

Chapter 5

Fickle Gods, Warrior Art, and the Birth of Writing: Mesopotami- an Art

In This Chapter

- ▶ Exploring the skyscrapers of the ancient world
- ▶ Eyeballing Sumerian sculpture and graven images
- ▶ Seeing through propaganda art
- ▶ Reading the first visual narratives
- ▶ Hanging out in Babylon

And Terah took Abram his son . . . and they went forth . . . from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan [modern Lebanon, Palestine, and Israel].
...

—Genesis 11:31

Abraham, the father of the Jewish religion, was an Iraqi — sort of. According to

the Bible, he was born in Ur, one of the world's first cities, which was located in Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq. But in those days, that part of Mesopotamia was called Sumer. So Abraham was actually a Sumerian, or more specifically an Urian (a guy from Ur). Historians don't know when Abraham left Ur, but until about 2334 B.C., Ur was an independent city-state. Sumer was not really a country, but a cluster of city-states, like Ancient Greece. Sumer included Ur, Uruk (Erech in the Bible), Eridu, Larsa, and about eight other cities in southern Mesopotamia. Although linked by culture, religion, and the fact that they shared the world's first written language, the city-states didn't unite for over a thousand years. Nevertheless, Sumerians called their patchwork "country" the "land of the civilized lords," which makes it sound like they had some pretty "uncivilized" neighbors. They also called themselves "the black-headed people."

Sumer was a land of firsts. The Sumerian patriarch Abraham founded *monotheism* (belief

in one God), and the Sumerians invented writing. They also created the first epic poem, *Gilgamesh*, and the earliest codes of laws, the most famous being the Code of Hammurabi. Archeologists even found the oldest wheel in Sumer — it's about 5,500 years old! The Sumerians seem to have made the first potter's wheel, too. What an inventive people.

Mesopotamia, which means "between rivers" in Greek, is bounded by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which fertilize it throughout the year. For this reason, it is also known as the Fertile Crescent. Some archeologists believe that this fertile belt of land, where fruits and grains once flourished in natural abundance, was the biblical Garden of Eden.

Geography was good to Mesopotamia's farmers, but not to its rulers. Unlike Egypt, which is surrounded by natural defenses — deserts on the east and west and the Mediterranean Sea on the north — Mesopotamia had no mountains, deserts, or



oceans to protect it. It was easy to conquer and hard to hold on to. The Sumerians' "uncivilized" neighbors — desert-tough nomadic tribes — must have been irresistibly attracted to this flowering oasis. Power changed hands in Mesopotamia over and over during the 3,000 years in which the pharaohs maintained a fairly steady hold on Egypt. The art of both civilizations tells the story of their governments. Egypt was stable and so was its art, which hardly changed in 3,000 years (see Chapter 6). Mesopotamia's art changed almost as often as its rulers, each conqueror bringing new influences.

In this chapter, I examine the art and architecture of the Sumerians, the Akkadians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and New Babylonians. Although each people had a distinctive style, these styles seemed to grow out of each other like a family tree of art and architecture, and in this chapter, I lay it all out for you.

Climbing toward the Clouds: Sumerian Architecture

Each Sumerian city-state had its local god, who owned and protected the city (a bit like the Greek goddess Athena protected Athens). Priest-kings ran the city-states, acting as the gods' appointed "shepherds of the people." They managed everything from the economy and government to religious affairs. They distributed the food, too, because even people's labor was viewed as god's property.

Zigzagging to Heaven: Ziggurats

And they said, Go to, let us build a city and a tower, whose



top may reach unto heaven. [Description of the building of the Tower of Babel or Tower of Babylon.]

—Genesis 11:4

The Sumerians tried to get physically close to god with their architecture. Because their gods lived in the sky, they built their temples like high-rises. (The same impulse to soar toward God seems to have motivated the architects of the Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages.) Sumerian architects achieved this skyscraper height with *ziggurats*, which look like tiered wedding cakes up to seven layers high. The temple sat on top, close to god. The biblical Tower of Babel (see the following section) was probably a ziggurat.

Because the Sumerians didn't have access to limestone, like the Egyptians, they built their ziggurats, temples, and palaces out of mud brick, which has a much shorter half-life than limestone or granite (the material the

Egyptians used to build the pyramids). As Genesis 11:3 says, "And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar."

Most Sumerian architecture has disappeared, and gauging the original grandeur of it from the ruins left behind is difficult. However, the epic *Gilgamesh* gives a brief description of the glittering beauty of a Sumerian temple in Uruk:

He built Uruk. He built the keeping place Of Anu and Ishtar [Sumerian gods]. The outer wall shines in the sun like brightest copper; the inner wall is beyond the imagining of kings. Study the brickwork, study the fortification; Climb the great ancient staircase to the terrace; Study how it is made; from the terrace see The planted and fallow fields, the ponds and orchards. This is Uruk, the city of Gilgamesh.

[Translated by David Ferry]



Ziggurats included long staircases, ascending from terrace to terrace, climbing toward heaven and the Sumerian pantheon. But only priests were allowed to use the stairs and enter the temple at the top.

All that remains of the ziggurat of King Urnammu of Ur is the first floor, but it's enough to show the impressive architectural and engineering skills of the ancient Sumerians.

The Tower of Babel

Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylon (605 B.C.–562 B.C.), gave ziggurats a bad rap by stealing holy objects from the temple in Jerusalem and housing them in the ziggurat of Babylon. He probably wanted to show that his gods had more power than the Hebrew god did. According to Chronicles II 36:7, “Nebuchadnezzar also carried of the vessels of the house of the Lord to Babylon, and put

them in his temple at Babylon.”

To the captive Jews, Babylon's mountain-high ziggurat must have symbolized Nebuchadnezzar's overweening pride. But in general, the Sumerian and Babylonian peoples built ziggurats to put them in touch with the gods, not to elevate their personal egos.

The Eyes Have It: Scoping Out Sumerian Sculpture

The Sumerians had lots of gods — a sun-god named Shamash; Enlil, the god of the wind; Anu, the king of gods; and Ishtar, the goddess of desire, to name a few. Each city also had a local god who acted as its spokesman in the assembly of the gods, kind of a like a



senator in the United States. As spokesperson, the local god made sure the leading gods (like the god of the sun and the god of floods) granted special privileges to his town. People could petition their local god indirectly (sort of like writing a letter to your senator) by going through the priest-king, or they could do it more directly by commissioning a statue of themselves and placing it in the temple.

Worshipping graven images

Like most gods, Sumerian divinities lived somewhere in the sky or mountains (though of course they didn't have an exact address). They also resided inside their statues in the temples of each city-state. In Sumer, a statue of a god wasn't just a representation, as it was later on in Greece — it *was* the god. Divinities could be in more than one place at a

time.

Statues could also be stand-ins for ordinary citizens. That is, if a Sumerian commissioned a statue, part of him or her took up residence *in* the statue — like a home away from home. For this reason, Sumerians placed statues of themselves in temples where they could interact with the statue of the local god.

Staredown with God: Statuettes from Abu Temple

People placed statues in temples to commune directly with god, as in the Abu Temple statuettes. Are they bug-eyed aliens or did ancient Sumerians really look like this? The statuettes (the tallest is 30 inches high) are called *votive statues*, because they repre-



sented real Sumerians who devoted themselves to, or made a vow to, their local god.

Okay, but why are they bug-eyed? In horror movies, people's eyes bulge cartoonishly when they see a ghost. The ancient Sumerians' eyes popped when they saw a god. Being bug-eyed meant you were devout; it showed that you were awestruck in god's presence and that you couldn't take your eyes off of him or her. Of course, the denizens of Tell Asmar didn't really look like this—though the clothes, beards, and hairdos are certainly on target. Tell Asmar was a small town and their sculptors weren't as polished, so to speak, as big-city artists in Ur and Uruk.



Compare the Abu Temple statuettes to the sensitively rendered mask of a god from Uruk carved approximately a thousand years earlier, about the time the Sumerians invented writing (see Figure 5-1). The mask's eyes were most likely filled with colored stones; the

eyebrows and hair were probably wrought of gold or copper, which is now missing.

Figure 5-1: The female head of a goddess from Uruk was carved between 3,500 B.C. and 3,000 B.C.



Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY





Early Egyptian statues seem squared-off and rectangular (see Chapter 6), but Sumerian statues appear cylindrical. In fact, Sumerian artists based the human body on the cylinder and cone. Conelike skirts flair out on the Abu Temple statuettes, most of which are men. Their legs are cylinders, and their braids look like vacuum-cleaner hoses. Staircaselike beards distinguish most of the men.

Playing Puabi's Lyre

When a Sumerian king or queen died, he or she didn't go to the grave alone. More than 60 soldiers, attendants, and musicians accompanied King Abargi of Ur into the tomb. Some of these grave guests wore helmets

and carried spears to protect the king from any afterlife dangers, others bore musical instruments (including Puabi's Lyre, shown in Figure 5-2) to perform for him, and a few drove wagons, which were pulled by teams of oxen. The oxen's remains were also found in the grave. More than 20 attendants joined Queen Puabi in her nearby tomb, including three soldiers with drawn copper daggers and ten well-dressed women buried in two rows facing each other. Whether these tomb groupies committed mass suicide or soldiers simply slew them, historians don't know. We do know that working for a Sumerian ruler was a demanding job!

Figure 5-2:
The design on the front of Puabi's lyre illustrates four ancient fables.





Plaque from the Lyre from Ur; University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology

The exquisite decoration that adorns Puabi's Lyre shows that Ur artists were master craftsmen. A golden bull's head protrudes from the harp, which stands in for the bull's body. His blue-tipped horns, mat of blue hair, baby blue eyes, and curlicue blue beard are made of lapis lazuli, an azure or deep-

blue gemstone. The closest source of lapis was 2,000 miles away in Afghanistan. Obviously, trade flourished in third-millennium Asia! Under the bull's beard are a strip of animal fables wrought with wood and shell and inlaid in bitumen, a mineral pitch made from coal or oil.

But who is the bull with the blue-tipped horns? In the top fable, a naked macho man hugs two bulls as though they were old school chums. The bulls' faces practically mirror the man's, and their right legs and hooves wrap about his head like parentheses. This image, common in Mesopotamian art, is sometimes called the "Gilgamesh motif." In the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh* (a story about literature's first superhero), Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu wrestle and slay the Bull of Heaven, whose horns are also made of lapis lazuli, like the bull's head on the lyre.

The three other bands under the Gilgamesh motif tell a visual story or perhaps a series of fables invented long before Aesop. A lion,

bear, wolf, deer, donkey, gazelle, and scorpion-man serve food and beverages or play instruments like the humanoid animals in Disney cartoons. Some of these scenes must have seemed comic even then, like the ass playing the lyre or the wolf and lion waiters bearing food and drink for a feast. Ironically, the wolf, who wears a knife in his belt, carries a wolf's head on a platter (it could be one of his cousins), which he apparently just dressed for dinner! We can only guess at the meaning today, ponder what appear to be ironies, and enjoy the craftsmanship of artists who lived four and half millennia before us.

Unraveling the Standard of Ur

The Standard of Ur depicts a Sumerian military victory fought in about 2,600 B.C. The

artist tells the story of the battle and aftermath with inlaid images on three parallel strips on both sides of a wooden box. The front (shown in Figure 5-3) focuses on battle scenes, the back (shown in Figure 5-4) on the peaceful aftermath. The king is the big guy in the middle of the top band (on the war side), examining naked prisoners (one of whom is blindfolded) who file before him. The lower strips show the battle itself. Apparently, this visual narrative should be read from bottom to top, because the battle is in full swing in the bottom register, and the king collects prisoners in the top band.

Figure 5-3: The Standard of Ur, measuring 8 1/2 inches high by 19 1/2 inches long, is a wooden box inlaid with shell, lapis



lazuli, and red limestone. No one knows how it was used. This is the war side.

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Figure 5-4: This is the peace side of the Standard of Ur.



Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY



Notice how the artist overlaps the wild asses (known as *onagers*) pulling the chariots in the top and bottom bands of the war side. And notice how awkwardly he illustrates the dead men trampled by the animals in the bottom

strip.

The peace side (refer to Figure 5-4) depicts what must be an after-the-battle banquet. Reading again from the bottom up, men convey what may be battle booty to the feast. In the middle band, the food-and-gift parade continues. The top strip shows the banquet, people eating and drinking before the king while an entertainer plays a lyre.

Despite all the activity, the Standard of Ur is static, frozen in time. A thousand years later, in northern Mesopotamia, the Assyrians dramatically improved visual narrative, giving it an action-movie feel (see “Unlocking Assyrian Art,” later in this chapter).

Stalking Stone Warriors: Akkadian Art

In about 2334 B.C., a powerful king finally united Mesopotamia. But he wasn't Sumerian. Sargon I, an Akkadian king from an area north of Sumer, conquered Mesopotamia, northern Syria, and possibly part of Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), creating one of the first empires. Now the devout Sumerians had a new kind of leader who put politics before religion. Under Sargon, art became a propaganda tool or another gear in his war machine. He used it to promote his ambitions rather than to honor the gods. Yet Sargon and his Akkadian successors still respected the Sumer religion. Sargon's daughter even became a priestess of Nanna, the moon-god of Ur. But Sargon replaced the Sumerian language with Akkadian. Sumerian culture was on the way out, though it had a brief rebirth before finally fizzling.

An example of Sargon's new art is the Head of an Akkadian ruler from Nineveh. The king is depicted as a godlike but secular ruler (not a shepherd of the people). He appears calm but with a seething battle-ready energy be-

hind his imposing features. The style is similar to Sumerian sculpture. The artist coifed the beard like those of the statuettes of Abu Temple, but the modeling of the face is much more realistic and brilliantly executed, especially the superb contours of the lips and slightly hooked nose.

Stamped in Stone: Hammurabi's Code

The Akkadian Empire lasted about two centuries, until tribes from the northeast overran it in 2112 B.C. Urnammu, the Sumerian king of Ur, which had remained independent, ejected them about 50 years later and reunited Mesopotamia for another century, until a new wave of conquerors swept the Sumerian kings away forever. These centuries of turmoil produced no great art. Finally, in 1792 B.C., Babylon emerged as a

great political and cultural power in southern Mesopotamia, under King Hammurabi, its greatest and most famous ruler. Art and Sumerian culture resurfaced. Hammurabi respected the Sumerian gods so much that he created a code of divinely ordained laws — the first detailed written law code in history — to help carry out their moral commands on earth. He wrote the code in *cuneiform*, the Sumerian script.

Like Moses, Hammurabi claimed to receive his law code directly from god. On the *stele* (a carved or inscribed upright stone slab used as a monument), Hammurabi meets the sun god Shamash, not on his knees like Moses, but standing, eye to eye with god. Under the image, Hammurabi writes a powerful introduction to the laws:

Anu and Bel called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the

wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; so that I should rule over the black-headed people [the Sumerians] like Shamash, and enlighten the land, to further the well-being of mankind.

Hammurabi's law code prevented judges from arbitrarily handing down sentences based on personal bias. Nevertheless, many of the laws seem brutal to modern ears:

- ✓ If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.
- ✓ If any one steal cattle or sheep, or an ass, or a pig or a goat, if it belong to a god or to the court, the thief shall pay thirtyfold; if they belonged to a freed man of the king he shall pay tenfold; if the thief has nothing with which to pay he shall be put to death.
- ✓ If a man knock out the teeth of his

equal, his teeth shall be knocked out [similar to the Hebrew “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” code].

In spite of its occasional severity, Hammurabi’s Code was the beginning of civil rights or, as the U.S. Declaration of Independence calls them, “inalienable rights.” Hammurabi must have known that writing the code in stone would make the laws seem immutable. (The expression “written in stone” derives from this practice.)

Unlocking Assyrian Art

In 1596, about a hundred years after the death of Hammurabi, the Hittites conquered Babylon. They produced no great art. Not long after, the Kassites overran Babylon. About the same time, in northern

Mesopotamia, the brutal Assyrians grew from a city-state called Assur into a vast empire that lasted from about 1363 B.C. to 612 B.C., when the Persians and Scythians overran them. With their iron weapons, they terrorized their neighbors and mercilessly destroyed all challengers.

The Assyrians created a macho art that glorified their rulers and intimidated their enemies. Each Assyrian king built a bigger-than-his-predecessor’s palace to flaunt his power.

Five-legged creatures called *lamassu* (half bull, half man) with mile-long beards guard the gates of the Citadel of Sargon II. The fifth leg makes the creature appear to be striding when viewed from the side, while from the front the lamassu appears to stand firm. More important, to convey their military exploits and staged hunting expeditions (the animals were released from cages and then killed), the Assyrians gave visual narrative an action-movie feel by inventing continuous visual narration. In other words, their



picture stories “read” like a film strip with one event leading dramatically to the next.



To appreciate this Assyrian contribution, compare an Assyrian storytelling relief to the Standard of Ur (refer to Figure 5-3 and Figure 5-4). The victory that the Standard of Ur describes is told in chunks — discrete strips. Not only does the story get stuck at the end of each band, but the events within the band have no dramatic momentum — one action does not propel the next. The Assyrian relief of *King Ashurnasirpal II Killing Lions* (see Figure 5-5) is cinematic and roils with dynamic energy. You can feel the lion’s awesome power as he leaps at the king, and you pity the dying lion under the horses’ hooves who has been shot a few moments earlier. Notice that rank is no longer indicated by physical size (as in the Standard of Ur) but by action.

Figure 5-5:
King Ashurnasirpal II Killing Lions captures the tense action of a lion hunt.



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Babylon Has a Baby: New Babylon

After the Persians and their allies sacked the Assyrian capital Nineveh, Babylon reemerged as the center of Mesopotamian culture. Nabopolassar, a Babylonian general who had sided with the Persians, became the first king of New Babylon. Although the kingdom only lasted for 70 years, its beauty and culture have become legendary, especially as

they flowered under the reign of Nabopolassar's famous son, Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar is best known for a present he supposedly gave his wife: the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the original Wonders of the World. But the Hanging Gardens didn't hang. They were terraced, rooftop gardens, irrigated by water pumped from the Euphrates. To visitors, it must've seemed as though an oasis had blossomed on the rooftops of Babylon.

The kings of New Babylon returned to the Sumerian model of being "shepherds of the people." Although Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah, the New Babylonians were much less warlike than the Assyrians. New Babylonian art reflected this quieter and gentler period; it was much less aggressive and less active than Assyrian art.

Nebuchadnezzar rebuilt Babylon into the most beautiful city on earth. One of his greatest architectural achievements is the

Ishtar Gate, the gorgeous entrance to the city. The animals in the Ishtar Gate look like ornaments. On the front, against a background of glazed blue bricks, stand decorative horses, blue-horned bulls, and dragons made of gold-colored, turquoise, and blue bricks. The top of the gate is *crenellated* (notched) like a medieval castle. But instead of squares (like in a medieval castle), the crenellations rise like mini-ziggurats.

What's the difference between the Ishtar Gate and Assyrian art? In the Ishtar Gate, all the animals strike the same pose; there is no movement. But the Ishtar Gate wasn't intended to tell a story. It was meant to be beautiful and imposing, a reflection of Nebuchadnezzar's cultivated tastes. The stiffness of the animals adds to this impression. Action would take away from the solemn majesty of the goddess's gate.