

Getty Villa Museum Presents *Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins*

At the Getty Villa

March 18 – July 27, 2020



Statue of Prince Gudea with a Vase of Flowing Water. Neo-Sumerian period, about 2120 B.C. Dolerite. Object: H: 62 x W: 25.6 x D: 20 cm (24 7/16 x 10 1/16 x 7 7/8 in.) Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités orientales. Image © Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Raphaël Chipault / Art Resource, NY. VEX.2020.1.138

LOS ANGELES – The J. Paul Getty Museum presents the most important exhibition of Mesopotamian art ever assembled on the West Coast in *Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins*, on display March 18 – July 27, 2020 at the Getty Villa Museum. The works of art come from the collection of the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities at the Musée du Louvre, Paris, with select additional loans from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Organized by the Getty Museum and the Musée du Louvre, Paris, the exhibition covers the three millennia of Mesopotamian history, from the appearance of the first cities in about 3300 BC to Alexander the Great's conquest of Babylon in 331 BC. On view will be many of the most renowned masterpieces of Mesopotamian art, including the silver cult vase of the Sumerian king Enmetena, the cylinder seal of the royal scribe Ibni-sharrum, statues of Gudea and other kings of

Babylonia, and a glazed brick lion from the Ishtar Gate in Babylon.

"The ancient land of Mesopotamia, in modern-day Iraq, occupies a unique place in the history of human culture. It was there, around 3400-3000 BC, that the first major cities arose, boasting massive city walls, temples and palaces; the first known writing on clay tablets, used by priestly bureaucracies to record agricultural activities; sculptures of gods, worshippers, and rulers; and many other remarkable cultural and scientific achievements," says Timothy Potts, Director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, who curated the exhibition. "It is a great privilege to be able to bring to the Getty Villa a selection of the most

important works of Mesopotamian art and other ancient cultural treasures from the Musée du Louvre's unrivalled collections."

"In addition to being the first collection of Mesopotamia art to be shown in a museum setting as early as 1847, the Louvre's collection is emblematic of Mesopotamian archeology because of its exceptional scale, quality and history," says Ariane Thomas, co-curator of the exhibition and curator of the Mesopotamian collections, Department of Near Eastern Antiquities, at the Musée du Louvre. "We are thrilled to share part of our collection of Mesopotamian masterpieces with the Getty Villa for this important exhibition. Visitors to the Getty can now explore this ancient world so close and yet so far from our own, through over 3000 years of Mesopotamia history."

Home to some of the world's most ancient civilizations, with a history that spans several millennia, Mesopotamia—the land "between the rivers" in modern-day Iraq—was inhabited by the ancient Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians before being integrated into the empires of the Achaemenid Persian, Seleucid Greek, and Arsacid Parthian dynasties. Their many achievements include the creation of the earliest known writing (cuneiform), the formation of the first cities, the development of advanced astronomical and mathematical knowledge, and spectacular artistic and literary accomplishments.

Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins is part of the Getty global initiative *Ancient Worlds Now*, which seeks to raise awareness of the interwoven histories of the ancient world through a diverse program of ground-breaking scholarship, exhibitions, conservation, and pre- and post-graduate education.

The exhibition is organized into three thematic sections: First Cities, First Writings, and First Kings.

First Cities

Some of the first cities of Mesopotamia—notably Agade, Ur, Babylon, and Nineveh—became imperial capitals, renowned and feared throughout the ancient world. When Alexander the Great conquered Mesopotamia in 331 BC, Babylon was still regarded as the most spectacular of all cities.

The first settlements that developed into sizeable cities emerged in Sumer (southern Mesopotamia) in the late fourth millennium BC. The largest and most imposing of these early cities was Uruk (biblical Erech), which was the seat of the legendary Sumerian kings Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh, the last of whom was believed to have built Uruk's mighty city wall of over five miles. Uruk and other Sumerian cities also boasted monumental temples and palaces decorated with statues of gods, kings, and worshippers, and were centers of innovation, learning, and artistic creation. The exhibition includes elements of architectural decoration, such as clay cone mosaics and bronze door decorations with scenes of military campaigns; as well as relief sculptures and plaques glorifying the

king and the gods from palaces and domestic contexts. In later periods, Babylonian temples and ceremonial spaces were elaborately decorated with images of protective gods and demons, such as the glazed tile panel of a striding lion from the Ishtar Gate of Babylon which is featured in the exhibition.

First Writing

The earliest known writing emerged in Sumer around 3400 BC, originating as a system of pictographs that evolved by 2600 BC into the characteristic wedge-shaped script we call cuneiform. Over the next 2,000 years, the use of cuneiform scripts spread to neighboring areas of Iran, Armenia, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt. Cuneiform eventually died out in the late first century AD, overtaken by the simpler scripts of Aramaic and Greek. The hundreds of thousands of Mesopotamian texts discovered through archaeology include royal inscriptions, legal codes, treaties, and literature, as well as receipts, contracts, letters, incantations and other everyday records that reveal the intimate details of Mesopotamian social, religious, and economic life to an extent unmatched by any other ancient culture. The vast majority of cuneiform writing was inscribed on clay tablets, many examples of which are in the exhibition.

Another highlight of the exhibition is an important group of stone cylinder seals that were impressed on clay tablets to serve like a signature. The craftsmanship and artistry of seals became especially sophisticated from the Akkadian period (2340–2150 BC) onward, their scenes ranging from everyday activities (banqueting, plowing, making pottery) to mythology, worship, rituals, and warfare, making them the largest and most important surviving body of Mesopotamian iconography. Despite their diminutive scale, these intricately carved seals are among the greatest works of Mesopotamian art.

First Kings

The third section of the exhibition examines the principal kingdoms and empires of Mesopotamia and the associated representations of their kings, conquests, court life, and royal families in art. According to Sumerian creation myths, kingship “descended from heaven,” and the gods determined the order in which cities and their rulers held sway. The ruler’s primary obligations were to lead in battle, to ensure the favor of the gods through temple building and regular offerings, to maintain the city walls and irrigation canals for agriculture, and to enact and enforce laws. Mesopotamian kings promulgated the earliest known law codes (most famously that of Hammurabi of Babylon), and political reforms motivated by a concern for social justice.

Enriched by tribute from conquered lands and active international trade, the cultures of Mesopotamia produced some of the greatest works of art that have come down to us from the ancient

world: a magnificent silver cult-vessel from a Sumerian temple in Lagash, elaborately decorated with mythological scenes; royal statues of kings of Agade, Ur, Babylon, and Girsu; stone relief sculptures from the palaces of Assyria; and colorful glazed brick reliefs of lions, bulls and dragons from Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon.

For some 3,000 years, Mesopotamia remained the preeminent power of the Near East. In 539 BC Cyrus the Great captured Babylon and incorporated Mesopotamia into the Persian Empire, which in turn fell to the Macedonian king Alexander the Great in 331 BC. Periods of Greek and Parthian rule followed, and by about 100 AD native Mesopotamian culture had effectively come to an end.

Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins is curated by Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, and Ariane Thomas, curator of the Mesopotamian collections, Department of Near Eastern Antiquities, at the Musée du Louvre.

Exhibition organized by the Musée du Louvre, Paris, and the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



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The J. Paul Getty Museum collects Greek and Roman antiquities, European paintings, drawings, manuscripts, sculpture and decorative arts to 1900, as well as photographs from around the world to the present day. The Museum's mission is to display and interpret its collections, and present important loan exhibitions and publications for the enjoyment and education of visitors locally and internationally. This is supported by an active program of research, conservation, and public programs that seek to deepen our knowledge of and connection to works of art.

Visiting the Getty Villa

The Getty Villa is open Wednesday through Monday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is closed Tuesdays, Thanksgiving, December 25 (Christmas Day), and January 1.

Admission to the Getty Villa is always free, but a ticket is required for admission. Tickets can be ordered in advance, or on the day of your visit, at www.getty.edu/visit or at (310) 440-7300. Parking rates vary. Groups of 15 or more must make reservations by phone. For more information, call (310) 440-7300 (English or Spanish); (310) 440-7305

(TTY line for the deaf or hearing impaired). The Getty Villa is at 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Pacific Palisades, California. Same-day parking at both Museum locations (Getty Center and Getty Villa) is available for \$15 through the Getty's Pay Once, Park Twice program.

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