) and *Gilgamesh and Huwawa B* (GHB); *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* (GBH); *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*; and the *Death of Gilgamesh* (DG). As GHA and GHB address the same exploit, Gilgamesh's encounter with the guardian (Huwawa) of the cedar forest, they are counted together.
63. For the history of the translation of this particular narrative, see Cooper 1981: 224–232; Katz 1993: 4–11. For issues in Sumerian "literature" more generally, see, e.g., Rubio 2009. More recently, see Delnero (2020: 21–31), who explicitly queries the degree to which Sumerian literary texts can be effectively analysed as literature. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address these issues in detail but I concur that the Sumerian literary compositions cannot be reduced to their formal features and/or stylistic devices even as I would argue for the ongoing analysis of these, alongside Akkadian literary compositions, as narratives and as literature; see Sonik, forthcoming a; forthcoming b.
64. This led at one time to the understanding of GA as a legitimate historical source for the study of Early Dynastic period (mid-third millennium BCE) Sumerian history (an issue discussed in Katz 1993: 11); such literary narratives are no longer accepted as historical documents (in any period).
65. The text specifically and repeatedly references the finishing of wells, a phrase that has been variously read: Lambert (1980) suggested Kish was demanding not only the submission of Uruk but also (perpetual) servile labour by its inhabitants. Within the context of the composition, this seems a likely interpretation but see, further, Katz 1993: 4; George 1999: 143.
66. The caution of the elders, as well as Gilgamesh's refusal to heed their advice, appears elsewhere in the Gilgamesh narratives as in the Old Babylonian epic (e.g., OB Yale 189–192).
67. George (2003: 8) suggests a different interpretation, namely, that Gilgamesh is asking for a volunteer to challenge Akka to single combat. Given that Gilgamesh and even Enkidu (who is less servant in this narrative than companion) are more likely candidates to be taken seriously as challengers to the king of Kish, such an interpretation seems unlikely unless it is a feint from the beginning—and unless the outcome, Birhurturra's capture and participation in the psychological attack on Akka and his forces, is both foreseen and deliberately intended. GA 57–58, in which Birhurturra volunteers to "go to Akka, / so his good sense is confounded and his judgement undone!" (George 1999: 147), seems to support this latter reading.
68. See note 69 below on bison and bulls. Sensational is here used to evoke both sensation as "embodied feeling" and as dramatic (media) event; Jervis 2015: 3.
69. Winter's (1995: 2574) study on Mesopotamian aesthetics discusses the use of the term for lapis lazuli to denote not the actual stone but rather its "dark luster," which is associated with the stone as a positive attribute. The lapis lazuli beard, moreover, is present in the visual arts from Mesopotamia; the famous Bull's Head Lyre of Ur (c. 2550–2450 BCE), currently in the Penn Museum (B17694B), includes a gold bull's (bison's?) head with a lapis lazuli beard. The designation of bull vs. bison remains somewhat confused and inconsistent in Mesopotamian scholarship: Robson (1999: 39, n. 46) notes the beards on such bull's heads may identify them as "artistic survivals of ... the (by then extinct) bison. Bison bulls are bearded; wild bulls (aurochs), like domestic bulls, are not"; also see Wiggermann 1992: 174–175.
70. *ETCSL* 1.8.1.1 reads "elegant" rather than "fine" fingers (*šu-si sag-ga-ni*), emphasising the role of this passage as aesthetic assessment. Cooper (1981: 237) prefers "beneficent fingers."

71. Affect, in the theory of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is *not* synonymous with personal sentiment or (socially constructed, at least partially) emotion. In his translator's note to the volume, Brian Massumi writes of affect that it does not denote "a personal feeling (*sentiment* in Deleuze and Guattari). *L'affect* (Spinoza's *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepositional intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xvi).
72. See, by way of comparison, Francis' (2009: 16) analysis of the *ekphrasis* of Pandora in Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*.
73. Katz (1993: 45) and Cooper (1981: 237) suggest Akka's second question is posed to Enkidu, who has just emerged from the city gates as Birhurturra did before him. While this is possible, it seems unnecessary; George (1999: 148) and *ETCSL* 1.8.1.1 leave it ambiguous, although George (2003: 9) attributes the affirmative response to Birhurturra. In terms of the dramatic effect of this second question and its affirmative answer, it does not matter whether Birhurturra or Enkidu responds.
74. This may be a matter, if not quite of justice, perhaps of expected fairness under the eye of the Utu, the Sun God (and god of justice). Gilgamesh acknowledges a debt owed to Akka for the latter's provision of refuge and nourishment and, to Akka's request, "[Repay me my favour!]" formally responds, "By Utu, I now repay you the former favour" as he sets Akka free (110–111; Katz 1993: 45).
75. See Aster (2012: 32) on these as equivalent.
76. McMahon (2019: 397), for example, discusses *melammu* within the framework of the propensity in Mesopotamian texts to directly present "cross-connections of aesthetic stimuli. For instance, light and heat merged into 'radiance' (Akkadian *melammu*), too painful to touch and too awesome for direct observation."
77. For its application to other things like temples and cult objects; some monsters; illnesses; weapons; etc., see Aster 2012: 59; also Winter 1994: 126–127.
78. See, further, Aster 2012: 60, 83 for the effects of seeing the *melammu* of a powerful figure.
79. That battle generally is antithetical to reasoned judgement is suggested in this narrative, as good sense in Uruk is immediately, if temporarily, confounded upon Akka's besieging of the city (GA 50).

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