The Burrell Collection

Egyptian and Mesopotamian Antiquities

Fig 50 Alabaster relief fragment of an Auxiliary Archer from the North Palace of Nineveh, Assyria 28-38

EXAMPLES OF OBJECTS representative of two of the world's early riverine cultures, those of Egypt and Iraq, form an interesting section in The Burrell Collection. The artefacts were acquired by Sir William Burrell, mainly toward the end of his active period of collecting, through dealers and agents, with the intention of, in his words, "rounding off" the collection. The items from the two contrasting geographical areas are displayed as works of art and craftsmanship. They range in date from the fifth millennium B.C. to the close of the first millennium B.C., covering prehistory and the later historical periods exemplified by various ruling royal families.

Although the inhabitants of Egypt and Iraq both depended on effective methods of irrigation to exploit the agricultural potential of their respective countries, natural conditions varied considerably between them. In Egypt the long narrow Nile Valley, bounded by dills edging deserts on either side, created a feeling of self-sufficiency and protection against intruders. Backed by rich resources of stone, metal-bearing ores and an efficiently administered economy, the Egyptians enjoyed a sense of unchanging stability, in a balance with nature. It was otherwise in the alluvial plain of Mesopotamia, where natural boundaries hardly existed. To obtain conditions suitable to develop the fertility of the land between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, required regular maintenance of canals, dykes and basins. In addition the prosperity and safety of the land had to rely on military force to prevent incursions by peoples on its borders. Unlike Egypt, stone suitable for sculpture was not so readily obtained.

A factor common to each culture was the use of a system of writing in connection with administration and commerce. The question of where a written script originated is a matter of debate. It has been proposed that the presence in Egypt in pre-dynastic times of Sumerian terms for various cereals and the absence of comparable Egyptian words in Iraq, argues for the introduction of the art of writing from abroad into the Nile Valley. This possible one-way (low is not conclusive. However, by the time of the Sumerian culture stage termed Uruk (circa 3500-3 100 B.C.), pictographic writing was invented.

Fig 51 Badge (or amulet) of Polished Oyster Shell 13-231

Middle Kingdom XIIth Dynasty

Fig 46 Stone cylinder seal 28-17

Copper foundation figure 28-75

Said to be from Uruk

South Mesopotamia, 3rd Dynasty of Ur

Fig 47

Fig 48 Terracotta Lion Head 28-37

Isin-Larsa period 2000-1800BC

The first records were designs engraved on the undersides of small pieces of shaped stone with a hole bored for suspension — a stamp seal. The design would appear in reverse on soft clay when the seal was pressed into it. In this way packets of goods secured with string, with clay lumps on the knots, could be identified for and given the official authority of the owner. Similarly a cylinder seal***(46)*** which was pierced lengthways and engraved round the outer surface could be rolled over soft clay to transfer the impression. At a later stage cuneiform script was developed where wedge-shaped marks were made with a stylus in the clay which was subsequently baked to preserve the form of the signs. By contrast the system ol writing, hieroglyphic script, introduced to Egypt at the beginning of the historic period (-circa 3100 B.C.), never lost its pictorial aspect entirely. The use of such a system played an essential part in the establishment of a central administration under a god-king. From this foundation, artistic convention, craft methods and the Egyptian life-style emerged to assume forms which scarcely changed for centuries to come.

Fig 49 Fragment of an alabaster cuneiform inscription from the annals of Ashurnasirpal II 28-78

The early dynastic period (circa 2900-2370 B.C.) of Sumerian civilisation was characterised by a number of prosperous city slates. It is possible to gain an impression of the physical appearance of the population from alabaster votive statuettes***(52)*** set up in a religious building to intercede with a deity on behalf of a worshipper. Such a figure, probably from southern Mesopotamia, is dressed in a long, flounced skirt having

sis tiers of material from waist to hem. The hands are clasped in front of the chest, while the eye sockets and brow line would have been inlaid at one time with shell set in bitumen. Each city in Sumer had a patron deity, worshipped in a temple. The latter formed the focal point for administration and organisation, the head man of the city acting as both priest and king. From the Neo-Sumerian period (circa 2230-2000 B.C.), there is in the collection a copper figure***(47)*** from a foundation deposit of such a temple. The figure carries on his head a token basket of mortar, supported by his raised hands, for use in the construction of the building.

Fig 55 Breccia jar 13-28 and Bird shaped slate palette 13-118

Fig 56 *Faience bowl 13-10*

XVIIIth Dynasty 1560-1450BC

At the start of the second millennium, city-states in southern Mesopotamia such as Isin and Larsa experienced a short period in the limelight. An almost life-sized terracotta lion head***(48)*** shows a product of this phase. The snarling mouth, looping whiskers, and incised mane decorate an object probably incorporated in a temple as a protective figure. Strife between. Isin and Larsa resulted in the former stale being defeated by the latter, which in turn was overcome by the first dynasty of Babylon. The best known member of this power's ruling family was Hammurabi, who in the eighteenth century B.C. drew up a code of laws which is inscribed on a tall stela preserved in the Louvre.

The northern part of Iraq, centred on the area round modern Mosul, became important circa 1800 B.C. with the rise of Assyria. Some thousand years later the Neo-Assyrian empire reached its full extent. This coincided with the best known of its art-forms, the extensive alabaster relief panels which lined the walls of the rooms in the royal palaces. A number of fragments of sculptured reliefs are in the collection. The northwest palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.) at Nimrud (ancient Kalhu) produced many fine slabs

of deities, kings and officials, including the head of a royal attendant***(53)***. The head, with long hair arranged in six rows of curls on the neck, wears a heavy ear-ring. The top edge of a robe is just visible, decorated with cross-hatching, and the knot at the top of a tassel appears beyond the hair. This particular piece shared a common slab in the same room of the palace with a winged, human-headed genie the upper part of which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The same palace bore cuneiform inscriptions known as the Annals of Ashurnasirpal II and a small extract is on display in the gallery. In the translation (after C. J. Gadd) it reads, "...the exalted prince worshiper (of the great gods) . . . clothed with splendour.. ."***(54).***

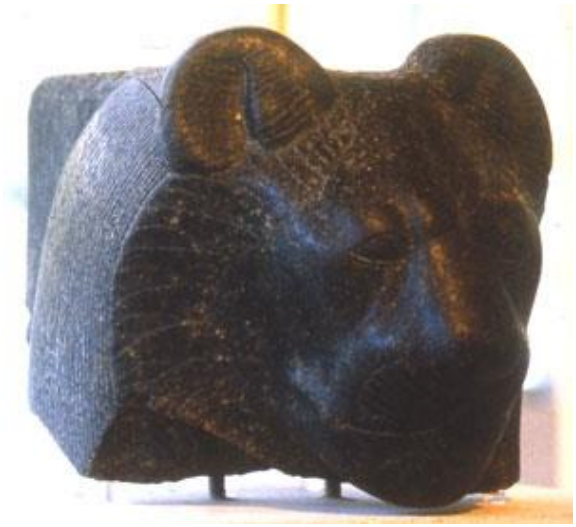

Fig 57 Head of the goddess Sekhmet 13-181
Circa 1400BC

At the site of Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik) the kings Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal had their palaces, with the apartments decorated in similar style to the earlier examples, although the main theme is increasingly military activities. A typical Assyrian soldier wore a pointed helmet, had his hair bunched and his heard cut square. His weapons and equipment depended on the type of unit he served in: chariotry, cavalry or infantry. In the last, men operated as archers, spearmen, shield hearers, or slingers. Specialised units were employed on mining operations and in the use of breaching devices at sieges. Auxiliary troops, sometimes recruited from tribesmen previously enlisted with enemy forces who had rebelled, surrendered and joined the Assyrian force, are represented by Persian bowmen. These are distinguished by their peculiar head-dresses—an arrangement of feathers contained by a headband — and the duck-headed terminals on their bows***(55)***. They march in a triumphant procession celebrating Ashurbanipal's victory against Elam in 639 B.C.

Fig 58 Statuette of a King 13-242
Late XIIIth Dynasty circa 1650BC

In common with collections of Egyptian antiquities elsewhere, craftsmanship in stone is strongly represented in The Burrell Collection. This reflects the material's potential survival as well as the range and quality available in ancient limes. With the use of the bow drill, cranked boring tool and abrasives, the Egyptians of the pre-dynastic period mastered the technique of hollowing out and shaping vessels of stone***(56)***. These occur in a variety of forms and sizes with granite, diorite, basalt, breccia, marble and limestone being employed. An almost regular item found in graves of the early period was a cosmetic palette of slate, often an elongated lozenge in shape but also in the form of fish or birds***(55)***. This, with a grinding pebble and some galena or malachite, was used to prepare eye paint.

Fig 59 Basalt Head of a Statue 13-13

XXXth Dynasty – Ptolemaic period after 375BC

Fig 53 Alabaster relief of a royal attendants head form the northwest palace at Nimrod, Assyria 28-35

Reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859BC)

Fig 54 Alabaster statuette 28-71

South Mesopotamia, Sumerian early dynastic III – circa 2600-2400BC

Coming to the age of the pyramid builders—-the Old Kingdom (circa 2780-2250 B.C.) —there is in the collection a painted limestone relief of an offering bearer***(61)***. As with practically every object in the ancient civilisation section, no record exists of its provenance. Resorting to comparative studies can narrow the options. Relief sculptures are often associated with the decoration of Old Kingdom *mastaba*—tomb chapel offering chambers—where scenes depict episodes from daily life which the deceased owner hoped to enjoy magically in the afterlife. The activities—agriculture, shipbuilding, or as in this instance the bringing of a goose, a covered cup and a basket of figs, the products of an estate, to the owner — were arranged in a series of registers. The fact that the surviving height of the figure is 26 centimetres, and that only from the waist up, precludes its position in a rnastaba, where this height is about the norm for a complete figure. However, in the royal mortuary temples attached to pyramids there are sculptured reliefs which are on a large scale and the proportions of the offering bearer would suit these more closely. The question remains, if this proposal is accepted, as to which royal structure might be appropriate. The piece can he assigned fairly confidently to the VIth Dynasty. The cap-like wig of the man shows a pattern of overlapping locks, a style associated with this dynasty, with no attempt to depict the diminishing rows at the top of the head as in earlier Old Kingdom examples. Similar offering bearers, one holding the same type of cup, appear on fragmentary reliefs from the mortuary temple of King Pepi II at South Saqqara. However, until it may he possible to match the Burrell slab with some section of relief of an as yet undiscovered or over looked structure, where the piece would fit into place, the matter of location is unresolved.

Fig 60 Quarzite statue of Prince Prehirwenemef 13-83 - XIX dynasty circa 1270 BC

A few objects from Egypt's Middle Kingdom (circa 2050-1786 B.C.) are in the collection. Of note is a possible soldier's badge in the form of a polished oyster shell***(51)***. Some 10.7 centimetres wide, it bears the engraved prenomen of King Sinusret I of the XIIth Dynasty within a cartouche. Two small holes have been drilled through the shell below the peaked end, by which it could be suspended presumably on a cord. In one instance, such a shell was found on the body of an archer. This association could support the idea of its being a kind of regimental insignia, but it may be an amulet of a special type.

Towards the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century B.C. the XIIth Dynasty came to an end and Egypt entered the disturbed period which eventually saw the domination of the Hyksos. For a century or so the full effect of the brief reign of a succession of many weak kings was mitigated during the XIIIth Dynasty by the continuation in office of administrators of the previous central government. The falling off in standards of artists and craftsmen starts to be apparent in, for instance, statuary and stelae, with loss of clear line and proportion. The upper part of a seated statuette of a king in green basalt is a fair example with its narrow waist, broad shoulders and the upper corners of the cover raised in peaks***(58)***.

Fig 61 Limestone relief of an offering bearer 13-279

VIth Dynasty Circa 2420 – 2250BC

The New Kingdom (circa 1565-1085 B.C.), when Egypt was an imperial power, with city-states in Palistine and Syria in allegiance to her and sending in regular tribute, together with the exploitation of Nubia, particularly its gold deposits, marked the height of the country's achievements. A typical product of the early part of the XVIIIth Dynasty, in the New Kingdom, a blue faience bowl decorated with lily or lotus petal pattern on the inside***(56)***. Such bowls were common domestic tableware and were also-used to hold offerings of flowers to the goddess Hat-hor. From the reign of Amenophis III (1402-1363 B.C.), a sculpted head of Sekhmet represents a fine example of craftsmanship. Sekhmet was the lioness-headed goddess of war and wife of the creator god Ptah. Later she was associated with Mut, the consort of Amun, whose cult-centre was at Asheru, south of the temple complex of Amun Ra at Karnak. Amenophis III embellished the precincts of the Mut temple with hundreds of statues of Sekhmet both standing and seated. Originally the head would have been surmounted by a solar disk, now missing, carved from a separate block of stone and fitted in place with a tenon. A mortise hole for the disk is cut out on top of the piece.

The collection has a number of objects from the Ramessid period of the empire including a representation of the famous King Ramesses II (circa 1290-1224 B.C.) in sunk relief in pink granite***(54)***. A quartzite statue of one of Ramesses' many sons, a certain Prehirwenemef, records in its inscriptions that the young prince pursued the career of a soldier. Among his titles was that of "Chief Charioteer of His Majesty"***(60)***.

Toward Life close of Pharaonic Egypt and the advent of the Ptolemies, some line pieces of sculpture were produced. The transition from native dynastic crafts-mans hip to the work showing the influence of Hellenism is covered by a line statue head in the collection***(59)***. Of blue-grey basalt and 15.7 centimetres high, the head shows a plain bag-shaped wig, training a narrow oval face and rising above the forehead. The eyebrows, although rubbed, form an arch above the root of the nose and eyes. The latter are almond shaped; the rims of the eyelids appear as slight ridges. The ears are moderately large but in proportion to the face. The nose and lips are rubbed, however the former was straight and the lips retain a pursed aspect. The chin recedes while the neck is strong.

Certain features help in dating the work. Here the wig is a guide. It is fairly large for die face, rising above the forehead, and a distinct line marks die edge at the front. The forehead is cut back to meet the wig which gives its edge a clearly seen depth. Taken together these points indicate a period covering the Persian domination and continuing into the XXXth Dynasty and even beyond.

Further work on the collections in the preparation of catalogues, articles, pamphlets and labels will undoubtedly contribute further details leading to more accurate and informative displays.