

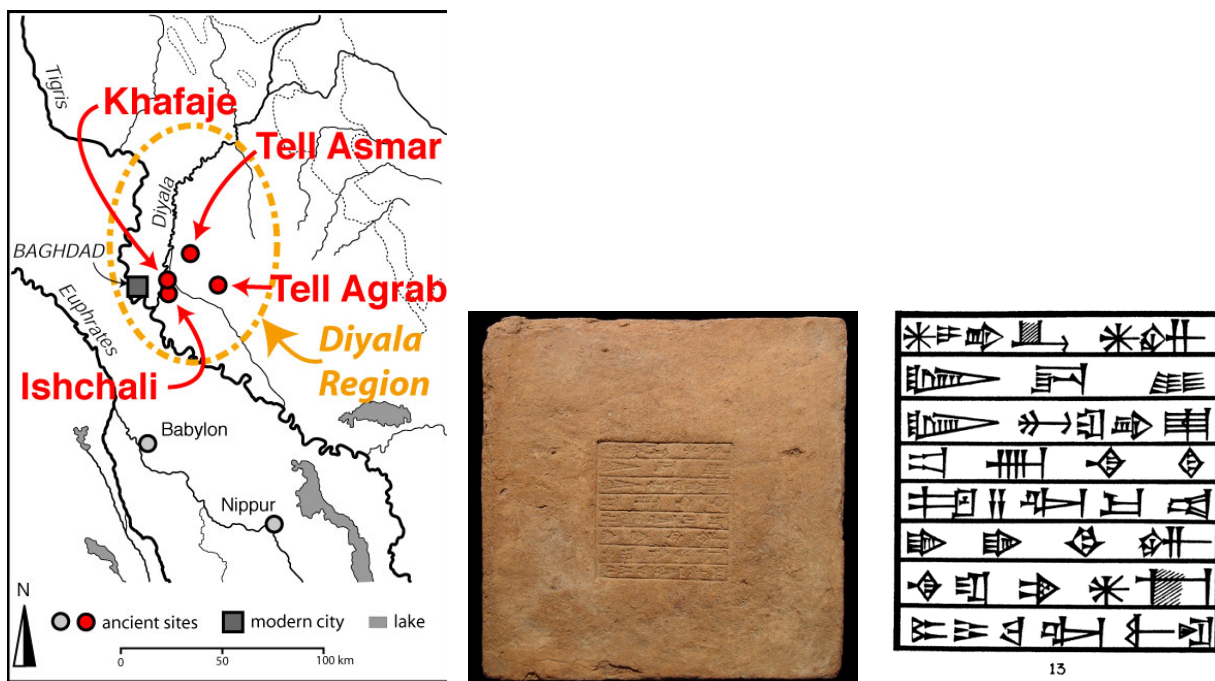
## Investigating Art History: Tell Asmar Statue Hoard: Communication and Art

This lesson plan has been inspired and adapted by the Project Archaeology lesson plans (free to download here: <https://projectarchaeology.org/2020/03/23/free-online-lessons/>).

The background information here can be adapted depending on the grade level.

### Background

Statuary from Early Dynastic Mesopotamia (ca. 2900–2350 BCE), represents an important period in the history of sculpture because of the representation of non-royal individuals. It is the only period where so many non-royal statues survive in Western Asia. ISAC excavations have found these statues in excavations, including in Level VII of the Inanna Temple at Nippur (excavated 1957-1958 and 1960-1961), as well as in the Diyala region, which is along the Diyala River, a tributary of the Tigris, particularly at temples at the sites of Tell Asmar, Khafaje, and Tell Agrab. The Iraq Expedition of ISAC worked for seven consecutive winters (1930/1931-1936/1937) at Tell Asmar, Khafaje, Ishchali, and Tell Agrab. These excavations found the remains of temples, palaces, houses, and workshops from the period dating to 3200-1800 BCE and found literally thousands of objects. The site of Tell Asmar (located about 50 miles northeast of Baghdad), where the statue hoard was found was selected because of the appearance of bricks with the name of the site of Eshnunna that started to be found on the antiquities market in Baghdad in 1928. Archaeological work revealed inscribed bricks with the ancient city name at the site thus confirming the hypothesis that Eshnunna and Tell Asmar were the same place.

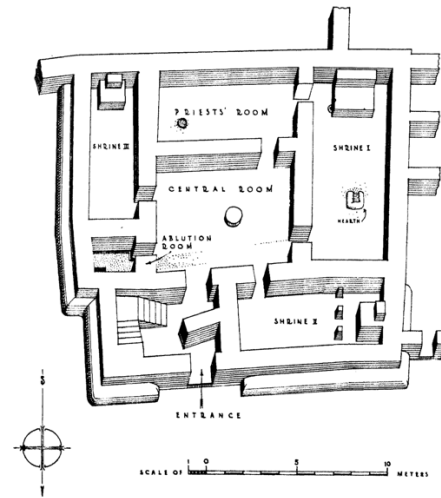
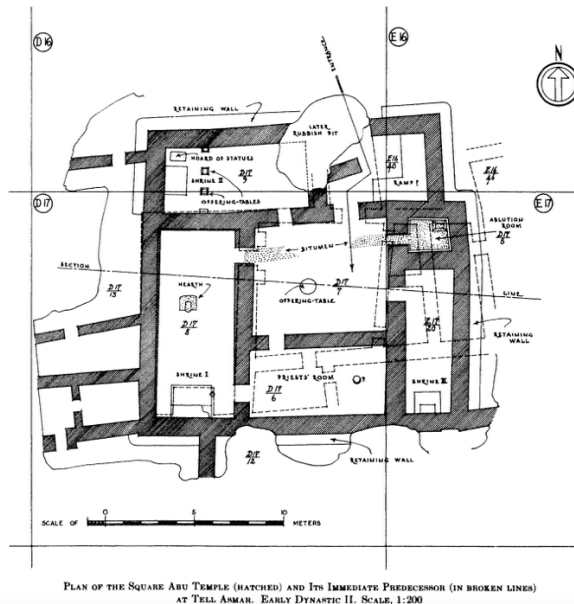


Map of region showing sites, stamped brick of Ipiq-Adad II, King of Eshnunna, ca. 1862-1818 BCE, mentioning the city of Eshnunna in line 4

## Early Dynastic Sculpture



At the time that these sculptures were carved, southern Mesopotamia was in the Early Dynastic period. This period is divided into three phases: Early Dynastic I (2900-2700), II (2700-2600), and IIIa and b (2600-2340). In this period, people increasingly moved into cities and by the Early Dynastic IIIb period, the region consisted of city-states that was ruled by a king which consisted of the main city, as well as other smaller centers. Before this, we are not sure exactly how their governments were organized. In the Diyala, there is a considerable increase in settlements. As the stamped bricks above indicate, the site of Tell Asmar was known in ancient times as Eshnunna.



Early Dynastic temples were built from mudbrick, the main construction material in Mesopotamia since stone was not plentiful. Although we have ideas about where these statues might have been placed in the temple, many of the statues are often found *after* they were no longer used, meaning that it is difficult to know where these statues originally would have been located. At Khafaje, however, there is evidence for statues in the courtyards of the temples (textual sources also attest to the worship of statues in courtyards) and statues were found in one temple apparently arranged on the floor. For the most part, however, these statues were not found in their original context, but rather in secondary contexts, such as hoards dug in floors.



FIG. 62.—A GROUP OF STATUES *in situ* ON THE FLOOR OF ROOM Q 42:7 OF SIN TEMPLE IX

As most people would not have had access to the temples themselves, the temple statues have been interpreted as being representations of a person praying based on the clasped hands of the statues. This statue (and by extension the person themselves) would then have access to the temple and be able to pray to the divinity perpetually. The distinctive large eyes on the statue are thought to depict the act of looking at the divine. About 550 statues survive, of which about 90 are inscribed with information about who the owners were. Although the inscriptions suggest that the owners of these statues were elite individuals, the statues themselves were made out of relatively cheap stone, such as gypsum or limestone. Only the eyes, which sometimes had lapis lazuli pupils, were made from valuable stone. The figures were on stands which would have allowed them greater stability than if the feet were resting directly on a surface.



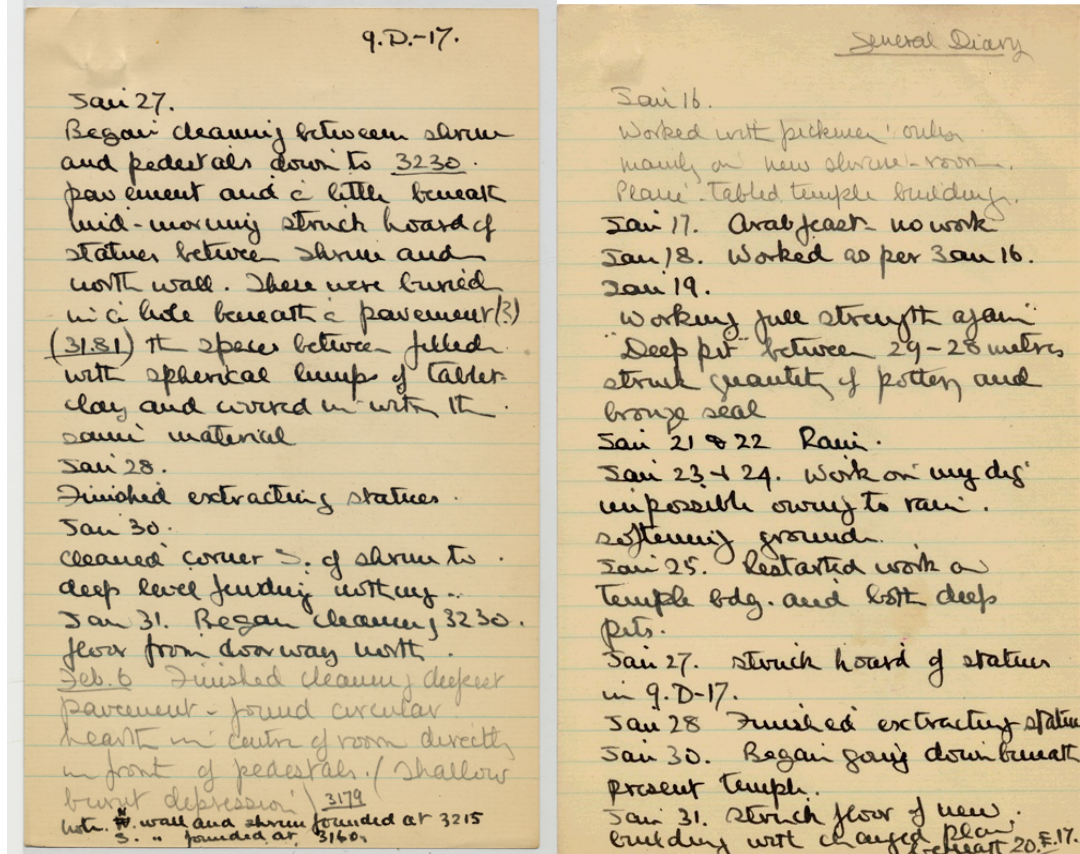
FIG. 151.—CLOSE-UP OF STATUE HOARD WHEN FIRST EXPOSED



Some statues, such as the Tell Asmar statues under examination here, were found together in a hoard of objects. The Tell Asmar statues were found in the floor of the so-called Square Temple at Tell Asmar and have been dated from 2900-2600 BCE. The Square Temple was said to be dedicated to the god Abu but there is no actual evidence for this at the temple itself. The statues were buried in a hole between the altar and the wall in one of the rooms that is thought to be a shrine to a deity, but it is now thought that the hoard is not associated with this level of the temple but may belong to an earlier level. It is not clear why the statues were hoarded together, but the theory is that this happened after they were no longer in use, but no one wished to throw them away, meaning they buried them in the floor of the temple instead. Textual evidence suggests that offerings were made to statues of both living and dead people, arguing that in some cases, these statues did not cease to function even after their owner had died. The statue hoard consisted of 12 statues of various sizes, which were excavated at the



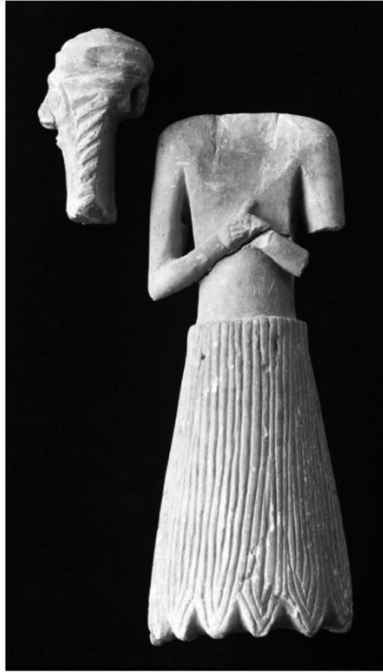
temple of Tell Asmar in 1934. Seven of the statues are now in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, four are in the ISAC Museum (A12328, A12330-A12332) and one is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (40.156, formerly ISAC Museum A12329) The three largest statues were deposited first and then the other statues were stacked on top of them in the hole in the ground. The amount of information that we have about the actual find is unfortunately limited. A few photographs survive, as well as the excavation records, but these are quite brief in their descriptions.



Most of the statues in the hoard were of men (10 in total), and like many statues of men from this period, they had long hair and beards, with only a few being clean shaven. As is typical of these statues, the men wore skirts with fringes or tufts without shirts, while women wore one-shouldered tufted dresses and had their hair style in elaborate braids. In the case of the statues from the hoard, most of them were made from gypsum, with a few from limestone and one from alabaster. Only the eyes, with their lapis lazuli pupils, were made from valuable stone, but in the hoard, only one statue had lapis lazuli pupils. The other statues had pupils that were made from black limestone. The eyes tend to be shell inlays, although some eyes were also made from paste. The eyes were fixed in the statue in bitumen, which was also used to color the hair.



Tell Asmar Statue hoard: ISACM A12330, A12331, A12331, A12328, Metropolitan Museum of Art 40.156, Fletcher Fund, 1940



Tell Asmar Hoard, No. 11



Nippur, Inanna Temple Statues

The statues are fairly stylized and many of the statues resemble each other, meaning that the people represented in the statuary did not probably look like the statues who are said to represent them. Nevertheless, the statue was considered a manifestation of that person and image itself was considered a “real” representation of that individual. The statues were made out of composite pieces, meaning that the statue was not carved from one large block of stone but rather put together from multiple parts with bitumen (a sticky black liquid that is part of petroleum) sticking these pieces together. Some heads were concentrated in groups, which suggests that heads may have been changed when the donor of the statue changed. The statues also would have been painted, meaning that today they look very different than they did at the time that they were being used. The inlays of the eyes have also not necessarily survived through time and have fallen out. Also, as the photograph above shows, the statues were broken when they were found and we can see that there has been a certain amount of restoration that has happened, also changing the statues’ appearance. Further, the statues are no longer together as a group since they are scattered between three museums.



8 (Ag. 35:857)

Statue of Nunamama, attendant of Amar-Kilima, ISACM 21488, Tell Agrab



## Lesson Plan



### Enduring Understanding

Communication is important to every culture and art, including sculpture is a form of communication. Through close looking at art, we can gain a better understanding of that art.

### Essential Questions:

What is communication? What is close looking? Why is important? How do we use observation and inference in order to better understand how art such as the sculptures in the Tell Asmar statue hoard communicate?

### What Students Will Learn

Communication is necessary for people and something that we see throughout history and across different cultures. Communication happens in different ways and it includes art such as

sculpture. This is a tool for visual communication. Through close looking we can try to identify ways that art communicates with us. Sculpture, painting and photography are an interpretation of reality rather necessarily than a true vision of what actually existed. They can represent how people viewed the world, rather than how the world actually appeared.

### **What Students Will Do**

Students will differentiate between observation, inference, and evidence through examining worshipper statues and determine what they think the purpose of these statues was and what message they were trying to convey.

### **Assessment**

Write a short essay about how the student viewed the statue and present it to the class explaining what the statues meant to them and how they think the statues would have communicated at the time they were made.

### **Materials**

*For each student*

Background information sheet on Mesopotamian Worshipper Statues  
Print out of “Artifacts as Primary Sources” showing a photograph of one of the worshipper statues from the Tell Asmar Hoard being used by the teacher for close study

*For the teacher*

Images of paintings and sculpture that will assist in the discussion of how art communicates ideas.

### **What is communication in art history?**

Communication is something that happens between individuals and it is the way in which people interact with each other. This interaction happens through different customs, roles, rules or rituals and defines and establishes the characteristics of a particular culture. Culture is made through the shared values that a group holds which is created through that communication and differentiates them from other groups.

Different forms of communication change through time. The invention of photography, for example, was a major technological change in the way people communicated with each other. Photography was seen as accurately recording an image as opposed to painting or other forms of art, which was seen as more of an interpretation of reality. But photography is also subjective. Individuals who take photographs do so with a particular purpose, often trying to convey a particular message. These can be studied through art history.

According to britannica.com art history is an "historical study of visual arts, being concerned with identifying, classifying, describing, interpreting, and understanding art products and historic development of the fields of painting, sculpture, architecture, the decorative arts...etc." In art history, we can look at the different ways in which art communicates and try to understand what the artist was trying to communicate with the audience.

In order to start to begin to study a particular piece of art, it is useful to apply "close-looking" to the artwork. Close looking is to look at a particular piece of art for a number of minutes (sometimes up to ten minutes). Many people do not realize that most people spend 5-30 seconds looking at an object or artwork in a museum. On average, people spend 15 seconds looking at a piece of art as famous as the Mona Lisa. The benefits of close looking are that the more that one looks at an artwork (or picture of an artwork) one sees more and more in the artwork. Further, it allows people to think about the way in which your own ideas influence the way in which you see an artwork and how someone else might see an artwork differently, just as the artist themselves would have seen their own art differently than we do. After looking at the artwork, it is then important to describe what one sees and write down observations about the artwork. Then think about how the artwork makes one feel, again writing down these feelings. Finally, interpret the artwork. What does one think that the artist is trying to say with this artwork? In close looking, there are no wrong answers. While the historical context in which the artwork was created or knowledge about the life of the artist can help inform us about what the artist was trying to do, looking at an artwork with no background whatsoever is also not a problem in close looking.

### **Preparing to Teach**

1. Display photograph of worshipper statue "Artifacts as primary sources"
2. Draw or display emojis on the board
3. Write these ideas on a board to prepare the group discussion at number 4 in the Discover New Knowledge Group Activity:

The message or messages that they think the artist is communicating. What can you infer about how this object was used? What was its purpose?

How an artist uses images to communicate. Who could have used the statue?

Why would the artist use art to communicate? Where would the statue have been used?

4. Post this lesson's Enduring Understanding, the Essential Questions, and the word bank words

Word Bank:

art history: study of visual arts created by people



communication: the imparting or exchanging of information; the conveying of or sharing of ideas and feelings

evidence: material used to answer the questions and interpret them

analysis: investigation to learn new information about something or solve a question

observation: seeing something and noting what it is you have seen

inference: subjective conclusion reached on the basis of an observation of the evidence

composition: the way in which something is put together or arranged

image: a representation of the form of a person or object, such as a painting, sculpture, or photograph

hoard: two or more objects found collected together that often would be hidden. Hoards can be left for a variety of reasons including being buried because of an emergency, putting something away for safekeeping, or for ritual purposes

symbol: something which represents something else

close looking: act of looking at an artwork for a number of minutes, then writing down a description of the artwork, how the artwork makes the observer feel, and trying to determine what the artist might have trying to communicate with that artwork

### **Uncover Prior Knowledge**

**What is communication? Why is communication important? How does art, such as sculpture, communicate?** Explain to students that these questions will guide their learning. Tell them the word bank words (communication, observation, inference, analysis) and indicate that the students will learn to use these as tools and define them during this lesson.

1. Indicate emojis on the board. Ask students, what do these symbols mean? What emotions can these convey? Writing not only can convey an idea but also a feeling.
2. Ask the students to think about different forms of communication. Ask students individually to think about and then tell the class one form of communication and add items until you have a representative sample. These examples can include books, computers, cell phone, and photographs. Be sure to include an example of a sculpture since this will correlate to Mesopotamian worshipper statue.
3. Ask students:  
How do the different forms communicate? Why is it important to have different types of communication? Why is sculpture a form of communication? How do sculptures communicate ideas?

4. Help students to define communication and symbol and add them to the word bank.

### **Discover New Knowledge: How does art help people communicate?**

1. Remind students that art has been around for tens of thousands of years. For most of this history, the people who created art had no written language. How could this art have helped people communicate?

2. Show students examples of sculptures and other objects from a time when people had no written language and an example of a sculpture depicting a historical event from the past. Explain that people communicate through artworks but that they also use artwork to communicate past events that we know about through written histories.

3. Show students the painting “Young Man and his Wife” by Jewad Selim (1953). Explain that the artist wants to tell us something through the images he has painted.

4. **Observation.** Tell the students to study the picture silently for ten minutes to practice close looking. As they are looking at the picture, tell them to write down what they see. This is not only what they can observe from the painting itself, but also what it makes them feel.

5. **Inference.** Ask students: What inferences (conclusions) can you make about what the artist’s message is? What do you infer about the artist’s message in this painting? What evidence in the painting supports your inference(s) about it? What can we learn about the culture of the artist from the message?

6. Explain to the students that this is a painting by the Iraqi artist Jewad Selim (1919-1961), who was one of the founders of the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951. He was both a painter and sculptor, who in the 1940s worked for Directorate of Antiquities in Iraq. He seems to have been fascinated with ancient art from Iraq and in the photograph of him in his studio, we can see paintings on the wall of Early Dynastic worshipper statues. Indeed, it has been suggested that the faces in this painting were influenced by ancient art from Iraq.

### **Group Analysis**

1. Divide students into groups of 3 or 4

2. Tell students: You will use analysis and interpretation to study a photograph of a statue through close looking. You will interpret the meaning of the sculpture and use evidence to support your conclusions. Assist students in defining observation, inference and close looking adding them to their word bank.

3. Distribute photograph of a worshipper statue to the students.

4. Have students observe the sculpture photograph and think about what message the

sculpture might be trying to convey to the audience for ten minutes. Have them write down their observations as they work and have them think about what they can observe about different aspects of the statue, such as the hair, eyes, hands, clothing, and what type of material they think the statue is made from.

5. Assign one student to record their group's ideas. Tell the students to brainstorm as a group. Ask the students to describe the statue, how it makes them feel, and some inferences about the message(s) that they believe the artist is trying to communicate.

6. Have each group share the sculpture and their brainstormed ideas and allow the class to respond with their own interpretations and ideas.

7. Ask students: How can we test our interpretations about the sculptor's message? This could include research into time period and culture, find common symbols of a cultural group, ask an artist or people from the same cultural group for their interpretation.

8. As a class discuss: What does the statue tell us about how we live or what is important in their culture? What do they think the statue is doing? What does the fact their hands are clasped suggest about what they are doing? Why do the statues look the way that they do? Why might they have such big eyes? Why is art, including sculpture, an important form of communication?

9. Show the students the photograph of all the statues together and ask them how old they think the statues are? Once you have heard the students' opinion, explain to them that the statues are almost five thousand years old and that this statue was found together with others in the hoard in the floor of a temple.

10. Remind students that it is all right not to understand the meaning of everything that they are looking at. For instance, display a road sign of a camel crossing. Most people know what a camel is so that they would recognize that this designates that there are camels in the area because they know the code. Then show a road sign from Australia, which shows a southern cassowary, an animal that someone might not recognize. Show another sign, which appears to show an elk attacking a car. In these cases, we may not have the context to understand what these signs mean.

## **Assessment**

1. Write a short essay about how the student viewed the statue and present it to the class explaining what the statue meant to them.

2. Remind students that they should think about image and composition when they are making writing their essay and add that to their word banks.

## **Reflect on New Knowledge**

1. This lesson's enduring understanding is: Communication is important to every culture and art is a form of communication. Ask students: Based on your exploration of culture, communication, and art what can you say about the role of art in culture? In communication?

2. Give students a few minutes to write what "Communication and Art" means to them on their

sheets.