

# The Impact of Writing on Art in the Ancient Near East

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Before writing, Near Eastern art featured almost exclusively lines of repeated animals or figures. But after literacy some compositions depicted scenes involving multiple interacting figures. The paper attributes this change to literacy. It argues that writing brought a paradigm of communication that could be applied to art. In particular, the Mesopotamian script consisted of signs whose value depended on size, location and direction. For example, a small wedge stood for 1 and a large wedge for 60; signs placed on the upper part of the tablet were understood as being of greater value than those below; or a sign of greater value was placed to the right of one of lesser value, etc. The paper shows how art adopted the paradigm of writing and started attributing different significance to figures of different sizes, in different locations and facing a different direction. For example, the hero was shown larger than his attendant and a personage in front of him was to be understood as more important than one behind him, etc. As a result, art changed from merely evocative to narrative.

In this paper I analyze how, in the Near East, the composition of pottery paintings changed with the advent of literacy. To make my case I compare and contrast compositions—the way designs are organized to decorate a vessel—before and after the invention of writing, ca. 3200 BCE. I show that the former paintings consisted mostly of repeated motifs but that figures interacting in narrative scenes appeared among the latter. I conclude that, by borrowing communication strategies from writing, images could be made to tell a story.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Schmandt-Besserat, *When Writing Met Art*.