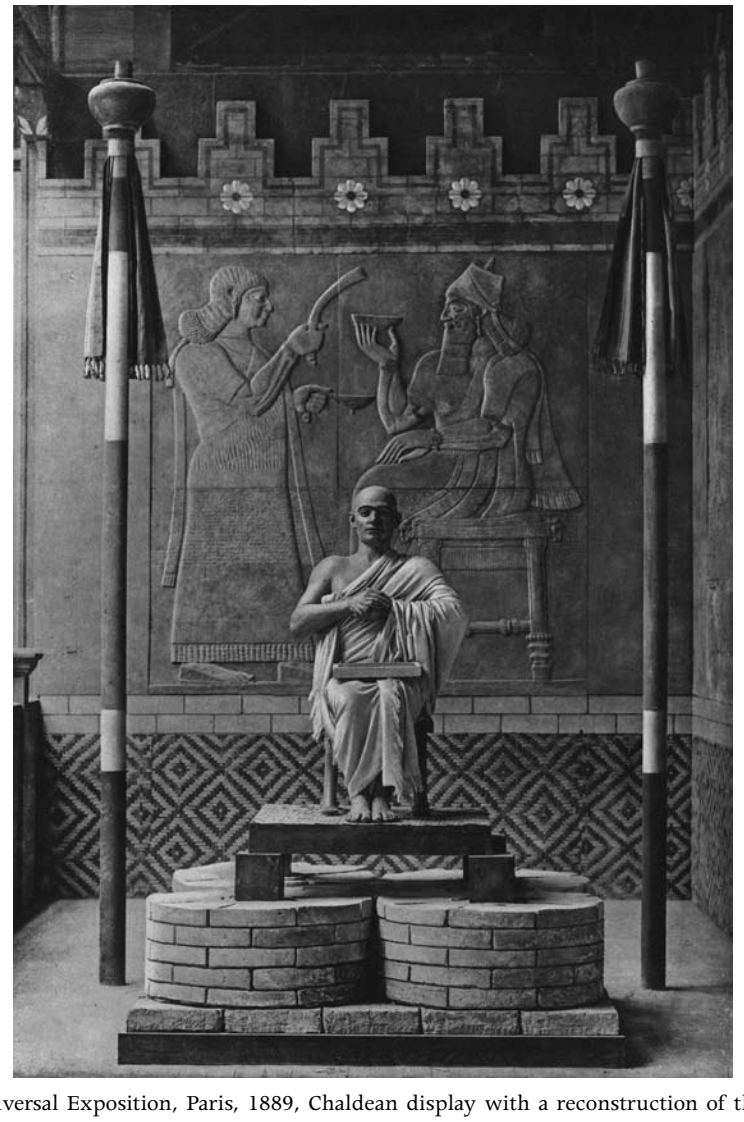
INTRODUCTION

Because this study was conceived of as a biography, it should start at the beginning, with an early modern image of Sumer. Visual evidence of Sumerians was almost completely unknown until 1877, when the site of Tello began to yield numerous statues of Gudea, the ruler of Lagash (ca. 2100 BC). Shortly thereafter, the Sumerians were featured in an ethnographic exhibition celebrating the progress of human labor at the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris (Figure 1). Included in the exhibition were a Cro-Magnon husband and wife carving an antler, Mexicans manipulating agave fiber, Sudanese blacksmiths with monkey-skin bellows, Chinese cloisonné-makers, and Gudea with tablet, ruler, and stylus.[1] In the center of a pavilion, a polychrome plaster reconstruction of Gudea was exhibited. Nearby was a plaster cast of the statue of Gudea on which it was modeled (Figure 2). The head of the statue had not survived, so one was created based on other ancient sculpture as well as a "modern Chaldean" from around Baghdad.[2] Plaster cast, stone statue, and living human being thus were combined to form the earliest modern image of a Sumerian.

Another early modern image of a Sumerian is from around half a century later. By then, knowledge of the Sumerians had grown considerably through excavations, including those of the so-called Royal Cemetery at Ur. One of its famous burials belonged to a woman whose name was read in Sumerian as Shub-ad. A reconstruction of Shub-ad was overseen by one of the premier physical anthropologists of Britain (Figure 3). Because the skull of Shub-ad was poorly preserved, a plaster cast was taken of a different skull excavated at Ur. The features of the face were modeled in wax over the plaster cast in order to approximate a Sumerian physical type, and the garment was styled according to Sumerian statues. Polychromy heightened the realistic effect. The modern sculpture of Shub-ad was declared "an accurate representation of the Sumerian type." As a



1. Universal Exposition, Paris, 1889, Chaldean display with a reconstruction of the ruler Gudea of Lagash. From Heuzey 1891–1915, frontispiece.

physical type, it was, incidentally, also "a type occasionally seen amongst the Arab women of southern Iraq at the present day."[3] Today, the Sumerian name of Shub-ad is read instead as Puabi, a Semitic Akkadian name.[4] The dramatically arching eyebrows, heavily lined eyes, and prominent lip bow of the Shub-ad reconstruction are reminiscent of a publicity photo of Greta Garbo in the 1931 feature film *Mata Hari*. It was rumored that several women were claiming to have been the model for Shub-ad.

All of this nonsense, however, was soon forgotten. The end of the initial phase of the discovery of Sumerian civilization – circa 1850–1930 – was marked by significant advances in the understanding of the Sumerian language and

2. Girsu (Tello), diorite statue of the ruler Gudea of Lagash dedicated to the god Ningirsu (also known as "Statue B"), ca. 2100 BC. Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Antiquités Orientales, AO 2. From Sarzec 1884–1912, Plate 18.

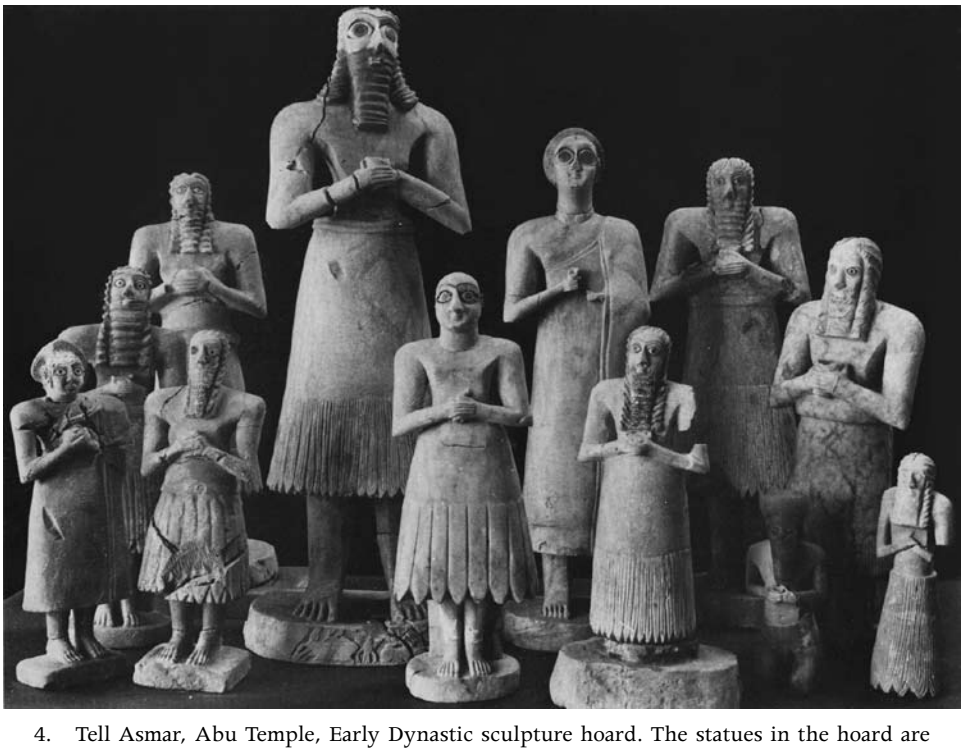
early Mesopotamian chronology. Early Sumerian sculpture was dated to the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2900–2350 BC), a span of time encompassing some six hundred years of the third millennium BC. An Early Dynastic hoard of stone statues was discovered during the 1934 excavations at the site of Tell Asmar, in the Diyala region east of Baghdad (Figure 4). The sculpture in the Asmar hoard was proclaimed the oldest monumental stone sculpture in Mesopotamia. The style of the sculpture, which abstracted the component parts of the body to geometric shapes, was understood as an embodiment of primordial forms at the origins of world art history. Thus, Sumerian sculpture was transformed from an ethnographic artifact and racial index of an ancient civilization into an aesthetic object.

The contrast between the early ethnographic materialization of the Sumerians and the subsequent canonical, art-historical status of Sumerian sculpture is striking. Comprised of plaster, wax, polychromy, and real materials, the early

3. Katharine Woolley, 1928 reconstruction of Shub-Ad from Ur, Royal Cemetery, tomb PG 800. From Woolley 1934, Plate 128. Reproduced courtesy of Richard L. Zettler, Associate Curator-in-Charge, Near East Section, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

modern images of Gudea and Shub-ad are scientific documents of ethnography. Literally and figuratively, in their use of perishable materials and in their conception, the modern reconstructions of Gudea and Shub-ad belong to the singular time and place of their manufacture. In contrast, stone sculpture traditionally belongs to the realm of fine art. The former comprises the ephemeral side of the latter, which is durable and eternal.

When considered together, these two sides of sculpture underscore its unique ability to document the body. In the 1860s, a technique for casting the absent body at Pompeii was achieved by pouring plaster into the cavities encountered within the compacted volcanic ash covering the city. Out came self-sculptures or semiophores, objects that paradoxically rendered present that which had been absent.[5] Similarly, the absent Sumerian body was made present in scientific reconstructions assembled from a patchwork of ancient sculpture, skeletons, and living human beings. Materialized in the void of absence, the various modes of casting the Sumerian body obliterated ancient sculpture as a physical, material object.



4. Tell Asmar, Abu Temple, Early Dynastic sculpture hoard. The statues in the hoard are now divided among the Iraq Museum, Baghdad; The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Chicago; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From Frankfort 1935b, Figure 63. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

The biography of Sumerian sculpture undertaken here is arranged as a series of themes encircling a central premise: a statue *is* a material object. In *Lives of Indian Images,* which suggested my own title, Davis utilizes the concept of biography to interrogate past and present interpretive communities, which produce multiple readings of objects.[6] Through these varied perceptions, objects embody the qualities of social beings and assume identities that are not fixed at the moment of inception. Rather, these identities shift repeatedly through human interactions.[7] Materiality, which considers the social relations between people and objects, is a central concern of this biography. While the analyses of material culture in ancient contexts are typically empirical, addressing the form, materials, and manufacture of objects, materiality addresses the object as it is implicated in the construction of social identities. The constitution of object worlds and their shaping of human experiences are central issues of materiality.[8]

Thomas characterizes the shifting nature of object worlds as a lack of containment, which causes us, as subjects, to have entanglements with objects.[9] Because we conceive of stone statues in a certain way, we respond to them in a certain

way. Our responses are grounded not in universal principles but in the varied and often conflicting notions that reflect shifting sociohistorical phenomena. Materiality is not an essentialist principle, and object worlds must be contextualized within specific cultural contexts. Meskell therefore challenges archaeologists to formulate new questions that can potentially delineate subject–object relations from archaeological context.[10]

As a biography, the study here further recognizes that past and present visual cultures – in which ways of seeing are contextualized within cultural practices – will perceive objects in different ways. Vision and seeing thus are perceptual practices mediated by specific sociocultural conditions.[11] A consideration of visual perception marks an anthropological shift away from traditional art-historical discourse.[12] The potential for both materiality and visual culture to emerge as independent disciplinary pursuits is mediated, however, by efforts to avoid ensconcing them within the same constraints as existing disciplines.[13] Materiality and visual culture therefore are utilized here as part of an art history that has abandoned universalist and essentialist models, particularly in reference to aesthetics. I understand materiality and visual culture as evidence of a general paradigmatic shift that art history has already adapted, processed, and accommodated to varying degrees.[14]

As in anthropology and archaeology, new paradigms in art history generate new issues that require address. To my mind, one advantage of the shift away from the aesthetic inquiry central to traditional art history is the creation of an expanded corpus of visual imagery. This corpus can be subject to the visual analysis that had formerly been the exclusive domain of the artwork. Regarding the subject of this book, visual culture admits into an inquiry into Sumerian sculpture the visual imagery through which perceptions of Early Dynastic sculpture have been constructed. That is, the study of Sumerian sculpture requires a negotiation of the historical terrain comprised of past scholarship.

Because it engages in the practice of materializing absence, archaeology has grown increasingly reflexive in understanding its own methodologies as a mode of encountering the past that is open to human agency and thus unfixed.[15] The materials of archaeology are continuously remade and, in the example of Sumerians, pushed to the margins of the field and rendered immaterial. To consider the modes in which the Sumerians were materialized and made present is to understand a part of the history of our own cultural production in ancient Near Eastern studies. In doing so, the dominant discursive practices in which we currently participate are better understood.

Much of the empirical data of early ancient Near Eastern archaeology is not used because it is outdated. We pick and choose what is relevant and leave the rest – the plaster casts and waxworks – behind. However, I am interested in what has been left behind, in the story that shifts among these ephemeral visions of past worlds. This, too, comprises the visual culture of ancient Sumer.

The spaces left behind also are metaphors for postcolonial issues in which subaltern discourses are relegated to the margins.[16] In the paradigm of Orientalism, the Orient is an absence that must be constructed in order to be rendered present.[17] Mitchell describes a series of fundamental absences – the absence of movement, reason, order, and meaning – that are polar opposites of the West. Such absences are necessary elements in the ordering of representation itself.[18] Bhabha locates important late twentieth-century cultural work in the spaces between established bodies of knowledge.[19]

The inquiries into the early reception of Sumerian sculpture sustained at the beginning of this book gradually shift from intellectual history to ancient context. That is, my interest in how the early reception of Sumerian sculpture influences our current conceptions of Early Dynastic statues leads to a reexamination of the temple. I therefore raise certain issues at the beginning of the book that are central to, for example, postcolonial theoretical methodologies, but I do not attempt to sustain such a narrative throughout the entire text. The final chapters of the book instead self-consciously negotiate between our inheritance of the early reception of Sumer and our understanding of Early Dynastic sculpture as a material presence in the temple. The second part of the book therefore pragmatically engages with an archaeology of Early Dynastic temple sculpture that aims to apply more current methodologies to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archaeological data and to overcome the biases we have inherited. Rather than a positivist approach that encompasses all surviving examples of Early Dynastic sculpture, my aim is approached thematically through a series of inquiries that begin with the general and proceed toward a specific subset of inquiries.

The object world of Early Dynastic sculpture underscores the assumptions we as subjects impose on objects. By exploring the shifting meanings – the lives – of sculpture over time, I proceed sequentially and temporally toward answering the question of what a stone statue of a human figure signified, both in modern times and in antiquity. The some 550 surviving examples of Early Dynastic sculpture belong to a type referred to as a dedicatory, worshiper, or votive statue. These statues are with few exceptions only found in temples, and it is only in the Early Dynastic period that they are found in such abundance. Inscribed Early Dynastic statues reveal that sculpture was dedicated to temples by individuals who, although of an elite class, were not royal. We know, for example, of temple administrators, priests, scribes, cup-bearers, and singers who dedicated statues to Early Dynastic temples. At no other time in the history of the ancient Near East has nonroyal sculpture survived in such abundance. Early Dynastic temple sculpture is therefore foremost a phenomenon of private, elite individuals.

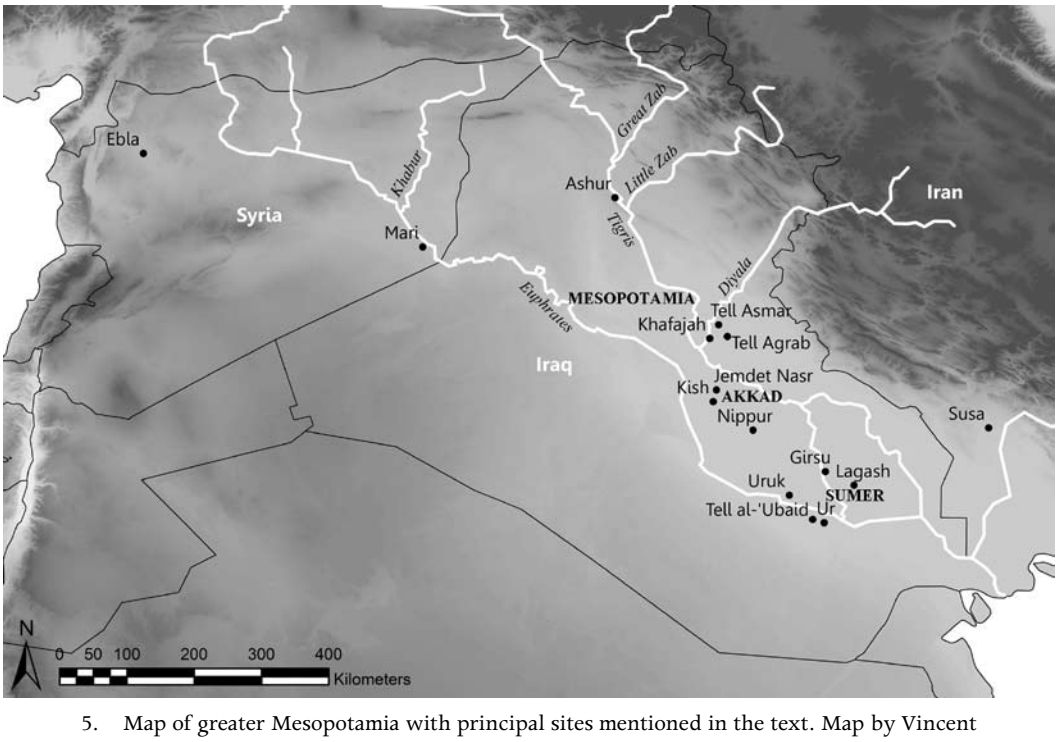
My study emphasizes that Early Dynastic temple statues are a distinct phenomenon of the Early Dynastic period. Consequently, I have refrained

from collapsing the evidence of various periods into a single treatment of the Mesopotamian image across time and space. What was happening in the first millennium BC, when textual evidence is more abundant, was not necessarily happening in the third millennium BC. At the same time, the reality is that a degree of continuity in Mesopotamian traditions has created a type of composite understanding of the Mesopotamian image in scholarship. This composite understanding is valid in general but is not applicable wholesale to the particular. The tension between phenomena that are distinct in time and space as opposed to the continuity of tradition must be negotiated in any study. I have been particularly careful to note the dates of the sources used in this study because in my view it is methodologically flawed to project later sources onto earlier periods.

This book comprises a study of sculpture dating to the Early Dynastic period of Sumer, but it is not a study of Sumerians per se. The English term Sumerian, derived from the Akkadian *šumerum*, is a conventional term for the people who lived in ancient Sumer, a region with its upper limit at about the latitude of the site of Nippur (Figure 5). In the Sumerian language, this region was referred to as **ki-en-gi**, perhaps meaning native land or homeland. But it is only in modern scholarship that a Sumerian people were designated according to definitions of race and ethnicity.

Sumerian history usually refers to the period during which the Sumerian language was used, but its precise chronological demarcation is problematic. It cannot be proven unequivocally that the earliest known writing indeed records the Sumerian language. On the other hand, the Sumerian language continued to be used for writing certain texts long after it had ceased as a spoken language. In addition, other languages, such as Akkadian, were used in Sumer. Conventionally, Sumerian history spans the third millennium BC, but in some studies it will also include portions of the fourth and the second millennia BC.

Archaeological surveys have indicated a settlement pattern for Sumer in which populations were increasingly concentrated in large urban centers over the course of the Early Dynastic period (2900–2350 BC). Thus there arose during the Early Dynastic period a number of city-states or polities, consisting of one or more urban centers and surrounding land. For example, the Early Dynastic city-state of Lagash included the cities of Lagash (al-Hiba), Girsu (Tello), and Nina (Surghul). By the end of the Early Dynastic period, some twenty to thirty city-states shared a common cultural identity. Shifting alliances or coalitions of city-states emerged, with rulers expressing hegemony by adopting titles such as "king of Kish." Ultimately, an empire encompassing much of greater Mesopotamia was founded by the Akkadian rulers (ca. 2334–2154 BC). After the decline of the Akkadian empire, some city-states in Sumer reemerged as independent polities similar to those that had characterized the Early Dynastic



5. Map of greater Mesopotamia with principal sites mentioned in the text. Map by Vincent Van Exel; ASTER GDEM is a product of METI and NASA.

period. This is when Gudea of Lagash ruled (ca. 2100 BC). Around this time, another empire, known as the Third Dynasty of Ur, was established and lasted until the end of the third millennium BC (Ur III period, ca. 2112–2004 BC).

In scholarship of the ancient Near East conducted from around 1850 to 1930, Early Dynastic sculpture was discussed as "early Sumerian sculpture." I will be referring also to "Sumerian people" and "Sumerian sculpture" when discussing this early scholarship. Although the cultural assemblages excavated from Sumer – and, in the example of Early Dynastic sculpture, the assemblages excavated from Akkad and greater Mesopotamia – were related to varying degrees, these relationships are not to be equated with a homogeneous Sumerian population construed according to either racial or ethnic criteria. We only have Sumerians insofar as they are the inhabitants of the geographical region of Sumer. The persistence of discussing Sumerian sculpture in contemporary scholarship is a reflection of the Sumerian culture and cultic practices in which it is reasonably assumed that Early Dynastic sculpture originated. Sites such as Mari and Ashur are located outside the geographical region of Sumer as are the sites in the Diyala region east of Baghdad. The presence of the temple sculpture tradition is a product of Sumerian cultural influence, but these sites are not themselves Sumerian sites. As a title, *The Lives of Sumerian Sculpture* encompasses an awareness of the discursive shifts surrounding Early Dynastic statues.

Chapter 1 begins by examining sculpture in general as a document of human taxonomy. Because of its ability to reproduce the body, sculpture was uniquely positioned vis-à-vis nineteenth-century race and aesthetics. It was classical sculpture that signified the civilized body at the pinnacle of human taxonomy, and aesthetics and ethnography were combined to delineate a visual culture of bodily differences. Because of the materialization of the classical ideal in human taxonomies, nineteenth-century Western scholars understood sculpture in general as an authenticating document of the body. The reception of Sumerian sculpture is contextualized in Chapter 1 within the debates from 1850 to 1930 over the origins of the Sumerian race, a complex issue known as the "Sumerian problem." Although differences were recognized, statues, relief-carvings, skeletal remains, and living human beings comprised a single scientific category of ethnographic data that aimed to understand the Sumerians as a physical type. Attempts at a linguistic classification of the Sumerian language, the identification of a Sumerian race on monuments, and the excavation of so-called Sumerian skeletal remains were all informed by sculpture and its aesthetics. The results often reflected persistent cultural attitudes regarding what the origins of Western civilization should look like.

The Sumerian problem formed the background against which hundreds of Early Dynastic statues were excavated in the Diyala region of Iraq in the 1930s. Finally, for the first time, a large sculpture corpus was available for determining Sumerian origins. As I discuss in Chapter 2, however, the Diyala publications instead adopted art-historical methodologies. As the oldest monumental stone sculpture in Mesopotamia, Early Dynastic sculpture was drawn into a well-established discourse on the origins of art. Sumer already had been designated "primitive" within an ethnographic paradigm. From there, it was but a small shift to framing Sumerian sculpture as "primitive" art. The aesthetics of the "primitive," which already had been embraced by the early twentieth-century Western art world, allowed Sumerian sculpture to be defined art-historically. The reconfiguration of Early Dynastic sculpture as artwork therefore reflected the role of sculpture as an ethnographic document in general and the established visual culture of a Sumerian racial body in particular.

Three principal areas of inquiry regarding Early Dynastic sculpture are still informed by the early reception of Sumerian sculpture. The first area concerns a debate over Early Dynastic chronology. Essentially, the significance accorded to sculpture style obscured its limitations as a chronological marker. Secondly, the belief that an abstract or geometric style of sculpture was evolving toward naturalism or realism obscured the quality of abstraction that statues dedicated to temples share throughout the Early Dynastic period. Forming a tradition lasting hundreds of years, abstraction in its various manifestations is an important visual quality of Early Dynastic temple statues. It is therefore worthwhile to consider