

BOOK REVIEW

From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics. Edited by JENNIFER Y. CHI and PEDRO AZARA. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. 168. Paper, \$39.95. ISBN 978-0-691-16646-9.

Excavations at sites throughout Mesopotamia during the early twentieth century uncovered such finds as elaborate jewelry from tombs at Ur and the well-known corpus of statuettes from the Diyala Valley.¹ Appealing to the general public, the finds were almost immediately incorporated into museums and exhibitions throughout the United States and Europe as well as sized to the general public through print media, quickly establishing identities for the objects and the ancient culture from which they came. Organized by the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, the 2015 exhibition, “From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics,” and this accompanying catalogue, seek to unpack these identities, illustrating the many layers of meaning an object has over its life, from creation in antiquity, to discovery, and use today.

To investigate this modern reception, the exhibition presented several iconic Mesopotamian objects along with material related to their discovery, exhibition, and later history. The catalogue expands on these object biographies with a collection of six essays and a concluding appendix that offer close readings of particular objects. The incorporation of archival documents, modern artworks, and current perspectives makes this catalogue an especially valuable resource for the study of objects from the ancient Near East. Although primarily focused on Ur and the so-called Queen Puabi, the essays generate a compelling picture of the ways in which archaeology and the aesthetics of reception can, and in the case of Mesopotamian objects often did, mislead our understanding of ancient objects.

The first two chapters establish the aim of the catalogue: to “illuminate the way an archaeological object has been transfigured into an aesthetic object” (51)

¹ For an overview of objects from Ur see Richard Zettler and Lee Horne, ed. *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 1998. Further information on the Diyala Valley Project at the Oriental Institute, including full bibliography on the site is available at <https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/projects/diyala-project>.

through its interactions with the modern world. In Chapter 1 exhibition curators and catalogue editors Jennifer Chi and Pedro Azara draw a clear distinction between archaeology and art history, the former interested in ancient context and meaning and the latter concerned with aesthetics and modern response. According to the authors, it is this western aesthetic fueled by the individuals and circumstances surrounding the excavation that generated reception of Mesopotamian objects and in many instances skewed their meaning.

Azara and Marc Marín's essay in Chapter 2 further expands the theoretical premise outlined in the first chapter that objects are transformed. The authors survey the paths by which both archaeology and early art history contributed to the almost immediate transformation of Mesopotamian objects from artifacts to artworks, including the sensationalized vocabulary used in press releases, invocation of historical figures familiar to Western audiences, and the display of objects in museum settings divorced from any historical context. Although this essay, particularly the concluding remarks, at times reads as an extended introduction to the material and methods of the catalogue, the thorough overview of the sites, materials, and individuals provides a key grounding for the remainder of the volume.

Each of the remaining chapters offers an object biography, in most cases removing or at least making visible, the modern layers of meaning. Chapters 3 through 5 focus on Queen Puabi from Ur and her jewelry. William Hafford and Richard Zettler's essay in Chapter 3 chronicles the discovery and reconstruction of Puabi's famous golden headdress. Focusing on the model-heads made to display the headdress, the authors highlight the way in which an object's display alters its meaning. Chapter 4 contains Holly Pittman and Naomi Miller's informed reconstruction of Puabi's jeweled diadem, previously modeled by Charles Leonard Woolley. The authors make a compelling argument that the gold and lapis beads actually constitute seven separate strands, which when considered from a Mesopotamian perspective are grouped thematically according to their shape and iconography.

Chapter 5 contains Kim Benzel's intriguing consideration of Puabi's image and identity by way of her jewelry. Deliberately departing from the (western) definition of aesthetics that is central to the remainder of the volume, Benzel instead engages with current scholarship on Mesopotamian aesthetics, which as-

signed value to the technical processes of creating objects.² Analyzing a selection of Puabi's golden jewelry, Benzel demonstrates how the skillful production of these objects imparted additional meaning to Puabi's image.

It is only in the final chapter and short appendix that the catalogue departs from its focus on Queen Puabi. In Chapter 6, Jack Green and Jean Evans convincingly argue for the necessity of archaeological context in the interpretation of the Early Dynastic sculpture of the Diyala Valley. The authors examine how these objects' meaning has relied on their incorporation into the Western canon of art historical tradition, particularly due to the early work of Henri Frankfort, and call for a renewed consideration of the statues according to their ancient use. A short concluding "Appendix" by Clemens Reichel follows the essay and offers a final thought on the Diyala Valley excavation records, which are currently being digitized by The Oriental Institute Diyala Project. Finally, the manuscript is handsomely produced with color photographs throughout the text. An exhibition checklist follows the essays with thumbnail sized images of objects not included throughout the text. A useful, selected bibliography completes the volume.

Without a doubt, Chi and Azara's catalogue demonstrates the fruitful discussion that can result from renewed consideration of familiar material. While the subject at hand is Mesopotamian objects, the questions and methods can be applied to a diversity of material. Although some of the essays are more suitable for a scholarly audience, the volume is accessible for any individual with some prior knowledge, and the diversity of topics will appeal to anyone interested in ancient objects and their reception.

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² Among other works see Irene Winter, "Aesthetics in Ancient Mesopotamian Art." In *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, edited by Jack M. Sasson, vol. 4 2569-80. New York: Scribner, 1995; and Zaiyanab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time, and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity*, London: Reaktion, 2014.