



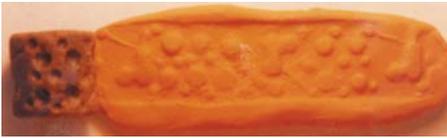
Two polished stone mace heads, Hittite second millennium BC, fine condition. £125 each.



A group of three coloured stone seals, Sassanian, c200AD. £30 each.



A decorative bone plaque carved with human head gryphons, Assyrian c800BC. £495



A Jemdet Nasr cylinder seal, c3000BC. £125.



A black stone cylinder seal carved with a presentation scene. Neo Assyrian, c900BC. £125.



A calcite seal carved with animals, c1500BC. £95.



Two stone stamp seals carved with humans and animals, c3500BC. Approx £100 each.



A small clay model of a bull, Syrian c1000BC. £95.

## Collecting Antiquities of the Ancient Near East by Vincent McCarthy

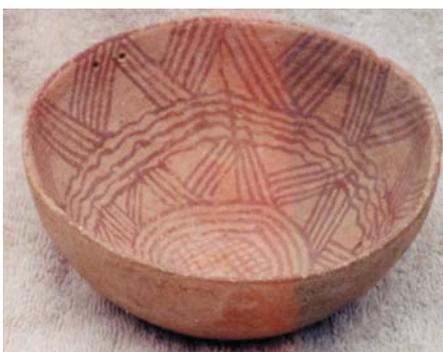
For the purposes of this article I would define the Near East as the region on the map bounded by the Black Sea to the north, the Mediterranean to the west and the Red Sea and Afghan mountains to south and east. This is a large area of generally dry and often mountainous land which was for several thousands of years was fought over and ruled by diverse kings and cities; the Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Elamites, Phoenicians, Israelites, Persians, Seleukids and Parthians. All of these kingdoms imposed their rule and left traces of their culture in the region. Luckily for the collector much of the Near East has been excavated and studied, often with reference to Old Testament bible studies so quite a lot is known of the history of these people.

The fertile plain between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates is traditionally felt to be the site of the Garden of Eden and can justifiably claim to be known as the cradle of civilisation. Mesopotamia saw the rise of the first walled cities, Jericho was founded before 8000BC. The area saw the beginnings of pottery manufacture, the earliest experiments with copper and one of the first systems of writing. The earliest pottery appeared around 5500BC. This was handmade so it consists mostly of simple round bowls and bag shaped vessels, generally of buff colour often with red coloured decoration. These early pots have a wonderful naive charm and are quite easy to find so collectors can expect to pay between £100 and £250 for an intact but simple vessel. Two thousand years later the potter's wheel

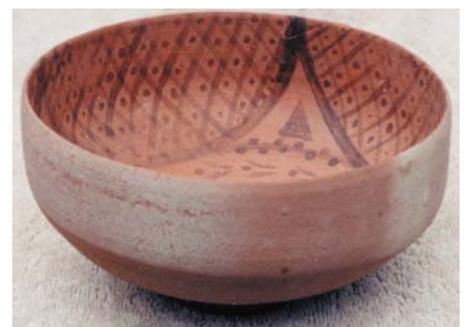
was invented and this led to more finely potted vessels of elaborate shape with handles and spouts. The base clay colour is still buff or cream but the decoration is often more delicately painted with recognisable floral or animal motifs. Some of these pots can have exciting provenances, often with named Old Testament places and collectors are willing to pay rather more for these. Even so prices for good pots can be as low as £200 whilst the more desirable examples can still be bought for £400 or £500.

The earliest artefacts from the region are stone tools of the neolithic period. However these are not often found outside of museums so the collector may find himself some examples of tools or weapons in copper and bronze. Simple knives, spearheads or axes are common. A distinctive type of axe in the form of a duckbill made in the second millennium BC is popular with collectors. These bronze pieces range from around £100 to £400 and are not too difficult to find. The later Bronze Age in Iran saw a profusion of bronze items and I hope to devote the whole of my next article to these very collectable objects.

The religious beliefs of ancient people is fascinating to us today, but not a lot is known of the early period. Remains of temples have been found, simple affairs of mud brick with altars which suggest offerings or sacrifices. These sites sometimes turn up hoards of clay figurines, often purposely broken as if for ritual reasons. Female figures certainly predominate and these are assumed to be of fertility type. The enchanting seated ladies



A pottery bowl from Jericho with basket weave pattern, c3000BC. c£200.



A painted dish from Palestine, c2000BC. £200.

with broad hips and over large bosoms found at Tell Halaf are obvious fertility icons. These figures come in all sizes from an inch or so to six inches or more in height. They are usually repaired or restored to some degree and a little lady can be bought for £150 whilst £700 can buy a veritable giantess. Figurines of Astarte, a powerful goddess in the region are also fairly common. A particular type from Syria has bird like features and is frequently available from £100 to £300 depending on condition and size. Terracotta and bronze figures of male deities and animals are popular and range in price from around £100 for small animals to upwards of £1,000 for good sized bronze pieces.

A system of writing developed around the same time in Mesopotamia and in Egypt. The Egyptians adopted the familiar hieroglyphic form whilst a system we know as cuneiform began to be used in the Near East. It was simply made using a bone or wood nib pressed into soft clay which was later dried in the sun or perhaps baked in an oven if deemed important enough. Many thousands of clay tablets still exist today, a great many of them recording business deals and tax collecting matters. These tablets are quite widely available to collectors. Well preserved examples with clear and interesting texts can cost between £300 and £600 but tablets with some damage, of which there are many, can be had for less than £100 each. A particular form of clay cone with cuneiform text appeared in Sumeria around 2000BC. These record the construction of buildings by various rulers and were placed within the walls much as we use foundation stones today. We describe them as foundation cones. Examples around six or seven inches in length can be bought for around £300, perhaps a little more if the ruler is of special interest such as Nebuchadnezzar of biblical fame.

Along with writing and the growth of an ever more complex society there grew the need for some form of sealing to provide security or affirm ownership. During the third millennium stamp seals and later cylinder seals made an appearance. Usually carved in stone or occasionally glass or bone these small objects provide a wealth of information about the lives of the peoples who used them. We find details of cloth making and pottery and even food production along with the usual self important propaganda from various kings and governors. Seals are very popular with collectors as they are widely available and relatively inexpensive. Simple stamp seals can be found for around £40 or £50 whilst cylinders are a little more money at £100 or so, more if the subject is of particular interest or if the seal itself is of a good stone with some artistic merit. Jewellery was worn throughout the region and is often found. Necklaces were obviously popular as quantities of beads of glass, faience or polished stone turns up, many being familiar Egyptian types imported through trade or war-like expeditions. Bronze bangles of open type with animal head terminals from Assyrian times are attractive and can be bought for around £100. Similar bangles in silver are also seen at around double the price of bronze.

Early core-made glass from the Lebanon or imported from Alexandria is very distinctive but was always a luxury product and nowadays is scarce and expensive. Prices can easily go up to £1,500 or more for a fine example but if you can live with minor knocks and small repairs you may pick up something quite collectable for less than £500. During the long period from the early settlements in Anatolia up to the start of the long lasting Byzantine empire a huge quantity of artefacts were produced and a great many still survive for today's collectors to enjoy.



*A terracotta 'Astarte' figure, c1500BC. £195.*



*A terracotta figurine of a fertility goddess, Tell Halaf, c5000BC. Repaired. £295.*



*A core-made glass alabastron, probably from Lebanon, c2nd-1st century BC. Some surface wear. £495.*



*A stucco figure of the Buddha, Gandhara, c3rd century AD. £295.*



*A beaten silver roundal depicting a seated female, Bactrian c2nd-1st century BC. £295.*

In September the series continues with *Ancient Iranian Bronzes*.



*A tablet about a delivery of wool for temple use, c2000BC. £295.*



*A clay tablet listing quantities of barley etc, c2000BC. £295.*



*A clay foundation cone of Dagan, Sumerian c1950BC. £395.*



*A pair of hollow mould made figurines, Phoenician, c1200BC. Approx £250 each.*



*A flat-backed terracotta figure of a female deity, second millennium BC. £165.*