



## The Ancient Near East Today

CURRENT NEWS ABOUT THE ANCIENT PAST

### Mesopotamian Sculpture in Color

By Astrid Nunn

Visitors to museums have long been accustomed to seeing ancient sculpture literally in black and white. The fact that Greek sculpture was painted continues to surprise some people. This is also true for Mesopotamian stone sculpture, although few traces of color have always been visible to the naked eye. This is changing as in the 21st century new ways of retrieving and interpreting those traces are now available.

Some traces are clearly visible. The black coloration of hair and beard is much more obvious than the red on skin. Colors are even better preserved on statues made of clay. As early as 1943, the discovery of the polychrome head in Ishchali in southern Mesopotamia led archaeologist and art historian Henri Frankfort to realize that the figure was strikingly polychrome, and to wonder how many of the hard stone figures were originally colored.



Fig. 1. Damaged bust of a standing man, black on hair and beard, yellowish brown skin. Tell Agrab. H. 24 cm. 2750-2575 BCE. A21488. © Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.



Fig. 2. Male head, red brown skin. Ishchali. Reconstructed H. 6.5 cm. About 1800 BCE. A17009. © Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.



Fig. 3. Detail of a standing man, black on hair. Tell Asmar. Complete H. 48.5 cm. 2750-2575 BCE. A12330. © Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

But we also find brief notes in handbooks of Mesopotamian sculptures, with opinions ranging from the conviction that statues were colored to the opposite. Some scholars believe the main aim of applying paint to a statue was to cover a rough “inferior” stone surface. A finely polished stone surface would not have been painted, as the material was intrinsic to the value and beauty of the statue. But the dearth of color remains have never led to the polychromy of the statues being viewed as a primary research question.

The lack of research has also been due to technical difficulties. The study of colors has to be non-destructive, feasible, and affordable. Nowadays, the most common techniques are spectroscopic analyses, which measure the electromagnetic radiation transmitted, emitted or absorbed to determine the atomic or molecular composition of material. Because the colors are so badly preserved, because access to the material in the museums is not always easy, and finally because we needed an equipment that was easy to transport and quick to assemble, ultraviolet-visible spectroscopy has proven to be more suitable than Raman-spectroscopy (which typically uses a laser to vibrate molecules) or x-ray fluorescence. Of the 178 statues we examined in our research, we classified 59 as having definite traces of color.

The number of colors is small in ancient Mesopotamia and is limited to shades of red and black. Red pigments consist almost entirely of haematite, black is either bitumen or a carbonized product. White is almost non-existent (white lead, gypsum), apart from rare cases where it is used as color lightener for the skin. We did not find either blue or green. It is difficult to judge whether this lack reflects an ancient reality or not. On statues, as well as in most wall paintings, pigments were hardly ever mixed. This seems to be a conscious choice, as mixing pigments is not technically difficult.

Hair and beards are dark. The existential importance of eyes explains the tradition of making them come alive using inlays since the Neolithic period. Whether eyes were inlaid or merely painted, the black outline remains fundamental. It imitated a real outline that was drawn in kohl onto the eyelids.



Fig. 4. Female head, black on hair. Khafaje. H. 8 cm. 2750-2575 BCE. A12431. © Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

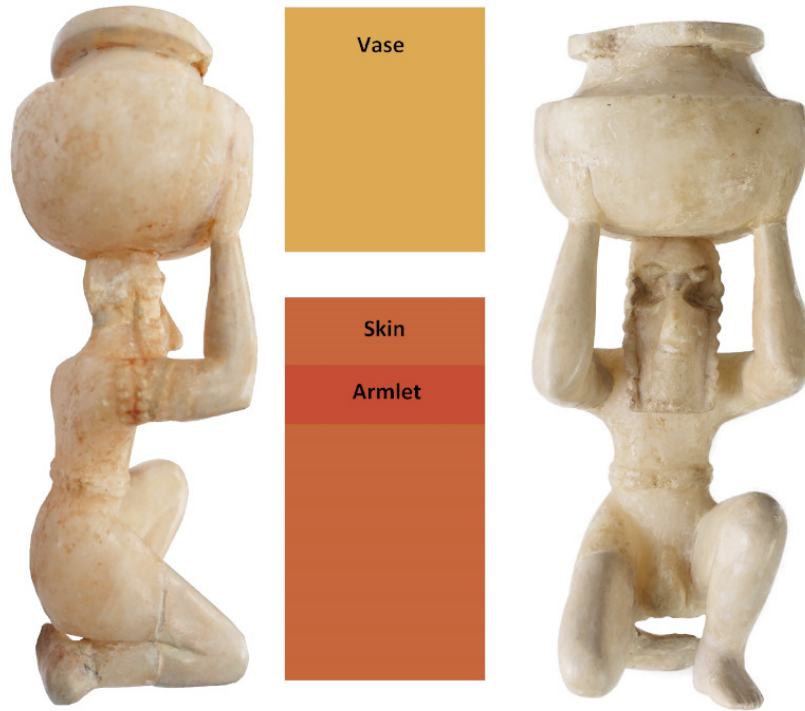


Fig. 5. Kneeling man, black on hair and beard, red brown skin, dark red armlet, yellowish brown vessel. Tell Agrab. H 10 cm. 2750-2575 BCE. A18067 © Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.



Fig. 6. Standing private man with our reconstruction. Assur. H. 46.5 cm. 2575-2300 BCE. VA 8142. © Olaf M. Teßmer, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Vorderasiatisches Museum, and A. Nunn/H. Piening.



Fig. 7. Standing private woman with our reconstruction. Ur. H. 51 cm. 2000-1760 BCE. BM 122933. © Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, and A. Nunn/H. Piening.

Skin appears to be orange, yellowish brown (see Figures 1, 6), red brown (see Figure 5) and brown in the third millennium. A general change to bright red (see Figure 7) and red brown (see Figure 2) took place in the second millennium. In the first millennium skin is rather dark, albeit not on all media.

As to garments, the Early Dynastic (2700-2300 BCE) tufts exhibit the whole range of warm hues from the light yellow and orange to yellowish brown, red brown and dark brown (see Figure 6). From 2300 BCE onwards, fabric either consists of flounced rows or is plain. A bright red and red brown remained fashionable during the second millennium.



Fig. 8. Standing conjurer with our reconstruction. Said to be from Larsa. H. 12.6 cm. 2000-1760 BCE. VA 8791 © Olaf M. Teßmer, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Vorderasiatisches Museum, and A. Nunn/H. Piening.

Textiles used a plant based dye—usually madder. Yellowish brown commonly existed through the centuries (see Figure 7). In the second millennium red and red brown seem to have been the garment color of all social groups, from divine and clerical to royal and commoner.

There is clearly a parallel between our results and the ancient “color” conceptions. Recent studies on color vocabulary in many languages brought completely new insights. First, envisioning colors is subjective and a matter of socialisation that starts from the moment we are born.

The second issue concerns relationships between color and materials being described. Already in the earliest Sumerian texts from about 3500 BCE the adjectives referring to cows that we translate as white, black, yellow, and probably red-brown and orange, also connote textures such as long-haired, patchy, rough, or smooth. According to our conceptualization, these qualities are not colors but textures or other characteristics. Taking the materiality of colors (and not simply their hue and chroma) as a starting point enables us to understand why ancient terms that are translated as dazzling, shining, lustrous, brilliant and translucent, or, inversely, dark, poorly lit, dim and dull, must be considered a – positive or negative – color category.

In Akkadian literature, red on the body, especially on the face, was very positive. Seen in this way, texts and our newly discovered colors converge. Hair color must have been a benchmark characteristic, as “the dark-headed” (*šalmāt qaqqadi*) exists as a poetic expression for mankind from the beginning of the second millennium onwards. Beards also are always depicted in black. However, in Sumerian and Akkadian texts, gods (in particular the sun god Utu), heroes and kings sport beards referred to as lapis lazuli. Thus these words also mean bright and shiny. Despite the reference to lapis lazuli (blue) being conceivable, the shininess of the beard was just as important as its hue. The lustre of hair and beard, highlighted in the texts, was reproduced in three-dimensions by greasy substances mixed with oil.

Another aspect of color that is reflected in many civilisations is to contrast two opposites. Expressed in colors, the juxtaposition of a lighter and a darker red for instance, also included the contrast between light and dark, thus representing the entire process of creation and achieving a balance. On statues, border strips have often a different color than the remaining garment (see Figure 8). These considerations lead me to consider the reasoning behind individually colored border strips as being more than a purely pragmatic aspect of improved visibility.

Although probably not all statues were covered with colors, most of them were. This aspect is particularly challenging for statues made out of expensive, imported and hard to work stone such as diorite. We can now be sure that at least middle-sized statues made out of this expensive stone were painted (see Figure 2). So how do we reconcile the complete overpainting of statues in antiquity with the fact that the stone itself was very precious? The solution is that we have to challenge our perception. A well-polished light or dark stone would certainly also have expressed the positive character of brightness, even when covered with paint.

We must also acknowledge the realistic aspect of the statues. The fact that the triad of red, black and white belongs to a common practice worldwide does not mean we should forget that these colors are fundamentally positive. At the same time, more colors would have been technically possible, but unacceptable colors would not have been used.

Colors for skin and garments therefore derive from a combination of realism mixed with artistic conventions and social determinants, which in turn are subject to symbolic meaning. Each color had its place in and between reality and meaning. Through color, we are now able to recognize the true face of the statues. Their luminous, radiant and lucid colors convey a definite sense of well being and communication.

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