Through a study beginning with the fourth millennium and continuing into the 14th century, Donny George, former president of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq, presents the main thesis of this monograph, in his introductory remarks. He posits that Sumerians on the site of the Tigris and Euphrates created the world’s most advanced civilization with the oldest and richest artistic traditions; therefore, Mesopotamia or ancient Iraq is the “mother of art.” Supporting evidence for this proposition comes in the form of remarkable and venerable monuments of art such as the Royal Tombs at Ur, the Ishtar Gate of Babylon, the Temple of Warka, and many other significant landmarks heralding early civilization.

The difficult task of summarizing a vast historical period is aided with the inclusion of a wide panorama of images that the book’s contributing authors document and further contextualize through the developing story of Middle Eastern peoples. Literary events, such as the epic of Gilgamesh which proves a vital source of information and was transmitted by the Jews upon their return from captivity at Babylon, supplement this cultural study.

Supporting documents are essential to a general survey of this nature and the contributing authors draw upon music, literature, and art to reinforce their perspectives and opinions. Cylinder seals engraved in relief have allegorical realism in their iconographic themes of power, strength and sovereignty; ziggurats are clearly defined including photographs of aerial views presenting the reader with the potential for a clear understanding of their impact and functions; the convention of a stone divinity systematically shown in a frontal position becomes the paradigm for the Byzantine period where icons are similarly rendered, imparting a peaceful yet authoritative presence. The significant Hellenistic period in Iraq is the subject of an essay by Carlo Lippolis in which he reveals the reuse of strong Greek thematic elements such as the Rape of Europa, or geometric revetments taken from Greek theatres and orientalized into Mesopotamian decoration and other classizing motifs distributed among art and architectural works found in Seleucia and Uruk.

The cultural intersections continue. The great rulers are not neglected, but rather celebrated through their monuments: Hammurabi and his law code stele, Ashurnasirpal through his Nimrud Palace, and Ashurbanipal at Nineveh. Magic bowls decorated with Aramaic script are one of the few references to the Christian populations inherent in Mesopotamian lands that have remained a minority throughout the ages. A few enticing facts and materials from the elusive and complex societies of Dura-Europos and Palmyra, which are briefly discussed in relation to Sassian art forms, leave the reader wishing for more substantive information of these areas. The Islamic era is represented through numerous mosques and many forms of decorative arts that are ubiquitous in the literature of Muslim art and architecture.

The last chapter is devoted to documenting the various forms of art and architecture discussed within the text, complete with aerial shots, diagrams, maps, elevations, and other formats that would enable a firm understanding of the elements necessary to develop an aesthetically dynamic civilization.

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