

Animal Motifs on Prehistoric Pottery in Mesopotamia

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore the symbolic and artistic significance of animal motifs depicted by ancient humans, focusing on their application to pottery and their lasting influence on subsequent artistic traditions. **Method:** A qualitative analysis was conducted by examining various animal motifs painted on ancient pottery vessels, complemented by a historical review of their cultural and functional contexts. The study analyzed the use of natural pigments and artistic techniques employed despite the limited tools available during the period. **Results:** The findings reveal that animal motifs served multiple purposes, including protection from perceived dangers, magical practices in hunting, and artistic expression. These motifs, characterized by their symbolic nature and precise execution, illustrate the aesthetic sensibilities of ancient Iraqi artists. Their enduring presence influenced artistic developments in later eras, indicating a continuity of symbolic representation in Mesopotamian art. **Novelty:** This research highlights the early integration of symbolic motifs in utilitarian objects, demonstrating how primitive artistic practices contributed to the evolution of cultural and artistic identities in ancient Iraq, an aspect often underrepresented in existing archaeological studies.

INTRODUCTION

Art is one of the most important pillars of human life on Earth [1]. It embodies the extent of human intellectual development and maturity through the use of tools, colors, and decorations, whether geometric or natural. Among these are animal motifs, which have multiple connotations, the most important of which are symbolic and artistic. Humans used symbols to express their surroundings, indicating their strength or importance in the process of fertility and reproduction. For example, the symbolism of the bull reflected the importance of daily life through its uses, such as plowing and pulling carts.

As for the artistic aspect, it was expressed in a precise and realistic style, despite the use of simple tools and plant colors to color these decorations or animal shapes executed on the surfaces of pottery vessels, uncovered by excavations, whether foreign or ornamental, in a number of Mesopotamian sites, including, most notably, Hassuna, Halaf, Samarra, and Al-Ubaid, all of which date back historically to prehistoric times [2], [3].

RESEARCH METHOD

Decoration, both linguistically and technically

Linguistically, decoration means adornment and the perfection of something, and the decorated one means the one who decorates. Decoration is the art of adorning objects with engraving, embroidery, or inlay. It is mentioned in the Holy Quran in four surahs:

Al-An'am, Al-Isra, Yunus, and Az-Zukhruf [4]. Technically, decoration is an artistic work based on regular and irregular work with various types of decorative motifs, whether animal, geometric, or plant. These motifs are based on a set of elements in their composition and construction, such as the foundation, sequence, overlap, contrast, repetition, and symmetry [5].

The Beginning of Animal Ornamentation: The remarkable material remains left behind by ancient humans demonstrate a desire to choose decorative forms to adorn some of their daily necessities. Ornamentation has been used in various fields since ancient times. The concept of ornamentation is linked to the adornment of the original composition of a shape with diverse decorative units derived from nature as symbols with many meanings to express their many and varied ideas. Through the groups, decorative elements developed. Evidence of humans' practice of magnificent artistic works and their use of ornamentation is represented by engravings and drawings that included numerous and diverse scenes of plant and animal forms found in the environment. Therefore, the environment was an important source from which ancient humans drew inspiration for many diverse decorative elements, depending on the natural environment and its components. The inhabitants of the agricultural villages in the Neolithic Age (seventh millennium BC) came up with the invention of pottery industry to meet their daily needs instead of using stone and tree branches to make baskets and cooking utensils, to transport and preserve water and other liquids, to store agricultural crops and to use them in religious rituals [6]. This made pottery one of the necessary industries in which man was creative, leaving his artistic mark on it, as he took the surfaces of those pottery forms as a field to express his feelings, emotions and artistic abilities, in addition to archiving past events. The Neolithic Age represents the actual beginning of the development of human artistic activity, as previous artistic activities were transformed from drawing and sculpture that were practiced in previous eras to engravings and decorations to decorate pottery vessels, the manufacture of which developed clearly in the role of Hassuna, as the pottery works revealed at the beginning of the Stone Age (mid-sixth millennium BC) revealed a new phase of importance in the history of ancient Iraq, as it was manifested in artistic and aesthetic creativity. Interest appeared in decorating vessels and communicating to know the arts of polishing, engraving and drawing. Samarra pottery (5000 BC) in this era occupied the interest of archaeological researchers, and was known by this name in relation to the city of Samarra, located about 120 km north of the capital, Baghdad. The German mission, under the supervision of the researcher Herzfeld, excavated in 1911 AD, as it found a type of pottery dating back to the late Neolithic and the beginning of the Stone Age, in which animal decorations appeared alongside geometric decorations, as we notice the appearance of fish, birds, bulls and other wild and domestic animals. These decorations were executed in one color, which is light black on a yellow background. Either in the Halaf era (4500 BC), which is considered an important civilizational role in the history of the civilization of Mesopotamia, as this era received the attention of archaeologists and researchers because of the artistic innovations that occurred in it in several fields, and this era was

called Halaf in relation to the hill called Halaf or Khalaf, located on the Khabur River near the village of Ras al-Ain on the Turkish-Syrian border. This site was excavated for the first time by a German archaeological mission under the supervision and leadership of Max Oppenheim in 1911 AD. The features of this civilization spread in northern Mesopotamia, Syria and Anatolia. The animal decorations in the Halaf era included domestic and wild animals, birds and fish, and these animals give us a clear picture of the reality of the natural environment in which humans lived in that era. These decorations were executed in a precise style with complex designs, with bright colors an authentic Iraqi product, was named after an archaeological mound located near the ancient city of Ur in southern Iraq, dating back to 4000 BC. This mound was excavated by a British expedition in 1923-1924 AD. Pottery with animal motifs, such as birds and horned animals such as goats, gazelles, and elk, was found there. These motifs were executed in a single color, such as black or bright red, on a green background.

Animal shapes and their artistic and symbolic significance

Ancient man was able to surround himself with a vast number of symbols that carried specific connotations and meanings derived from his environment and the culture in which he lived. These symbols reflect a visual image of man's thinking about nature and the dominant forces [7].

Whether religious or secular, symbols were interpreted from the religious side as the existence of countless things outside human consciousness. Thus, the symbol indicates the form of something that has an independent presence that replaces the language of suggestion and is in the form of an image, statue, or sign that indicates the meaning of the symbol. Man's fear of the unknown led him to respect all the forces affecting him and surrounding him, and animals were one of those influential forces. The relationship between man and animal goes back to prehistoric times. We notice this in the art of drawings and engravings that decorate the walls of caves, as man depicted animals in numerous scenes that have religious and secular meanings, as man used them for his livelihood and sought protection from some of them and avoided others due to their ferocity and brutality [8]. This is what reflected the importance of the animal on the religious side, so it became a symbol of religion and thought. Therefore, animals played a prominent role in the religion of Mesopotamia, as they believed that animal spirits communicated with and influenced the gods. Therefore, they became a link between them and the gods. The symbolic importance of animals lies in their companionship with humans since their existence on Earth. They were always feared and avoided in many ways, including magic and the symbols they drew on the walls of their caves. At the same time, they were used as a food source, a means of transportation, and assistance in agricultural work. Either from the artistic aspect of the animal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The scorpion and the deer

The scorpion is one of the most important and famous animals in Mesopotamia, as it has been known since the Samarra era until the present time. It was known in the

Sumerian language as (GIR) J.A.; 99)), and its equivalent in the Akkadian language is (aqrabu) (CAD,A,2,P-207:b), as well as the term (Zuqaqipu) (CAD,Z,P.163:a). The scorpion had a high status in the hearts of the people of Mesopotamia, so it was considered a source of good and evil. Archaeological excavations in Tell al-Sawan revealed a pottery vessel dating back to the Samarra era, in which animal decorations were executed, consisting of eight scorpions revolving around four women whose hair falls on the left side of the vessel, and they have exaggeratedly large buttocks and shoulders, forming something resembling the Maltese cross (see Figure 1_A). The researcher believes that this condition represents or expresses some sadness caused by the scorpion, and this is what was confirmed by archaeological excavations in the Tell al-Sawan site for the graves of many children. 1971, p. 40), and there is an opinion that believes it is a celebration or what is called the rain dance, which is the time of reproduction and fertility, so the symbol of a scorpion in this form is evidence that it is the active element in this role, and we note that the ancient Iraqi artist.

He excelled in depicting the situation in a wonderful artistic way, using dark red to paint the women and scorpions against a yellow background. As for the ibex, it held significance for the inhabitants of Mesopotamia. Archaeological excavations in the city of Samarra revealed a group of pottery vessels (see Figures 1b, 1c, 1d) decorated with ibex running and spinning, depicted in an abstract manner. These pottery motifs were interpreted as incantations or symbols of a magical nature. They were characterized by communication in the quality of thought, with the aim of continuing their symbolic meaning between the earthly world and the afterlife. Such motifs represent social activities undertaken by the inhabitants of Samarra to achieve a means to activate collective activity systems, and these motifs are emotional expressions that embody the suffering of the human spirit [9], [10], [11], [12].

2. The snake

The snake was known in the Sumerian language as (MUŠ- TUR), and in the Akkadian language as (nirāḥu) (Labat Rene, undated 369). The snake had an important position among the inhabitants of the ancient Near East, especially in Mesopotamia, and this appears clear through the works and tasks that were assigned to it (Al-Ahmadani, Sumer Magazine, 2008, p. 1). We know this through the material and written remains that have reached us through the different eras, as it was used in the treatment of epidemics and diseases or what is related to fertility and offspring (46, C. Skinner). The oldest appearance of the snake clearly on pottery reached us from the Halaf era from the site of Arbajiya, and the snake also represents a symbol of the generative forces in the earth since the early ages (Ahmed, Imad Shaker and others; undated, 355). Archaeological excavations at the site of Arbajiya revealed a piece of pottery on which the shape of a snake was executed, see Figure 2 in an attacking form, and it was depicted in an abstract manner.

3. The bull (bull's head)

The bull was known in the Sumerian language as (GU4), and its equivalent in the Akkadian language is (alpu). In Mesopotamia, the bull was associated with a variety of

gods. This association was explained by the possibility of comparing the characteristics of the bull with the characteristics of various gods and their similarity to them, including fertility traits, whether agricultural or genetic. We note that the horns or heads of bulls were depicted in various forms (see Figure 3), and we note that they were drawn in an abstract manner and in different directions. 4- Birds: Birds in their various forms were among the animals that received the attention and sanctification of ancient Iraqi man. The reason for this is due to man's relationship with them from many aspects, including the religious and magical ritual aspect for the purpose of hunting. This is what excavations in the village of Zawi Jimi revealed about the remains of bones of a group of birds with skeletons representing falcons. Pottery vessels were also found on which a group of birds were drawn. The date of these vessels goes back to the Halaf era. The purpose of decorating the birds was for decorative purposes. These birds were drawn symbolically in the form of movement and in a state of rotation and repetition (see Figure 4-5-6). The ancient Iraqi artist was creative in implementing in a realistic way what was going on in his imagination and what his eye saw in a wonderful and precise way, despite the simple tools he used in his artistic work [9], [13], [14], [15].

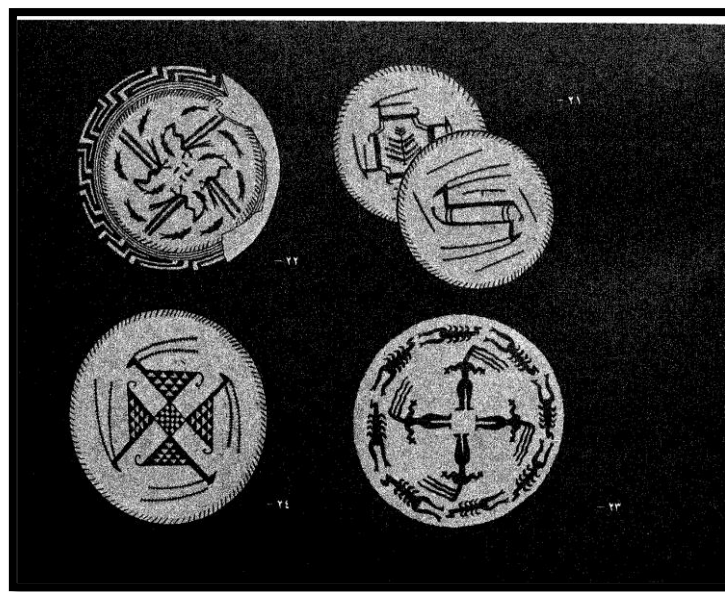


Figure 1. Source: Okasha, Tharwat. History of Art, (n.d.), p. 95.

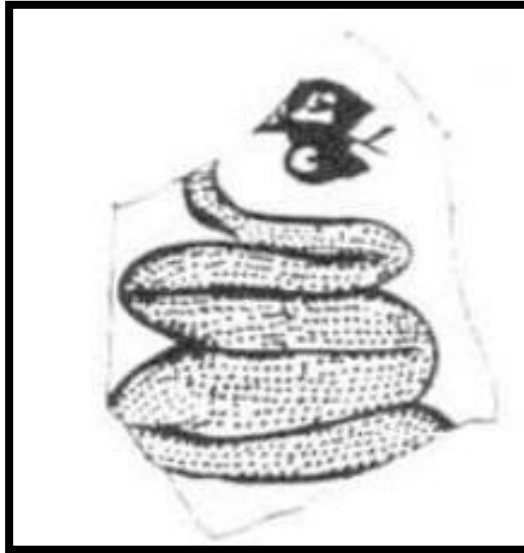


Figure 2. Source: Maisels; Charles Keith; Early Civilizations of the Old World, Landan, 1999, p. 22.

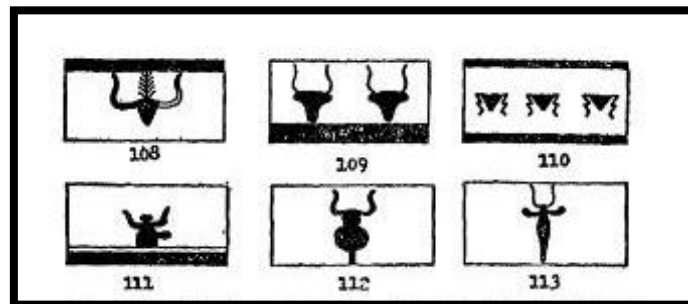


Figure 3. Source: Al-Dabbagh, Muhammad Taqi. Pottery in Prehistoric Times, Civilization of Iraq, (Baghdad, 1985), Vol. 3, p. 20.



Figure 4. Source: Okasha, Tharwat, History of Art, (n.d.), p. 98.

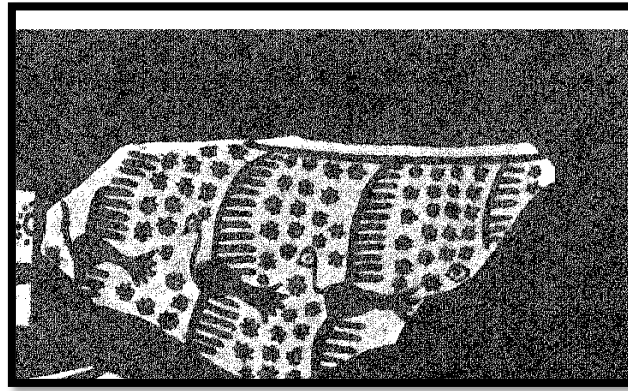


Figure 5. Source: Okasha, Tharwat, the same source, p. 100.

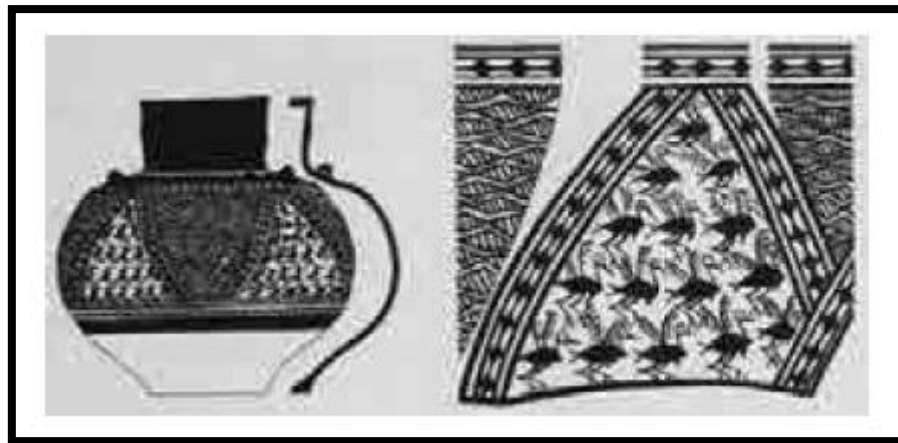


Figure 6. Goff, Beatrice Laura, Symbols of Prehistoric Mesopotamia , London, Yale University, 1963, fig. 81.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : The artistic achievements of ancient Iraqis reveal a sophisticated aesthetic sensibility manifested through precise depictions of daily life, innovative decoration techniques, and symbolic interpretations deeply rooted in their environment, religion, and rituals. Their use of repetition and rotation, especially with animal forms, demonstrates an early mastery of artistic methods that would influence successive civilizations. **Implication :** These findings underscore the importance of considering environmental and cultural factors in the evolution of early artistic expressions, offering valuable insights into the social and religious dimensions of ancient Mesopotamian society. **Limitation :** However, the study is constrained by the limited availability of well-preserved artifacts and the reliance on secondary sources, which may not capture the full breadth of artistic variation across different periods and regions. **Future Research :** Further interdisciplinary investigations, integrating archaeological discoveries with advanced imaging and reconstruction technologies, are essential to deepen our understanding of the symbolic and technical innovations of ancient Iraqi art.

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