

THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM

MASTERWORKS FROM THE MORGAN: ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CYLINDER SEALS

Engraved cylinder seals are among the smallest objects produced by sculptors. Yet, focusing on the engraved designs enables us to enter the visual world of the ancients. Seals were surely meant to benefit their owners by protecting them and by bringing them good luck. It is certain that the human figures, animals, and plants were intended to influence the life of the wearer in a positive way. At the same time, the scenes provide some reflection of the life, costumes, and furnishings of the period. Many of the images served as symbols of human qualities and other concepts in the religious and poetic literature of the ancient Near East, including the Old Testament. Through the latter as the medium of verbal tradition, much of the symbolism continued into the imagery of the Middle Ages of Europe. Ancient Mesopotamian seals are among the earliest known objects to reproduce pictorial symbols to communicate ideas. In a way, their designs precede the illuminations of medieval manuscripts through their symbolic content and the record they provide of their own time and place of origin.

Note on exhibition: Seals were usually made of stone and engraved with scenes and designs that appear in relief when they were rolled over clay. The impressed clay dried and hardened into a seal for doors, jars, boxes, and baskets. The principal function of the cylinder seal in later times was to impress clay tablets on which records were inscribed in order to authenticate a document. Displayed here, at the upper left of each grouping, are ancient cylinder seals carved from various stones. To the right of each seal, replacing the clay used by the ancients, is a modern impression made by rolling the seal in plasticine. Below each impression is a photographic enlargement that clarifies the detail and beauty of the engraving.

The Late Uruk/Jamdat Nasr Period (ca. 3500–2900 B.C.), Nos. 1–3

The earliest period of urban civilization in southern Mesopotamia is named Uruk after the preeminent sanctuary town of the age. At Uruk, monumental architecture and sculpture were found in levels that also yielded cylinder seals and their impressions on clay lumps placed over cords around the necks of jars or on clay balls enclosing small counting devices. Somewhat later, cylinders were rolled onto tablets bearing the first signs of Sumerian writing.

1. Leather Workers (?) in Rooms Framed by Serpo-Felines
Cylinder seal; 2.95 x 2.5 cm
Mesopotamia, Late Uruk period (ca. 3500–3100 B.C.); serpentine
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 1
2. Goats Before a Shrine
Cylinder seal; 4 x 3.55 cm
Mesopotamia, Late Uruk/Jamdat Nasr period (ca. 3500–2900 B.C.); marble
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 23

The earliest seals feature repeated rows of animals representing the controlled herds upon which the economy was dependent. The scene engraved on this cylinder shows three horned animals above wavy lines, perhaps representing the two rivers of Mesopotamia: the Tigris and the Euphrates. At the left is the facade of a temple. The seal carver rendered nothing less than an ordered view of the world by creating a scheme that represents a distillation of the most important elements of Mesopotamian life: the waters that bring life, the animals upon which human life depends, and the temple—the economic, social, and spiritual center of these earliest communities.

3. Three Stags with a Plant
Cylinder seal; 2.5 x 2.2 cm
Mesopotamia, Late Uruk/Jamdat Nasr period (ca. 3500–2900 B.C.); serpentine
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 20

The Early Dynastic Period (ca. 2900–2334 B.C.), Nos. 4–7

The Early Dynastic period is so called for the dynasties of rulers that emerged in the city-states of Mesopotamia, such as Ur, Lagash, and Kish. In the north Semites were dominant, in the south, Sumerians. In the later phases of the Early Dynastic period, seals with friezes of animal contests predominate—linear and imaginary in the earlier period, more

naturalistic and modeled in the later (Nos. 5–7). The scenes of animal contests continued into the next period, that of the Akkadians (ca. 2334–2100 B.C.); however, the frieze is broken up into pairs of contesting figures (Nos. 8–10).

4. Lion-Armed Demon with Human Torso and Legs; Two Scorpions, Small Seated Figure, and Crossed Lions
Cylinder seal; 3.7 x 2.4 cm
Mesopotamia, Early Dynastic II period (ca. 2750–2600 B.C.); marble
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 61
5. Heroes Protecting Animals from Felines; Inscribed
Cylinder seal; 2.4 x 1.3 cm
Mesopotamia, Early Dynastic III period (ca. 2600–2334 B.C.); lapis lazuli
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 80
6. Bull-Man Protecting Horned Animals Attacked by Felines; Scorpion Above Crossed Felines
Cylinder seal; 4.1 x 2.5 cm
Mesopotamia, Early Dynastic III period (ca. 2600–2334 B.C.); marble
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 75
7. Kilted Hero Attacking Felines Menacing Horned Animals; Human-Headed Bull Below Empty Space
Cylinder seal; 2.2 x 1.4 cm
Mesopotamia, Early Dynastic III period (ca. 2600–2334 B.C.); lapis lazuli
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 85
8. Crowned Hero Grasping Bull; Nude Bearded Heroes Holding Human-Headed Bulls
Cylinder seal; 2.35 x 1.3 cm
Mesopotamia, Akkadian period (ca. 2334–2154 B.C.); carnelian
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 149
9. Bull-Men Contesting with Lions
Cylinder seal; 2.8 x 2.6 cm
Mesopotamia, Akkadian period (ca. 2334–2154 B.C.); marble
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 167
10. Nude Bearded Hero Wrestling with Water Buffalo; Bull-Man Fighting Lion
Cylinder seal; 3.6 x 2.5 cm
Mesopotamia, Akkadian period (ca. 2334–2154 B.C.); serpentine
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 159

The seal exemplifies the fully developed Akkadian style. In the carving of the figures, the ancient artist demonstrated a real feeling for and understanding of human and animal forms. The design of the two heraldic pairs emphasizes the concepts of force and power. Through the strength of the nude bearded hero and the bull-man, the natural world represented by the lion and the water buffalo is dominated and controlled. Perhaps the tree, placed on a stylized mountain, and the space surrounding the figures were meant to serve as an indication of the gigantic scale on which the figures were to be imagined.

The Akkadian and Post-Akkadian Periods (ca. 2334–2100 B.C.), Nos. 11–14

The centralized empire of Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2334–2279 B.C.), a Semite, replaced the largely Sumerian city-states of the Early Dynastic period. The royal art of Sargon and his successors, of whom Narim-Sin (ca. 2254–2218 B.C.) was the most important, determined the artistic development of Mesopotamia for centuries. On Akkadian cylinder seals, the gods—wearing their distinguishing horned crowns—are shown in their various mythological settings (Nos. 11–13). An invasion of the Gutí, a barbarous people from the Zagros Mountains, terminated the Akkad dynasty, though some southern centers of culture continued to preserve the quality of Akkadian art (No. 14).

11. Male and Female Worshipers Led Toward the Sun God Enthroned on a Mountain
Cylinder seal; 1.65 x 0.95 cm
Mesopotamia, Akkadian period (ca. 2334–2154 B.C.); lapis lazuli
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 190
12. Water God Enthroned with Worshiper and Vizier and Nude Bearded Heroes Grasping Gateposts; Inscribed
Cylinder seal; 3 x 1.9 cm
Mesopotamia, Akkadian period (ca. 2334–2154 B.C.), serpentine with calcite vein
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 202
13. Worshiper Pouring Libation Before Weather God and the Rain Goddess
Cylinder seal; 3.35 x 2 cm

Mesopotamia, Akkadian period (ca. 2334–2154 B.C.); shell

The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 220

14. Lion-Headed Eagle Clutching Ibexes; Inscribed

Cylinder seal; 3 x 1.7 cm

Mesopotamia, Post-Akkadian period (ca. 2154–2100 B.C.), steatite

The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 267

The beautifully incised inscription on this unique cylinder is incorporated into the design to frame the composition and relates that the seal was created for a man who was the minor priestly official and scribe of a purification priest of the goddess Shara. This was probably at the ancient Southern Mesopotamian city of Lagash, where Shara was the consort of the chief god, Ningursu, and where the lion-headed eagle was a favored image. The delicately worked wings of the lion-headed eagle give the impression that the wings of the giant, majestic creature are spreading open before one's eyes.

The Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2112–2004 B.C.), No. 15

After roughly one century, the domination of the Gutian foreigners was broken, and the region of their conquest came once again under the rule of a Mesopotamian dynasty, the Third Dynasty of Ur. This was a period of renaissance and restoration. The religious feeling of the era is expressed in the characteristic motif of these cylinder seals—rites of worship in the temple (No. 15).

15. Worshiper Led by Goddess Toward Enthroned God

Cylinder seal; 3.2 x 2 cm

Mesopotamia, Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2112–2004 B.C.); jasper

The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 277

The First Dynasty of Babylon (ca. 1894–1595 B.C.), Nos. 16–20.

Like the Akkadian Empire, the Third Dynasty of Ur collapsed. After several hundred years of internal strife, Hammurabi of Babylon (ca. 1792–1750 B.C.) established another empire in Mesopotamia. Since the discovery of his famous code in 1901, Hammurabi has been well known to students of law. An excerpt from the prologue characterizes the spirit in which the code was written: “The gods . . . called me, Hammurabi . . . to create justice in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak. . . .” The most characteristic seals of the period continue the worship scenes of the Third Dynasty of Ur, rendering the figures in minute detail and an elegant style (Nos. 17 and 18).

Contemporary seals from Syria show the opulence of an art that combines Syrian, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian elements (No. 19 and 20).

16. Bull-Man Fighting Lion; Nude Bearded Hero Kneeling on a Lion and Holding

Lion Behind His Head; Kneeling Man Attacked by Lion-Griffin

Cylinder seal; 2.6 x 1.35 cm

Mesopotamia, First Dynasty of Babylon (ca. 1894–1595 B.C.); hematite

The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 362

17. Goddess, Suppliant Goddess, and Worshiper Carrying Kid Before Sun God with

Goddess Behind; *in the field*: Star, Demonic Mask Above Priest, Bull, Human

Head, Star and Crescent Above Goat; Inscribed

Cylinder seal; 2.5 x 1.35 cm

Mesopotamia, First Dynasty of Babylon (ca. 1894–1595 B.C.); hematite

The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 399

18. Suppliant Goddess and Worshiper Before God with Rod and Ring on Temple

Throne and Placing Feet on Bull, Goddess and God in Attendance with Nude

Female Between

Cylinder seal; 2.35 x 1.12 cm

Mesopotamia, First Dynasty of Babylon (ca. 1894–1595 B.C.); hematite

The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 391

19. Worshiper Offering Gazelle to Enthroned Deity Holding Ankh, Winged Sun-Disk

with Pendant Cobras Above; *two registers behind throne, upper*: Ibex-

Demon and Winged Bull-Demon Shouldering Bar with Suspended Stag, *lower*:

Two Attendants Carrying Bar with Suspended Antelope

Cylinder seal; 2.95 x 1.5 cm

Syria (ca. 1850–1720 B.C.); hematite

The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 910

20. Male Figure Before Goddess Drawing Aside Her Mantel; *two registers forming*

the terminal, upper: Confronted Lions, *lower*: Ibex and Griffin

Cylinder seal; 2.3 x 1.1 cm

Syria (ca. 1720–1650 B.C.); hematite

The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 945

For the ancient Near East, the act of procreation symbolized creation itself. The female figure in this scene is revealing only her pubic area as if to emphasize this idea of procreation rather than mere carnality. The hand-to-mouth gesture of the male figure, as well as his downward-stretched arm, emphasize his astonishment at the truth being revealed to him through the generosity of the female's gesture. He is visually taken aback. The empty space between the figures emphasizes their gestures. The scene is framed by natural and mythical animals.

The Middle Assyrian Period (1430–1050 B.C.), Nos. 21–30

A period of cultural flowering and exchange developed in Mesopotamia after a dark age that followed the destruction of Babylon in 1595 B.C. The emergence of the Assyrians as a political power in northern Mesopotamia during the fourteenth century B.C. foreshadowed the ascendancy that culminated in the world empire of the first millennium B.C. That phase of history, which falls into the latter half of the second millennium B.C., is called the Middle Assyrian period to distinguish it from the Old Assyrian period (early part of the second millennium B.C.) and from the Neo-Assyrian period (first third of the first millennium B.C.).

The designs of seals of the so-called Middle Assyrian period, beginning about 1400 B.C., exhibit a new naturalism and vivacity that is surely a reflection of the general trend toward realism that prevailed in Egypt and the Aegean during this truly international age. The glyptic art of Assyria was greatly influenced by its precursor—that of the Mitanni, from which the fantastic creatures and elaborate sacred tree–designs are derived (Nos. 21–23). A specifically Assyrian style is shown in the preference for fewer and more clearly arranged and carefully modeled figures, often forming a heraldic image, as well as the addition of naturalistic landscape elements (Nos. 24–30). Most of the subjects associated with this style are contest scenes. The Morgan's Middle Assyrian cylinders are the finest of any collection.

21. Hero Grasping Lions Standing on Kneeling Bulls, Winged Sun-Disk Above; Palmette Tree with Birds of Prey Between Sphinx and Griffin
Cylinder seal; 2.7 x 1.3 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. fourteenth century B.C.); rock crystal
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 592
22. Lion-Griffins Attacking Bull; Palmette Tree
Cylinder seal; 2.4 x 1.15 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. fourteenth century B.C.); chert
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 594
23. Griffin-Demon Grasping Bull, Inscribed
Cylinder seal; 2 x 1 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. fourteenth century B.C.); chalcedony
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 595
24. Leaping Stag with Tree on Mountain
Cylinder seal; 3 x 1 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. thirteenth century B.C.); chalcedony
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 601

The artist who carved this stag—its antlered head proudly held high, its forelegs poised to land—must have been familiar with the extraordinary grace and dignity of this animal, whose name, *lulimu*, could also mean “ruler” or “prince.” The significance of the scene is unknown; however, an echo of its meaning is found in a biblical text from the Song of Solomon (2:8–9), in which the bride speaks of her bridegroom: “The voice of my beloved! Behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. My beloved is like a roe or a young hart.”

25. Lion Attacking Mouflon; Tree and Star
Cylinder seal; 2.8 x 1.2 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. thirteenth century B.C.); banded agate
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 602
26. Lion Attacking Stag Before Tree on Mountain
Cylinder seal; 3 x 1.3 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. thirteenth century B.C.); chert
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 603
27. Winged Hero Pursuing Two Ostriches, Inscription Abraded in Antiquity
Cylinder seal; 3.1 x 1.4 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. twelfth/eleventh century B.C.); marble
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 606

In one of the most striking of the Morgan's Middle Assyrian seals, a winged hero pursues an ostrich, possibly representing the earthly equivalent of the griffin, the conveyor of death. The fleeing ostrich, with its head turned back in fear and fury and its feathers bristling, ranks among the greatest Mesopotamian depictions of animals. In Job (39:13–17) the ostrich is considered a malevolent creature because it disdains its young, which may account for the presence of the young ostrich and enhances our understanding of this extraordinary seal.

28. Winged Lion-Griffin Attacked by Hero over Kneeling Calf
Cylinder seal; 3.2 x 1.3 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. twelfth/eleventh century B.C.); carnelian
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 607
29. Griffin Fighting Griffin-Demon Armed with Dagger for Small Calf Below
Cylinder seal; 4.2 x 1.65 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. twelfth/eleventh century B.C.); chalcedony
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 608
30. Griffin-Demon Tearing Branch from Tree, Inscribed
Cylinder seal; 3.8 x 1.5 cm
Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian period (ca. twelfth/eleventh century B.C.); sard
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 609

The Neo-Assyrian Period (ca. 1049–609 B.C.), Nos. 31–33

The great Assyrian Empire dominated the beginning of the first millennium B.C. Scenes depicting astral deities, carved in a linear manner (No. 32) or a drilled style (No. 33), are characteristic of the period.

31. Two Figures Attacking Bearded Hero with Curls, Perhaps the Heroes
Gilgamesh and Enkidu Slaying the Giant Humbaba
Cylinder seal; 3.55 x 1.55 cm
Mesopotamia, Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 1049–609 B.C.); serpentine
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 686
32. God Astride Bull-Headed Dragon and Aiming Star-Studded Bow at
Lion-Griffin
Cylinder seal; 3.7 x 1.5 cm
Mesopotamia, Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 1049–609 B.C.); steatite
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 689
33. Goddess with Ring and Scimitar on Star-Studded Throne over Lion (?);
Worshiper Facing Armed God Standing on Bull
Cylinder seal; 3.4 x 1.6 cm
Mesopotamia, Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 1049–609 B.C.); chalcedony
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 694

The Neo-Babylonian Period (ca. 1000–539 B.C.), Nos. 34–38

In 612 B.C. Nabopolassar, king of a Chaldean dynasty of Babylon (and father of Nebuchadnezzar), participated in an alliance of foreigners to defeat Assyria and brought about the destruction of Assyria's two great cities, Ashur and Nineveh. The borders of the empire remained more or less intact; only its rulers changed from Assyrian to Babylonian. Among the finest of the cylinders of Assyro-Babylonian art of the ninth to seventh centuries B.C. is No. 34, inscribed with the name of its Neo-Babylonian owner.

34. Winged Hero Contesting with Lion-Demon for Bull, Inscribed
Cylinder seal; 3.85 x 1.8 cm
Mesopotamia, Neo-Babylonian period (ca. 1000–539 B.C.); carnelian with
partly preserved copper setting at both ends
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 747

In the miniature space on the surface of this seal, the artist created a contest of monumental proportions: a demonic lion faces a winged superhuman hero. The lion's threatening gesture and tension in the span of his sharp claws suggest his evil power. But the hero will prevail: taller than the lion, he acts with a calm force, and the bull, the victim of the contest, remains in his power. The smooth muscular forms of the heroic figure are set off by his carefully detailed and ornamented flounced garment. Despite the violence of the action, the figures seem frozen in time—a result of the symmetry.

35. Hero Grasping Two Struggling Birds and Stepping on Third Bird
Cylinder seal; 2.4 x 1.2 cm
Mesopotamia, Neo-Babylonian period (ca. 1000–593 B.C.); chalcedony
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 764
36. Centaur with Bow and Arrow Attacking Winged Lion

- Cylinder seal; 3 x 0.9 cm
Mesopotamia, Neo-Babylonian period (ca. 1000–539 B.C.); banded agate
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 749
37. Armed Hero Grasping Kicking Ostrich; Worshiper Behind Two Fish-Men with
Pollen Baskets Flanking Sacred Tree; God in Winged Sun-Disk Above
Cylinder seal; 3.7 x 1.7 cm
Mesopotamia, Neo-Babylonian period (ca. 1000–539 B.C.); carnelian
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 773
38. Worshiper Before Two Altars Adorned with Divine Symbols
Cylinder seal; 3.9 x 1.8 cm
Mesopotamia, Neo-Babylonian period (ca. 1000–539 B.C.); lapis lazuli
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 781

The Achaemenid Period (ca. 550–330 B.C.), Nos. 39 and 40

In 539 B.C., the Persian king Cyrus the Great defeated the last ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Babylon, along with the entire ancient empire that spread throughout Mesopotamia, became a province of Persia. Cylinder seals were used until the defeat of the last Persian king by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C. They no longer had a function, as parchment and papyrus replaced clay tablets and the centers of empire moved from western Asia to Greece and Rome.

39. King Standing on Sphinxes and Holding a Lion in Each Hand;
Palm Tree with Winged Sun-Disk Above
Cylinder seal; 3.2 x 1.5 cm
Persia, Achaemenid period (ca. 550–330 B.C.); banded agate
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 824

Even though cylinder seals had been carved in Mesopotamia for over three thousand years, by the time of the Persian conquest, the form was by no means exhausted. Some of the most exquisite cylinders were produced in the Achaemenid workshops. On this seal it is no longer the nude bearded hero of the Akkadians who dominates the animals (No. 10) but the Achaemenid king himself in a beautifully balanced yet artificial composition, in which all elements are subservient to and are a reflection of the king's majesty.

40. Striding Bull
Cylinder seal; 2.5 x 1.3 cm
Persia, Achaemenid period (ca. 550–330 B.C.); chalcedony
The Pierpont Morgan Library, Seal no. 837

Foundation Figure of King Ur-Namma

Statue; h. 33.5 cm
Mesopotamia, Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2112–2004 B.C.)
The Pierpont Morgan Library

The first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, Ur-Namma was responsible for the restoration of old temples and oversaw the extensive construction of new temples and stepped temple towers known as ziggurats. The figure depicts the king with his head and face shaved, his torso nude, and wearing a long skirt. On his head he carries a basket containing the mud to make the temple's bricks. The first was molded by the king himself, who is represented in the occupation considered the lowliest in Mesopotamia—"carrying the basket"—for in the presence of the gods the king was a humble servant. The skirt is inscribed with his titles and achievements, *Ur-Namma, king of Ur, king of Sumer and Akkad, the one who built the temple of Enlil*. He is shown in an act of deep piety, and the sculpture gives us a rare glimpse of royal portraiture by first-rate metropolitan craftsmen of the twenty-first century B.C.