
How Power Is Depicted In Art History

Depiction of Power in Art History

Hammurabi was Babylon's most powerful king. He is known for his conquests and most of all, his laws. His famous law code was immortalized in a black-basalt stele. Black-basalt is a very durable material, which signifies the importance of this king and the severity of his laws. On the top of this stele, Hammurabi is featured standing next to the sun god Shamash. We know he is the sun god by the flames emitting from his shoulders. The two are depicted equal in size. This attests to Hammurabi's power because in other artworks of this time, the god is always displayed much larger than anyone else. The fact that Hammurabi is depicted standing level with a god shows that he is almost god-like. However, Shamash is shown sitting atop a throne while Hammurabi stands. This clarifies that although Hammurabi is worthy enough to be present in the first place, Shamash still has the most power. Both men are wearing royal headgear with their hair and beards groomed to perfection. However, the god's headpiece is made of four pairs of horns that are a symbol of divinity in ancient times. Both men are shown with bulging biceps. This is most likely not true to life, but they were rendered this way in order to emphasize their strength. In the picture, Shamash is handing over a coiled rope and measuring rods to Hammurabi. These two objects are both symbols of authority. Specifically, they show the king's power "to build the social order and to measure people's lives," (Kleiner, 44). Hammurabi receiving these gifts as a blessing illustrates that he has a personal relationship with the god. The gifts signify that the Shamash deems Hammurabi deserving enough to have the power to govern and judge Babylon by enforcing all of the laws depicted on the stele.

Similarly, the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton and his queen are also portrayed receiving a sun god's blessing in their intimate family portrait, Akhenaton, Nefertiti, and three daughters. In this limestone stele, the sun disk Aton showers the pharaoh's family in life-giving rays. These are symbolized by ankhs, which were known in Ancient Egypt as the key of life. Aton's rays are shining down on the entire family, but the ankhs are placed right at the noses of the two rulers. This is interpreted as transferring the breath of life. The scale element is also present here, as Akhenaton is illustrated slightly larger than his wife. The more important you are, the larger you are shown in the artwork. This indicates the two are not quite equal; Akhenaton is more powerful than Nefertiti. His headdress is bigger, and his chair is even positioned higher than hers is. However, on her chair are the symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt. This signifies her power over them both. Additionally, the royal couple is shown wearing headdresses that symbolize their authority. Akhenaton refuted the existence of any other god and directed all worship to Aton. He also claimed to be the god's son and only prophet. This shows power in that he could drastically alter the religious norm of his people by suppressing their previous traditions. This is represented in the small cobra found inside the sun disk, which tells us that Aton is the sole deity (Khan Academy, 2012). Furthermore, accompanying the dramatic change in religion was a dramatic change in art. Akhenaton did not choose to be portrayed rigid and muscular like the gods before him. He is seen in this image with a small waist, skinny arms, and a protruding belly. Making change takes power, and Akhenaton is responsible for revolutionizing not only the art style, but also the religion of the Amarna period.

Lastly, the bronze dagger blade found in Grave Circle A illustrates a scene of hunters attacking

lions. It is a costly weapon because it is inlaid with gold, silver, and a black metallic alloy called niello. The metalworking is extremely detailed and executed beautifully. Only someone of great wealth could afford this combination of highly skilled work on expensive medium; this exemplifies the prosperity of the Mycenaean kings. In the scene, we see a battle between five hunters and three lions. Two of the lions are wounded and fleeing, which celebrates a battle victory and attests to the warlike nature of the rulers. Lions are feared beasts. The fact that this small group is successfully fighting them shows that the ruler is strong and prevails in the toughest of attacks. Although we do not know who it is specifically, we can infer that the hunter in the back of the scene is the ruler since he is depicted the largest of them all. He is also standing furthest from the lions, which shows his importance. While he is involved in the battle, his subjects are doing the most fighting and are closest to the danger in order to protect him. Overall, the fact that the Mycenaean kings were buried with such valuable and luxurious treasures proves that they were admired and possessed great wealth.

Throughout the course of history, a common theme in ancient artworks is the depiction of mighty rulers and gods. The stele with the law code of Hammurabi, the sunken relief stele depicting the family of Akhenaton, and the bronze dagger found in Grave Circle A are all examples of this. Although art is constantly transforming over time and across cultures, there are a few similar stylistic conventions shared by the ancient artists of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Mycenae. First, it is common for figure size to be manipulated in order to distinguish the ruler from everyone else in the scene. All three artworks portray the ruler with greater stature than those around him. On Hammurabi's stele, Shamash's size illustrates his dominance over Hammurabi. However, Hammurabi is almost the same height; they are both powerful but not equally powerful. Similarly, this concept is reflected on Akhenaton's family portrait where Akhenaton is pictured slightly larger than his wife. Even the slightest height difference can be symbolic. On the lion hunt dagger, there is one man significantly larger than the rest. This theory allows us to assume he is the ruler. Next, the artists' use of expensive materials and intricate details in their work can create a godlike element of perfection as well as attest to the wealth of the ruler. For example, Hammurabi's stele is made of a dark stone that is difficult to carve. On this stele, both Hammurabi and Shamash appear perfectly groomed and in excellent physical shape. This is evident in the smooth texture of their hair and beards, as well as their obviously chiseled muscles. Comparably, the lion hunt dagger displays sophisticated metalworking skill. It is composed of extremely expensive materials. This tells us that whoever was laid to rest with this item must have been regal. Lastly, a composite view of the body is used in both Hammurabi's stele and Akhenaton's family portrait.

On the other hand, the power of the god is also depicted differently in these artworks. The family portrait of Akhenaton is the most dissimilar of the three. The most obvious distinction is that this stele was created during the Amarna period, so curves are used in place of rigid lines. The bodies are portrayed very frail with full lips and heavy-lidded eyes on elongated faces. This varies from the tradition of gods being rendered in perfect physical shape. However, art historians do not believe this was an accurate representation of Akhenaton's true body shape. They originally thought this may be an indication of health issues, but it is accepted as a mere stylistic change. On this limestone stele, Akhenaton is seen in an intimate setting with his family. This is extremely different than the formal scene between Hammurabi and Shamash pictured on the stele with the law code of Hammurabi. Additionally, Akhenaton and his family exist informally in the presence of a god. Akhenaton and Nefertiti display relaxed postures while they care for their daughters. This attests to the royal couple's personal relationship with the sun god Aton. He is showering them with his rays of life at all times, even when they do not formally

ask. Hammurabi is also in the presence of a god, but he is standing with his arm raised in respect. His stele depicts a very reverential scene. The lion hunt dagger is the complete opposite. Instead of showing intimacy or formality, it shows valiancy in conquest. This dagger is unique in that the god is fighting alongside his soldiers. His dominance is seen because they appear to be victorious. Lastly, the form of the ruler varies from artwork to artwork. In Akhenaton's family portrait, the god takes the form of the sun disk giving off rays. He does not take on human form like the rulers in the other two. This means he is also sexless, while the other gods are shown as male. Overall, no matter how different the styles are, these three artworks were created to depict the superior power and strength of ancient rulers and gods.

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