

February 2019

An Alternative View on the Roll-Brimmed Hat

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Recommended Citation

King, Lauren (2019) "An Alternative View on the Roll-Brimmed Hat," SMU Journal of Undergraduate Research: Vol. 4, Article 8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25172/jour.4.1.8>

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Cover Page Footnote

2018 Larrie and Bobbi Weil Undergraduate Research Award

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ABSTRACT

Why does Gudea wear the roll-brimmed hat? Neo-Sumerian period statues of Gudea, king of Lagash (c. 2100 BCE), were primarily designed to convey the leader's piety before the gods. The traditional interpretation of the roll-brimmed hat suggests that this garment added to Gudea's pious affect, serving as a humbler alternative to the divine horned-headdress worn by Naram-Sin, the last king of the previous Akkadian period. While acknowledging the less overtly ambitious quality of the roll-brimmed hat, I nevertheless argue that other potential meanings of this headgear have been overlooked. In particular, I take a materiality and haptic approach to propose that Gudea's hat suggests that he may have learned from, and improved upon, the grand claims of Naram-Sin. Both the Stele of Naram-Sin and the statues of Gudea share the portrayal of a strong and supple right arm, which Irene Winter has interpreted as making both leaders appear sexually alluring and "well-formed". This paper will argue that the roll-brimmed hat had a similar effect. Exploration of earlier depictions of the roll-brimmed hat from Uruk period artworks and on rock reliefs in the Zagros mountains will demonstrate that this headgear had a history of association with the "well-formed" bodies of powerful rulers. However, those earlier depictions render the hat as a smooth surface. Thus, Gudea's choice to emphasize his headgear's woolly quality was deliberate. It not only gave a humble effect to the garment but also, I will propose, offered a distinct kind of allure. The pattern of the curling sheep's wool on the hat encouraged haptic appreciation, disrupting the smooth materiality for which diorite was usually prized and creating the illusion of a soft, plush texture which contrasted with the rest of Gudea's relatively undecorated garments. More than simply humble, I propose that this headgear was a deliberate artistic strategy designed to make Gudea powerfully attractive to both his people and his gods.

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