

Popular Art and Official Art: a possible and useful classification in Mesopotamian iconography?

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One of the principal distinctions in the modern system of art classification is that between official art and popular art, sometimes called, respectively major and minor, or “fine” and “applied”¹. Official art is always well considered, as the expression “fine arts” demonstrates, and implies a judgement of an aesthetic value. On the contrary, popular one often lifts problematic judgments. It is neglected as not important², not artistically found, not interested in expression of emotions and not conformed to canonical “beauty”. Sometime it is over-estimated upon moot reasons: “popular” is like “simple”, “more truthful”, “more lively”³.

¹ Quite a few books are concerned with these definitions in Europe, being used for long, since Medieval times: see, for example, Talon-Hugon 2008; Court 2002; de Maison Rouge 2002; Makravis 2002, 588-593; Cometti, Morizot and Pouivet eds. 2005, 7-18 and 33-99. The bibliography in the USA is more developed in reference to contemporary art and to “mass culture”. Some recent analyses concerning the Ancient Near East try to overcome these concepts: Winter 1989, 321-332; Mazzoni 2001, 292-309; Suter and Uehlinger eds. 2005; Matthiae and Romano eds., 2010¹, 615-1031. The last ICAANE, held in Warsaw (2012), dealt with these subjects within the framework of the third theme.

² «Les arts mineurs (principalement décoratifs) produisent des formes dont la fonction signifiante et l’impact émotionnel sont réduits à peu de chose» (Mavrakis 2002, 590). «Les arts mineurs constituent à cet égard une zone indécise à la frontière de ce qui est de l’art et de ce qui ne l’est pas» (*ibid.*, 591).

³ But in the academic world, the prejudices against “minor art” are still present: Korichi 2007, 173-207; Cometti Morizot and Pouivet eds. 2005, 8-16; Talon-Hugon 2008. Some philosophers in aesthetic consider as the basis to judge an artistic work its aesthetic satisfaction, that is, its beauty: Mavrakis 2002, 583-590.

What do these modern definitions mean if used for ancient cultures? How can they help us in understanding ancient productions?⁴ Today, according to the most used term, an object is considered of popular art⁵ if it is made with a poor material, in a serialization production, in a linear and not naturalistic style. But also if its producer and its consumer belong to the “popular class”; if the producer is anonymous and, finally; if his or her abilities are only taught orally.

So, in the more widespread definition of popular art four elements are essential: material quality, type of production, style, social class of producer and consumer. Nevertheless, these four conditions are not always honoured. For example, contemporary art manipulates poor, used, daily or even impermanent material⁶. But one couldn't say that this is not official art. Contemporary art employs sometimes a serialization production, when it uses moulds or reproductions of identical subject, in equal technique, in unchanged composition⁷. So, the work of an artist can be identified before reading the picture's legend. This explains why the paintings can be called from the colour used or from the year(s) of their achievement. And the most recent innovations come from the introduction of the computer⁸. Despite these features, such art is considered official⁹.

The style is not a good criterion to designate an artistic creation as popular or official. Linear style is not necessarily linked to popular art.

⁴ Winter (1994, 1995b, 2002, 2007) and Orthmann (2008) try to find the textual expression of beauty as a mark of ancient aesthetical judgement. Bahrani (2003) starts from a programmatic reject of the “colonialistic” approach (=modern use of writing and analysis), even if she doesn't explain how one can better understand art without employing present-day language. Apart from the difficulties to follow her in the simplistic judgements of other scholars, as well as in assertions without developed explanations, she fails to define the specific field of Mesopotamian aesthetic and values, leaving unsolved theoretical points and focusing only in “official” monuments.

⁵ Talon-Hugon 2008; De Maison Rouge 2002.

⁶ Acrylic paint doesn't resist for a long time and museums' inspectors try to resolve this problem: De Maison Rouge 2002, Millet 1987.

⁷ For example, Alechinsky (in Butor & Sicard 1984).

⁸ «La mutation majeure du moment, c'est l'arrivée d'Internet et des techniques numériques, l'ouverture d'un monde de communication totale mais incontrôlable. C'est donc un nouveau rapport au temps qui commence. (...) On entre pour de bon dans le “Postmoderne” vu comme l'après sans mémoire des temps modernes»: De Maison Rouge 2002, 80-81.

⁹ De Maison Rouge 2002.

In the last century of painting history, all kinds of styles were tried and they haven't changed the official definition of this art¹⁰.

At last, the social class of producer and consumer is of a quite difficult definition, if applied to ancient societies. What is "popular class"? This term, invented in Europe during the 18th century CE, is difficult to be applied to all the economic and social situations which existed before.

In this paper I'd like to check if the modern definition of popular and official art also worths for Mesopotamian iconography of historical times and how it helps a better understanding of ancient art¹¹.

I. Is it possible to apply the modern definition of popular art to the Mesopotamian iconography?

According to the definition of popular art as traced before, four elements distinguish official and popular monuments. Could they be applied to ancient Mesopotamia? First of all, it's very difficult to explain the concept of "popular class" in the ancient Mesopotamian society¹². Craft and art production have been discovered in towns, inhabited mostly by elite and by what can be called "middle class". Middle class was formed by well-off people working for temples or in trade, having property ownership and real estate.

The pooriness of the recovered material is a constant feature of Mesopotamian civilization because of the lacking of stone and wood. Clay is the sole Mesopotamian material used everywhere and by everyone in all periods¹³. Temples and palaces, houses, facilities, storage containers, vessels, etc., were made of earth. Literature, legal documents, and private letters were written on tablets of clay. Moreover, clay figurines are attested even in royal palaces.

¹⁰ Zarka 2010, Michaud 1997, Millet 1987.

¹¹ For studies concerning the esthetic, see: Winter 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 2002, 2007, 2010; Feldman 2005, Orthmann 2008, Breniquet 2012, while Bahrani 2002, 2003, 2008 and Steadman & Ross (2010) don't convince. See also Feldman 2004, Browne 2006, Winter 2007 and Fales 2009.

¹² Liverani 2011, Fales 2009-2010.

¹³ Moortgat 1967; Curtis and Reade 1996; Margueron 1997, 2004.

Mesopotamian productions used two kinds of style from the beginning: one was more naturalistic; the other, more linear¹⁴. Thus, the kind of style as defined by modern terminology – linear for popular art and naturalistic for official one – cannot be used for Mesopotamia.

Finally, the conscience of being artist did not exist in Mesopotamia¹⁵. Craftsmen and artists were both anonymous, received the same training in workshops; their main responsibility was to conform with tradition and the furtherance of what people had created before them. Originality was not a criterion of judgement in artistic or craft production. In that sense, the real difference between popular and official art has to be found in special requests, tasks, goods and significance dictated by king or temples' institutions. It is difficult to know whether considerations over social status or income established or not a distinction between artists and craftsmen.

The criteria used today to distinguish official from popular arts don't correspond to the Mesopotamian production of the historical era¹⁶. Other factors support this idea, as the exchanges of iconographic subjects, objects and methods between official and popular art.

II. From official to popular art

Some subjects used in official art shift afterwards in popular production.¹⁷ For example, a “geese goddess”¹⁸ first appears in stone

¹⁴ Cf. Moortgat 1967, Barrelet 1968, Amiet 1981, Spycket 1981, Börker-Klähn 1982, Collon 1982 and 1986, Matthiae 2002, Assante 2002.

¹⁵ Orthmann 2008; Winter 1995b, 2002, 2007; Breniquet 2012. However, during the Late Bronze Age, written documents concerning international exchanges expressed for the first time a mark of special consideration for some artists (Steel 2013). For other periods see Millard 2005. The individualities so recognised were exchanged between kings of different countries, from Mesopotamia to Egypt, to Anatolia and Syria.

¹⁶ Winter 1995b, 2002.

¹⁷ Few scholars have already observed some similarities between popular and official works without a systematic approach: van Buren 1930, 103, pl. 25, n. 139; Barrelet 1968, 336; Woolley & Mallowan 1976, 175; Matthiae 2002, 57-58. New interests are now arising: Suter and Uehlinger eds. 2005; Matthiae and Romano eds. 2010¹, 615-1031; Battini, in press 1.

¹⁸ The nickname of Woolley (1926, 375) has long been used till now. This is not the place to consider the exact identification of the goddess: for a bibliography of precedent works, see Battini 2006a and Maxwell-Hyslop 1992.

reliefs at the end of Early Dynastic period (2500-2400 B.C.), then in cylinder seals during the Akkadian period, to continue throughout the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods, when the subject is also attested in clay reliefs¹⁹. In stone reliefs and cylinder seals the theme is enriched with figures, elements and symbols. The goddess (**Fig. 1**), more often in profile, sitting on a goose, sometimes laying her feet on a second goose, is receiving a worshipper in a space symbolically marked by elements such as a crescent, a plant, a scorpion, a water flowing vase, a star, fish, etc.²⁰. These elements reveal the links of the goddess with water, earth and sky, the three components of the inhabited world, and hence with abundance, life and reproduction.

The passage to popular art, as well as the choice of different media, provoke interesting changes in the goddess' representation and even in her significance. First of all, clay reliefs reduce the subject essentially to the goddess (**Fig. 2**) and some elements, such as the vase and astral symbols. They prefer frontal representation, repetition of scheme and composition, and thanks to the use of moulds, the subject results more conventional and repetitive. At the same time, the frontal representation establishes a more direct link between the goddess and the owner of the clay relief. It's more important to render this direct relationship to the goddess than to reproduce a devotional scene. The reasons have to be sought in the particular needs of the people buying clay reliefs.

III. From popular to official art

Popular subjects affect occasionally official art. One example of this concerns a carved relief of one of Tukulti-Ninurta I's (1243-1207 B.C.) stone altars (**Fig. 3**)²¹. Two servants, so called "Gilgamesh", with

¹⁹ Battini 2006a and Battini in press 1.

²⁰ These "secondary" elements are in fact essential for the understanding of the seal: Collon 1995, Battini 2006b, Pittman 2013. This evidence, always recognized for *kudurru* (Seidl 1989, Slanski 2003/2004) and other reliefs (Börker-Klähn 1982, Black & Green 1992, Green 1995, Muller 2002), has long been neglected for seals with few exceptions: Frankfort 1934, Amiet 1961, 1973 and Winter 1986.

²¹ Börker-Klähn 1982, pl. 135: Istanbul 7802.

six curls in the hair and a rayed disk over the head, dress a short skirt and hold a standard, also with a rayed disc on top. Both surround the king, and are taller than him. They set a vertical direction to the scene, because of their heights combined with the height of the standards and head disks which they bear. The standards reach the altar's rim and end with the same disc standing over the heads of both "Gilgamesh" and in the altar's volutes. One of the possible interpretations of the altar is that it celebrates the king, who is being honoured by the two "Gilgamesh"

However, its comparison with a kind of a popular production of the Old Babylonian period allows for a better understanding of the altar's relief. It concerns three-dimensional clay models and two-dimensional clay carved reliefs celebrating the deity who appears surrounded by the frames of the temple door (**Fig. 4**)²². Like the altar, they often represent, at the sides of the god two similar "Gilgamesh" figures, with six-curled hair, a standard identical with the ones from the altar, and the sun-rayed disk. Such representation signifies the investiture of the deity with its strongest powers, being a symbol of victory against the evil which threaten the entrance of the temple, in its quality as an "ambiguous" place.

The altar of Tukulti-Ninurta I can be interpreted in the same way: the king appears with the maximum of his power, as vanquisher of all evils that menace his kingdom. The ruler, thus, can be compared with the god at the temple entrances of the Old Babylonian examples cited, suggesting for him a quasi-divine nature.

Finally, the insistence to represent the disk evoked the protection of Shamash, the "sun-god", and established a justification for the king's rule²³.

²² Battini, in press 2. Sometimes the god is not anthropomorphically represented but through symbols and animals.

²³ Seidl 1971 and 1989, Mayer-Opificius 1984, Orthmann 1992. Oaths of loyalty were sworn before the emblem of wingless or winged sun disk in the IInd mill. and Ist mill. (Dalley 1986, 92-101. But the sun disk and especially the winged disk changed attribution and significance: Teissier 1996, 92-101, Ornan, 2005, 208-210. About the importance of divine symbols see Van Buren 1945, Tosun 1956, Seidl 1971, Green 1995, Braun-Holzinger 1996, Slanski 2003/2004 and Giovino 2006.

Tukulti-Ninurta I is thus presented as a righteous, strong and victorious king, comparable to the gods. It is quite possible to see a perpetuation of this theme in the “Gilgamesh” with six hair curls posted to protect entrances in Neo-Assyrian palaces.

IV. Discovery of popular objects in official buildings

Popular objects, like clay figurines, have been found in official buildings. Their use by people living in the palace can be established, giving a new insight of the life of the élite²⁴. Prophylactic figurines of clay dogs and *apkallu* were buried under the floor of official buildings (Nimrud, Ninive, Khorsabad), as in private houses (Aššur) (**Fig. 5**)²⁵. They are mostly attested in the Ist millennium BC when, according to Braun-Holzinger, an augmentation of fears and worries increase the representation of demons and monsters, in comparison with the IInd millennium BC.²⁶

V. Between official and popular art: glyptics

Glyptics belonged to all kinds of people, whether members of the political and religious elite, or common people. Some of the seals' inscriptions let discover the owners' identity: kings, courtiers, functionaries, officials, priests, templar officials, merchants, scribes, smiths, cooks, soldiers, carpenters, messengers, barbers, canal inspectors, goldsmith and other craftsmen. Even the most humble people can take advantage of the so-called BURGUL seals, made in clay or wood, in a very schematic style, used once for a specific legal act²⁷. If this type of seal is widely distributed, social status of seal-cutters and other

²⁴ For example, in Mari: Margueron 2004, 489-491, 514-515; and 1997, 731-753.

²⁵ Van Buren 1931; Ellis 1968; Rashid 1983.

²⁶ Braun-Holzinger 1999.

²⁷ Renger 1977, 77; Collon 1986, 218-220; Postgate 1994, 286.

craftsmen, however, still remain difficult to be deduced²⁸.

Whether the elite chooses specific artists or used the same artisans as other people it remains a subject under discussion. Both proposals could exist in different times. Only a deeper study of seals' style and inscriptions could partially answer to this question²⁹. However, even if artists were responsible for making the seals destined to the elite, their social consideration, incomes, the existence of special trainings are impossible to be deduced without new discoveries. Certainly, some seals supported a political message and their use was reserved to one part of the society³⁰. Others concern a greater number of people and more individual aims.

VI. Serialization: a manner of production

Exchanges between popular and official arts concern not only themes but also techniques. Serialization, considered today as typical of popular art, was used in Mesopotamia for clay figurines and plaques, made by hand or in moulds, as well as for royal statues. The set of king Gudea's statues (second part of the 22nd century BC) belongs to this form of serialization (**Fig. 6**) repeating the materials, positions and subjects³¹. Another example is given by stone votive statues of the Early Dynastic period, widely produced in Mesopotamia.

VII. Provisional conclusions

The modern distinction between popular and official does not have correspondence in ancient Mesopotamian society. It can be useful for modern analyses, without forgetting that, from the point

²⁸ On seal-cutters, see lastly the articles of Meijer (2010) and Feller (2010). For a general comprehension of craftsmen, see Gunter ed. 1990; Zettler 1996 and Stein 1996. Like others, Steel's last book (2013) failed to demonstrate the important social status of craftsmen. Their social consideration in the ancient Mesopotamian society at different periods is still uncertain (cf. Zettler 1996).

²⁹ As the last study of Otto (2013).

³⁰ Mayr and Owen 2004; Otto 2013, 50-51.

³¹ Spycket 1981. For a recent analysis of this series see Suter 2000.

of view of Mesopotamians, it doesn't matter. This distinction cannot be found in written documents where the word *ummanu*, «master», defines an artist or craftsman. Negative judgements do not affect productions made in a linear style, nor productions considered today as “minor”. What can distinguish official works is the spread of a political/religious message and the astonishing materials and prices. Finally, official and popular arts pursue the same aims: one “aesthetic” and one more “philosophic”. All kinds of production fulfil the need of making life more pleasant.³² In addition, each is linked to specific needs depending on social status: political or religious needs for institutions, or apothropaic and prophylactic for people. Their difference lies only in their meanings: imposed by political or religious messages, or demanded by the needs of living people.

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³² See Winter 1994; 1995b and 2002.

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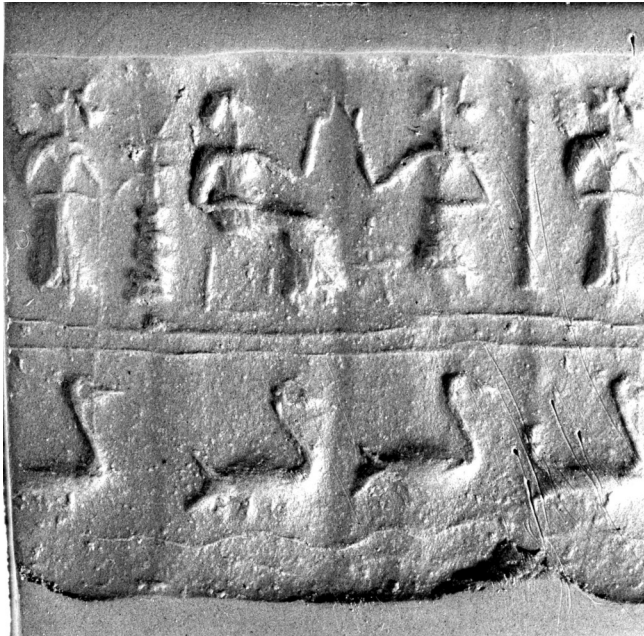


Fig. 1: Cylinder seal of the “geese goddess” (Paris, Louvre, AO 15478).



Fig. 2: Clay relief of the “geese goddess” (Woolley and Mallowan 1976, 147, pl. 80).



Fig. 3: Carved relief of the altar of Tukulti-Ninurta I
(Istanbul, Archaeological Museum 7802).



Fig. 4: Model of a gate overwhelmed with a godly presence (Barrelet 1968: 814, pl. 81).



Fig. 5: Dogs buried under the floor (Curtis and Reade 1996: 116).

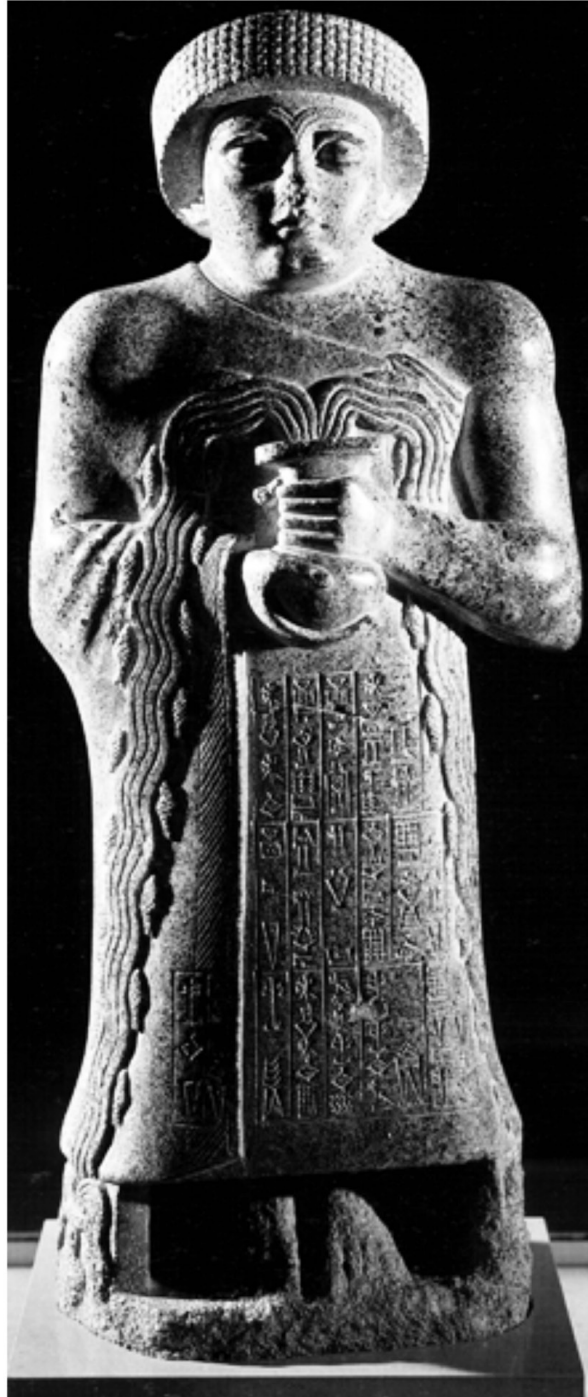


Fig. 6: Statue of Gudea (statue N. Paris, Louvre, AO 22126)..