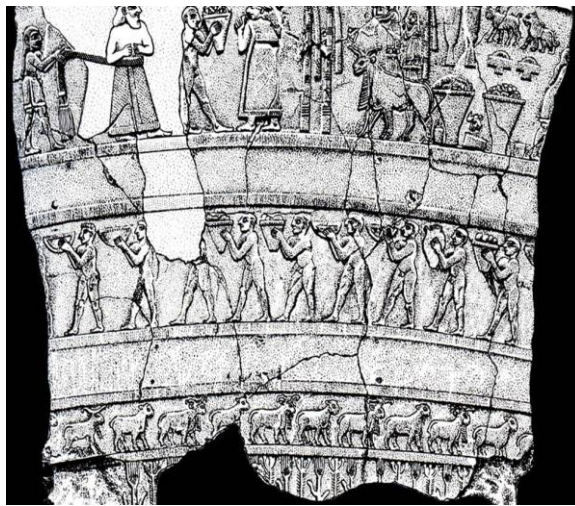


The Warka Vase

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The Mesopotamians were a culture that believed in deities and built monumental temples dedicated to them. They also produced artifacts that expressed their loyalty and devotion, and many of these pieces were buried in these temples. . One such piece was the Warka Vase which was discovered in the Temple of Inanna, a deity who was considered to be the goddess of love and war.

The Mesopotamian "Warka Vase" is a 3 foot high cylindrical container considered to be the first major piece of "narrative relief" sculpture. It is made from alabaster and dates roughly to 3000 BCE. Most significantly, the Sumerian artists introduced the concept of pictorial narration – which allowed them to tell a story – quite an innovative advancement and different from prehistoric art where artists depicted what they "knew" with no reference to sequence or order.

The most significant advance, was the concept of registers which organizes the narrative and artistic impact by forming rows that allow images to be aligned systematically and at the same time be grounded within the rows to tell a coherent story. The rows also contribute to a sort of timeline where the story begins at the bottom row and works its way up to the top row. (I guess in my own business background lingo I'm fascinated by the notion that it might represent the birth of "flow charts.") On this particular piece, the bottom row includes images of domesticated animals and agriculture products – expressing the idea that animal fertility, animal husbandry, and plant life were understood and valued. The next row above extols the abundance of their life style with men carrying overflowing baskets of crops and produce. The top row shows the goddess Inanna with the symbols of her station and aides

bringing votive offerings and symbols of abundance. The image of Innana also is larger than the other people depicted. This artistic convention of depicting people of higher rank as being quite literally larger than any others in their society, is called hierarchy of scale, and is consistent with art depictions of this period. All of these images supported key aspects of Samarian culture – the ideas of order, dedication, loyalty, sophistication, and prosperity.

The Standard of Ur which dates to about 2500 BCE is quite a different work of art, being an inlaid wooden box about 8” tall and a foot and a half wide. The belief is that these boxes were used as banners – much the same way flags or lances or banners have been used historically in battle or ceremony to identify troops, royalty, or officials. The similarities here include particularly the use of registers sequenced to tell a story and hierarchy of scale denoting in this case the seated King. The artistic conventions of the Sumerians remained pretty much the same in the timeframe between these two works.

Comparing the Vase with the prehistoric Hall of Bulls, the most striking similarity is of the composite views of the Bulls compared to the conceptual representation of the Vase. The frontal (and somewhat exaggerated) view of the eyes of the figures in the Vase while having the figures in profile is representative of this style. Most divergent is the way the figures are grounded in the Vase and organized in sequence vs. the random display of multi-dimensional figures (animals) in the Cave.

The art of the Sumerians represented a giant leap forward in techniques and expression of visualization from earlier civilizations, and mirrored their more organized society, advances in technology, and belief system.