

Birth of Na

HOW WRITING LED TO PICTURE PAINTING

DENISE SCHMANDT-BESSERAT

Pottery painting was a major art form in the ancient Near East as early as the seventh millennium B.C. For thousands of years, the designs painted on ceramic pots were largely limited to geometric or animal patterns, though these decorations were often very elaborate and striking. Then, in the third millennium B.C., Mesopotamians and Elamites began producing a new form of pottery painting: narrative scenes, or painted tableaux that tell stories in images.

How did this happen, seemingly all of a sudden? Is it possible to say why the adoption of narrative scenes—so familiar to us today in art, advertisements and even comic books—first appeared where and when they did? Can we really witness the birth of a major art form that occurred 5,000 years ago?

The answer is yes. The specific precipitating event was the development of writing in southern Mesopotamia toward the end of the fourth millennium B.C. By borrowing strategies used in writing, painters vastly increased their capacity to communicate information.

Preliterate narrative compositions in Near Eastern pottery painting are exceedingly rare. One example is a hunting scene painted on the inside of a bowl from Susa, dating to about 3500 B.C.¹ The hunter, sporting an impressive hairdo or headdress, aims his bow at an ibex located on the other side of a set of sweep-

ing broken lines. Another example, a 4,000 B.C. vase fragment from Telul eth-Thalathat in northern Iraq, shows a calf following a cow.² As these examples show, all of the known preliterate Near Eastern narrative compositions depict a small number of participants whose association is obvious: A hunter stalks his prey; a calf seeks out its mother.

Far more often, however, early pottery produced by such peoples as the Halaf culture (6500-4500 B.C.) of northern Mesopotamia and the Ubaid culture (4500-3500 B.C.) of southern Mesopotamia was decorated with geometric designs.³ The potter would mark out a register (an enclosed band extending around the circumference of the object) on a ceramic vessel; then he would decorate this register with patterns of herringbones, zig-zags, inverted triangles or other designs. On a late-fifth-millennium B.C. bowl from Telul eth-Thalathat, for example, the thin top register (the rim, really) is decorated with a pattern of small triangles. Below this rim, a second register is painted with broad oblique bands of crisscross lines. The two registers are separated by a pair of dark lines.

East of Mesopotamia, in Elam, contemporaneous



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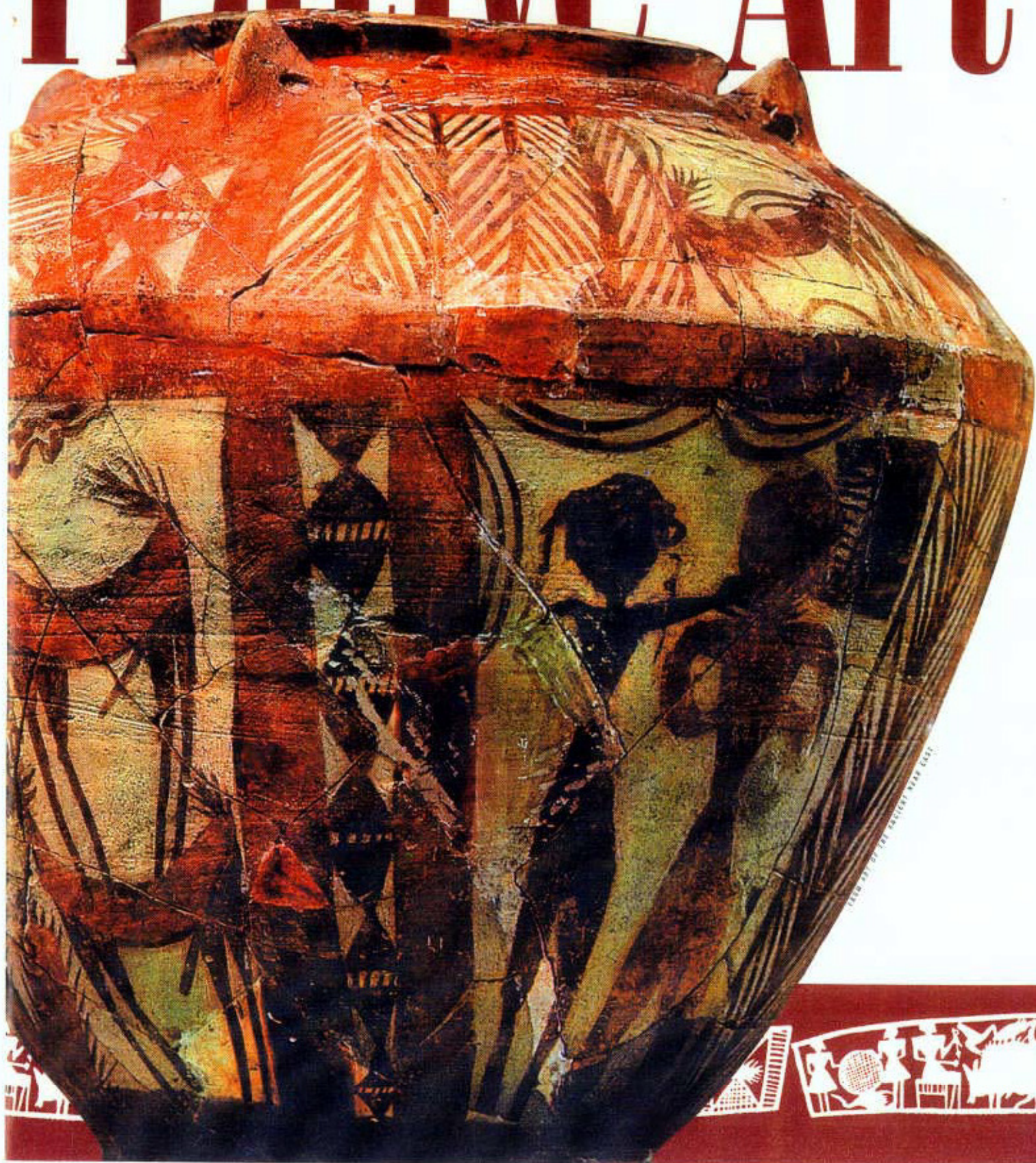


PHOTO BY THE HAZARDY TEAM



Previous pages: Does the painting on this 12-inch-high vase, dating around 2800 B.C., show a hunt? Or possibly preparations for a sacrifice? Although we cannot “read” the scene, it does present some kind of narrative—and that was a revolutionary development in the Near East. For thousands of years vases were only decorated with geometric or animal designs; then, in the early third millennium B.C., artisans began producing vase paintings with narrative scenes. Why then? Author Denise Schmandt-Besserat suggests that they learned the tricks of the trade from early cuneiform writing. (This scarlet ware vase, found in central Iraq, is part of the Baghdad Museum’s collection. According to Zainad Bahrani, a senior consultant to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, its location is now unknown.)

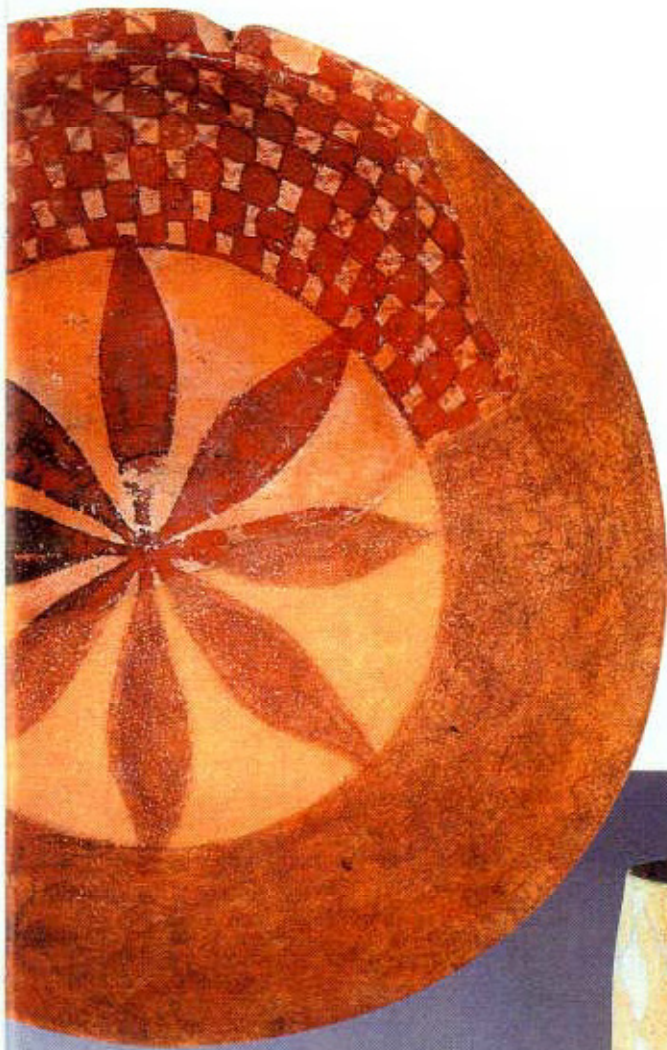
potters preferred animal designs.⁴ An early-fourth-millennium B.C. beaker from Susa, for example, is decorated with registers containing images of water birds, dogs and ibexes—forming one of the most ornate and beautiful preliterate Near Eastern pottery paintings (see photo, p. 40). These animal designs are extremely stylized; for example, the birds of the upper register are painted with only five brush strokes of various lengths and thicknesses to show their heads, elongated necks, bodies and legs. The second register from the top shows five running dogs with pointed heads, thin bodies, stretched-out legs and curly tails. At the bottom are three ibexes, each with horns in the shape of two large concentric circles twice as large as the animals’ bodies.

The animal motifs on this Elamite vessel do not tell a story. As with the Mesopotamian geometric designs, the animal patterns simply repeat again and again around the vessel until the allotted space in the register is filled.

Nor do animals on the same register of the Elamite beaker interact with one another. The 60 birds perched on the top register just stand still; they are tightly packed together, and they do not show any awareness of one another. The same is true of the five dogs and three ibexes. In fact, the disregard of the animals for their own kind is matched only by their utter indifference to the other species. The birds are unaware of the dogs, which are oblivious to the ibexes. The painter has almost underscored the lack of interaction by depicting the animals in each register as facing in the opposite direction to the animals in the register below, forming what we might call a boustrophedon composition (from the Greek meaning “as the ox plows,” boustrophedon refers to writing in which each successive line is read in the opposite direction). Furthermore, the dogs are not aligned with the ibexes and therefore appear to be out of step.

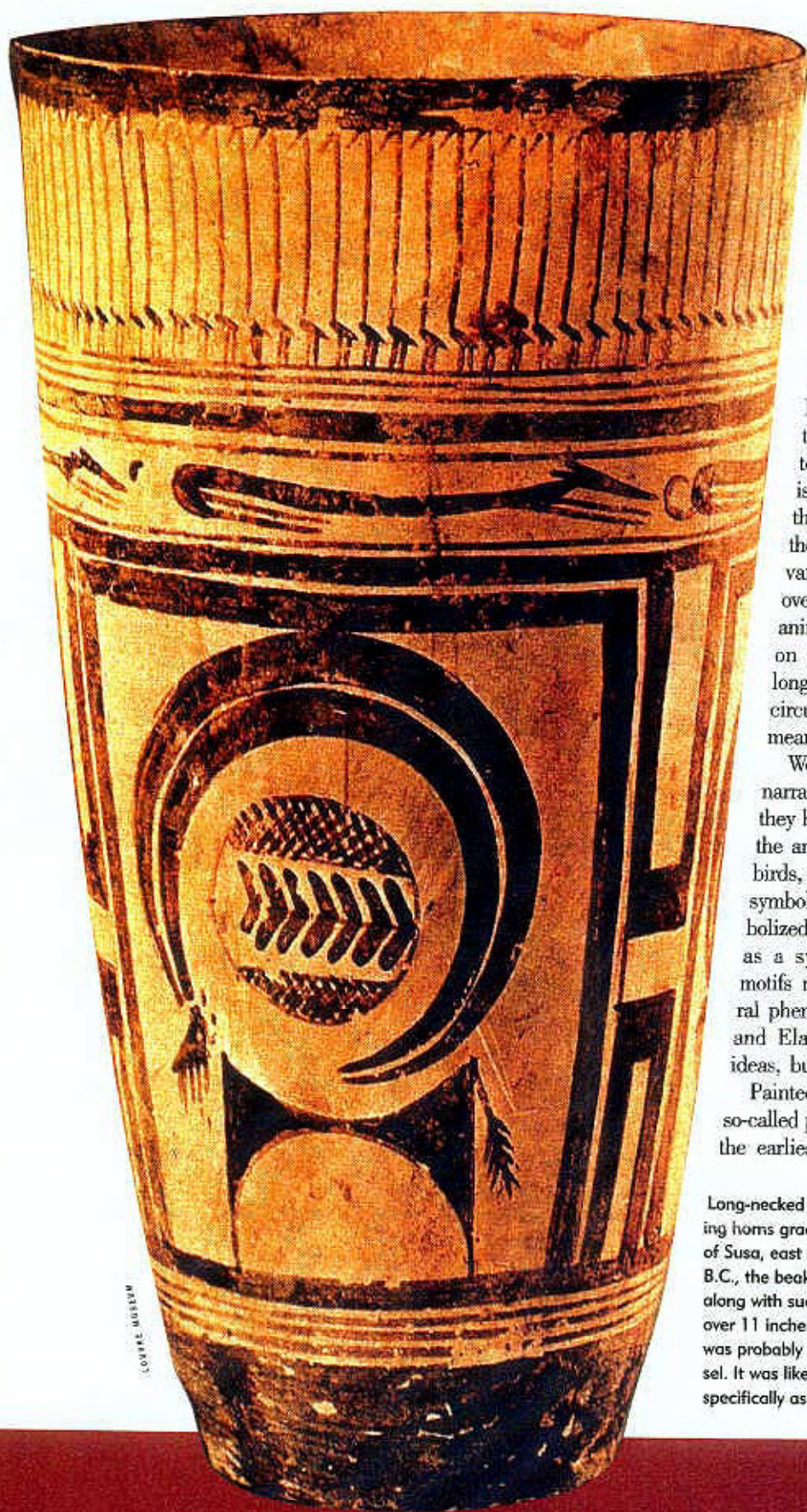
Clearly, the animal patterns serve an aesthetic, or decorative, function. The pottery painter creates a pattern (a stylized water bird, say) and repeats it until he has completed the journey around the vessel’s circumference. He now has a work of great beauty. This aesthetic function is also suggested by the use of lines between registers and, in the case of the register with the ibexes, between images on the same register. The lines are of various thicknesses, creating a visual rhythm. The thick band around the lip echoes the band around the base, the three lines below the birds correspond to





Floral and geometric designs ornament these ceramic vessels. The 6-inch-wide flattened bowl at left is from the Halaf period (6000-5400 B.C.) in northern Mesopotamia; the delicate objects below—the tallest piece at center is only 5 inches high—are from the Ubaid period (5900-4300 B.C.) in southern Mesopotamia. Pottery painting in the Near East goes back at least as far as the seventh millennium B.C. For thousands of years, however, artisans painted pots simply with designs meant to be beautiful, or possibly symbolically meaningful, but not meant to tell stories.





a parallel set of three lines below the ibex, and a pair of lines of different thicknesses appears in reversed order above and below the dogs. Integral to the design, the lines form a kind of geometric pattern that is fused with the animal pattern.

These pottery paintings from Elam and Mesopotamia are representative of preliterate pottery paintings throughout the Near East. With few exceptions, preliterate pottery decorations make use of repeated patterns and of framing lines to separate registers. They are also “composed”—that is, they were intended to be viewed as an aesthetic whole. Mesopotamian painters employed varied geometric motifs to create handsome overall designs. Elamite painters weaved together animal motifs of various kinds and shapes—on the Susa beaker, for example, vertical long-necked birds, horizontal running dogs and circular ibex horns—into an attractive design meant to be appreciated in its entirety.

We cannot assume, however, that these non-narrative paintings were merely decorative, that they had no meaning. Most scholars assume that the ancient Elamites would have thought of the birds, dogs and ibexes on the Susa beaker as symbols (though we do not know what they symbolized)—much as we moderns think of the dove as a symbol of peace. The Ubaid geometric motifs may also represent ideas, deities or natural phenomena. So it is likely that Mesopotamian and Elamite pottery paintings evoked profound ideas, but they did not tell elaborate stories.

Painted pottery disappeared entirely during the so-called proto-literate period (3500-2900 B.C.), when the earliest writing appeared (and when Sumerian

Long-necked birds, slender running dogs and ibexes with curving horns grace this spectacular beaker from the Elamite city of Susa, east of southern Mesopotamia. Dating around 4000 B.C., the beaker was found in a cemetery in Susa's acropolis along with such other burial goods as copper axes. A little over 11 inches high, this beaker, now in the Louvre Museum, was probably too fragile actually to be used as a drinking vessel. It was likely created as a decorative object, perhaps specifically as a funerary offering.



T. COLLIER / ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

and Mesopotamian city-states were emerging). During this period, plain or gray burnished ware prevailed.⁵ Paintings on pottery reemerged in the early dynastic period (2900-2500 B.C.). The earliest examples, the so-called scarlet ware popular in the Diyala region of central Mesopotamia and at Susa, depicted complex narrative scenes.

What happened between the disappearance of pottery paintings with geometric and animal designs and the emergence of pottery paintings with narrative scenes? The invention of writing.

The earliest writing evolved from counting.⁶ Around 7500 B.C. farmers began using a system of clay tokens to keep track of goods. A small cone-shaped token, for example, stood for a small measure of grain; a large cone-shaped token stood for a large measure of grain; and a spherical token stood for a medium measure of grain. In the mid-fourth millennium B.C., inventory administrators in Mesopotamia and Elam began placing tokens in clay

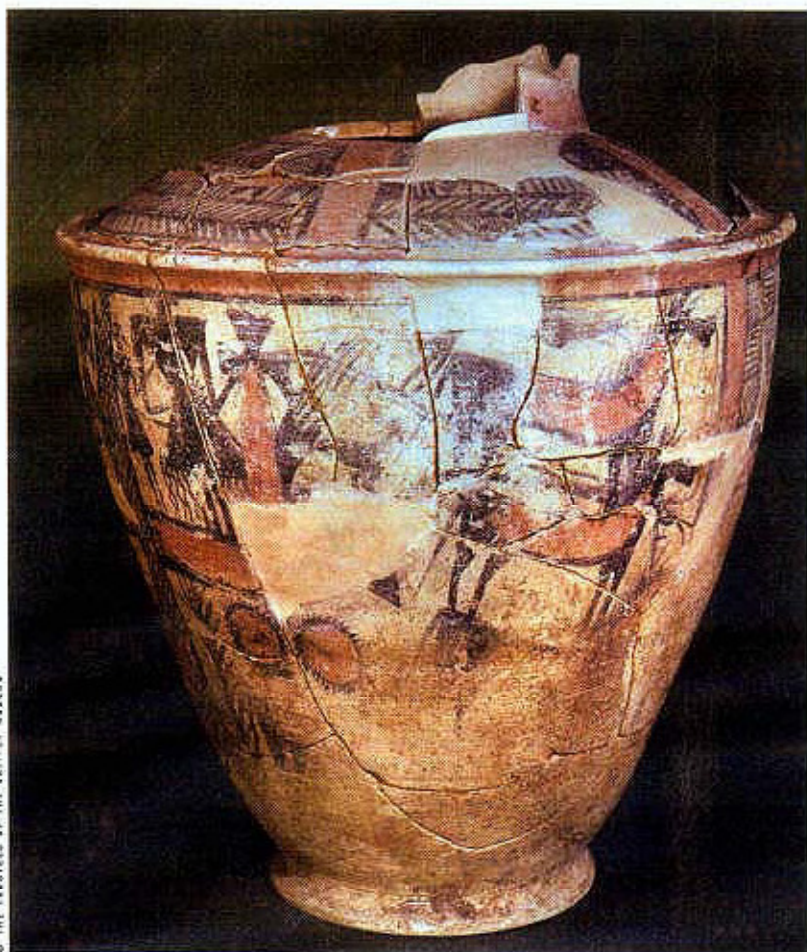
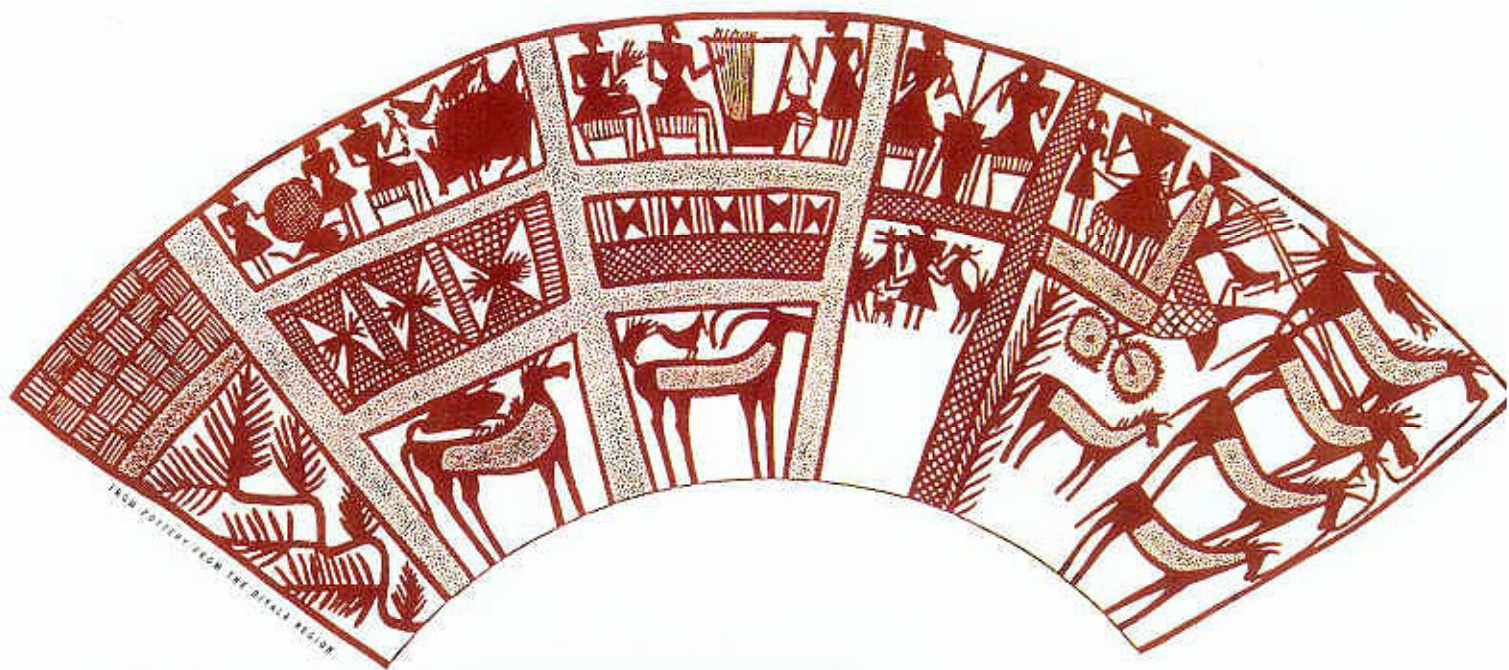


LEONIE ROSSER



The tokens below were used to keep inventories of goods. A small cone-shaped token, for example, represented a small measure of grain. By the mid-fourth millennium B.C., tokens began to be stored in round clay envelopes, sometimes with the envelope's contents impressed on its surface. Toward the end of the fourth millennium, Mesopotamians developed a new system in which token shapes were incised on clay tablets, as in the photos above. These tablets made careful use of space and size to represent different amounts of goods; the large cone shapes placed above the circles (on the tablet above) denote large measures of grain, whereas the smaller cone shapes placed below the circles (in the tablet above left) denote small measures of grain.





envelopes to keep accounting records orderly and tamper-proof (we have about 150 of these hollow clay balls with tokens inside).

Toward the end of the fourth millennium, accounts began to be recorded on clay tablets. For example, the image of a cone-shaped token incised in wet clay resulted in a wedge shape, which then came to stand for a small or large (depending on the size of the wedge) measure of grain; and a spherical token incised in wet clay produced a circle, which came to stand for a medium measure of grain. Blocks of clay impressed with such token counters were the world's first written tablets.

Cuneiform ("wedge-shaped") writing developed from

In the second half of the fourth millennium B.C., painted pottery disappeared entirely in Mesopotamia. Then, in the early third millennium B.C., artisans began producing pottery paintings with narrative scenes—such as the 13-inch-tall vase (left) from Tell Khafaje, in central Iraq, and the 19-inch-tall vase (opposite) from Susa.

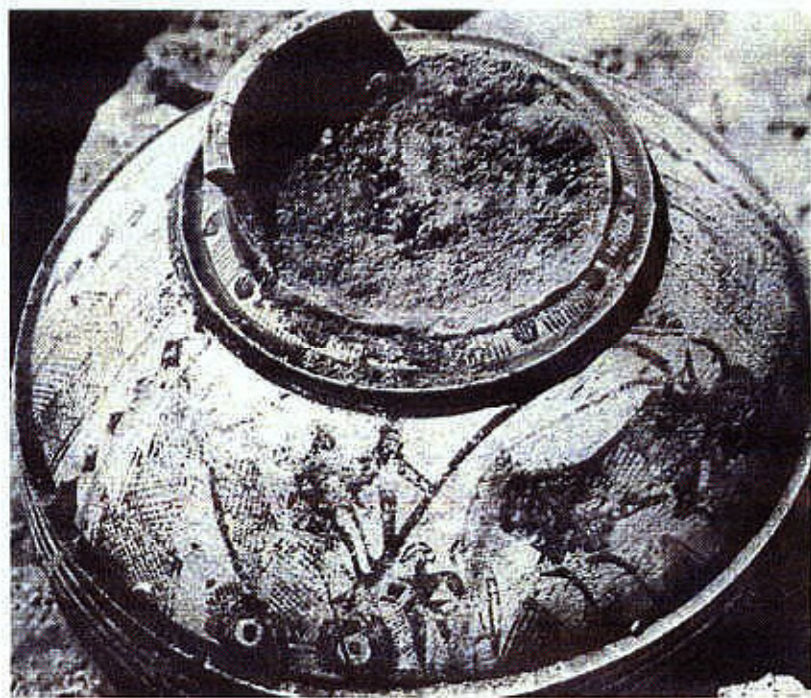
These paintings clearly tell some kind of story, even if the details are now obscure to us. The upper register of the Khafaje vase, from left to right, shows three musical scenes followed by a scene in which someone accompanied by an attendant departs in a chariot. The division of scenes into registers, the use of common baselines, and the communication of information through the use of space and size (the attendant in the Khafaje vase is smaller than his master, for example, and the master has a more central position in the scene) all derive from writing, according to author Denise Schmandt-Besserat. Such "writerly" techniques allowed artisans to create the earliest images that tell a story.



these incised accounting tablets. Mesopotamians and Elamites created syllabic forms of cuneiform by making the signs (the *tokens impressed on clay*) refer to the sounds—or parts of the sounds—of the things they represented (oil, wine, bricks, goats, and so on). The first phonetic signs represented the names of people who gave or received goods. The name would have been rendered phonetically as a rebus composed of two or more signs stuck together. In Sumer, for example, the name “Lucas” could be rendered by a sign for “man” (the Sumerian word *lu*) plus a sign for “mouth” (the Sumerian word *ka*). In this way, syllabic cuneiform writing encoded the sounds of human language.*

From the beginning, the signs impressed on the accounting tablets were organized in lines. Each line generally consisted of one or several identical signs. In turn, the lines were organized in hierarchical order, with the largest units occupying the top of the tablets. This system is illustrated by two tablets (see photos, p. 41), each featuring an account of quantities of grain. The large and small wedges representing large

CONTINUES ON PAGE 54



* See the following Origins columns in *Archaeology Odyssey* by Denise Schmandt-Besserat: “Signs of Life” (describing how writing evolved from counting), January/February 2002; and “One, Two ... Three” (describing the development of counting), September/October 2002.

Birth of Narrative Art

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 43

and small quantities of grain can be easily distinguished because they appear above and below the circular signs standing for a medium quantity of grain. On the rare occasions when, as in the right-hand photo on page 41, a line is composed of two different signs, the larger unit was placed to the right and the lesser units to the left.

The inventory tablets thus made use of a linear format in which the size, position and order of signs conveyed certain information.

The earliest pottery paintings with narrative compositions were also organized in this way. A good example is a painted jar from Khafaje (ancient Tutub), in central Iraq, dating to the early third millennium B.C. (see p. 42). The upper register of the painting is organized into four panels showing (1) a percussion ensemble, (2) a person listening to a singer accompanied by a lyre, (3) a banquet involving two people sipping beer from a jar, and (4) a chariot scene (which extends down below the baseline of the three preceding registers) in which a driver and his attendant stand on a carriage drawn by a team of equids. Very likely, this painting depicts the various episodes of a festival, with the grand chariot scene presenting the departure or arrival of the participants.⁷

An early-third-millennium vase from Susa, shown on page 43, provides an Elamite parallel.⁸ A frieze broken into three panels is painted above the shoulder of the oval vase, just below the rim. The paintings show a chariot scene, a flight of eagles, and a grouping of three elements: three- and two-tiered towers with people on them, and a vase with plants.

As on the Khafaje jar, the scenes



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on the Susa vase seem related, even if we cannot now supply the connection and "read" the story. What is clear is that the decorations on both of these vessels are not repeated patterns but individualized tableaux. On the Susa vase, for example, each figure in the chariot scene is distinguished from the others by garb, gesture and context. The charioteer sports a flat cap and is seated in a four-wheeled chariot. His bare-headed, clean-shaven attendant, wearing a fringed garment, bustles about the vehicle. In back of the chariot, a person seated on a three-tiered tower and dressed in a short tunic emphatically waves to the hero.

If preliterate painters strove to achieve the utmost stylization, painters of the literate period sought to convey as much information as possible. For example, the chariot is depicted in great detail, with a two-part box, a long curved draft pole, solid wheels rotating around a hub, and even a copious set of copper nails securing the leather tires. The single ox that draws the chariot is shown with a big round eye and the curved horns characteristic of its species.

The function of lines also changed significantly in the pottery paintings of the literate period. In the preliterate period, lines were used as dividers; in the literate period, lines were used to unite the features of a composition. On the Susa vase, for example, the tower, the chariot wheels, the attendant's feet and the ox's hooves all rest on an imaginary ground line—orienting the figures together in space and time (the ox pulls the cart away from the tower). The chariot scene depicts an event; it does not just present a pattern.


This suggests another difference between preliterate and literate pottery paintings. In the former, the various patterns on a vessel are meant to produce an overall effect: a beautiful object. In paintings of the literate period, on the other hand, each scene is meant to be read individually, or sequentially, even though the various scenes or sequences probably fit together to tell a larger story.

From these early examples, then, it is possible to discern the principal techniques painters learned from scribes to tell a story in images—allowing us, some 5,000 years later,

to understand the basic elements of a narrative scene even if we cannot "read" it from beginning to end.

In the literate period, "reading" images became akin to reading a text. Like the signs lined up on a tablet, painted figures sharing the same line were understood to belong together. Like written signs, figures of different sizes had different meanings. Much as the meanings of written texts depended on the place and order of the signs on a tablet, the meanings of painted scenes depended on the position and orientation of elements.

All this may not have happened consciously. There was probably no single "adapter" who announced: "We shall henceforth borrow grammatical rules from cuneiform writing to tell stories in images." Very likely the meaningful and efficient organization of signs on tablets simply suggested to vase painters a meaningful and efficient way to arrange images.

In any case, it was a revolutionary development in the history of art. Although preliterate painters could produce beautiful images, and even evoke profound ideas, they could not tell complex stories involving multiple figures. To tell such stories, painters required rules to organize the images—and they found these rules in writing. 

¹ Pierre Amiet, *Elam* (Auvers-sur-Oise: Archée Editions, 1966), p. 44, fig. 16.

² Namio Egami, *Tell el Thalathat: The Excavations of Tell II 1956-1957*, The Tokyo University Iraq-Iran Expedition, Report 1 (Tokyo: The Yamakawa Publishing Co., 1959), pl. 6.

³ Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Equinox, 1990), p. 38.

⁴ Annie Caubet and Patrick Pouyssegur, *The Origin of Civilization, The Ancient Near East* (Paris: Editions Pierre Terrail, 1997), pp. 40-41.

⁵ Dominique Colton, *Ancient Near Eastern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 45.

⁶ Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *How Writing Came About* (Austin: The University of Texas, 1996); and *Before Writing* (Austin: The University of Texas, 1992).

⁷ Henri Frankfort, *Progress of the Work of the Oriental Institute in Iraq, 1934-35*, Fifth Preliminary Report of the Iraq Expedition, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Oriental Institute Communications, no. 20 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1936), pp. 62 and 65, pls. 50-51; Pinhas Delougaz, *Pottery from the Diyala Region*, The Oriental Institute Publications, vol. 63 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952), pp. 70-72, pl. 138.

⁸ R. de Mecquenem, *Mémoires de la mission archéologique en Iran*, vol. 29 (1943), pp. 103-104, figs. 72 and 79; Amiet, *Elam*, pp. 135-136, fig. 106.