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Civilization 003

24 September 2017

How Mesopotamian, Classical Greek, and Imperial Roman Art Enhances The Understanding of Their Civilizations

The study of art is, at the same time, the study of history. The understanding of the arts, be it literature, sculpture, or architecture, have enhanced the knowledge of ancient civilizations. Art has shed more light on the Mesopotamian, Classical Greek, and Imperial Roman civilizations in particular; Mesopotamian art reveals their culture's fear and reverence of their gods through the recurring theme that punishes hubris against them; Classical Greek art documents a shift in society towards a more secular, relatable view of their gods; and Imperial Roman art sees art become more of a tool for propaganda.

Mesopotamian art reveals its culture's fear and reverence of their gods. Their literature helps reinforce these feelings through the recurring theme that hubris against the gods will be punished. The textbook *Experience Humanities* summarizes *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an ancient Mesopotamian epic about the Sumerian King Gilgamesh. In the epic, King Gilgamesh "chooses friendship with Enkidu rather than love offered by the goddess Ishtar" and is "punished by being made to watch helplessly as Enkidu dies from an illness sent from the gods" (Matthews et al. 10). According to the textbook, the moral of the epic is that "those who, like Gilgamesh, ignore the power of the deities have to pay a heavy price for their pride" (Matthews et al. 11). The epic shows that not even kings are safe from the wrath of the gods, and communicates that pride can have deadly consequences. The text effectively serves as a warning against hubris.

Another piece of Mesopotamian literature that serves as a warning against hubris is *The Curse of Agade*. The story is about the Akkadian king Naram-Sin and the fictional account of how the Akkadian Empire becomes "a victim of one king's arrogance in the face of the gods" (Mark). In the text, the gods withdraw from the city of Akkad which causes Naram-Sin, after having not received an explanation for seven years, to destroy the temple of Enlil (Mark). In retaliation, the gods send the Gutium people to invade Akkad, which leads to the fall of the entire Akkadian Empire (Mark). Here we see another Mesopotamian king cast down because of his arrogant actions, reinforcing the Mesopotamian belief that you should never act against the gods, lest you put yourself and others in jeopardy. Mesopotamian pessimism manifested itself in literature, and its discovery has lead to a better understanding of their religion and the prevailing mood of their culture.

Classical Greek art, namely Hellenic sculpture, charts the classical revolution, which was marked by cultural changes in the field of art, and a shift towards depicting their gods as more relatable, humanlike deities. The *Kritios Boy* is "the best surviving example of the transitional phase of Greek sculpture between the late Archaic style and the early Classical" (Kritios Boy). This transitional phase is known as the Severe style (Matthews et al. 75). According to the Museum of Classical Archaeology Databases at the University of Cambridge this sculpture marked an end to "the formulaic anatomy and stiffness of the kouros pose." *Experience Humanities* states that this sculpture shows "a figure fully at rest" and that its use of contrapposto "helped to make the classical revolution" (75). Sculptures of the Severe style marked the beginning of change in Greek art, and figures began to be depicted as more relaxed.

The next stage in this classical revolution was characterized by the High Classical style, by sculptures like *Zeus of Artemision* (Matthews et al. 75). Sculptors of this style wanted to

depict “a world . . . in which serene gods and mortals showed grace under pressure” (Matthews et al. 75). The sculpture of Zeus does just that, by depicting him poised and ready to hurl an object, and serves as a “visual [metaphor] for the Greek notion that deities and mortals are kin” (Matthews et al. 75). During this stage in Greek art, not only were poses changing to become less stiff and more active, but how Greeks viewed their gods was also changing; High Classical art shows a desire on part of the Greeks to relate to their gods.

The final stage of the revolution is the fourth-century style (Matthews et al. 75), in which *Hermes with the Infant Dionysus* was sculpted by Praxiteles of Athens (Hermes with the Infant Dionysus). According to the Museum of Antiquities at the University of Saskatchewan, Praxiteles’ work represented the “secular, worldly trend of the Late Classical epoch.” The inclusion of a child in the sculpture, the museum article states, was “significant of social changes, of the prevailing secularism and sentimentalism from this point” (Hermes with the Infant Dionysus). *Experience Humanities* notes that while “[e]arlier classicism has stressed the notion that humans could become godlike . . . the last phase concluded that gods and mortals alike reveled in human joys” (79). Fourth-century sculpture represents the realization of the idea of the relatable god, by depicting deities “[reveling] in human joys” (Matthews et al. 79) and sees Hellenic Greek society become more secular. Societal changes were documented by advances in sculptural style, and these surviving works tell a lot about the Greeks and their evolving views towards their gods in relation to themselves.

Imperial Roman art parallels Roman government in that it gradually becomes more of a tool for propaganda as it sheds its Hellenic roots. The sculpture *Augustus of Prima Porta* marks the beginning of this transformation. According to *Experience Humanities*, “[the] pure Hellenic style is evident in Augustus’s relaxed stance and idealized face” (121), but the sculptor has snuck

in some propagandistic symbolism; “the cupid represents Venus the mother of Aeneas, and thus Augustus is symbolically connected to the legendary origins of Rome” (Matthews et al. 121). This sculpture illustrates the fading influence of Hellenic art, and at the same time shows the rise of propaganda in Imperial Roman art.

Roman sculpture “reached its highest potential as a propaganda tool on triumphal arches and victory columns, such as the *Arch of Titus* and *Trajan’s Column*” (Matthews et al. 123). According to Mark Cartwright of the Ancient History Encyclopedia, the *Arch of Titus* is a “lasting testimony to the Roman love of monumental architecture constructed to celebrate military victories of Roman leaders” and a “tour de force of propaganda art.” This column, decorated with “reliefs illustrating Roman emperor Trajan’s two military campaigns in Dacia” (Cartwright) openly celebrates a historic Roman emperor and his victories, and is the epitome of Roman propagandistic art. The timeline of Imperial Roman art can be summarized by *Augustus of Prima Porta* and *Trajan’s Column*; the former depicting the end of the Hellenic style and the later serving as the zenith of Roman propaganda.

Studying art is important in understanding the past because it has enhanced knowledge of ancient civilizations. Mesopotamian art revealed its people's pessimistic, fearful reverence of their gods, and often serves as warning against hubris. Classical Greek art showed cultural changes and secularization in Greek society. Imperial Roman art saw art become a tool for propaganda over time to unite a growing empire. Each of these civilizations left behind masterpieces that tell stories of the era they were crafted in, as well as the historical figures and legends that lived among them. Art tells of the prevailing moods, societal and religious changes, and reforms of their times. Without art, history would be left no personality, and would be shrouded in mystery.

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