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Diplomacy by Design: Luxury Arts and an 'International Style' in the Ancient Near East, 1400–1200 BCE, by Marian H. Feldman, 2006. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press; ISBN 0-226-24044-4 hardback £38 & US\$60; xvii +278 pp., 83 figs., 19 col. pls.

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of messages, female kin and other personnel, and also highly crafted gifts. The correspondence exchanged by these rulers, recorded on clay tablets in a common script (cuneiform) and language (Akkadian), was composed in an idiom of 'brotherhood', expressing — as might be expected — a very different world-view to that represented on royal monuments. The latter were concerned with the affirmation of hierarchical relationships between gods, kings and subjects, and projected an image of legitimate power as uniquely vested in particular sacred landscapes, each bounded by potent but also polluting forces. By contrast, the diplomatic correspondence of the Late Bronze Age fully acknowledged the inter-dependence of multiple political domains, and emphasized the need for reciprocity among their rulers.

The relationship between these two ideological structures was characterized in terms of an opposition between 'interest' and 'prestige' by Mario Liverani (1990), who highlighted the distinct forms of coercion involved in each. The epistolary ideal of brotherhood provided a set of normative expectations through which status was negotiated and local interests pursued between courtly centres, with variable tact and skill. Precious gifts were demanded, held back, derided, or even melted down and quantified in a trans-continental 'tournament of value', to use Arjun Appadurai's (1986) felicitous phrase. In some cases, gifts were also carefully inventoried according to type, material and method of manufacture, among the most detailed examples being a list of items sent from (?) Amenhotep IV to the Kassite king Burnaburiash on the occasion of the pharaoh's marriage to a Babylonian princess. Reflecting, perhaps, its essentially competitive nature, the protocol of palatial correspondence did not encourage the direct appreciation of these greeting gifts (Akkadian: *šulmānu*); and, when expressed, such appreciation was usually directed not towards the aesthetic qualities of the gifts themselves but to their value as tokens of care for the health of a royal 'brother'. Neither this nor the uncertainties involved in translating ancient terms for object forms and styles have prevented modern analysts from seeking direct parallels for royal gifts in the archaeological record. Marian Feldman's beautifully produced book is the most recent, and boldest, move in this direction to date.

Feldman's basic contention (first outlined in a 2002 piece for *The Art Bulletin*) is that the ideology of 'brotherhood' may have been directly supported through the production and circulation of a distinctive range of decorated luxury items, which — she argues — formed an important subset of the total repertory of objects considered appropriate as accompaniments

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Diplomacy by Design sets out to provide a new perspective on inter-regional relations in the Middle East during the final centuries of the Bronze Age (c. 1400–1200 BC). The topic holds a particular fascination owing to the fact that written sources — principally the archives discovered well over a century ago at el-Amarna in Middle Egypt — preserve detailed information about the principles of inter-palatial exchange at this time. These much studied documents and comparable ones from Boğazköy (site of the ancient Hittite capital in central Turkey) demonstrate that the rulers of major regional polities from the Tigris to the Mediterranean were engaged in a highly formalized pattern of interaction, involving the circulation

to diplomatic exchanges. These items belong to what Feldman terms the 'international artistic *koiné*' and are said to share characteristics of 'theme and motif, composition, idiom, technique, material, and object types' (p. 58). The number of surviving works 'securely classified as part of the international *koiné*' is said to be 'less than eighty' (p. 116). Only a handful are discussed in detail and no corpus is provided that would allow the reader to assess the overall validity of the classification but, for purposes of discussion, I will use the term '*koiné*' here in the specific sense intended by Feldman. The objects discussed in the book as exemplars of this class in fact constitute a very disparate group, the unity of which was difficult for this reviewer to appreciate on first inspection. Among them are the inlaid wooden chest inscribed for Tutankhamun and Ankhnesenamun, found within the former's tomb, a golden bowl with repoussé ornament from Ras Shamra, a faience rhyton with polychrome ornament found at Kition on Cyprus, and a poorly preserved assemblage of ivories deposited at the Artemision on the Cycladic island of Delos during the Geometric period but dated to the Late Bronze Age on the basis of stylistic comparisons with ivories from Megiddo. On what grounds, then, should such items be considered as belonging to a coherent and distinctive group, and how precisely do they relate to the kind of diplomatic exchanges documented in contemporaneous written sources?

In exploring these questions, Feldman encounters much evidence that contradicts her initial supposition, and this ultimately obliges her to posit nothing stronger than a 'potential' relationship between her *koiné* and the diplomatic exchange of 'greeting gifts'. Differential archaeological preservation is evoked, with some justification perhaps, to explain why the main distribution of surviving *koiné* goods is coastal, whereas the 'global village' of the Amarna Letters centres upon the vast inland states of Babylonia, Assyria, Mitanni, and Hatti, with Egypt as something of a geographical (and cultural) outlier. More complex arguments concerning status negotiation are advanced to explain the presence of *koiné* items — as defined by Feldman — at minor kingdoms such as Ugarit, the subordinate status of which in fact precluded their participation in the highest circuit of diplomatic exchanges. Rather less convincing is her assertion that all of the materials used to produce *koiné* goods were subject to an 'extraordinary' level of palatial control, 'if not a monopoly' (p. 118). Archaeological evidence for the production of faience (notably at el-Amarna itself: Shortland *et al.* 2001) in fact suggests a less centralized scenario, and Feldman herself acknowledges the ab-

sence of this material from palatial correspondence. Converse problems are raised by lapis lazuli, frequently mentioned in the context of *šulmānu* but virtually absent from the surviving repertory of *koiné* objects. Such caveats point away from any single explanatory model and towards a more complex reality which might have been elucidated through closer consideration of the archaeological record, not to mention the extensive literature on Bronze Age economic systems, which is given only the briefest treatment in Feldman's book. Similarly lacking is any detailed discussion of alternative candidates for diplomatic 'greeting gifts', such as stone vessels bearing Egyptian royal names, which first reached the palatial centres of coastal and inland Syria during the Early Bronze Age (e.g. Sparks 2003; and further suggestions in Cochavi-Rainey & Lilyquist 1999).

What, then, of the 'international artistic *koiné*' itself? Did it really exist as a strategic element of elite culture during the Late Bronze Age? Or is it essentially a modern heuristic category, produced by 'our' ways of responding to objects rather than those of the ancient actors? In support of the former possibility, Feldman embarks upon a detailed analysis of surface decoration in order to isolate the visual properties of the *koiné*. In this, by far the strongest part of the book, she departs both theoretically and substantively from the often vague definitions of an 'international style' advanced in earlier studies. Art historians, she observes, have tended to approach visual hybrids as technical problems to be solved through a display of scholarly expertise, which allows them to be assigned with minimum discomfort to a particular workshop or regional school. Drawing upon recent developments in cultural theory, and using selected elements of the Amarna correspondence as a contextual frame, Feldman argues to the contrary that artistic hybridity had a positive value within the Late Bronze Age system of palatial exchange. The most successful hybrids were those which disguised altogether their source of origin while evoking generic ideas about kingship, thereby serving as ideal accompaniments to diplomatic exchanges. Only objects bearing the latter, fully hybridized, designs are accorded a place in Feldman's international *koiné*. Among their defining attributes is a 'paratactic' mode of composition (roughly the visual equivalent of a Samuel Beckett monologue) which is thought to suppress the reading of their imagery as linear narrative. According to Feldman, this is one of a number of devices through which distinct messages were encoded and transmitted between rulers in contexts where more hierarchical modes of elite representation (emphasizing the heroic deeds of

kings in relation to hostile outsiders) were deemed inappropriate. Feldman's distinction between *koiné* and non-*koiné* modes of decoration could therefore be said to echo Liverani's interest/prestige distinction (my comparison, rather than hers).

Here the case might have been strengthened by discussing the implications of divine imagery and its apparent absence from many of the decorated objects included in the international *koiné*, which — like later so-called 'orientalizing' goods in the eastern Mediterranean — tend to feature monsters (griffins, sphinxes) rather than gods. It must be noted, however, that both *koiné* and non-*koiné* modes of representation (again using Feldman's terms for convenience) are sometimes combined on the same objects, such as an ivory bed-frame from Ras Shamra and an alabaster ointment jar from Tutankhamun's tomb. The body of the latter object is ornamented with a scene of animal predation set amid lush vegetation (a typical *koiné* arrangement, according to Feldman), but the jar itself is set within a carved frame that terminates in the heads of defeated foreigners, a common visual trope of Egyptian kingship. Such examples undermine the proposed iconographic distinctiveness of the 'international artistic *koiné*', as well as its suggested social and psychological functions. Furthermore, the deposition of objects that conform to this classification in close association with others that do not (e.g. at Ras Shamra and in the Theban tombs) suggests complementary, rather than opposed, roles in elite display. These problems are alluded to, but not resolved, by Feldman, and the decision to illustrate objects in singular isolation (as in a museum catalogue) has the unfortunate effect of further marginalizing questions of function and context.

A further chapter considers correlations between cuneiform texts and diplomatic gifts, primarily in terms of their shared 'materiality' and exclusivity as products of skilled labour. While these are certainly novel lines of enquiry, they appear to be pursued at the expense of more specific insights into the ideology of gift-giving provided by the inscriptions themselves, which might have opened further avenues onto the analysis of luxury objects. In particular, the practice of gift-exchange as a form of non-violent coercion — designed to fortify the position of the giver *vis-à-vis* the recipient — invites comparison with recent work on the materiality of gift-exchange among Pacific islanders. Much of the relevant literature (by now familiar to archaeologists) is in fact sampled by Feldman, who at various times asserts the 'agent-like', 'biographical' and 'entangled' nature of objects; but these terms are too often laid over the main argument rather than

woven through its fabric, and the comparative issues they raise for Bronze Age diplomacy are little developed. For example, within such a competitive system of diplomatic exchange, what role might be envisaged for objects that seek merely to persuade, rather than to dazzle or intimidate? Perhaps the answers lie in a closer consideration of the relationships *between* objects (what Alfred Gell [1998] called the 'inter-artefactual domain') and their meaningful integration as sets or assemblages.

On a more general, and positive, note, *Diplomacy by Design* is that rarest of things: a stunningly produced book that also contains a bold argument and makes the reader think. Feldman has worked hard to question conventional boundaries of scholarship, both regional and theoretical, albeit with mixed success. The outcome is likely to generate considerable debate, and should embolden all students of epigraphy, art history and archaeology to look beyond their ordinary specialisms towards a more holistic view of cross-cultural relations in the Bronze Age.

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