

The evolution of simplicity: aesthetic labour and social change in the Neolithic Near East

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Abstract

Conventional accounts of early state formation have taken the explanation of innovation and complexity as their central problem. In consequence, those areas of social life which became markedly more simple during the formation of ‘complex’ societies – such as daily consumption – have received little attention. This paper seeks to problematize the evolution of social simplicity by introducing a concept of aesthetic labour into the analysis of social change. Aesthetic labour describes the whole complex of techniques, forms of knowledge and material objects through which a society invests the concepts it lives by with sensuous and psychological force. Taking the development of pottery production in the late prehistoric Near East as a focus, and following anthropological discussions of the development of élite culture, I aim to show how the transition from simple to complex society involved the dislocation of aesthetic labour from everyday practices, and its transposition to a restricted, and politically empowered, sector of society.

Keywords

Aesthetics; production; pottery; basketry; skeuomorphism; cosmology; cultural transmission; state formation; Near East; Neolithic.

Enmerkar, the son of Utu
To his sister, the lady benefactress of desires
To holy Inanna made a plea:
‘O my sister, for Uruk may Aratta
Fashion artfully gold and silver on my behalf
Let them cut the pure lapis lazuli from the lumps
The brightness of pure lapis lazuli. . . .
In Uruk a holy “mountain” let them lavishly decorate.
The house “descending from heaven”, your place of worship
The shrine Eanna, let Aratta build’

(from the Mesopotamian legend of ‘Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta’,
early second millennium BC; Cohen 1973)



The point I wish to establish is that the attitude of a spectator towards a work of art is fundamentally conditioned by his notion of the technical processes which gave rise to it. . . . In reconstructing the processes which brought the work of art into existence, he is obliged to posit a creative agency which transcends his own and, hovering in the background, the power of the collectivity on whose behalf the artist exercised his technical mastery.

(Gell 1992)

Introduction: the concept of aesthetic labour

Two recent studies, by Susan Kus (1989) and Adam T. Smith (2000) respectively, have drawn attention to the aesthetic dimensions of political change in the formation of 'complex' societies. Both highlight an aspect of political culture which has been widely discussed in relation to historically documented states, European and non-European (e.g. Orgel 1975; Geertz 1980). This aspect is neatly summarized by Abner Cohen's (1981) phrase, 'the dramaturgy of power', which describes the way in which polities establish and maintain themselves by altering the sensuous environment of human experience and interaction within their sphere of control.

Cohen's main assertion is that, in order to remain in existence, élites are obliged to evolve a social and cultural organization which serves both particularistic and universalistic ends. This theme was developed by Maurice Bloch in his (1987) analysis of royal bath ceremonies in nineteenth-century Madagascar. Like many such ceremonies, the ritual of the royal bath linked the personal life-cycle of the king with cycles of seasonal and astronomical change, representing royal authority as 'an aspect of a whole which is beyond the mere creation of man' (Bloch 1987: 283). Taking place at the beginning of the agricultural year, which was in turn synchronized with the official calendar year, the royal bath was a focus of moral and material renewal for the community at large, and was marked at various stages by the paying of taxes ('the price of life') to the sovereign, in recognition of his active role in this process.

A structurally similar pattern of authority may be deduced from the decoration of the Palermo Stone, which chronicles the reign of Egypt's earliest kings (Baines 1995). Each regnal year is commemorated by a ceremonial appearance or ritual act of the king, which made manifest his presence throughout the land and was linked both to taxation and the annual inundation of the Nile, upon which all agricultural productivity depended. Although the precise content of these ceremonies remains enigmatic, their titles suggest a markedly public and visible character. The ordered cycle of royal ceremony and the temporal cycle of change in the non-human world would therefore have occupied the same space of social memory (cf. Connerton 1989).

Central to Bloch's formulation of the symbolic construction of authority is the capacity of élite ceremony to dramatize themes and events of significance to society at large; in other words, to invest common experiences such as death, marriage or initiation with cosmological meaning. The emotional power of such ceremonies for those who participate in them, whether as actors or remote witnesses, derives precisely from the fact each is, in Walter Bagehot's phrase, a 'brilliant edition of a universal fact' (cited in Cannadine

1987). It is the idea of ‘brilliance’ which I would like to dwell on here, since implied in this statement is a theory of the distribution of aesthetic labour in complex societies. By ‘aesthetic labour’ I mean the whole complex of techniques, forms of knowledge and material objects through which a society imbues the concepts it lives by with sensuous and psychological force.

The changing division of aesthetic labour in processes of pristine state formation has been touched upon by John Baines (1994) in a discussion of the status and purposes of ancient Egyptian art. He notes that the emergence of the dynastic state was accompanied by the specialization and circumscription of artistic production within élite circles *and* the ‘aesthetic deprivation of the non-élite’. This is particularly evident with regard to the production of widely disseminated media such as pottery, which was often decorated with complex and idiosyncratic designs in predynastic times. With the onset of the dynastic period pottery production was rationalized, drab and uniform vessels serving the needs of centrally organized processes for the production and distribution of staples such as bread and beer (Chazan and Lehner 1990; Samuel 2000).

The ‘aesthetic deprivation’ experienced by most Egyptians in their everyday lives must surely be juxtaposed, however, to events such as those chronicled on the Palermo Stone. Owing to their ephemeral nature, such events can only rarely be directly reconstructed through archaeological remains. Nevertheless, the ability of spectacular revelations to inscribe themselves upon the emotional and intellectual memory of witnesses, and to confirm the reality of an existing cosmological order through momentary exposure to its highest manifestations, has been widely discussed in other contexts (Forty and Küchler 1999). The permanence and visibility of mortuary monuments has become almost synonymous with ancient Egyptian culture and religion (Frankfort 1948; Assman 1991), but they are only the most archaeologically visible aspect of an aesthetic apparatus through which the dynastic state constructed the political memory of landscape among its subjects.

The wider implications of this are succinctly expressed in Susan Kus’s call for an ‘archaeology of bread and circuses’, which takes into account the dualistic nature of social change in the transition from ‘simple’ to ‘complex’ societies. It becomes necessary to understand, not merely how certain aspects of cultural life were subject to complexification (the circus-like features which appear in every archaeological check-list of state formation) but also how others, notably everyday activities such as eating, were divested of symbolic significance and subjected to routinization and simplification. These dual aspects have too often been subsumed within unitary formulae of social change, which disguise the human processes through which long-term social transitions occurred. By focusing upon the division of aesthetic labour in societies at all levels of the conventional ‘social-to-complex’ continuum, it may be increasingly possible to understand early state formation as changing patterns of sentient action and response, and not merely as the realization of historical abstractions.

The evolution of social simplicity

Occupying a position roughly midway between the establishment of sedentary farming communities (c.9000 BC; all dates calibrated) and the emergence of cities and writing

systems during the Uruk period (fourth millennium BC), the late Neolithic societies of Mesopotamia (Hassuna-Samarra-Halaf cultures) provide an appropriate framework within which to explore the themes outlined above. In order to give this discussion an analytical focus, I will concentrate upon the changing aesthetic properties of a single medium of social interaction, i.e. pottery.

As in Egypt, the general trend from late Neolithic to Protodynastic times in Mesopotamia is one of decreasing elaboration in pottery production, although the pace and social context of this process differed markedly in each region. In Mesopotamia it culminated, during the fourth millennium BC, in the mass production of extremely plain and crude bowls, which often make up more than half of the ceramic assemblage at early urban centres from southern Mesopotamia to south-eastern Turkey (Frangipane 1997). The most convincing explanation for the function of such vessels, the mostly widely distributed type being the conical-truncated 'bevelled-rim bowl', is their use as moulds for cooking leavened bread (Millard 1988; Chazan and Lehner 1990). Large numbers of them have been found together in deposits associated with urban institutions, which in turn have produced evidence for the bureaucratic management of food supplies, raw materials and labour in the form of seals and inscribed tablets (Nissen et al. 1993). The character of early urban pottery suggests that daily acts of consumption for the majority of people were impersonal, ephemeral and routine. In terms of the investment of aesthetic labour, which relates potentially to the social work both of production and consumption, bevelled-rim bowls rank about as low as any functional vessel ever could.

Conventional accounts of early state formation in the ancient Near East have taken the explanation of innovation and complexity as their central problem. In highlighting an aspect of social life, i.e. daily consumption, which was markedly simpler in urban societies than in the prehistoric ones from which they developed, I should like to attempt a reversal of this approach. My aim in the remainder of this paper will be to emphasize the explanatory potential of problematizing the development of social simplicity: the evolution of the 'bread', rather than of the 'circus'. The interpretative process by which this will be attempted is no different from that applied to the evolution of complex aspects of early urban society. It is based upon the identification of salient contrasts between earlier and later manifestations of the same type of social behaviour. Just as the social significance of proto-cuneiform writing seems best understood by charting its emergence from prehistoric systems of contract and transaction (Wengrow 1998), so that of simple consumption systems should in turn be understood in relation to the complex sensuous practices which preceded them.

'Attaching people to things': the complexity of consumption in the Neolithic Near East

Painted pottery, made and decorated by hand, is the most ubiquitous category of object found among the remains of Late Neolithic villages in lowland Mesopotamia and along the fringes of the Taurus and Zagros mountain ranges. Its wide distribution and distinctive visual properties have long made it a primary tool of archaeological research, and the temporal framework of later prehistory in the Near East is closely linked to its perceived

stylistic evolution. The most elaborately decorated forms are conventionally distinguished into two visual styles: monochrome-painted Samarran ware (Fig. 1a–c), which became widespread in Mesopotamia during the late seventh millennium BC, and polychrome-painted Halaf ware (Fig. 1d, e), which succeeded it in the sixth millennium BC, achieving a much wider north- and westward distribution (for distribution, see figures in Roaf 1990: 43, 49; for chronology, see Copeland and Hours 1987; Watkins and Campbell 1987; Blackham 1996).

Decorated pottery became widespread in the Near East only some two millennia after the initial appearance of ceramic technology there. Clay and plaster vessels, small and plain, were first produced in this region during the Early Neolithic period (ninth millennium BC), as part of an unprecedented exploration of the tactile properties of these

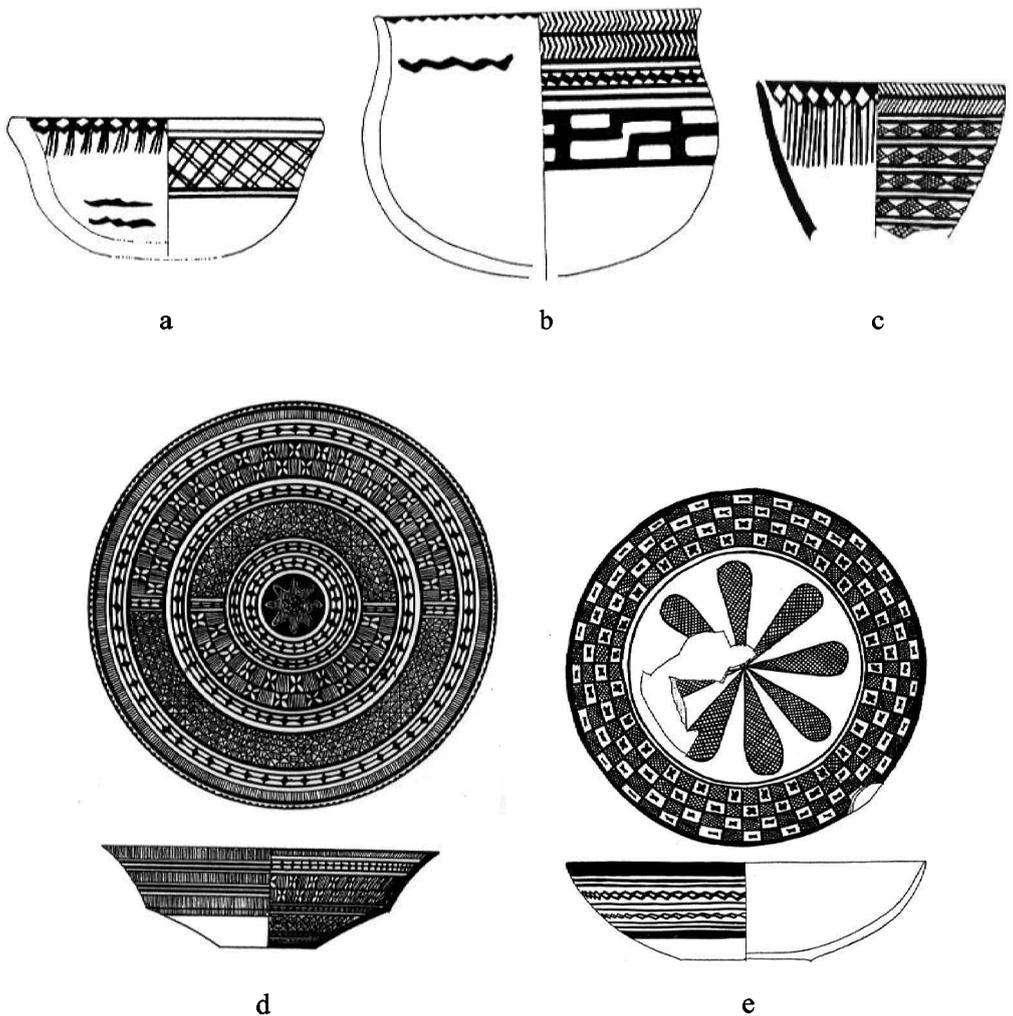


Figure 1 a–c; Samarran painted bowls from Tell Sabi Abyad and Tell es-Sawwan (after Le Mière and Nieuwenhuys 1996 and Ippolitoni 1970; scale approx. 1:5); d–e: Halaf painted bowls from Tepe Gawra (after Tobler 1950; scale 1:6) and Arpachiyah (after Mallowan and Rose 1935; scale 1:4).

materials then under way in early farming settlements of the Fertile Crescent (Schmandt-Besserat 1974, 1977a, 1977b; Rollefson 1990; Le Mière and Picon 1999). This experimentation with plastic media permeated many aspects of Early Neolithic domestic and ritual life, including house construction and furnishing, the manufacture of human and animal figurines and geometric tokens, and the decoration of human skulls (Wengrow 1998).

A shift in the emphasis of cultural representation from free-standing plastic forms to the surface of containers is characteristic of the transition from Early to Late Neolithic throughout much of the Fertile Crescent (for evidence of decreasing figurine production at this time, see Hole 1977: 197; Voigt 1983: 181; Garfinkel 1995: 42; Gopher 1995: 211). Archaeologically most visible in the ornamentation of pottery, it is likely that this transition was stimulated by developments in other media. Among the earliest painted designs in the Zagros region were linear patterns 'reminiscent of basketry and network' (Meldgaard et al. 1964: 116), and oblique arrangements of 'blobbed' lines, evoking the appearance of contemporary stone vessels (Braidwood and Howe 1960: 43; Mortensen 1964; Oates 1973; Adams 1983: 221–2). In northern Mesopotamia (Proto-Hassuna period), early painted decoration consisted of stripes, dots and parallel rows of zigzags (mimicking twill plaiting?), patterns also found among the contemporary murals from Umm Dabaghiyah in the Jezira (Kirkbride 1972, 1973, 1975; Bernbeck 1994; McAdam 1995; Gut 1995). There the decline in clay figurine production was also accompanied by the application of clay forms in relief onto coarse pottery vessels (e.g. Kirkbride 1972; Fukai and Matsutani 1981; Bader 1993a). In addition to non-figural forms, these applied images included horned animals and human figures closely replicating the themes, and sometimes the morphological attributes, of their free-standing counterparts. Painted zigzag lines and dots are also found on a range of vessel forms in the Pottery Neolithic of the Levant, where they were combined in a distinct way with features such as incised herringbone patterns and handles (Garfinkel 1999).

During the late seventh and sixth millennia BC (Late Hassuna/Samarra – Halaf periods), vessel ornamentation in Mesopotamia was increasingly restricted to a suite of bowls, jars, beakers and dishes, the forms of which are highly suggestive of specialized roles relating to the serving and consumption of food and drink (cf. Akkermans 1993: 238–9). Their changing spatial distribution, which was accompanied over the long term by alterations in decorative style, implies patterns of social interaction which transcended regional differences in other aspects of material culture and economy. This is most apparent in the initial transmission of Samarran painted pottery throughout northern and central Mesopotamia, areas then occupied by communities practising different styles of house construction and figurine manufacture, and occupying opposite sides of the 200mm rainfall isohyet, south of which dry-farming became impossible (Oates 1973). Rather than reflecting the existence of monolithic social or cultural entities, decorated vessels therefore played a distinct role in constructing and maintaining channels of social interaction, along which persons, ideas and other objects could flow.

Archaeological classifications of the Samarran and Halaf decorative styles have often proceeded by dissecting designs into constituent motifs and identifying principles according to which the latter were deployed. These principles are usually expressed as a series of structural operations, which determined the patterning of both figural and non-figural ornamentation on vessel surfaces. On Samarran pottery, painters tended to adhere to a

combination of continuous horizontal patterning on vessel exteriors and focal patterning on the interiors of bowls, where designs exhibit rotational and radial symmetry (Tulane 1944; Leslie 1952; Bernbeck 1994). As Tulane observed, their execution proceeded in accordance with a sense of the basic architecture of the design as a whole: 'The reiteration of the basic structure by all divisions and motifs is seldom violated' (1944: 60). The decoration of Halaf pottery, while involving more complex and diverse arrangements of patterns and motifs, has been similarly expressed as the operation of geometric motions in the plane, such as rotation, reflection and linearization (Mallowan and Rose 1935; Vértesalji 1989).

While useful in constructing typologies, such definitions of style offer only a limited impression of the aesthetic properties of any particular vessel, or of how those properties might have been experienced within the wider setting of Neolithic villages. By approaching painted designs as so many examples of a predetermined set of rules or abstract formulae, variability between individual designs – a pervasive feature of both Samarran and Halaf painted pottery – is obfuscated, and its significance therefore remains unexplored. Both inter- and intra-site comparison of pottery assemblages reveals that, despite their adherence to clearly defined design structures and a common range of motifs, painters in fact seem to have avoided the replication of entire compositions on particular vessel forms (Mallowan and Rose 1935: 130; Watson and LeBlanc 1990: 52; Akkermans 1993: 281). Even in the execution of standard motifs, such as the horned animal-heads that often appear on Halaf pottery (Fig. 3c), every opportunity appears to have been taken to individualize the end product through variations in form, arrangement and combination with other motifs (see Mallowan and Rose 1935: *bucranium* design). The complexity of designs, and the precision with which motifs were distributed around the form of the vessel, also varied greatly. These factors suggest that Neolithic painted pottery styles may be taken to represent past fields of activity, through which personal ingenuity and skill were expressed within collectively held norms of visual and formal appreciation.

The notion that decorative designs on pottery served, in Alfred Gell's (1998: 73) terms, to 'attach people to things, and to the social projects those things entail', may be further explored in relation to clay anthropomorphic figurines (Oates 1966, 1969; Ucko 1968: 359). Aside from pottery, such figurines are the only surviving objects found at Late Neolithic villages to which painted decoration was regularly applied (Fig. 2a, b). They were typically fired to a ceramic texture, thereby undergoing the same processes of ornamentation and physical transformation as painted vessels. Examples may be found of the humanizing and gendering of painted ceramic vessels – both Samarran and Halaf – through decoration with anthropomorphic features which echo the characteristic attributes of contemporary figurines (Fig. 2c, d).

A shared attribute of the figural motifs most commonly included within Samarran and Halaf designs was their harmony with a formal principle central to the techniques of design production. Horned animals and flowering plants are among those features of the living world which simulate the world of symmetrical relations produced through the practice of vessel construction (Fig. 3b–d). They could be integrated into the process of cultural creation while retaining their iconicity, thereby bringing the aesthetic properties of decorated vessels into conjunction with the perception of living forms, and at the same

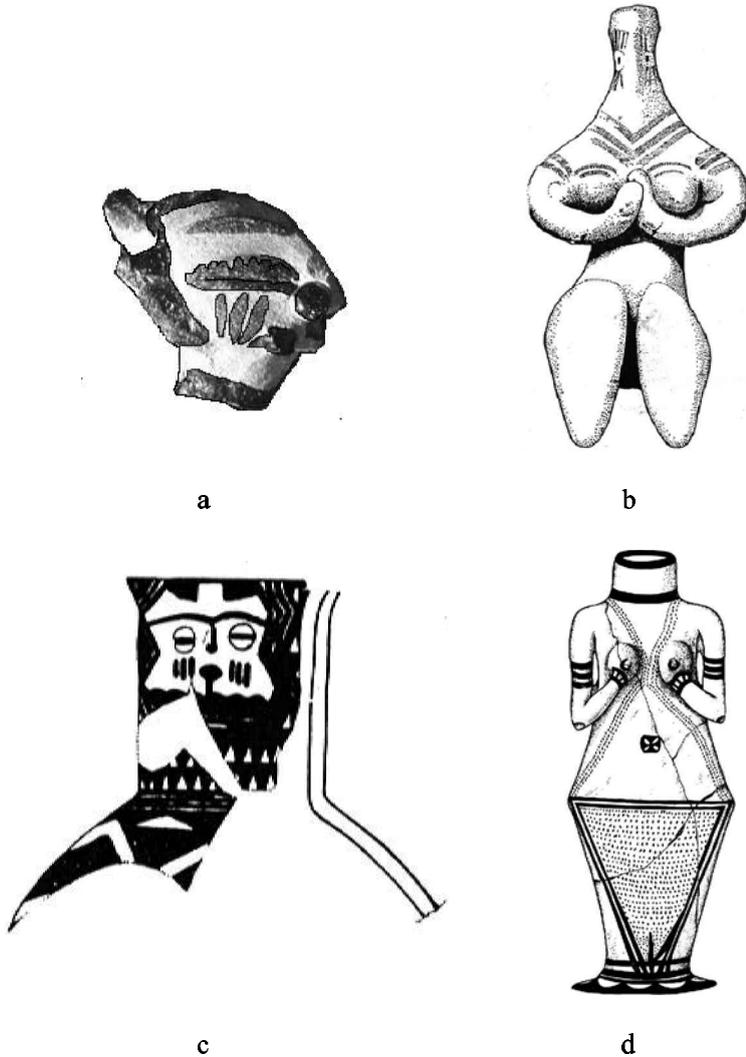


Figure 2 a: Samarran figurine-head from Choga Mami (after Oates 1969; scale 1:1). b: Halaf figurine (composite representation of typical features, after Ucko 1968; scale 1:2). c: Samarran painted vase from Tell Hassuna (after Safar 1945; scale 1:5). d: Halaf painted vessel from Yarim Tepe II (after Merpert et al. 1981; scale 1:3).

time incorporating those forms and their associated meanings within the controlled spaces of decorated vessels.

Recognizable images of other animate beings on Samarran and Halaf pottery are quite rare, but include a wide array of subjects such as snakes, birds and humans, depicted with varying degrees of schematization. The anthropomorphic figures in Fig. 3a, for instance, are constructed largely from triangular elements, and fully incorporated as motifs into the geometrical structure of the design. As Mallowan showed in his analysis of *bucranium* and *moufflon* motifs on Halaf pottery, the reduction of living forms to a small number of

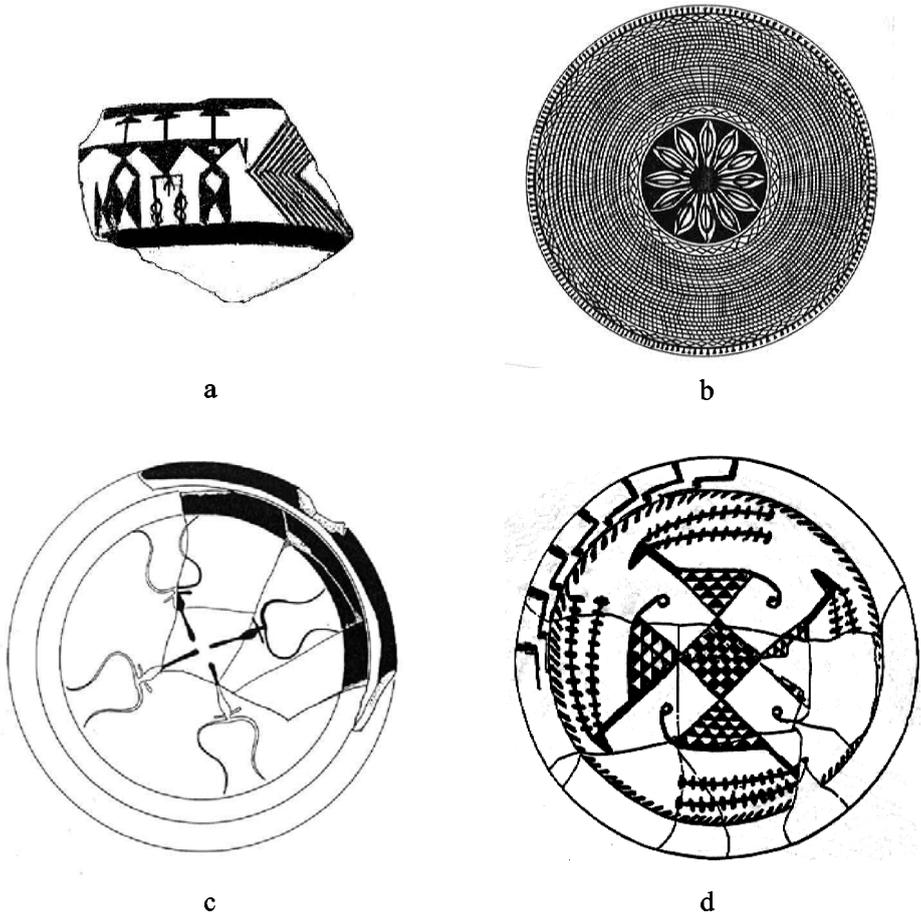


Figure 3 a: Samarran sherd from Choga Mami (after Oates 1969; scale 1:2). b: Halaf bowl interior from Tepe Gawra (after Tobler 1950; scale 1:6). c: Halaf bowl interior from Arpachiyah (after Mallowan and Rose 1935; scale 1:5). d: Samarran bowl interior from Samarra (after Herzfeld 1930; scale 1:5).

elements, systematically and widely deployed within a network of geometrical transformations, is most clearly demonstrable in the case of horned animals. In tracing the various operations applied to these forms, he arrived at a blueprint for the operation of the decorative style as a whole (Mallowan and Rose 1935: 158; for the intellectual background to Mallowan's approach, see Gombrich 1979: 180–93; Gell 1998: 168).

In so far as it provided a framework for the organization of symbols into consistent and replicable relations, the decoration of vessels made manifest the operation of a cosmology in the world of tangible things, where ideas could be envisaged, meditated upon and transmitted across the boundaries of individual life-cycles. It should not be assumed that the only meaningful images encoded within these operations were those with iconic values that are recognizable to us (cf. Boas 1955 [1927]; Ucko 1977: *passim*; Guss 1989; Morphy 1989: *passim*). Other subjects may have been incorporated through

more extreme schematization, or by association with attributes that are to us less obviously meaningful, such as skin texture, colour or mythological association. Their perception would then have been embedded within aesthetic codes inaccessible to observers from remote places and times.

The transmission of aesthetic labour in the Neolithic Near East

The preceding discussion is intended to show how Neolithic painted pottery exhibits a feature which is common to many pre-industrial art forms practised within the framework of small-scale societies (for a classic survey, see Boas 1955 [1927]). David Guss, in his (1989) study of the 'poetics' of Yekuana basketry, has characterized this as the ability of the artwork to absorb and extend itself into multiple aspects of mental and emotional life, such that an in-depth study of its production and use exposes the mechanisms of social reproduction. Commenting upon Alfred Gell's (1998) theory of the art nexus, David Parkin (1999) has observed that 'social trails may lead up to and follow the use of physical objects which, insofar as they are sometimes associated with particular persons, extend that personhood beyond the individual's biological body'. I would suggest that decorated Samarran and Halaf vessels were objects of this kind. Through the aesthetic labour invested in their creation, they transformed a way of eating into a way of seeing and knowing the world. Or, to reverse the equation, they imbued a mode of seeing and knowing the world with tangible properties of touch, taste and smell, channelling its transmission through concrete social acts mediated by the internalizing of consumed substances.

The reception and consumption of aesthetic labour is, however, only one aspect of its role in social praxis, which has perhaps been accorded a disproportionately great emphasis in recent anthropological definitions of aesthetics (e.g. Morphy 1992a, 1992b; Coote 1992). In defining a form of aesthetic labour, it is also necessary to address the means and contexts of its (re)production; as Küchler (1997: 42) has put it, images (and other sensory media) are reproducible partly because 'they are revealed in objects displaying certain formal properties that facilitate an economy of transmission' (cf. Rowlands 1993).

It has long been recognized by archaeologists that the transmission of complex decorative codes on pottery presents difficulties of interpretation because, unlike work in other materials such as fibre, wood, stone and bone, the process of constructing forms and ornamental patterns in clay is largely free of suggestions imposed by the texture of the medium (Myres 1923: 70; Frankfort 1924). Partly for this reason, it is unlikely that the transmission of pottery designs took place solely through 'memory-work' of the kind which Küchler describes for the wooden *malangan* (funerary sculptures) of northern New Ireland (1992, 1997). Unlike *malangan*, which were briefly displayed in mortuary rites and subsequently destroyed, painted pottery was a durable item of everyday use, as indicated by the sheer quantity of sherds found on any Late Neolithic tell. Furthermore, the construction of *malangan* sculpture was basically an agglutinative process, while the production of complex (but ultimately idiosyncratic) geometrical designs on pottery demanded a pre-existing template of actions for relating pattern to a confined form, in addition to familiarity with a recognized corpus of constituent motifs.

It was, in fact, a tenet of early twentieth-century prehistory that the appearance and spread of geometric designs on Neolithic pottery was practically and intellectually grounded in a more rigidly structured medium of daily production, which has barely survived in the archaeological record, i.e. basketry (Petrie 1920; Myres 1923; Schuchhardt 1925; Childe 1925). The suggestion that Samarran pottery designs in particular derived from basketry prototypes was made by Sir Max Mallowan, and has occasionally been restated, albeit obliquely, in more recent literature (Mallowan and Rose 1935: 170; cf. Adovasio 1977: 228; Sherratt 1997: 366–7). Mallowan also proposed that the more elaborate Halaf decorative style, with its greater range of cursive and figural motifs, represents increasing departure from the imitation of woven designs, and a more exploratory approach to the decorative possibilities of the ceramic medium. However, like many identifications of skeuomorphic relationships, Mallowan's case rested upon little more than the passing assertion of visual similarities between prehistoric artefacts and the absent evidence of vanished media. I would argue that, in order to substantiate such assertions, it is necessary to analyse the replication of aesthetic effects, not merely in terms of their reception, but also through the active technical processes and forms of knowledge implied in their production.

The existence of a technological relationship between the manufacture of basketry and pottery in the Neolithic of the Near East is much better documented today than in Mallowan's time. Direct evidence now exists that basketry was practised throughout the Fertile Crescent by early Neolithic times, and already employed the techniques of twining, coiling and plaiting (Hole et al. 1969: 220–3; Adovasio 1977; Bar-Yosef 1985: 9; Stordeur et al. 1996). In addition to the occasional preservation of actual basketry, ceramic base-sheerds bearing negative impressions of coiled basketry-bases have been found at a number of Early Neolithic sites in the Zagros region (Vandiver 1987; Morales 1990: 26). Although small in number, these impressions are of considerable importance, indicating that baskets were used as moulds for clay vessels around the time when ceramic technology was first emerging (see especially Voigt 1983: 263–7, pl. 25). It is likely that this technique developed through the lining of cooking baskets with clay and/or the caulking of storage and carrying baskets with non-porous materials such as plaster and bitumen. These practices are directly attested throughout the Early Neolithic Fertile Crescent (Bader 1993b: 34; Braidwood and Howe 1960: 42; Kirkbride 1972, pl.6a; Adovasio 1983; Noy 1989; Schick 1988).

Some of the earliest plastic vessels known from the Levant (PPNB) are made from lime plaster rather than clay (Garfinkel 1999: 12–13). In some cases the ribbed surface of these White Ware vessels clearly demonstrates the use of coiled baskets as moulds (Mellaart 1975: 62; Dornemann 1986: 15). Clay vessels with similarly textured exteriors are consistently found at later Neolithic sites, and were sometimes decorated with painted geometric designs (e.g. Mallowan and Rose 1935: 127–8; Oppenheim 1943, pls 78, 80, 86; Merpert et al. 1981, fig. 17; Merpert and Munchaev 1993, fig. 8.10: 7; Campbell et al. 1999, fig. 12: 7). Physical analyses suggest that forming in a mould remained the main technique for creating the base and lower walls of clay vessels throughout the Neolithic, coiling becoming common only in the fourth millennium BC (Moorey 1994: 149). The large slabs used to form rounded bases, a common feature of Late Neolithic pottery, must have rested 'either on a flat or curved surface, such as a basket or hollow in the ground' in order to

retain their form under the pressure of construction; the sharp carination of many Halaf vessels would also have been difficult to achieve by slab construction without the use of an external support (Vandiver 1987: 18, 30).

The extent to which preservation may have exaggerated the role of pottery in Neolithic village life is strikingly revealed by the recent discovery of a large assemblage of clay sealings at Tell Sabi Abyad in north-eastern Syria, their reverse sides retaining prints from the surface of the containers to which they had been attached. While a third had been used to seal pots, slightly more than this bore impressions of coiled basketry, and the remainder had sealed plaited mats, leather or woven bags and stone bowls (Duistermaat 1996).

While there are no surviving examples of decorative designs on Neolithic basketry, ethnographic studies of basket manufacture have often stressed how the basic structure of designs derives in a fundamental way from techniques necessary to the production of a functional vessel. Although the values attributed to these structuring effects are specific to particular societies, tensions between cultural form and non-cultural matter inherent in the process of construction lend a generic similarity to decorative designs produced in historically independent traditions, such as those of Africa and the New World (e.g. Guss 1989; Gerdes 1998; cf. Ingold 2000). In his survey of *Primitive Art*, Franz Boas accordingly proposed that the 'effect of automatic control is seen nowhere more clearly than in basketry, matting and weaving [in which] evenness of surface results from repetition of pattern' (1955 [1927]: 40–1). Structural regularities of weave and symmetrical properties of the vessel are built into the fabric of the decorative scheme, and vice versa. This process had been more extensively explored by Otis Mason (1988 [1904]) in his monumental *American Indian Basketry*, which inspired an equally informative study by George James (1972 [1909]). The shapes of basketry, they pointed out, are related to the forms of solid geometry, and their ornamentation is consequently built up within a mesh of uniform elements determined by the intersection of warp and woof. Decorative designs therefore tend to be dominated by motifs such as zigzags, triangles and diamonds, which are organized into linear, symmetrical, radiating and chequered patterns generated along the axes of the woven coils, twines or plaits (Fig. 4a–e). The same points are restated in a variety of other studies undertaken during the early twentieth century, and in more recent times (e.g. Roberts 1985 [1929]; Guss 1989 [especially pp. 88–9]; Gerdes 1988; and cf. Pryor and Carr 1995).

It may therefore be inferred that the craft of hand-woven basketry would have equipped Neolithic potters with the applied knowledge of spatial relations and properties of number required to reproduce complex geometrical designs on ceramic forms. Basketry would have provided a medium through which that knowledge could be transmitted over generations and between village groups, and its production is therefore likely to have underpinned the wide spatial and temporal distribution of geometric styles on Samarran and Halaf pottery. Derivation from woven prototypes accounts particularly well for the characteristic features of Samarran pottery designs described by earlier commentators (see references, above). These include the division of patterns into uniform segments, the systematic use of radial and rotational symmetry on vessel interiors and of linear repetition on exteriors, the rigid geometry of figurative designs and the overall harmony of decorative pattern and vessel form. The rims of Samarran and Halaf vessels

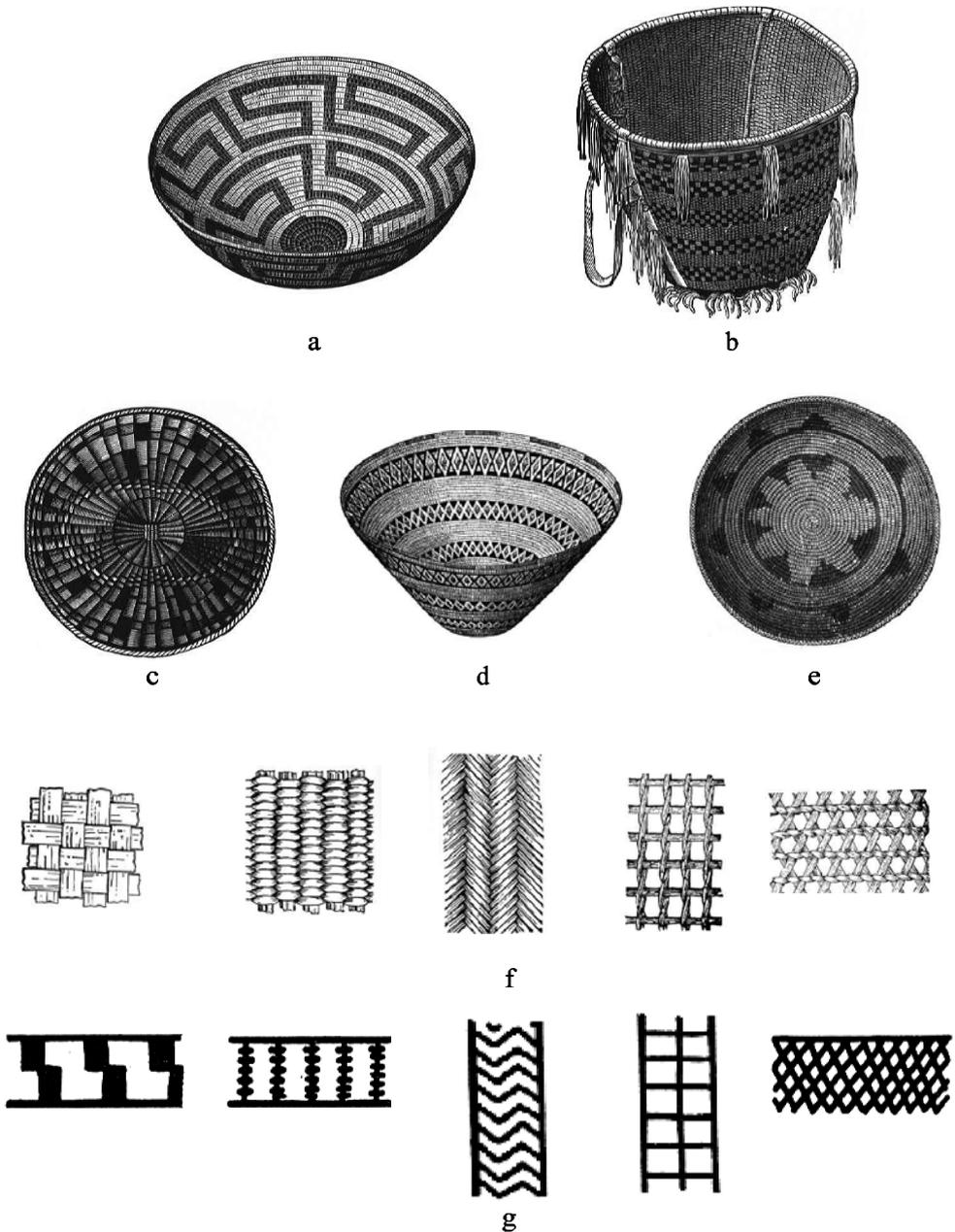


Figure 4 a–e: exterior and interior views of Native American basketry from various cultural traditions (not to scale). f: Native American weaving patterns (James 1972 [1909]). g: typical motifs employed on Samarran painted ware (after Tulane 1944).

are often decorated with a series of vertical linear motifs, the more elaborate of which have sometimes been interpreted as ‘dancing ladies’ (Fig. 1a, c). In the context of the present discussion, they seem better understood as two-dimensional representations of the woven fringe that remains around the mouth of a basket at its completion, and may

be either tied over the rim or converted into decorative tassels (Fig. 4b; see also Boas 1955 [1927]; Roberts 1985 [1929]: fig. 5a; Guss 1989). Many of the characteristic rim and body motifs used in the ornamentation of Samarran and Halaf vessels in fact correspond to the basic constructional elements commonly used in building up baskets (Fig. 4f, g).

Such correspondences suggest that, in executing designs, the painters of Late Neolithic pottery habitually reproduced, not only the operational procedures familiar to them from basketry, but also the outer appearance, texture and perhaps colour schemes of decorated woven vessels. In evoking an associated range of sensory experience that was alien to the ceramic medium, they were perhaps alluding to links between technical competence and creative expression upon which the social efficacy of their designs depended. The appreciation of painted pottery would in turn have been mediated by experience of the diverse visual and tactile properties of decorated baskets, as well as knowledge of their associated functions and meanings, and may have been evaluated accordingly.

Conclusion

The simplification of painted pottery designs began throughout Mesopotamia during the fifth millennium BC (Late 'Ubaid/Chalcolithic period), following the end of the Neolithic period, and reached its peak with the onset of urbanization during the fourth millennium BC (Uruk period). Throughout the vast network of Mesopotamian villages, the form of painted vessels became markedly less diverse and ornamental designs were reduced to concentric bands filled with simple rotary patterns (Oates 1960). The uniformity and scale of this transformation has led Hans Nissen (1988) to attribute it to the diffusion of a new production technique, based on the use of a slow-wheel or 'tournette'.

Nissen's proposal has not been universally accepted, and clearly must be evaluated in relation to the wider context of social change during the 'Ubaid period. I have argued elsewhere (Wengrow 1998: 790–3, fig. 3) that the appearance of the multi-room 'tripartite' house throughout Mesopotamia at this time (prefiguring in its plan the monumental urban institutions of the Uruk period) signifies the rationalization and intensification of domestic production. This process would have influenced the whole range of domestic industry, inhibiting creative interchange between crafts such as pottery and weaving. There is, of course, no direct evidence for the standardization of woven products during the 'Ubaid period. Nevertheless, administrative texts recovered from early urban institutions confirm that textiles and reed-based products had, by the Uruk period, become integrated into a hierarchically organized production system, within which weavers and potters were assigned distinct bureaucratic statuses (Englund et al. 1993; Potts 1997: 94).

It should also be noted that the simplification of pottery designs was preceded, during the sixth millennium BC (Halaf period), by an unprecedented phase of elaboration and experimental design. Based on the preceding discussion, the relationship between these long-term processes becomes explicable in terms of a growing disengagement of decorative practices on pottery from the techniques of weaving that underpinned their reproduction as a form of social knowledge. On Samarran vessels this disjunction was restricted to combinations of interior and exterior designs that would be technically impossible in basketry, while the designs themselves respected the structural possibilities of weaving. Accordingly, those possibilities were transcended only through reference to

their existence. It was only during the Halaf period that the vessel surface increasingly came to be treated as a scene of representation, rather than a formative factor in the composition of designs (e.g. Oppenheim 1943: pl. lx; Breniquet 1992; Ippolitoni-Strika 1990).

Without dwelling further on this process, I should like to conclude by focusing upon the contrast between Late Neolithic pottery and that of the early urban period, and the implications of this for the role of aesthetic labour in the process of state formation. It has been argued that Neolithic painted pottery invested the social and sensory activity of consumption with conceptual, and even cosmological, value. Its production, use and circulation provided a material framework for the construction of lasting interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the aesthetics of painted pottery designs made reference to a shared knowledge of the productive codes and techniques of basketry upon which their transmission depended. It was as potential practitioners that people encountered and appreciated these products, generating a system of social relationships between producers and consumers of aesthetic labour which differs fundamentally from that prevailing in our own society and, in a different sense, from those which characterized early states of the kind described at the start of this paper.

What I am arguing is that the means of aesthetic production, and hence control over the affective dimension of experience in Neolithic society, was widely distributed through techniques and practices making up the fabric of everyday life. The conceptual and moral world, within which personal relations acquired substance and meaning, was a world of people's own making. The subsequent simplification of everyday practices may therefore be understood as a central feature of the state formation process, signifying progressive abdication of the responsibility for aesthetic labour, and the political power it confers, to a restricted sector of society. That sector cultivated access to knowledge, materials (notably exotic metals and stones) and techniques of transformation which could not be reproduced in every household, but were confined to the houses of the gods, their products periodically revealed in dramaturgical activities which renewed the bond between society, the cosmos, and the political order.

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