

Neolithic to Nebuchadnezzar
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By Amy Page

Ancient Near Eastern art is a vast field with growth potential.



Ancient Near Eastern art, also called Western Asiatic, is not as well-known as Greek or Roman art, but is a fascinating and very complicated field. The complication is due to the fact that it spans an enormous time frame—from the 8th millennium B.C. (Neolithic period) to 323 B.C. (the death of Alexander the Great)—and an enormous geographical area as well a multitude of civilizations.

As for the fascination, in addition to aesthetics it has a great deal to do with the perception that Near Eastern art is very, very old, older in fact than every other form of art. This belief, according to Hicham Aboutaam, co-owner of Phoenix Ancient Art in New York and Geneva, exists “because most of the sites from the ancient Near East that we know of today were referred to in the Old Testament—Ur, Sumer, Babylon, Nineveh, not to mention kings such as Nebuchadnezzar. Because the Old Testament is so very old, we consider art from that period as very old as well.” Aboutaam points out that this perception that is not, in fact, correct. Cycladic art is older, and Egyptian culture older still.

Ancient Near Eastern art has always been prized and has been collected for centuries. Dominique Collon, in her excellent book on the subject, points out that pilgrims and Crusaders brought back relics from the Holy Land, the majority of which “were of doubtful authenticity.” Because German and British expeditions were excavating in the Near East during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were far more collectors in those countries than in the United States. Austen Henry Layard, a British traveler and diplomat, excavated the Assyrian capital of Nimrud and Heinrich Schliemann, a German businessman and archaeologist, capped a decades-long obsession by finding the Homeric city of Troy in Anatolia.

“Ancient Near Eastern art is a misunderstood field,” says G. Max Bernheimer, International Head of Antiquities at Christie’s. “It is such a vast region and encompasses many different cultures. Every region is different. It is not like being an Egyptologist. New discoveries occur and we have to rewrite art history. Moreover, things moved around. For example, after the Elamites of Susa sacked what is now Iraq they brought Mesopotamian material back to Iran with them.”

Many potential collectors shy away from Near Eastern art because of the question of authenticity. “There are many fakes around,” says Richard Keresey, international senior director at Sotheby’s New York, “an awful lot of fakes, more than in other areas, and they are more recently made.” He stresses the importance of buying “from reputable people” and certainly not in the country of origin.

“One dark cloud that hangs over the question of forgery in Near Eastern art is lack of knowledge,” says Aboutaam. “Mainstream scholars tend to condemn what is not commonly known.” He, too, stresses that one must only buy from “reputable and knowledgeable people who go beyond the bounds of research.” Torkom Demirjian, owner of Ariadne Galleries, says, “We don’t worry about fakes because we do due diligence and have things tested.” Scientific testing is good thing for every area of antiquity, but it can be expensive and can also take a long time. But for serious collectors of important pieces, testing has made buying antiquities a great deal safer.

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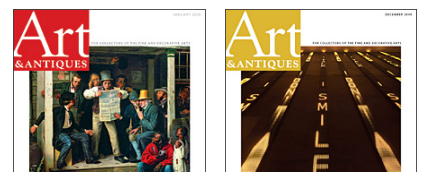
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Provenance is always important and particularly with Near Eastern antiquities. "I don't buy any Middle Eastern art unless I can verify its provenance," says Demirjian. "Otherwise," he adds, "it's a can of worms." For Aboutaam, that the buying process is twofold. "When we see a great work of art," he says, "it takes our heart away. And then we must look at it from a legal perspective: are we buying it from a good source, are we not going to have patrimony laws following us?" There has always been a demand for Near Eastern antiquities, and according to Aboutaam, there is even more demand now because we can distinguish the pieces that have been in circulation for a long time from those that have not. "This separation," he says, "has produced more interest and a clearer market."

"If a piece is fine and has a good provenance," says Keresey, "it is going to do very well. Sumerian pieces with good provenance are very rare, he says. As examples he cites the Sumerian alabaster figure of a worshipper, circa 2800–2550 B.C., that came from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, N.Y., and sold at Sotheby's in June 2007 for \$1.7 million (est: \$300,000-500,000) to the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and the famous proto-Elamite limestone Guennol Lioness, circa 3000 B.C., which, he says, "is almost Sumerian, from right next door" and which brought \$57.1 million (est: \$14-18 million), the most ever paid for an antiquity. "The lioness was a bargain," says Jasper Gaunt, curator of Greek and Roman art at Michael Carlos Museum at Emory University in Atlanta. "You can't wipe your shoes at Damien Hirst's studio for less than \$50 million," he adds.

Bernheimer agrees that the market is strong for the best pieces. "If something is good, it really takes off," he says, citing as example the re-discovered Assyrian relief from Nineveh that sold at Christie's London in 1994 to the Miho Museum in Japan. for £7.7 million (\$11.9 million)—then a record auction price for an antiquity. In 2005, Christie's sold an Anatolian "Stargazer" marble female idol dating from 3300–2500 B.C. for \$1.8 million. The rare type of figure get its name because its head is tilted back as if it were looking at the sky. "It was the best of the best," recalls Bernheimer.

Despite the spectacular prices mentioned above, the field is still relatively affordable when compared to Classical antiquities. According to Jerome Eisenberg, the owner of Royal-Athena Galleries in New York, one can buy "nice stylized Anatolian marbles for \$5,000 to \$20,000." Demirjian says, "Ancient Middle Eastern pieces still have modest valuation, even though in many cases they are archaeologically and art-historically important. Things change. In 1975, you could buy a good Cycladic piece for relatively little. No more." Gaunt agrees: "Most Near Eastern pieces do not cost a lot of money. They still have a way to go." Sasanian silver, Gaunt adds, "is always well regarded and collected. Objects from the ancient Near East are usually small, tactile, intimate things One can't buy a monumental piece of sculpture; it doesn't exist."

"Some people buy ancient Near Eastern art because of its form and style, and others might have a geographical or historical interest in it," says Demirjian, "geographically and historically." Owners of classical antiquities might buy a piece or two to give their collections dimension. Aboutaam notes, "There are people who collect both Classical and Near Eastern art, but not everybody does that. Those who like Near Eastern art in general, feel that it is historically and archeologically superior to Classical art. Those who collect Classical art like, from time to time, to go out of the Hellenized world boundaries and back to earlier periods in the same region, a few millennia earlier. So they play a game of moving back and forth."

Some Near Eastern pieces have gone back to the Middle East, says Bernheimer, "but they have gone to the Gulf States, not to their countries of origin." Demirjian adds, "The field of Near Eastern will grow. It is an evolving market because sooner or later the Arabs will take a stronger interest in it. Right now the political situations in the Middle East are hurting the market. It doesn't function purely on aesthetics or art-market criteria. If the Middle Eastern situation reaches a certain normality, the market will get much better."



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