

## THE MORGAN MOUNTS EXHIBITION OF EXTREMELY RARE COPPER FIGURES FROM ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

*Founding Figures: Copper Sculpture from Ancient Mesopotamia, ca. 3300–2000 B.C.*  
May 13 through August 21, 2016

**New York, NY, April 7, 2016** — Standing about a foot tall, the small yet monumental “foundation figures” in ancient Mesopotamia were not created to be seen by mortal eyes. Cast in copper and placed beneath the foundation of a building, often a temple, they were intentionally buried from prying humans. Perhaps only intended for the gods, they combine both abstract and natural forms and were created at the behest of royal rulers concerned with leaving a record of their humanity, deeds, and civilization.

Surviving examples are exceedingly rare and a new exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum,

*Founding Figures: Copper Sculpture from Ancient Mesopotamia, ca. 3300–2000 B.C.*,

brings together ten outstanding works,

including ancient cylinder seals, from several

public and private collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Babylonian

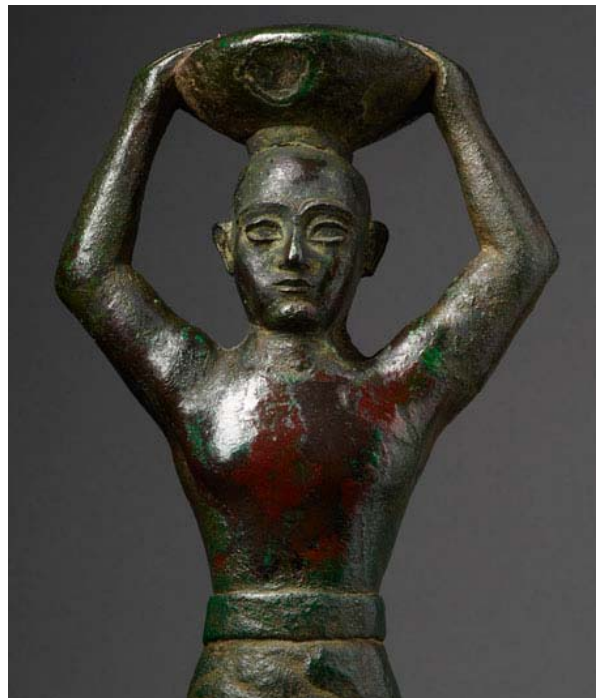
Collection of Yale University. With the Morgan’s own *Foundation Figure of King Ur-Namma*

serving as centerpiece, the show demonstrates how the medium of copper allowed sculptors to explore a variety of forms with a fluidity not available in traditional stone, resulting in figures of

exceptional grace and delicacy. The exhibition also includes enlarged impressions of scenes

engraved on cylinder seals, maps, and other visual tools to provide visitors historical and cultural

context. *Founding Figures* is on view at the Morgan from May 13 through August 21.



A Neo-Sumerian Copper Foundation Figure of King Ur-Namma (detail). Mesopotamian, Third Dynasty of Ur, ca. 2112–2004 B.C. reign of King Ur-Namma, ca. 2112–2094 B.C. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased by J. P. Morgan, Paris, 1907.

“Pierpont Morgan, the founder of the museum, was fascinated with the art and civilizations of the ancient world,” said Colin B. Bailey, director of the Morgan Library & Museum. “He made several trips to the Middle East and left the Morgan an extraordinary collection of cylinder seals and other artifacts that he had acquired. The exhibition *Founding Figures* continues this legacy and demonstrates the remarkable artistry of sculptors of the period who gave us figures of transcendent beauty.”

## **THE EXHIBITION**

How, why, and precisely when the process of casting molten metal to form representative images began is lost in the remotest past. However, it is clear that by 3300 B.C. in Ancient Mesopotamia, the cradle of Western civilization, the craft of casting metal had been perfected. By this time, the metal sculptor, through building a work from soft malleable wax, mastered the delicate fluidity of forms and their inherent naturalism, creating figures of striking originality.

During excavations carried out from 1955 to 1958, two foundation deposits each containing a figure of King Ur-Namma similar to the Morgan sculpture were found. The figures were placed deep in the earth under the lowest course of the structure in deposits made of baked brick and sealed with bitumen to make them air and water tight. The deposits were placed at the corner of a wall or under gate towers, probably marking the principal points of the temple’s plan, and were intended to record forever the pious works of royal builders. Upon rediscovery, they serve as a remarkable record of a period millennia removed from modern times.

The Morgan’s *Foundation Figure of King Ur-Namma* features an inscription that mentions Enlil who was the major god of the Mesopotamian pantheon. The king’s artisans created a new type of full figure sculpture to commemorate Ur-Namma’s involvement in the construction of Enlil’s temple. The king is shown wearing a long skirt upon which the inscription is prominently featured. His torso is bare and his head and beard are shaved in preparation for ritual. The figure demonstrates a restrained naturalism and calmness and is considered to be among the finest of all foundation figures created during the third millennium B.C. Both in the gallery and on the Morgan’s website, this exceptional piece can be viewed fully in the round.

One of the earliest surviving cast copper sculptures from Mesopotamia is *Figure of a Priest King*, which dates to ca. 3300–3100 B.C. Although the figure’s identity and function are unclear, its great musculature and full beard suggest authority and power. The figure is depicted ritualistically



Left: Figure of a Priest King, Mesopotamia, Sumerian, Uruk IV period, ca. 3300-3100 B.C. Copper alloy. Private Collection. Right: Foundation Figure of a Kneeling God Holding a Peg, Mesopotamia, Second Dynasty of Lagash, reign of Gudea, ca. 2144-2124 B.C., Copper alloy. The Morgan Library and Museum (Purchase 1974).

in heroic nudity wearing only a belt around its narrow waist. The *Priest King's* complex asymmetrical posture encourages viewing from all sides. Overall the sculpture conveys a sense of alert, thoughtful, and assured majesty.

*Foundation Figure of a Kneeling God Holding a Peg* is an example of a well-preserved figurine of a god, recognizable as such by his headgear, topped by several pairs of bull horns. By firmly grasping the peg, the god is shown symbolically “nailing” the foundation of the temple forever to the earth. The sculptor has conveyed a naturalism and delicate fluidity in a figure fully realized in the round. Though immobilized by the permanence of the act itself, the muscular interaction of the body parts is well understood. The fine facial features as well as the deity's erect posture convey a sense of divine certitude. The inscription on the peg is now too corroded to read, but, by analogy with earlier inscribed foundation figures, the deity probably represents the personal god of Gudea, ruler of Lagash.

### **Free Brochure**

A complimentary, fully-illustrated brochure will be available to visitors in the gallery, outlining all items on view in *Founding Figures*, including their provenance.

## Public Programs

### **GALLERY TALK**

**Founding Figures: Copper Sculpture from Ancient Mesopotamia,  
ca. 3300-2000 B.C.**

*Sidney Babcock, Curator and Department Head, Seals & Tablets*

**Friday, May 20, 6:30 pm**

**Tickets:** All gallery talks are free with museum admission; no tickets or reservations necessary

### **GALLERY TALK**

**Founding Figures: Copper Sculpture from Ancient Mesopotamia,  
ca. 3300-2000 B.C.**

*Sidney Babcock, Curator and Department Head, Seals & Tablets*

**Friday, July 22, 1 pm**

**Tickets:** All gallery talks are free with museum admission; no tickets or reservations necessary

## Organization and Sponsorship

The exhibition is organized by Sidney Babcock, Curator and Department Head, Ancient and Near Eastern Seals and Tablets at the Morgan Library & Museum.

*Founding Figures* is made possible with generous support from Jeannette and Jonathan Rosen.



The programs of the Morgan Library & Museum are made possible with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

## The Morgan Library & Museum

A complex of buildings in the heart of New York City, the Morgan Library & Museum began as the private library of financier Pierpont Morgan, one of the preeminent collectors and cultural benefactors in the United States. Today it is a museum, independent research library, music venue, architectural landmark, and historic site. A century after its founding, the Morgan maintains a unique position in the cultural life of New York City and is considered one of its greatest treasures. With the 2006 reopening of its newly renovated campus, designed by renowned architect Renzo Piano, and the 2010 refurbishment of the original library, the Morgan reaffirmed its role as an important repository for the history, art, and literature of Western civilization from 4000 B.C. to the twenty-first century.

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