CHAPTER ONE

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA:
MATERIALS AND PLACES

Each person made every effort to ennoble his cult image. The one gilded his god, the other covered it in silver. Another encased his idolic image with bronze because he was poor. Another again, who was still poorer, carved himself one of wood and painted it, so that it may please. And the one who could not even afford one of wood, bought himself a god from the potter to suit his means.¹

Sculpture involves shaping materials. It also involves shaping ideas. Whether such forms are crude or well defined, they carry a meaning which the sculptor seeks to communicate. For this purpose he uses a material that enables him to express concepts in a visual and concrete language. As he depends on materials such as clay, wood, stone and metal, their abundance or scarcity inevitably has a bearing on his creative activity and the development of sculpture at large, as we shall see on closer examination.

To trace this development we must go back several thousand years. We can do this with the help of a mental map of Ancient Iraq and follow the flow of two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, from north to south, from Anatolia (now Turkey) to the Persian Gulf. We notice that there is a discernible north–south divide in the way early settlers gravitated towards the more fertile areas on either side of the upper Tigris, and in the south, where they founded settlements and city-states on the expanse of land between these two major watercourses. More significant however, regarding the development of sculpture, is the geographical distribution of materials: in the north of Mesopotamia stone is easily available, but not so in the south where it is rare. There, however, clay and bitumen² are plentiful; they became the bricks and mortar of Babylonian civilisation.³ Regarding other materials, neither the south nor the north has any local supply of metal or quality wood; these, as well as ivory and semi-precious stones, such as lapis lazuli, had to be imported from neighbouring countries or even from more distant lands.
What evidence is there of colour in sculpture? Polychromed pottery and painted clay figurines of the fifth millennium BC have been found in places as far apart as Tell Halaf in the Fertile Crescent of the north towards Anatolia, and Tell al-’Ubaid near Ur in Sumer. Both places are situated on an important ancient trade route which may have been followed in the nineteenth century BC by the patriarch Abraham, who went from Ur to Haran, a few miles north-west of Tell Halaf. However, these painted clay objects belong to a much earlier period than that of the patriarchs.

Sumer and Akkad, Babylonia and Assyria, refer to successive cultures and geographically definable regions in Ancient Mesopotamia, which was occupied by different peoples at various periods in history. Each in turn produced a distinct and identifiable culture. Sumer is the most ancient civilisation that sprang up between the two rivers furthest to the south. The Sumerians were either displaced or absorbed by the Akkadian people who had settled in the lands adjoining their northern border. Although they spoke a different language, they adhered to much the same cult practices and forms of government. In time, the Babylonians brought these two smaller regions under their control and thus became the dominant power in southern Mesopotamia until they too succumbed to a mightier people. During the first millennium BC, the Assyrians outgrew their own city-state Ashur and reached out in nearly all directions, bringing many neighbouring kingdoms under their sovereignty. Their large-scale stone sculptures still speak of their strength and prowess. No civilisation was mightier than the Assyrians’, yet they too lost their place among the nations in the battles for power.

Over a period of more than three thousand years, cultural development in Ancient Mesopotamia was formed and influenced by many people who were at one time geographically and ethnically separate and distinct, yet were governed by similar religious and economic forces. Their names have come down to us through ancient literature – notably the Bible, where we read of the Chaldeans who had settled around 1200 BC in Shinar, the land of Sumer. But long before the Sumerians began to build their city-states, the Akkadian-speaking people had established themselves to the north of Sumer, where during the latter part of the third millennium BC they had raised an outstanding dynasty. Akkad and Sumer were united under Babylonian rule. Thus, Babylon’s pre-eminence in southern Mesopotamia lasted until the Babylonians were overrun by the Assyrians. In the words of one of their most powerful kings, Ashurnasirpal II (884–859 BC), they had conquered all countries and acquired dominion over the mountain regions and triumphed over all the countries from beyond the...
Tigris to the Lebanon and the Great Sea.

There were the Hittites, Hurrians and Canaanites or Phoenicians fighting over or controlling lands along the north-western flank of Mesopotamia, with the periodic influx of the Egyptians. The east, the homeland of modern Iranians, was once peopled by the Parthians and the Medes, while in the most southern region the ever troublesome Elamites made their forays into Sumer and Babylonia. Parts of the Near East were finally, during the fourth century BC, invaded by the Greeks and thus the indigenous cultures came under a new and dominating influence. We shall here be concerned not so much with the history proper of Ancient Mesopotamia. Instead we shall concentrate on aspects pertaining to sculptural developments which will serve us as a basis from which to explore further the concept of colour in sculpture.

The sketchily modelled terracotta figurines of the prehistoric Halaf period have the appearance of dolls, or represent strange hybrid creatures connecting the real with the fantastic. All essential features, whether humanoid or animal-like, have been roughly shaped in clay, while details such as eyes, hairs, body marks and other physiognomical characteristics have been painted on with bold brush strokes. Either black or red has been used to indicate rather than to imitate precisely what may have been the customary make-up, body decoration or adornment.

These hand-size models are among the earliest references that we know of to the age-old practice of body-painting, tattooing or scarification which seems to have been part of life in Ancient Mesopotamia, as they have been in more recent times. However, one of the two larger lime-plaster figures discovered in 1983 at Ain Ghazal, near Amman in Jordan, shows stripes on its upper leg which appear to be intentional paint marks. The half life-size figures have been dated to around 6500 BC. They are the earliest known representations of the human form.

Initially such marks may have indicated ownership before they developed into decorative pattern or status symbols in their own right. Clay figures offer scope for experimenting with and expressing new ideas, and colour application may have played an essential part in formulating concepts. Modern sculptors have found it useful to make bozzetti, or clay sketches, before committing themselves to working full scale in a more expensive and time-consuming medium. However, the Tell Halaf and al-’Ubaid figures have to be seen as the intended full expression, however roughly executed.

The Sumerian sculptor of the third millennium BC worked out a
method of combining different materials of contrasting colour value, with the effect of enlivening the sculpted image. Although his resources were limited, he was himself resourceful and explorative in his approach to creating unique pieces of sculpture. Monumental in their conception, they were however mostly on a small scale. As stone was precious and rare, he used the material sparingly. This may be best studied by a find made at Warka (Uruk) during the 1938–39 excavations. It is a limestone head or mask representing a woman, now known as the Lady of Warka (c. 3100 BC). It is probably one of the first near life-size pieces of sculpture known to us. Its incomplete state is interesting in itself. The archaeologist Seton Lloyd made the following observation about the use of material in relation to Sumerian sculpture with particular reference to this head:

The contrivance of a life-size human figure in the round, to which this fragment bears witness at so early a date, is most remarkable, but its form suggests the material limitations of the period. There can be little doubt that the mask-form is accounted for by the scarcity and value of stone in the alluvial district of South Iraq. So that the head and probably the clothed parts of the body would be completed in some more easily obtainable material. Since wood is almost as rare as stone, one must look for some other substance of which the local supply is plentiful, and the most suitable is obviously bitumen. Remembering, for instance the lions heads from the façade of the Nin-harsag temple at al-‘Ubaid’ composed of fine copper-plating over a core of bitumen, it is not difficult to imagine our Warka head completed by a core [of bitumen], forming the basis for a coiffure modelled in some more valuable material.6

The head has lost all its incrustation. The eyes, eyebrows, hair and side-locks are missing. Thus it has also lost its colourful and life-enhancing expression. The mask-like face looks severe, partly because of the tight, unsmiling lips, but also because the dark eye sockets offer no focus. But what might the image of the Lady of Warka have looked like? Again, we are helped by the scholarly approach brought to such a problem. A reconstruction of the head was made and Seton Lloyd was then able to present his final deductions:

The assumptions on which the reconstruction was based were accordingly as follows:

a) That the hair was modelled in thin gold over a bitumen base. The gold would extend over the flat frontal waves and so cover the two rivets near the parting attaching the stone to the bitumen.

b) That the coiffure may be adopted from the most characteristic hair dresses among the Diyala heads.

c) That the rivet-holes in the temples were for attaching side-locks, also
made of bitumen covered with gold.
d) That the projection beneath and behind the ears represent the ends of a roll of short hair which almost invariably occurs beneath the chignon. The rivet-holes, for attachment of the bitumen, would also be covered by the extension of the gold over them.
e) That the parting was inlaid with bone or mother-of-pearl, which helped to secure the gold, and the eyes and eyebrows with lapis and bone, as is usual with Sumerian statues.

Altogether, it is a well-planned work and its effect must have been as startling as its modern reconstruction for the Iraq Museum. The result is interesting and highly probable, but it reveals that the possibility of different interpretations exists and that we shall never know for sure about the appearance of the Lady of Warka.

Fig. 1–1, left. Clay figurines from Ur (c. 4500 BC), typical of the Ubaid culture in southern Iraq. Figure on the right h. 13.6 cm.

Fig. 1–2, right. Head of The Lady of Warka (c. 3100 BC); h. 21.2 cm. © Photo: D. Collon.

* We can study our own response to Sumerian craftsmanship when visiting the British Museum. There, on permanent display are – among other finds from Sumer – objects which Sir Leonard Woolley recovered
from the Royal Cemetery of Ur. One of these is the *Ram in the Thicket*. It demonstrates fully the capability of the Sumerian craftsmen and gives an indication of their inventiveness and their determination to obtain the necessary resources at whatever cost.8

*The Ram in the Thicket* may remind us of the biblical story of Abraham, who found in the thicket a ram which he used instead of his son Isaac as a sacrificial offering. This cult object, worked seven centuries earlier and dating from about 2600 BC, is, like most works of art in Sumer and Akkad, relatively small in scale, barely half a metre in height (but when seen in photographic print one may easily mistake its size for that of a living ram).9 Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, shell, copper and bitumen are the materials that give it its multi-coloured appearance. The sculptor worked out a scheme based roughly on the characteristic features of the animal: finely modelled head and legs, showing the taut skin stretching over the bony structure. The legs and sexual parts are covered in gold leaf, as is the thicket. The inlaid eyes are of shell and lapis lazuli, a material also used for the horns and upper part of the fleece. The ears are made of copper, now green. Shell pieces emulate the heavy fleece of the lower part of the body. However, for the underbelly the silver (now lost)10 would have suggested a difference in quality and growth. The little platform on which the ram and the tree-like support are mounted has a regular pattern of inlaid squares of mother-of-pearl and limestone; their colours range from cream to red and blue. The brightest pink or red, while not yet part of the figurative element of the piece of sculpture, points to the fact that red is one of the most dominant colours in Ancient Mesopotamia. The archaeologist Anton Moortgat referred to the tendency to piece together such images by combining and using different materials for different body parts, thereby introducing colour contrast, or adding extra colour by inlays of semi-precious coloured stones.11 Lapis lazuli’s great popularity came during the Early Dynasty III, the period which produced the great treasure found in the Royal Cemetery of Ur, when links between Sumer and the east were particularly close. Never again was lapis lazuli to be used so effectively and so lavishly. The Badakshan mines in Afghanistan were the principal source for the semi-precious stone. Trade in this prestigious commodity once spread throughout the Near and Middle East; it may have taken the merchant caravans three months to cover the 1500 miles between Afghanistan and Sumer. Scientific analysis has shown that the varying shades of blue of the pieces of veneer on the *Ram in the Thicket* are paralleled by modern specimens from Badakshan. The blue semi-precious stone was both desirable in its solid state and much valued as a pigment, which since the Middle Ages has been known as ultramarine.12
The Sumerians made a virtue out of necessity. Their recognition and acceptance of the enhancing quality of combined materials, each being worked to its own full advantage – as in the chasing and polishing of precious metals, or the cutting and inlaying of mother-of-pearl – added character to their sculpture, which might otherwise have remained a crude art form. (Later, the Ancient Greeks, who had plenty of stone, recognised the beauty of artfully combining gold and ivory and by giving chryselephantine sculpture its full aesthetic expression.) Not only were the Sumerians able to handle the technical problems involved in joining diverse materials; their aesthetic sensibility was founded on their understanding of each material’s intrinsic quality and potential. They also understood, as the Ram in the Thicket shows, how to relate to and substitute for nature’s attributes. The velvety dark blue of lapis for the softness of hair, the iridescence of shell for moistness of eyes, tersely modelled and polished form for skin over bone, all indicate astute observation and intelligent application of what they knew.

If their stone carvings look less schooled and daring than what we find later in Assyria and other neighbouring cultures, who had recourse to plenty of good stone, it is as well to remember that they were deprived of an essential training ground in carving blocks or slabs of stone.

We have already seen that crudely modelled clay figurines from the pre-dynastic period (5000–4000 BC) were partially painted with either a red or black colour. The paint was used to pick out particular features rather than to colour larger surface areas uniformly. The brush marks indicated bodily traits such as hair, eyes, tattoo marks and jewellery. This exchange of media for the sake of creating a fuller expression is also found on limestone and terracotta sculpture of later periods, particularly towards the end of the third and the beginning of the second millennia BC in Sumer and Babylonia. However, these statues were more fully painted in order to suggest the actual colour of skin, hair or dress, whereas the eyes were frequently inlaid when not modelled and painted. Despite the fact that added pigments easily rub off and are lost forever, we have some good examples of polychromed statues which verify the practice of painting sculpture in Mesopotamia, and traces of pigment have been found on quite a few sculpted fragments and on statues which appear monochrome.

The stone statue of a woman worshipper from Ur (about 1900 BC), which is in the British Museum, still shows some of the once glowing red with which the modelled dress top and neck jewellery has been painted. Her hair and carefully carved inlaid eyes, which have lost the black of the
iris, and also the regular folds of her dress, indicate that the paint has a different function; it is no longer taking over where the modelling tool or chisel fail to convey detail. The colour is there to complete in another sense: to brush on some life. Or perhaps the colour is used to reflect the life-giving spirit of the god to whom this worshipper is perpetually praying in the temple on behalf of the donor worshipper.

Fig. 1–3 Warriors carrying idols in procession, South-West Ruins, Nimrud. Drawing by A.H. Layard: *A Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh* (1852).

The original settings of most Sumerian sculptures were temples and sanctuaries. The social and religious structure of such city-states as Ur and Uruk evolved around their cult centres, the temples of their state gods and other deities, of which there were many. Their pantheon was hierarchically ordered; according to their specific needs the supplicants installed votive figures in their temples. The people also offered their gods sustenance and generally contributed to their well-being. The deities had to be regularly fed, washed, anointed and dressed, specifically so for the New Year Feast, when the statues were richly adorned, taken from their sanctuaries and carried in processions through the streets. They were also taken to visit other gods on appointed days. On these occasions the street scenes were as rich in colour as they are today during saint’s days in any of the Roman Catholic countries in southern Europe or South America.

We know from ancient records and inventories how the love-goddess of Sumer, Inanna-Ishtar, presented herself on a feast-day. A poet left us this description:

""
The šugurra, crown of the plain, she put upon her head,
Locks (of hair) she fixed upon her forehead,
The measuring rod (and) line of lapis lazuli
she gripped in her hand,
Small lapis lazuli stones she tied about her neck,
Twin nunuz-stones she fastened on her breast,
A gold ring she put about her hand,
The breastplate “Man, come, come!” she
Bound about her breast,
With the pala-garment, the garment of ladyship,
she covered her body,
The ointment “He (the man) shall come, he
shall come,” she daubed on her eyes,
Inanna walked toward the netherworld,
Her minister Ninsubur walked at her [side].

We also know what Ishtar of Lagaba owned, because the contents of
her treasury were recorded on clay tablets that itemise every piece of
jewellery, garment, woollen or flaxen ribbon and, of course, the “dress of
Inanna”, which was kept in safe keeping under the superintendence of
Awil-Ishtar and two other officials at the temple of the god Isarkidisu.

Although there is no direct reference to any particular colour on these
objects, the ancient scribe did state all the materials of which each item
was made, with the exception of the seals. The statue was adorned with
jewellery and ornaments made of gold, silver, copper, bronze, lapis lazuli,
carnelian and ivory, materials which guaranteed a wide colour spectrum
and a rich, sparkling effect.

Whether the recorded three great coats of linen were white, orange, red
or any other shade is more difficult to establish. However, red played an
important part in ceremonies. From another record we learn that at
Babylon during the New Year Festival, which lasted eleven or twelve
days, three artisans were summoned on the third day and provided with the
materials to make two statuettes of wood adorned with precious stones and
clad in red garments. We may recall that the stone statue described above
also wore a red garment. Further evidence comes from Ur where, during
the excavations of the Royal Cemetery, Sir Leonard Woolley found a
small fragment of red material. Though we do not know who was buried,
we know they wore red dresses during this final ceremony of burial, which
also was to be their last hour alive.

Ishtar of Lagaba also possessed seven “beautiful gowns” of which two
were new additions, two loin cloths and two kaunakes or sheepskins.
Again, the list does not give any clue to their different appearances and
uses. It is known however that Inanna-Ishtar was worshipped not only as
the goddess of love, but as the goddess of fertility and the mother of life\textsuperscript{21} and the goddess of war. She was also the patroness of the palace. For each aspect of her divinity she may have required a distinct outfit by which the worshippers could recognise her deified status.

We have evidence that ritual clothing of the images was an important and very old feature of the Mesopotamian cult.\textsuperscript{22} Its significance to our investigation becomes apparent when we turn to a much more recent ritual text from Uruk (period of the Seleucids, third century BC) which refers to the same ritual practice and lists the jewellery and ornaments in the possession of the temple. It also indicates for which part of the body each item was meant and who crafted the object – that is, a blacksmith, jeweller, lapidary or carpenter. From this information the archaeologist W.F. Leemans deduced the following:

In this period of the decline of Babylonian civilisation the same objects still occur, which had remained in use as a result of the persistency in the tradition of religious customs. The hand- and foot-rings were made by the blacksmith now, probably of iron and bronze. The insabtum, as in Ishtar’s descent defined as ear-ornaments, were still made of precious metal. The neck-ornament [mentioned in line 20 of the Sumerian version] was now made of sanctum (carnelian). The tudittu (ornaments on her breasts) were no longer made of gold or silver, but of (painted) wood, like the bronze sewiro a sign of the impoverishment of the temples in the Seleucid period.\textsuperscript{23}

Such an adaptation to an economic situation may be observed in different cultures and during different periods (Greek, medieval), but it should be noted that the changes due to economic circumstances work both ways and lavishly rich endowments may precede and succeed periods of decreased riches.

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Before leaving the temple compounds, from which so much of the cultic and symbolic thinking and practice emanated, we picture the approach of a worshipper who, from the entrance, makes his way to the sanctuary. Ahead of him, in the shaded sanctuary, the cella, the statue of the deity acts like a magnet. The highly polished surfaces of its precious metals and the sparkling jewels add to the awe-inspiring image of the mystical god figure whose forms, in all probability, instil more fear than love, while he fixes his gaze on the penetrating eyes of inlaid shell whose iridescent whiteness glimmers in the semi-darkness. Around the statue numerous votive figures are positioned (the tallest shown here is 72cm in
height). These conical or column-like figures stand their ground rigidly, with folded hands at chest level, their wide shoulders and pointed elbows held away from their bodies. Some are bald and beardless while others have their carved hair and wavy beards painted black. But the most notable feature is their eyes; these large, flat discs are out of all proportion with the rest of the face. They are inlaid with shell and bitumen or lapis, which provide them with focal points through which the divine communication was meant to take place.

Fig. 1–4 Votive statues from Tell Asmar (c. 2700 BC). Tallest figure h. 72 cm. Iraq Museum, Bagdad, and Oriental Institute, Chicago.

Outside the temple, in the glaring sun, there is colour everywhere: vegetation, sky, the temple’s reflection in the water, people wearing brightly dyed dresses or bleached linen in contrast to their own body colours enhanced with kohl, senna and other shades. Some large buildings had their exterior walls clad with painted baked clay pegs. The foremost example is a columned building in the Eanna temple precinct at Uruk (about 3300 BC). The white, red and black peg heads were arranged in attractive patterns. Below the roof of yet another sanctuary a coloured frieze enlivened the stuccoed façade. The Sumerians and Akkadians, and
later the Babylonians, enjoyed and made the most of colours. To them colour was a divine expression of benevolence.

The building of ziggurats is one of the earliest manifestations of man’s instinct to reach upwards towards heaven and outwards towards the universe. At Babylon, during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC), the Tower of Babel was being built and rose 90 metres from the ground into the sky. This ziggurat was called E-temen-an-ki, the House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth. According to various records the edifice rose in seven stepped stages that were coloured, from the bottom up, in white, black, red, blue, orange, silver and finally gold. This last stage was a small temple.

Although Robert Koldewey, the archaeologist responsible for much of the early excavation of Babylon between 1899 and 1917, did not support the idea of a “coloured ziggurat” or, rather, its possible symbolic significance, we do owe to him an insight into another aspect of colour in art: multi-coloured enamelled brick reliefs. The Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way are the two monuments with which his name is especially linked; they are of particular interest to us because of their decorative schemes. Under Koldewey’s direction the walls were gradually freed from the rubble of past ages and he discovered that the walls of the Ishtar Gate were faced with glazed bricks moulded in relief to only one storey and faced with alternating rows of coloured bulls and dragons,24 the symbols of the weather god Adad and the patronal god of the city of Babylon, Marduk. The facing walls on either side of the Processional Way were moulded with rows of the lion symbol of Ishtar, the goddess of war. A brilliant blue, reminiscent of lapis lazuli, served as a background for the whites, light blues, yellows and reds. (The reds are now green because of the oxidation of the ferrous colour pigments.)25 The production of at least 350 large-scale reliefs based on three different designs – bull, dragon and lion – bespeaks considerable technical and organisational competence. Each image is composed of dozens of bricks.26 First the bricks had to be separately moulded, then they had to be reassembled after the first firing. The outlines of all the colour areas could be drawn, or laid on, with black glass filament before the individual colours were then filled in, a technique similar to cloisonné. Wet clay shrinks considerably during the drying and firing processes. One has to admire the precision with which the ancient craftsmen prepared not only the moulds but also the colour mixtures for the glazing and, not least, how diligently they supervised the firing process.

The Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II achieved a high quality of colour enamelling, but the technique itself was not new. In the second half
of the second millennium BC the Kassite kings of Babylonia and the Elamite kings of south-western Iran produced moulded brick reliefs with figures of gods and goddesses. In the first millennium the Elamites experimented with glazed reliefs of this type. The Kassite kings had rebuilt and embellished many of the old sanctuaries. A new temple at Uruk was decorated with brick reliefs depicting deities. The French scholar Georges Roux conjectured that this ingenious technique, new to Mesopotamia at that time, was perhaps a substitute for rock carving. It was also used later by the Achaemenians in Susa. The style of these moulded reliefs, as Koldewey pointed out, is quite different from the cut stone reliefs with their steeper sides, often at right angles to the flat surface of the background. He compared the brick relief with an impression made by a seal into the wet clay. Any mould has to release easily the still soft material without doing damage to the image. Slightly sloping sides and no undercuts are therefore characteristic of this type of relief.

So far our examples of polychromed sculpture have come from the south of Mesopotamia. This is not only for historical reasons, but also because, as we move north and to Assyria, we find a different setting and different way of thinking about sculpture. Between the tenth and the seventh centuries BC, the Neo-Assyrian kings were at the absolute height of their power. The excavated ruins of their cities and the monuments therein still testify to this. The mere mention of their names conjures up a picture of political absolutes and frenzied activities. The capital of Ashurnasirpal II was Nimrud (ancient Calah) and his palaces were decorated with huge stone reliefs showing his adventures in war and peace. Whether we look at the detailed carvings of captives being taken prisoner and deported or the king hunting lions, these pictorial annals (continuous narratives) are of a quite different order from what we have seen in Babylonia.

The material and the large scale are the two most significant physical aspects of Neo-Assyrian sculpture. There was no shortage of stone. The mountains where the blocks were quarried gave the Assyrians a sense of scale, and with the determination of true conquerors their immediate environment, their palaces, was transformed by these massive stones with their engraved images. Pairs of giant winged human-headed lion or bull figures were carved to guard important entrances, and a large statue of the ruler gave his people a new focal point. A different orientation of cult and worship had occurred. As in Babylonia, the king had a divine mandate and was seen to serve his god, temple and people. Ashurnasirpal II and his
successors for the next two centuries recognised the propaganda value of cult symbols and made these their own. (The mythological hybrid figure of a man that is part eagle and part bull or part lion has retained its symbolic significance even for us, although within a different contextual use, for we associate with these hybrid images the four evangelists of the New Testament.)

The Assyrians were also skilled in bronze casting and, despite the fact that metals had to be imported, they worked extensively in this medium. However, like their predecessors, they periodically reused the metal of unfashionable statues which would deprive us of earlier examples of their bronze or silver casts. Destruction and looting, too, were as much of a problem as during other periods in history. Another destructive element, of course, is time itself. Either the wear and loss of finishes due to the decomposition of the material, or the staining of buried objects, inevitably alters the original appearance of works of art.

Seeing Assyrian stone carvings as they are in their present state, the museum visitor may assume that their bland stone colour, whether that of limestone or basalt, determined their original appearance. But our eyes quickly adjust to the monochrome surfaces of the reliefs and can pick out

Fig. 1–5 Lowering the Great Winged Bull. Drawing by A.H. Layard (1848), as shown in *Nineveh and its Remains*. 

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the subtle surface variations of the low relief or follow the incised lines as we do a tracing.

Fig. 1–6 Winged human-headed lion, North-West Palace, Nimrud. Drawing by A.H. Layard.

Most of these upright stone reliefs, or orthostats, once decorated the interiors of palaces at Nimrud, Khorsabad and Nineveh and could be viewed from close proximity, as they can be now in museums. Every detail could be read and the development of the narrative could be followed as the onlooker walked along or faced the walls. The clear depiction of animate or inanimate objects resembles unbroken line drawings made with a stylus or an engraving tool. The sculptors paid attention to the various patterns, whether those of hairstyles, dress, the swirling waters of a river or the texture of plants. These compositions show verve, imagination and an ability to transfer observations made from nature into a hard medium. The haunting image of a dying lion shows not only realism but empathy with a creature’s final struggle with defeat.
Fig 1–7 Carved orthostat depicting Ashurnasirpal II, the sandals still showing traces of paint. Acc. No. BM ME 124564. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.

Movement and dragging weight, uproar and anguish, motions and emotions, are all there and captured in this timeless image. The relief carvings introduce new visual concepts. In these panoramic fields of vision life unfolds scene by scene. The viewer participates in events and histories as his eyes follow the characters and actions portrayed. They are
different from the static images of deities or god-kings to which the
worshipper did homage. The orthostats were designed to glorify the might
of an earthly ruler.

Ashurnasirpal II did just that: he had his deeds told, not only in these
carved low reliefs but also on a block of sandstone placed near the
doorway to the throne room of his palace in Calah. The lengthy text tells
of his various exploits and also how he “took over again the city of Calah”
and built himself a palace:

I erected as my royal seat and for my personal enjoyment (text: 8) beautiful
halls … ; I sheathed doors … with bands of bronze; … I surrounded them
[the doors] with decorative bronze bolts; to proclaim my heroic deeds I
painted on their (the palaces’) walls with vivid blue paint how I have
marched across the mountain ranges, the foreign countries and these as, my
conquests in all countries; I had lapis lazuli coloured glazed bricks made
and set (them in the wall) above their gates.

From the same text, we gain further insight into his building
programme and can judge with what pride Ashurnasirpal II refurbished the
interiors of his palaces:

I erected in Calah, the center of my over-lordship, temples such as
those of Enlil and Ninurta which did not exist there before; I rebuilt in it
the (following) temples of the great gods: the temples of Ea-sharru (and)
Damkina, of Adad (and) Shala, of Gula, Sin, Nabu, Belet-nathi, Sibittu
(and of) Ishtar-kidmuri. In them I established the (sacred) pedestals of
the(se), my divine lords. I decorated them splendidly; I roofed them with
cedar beams, made large cedar doors, sheathed them with bands of bronze,
placed them in their doorways. I placed figural representations made of
shining bronze in their doorways. I made (the images of) their great
godheads sumptuous with red gold and shining stones. I presented them
with golden jewelry and many other precious objects which I had won as
booty.

I lined the inner shrine of my lord Ninurta with gold and lapis lazuli, I
placed right and left of it IM objects made of bronze I placed at his
pedestal fierce usumgalu-dragons of gold. … I fashioned a statue of
myself as king in the likeness of my own features out of red gold and
polished stones and placed it before my lord Ninurta.

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The royal account is in marked contrast to the impression of the
Assyrians’ restraint regarding colour conveyed by their large-scale
sculpture. King Assurnasirpal’s description reflects not only his pride and
narcissistic delight in a statue which he considered a good likeness of
himself, but also his pleasure in the decorative scheme of his palace, with no costs spared in having his might painted on the walls or engraved on stone slabs. His use of terms such as “vivid blue”, “red gold” and “polished stones” reveals the ruler’s sense of colour. Interestingly, he singled out blue, but then the blue of lapis lazuli was the most costly colour for painting, just as purple was for dyeing cloth.

But what are we, twenty-eight centuries later, to make of this description? Did he refer to actual wall paintings or to an entire decorative scheme which would have included the huge stone reliefs or orthostats that lined the length of the walls?

The Assyrian kings had vivid scenes painted on the interior walls of their palaces and temples, as we know from archaeological finds. Of these colour washes were made, and where possible samples were transferred to museums. Archaeologists noted that the monotonous grey-brown surfaces of the reliefs still had some colours left. Indeed, the observant visitor to the Assyrian galleries at the British Museum will be rewarded, for there are just a few traces left which tie these apparently monochrome stone slabs into a colour scheme which the English archaeologist Austen Henry Layard colourfully visualised when he had his reconstruction of Assurnasirpal’s throne room published in 1849. Later Assyrologists would agree that the details of this reconstruction are wrong, but that the scene as a whole carries conviction.

Traces can be seen on reliefs that come from two different periods and locations. Red and black are still to be seen on the footwear worn by the figures depicted on seven carved panels from Nimrud in about 865 BC. These are also the colours of other details, such as a bow or an arrow, on different reliefs. Black beards, the whites of eyes and yellow jewellery are also visible. Other examples were carved over two hundred years later for the North Palace at Nineveh and show protective spirits. One of the genii, Ugullu or “Great Lion”, still shows traces of red paint on the feathered mane of its lionhead.

Even so, it may take some vivid imagination to picture (as one museum guide encouraged her party to do) the red of the blood spewing out from a lion’s mouth or oozing out of the wounds inflicted on attacked animals or men. The eye-witness accounts of excavators at Nimrud and Nineveh have convinced us that colour meant a great deal to the people in Ancient Mesopotamia, for they saw painted walls or objects in a much better preserved state.

Although we can still catch a glimpse here and there of a little red or some black, white, yellow or blue, and we also can take Assurnasirpal’s liking for blue as trustworthy evidence, this begs a question: which other
colours elude our perception? The archaeologist Julian Reade also gives us an imaginative insight into the environment which the ancient Mesopotamians created for themselves:

As the sculptures were closely related to paintings, they were naturally painted. The Ashurnasirpal sculptures, on the whole the best preserved we have, had at the time of excavation extensive traces of black paint on the hair, white on the whites of the eyes, red in various places; the palace of Sargon at Khorsabad included scenes in which the vegetation was found to be painted blue, possibly a decayed copper green. ... It is nonetheless puzzling that more traces of painting have not been recorded. Otherwise the palaces were colourful places, with wall-paintings on the plastered walls above the sculptured panelling. ... Paintings in the main royal palaces of the ninth century seem to have had a rich blue ground, with details mainly in black, white, and red; later there was a wider range of colours. There were also panels of painted bricks, glazed, which decorated exterior walls, brightened the crenellations, or lined the arches above the major gateways. Colour at ground-level was provided by rich carpets, some of which were imitated in stone. We can hardly imagine the sculptures as dull virtually monochrome bands in deliberate tasteful contrast with their gaudy surroundings.

Two observations need to be made for which we may have no plausible answer. Firstly, the colour yellow seems conspicuously absent. Secondly, the carvings are incredibly detailed and subtle. The Nimrud panels in particular reveal something of the richness of garments and objects, such as the sheaths of swords and the quivers which were finely decorated with miniature scenes. These were incised into the stone with the skill of an engraver. Why go to so much trouble when much of it may get covered up by paint – that is, if those scenes were ever meant to be painted?

Two possibilities spring to mind. On the one hand, the incisions may have been used like “tracings” for the benefit of the painter who needed to know which parts to pick out with his restricted range of colours. On the other hand, the bands above the hems of the robes, or the containers for weapons, could have been overlaid with very thin gold leaf. The burnishing of the gold would have helped to show up the incised linear design.

If gold leaf were once applied, that would account for the fact that the colour yellow is missing, for gold and yellow may have been interchanged as colour values. Also any sheath or quiver, as shown here in relief, was probably made of metal, perhaps gold or silver, into which images could be engraved for decoration. It is not very likely that such items were painted with garish colours. However, the application of gold leaf would...
have required elaborate preparation of the ground onto which to lay the gold and there appears no evidence for this, at least not to the naked eye. If metal covering were involved, the possibility of its peeling off, rather than wearing off as with colour pigments, would effectively remove the applied surface and expose the bare stone. In such a case however archaeologists would surely have found traces of gold leaf in the debris or a tiny amount on the stone itself.

A similar problem presented itself to archaeologists examining the carved limestone reliefs at the Persian capitals of Pasargadae, founded by Cyrus the Great (559–530 BC), and Persepolis, which Darius began to construct around 520 BC. As in the case of the Nimrud panels, they found traces of various colours, notably at Persepolis. Red, blue, white, green and a blue–green mixture were noted. Yellow proper was missing on the reliefs, although a sherd found on the terrace contained some yellow ochre. Another sample of yellow appearance was analysed as being a colourless transparent substance showing up as yellow, some brownish-yellow which visually is registered as tan, or an orange colour which changed with time to yellow. A small piece of gold leaf was also discovered which was of the thickness of 2 micro millimetres and embedded in a large lump of material among the samples of Egyptian blue. Although no pieces of metal leaf had been found on the reliefs at the time of the investigation in 1983, the archaeologists working on the two sites suspected that gold leaf might have been used along with paints in the decoration of Persepolis.

The late C.J. Gadd of the British Museum, who in 1934 published his volume on the Assyrian sculptures, thought that:

there can be little doubt that colour was in fact used rather sparingly, and only to emphasize details … . So far as the [Nimrud] sculptures were concerned, the colours in use seem to have been restricted to black, white, blue and red, certainly in the ninth century, and probably until the seventh. The range of colours used in the wall paintings and enamelled bricks was more extended, as may be seen in the specimens collected in the Assyrian Room. For these yellow was introduced at least by the time of Tukulti-Enurta II, the predecessor of Assurnasirpal, and was freely employed by him; green does not seem to appear before the end of the eighth century.

While the issue raised here about the presence or absence of certain colour substances remains inconclusive, we need to be aware of the fact that not only may colour application be influenced by the availability of colour substances at a given time and in a particular location, but that cultural and regional preferences probably played their part.
As the evidence of colour in sculpture gradually emerges, often after painstaking sampling procedures and analyses in laboratories, we need to bear in mind that not every type of relief or monument was necessarily coloured. Because of their function and position kudurrus or boundary stones, stelae and obelisks probably remained unpainted. This may also be assumed of the numerous statues of Gudea, the ruler of Lagash (c. 2130 BC). Gudea had on one of his images proudly engraved “this statue is neither of metal nor lapis lazuli; no one has riveted it with copper, lead or iron: it is made of diorite”. Indeed, the majority of the over thirty extant Gudea statues were carved in diorite, a rock which when incised and left unpolished has a golden appearance.

The primary function of the kudurrus was the recording of major land grants, generally involving the king. The stelae and obelisks proclaimed the law of the land or let royal deeds be known. The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC) was erected in a prominent position in the centre of Nimrud in 825 BC, shortly before the death of the Assyrian king. The obelisk glorifies the achievements of Shalmaneser and his chief minister, a shrewd political tactic during a time of civil strife in his country. The sheen of the densely grained, slightly polished surface of the dark stone helps to emphasise the crisp incisions of the cuneiform script and the detailed carvings of the figures. The matt and the polished surfaces help to differentiate images or writing and their background.

The Code of King Hammurabi (1792–1750 BC) is a conical stele of hard, black polished diorite 2.25 metres high which stands like an upright finger with the image of the ruler in prayer carved on the nail. The “code” dictated by the king was inscribed into the stone in cuneiform characters in the Akkadian language below the image. This stele was discovered in 1901 at Susa in south-western Iran, whither it had been taken by the Elamites as royal booty from Babylon. Also, many kuddurus were taken by the Elamites when they overthrew the Kassite dynasty in 1157 BC. A kudduru from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (1125–1104 BC) found at Sippar shows carved symbols of different gods invoked for the protection of the legal arrangements.

One such symbol shows a rainbow arching over a horse’s head. This rainbow may be the closest connection between polychromy and the stelae of ancient times. The allusion to the rainbow and its various connotations has its proper place in Babylonia and deserves our attention. On a stele taken to Susa the symbols were identified and given their literary meaning. Thus, we know that the crown of the god Ninurta was described as a rainbow. Apparently manzat, the Akkadian word for “rainbow”, was also...
the name of a goddess and of a star in the constellation Andromeda. It may be this star that is illustrated as a rainbow arching over a horse’s head. Moreover, the Sumerian city of Uruk was given the literary name of “Rainbow”.32 We shall find the deep-rooted cult symbol to have a significant place in our discussion of colour, even in modern sculpture.

A.H. Layard, who directed the excavation of the massive stone sculptures of winged bulls, produced later a coloured reconstruction of a palatial interior with such sculptures in place. He made them appear partially painted. While today there are no traces of colour left, Layard remarked in his writings on the fact that some colour was still visible during the excavation but that it quickly disappeared once exposed to the atmosphere.33 He noted some dark pigments in the eyes of the stony creatures.

While polychromy seems (to us) impractical or out of keeping with these huge stone figures, we nevertheless have to consider it probable in view of what was wanted at the time. Indeed, the glazed brick reliefs of lions and bulls on the gates of Babylon, and of Mischwesen (composite creatures) on the palace walls at Khorsabad, were imposing images not only because of their size and position, but also because of the colours involved.34

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The man-headed winged bulls, also known as Guardians of the Gates, appear to be freestanding. This is because of the added fifth leg which, when viewed either from the front or from the side, gives the impression of a figure in the round, in spite of being set into the wall. The dimensions of the gates themselves were in keeping with the size of their stony guardians. Although the wooden constructions of the gates or doors have not survived, the bronze fittings of doors for a royal building at Balawat (about 845 BC) have been found which provided the measurements for a modern reconstruction displayed in the British Museum. The pair of door leaves each had a vertical post which rested in a bronze socket and at the top was held by a band and cap of metal. Equally spaced along either post were the loop endings of eight horizontal strips of embossed bronze, and attached to these were the wooden uprights which made up the actual leaves of the doors.

As with the bas-reliefs in stone, the bronze strips were decorated with design in relief. This introduces us to yet another aspect of ancient craftsmanship: metalwork. Already as early as the fourth millennium BC, casting – notably lost-wax casting – was the most important technique employed in small-scale as well as large-scale statuary. Even when bronze
alloys of tin and copper were known, the castings of statuary were still in copper, a difficult option as not even lead was added as a flux. Still, a particularly fine piece of copper casting has come down from the Akkadian period (about 2350–2200 BC) of a life-size royal head from Nineveh, perhaps that of King Sargon of Agade (Baghdad Museum).  

When Herodotus wrote *The Histories* in the fifth century BC he referred to “the Assyrians [who] went to war with helmets upon their heads made of brass and plaited in a strange fashion which is not easy to describe”. Head gear of the kind that fits his description was already in fashion around 2600 BC, such as a gold helmet now in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, a show-piece of great craftsmanship which came from the Royal Cemetery of Ur. Like the strips of bronze from Balawat, it had been worked in repoussé, a technique which produces a (low) relief by punching into a thin sheet of metal from the back and, as a rule, over a core of bitumen. When finished – that is, after the surface of the design has been chased or engraved and finally polished – copper or bronze objects will have a yellowish to reddish colour, depending on the copper content of the alloy. Bronze finds from antiquity will have changed their colour; the bright tawny colour will have darkened to anything between a green and a brownish-black shade.

Clearly, metals have colours which can be, and have been, adroitly exploited at all periods by metalworkers. White silver, white to reddish-gold, yellow brass, black iron and red copper were effectively used in combination with one another or with altogether different materials. More will be said of this later. None of the base metals, including tin, lead, nickel, zinc and antimony, was locally available in either Babylonia or Assyria. The nearest, or perhaps most accessible, copper mine was probably at or near Ergani Maden on the upper Euphrates and was perhaps producing ore as early as 6000 BC. This area is part of a copper belt which stretches from Iran across Anatolia and Cyprus to Sinai.

There have been finds of hammered copper objects at Cayanii (sixth millennium BC) and a small heap of ore and many pieces of copper slag at Narsun Tepe (c. 3500 BC), a hill near the copper belt on the upper Euphrates, all of which have been examined for the metal constituents of the ore. The crystalline type of ore also revealed the existence of blue azurite, green malachite, white quartz and barite and red brown antimony-ochre. Colour pigments may well have been traded together with the copper.
One more material must be considered here: ivory, which has a unique and fascinating appeal because of its white colour and silken sheen. In ancient times not only were ivory objects desired because they appealed aesthetically, but they also epitomised wealth and luxury. At Nimrud there have been particularly rich ivory finds which offer a unique insight into the type and style of artefacts and the trade in ivory objects. During the first millennium many of the ivory objects came from Syria and Phoenicia by way of trade, and also as part of the tribute paid by the conquered Aramaean tribes. The Syrians were renowned for their ivory carvings and ivory inlaid furniture. It seems that Syrian craftsmen skilled in this valuable trade were part of the tribute, which meant that their skill and labour were put to good use for the benefit of the Assyrian kings. This would explain the quantity of ivories and style of workmanship not native to Assyria.

Although ivory carvings were often inlaid with gold and semi-precious stones or overlaid with gold which gave them additional colour, it seems that the ivory itself was generally left in its natural state. However, ivory does stain and change its original colour under certain circumstances, for instance when subjected to high temperatures. After a time lapse of some three thousand years it is extremely difficult to determine whether the discolorations – ranging between yellow, brown, black and grey-blue shades – were accidental or intended. The Phoenician carving of a female head that comes from Nimrud and is now in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad shows heavy discoloration which seems to add its own charm to this piece of ivory carving.

Many of the Nimrud ivories show Egyptianising designs with sphinxes and hieroglyphic inscriptions. Phoenician craftsmen of the eighth century BC not only assimilated foreign design ideas themselves, but also had these spread abroad. It is the small-scale object that travels lightly and thus becomes the most likely influence by spreading images and stylistic concepts further afield. But also it is the traveller, such as Herodotus, who sees, remembers and tells of the wonders or foreign customs he has met on his journeys. More wondrous works have been made, lost and found again since his days. For us questions remain. What motivated these early craftsmen? What were their intentions? Why did they do things the way they did? Why, for instance, did they want colour in sculpture?
Notes


3. Ibid., p. 8; bitumen was also applied as a paint.


5. In Genesis 4:15 we read of Cain being marked for his protection after he had killed his brother Abel.


7. Ibid., p. 8.

8. A pair of goat figures were found; one was given to the British Museum, the other object is in the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia, USA. The second figure is 51 cm high.


14. The Ancient Near East. A New Anthology of Extant Pictures. Vol. 2. Edited by James B. Pritchard (1975), pp. 100–101. This slab was found in 1951. (Pritchard has sandstone, not limestone.)


16. Lapis lazuli, carnelian and gold possessed important ritual values, but how the rituals and the symbolism were manifested is not entirely clear.


18. It has been suggested that they were temple personnel. (Dr D. Collon’s personal communication.)

19. Written communication: Dr Dominique Collon, who pointed out that some yellow traces are still visible, although there is no evidence for the keying in of gold leaf or the forced removal of it. But see also J.A. Lerner (note 20), who refers to the problem of the missing yellow and the possible evidence of traces of it in Persepolis. Astrid Nunn, on the other hand, alerts us to the fact that colours were most probably used differently depending on locality and time, as Gadd already
indicated (A. Nunn, pp. 230–231: “Die Perser und die Mesopotamier gebrauchen die Farben anders”).

20 J.A. Lerner, “A painted relief from Persepolis”, in *Archaeology* (1973), pp. 116–122. He refers to Egyptian blue, a synthetic pigment. (The Persian King Darius visited Egypt in 520 BC.)

21 W.F. Leemans (1952), p. 17, mentions that offerings were made to her in form of statuettes of clay or sometimes of precious metals.


23 W. F. Leemans (1952) “Ishtar of Lagaba and her dress.” In *Studia ad tabulas cuneiformas collectas ab de liagre Böhl pertinentia, SLB I (1)

24 The *mushhushhu* (raging dragon or furious snakes) on the gate of Nebuchadnezzar’s Ishtar temple at Babylon was crafted from 77 glazed bricks (yellow, black, white and green in colour, each measuring on average 32 x 25 cm. See *MINERVA*, Vol. 8, No. 1.


29 “Identification of ancient Persian pigment from Persepolis and Pasargadae”, L. Stodulski, E. Farrell and R. Newman, in *Studies in Conservation*, 29 (1984), pp. 143–154. The article includes four tables showing the results of the analyses of pigments found at Persepolis and at Pasargadae. The blue colour from Persepolis is Egyptian blue; a sample which proved to be azurite was also found. The majority of colour samples were taken from Persepolis, while from Pasargadae only a red pigment (hematite and hematite with a trace of cinnabar) was analysed. The authors stated (p. 148) that “Egyptian blue was manufactured as early as the IV Dynasty (c. 2600 BC) in Egypt, and was later widely used throughout the Near East and in Greece and Rome and by about AD 250 had spread as far as Norway.”


33 A. H. Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains* (1970), p. 134: Layard mentioned that on a gigantic head discovered at Nimrud black paint had originally been applied; and in the same location he observed that on the flooring, below the sculptures, considerable remains of painted plaster still adhered to the sun-dried bricks, which had fallen in masses from the upper part of the wall. The colours, particularly the blues and reds, were as brilliant and vivid when the earth was removed from them, as they could have been when first used. On exposure to the air they faded rapidly.
34 See Layard’s drawings in the British Museum.
35 King Sennacherib’s records of the restoration of the palace at Nineveh (700 BC) mentioned the brightness of metal and stone: “Mighty cedar beams covered with sheathing of bright bronze and set them up in their doors. Out of white limestone, which is found in the country of the city of Baladai, I had mighty colossos fashioned and stationed right and left of their entrances.” (See Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylon*, Vol. II, p. 180).