

Book Review

Analyzing Assyrian Palace Reliefs

By GIORGIO BUCCELLATI

The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit (Schocken; \$19.95)

The most gratifying task of the humanist is to recapture the experience of the past, re-embedding it in our own experience. As humanists, we aim for that moment when we come to understand the past from within its own historical existence and, conversely, come to understand ourselves as being touched by such remoteness. Clearly, the more distant the document, the more difficult will be this process of absorption into our own culture. The Renaissance, with its rediscovery of the classical world, is the acknowledged paradigm.

Ancient Mesopotamia has been rediscovered during the last century and a half. Long the domain of specialists, it has begun to appeal to "outsiders." Two interesting recent examples are John Gardner's translation of "Gilgamesh" (Knopf, 1984) and Diane Wolkstein's cooperation with S. N. Kramer on "Inanna" (Harper, 1983). This new book by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit is in line with the resurgence of interest in things Mesopotamian: It takes up Assyrian visual art as a springboard for reflections on the representation of violence.

Bringing In Freud, Sade

The book aims at providing a new understanding of the reliefs with which the Assyrian kings had their palaces decorated in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. The authors claim that art historians have missed the significance of these sculptures. To reverse the situation, they use a psychoanalytical type of analysis, with ample references to such authors as Freud and Sade. Attractive as this endeavor is, I am disappointed in the results as they pertain to the Assyrian reliefs, with which I have more familiarity. Such claim to competence might disqualify me in the eyes of the authors, since they feel that the professional field has pedantically missed the essence of what the Assyrian reliefs have to offer. But if I go halfway with them and accept in part their assessment of the professionals, I hope they will go halfway with me in accepting my criticism.

It is true that some of the professional literature has been narrowly focused, but not altogether so. The work by Gronewegen-Frankfort, which they quote, is much more sensitive than they give it credit for. The work they don't quote is even more pertinent and significant, especially Pauline Albenda's. The authors would have benefited from the latter's work because it provides a formal analysis which is along their line of reasoning, yet more controlled and convincing.

Ripples and Fish Eyes

For instance, the authors' correlation of circles representing ripples in a water scene and the eyes of the fish swimming in the water is hardly tenable (more convincing, instead, is their analysis of rows of marching people as serving a "de-temporalizing effect"). And conclusions drawn from formal observations remain often unjustified—for example: "The study of straight and curved lines in the visual arts is instructive about some of the ways in which perception can be made to serve political purposes."

The key interpretive argument is that Assyrian reliefs are only *deceptively* narrative: There is in fact,

the authors argue, such a discontinuity of the natural sequence that the attention of the viewer is deflected from the alleged purpose of the narrative, violence. While the ostensible representational object of the reliefs is violence, the artistic message is a negation of violence.

Back to Sumerian Statuary

The authors are quite right in pointing at such stylistic discontinuities in the representation of natural sequences. But there are two major caveats: (1) This is true largely on a microscopic level of observation, and not at the level of each relief as a whole: Here the *sequential* order of the composition emerges as a deliberate stylistic goal of the artist, and a successful one at that. (2) Discontinuity at the level of the individual detail is

embedded in the long tradition of Mesopotamian art which reaches back to Sumerian statuary—it is, in other words, a stylistic convention that helped the ancient viewer "read" more easily a detail that was inserted in the new, more ambitious and definitely "narrative" framework of the relief as a whole.

The central thesis of the book, that narrative discontinuity deflects attention from violence, may well remain valid even if it does not illuminate our understanding of the Assyrian reliefs. But isn't it true of all artistic endeavors, if truly artistic, that they sublimate real-world events (violence, among others) and transpose them onto a different plane of existence?

Buccellati teaches Mesopotamian literature, history and archeology at UCLA.