

5.2 The Ancient Near East: Mesopotamia

BETWEEN 3500 AND 3000 BC a great civilization arose in Mesopotamia, the flat and fertile land which lay between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Here a group of people called Sumerians established their first city-states. Cuneiform writing, schools, democracy, and the use of the vault and arch all originated in Sumer. For well over one thousand years the Sumerians dominated Mesopotamia. Eventually, however, the Babylonians, the Assyrians and, finally, the Persians ruled the region.

Unfortunately, little remains of the Sumerian civilization. They did not leave behind numerous tombs, like the Egyptians did, although several rich tombs have been found in the city of Ur. Also, because building stone was not available in Mesopotamia, Sumerians used mainly mud-brick. Nothing is left of their structures except the foundations.

We know that the Sumerians worshipped gods. Every city-state had its own god and human ruler who led the populace in serving the deity. Because there were no hills on which to build temples, the Sumerians constructed huge mountains of earth faced with mud-brick and sometimes fired brick. These mammoth structures were called **ziggurats**. The ziggurat, or temple, was the center of both spiritual and city life. Everything else in the city clustered around its base. The most famous of the ziggurats, the biblical Tower of Babel, has been completely destroyed but others have survived at Warka and Ur.

Sumerians and the later inhabitants of Mesopotamia have left us numerous examples of their stone sculpture and metalwork. Early on, the Sumerians established conventions for the depiction of the human figure. With this development, art had begun to be formalized.

Key Notes

- A great civilization is born in Mesopotamia.
- Gods and rulers become central to the creation of art.
- Sumerians formalize the depiction of the human form.

Vocabulary

ziggurat
cella
stele
low relief

Special Feature

The City of Ur

Several of the ruined cities of Sumer today still are dominated by one of the most important of Sumerian art forms, the ziggurat. Ziggurat complexes were designed to make the worshiper go around as many corners as possible before reaching the **cella**, or main room. Sacrifices were offered in the cella.

Perhaps the most interesting of all Mesopotamian ziggurats was built at Ur about 2100–2000 BC (fig.5–9). The royal architects who designed the ziggurat at Ur included stepped levels, dramatic staircases and subtly curved lines. This ziggurat also had more than the usual single staircase. There were three, and they converged at an impressive gate tower, topped perhaps by a dome. The structure's facing has withstood floods and weathering so well that it is the best preserved ziggurat in southern Mesopotamia.

The function of the ziggurat was to bridge the gap between human and divine, the earth below and the spirit world above. This explains



5–10 This section of the standard depicts the results of a Sumerian military battle. Prisoners and servants carry booty. How is the king celebrating his victory?

Standard of Ur: Peace, about 2685–2645 BC, Sumerian. Mosaic panel of shell and colored stones, 19" (48 cm) long, Royal Cemetery at Ur. British Museum, London.

why they went up as high as was humanly possible.

Some of the finest works of art from the Sumerian period were discovered in the royal cemetery at Ur. Archaeologists unearthed statues, panels and other artifacts. Look carefully at the *Standard of Ur: Peace* (fig.5–10). The work is a



5–11 This instrument was buried with its owner to provide music for him in the afterlife. It is related to the modern guitar. *Lyre*, about 2600 BC, Sumerian. Wood, overlaid with silver, shell and colored stones, 38 1/2" (98 cm) high, Royal Cemetery at Ur. British Museum, London.

mosaic-like panel of shell and colored stones. Notice the carefully spaced figures. This is very different from the haphazard placement of figures in Paleolithic art.

Sumerian kings and queens were buried in the tombs in all their finery, together with their servants (who were killed so they could accompany their royal masters into the next world) and their palace or temple furnishings. Some of these objects show marvelous workmanship. Among them is an exquisite lyre made of wood overlaid with silver, shell and colored stone (fig.5–11).

Though not found at Ur, the *Praying Nobleman* (fig.5–12) typifies the Sumerian depiction of the human form. Cut from a solid block, the figure is cylindrical and very simplified. Arms and legs have the roundness of pipes. The long skirt is straight. Notice the overly large eyes, which Sumerians believed were the windows to the soul. We are reminded of how humans have always perceived the power of the eye. Even today we are told to respect people who "look you straight in the



5–12 The form of this figure is simplified and based on the cylinder.

Votive Figure of a Nobleman, about 2600 BC, Sumerian. Alabaster, 14 1/4" (36 cm) high. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.

