

# Ancient Civilizations (Prehistoric, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian)

## Prehistoric Art

### Key Ideas

- Prehistory is the study of human civilization before the invention of writing.
- The history of art begins with the study of Paleolithic sculptures and paintings.
- Paleolithic cultures were hunters, gatherers, and nomadic (did not build permanent structures).
- Neolithic cultures developed agriculture, domesticated animals, and built permanent structures.

**Paleolithic “Old Stone Age”:** 40,000-8000 BCE

**Neolithic “New Stone Age”:** 8,000-2300 BCE

**(Bronze Age: 2300-1000 BCE and Iron Age: starts 1000 BCE)**

*Venus Figure*, sandstone, probably La Mouthe France, Upper Paleolithic, about 20,000 BCE (72.10)

### **Terms**

*BCE*: Before the Common Era (replaces B.C., Before Christ)

*CE*: Common Era, (replaces A.D., *Anno Domini*)

*Composite creature*: Combination of animal and human elements in figure.

*Relief* (low and high): Background is carved away, to set off the figure.

## Art of Ancient Civilizations: Mesopotamia (Sumerian, Assyrian, Luristan, Marlik) and Egypt

### Key Ideas

- Control of rivers (Tigris and Euphrates/Nile) contributes to the development of large-scale urban areas, kingdoms, and empires.
- Cities required cooperation, planning, and leadership—social hierarchies and specialized labor develop.
- Writing is invented, used to document events and create the world’s first epic literature (cuneiform in Mesopotamia and hieroglyphs in Egypt).
- Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations are polytheistic, worshipping many deities. Both civilizations believe that the human spirit continues to survive after physical death.

## *Mesopotamia*

**Sumerian, 3500-2340 BCE and Neo-Sumerian, 2180-2010 BCE (modern Iraq)**

*Foundation figure*, copper, 2500 BCE, 74.23 (not on view).

### **Terms**

*Cella*: Innermost sacred room of a temple.

*Cuneiform*: “Wedge-shaped” writing.

*Hieratic scale*: The most important figure is also the largest.

*Registers*: Horizontal bands of narrative.

*Theocratic socialism*: Planned society ruled from the temple.

*Votive*: An offering to deities.

*Ziggurat*: Mesopotamian stepped-temple structure.

**Assyria 1015-612 BCE (modern Iraq)**

*Winged Genius*, limestone, 883-859 BCE (41.9).

### **Terms/Names**

*Ashurnasirpal II*: King of Assyria. (The Winged Genius was in his palace at Nimrud.)

*Genius/Genie*: demi-god of Assyria.

*Standard inscription*: Inscription repeated on Assyrian royal sculptures, denoting the titles and accomplishments of the ruler.

**Luristan 1500-600 BCE (western Iran)**

*Rhyton in the shape of an animal*, terracotta, 1500 BCE, 76.73.83 (not on view)

*Horse bit and cheek plaques*, bronze, 1000-600 BCE (accession number not available, not on view)

### **Terms/Names**

*Rhyton*: A drinking cup in the shape of an animal or figure.

## **Marlik 1400-800 BCE (Iran)**

*Beaker*, silver, 800 BCE, 65.36.2 (not on view).

### **Terms/Names**

*Repoussé*: A technique of pushing or hammering metal from the back to create a protruding image.

## **Egypt**

### **Old Kingdom, 2575-2150 BCE**

*False Door from the Tomb of Iry-en-Akhet*, limestone, about 2400 BCE (52.22)

*Headrest*, hardwood, with traces of gesso, 2635-2155 BCE (2000.70.2)

### **Middle Kingdom, 1975-1640 BCE**

*Horus Collar*, glazed faience, 2133-1783 BCE (27.42.4)

### **New Kingdom, 1539-1075 BCE**

*Clappers*, hippopotamus ivory, 1550-1292 BCE (2012.64 a,b)

### **Third Intermediate Period, 1075 to 715 BCE**

*Mummy, Cartonnage and Coffin of Lady Tashat*, 945-712 BCE (16.414)

*Funerary Papyrus*, 1070-712 BCE (16.675)

### **Ptolemaic Period 332-30 BCE**

*Striding Figure*, red granite, 300-30 BCE (58.14)

### **Terms**

*Ankh*: Symbol for everlasting life.

*Canon of Proportions*: Egyptian standard of measurements to reproduce images of people.

*Canopic jars*: Held the organs of the dead.

*Cartonnage*: Mummy case made of layers of linen or papyrus, glued together.

*Faience*: kiln-fired glass paste.

*Hieroglyph*: Sacred pictorial writing.

*Ka*: life force or spirit

*Kohl*: Black eye liner.

*Mastaba*: Egyptian tomb.

*Monotheism*: Worship one deity.

*Natron*: Natural salt used in mummification.

*Papyrus*: Writing material made from papyrus plants.

*Polytheism*: Worship many deities.

*Scarab*: dung beetle, symbol of rebirth.

*Serdab*: Sealed room in tomb, holds *ka* statue.

*Sunk relief*: Image is carved into surface of stone.

*Udjat or Wedjat*: Eye of Horus, symbols of moon and sun.

### **Egyptian gods and goddesses:**

**Ra (or Re)**: The sun god. The *pharaohs* were believed to be the sons of Ra, thus were divine.

**Horus**: God of the sky and earth. Often depicted as a falcon or falcon-headed man. Son of Osiris and Isis. Pharaoh was thought to be the living Horus on earth.

**Osiris**: God of the dead and also resurrection.

**Anubis**: Jackal-headed funerary god.

**Isis**: Goddess who was viewed as the divine mother.

**Amun**: King of the gods. He is often conflated with Ra and worshipped as **Amun-Ra**, god of the sun.

**Ma'at**: Goddess of truth and justice.

**Thoth**: Ibis-headed god of wisdom and knowledge.

## **Additional resources**

Here's a great resource to explore from the Penn Museum on ancient Egypt, including more information on the gods and goddesses: <http://www.penn.museum/sites/egypt/egyptintro.shtml>

Life in ancient Mesopotamia, Online exhibition from the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago  
<http://mesopotamia.lib.uchicago.edu/>

This online essay, *Art of the First Cities in the Third Millennium BCE*, discusses the development of the first civilizations (including Sumer): [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/trdm/hd\\_trdm.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/trdm/hd_trdm.htm)

The Metropolitan Museum has a great online essay on Assyrian art:  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/assy/hd\\_assy.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/assy/hd_assy.htm)