

## **Description of *When Writing Met Art: From Symbol to Story***

WHEN WRITING MET ART: From Symbol to Story deals with the interface between writing and art during the early Urban Period in the Near East. I propose that an exchange took place between the two visual media of communication in two installments. Namely, in the late fourth millennium BC (ca 3500-3000 BC) writing had an impact of great consequence on art and reciprocally, in the early third Millennium BC, (ca 2700- 2600 BC), art had an impact of no less significance on writing. I show that through this mutual exchange both writing and art multiplied their capacity to communicate information. Art became narrative and writing went beyond accounting to become a comprehensive medium of communication

### **Introduction**

When writing came about it was used exclusively for accounting. After a review of the origin of art and writing in the Near East, I introduce the first texts impressed with tokens on envelopes and tablets which are pivotal to the theses developed in the volume. I analyze how, ca 3500-3100 BC, without using verbs or sentences, the texts communicated data clearly and efficiently using the following strategies:

- One-to-one correspondence
- Linearity
- Semanticity of sign location on the envelopes/tablets (up/down)
- Semanticity of sign order on the envelopes/tablets (right/left)

## Part I: HOW WRITING SHAPED ART

### **Chapter 1. Pottery Painting**

Near Eastern preliterate pottery painting compositions are mainly geometric but animal designs were also popular. They consist of series of identical animals, stylized to the utmost, repeated one after the other as many times as necessary to cover the diameter of a vessel. In contrast, particular pottery paintings of the early literate period feature figures individualized by their garments, headdress and gestures that interact with one another. The dynamics of the scenes are communicated by the position, direction, orientation and order of the figures, which I view as emulating the strategies of the impressed tablets to convey information. I credit writing for the change from repetitious designs to narrative and from the preliterate all over patterns apprehended *globally*, to those of the literate period “read” *analytically*.

### **Chapter 2. Glyptic Art**

The collection of 700 seals from Tepe Gawra in north Mesopotamia shows an evolution in techniques of communication over the 3000 years spanning the period before, contemporaneous with, and after the invention of writing (5000-2000 BC). The preliterate circular compositions merely evoked ideas; the proto-literate seals told simple stories by adopting the linear mode of writing and creating a syntax – an established order to connect figures. After literacy was well established, the Tepe Gawra glyptic art was able to tell complex stories by elaborating linear compositions to new subtleties and developing a repertory of status markers emulating the determinatives signs of cuneiform writing.

### **Chapter 3: The Uruk Vase**

When carved stone vases became popular in Mesopotamia in

the proto-literate period, ca. 3100-3000 BC, an alabaster vessel from Uruk displays the longest Near Eastern narrative of the fourth millennium BC. The scene depicting the great New Year festival of Uruk extends over 5 parallel registers. I demonstrate that the remarkable bas-relief broke new grounds in articulating several parts of an event into a visual composition by borrowing the hierarchical structure and sign order of the impressed texts.

#### **Chapter 4: Wall and Floor Paintings**

The preliterate compositions painted on the house walls or floors of such sites as Mureybet and Halula, Syria; Umm Dabaghiyah, Iraq, and in particular, the “hunting scenes” of Catal Huyuk, Turkey, are compared to murals of the literate period at Malyan, Iran, in the fourth millennium BC and Mari, Syria, in the early 2d millennium BC. I show that in the preliterate composition the participants of a scene are only juxtaposed but do not interact. Instead, the figures in a literate scene are intricately connected by a network of meaning derived from their strategic situation, position, order, orientation, and size. No longer are figures repeated to cover a space, instead they are “syntactically” positioned in order to tell a story. As a result the meaning of a scene is no longer derived from mere association but analytically.

### **PART II: HOW ART SHAPED WRITING**

#### **Chapter 5. Votive Inscriptions**

After presenting the importance of the name in Sumer, I interpret the personal names inscribed on the lavish gold vessels and lapis-lazuli seals of the Royal Cemetery of Ur as part of the cult of the dead. I present these funerary texts as the earliest non-economic and non-lexical texts. I show that by enshrining their names in art objects, the kings and queens of Ur finally gave writing a new funerary function that liberated it from accounting.

Even more importantly, the Ur inscriptions were the first entirely phonetic texts marking a radical step towards the emulation of the sound of speech.

## **Chapter 6: Dedicatory and Votive Inscriptions**

Statues typical of the Early Dynastic II and III periods ca. 2700-2600 BC, bear short inscriptions including a personal name, that of a god or a temple to whom the object was presented and a prayer. I argue that the chains of personal, gods and temple names written phonetically paved the way to a syllabary. Moreover, I argue that it was the desire to be heard by the gods that led the Mesopotamians to write simple sentences with subjects, verbs and complements. The votive art objects thus document the transition from mostly logographic lists of goods, to a phonetic and syntactic system of communication able to reproduce speech. This was the final stage of the emancipation of writing from accounting.

## **Chapter 7: The Stele of Hammurabi**

The monument King Hammurabi of Babylone commissioned combines forcefully the power of writing with the power of images. I analyze how each of the two media contributed in its own way to the monument. I present the stele as the epitome of the interface between writing and art in the ancient Near East because the text and images enhanced and supplemented each other. Writing had the power to state authoritatively the law of the land. The relief had the power to evoke the divine origin of justice.

## **Conclusion**

In the ancient Near East art broke new grounds with the advent of literacy. Following writing's lead, the major forms of art, namely pottery, seals, stone vases and wall paintings, changed from evocative to narrative. They went beyond the mere repetition or association of symbols to depict complex scenes involving multiple interrelated participants. In turn, art proved a fertile

ground for the emancipation of writing from accounting. Funerary and dedicatory inscriptions on lavish artifacts endeavored to replicate the sound of speech to write names phonetically. Votive art objects carried a written message from devotees to the gods specifying *to whom* they dedicated their precious gift and *for what purpose*. The association of writing with art to sway the gods led writing to evolve from an accounting device to a comprehensive medium of communication.