

# Iconography of power

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Iconography of power can be defined as identification of images of a given historical period with their further description and interpretation.

Ancient art is full of power images because art was the privilege of the rich. Art was a tool of influence and story-telling; it is the reason why it is critical to understand how power is rendered in ancient art and what methods are used to do it.

Iconography of power can be studied in relation to many art objects of the ancient era. Such artworks as Naram-Sin victory stele and the Standard of Ur depict authorities placing them above others or giving them attributes of power. In the Standard of Ur, people who have power are dressed better and they are depicted sitting on thrones while other people serve them. In Naram-Sin's victory stele, the position of the king symbolizes his power. Also, his depiction has more details compared to other figures; according to Pritchard and Fleming, the king's helmet with horns symbolizes his divinity that gives him even more power.

Architecture is also used to convey power symbols in ancient art. Such huge buildings as the Pyramid of Zoser and the Ziggurat of Ur present supremacy of their owners to their followers. Kings needed to communicate their power effectively and they used huge buildings to manifest their top position in their community.

Ancient art uses hierarchy of scale to underpin images of power. It can be defined as specific manipulation with the sizes of objects and space in order to stress the most important ones in a composition. For instance, in the Standard of Ur people of high social status are significantly bigger than their servants. The same applies to Naram-Sin's depiction because it is bigger than

any other object in the composition.

Important figures are often depicted in conceptual poses which add special meaning to an artwork. In the Naram-Sin victory stele, the king stands above all his followers to present his power over them. The heads of the followers are turned to Naram-Sin to show their respect. In the Standard of Ur, all kings sit while their slaves stand. Sitting is a privilege as it stresses peoples high social status compared to those who stand close to them.

Narrative composition is a composition which "tells a story" by placing objects in their relation to one another. For instance, Warka vase is a good example of a narrative composition; it shows the relations between people, divinities, animals, water and plants. All objects have the same proportions; connections between them create the story which explains many details about the culture that created the vase. Another good example of narrative composition is the Battle of Till Tuba; this stone relief depicts a battle scene where all characters are depicted in action. Unlike hieratic composition, where relations between people are rendered through their size, narrative composition stresses actions and dynamic approach to storytelling.

Overall, ancient civilizations encoded their history in their art stressing important figures and constructing amazing building to present the power of their rulers. Ancient art clearly presents power relations in communities where it was created. All in all, many artworks were created with a sole purpose to manifest ones power.

#### Work Cited

Pritchard, James Bennett, and Daniel E. Fleming, eds. *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Princeton University Press, 2011.