

monographs on the ancient near east

volume 3, fascicle 1

monumental art of the assyrian empire:

dynamics of composition styles

by

pauline albenda

undena publications

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Editors: Giorgio Buccellati, Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati

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Monumental Art of the Assyrian Empire: Dynamics of Composition Styles

Pauline Albenda

The time of the Assyrian empire was a period of immense creative activity. This study sets forth the achievements of Assyria in the visual arts and focuses upon the stone reliefs that were originally placed along the lower walls of chambers in the royal residences. It traces the characteristics of pictorial design that evolved, from traditional methods of representation to compositions that impart a sense of newness. The respective arrangements of subject matter into whole patterns or compositions derive from five basic schemes or stylistic preferences: activity, symmetry, centrality, triangularity, dimensionality. Each scheme is defined and discussed separately. Individual works of art are singled out as exemplars of the preferred composition style and for the innovative aspects of their design.

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PREFACE

In ancient times Assyria shared in the history, religion, and culture of Mesopotamia, a region that was part of the vast geographical area of the ancient Near East. The interaction of human experiences and the exchange of ideas among the peoples of Mesopotamia largely influenced the concrete forms of Assyrian art works. This explains why the Assyrian artistic style seems to replicate the standard models of representation and design common throughout Mesopotamia. Despite the apparent similarities with traditional types, individual Assyrian works of art displayed distinctive qualities from the beginning, and innovative trends evolved in works of later date. Unfortunately, artifactual sources do not furnish sufficient data by which those trends can be traced in a continuous pattern.

Fortunately, large quantities of works of art datable to the period of the Assyrian empire (ninth to seventh centuries B.C.E.) were excavated as a result of archaeological exploration. Many of these art works consist of stone wall reliefs that are oftentimes colossal in scale and outstanding for their intrinsic qualities. The extensive assemblages of wall reliefs found at different sites show that the time of the Assyrian empire was a period of immense creative activity that reached into new realms of representation and complexity in the visual arts. Wall painting and sculpture-in-the-round from the same period, however, sometimes relied upon artistic formulas that differed from those of the wall reliefs. Thus they deserve to be studied as independent subjects.

In the mid-nineteenth century European interest in the art and culture of Assyria was sparked by several remarkable discoveries made at the modern sites of Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin), Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), and Nineveh. At these places the pioneer excavators—the Frenchmen Paul Emile Botta and Victor Place and the Englishman Austen Henry Layard—uncovered ancient edifices containing massive walls lined with large limestone slabs on which were carved mythical creatures and scenes of warfare and related events. A new history and a new art was suddenly revealed. It was soon learned that the huge structures with their wondrous carved decorations were the remains of palaces of the kings who reigned during the Assyrian empire.

From the outset the pictorial record on the Assyrian wall reliefs was thought to be an interesting illustration of the historical books of the Hebrew Bible. But there was an important distinction: the scenes on the reliefs, together with the historical record, were judged to be dry narratives of military events of little importance except to those immediately concerned with them and lacking, according to Layard, in the “most sublime of moral lessons” (1853:631-632). His pronouncement signaled an attitude toward the Assyrian wall reliefs that denied them any intrinsic significance beyond their immediate worth as representations of the visible world of despotic Assyrian rulers.

More objective is the sentiment reflected in the important study of H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort, who analyzes the problem of space-time characteristics in the art of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Crete. Her assessment of the narrative scenes on the Assyrian reliefs is that they lack the religious character of older Mesopotamian art, they never transcend the purely episodic, and they are devoid of symbolic quality (1951: 180-181).

Another scholar, Anton Moortgat, considers the heroic-historical aspect of Assyrian rulership “to remain of the greatest importance to Assyrian art to the end of its history” (1969:130-133). Furthermore, he singles out one important trend in the style of Assyrian art in the Late Period

(Neo-Assyrian) which effected its progress: the integration of architecture and the pictorial arts. This last observation established a new direction for the study of Assyrian art and architecture which has still to be fully explored. A related subject which deserves serious study is to understand how individual workshops and master architects, artisans, and craftsmen responded to the challenges imposed upon them for the construction of the monumental edifices and the production of associated art works (see the remarks of Ann C. Gunter 1990).

In his analysis of the art of the Assyrian wall reliefs Barthel Hrouda distinguishes two principles of compositional styles. They are the dynamic and the static—the rhythmical form and strict symmetry—applied to narrative scenes and religious or cultic scenes, respectively (1965: 286-290). Recent scholarship on the arts of Assyria has expanded into other aspects of their creation and aesthetic significance (Winter 1995), and new areas of study have been undertaken, particularly for the period of the Assyrian empire. Publication of these scholarly endeavors include the cataloging of specific art types and subject matter, the study of material culture derived from representations in the works of art, the critical analysis of specific works of art, the interpretation of the art within its historical context, and the interconnection of art styles and the transmission of art works between Assyria and its neighbors. Future discoveries resulting from systematic excavations, as well as chance finds, may modify and enlarge our knowledge of and enhance our appreciation for the visual arts of the Assyrian empire.

The present volume aims at setting forth the achievements of Assyria in the visual arts and focuses upon the monumental stone reliefs that originally lined the lower portion of walls of the Assyrian palaces. It traces the characteristics of Assyrian pictorial design that evolved, during the Late Period, from traditional methods of representation to compositions that impart a sense of newness. In addition, the work considers whether, beneath the overwhelming display of religious and descriptive themes with their obvious messages, the ideas expressed in the images may have also included subtle meanings pertaining to the individual Assyrian king and his time.

The present study is essentially empirical; that is, the analysis proceeds from the work of art itself. This approach is due primarily to the sparse contemporaneous documentation available concerning the thoughts of master Assyrian artists with regard to their craft, and to the brief descriptions of the wall decorations given in the royal inscriptions and in letters to Assyrian kings. How the monumental stone reliefs of the Assyrian palaces were conceived, designed, and completed can best be understood by reviewing the relevant archaeological data and by examining the extant art works presently housed in museums and those restored to their original positions at the excavated sites.

Some Assyrian wall reliefs unearthed during the various campaigns of exploration were left *in situ* and exposed to the elements, reburied, or destroyed; many of those art works, however, were recorded in drawings made by competent draftsmen at the time of their discovery in the nineteenth century, and still others were photographed, once this medium became available. The drawings and photographs are preserved in the archives of several major institutes (The British Museum, London; the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Paris; The Oriental Institute, Chicago). Although secondary to the actual art objects, these resource materials in many instances are our only source of information regarding the original appearance of the sculptures and their architectural settings. Thus they furnish invaluable documentation and must be included in the study of the monumental art of Assyria. A selection of Assyrian wall reliefs and original drawings is reproduced in the present volume through the courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, the Musée du Louvre, and by permission of the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France. Schematic line drawings are by the author.

I. METHODS AND PRINCIPLES OF ASSYRIAN ART

Throughout the period of Assyrian ascendancy in the first millennium B.C.E. its kings, the foremost patrons of the arts, were able to assemble from different regions of Assyria proper and from conquered territories the large numbers of laborers, stone masons, and craftsmen required for the extensive royal building programs. Among the work forces were competent artists and skilled sculptors, some of whom may have been schooled in workshops associated with the royal bureaucracy. The avenues of creativity which these persons could explore were encumbered by several factors, among which were (1) the conceptual and perceptual expressions of art previously fixed as fundamental; (2) the restrictive themes chosen for their art works; and (3) the extent to which individual inventiveness could flourish within the regulated royal workshops. Nonetheless, the remarkable variety of pictorial compositions found on the wall reliefs and the technical expertise exhibited in many of those works attest to the vitality of artistic production.

The decorative programs devised for the Assyrian wall reliefs come mainly from the excavated palaces of four kings in Assyria proper (Fig. 1). They are the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) at Nimrud, the palace of Sargon II (721-705) at Khorsabad, and the Southwest Palace of Sennacherib (704-681) and the North Palace of Ashurbanipal (668-627), both at Nineveh. Sculptured works associated with the palace decorations of Shalmaneser III (858-824), Tiglath-pileser III (744-727) and Esarhaddon (680-669) have been recovered at Nimrud as isolated or *in situ* incomplete finds; thus their original placements within the intended decorative schemes are not always assured.

Methods

System of decoration. In planning for the carved wall decorations of the Assyrian palace, a standardized system was formulated early on, around the ninth century. This system established the kinds of decorative motifs that were appropriate for various walls in a hierarchical arrangement. The system also served as a means to articulate the visual displays with select features of the architecture. The standardized system consisted of three categories of subject matter, each restricted to a specific location in relation to the subject matter. Furthermore, the division of subject matter into three categories was consistent with the intended meanings given to each entity:

A. Mythical creatures lined the lateral walls of entranceways and the framing walls of important doorways. Winged human-headed bulls and lions (*aladlammu/lamassu/šēdu*), winged and wingless genies (*apkallu*), and other hybrid guardian figures were set up along the entranceways as protectors of the immediate and distant spatial areas through which one had to pass (see Kolbe 1981; Madhloom 1970:94-117; Wiggermann 1992).

B. Heraldic designs about five meters in height were set up in two known places: the main exterior surface of the massive wall surrounding the palace complex and the exterior surface of the courtyard wall leading to the throne room. The colossal heraldic design (Fig. 2) was composed of three contiguous blocks on which appeared a human figure grasping a lion—in the ninth cen-

tury possibly a winged genie without a lion—flanked by winged animals standing back to back (see Albenda 1986:101-102; Paley and Sobolewski 1992:17-20). The heraldic design was the symbol of Assyrian rulership and, as such, identified the center of that rule, the royal abode.

C. Religious themes and narrative scenes were carved on stone slabs, about three meters in height, that lined all the lower parts of the walls of the chambers and courtyards belonging to the royal residence. The narrative scenes were pictorial versions of events pertaining to the king's reign, and these subjects were suitable for the public and residential suites of the palace complex.

Procedure and technique. The carving of the subject matter was preceded by the positioning of the limestone and marble slabs shaped as rectangular blocks. The slabs were carved with low plinths and placed against the mud brick walls of the building in a continuous line. Metal clamps and dovetails secured the stones to one another and projecting rods of wood or metal secured them to the wall. The huge animal sculptures in high relief were probably partially carved before they were set up in important entranceways (see Russell 1991:Figs.54,59-61). A task that may have preceded the permanent positioning of the stone slabs was the carving of the standard royal inscription on their reverse side (see André-Salvini 1995). Once the slabs were positioned against the walls the subject matter on the obverse side was outlined, followed by the carving of the pictorial designs and the cuneiform inscriptions which oftentimes accompanied them.

The integrity of the brick wall surface was maintained on the carved slabs lining the same walls by depicting subject matter in high or low relief against a flat background. On occasion, patterned motifs representing land- or seascape elements filled portions of the stone surface as a backdrop without, however, detracting from the essential flatness of the stone. It should be noted that, visually, the colossal animal and anthropomorphic figures carved in high relief do not appear to be attached to the stone slabs lining the wall; rather, they seem to emerge from the stone while suggesting that their forms continue behind the surface (Ill. 1). This phenomenon derives from the distinctive manner of modeling the whole figure, in which the various carved shapes that make up the figure fit into a layered or stepped pattern, from high relief at the front to shallow relief at the point of contact with the background surface, leaving the far side of the figure only partially exposed.

The technique adopted for the depictions of subject matter on stone was the use of line rendering, to which were added surface modeling and decorative pattern. This technique, in which individual subjects are outlined and raised from the background, incorporated the knowledge of the effect of natural light upon linear forms. Indeed, the sculptors of the Assyrian wall reliefs recognized the importance of light as an adjunct to the art work, especially for the stone reliefs set up in entranceways or along the walls of open courtyards. The entry of sunlight into roofed chambers was probably facilitated by clerestory windows located in the upper sections of the walls.

Bright daylight brought into sharp focus the contours, patterns, and subtle modeling associated with the art work, while the addition of light from oil lamps and accents of pigment (blue, red, black, white) enhanced specific features. Colossal sculptures in high relief were delineated by deep shadows that made these art works readily visible from afar (see Chevalier and Lavedrine 1994:frontis.,Figs.2,10-13). Narrative compositions depicting subjects on a human scale were carved in low relief and the fine linear shadows formed by the available light made these scenes readily visible at close range. The viewer of the wall reliefs, as he passed by, must have been overwhelmed by the colossal sculptures and awed by the huge figural subjects. Still, the same person had to pause and then proceed steadily along, in order to better examine and contemplate the many narrative displays that decorated the walls of the royal residence.

Principles

Principles of design. The planning and organization of the Assyrian wall reliefs relied upon four principles of design. They are (1) horizontal alignment; (2) self-containment; (3) progressive distancing; (4) descriptive clarity. These four principles were generally integrated in a particular work of art, and in mural-type compositions one or more of these principles sometimes took on greater importance:

(1) Special consideration was given to the horizontal alignment of the art works. This objective was accomplished by establishing one height for all the blocks that belonged to the same unit of decoration. Consequently, in all the rooms of the royal residence containing narrative themes, the blocks lining the walls were the same height. The principle of the horizontal alignment extended to the decorations of the stone surface. Religious and descriptive themes in one register reached to the height of the stone slab and emphasized a horizontal direction. Narrative scenes were arranged into two registers of equal height, one above the other, but separated by a broad band containing the standard royal inscription. The registers and band stretched across one or more walls of the same chamber.

This method of handling the stone surface established a unifying effect for the visual displays, and was essential, since within the registers were independent compositions aligned alongside one another. The three-part horizontal division of the stone surface was characteristic in the ninth and eighth centuries. Later, in the seventh century, the band of royal inscription disappeared and the entire stone surface was devoted to the narrative compositions. In some instances the number of registers increased, while in others the registers were subsumed into the design to create a huge mural. To a large extent the principle of the horizontal alignment influenced the compositional styles that were designed for the palace wall reliefs.

(2) The principle of self-containment was fundamental for Assyrian decorative schemes. Compositions were designed to be complete or finite; generally, the beginning and the end of a scene were indicated through pose, direction, context, or a combination of these features. An isolated image was drawn in its entirety. It was never cut off by the horizontal or vertical margins of a composition, nor by the physical limits of a stone slab; in the latter instance the image was completed on the adjoining slab. When overlapping occurred, however, visual logic was followed, and priority of the complete image was given to the figure assumed to be closest to the viewer (see Czichon 1992:118 ff.). Individual images with hierarchical rank (e.g., Assyrian king, Assyrian soldier) were sometimes depicted on a scale larger than other subjects in the same scene, and oftentimes were situated in the foreground of the composition. Perceptual logic was followed where a figure was shown partially hidden within a mechanical contrivance or architectural unit as, for example, a chariot or walled town.

(3) The foreground was established by the baseline, which was either the lowermost part of a stone slab exposed to view or the lower band of a defined register. In one-register compositions showing larger-than-life-size figures, the baseline was actually a platform of shallow depth, raised from the background. The platform represented the ground upon which all figures stood. The depth of the platform increased markedly for the colossal animal and anthropomorphic figures that were set up in entranceways. Concomitantly, the frontal parts of those modeled subjects usually extended beyond the outer limit of the platform. The baseline was not always easy to define in narrative scenes where broad vistas were depicted. The designers of these compositions, however, understood and applied the fundamental principle of progressive distancing adapted to a flat surface. Thus the baseline, equivalent to the frontal picture plane, was located in the lower area of the scene, whereas the distant picture plane was located in the upper area of the scene. In effect, the visual reading of a panoramic scene is from bottom to top—that is, from near to far.

Perceptually, the baseline was important for the depictions of figures. An image aligned perpendicularly to the baseline or to terrain anchored to the baseline reinforced the notion of its balance or stability. An image that deviated from the perpendicular and at the same time was disconnected from the baseline or terrain appeared imbalanced and unstable, as, for example, a person falling from above. Transitory action, in which stability had to be maintained, necessitated the image to be posed with the least amount of turned or twisted movement. Where bodily movement resulted in an unusual pose, as, for example, a person falling backward to the ground, the image was shown to be unstable. The principle of stability and instability—strength and weakness—as perceived in Assyrian art explains the seemingly rigid or standardized poses given to the variety of images associated with the Assyrians. These poses are in contrast to the many differentiated poses of foes and their animals during battle, and wild animals in scenes describing the royal hunt.

(4) The pictorial designs of the Assyrian wall reliefs relied upon the principle of descriptive clarity. Figural subjects and landscape elements were selected for their relative importance in a scene and artfully arranged into a composition that described an event or expressed an idea that was understood by those who viewed the art work. Panel-type compositions show a limited number of figural motifs or images that fit into a well-defined rectangular area of stone surface. In scenes of this type a once-depicted image may signify several or many of the same kind, as, for example, the isolated figure of an Assyrian soldier or a tree. In those instances the image was recognized as a sign or ideogram. Therefore, in order to better grasp the intended meaning of a scene, a mental distinction had to be made between what is an ideogram and what is a specific feature, as, for example, the Assyrian king or a city under siege.

The ideogram was less effective in compositions expanded into a continuous frieze where the same or similar figural motifs increased numerically and oftentimes were aligned side by side. The ideogram disappeared in compositions showing vistas that originally filled large portions of wall surface. In these scenes the number of figural motifs and landscape features increased still further, and supplementary themes and vignettes were introduced. Together, they solidify the idea that a specific locale and event are displayed in the composition.

Composition styles. An overview of the groupings of subject matter on the Assyrian wall reliefs suggests that their respective arrangements into a whole pattern or composition derive from five basic schemes or stylistic preferences. Each scheme is organized according to certain notions of form and quality of expression that define the preferred style of the composition. The five schemes identified here are reduced to brief, general terms; they provide a framework, however, for distinguishing the composition styles and for tracing the development of those styles in the monumental art of the Assyrian empire. The schemes are activity, symmetry, centrality, triangularity, dimensionality. In the chapters that follow each scheme is defined and discussed separately. Individual works of art are singled out as exemplars of the style that derives from the defined scheme and, importantly, for the innovative aspects of their design.

II. ACTIVITY

The definition of the term “activity” includes the act, the performance of a single function or accomplishment, and action—a process that is continuous or capable of repetition. The activity may be quiet or vigorous, and those qualities are differentiated in Assyrian compositions.

The act limited to subtle movement is best exemplified by the scene on the stele of Ashurnasirpal II, discovered *in situ* to the right of the entrance to the Ninurta temple at Nimrud (Layard 1853:350-351; Reade 1983:Fig.10). Only the standing figure of the Assyrian king is depicted, together with five emblems of deities (Ill. 2). These subjects are effectively integrated into a whole composition by three elements: pose, glance, and direction. An imaginary vertical line passing through the visible eye and between the feet of the king bisects the pictorial plane (Fig. 3). The perpendicular axis of the king’s body in relation to the groundline reinforces the notion of stability.

Immediately above the clenched hand of the king’s extended right arm, the row of emblems gravitates downward and seemingly causes the pointing finger to bend slightly, due to their combined weightiness. Ashurnasirpal stares straight ahead to the lowermost emblem identified as that of the goddess Ishtar (Maxwell-Hyslop 1971:142-144). The oblique direction of the mace held in the king’s left hand likewise extends to the same emblem. Thus the grouping of the subjects is precise, which heightens the inner tension of the composition and strengthens the concept of interaction between Ashurnasirpal II and his deities. Further, the scene in a symbolic way dramatizes the giving of supreme power to Ashurnasirpal II and the latter’s acceptance of that power.

The newness of the composition on the stele of Ashurnasirpal II is clear, when compared with two stone reliefs of earlier and later date, respectively, showing a similar theme. In the earlier example, on the broken obelisk of Ashurbelkala (1073-1056), five emblems of deities hover in the field, in front of, and above the Assyrian ruler (Moortgat 1969:122-123,Pl.252). From the winged disc, the emblem of Shamash, emerges a pair of hands directed toward the king, one extended and the other grasping a bow. This detail implies divine acknowledgment of the king’s presence and military power. What is lacking here, however, is the notion of communication between the deities and the king who, instead, gestures toward the defeated foes (Fig. 4). In the later example, on the stele of Shamshi-Adad V (823-811), the composition is similar to that shown on the stele of Ashurnasirpal II (Pritchard 1969:300, Fig.442). But here, the structuring of the composition is awkward and lacks the intense dramatic quality of the original work of art.

In narrative scenes activity dominates the composition styles and consists of two types. The first is the orderly uninterrupted movement of figures and the second is the vigorous interrupted movement of figures. Translated into their subject matter, the two types of activity shown on the Assyrian wall reliefs generally deal with processions and battles, respectively. Each type is discussed separately.

Processions

Oftentimes procession scenes display the king, followed by his fan bearer and arms bearer, standing and gesturing toward a row of advancing persons who may include Assyrian officials, soldiers, foreigners, and bringers of booty or gifts. On the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II, where the subjects are aligned within a compact panel-type composition, the one-direction movement to the royal person is somewhat abbreviated (see Moortgat 1969:Pls.262,263). The brevity of movement is compensated by the distinguishing features, poses, and gestures given to the various persons, all of which enliven the visual aspect of the figural procession.

In later reigns, during the eighth and seventh centuries, greater portions of wall surfaces were given over to this type of composition. In the reign of Sargon II the motif of tribute bearers in a procession led by Assyrian attendants, all advancing to the king, was repeated three times along the walls of room 6 and two times along the walls of room 11 in the royal residence at Khorsabad (Albenda 1986:Pls.65,66,71,Figs.84, 85). The start and end of each procession was bounded by the length of a long wall or by one of the several doorways that led into the respective chamber. Pictorially, a sense of calm regal authority is conveyed and monotony is avoided by the various gestures of select individuals and by the differentiated costumes of the foreigners who comprise the respective processions.

A novel concept that was explored at this time is the double procession. One effective adaptation of this idea appeared on the parallel walls of a corridor, about 25 meters in length, that led from one open court to another (Albenda 1986:67-71,Pls.26-34). Both walls showed two similar sets of processions arranged one above the other, but separated by a band of inscription (Fig. 5). All four processions, consisting of foreigners on foot, horses, and camels, advance in the same direction. In this setting, a person proceeding through the corridor and also viewing the reliefs on the walls to his left and right, could readily perceive himself as centered and participating in the rhythmical actions of men and animals. According to the direction he took, the person moved either with the flow of activity, or the flow of activity passed steadily by him.

The double procession idea inspired other solutions, as evidenced by seventh-century compositions. In one large section of a narrative scene from room 12 in the Southwest Palace at Nineveh, dated to the reign of Sennacherib, for example, long lines of armed military personnel, arranged in three registers, stand and surround the Assyrian king in his chariot (Layard 1853:73-74) (Ill. 3). Here the vertical alignment of the three registers, separated by wide bands, succeeds in establishing within the composition a three-tiered depth effect, from bottom to top. The huge royal chariot located in the middle register extends far into the upper register, thereby creating an open space that unites both registers. A fine detail that accentuates the nearness of the armed soldiers in the middle register, in relation to those in the upper one, is the rendering of several spears held upright, whose tips terminate in the wide band separating both registers.

The procession scene evolved even further in the reign of Ashurbanipal. The desire to depict explicitly the leading away of countless numbers of subjugated people, together with their cattle, donkey-driven carts, and personal possessions, resulted in extraordinary compositions that stretched across many slabs of the wall surface. One composition, found on slabs fallen from an upper chamber into room V of the North Palace at Nineveh—unfortunately discovered with its end sections missing—contains an epigraph that identifies the foreigners as coming from the Elamite city of Din-Sharri (Barnett 1976:59, Pl.LXVII). The composition is divided into two registers, in both of which are continuous double lines of Assyrian soldiers, Elamites, cattle, and horses.

The upper two lines of figures proceed to the right, and those in the lower register proceed to the left and cease before the Assyrian king in his chariot, which is drawn large in scale. Pictorially, the simultaneous movement and countermovement of the paired processions are surpris-

ingly well balanced and implied therein is the notion of one extremely long almost-unending line of people and animals, subdivided in two parallel rows, which alters course as it advances and ultimately reaches its destination, the triumphant Assyrian ruler.

A highly ingenious adaptation of two separate processions moving in opposite directions was set within a complex, multifaceted design that originally encompassed all four wall surfaces in room F of the North Palace (Barnett 1976:39-41, Pls. XVI-XXI, B). The overall design is divided into two independent but similar compositions arranged in broad horizontal bands, one above the other (Fig. 6). Within each composition, after their defeat in battle long double lines of Elamites advance to the Assyrian king in his chariot, surrounded by Assyrian soldiers. In the upper register the procession moves clockwise to the royal person, who appears to the left of the single entrance, and in the lower register the procession moves counterclockwise to the royal person, who appears to the right of the entrance. At the center of both frieze-like compositions, on the wall opposite the entrance, their subject matter cohere; there, four lines of Elamite men, women, and children merge together into a densely compact group as they meet and then move on along their separate ways (Ill. 4).

Battle Scenes

The tempo of activity increased markedly in scenes of battle. One-direction movement dominated most compositions, beginning with the battles depicted on the wall reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II. One extant composition depicts Assyrian cavalry, chariotry, and infantry advancing steadily but rapidly, from left to right, and overtaking enemy soldiers on foot (Ills. 5-6). The quickened pace of the former group is indicated by the individual horses whose forelegs stretch forward, high off the ground. The quick left-to-right movement of the Assyrian militia is countered by the faltering motions and distorted postures of the foes. Actually, in the scene of battle there are two distinct overlaying sets of actions with different rates of speed, and one dominates the other. The dominant action, given to the Assyrian militia, is continuous and moves at constant speed; the subsidiary action, given to the foes, is fragmented and indecisive in its directional movement.

A highly dramatic scene of battle in which Assyrian chariotry pursue and overtake foes on horseback was displayed on a series of reliefs in room 2 of Sargon's palace at Khorsabad, now lost or destroyed but preserved in drawings made at the time of their discovery (Albenda 1986: Pls. 113, 116, 117, lower registers). The main movement from right to left is highlighted by the rapid speed of the chariots that overtake the cavalymen who falter, fall, or lie dead in the field. Visually, swiftness of action is made apparent by the manner in which the animals are depicted. The repetitive renderings of the chariot horses with outstretched forelegs differ from those of the cavalry horses, whose momentary halting poses reinforce the military defeat that befalls their riders.

Assuredly, the most spectacular composition of a military battle found on the Assyrian wall reliefs is the battle between the forces of King Ashurbanipal and those of the Elamite king, Teumman (Ills. 7-8). The scene was displayed in room 33 of Sennacherib's Southwest Palace, and the extant portion extends across the lower part of three slabs and contains the battle. However, the start of battle was located to the left of the scene, on slabs that were missing at the time of discovery (see the discussions of Layard 1853:446-451; Nagel 1967:27-30, Pl. 20; Reade 1979b:96-101, Pls. 17-18).

The battle is a scene of chaos and frenzy, but the structure is firm. The main section is divided into three evenly spaced horizontal zones of activity and is framed on the left and right sides by a linear arrangement of figural subjects. At the left, persons in a long line proceed rapidly downward, along the curve of a round hill that begins at the top zone and ends in the bottom

zone. In the bottom zone, the violent actions of men and animals are directed to the right, to a river drawn vertically across the height of the three zones. In the water the alignment of inert bodies of men and horses, one above the other, directs the pictorial movement upward, to the top zone. In the top zone, between its mid-section and the river, the general direction of action is from left to right; at mid-section the action reverses direction, advancing from right to left.

Thus the battle scene is designed to describe a fast-paced, ongoing movement that follows a circular route along the outer zones. At the same time an emphasis upon a lateral left to right movement is accentuated in the middle zone. A subtle but significant aspect of the composition is the treatment of figure groupings; the density of the human and animal figures increases as the drama of battle unfolds from left to right. Implied therein are the final close encounters leading to the culmination of battle, a notion that is aptly illustrated by the large numbers of dying or dead foes strewn near the water's edge. In sum, the organization of the composition articulates the multitude of actions that are displayed in the scene of battle by interrelating the elements of movement, countermovement, degrees of speed, and density of subject matter.

Beyond action is motion, the process of changing places. This kind of movement occurs on an extant portion of a three-register battle scene originating from room L of Ashurbanipal's North Palace (Barnett 1976:45, Pls. XXXII-XXXIII). Assyrian chariotry, cavalry, and infantry attack and overtake camel-ridden Arabs, and the single direction of the fierce assaults and relentless speed of battle seem to unfold in continuous movement (Ill. 9). The optical effect of forms moving is made explicit when one isolates the paired Arabs on their respective animals, represented numerous times among the three registers, and rearranges the groups to produce a succession of postures slightly changed (compare the sequence given in Figs. 7 and 8 with Ill. 9). The successive running-falling gaits of the camels change at a slow rate, while the successive seated-unseated-falling postures of the paired Arabs change at a quickened rate. The two rates of change belonging to the same groupings (camels and riders) increase the quality of motion. In particular, the distribution of the camel-ridden Arabs among the three registers is a subtle but forceful means of creating, visually, both an agitating effect and a constant shifting to various parts of the composition. The ability to depict in the same scene a series of poses in succession reveals a knowledge of how individual forms move in a given action and, coupled with a masterful technique of linear rendering on stone, marks the Arab battle scene an outstanding work of art.

III. SYMMETRY

In modern times the word “symmetry” has two meanings. In one sense symmetry means something well balanced, well proportioned, and symmetry denotes a concordance of several parts by which they integrate into a whole. The second sense in which symmetry is used is strictly a geometrical concept that refers to such operations as reflection, translation (distance-preserving repeat of a basic unit), and rotation (Weyl 1952:3-6). Bilateral symmetry is the image of left and right. Another special kind of symmetry in two dimensions is the geometric art of surface ornamentation (see Weyl 1952:109-115; Washburn and Crowe 1988:44-56). The geometric concept of symmetry is the focus of this chapter. It examines the application of mirror reflection, repetition, and rotation in select Assyrian works of art.

Symmetry in the visual arts occurred sporadically in the earlier periods of the ancient Near East. In particular, the iconographic scheme of duplicated images (mirror imagery) was known in the arts of the third and second millennia (see Albenda 1992:297). In the stone relief art of the Assyrian empire, as well as in wall painting and the decorative arts, symmetry is a characteristic feature. This system of organization to a large extent determined the decorative and narrative schemes adopted for the palatial art of Assyria. Symmetry expressed the ideals of formal beauty combined with a concept of world order peculiar to Assyrian thought.

Decorative Arts

Surface ornamentation in which symmetry makes use of one dimensional or longitudinal pattern only is typified by decorative wall painting. Examples of this scheme are found in Assyrian palaces, and the individual band ornaments are composed entirely of circles, buds, or palmettes repeated in regular spatial rhythm (Albenda 1992:298; 1994a). One notable variant is the wide band of a wall painting from Til Barsip, in which standing bulls confront a large square with incurved sides (Fig. 9) Here the figured pattern, that is, the bull on the left, is rotated 180 degrees laterally around a vertical axis (line of reflection) centered in the square, into its mirror image. The mirror image, in turn, is rotated 180 degrees into its figured pattern, and so on.

Rotation symmetry in two dimensions likewise occurs in Assyrian decorative arts. Examples include details of wall paintings and the terracotta wall knob-plates discovered at several Assyrian sites (Albenda 1991:299; 1994a:Fig.2). On the knobbed plates the main design is a continuous garland whose leafy plants and buds alternate and rotate around a central point in a cyclical pattern of *modulo* 4. Each plant of the same type has a proper rotation of 90 degrees around the center, but rotates 45 degrees from its neighboring plant (Fig. 10). Expressed in a different way, the geometry of the design derives from two interlocking squares, and at each of the four angles of the respective square is a flower of the same type.

Surface ornamentation involving two-dimensional linear combinations is also represented in Assyrian art. Examples include the stone dias of Shalmaneser III, which on the upper surface has a continuous pattern of hexagons, and the eighth- and seventh-century stone threshold slabs with different ornamental designs in the center field (Albenda 1978). On one group of threshold slabs

the surface ornamentation in the center field is a strictly geometric invention, drawn with a compass and rule (Fig. 11). The overall pattern derives from a six-rayed star inscribed in a circle, which repeats continuously along rows set equidistant from one another.

Wall Reliefs

Religious themes. Turning to the wall reliefs, a symbolic motif that recurred during the ninth and eighth centuries is a stylized tree, the so-called “sacred tree” (Ill. 10). Although its appearance varied from example to example, the drawing of the tree is always symmetrical, since its two sides mirror one another (Albenda 1994b). In formal compositions winged and wingless genies and also the Assyrian king confront the tree. In these instances the compositions display bilateral symmetry. However, strict mirror imagery (reflection symmetry) was utilized infrequently for the figural subjects. One known example consists of two-winged anthropomorphic genies kneeling on either side of the stylized tree, a subject that repeats continuously along the upper register of the carved slabs lining the walls in room I of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (Paley and Sobolewski 1987:3-8, Pl. 1, plan 3). Thus the genie on the left side of the tree has the right arm lowered and the left arm raised. His mirror image on the right side of the tree has the right arm raised and the left arm lowered. Similarly, winged genies holding animals (goat or stag) and flanking the same doorway were represented in strict mirror imagery (Fig. 12); by this means the animal held by the respective genie was rendered in full view (Meuszyński 1981:Pl.3; Paley and Sobolewski 1987: Pl.4).

The standard Assyrian method of depicting the mirror image of the genie or the king—positioned on the right side of the tree—combines two kinds of symmetry: rotation and reflection (Ill. 10). Rotation symmetry is given to the torso, which turns laterally around a vertical axis centered in the tree. In this way the gestures of the right and left arms and the objects held in the respective hands are retained in each of the two depictions of the human form (genie or king). Alternatively, the head and lower part of the body are reflective; they tend to negate the three-dimensional spatial rotation of the human form. In Assyrian art that particular stance was the standard rule for depictions of human figures.

Narrative scenes. On the Assyrian wall reliefs symmetry applied to narrative scenes seems to have been used selectively and may have served specific purposes. Repetition was a method used to illustrate large numbers of persons. Military personnel may advance in a line or stand at rest in close formation (Ill. 11), each individual of the same unit a replica of the one preceding him (Strommenger 1964:442, Pls. 210, 211; Barnett 1976:36, 37, Pls. II, III, VI). In those instances strict repetition conveys the notion of a military group that is numerically superior and also highly disciplined. In scenes where the main theme is the royal building works undertaken in the reign of Sennacherib, long lines of foreign laborers are depicted in nearly identical pose. There, repetition becomes an effective device emphasizing the king’s control over a huge labor force working in unison (Strommenger 1964:449-450, Pls. 232, 233).

An ingenious adaptation of the concept of surface ornamentation occurs in one section of a multi-registered wall relief that deals with warfare between Assyria and Elam (Albenda 1992: Fig. 4; Reade 1979b:96-101, Pls. 17-23). Seven or more lines of Elamite soldiers submit to an Assyrian official who introduces the newly appointed Elamite leader. An identical pose and gesture are given to each Elamite in the same line. However, on each line repetition is relaxed slightly, thereby effecting multiple, swaying motions. By this means submission to and acceptance of Assyrian authority is displayed in the active mode.

The active mode for scenes of deportation took on greater importance in the works of art produced for the North Palace of Ashurbanipal. A variety of poses, gestures, and hand-held equip-

ment are introduced in the renderings of long lines of deportees and Assyrian soldiers advancing in the same direction (Barnett 1976:Pls.XVII-XVIX,LX,LXVII-LXVIII). Interspersed among the extensive figure groups is a foreigner depicted with his or her head rotated 180 degrees to face back, a device that creates a pattern of sorts (see Ill. 4). The repeated use of the head turned back allows for visual pauses in otherwise uninterrupted one-directional movements and also isolates small units of figure groupings within the long processions. For these reasons the discrete use of the turned head motif was adapted with effective results.

Architectural decoration. In architectural decoration symmetry was maintained throughout the course of the Assyrian empire for the adornment of important entrances in palaces and temples. The typical scheme consisted of two-winged human-headed lions and bulls, and real lions, which were carved from stone in high relief and set up along the lateral walls of entranceways (Madhloom 1970:94ff.). The stone creatures show a parallel alignment and are mirror images of one another. The side walls framing the same entrance were decorated with small genies, one above the other. The genies face one another according to the standard Assyrian formula (see Reade 1983:Fig.4; Albenda 1986:Pl.35). The iconography of symmetry—reflection (lateral walls) and bilateral (framing walls)—adopted for the adornment of important doorways visually imparted the notion of ordered balance, serenity, and spatial containment. In addition, the subjects of the carved reliefs engendered a protective atmosphere, as the viewer proceeded from one chamber to another.

The most ambitious use of symmetry for architectural decoration derives from the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad. Of particular interest are the monumental stone reliefs on the walls flanking two central doorways, each of which opened onto an open court. One central doorway led from court III to the residential area reserved for the king. On each side of this entrance the long wall was decorated with the same emblematic motif. The motif—repeated in bilateral symmetry—consists of a pair of winged human-headed bulls striding back to back (mirror images), their heads turned 90 degrees to face the open court (Albenda 1986:Pl.35). On the long walls that flanked the central entrance that connected court VIII with the throne room was a more elaborate heraldic emblem repeated in bilateral symmetry (Ill. 12). The huge emblem consists of two human-headed bulls moving in opposite directions and flanking a hero grasping a lion, all of which are depicted with frontal faces. In its entirety the emblem measured about 5 meters high and about 12 meters across.

The North Palace of Ashurbanipal was the last to have its walls embellished with carved stone reliefs. In entranceways the reliefs were modest in scale and new guardian figures replaced the earlier types. Several doorway reliefs are preserved, including two that originally lined the opposite walls within entrance A, connecting rooms B and P (Barnett 1976:36,Pl.IV; Albenda 1992:Figs.5,6). The paired reliefs depict the same subject, namely three guardian figures standing in a row and turned toward room P (Fig. 13). The first is a wingless genie, an *apkalle*; he wears a horned helmet and his clenched hand is held upright. The second is a hybrid male creature, identified as an *uqallu*. He has a human body, a lion head with equine ears, and talon feet. He brandishes a dagger. The third is a hero holding an upright spear, and he has been identified as a *lahmu*. (These protective figures are discussed by Wiggermann 1992:74,164-166, 169-172.)

The paired reliefs from entrance A disclose the use of both reflection symmetry and rotation symmetry for the depictions of the individual guardian figures. The hero (*lahmu*) is repeated as a mirror image of himself. The twice-repeated first and second guardian figures (*apkallu* and *uqallu*) show the front and back views, respectively, of a torso rotated 180 degrees around a vertical axis. These depictions are obtained by placing the viewing position of the spectator beyond—that is, “south” of—the sculptured figures on the two wall reliefs from entrance A (compare Figs. 13 and 14); moreover, the proper axial rotation is not a lateral left-to-right, or in directional terms, west-to-east, as exemplified by the twice repeated hero. Instead, the proper

axial rotation is a near-to-far or, in directional terms, south-to-north. The change of direction accounts for the back and front views of the torso on the paired *apkallu* and *uqallu* respectively. Actually, the two wall reliefs from entrance A, together, display four views of a human figure whose body rotates around a vertical axis at intervals of 90 degrees. Expressed in a different way, the four-fold rotation of the human torso—seen on the two reliefs—accords with the cardinal points of the compass: north, east, south, west.

The near-to-far (south-to-north) direction of rotation symmetry was developed further, on another series of entranceway reliefs from entrance D, connecting the exterior and room S, as well on the reliefs from entrance B, connecting rooms S and T (Barnett 1976:50,52-53,Pls.XLV, LV). In the upper register appear two lion-headed guardian figures, each armed with mace and dagger, who confront and overlap one another (Ill. 13). Their bodies and legs are rendered in correct rotational symmetry, along the south-to-north axis, showing the back and front views respectively. The ability to draw an entire figure in correct rotational symmetry along that axis led to a great discovery that freed the artist from the flat world. It was the discovery of representing three-dimensional figures in space on a two-dimensional plane.

IV. CENTRALITY

“Centrality” in an Assyrian pictorial composition may be explained as the ordering of subject matter in a three-part lateral sequence, in which the two outer groupings are directed toward the central one, the focus of the described activity. In this instance the central subject is in effect the vertical axis of a symmetrical scheme. However, unlike reflective symmetry, the two outer groupings of subject matter are dissimilar in one or more ways. Thus the visual balance formed by the two outer groupings derives from the clustering of their respective subjects, which relies upon density and scale. The application of centrality in Assyrian art works was generally restricted to two themes, and these are the formal procession and siege scenes. In the first instance the figure of the Assyrian king is the central vertical axis of the composition, while in the second it is a foreign city under direct attack.

Formal Processions

A straightforward example of the use of centrality for a processional scene occurred in the lower register of wall reliefs from the throne room of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (Budge 1914:Pls.XXII,XXIII). At mid-section of a scene that extends across three and a half slabs stands the Assyrian king, turned to the right, followed by a personal attendant (Fig. 15). In the field above the king is a deity in a winged disk, a divine emblem that reinforces the military power and stature of Ashurnasirpal II. On each side of the king a long line of figural subjects advances toward him. On the right side the procession consists of court officials, subjugated men and women, Assyrian soldiers, and, in the field above the women, cattle. The individual figures in this group are of different heights and they display different gestures. The procession on the left side is composed of three horse-drawn chariots that pass in front of a walled city. The spacious setting indicated by the large architectural structure and the orderly alignment of the three chariots tend to balance, visually, the close formation of the striding human and animal figures shown on the opposite side of the composition. Both processions give to the composition a rhythmic pattern, the center of which is dominated by the figure of the Assyrian king.

An ingenious adaptation of centrality for wall decoration in which the theme of a procession delineated the spatial area of a chamber occurred in rooms 9 and 12 of the royal residence of Sargon II at Khorsabad (Albenda 1986:62-64,Pls.63,64). The two chambers may have served special functions, and it may be noted that their wall decorations were partially destroyed at the time of discovery; their subject matter, however, can be reconstructed with certainty.

Room 9 has two doorways, Z and Y (Fig. 16). The Assyrian king, shown larger than life size, appears on the wall directly opposite door Z. He holds a long staff in his right hand and a flowering plant in his lowered left hand. Starting from door Z, two processions of beardless Assyrian court officials, each posed with his hands clasped at the waist, advance toward the king. One procession moves counterclockwise past door Y, along three walls of the chamber. It is led by a high-ranking bearded official who faces the king and raises one hand in salutation. The second procession moves clockwise along the fourth wall. Room 12 has a single door and the Assyrian

king appears on the wall opposite this entrance. The carved wall decoration is similar to that of room 9, with the exception that the king turns to the left and faces the high-ranking official who leads the procession moving clockwise. The great heights of all the human figures in rooms 9 and 12 must have impressed the people who entered the two chambers. Furthermore, the repetitive and restrained poses of the court officials illustrate clearly the obedience that is given to the central figure, Sargon II.

Siege Scenes

Siege scenes were often displayed in Assyrian works of art and in many instances centrality forms the basis of their compositions. In scenes depicting Assyrian attacks against fortified cities two trends evolved. One of them considers which are the essential features of the event to be described; these features are organized into a closed composition. The other strives for descriptive details, and several phases of activity may be artfully manipulated into a unified event. In order to better accommodate the laterally placed figural groupings and ancillary motifs, therefore, the complete image of a city under siege is reduced in scale in relation to the surface area of the entire composition. This method of rendering foreign cities is especially evident on Assyrian wall reliefs of the late eighth and seventh centuries, in which siege scenes are included in the seemingly unending compositions.

A tightly composed scene of a military attack against a fortified city, preserved only in a line drawing and dated to the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (Barnett and Falkner 1962:25, Pl. CXVIII), occurs in the bottom register of a stone slab (Fig. 17). The entire central area contains a foreign citadel situated on a high mound; low-growing grapevines on the left side indicate the geographical location of the citadel. Six defenders are partially exposed behind the high walls; three turn to the left and three turn to the right. In the latter group is a woman whose raised open hand signals the defeat that is to come. A seventh defender falls headlong to the ground; the size of his body equals that of the Assyrian foot soldiers who are placed to the left, right, and at the base of the mound. All the Assyrian attackers turn toward the citadel and their offensive actions heighten the intensity of battle. Human activity remains central to the scene, since all the figures are depicted on a large scale in an almost circular arrangement. The Assyrian attackers are rendered entire in contrast to the defenders within the citadel who are only partially exposed, a pictorial device that conveys the idea not only of a battle unfolding but also of an outcome favorable to the Assyrian militia.

The depiction of a Babylonian campaign undertaken by the foot soldiers of Tiglath-pileser III is in accord with the style of centrality (Barnett and Falkner 1962:8, Pls. IX-XII), and all the main figural and landscape features are laid out in a tidy manner across several slabs (Fig. 18). Central to the scene is an eight-towered fortified city situated at the side of a large lake, which covers an extensive portion of one slab. A tall date palm at the left side of the fortified city is balanced on the right side by three smaller ones, which grow along the edge of the lake, and these tropical plants furnish the geographical backdrop for the military campaign. Beyond the landscape features on each side, Assyrian soldiers are arranged in groups of three side by side and they are drawn to the height of the walled city; at the left side a small tree immediately behind the soldiers provides the visual balance between the left and right sides of the composition. Interaction between the Assyrian militia and the defenders, who are small in size and visible on the towers, is minimal. Pictorially, the prominence given to the foot soldiers does convey the notion of Assyrian military might, but less evident is the notion of a successful siege campaign.

The design formula for siege scenes in which Assyrian infantrymen flank a fortified city recurred several times on the wall reliefs dated to the reign of Sargon II. All the reliefs are pre-