Figure one- Bull-man holding a post. 2000BC-1600BC. The Trustees of the British Museum

Created around 2000BC-1600BC in the Old Babylonian period, figure one is a great example of how art, and in this case a clay plaque, was likely used as a way to communicate social messages which would have been understood by the society of the time and how in the absence of deep symbolism, meaning could still be made[1]. The art form of the plaque itself, the manner in which it was created, and particular figure designed does appear to provide enough reasoning to suggest that whilst the design is not unique or skilled enough to likely provoke any intense reaction upon viewing and therefore ascribe to Gell's theory of agency, it did still provide a purpose[2]. This is because though such a piece could have simply been used for aesthetic purposes, and have no functional purpose further than its appearance, the very inclusion of the bull motif seems to at the very least imply a certain level of communication- even if it is very minimal[3].

Created out of fired clay, the plaque (figure one) details a bull-man holding onto a post with both hands. Minimal detailing is found on the figure's lower half, though the bull features of the legs, hooves and tail are clearly defined by the smooth grooves outlining the figure, giving shape to the non-human form. Only a few incisions are found which provide further detailing to the otherwise clean and flat shape- a couple lines separating the hooves from the legs and a couple more which separate the body from the legs. The upper torso of the figure is equally bereft of detail, though mostly hidden by the arms crossing over the chest and ensuring focus is upon the post being held which is the same height as the figure being portrayed. It is long and thin, but not straight. Its warped form stands at equal height to the bull-man and is capped off with a rounded top which is thicker than its base. From the neck down it is clear that within the creation process, focus was not placed upon this section of the figure, and any further detailing which was included was likely not for purely aesthetic or realism reasons, and were instead to emphasise the separation of various body parts to avoid the figure's features all blending together.

Instead, the face is what holds most detail. Large eyes are placed prominently and centred upon the head, both lids visibly pronounced, and with what appears to be either eyebrows or the crease of the eye finishing the detailing off. The bull theme continues with large and pointed ears flopping either side of the face and level with the eyes. Further detail is once more included, portraying depth to the ear by including a cavity, imitating how it would be in life rather than simply using incisions to provide a suggestion of realism as has been done in the lower section of the body. Lines and indents upon the face give it more life, such as there visibly being the inclusion of cheeks, with a strong beard placed near-awkwardly below the chin. Though seeming almost out of place with it not blending completely into the rest of the face, impressions carved into it give the suggestion of the hair having a curled texture. The figure is then completed with the top of the head covered with a

[1] Sonik, 2014, p.273; Feldman, 2014, p.337
[2] Gell, 1998, p.6
[3] Van Dijk-Coombes, 2018

hat or headdress, the curved, crossing lines giving the idea that it represents some sort of wrapped fabric.

Therefore, when analysing this piece within the context of other plaques found within Mesopotamia, and also considering various theoretical approaches to understanding art, such design choices become very important. This is because when considering whether this plaque could have been used as a form of social communication, it is important to consider what exactly it is trying to communicate. One such thing could be gender as a social identity. Male and female representations upon plaques and figurines are very different, and many commonalities are found which stay consistent within the bounds of gender[4]. Therefore, whilst it is clear that the portrayal of a bull-man is the main motif, it is still helpful to consider what the gender itself shows.

Consistent with the design choices of plaques within Mesopotamia, is the fact that the body of the figure does not contain much detail[5]. With male figures, it is often noted that much of the artist's attention was placed upon the face of the man, alongside whatever it was that he was to be pictured holding[6]. This, as seen within figure one, stays consistent even if the male form is not one which is entirely human. The post, though not as detailed as the face, still heralds more of a unique shape and attention to detail than the simple presentation of the body, and this aligns with popular motifs of the area- especially the bull ears and curved nature of the post[7]. Something which connects the plaque to the similar art form of figurines is also the prominent nature of both the headpiece and beard. These two features are something which characterises figurines of the male form, and it could be an explanation for why the beard on figure one is not as smoothly incorporated as the rest of the features- it was something which was needed but was not something which the artist was proficient at[8]. These expressions of gender, therefore, whilst can not be used to explicitly state the meaning, can be understood as perhaps an idealised conception or a socially accepted representation of the male form[9]. The frequent depictions of the male figures holding items could also be viewed as some form of communication in regards to gender- with how commonly the motif is seen, it certainly seems likely that the reasoning or meaning behind it was something widely understood[10].

Furthermore the feature most obviously prominent about figure one is the fact that though portraying many of the features commonly depicted alongside the male form, it is not a simple depiction of a man. Instead, what is featured is a bull-man. This is especially significant when considering how art can be used as a form of social communication as the motif of a bull is one which is often found within the ancient Near East[11]. The motif of a bull could be a symbol or attribute of a god, which definitely increases the chance that this object served as some form of communication- the use of the motif able to symbolise many things within Mesopotamia such as fertility, storm, power and strength, thereby having many potential meanings depending on the person viewing-[12]. Morphy's theory of inner and outer meanings depending upon the person viewing could also be possible, especially in the sense that it seems reasonable for any form of art to have

[4] Roßberger, 2018, p.530
[5] Roßberger, 2018, p.528
[6] Roßberger, 2018, p.528
[7] Roßberger, 2018, p.528, 530
[8] Roßberger, 2018, p.530; Graff, 2014, p.372
[9] Graff, 2014, p.372
[10] Roßberger, 2018, p.530
[11] Van Dijk-Coombes, 2018
[12] Van Dijk-Coombes, 2018

multiple potential meanings, no matter how generic or similar to popular motifs it is[13]. It could have started as a form of communication, but people would have been able to create their own meaning from that symbol. In fact, figure one, demonstrating a bull-man and nothing else, is a very overt representation of the commonly depicted bull, which ensures that the bull symbolism was very important to the artist. Therefore, whilst this may not be depicting any sort of god in particular, socially, it demonstrates that this symbol was important and therefore to use it, was to communicate something[14]. This, along with the fact that though plaques, due to their nature had common themes, variation in potentially spiritually thematic scenes upon different plaques were varied enough that it can not be said that they were utilised for religious worship[15]. Instead, it may simply just be a way to communicate and enjoy motifs which were important socially, but were not intended to be used for anything more structured.

Communication as an intention behind art is definitely limited, as whilst the artist may have an intended message behind what they create, it is also important to recognise that it's not only the people analysing the art who may come to different conclusions, but also the people living at the time[16]. So, it also seams reasonable to always consider meaning-making alongside any other theoretical framework, as despite the artist's intentions, people will always make what they want of something and Feldman's argument that 'meaning' is not static, and that it shifts with time and person is very convincing[17]. Therefore, whilst social communication was definitely a likely choice behind the creation of such a motif, the picture of the bull and representation of gender being inherently symbolic, also believing that there is a singular interpretation seems incorrect[18]. Instead, the nature of the plaque being one which is commonly reproduced and wide-spread, seems to imply that the object was intended to be viewed and consumed as needed by the viewer[19]. In other words, the person who held it created their own meaning, and as society shifted, the meaning may naturally have shifted also[20]. It seems likely that whilst it does have a message which it wishes to communicate, it is more of a "sign vehicle"- a culturally conventional symbol which is understood in the mind of the interpretant, it was chosen to simply be a message about some of the very basic aspects of the society[21]. Figure one was something which would be very easily understood, and with how commonly both figurines and plaques were, that was likely intentional to not exclude anyone.

Due to the fact that this style of art is rarely transcribed, and that the way in which plaques are created- often mold-made- encourage multiple productions of the same or similar model, it seems further reasonable to assume that it is something which could be easy to either understand or connect to[22]. Such an assumption also comes from the fact that plaques which detail the human (or humanoid) form are often very generic and have many commonalities found between them- such as a "'barbie-doll'-like appearance" for women[23]. This therefore means whilst the artform may be less outwardly impressive than an entirely unique and detailed piece, which could then be used as a form of enchantment, it could indicate that perhaps this object was not intended to be marvelled[24]. It was

[13] Jones, 2006, p.214
[14] Van Dijk-Coombes, 2018; Sonik, 2014, p.273
[15] Sonik, 2014, p.273
[16] Feldman, 2014, p.338, 339
[17] Feldman, 2014, p.337, 339
[18] Roßberger, 2018, p.530; Van Dijk-Coombes, 2018
[19] Graff, 2014, p.372; Roßberger, 2018, p.526
[20] Feldman, 2014, p.338
[21] Jones, 2006, p.224
[22] Sonik, 2014, p.274; Graff, 2014, p.372
[23] Roßberger, 2018, p.527
[24] Gell, 1994, p.43

instead likely intended instead as a more mundane form of communication alongside as being something to own which was more generic but still nice to look at.

This is especially the case when considering the plaque from a purely aesthetic standpoint, as it is possible that it served a dual function- aesthetic communication[25]. This is because whilst it definitely communications aspects about the society, the things that it communicates are commonly understood[26]. Therefore, though it could still serve its role, it is also probable that they are not things that would make people stop to think about. This object could thus simply also be used for aesthetic purposes, and was created to serve that role[27]. The production of plaques providing common motifs could definitely lead to the art having no functional purpose outside of serving as something nice to look at[28]. The figure is definitely created with skill- the smooth outlines and adherence to common motifs making it desirable, though there is also not enough skill demonstrated to consider it technologically perfect, and therefore an object of enchantment[29]. Furthermore, a consequence of such an artform is that with both plaques and figurines, rarely is a primary deposition found[30]. This, whilst unfortunate when attempting to gain an understanding of where and how it may have been used in life, does also give further understanding of how, as an object, it was viewed. A secondary deposition does give the impression that objects such as plaques or figurines were not the type of object to be held with too much reverence, further supporting ideas formed from the fact that both these objects were common and plaques especially less individualised[31]. This is compounded with the fact that most were found in domestic contexts and the plaques, figure one included, did not include any manner in which to attach from the back, meaning they were always likely to not be a permanent fixture[32].

Overall, it is clear that whilst there could definitely be discussion to be made for how social communication was the sole reasoning behind the creation for figure one, it seems more likely for it to have been one of a few. Communication on its own, especially when considered together with meaning-making, can certainly be a large part of how figure one can be analysed- the gender expression and divine connections made with the bull symbolism making connections to social communication obvious[33]. But, it is also necessary to consider that common symbolism could also naturally lead to it's purpose being solely aesthetic. Therefore, whilst communication is definitely present, it was likely not utilised solely for that purpose.

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[25] Iseminger, 2004, P.31
[26] Van Dijk-Coombes, 2018; Sonik, 2014, p.273
[27] Iseminger, 2004, P.31
[28] Iseminger, 2004, P.31; Sonik, 2014, p.273
[29] Iseminger, 2004, P.31; Gell, 1994, p.43
[30] Roßberger, 2018, p.524-525
[31] Roßberger, 2018, p.524-525
[32] Graff, 2014, p.378
[33] Van Dijk-Coombes, 2018; Roßberger, 2018, p.530

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