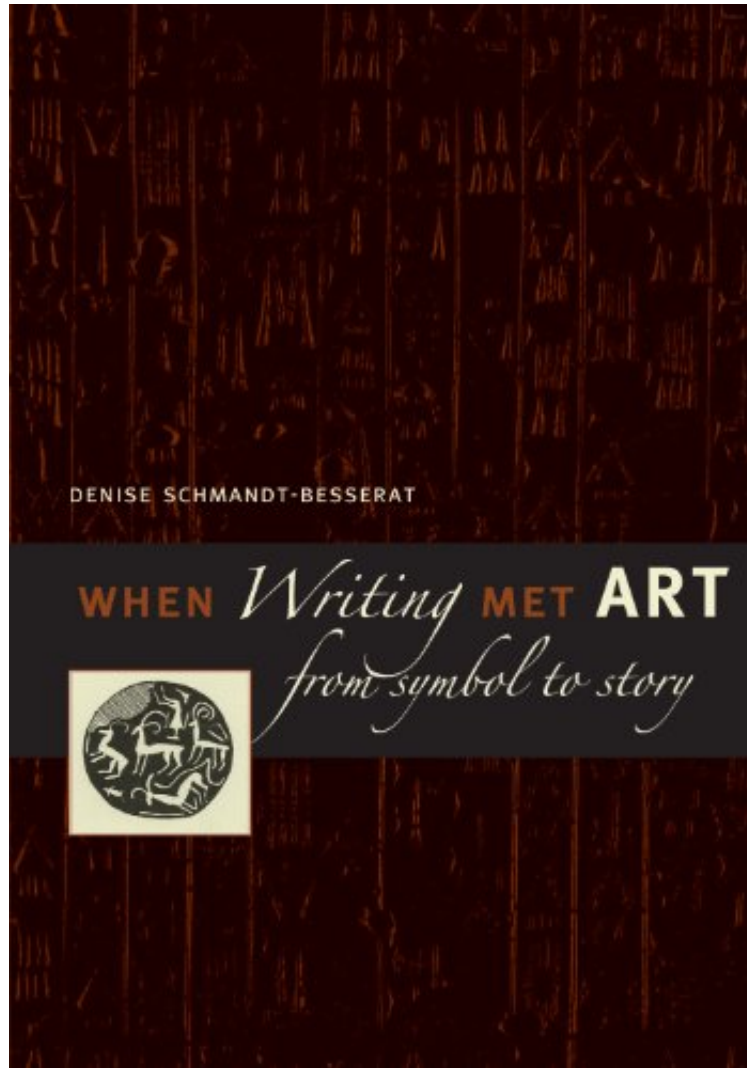


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When Writing Met Art: From Symbol to Story

Denise Schmandt-Besserat

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Denise Schmandt-Besserat : When Writing Met Art: From Symbol to Story before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised When Writing Met Art: From Symbol to Story:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Art was the vehicle that turned accounting into poetryBy Janet ChennaultInteresting for the amateur but detailed enough for the critical thinker, Bessarat tells the story of how the need to ensure the persistence of your name, and therefore soul, provided a transition from words recording economic transactions to words being a means of expression.7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. How Writing Interacted with Early ArtBy Robert LeblingThe author of this book is internationally recognized as the discoverer of the origin of writing. Her research found that farmers in Mesopotamia almost ten thousand years ago developed a token system to keep track of sheep and other livestock, and this form of early accounting evolved into cuneiform

writing. Schmandt-Besserat has now taken on early art, or visual imagery, and its interaction with writing. She argues that historically this was a two-way process. The first major interaction was in about 3500 BC, when writing caused fundamental changes in Near Eastern art - specifically in the way designs were organized. Examining pottery imagery, wall paintings, seals and stone reliefs, she shows how writing techniques were applied to Mesopotamian art, rendering it linear and creating a sequential story. As she says, "By borrowing strategies of writing, art increased its capacity to communicate information and thus became narrative." The second period of interaction occurred in about 2700-2600 BC. Schmandt-Besserat cites three well-known art objects - the gold bowl of Meskalamdug, the statue of Nani and the stele of Hammurabi - to show how three individuals placed their written names on artistic creations to assure their own immortality. This new interaction of text and art was a fresh rendition of an ancient tradition: the ritual uttering of one's name to the gods, which was required to assure one's survival in the underworld. The author sets forth her argument persuasively and concisely in little more than 100 pages, well illustrated with the artwork and texts. Schmandt-Besserat's findings matter to us today because, as she puts it, the West is heir to the ancient Mesopotamian tradition, and the interface of writing and art that she describes still resonates in how we communicate today.

Denise Schmandt-Besserat opened a major new chapter in the history of literacy when she demonstrated that the cuneiform script invented in the ancient Near East in the late fourth millennium BC - the world's oldest known system of writing - derived from an archaic counting device. Her discovery, which she published in *Before Writing: From Counting to Cuneiform and How Writing Came About*, was widely reported in professional journals and the popular press. In 1999, *American Scientist* chose *How Writing Came About* as one of the "100 or so Books that shaped a Century of Science." In *When Writing Met Art*, Schmandt-Besserat expands her history of writing into the visual realm of communication. Using examples of ancient Near Eastern writing and masterpieces of art, she shows that between 3500 and 3000 BC the conventions of writing - everything from its linear organization to its semantic use of the form, size, order, and placement of signs - spread to the making of art, resulting in artworks that presented complex visual narratives in place of the repetitive motifs found on preliterate art objects. Schmandt-Besserat then demonstrates art's reciprocal impact on the development of writing. She shows how, beginning in 2700-2600 BC, the inclusion of inscriptions on funerary and votive art objects emancipated writing from its original accounting function. To fulfill its new role, writing evolved to replicate speech; this in turn made it possible to compile, organize, and synthesize unlimited amounts of information; and to preserve and disseminate information across time and space. Schmandt-Besserat's pioneering investigation of the interface between writing and art documents a key turning point in human history, when two of our most fundamental information media reciprocally multiplied their capacities to communicate. When writing met art, literate civilization was born.

About the Author DENISE SCHMANDT-BESSERAT is Professor Emerita of Art and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work on the origins of writing has been covered by *Scientific American*, *Time*, *Life*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, among other publications. She has also appeared on television programs such as *Out of the Past* (Discovery Channel), *Discover* (Disney Channel), *The Nature of Things* (CBC), *Search for Solutions* (PBS), and *Tell the Truth* (NBC).