

Aesthetic

The 'Ancient Near East' is a term coined by modern archaeologists, typically used to discuss cultures that were situated around modern-day Syria, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon, sometimes creeping towards Turkey and Egypt. These cultures generally span between the 4th millennium BC, until around the 7th century AD. This is around the time of both the Bronze and Iron Ages of the area. With such a rich history- spanning many millennia- it is very clear that many examples of artistic depictions have been excavated and dated to these civilisations. Modern anthropologists use a variety of anthropological approaches to discuss, interpret and examine these finds. These approaches include symbolic communication (the messages the art represents), enchantment (the art being used to emphasise a social order) and agency (art being used as a "function of relational context" (Gell, 1998 p.11)). These approaches can be used in unison or on their own, and help interpreters gather an idea on the art's purpose, construction method and prominence within it's society. Simply put, most objects or artefacts have some artistic properties in one way or another, and therefore these anthropological approaches are used very often. Although, in some cases, the attempted use of these approaches can hinder archaeologists in their interpreting techniques, generally these approaches have helped to gain an insight into how a society was structured. However, there is another- arguably more simple- anthropological approach that modern scholars use to interpret ancient art; the aesthetic approach.

Firstly, in order to even begin to interpret art in an effective and efficient way, we must first answer the question as to what exactly is art? And what objects count as art? From my own knowledge, without any prior research, I would define art as follows: "subjective; whatever the on-looker wants it to be. Art is not just one thing, merely it is a combination of everything put together in context to produce a piece, object or inscription that provides the work with a history, even if this is not initially apparent to the viewer". Although I would personally argue that this definition is correct, art is more than this small definition. Karen Sonik defines art as something that is "simply in order to be looked at....with an absorbed, exclusive, & disinterested attention" (Sonik, 2022 p.531). Despite the fact that this definition of art is shorter and more concise than my own, I do believe that Sonik has perfectly summarised exactly what art entails, and therefore this definition is along the same lines as one I will be basing the rest of this discussion paper on. Similarly, when discussing the effects of a culture having depictions of art within it's history, Robert Layton argues that "Any community which possesses a tradition of artistic expression has more than a little sophistication in its culture" (Layton, 1991 p.3). From this definition, it is clear that the general agreement from modern archaeologists is that the occurrence or presence of art in a civilisation sets the culture in history- the art is used as a way to remember ancient ideals that may have been forgotten through time. In other words, as long as the art exists and stays undamaged, the civilisation's narrative continues. Although I cannot say whether this definition is 100% correct or not, as art is very subjective and is viewed differently from person to person, I

do believe that a combination of the three definitions provided does very well in encapsulating what art means, and provides a strong definition of 'art' for me to base this paper off of.

Now that I have defined art as best as I can, I believe that the next requirement of this paper before I carry on with any interpretation would be to answer the question as to what is aesthetic? And what exactly is an aesthetic approach? One of the most used definitions websites online (dictionary.com) defines aesthetic in 3 parts: "relating to the philosophy of aesthetics; concerned with notions such as the beautiful and the ugly", "relating to the science of aesthetics; concerned with the study of the mind and emotions in relation to the sense of beauty", or simply "having a sense of the beautiful; characterized by a love of beauty" (dictionary.com, 2022). Although these may seem like completely helpful definitions at first, I would argue that these leave myself with more questions than I began with. For example, the words 'beauty/beautiful' and 'ugly' are mentioned in determining whether an object or piece is aesthetically pleasing or not. However, these are very controversial terms themselves. What makes an object beautiful? And simultaneously what makes a piece of artwork ugly? Due to the lack of definitive words provided for these definitions, I would also argue that the term 'aesthetic' is just as subjective as 'art'. What one archaeologist may seem ugly and not pay much attention to, could be their co-worker's favourite piece. I myself saw this when sitting in lectures discussing ancient near eastern objects. With each new object shown, there would be one member of the class who was fascinated by the object's details, whereas there would also be one member who did not care for the object. Similarly, this is a difficulty that both anthropologists and archaeologists face every day. Due to these difficulties, I again struggled to find a strong definition for aesthetics. However, Louise Steel- my lecturer- defines aesthetics as "The science of sensuous perception- the perception of the beautiful", later adding how "Art is produced with the intention that it is aesthetically pleasing & does not need to be functional" (Steel, 2022). Although the term 'beautiful' has been used in this definition, I believe that the context in which it is used within plays a key role here. As opposed to saying that a piece has a "*sense*" of beautiful, this definitions discusses how a piece may have the "*perception*" of being beautiful, clearly remembering that beauty is subjective and how a piece only needs to be perceived as beautiful to one small group of people to be determined as 'aesthetically pleasing'. This in turn ties in to the aesthetic anthropological approach to artefacts.

As previously mentioned, the key point that needs to be remembered when interpreting objects as aesthetic is the fact that aesthetic beauty is subjective. This is not something that is only apparent in the ancient world. In the modern, western world many groups of people have differing viewpoints on what an object requires to be 'aesthetic', and this has changed dramatically in recent years. During the Renaissance Period in Europe, artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Michaelangelo created their own masterpieces, most



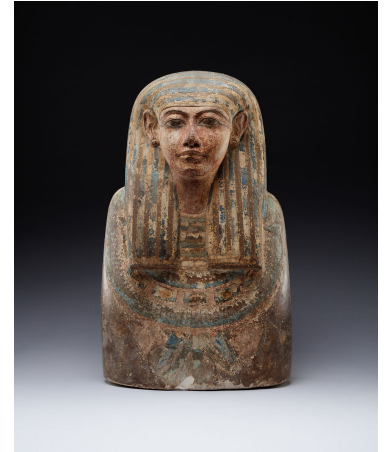
famously the Mona Lisa and the statue of David (above, right) respectively. These are amazing pieces of art, featuring incredibly intricate detail that will be remembered for a long time. The statue of David has recently been referred to as the “World’s Greatest Sculpture” (academia.org, 2022). These were revolutionary for the time, as the tools available to each artist were not as varied as they are today, and yet such a clear image was created. However, statues in more recent years look completely unlike Michaelangelo’s David. Although the tools necessary to create identical sculptures are readily available, more sculptures following a trend of both modernism and postmodernism are being constructed. Amedeo Modigliani’s *Head of a Woman* (right) dates to around 300 years after the creation of Michaelangelo’s David, yet is clearly more abstract and not as realistic as it’s counterpart. Interestingly,



I would argue that this woman’s head is more similar to the ancient art I will discuss later on, as opposed to the renaissance ideal of art. Although the wider population would argue that Michaelangelo’s David is more aesthetically pleasing, due to the details such as veins and tendons being included, I would personally disagree. I would argue that the statue of David is obviously more famous, and therefore would attract more visitors to see the statue in person. However, I would also argue that the *Head of a Woman* is more eye-catching, and therefore aesthetically pleasing in it’s own right. It is not a debate of which statue is more ‘beautiful’ or ‘pleasing to the eye’, moreover an insight into the differing ideas that great artists have. I am led to believe that the statue of David is famous not for it’s beauty, but rather the craftsmanship of the time, and how realistic the statue is. Overall, in discussion with modern aesthetic, I believe that we as a civilisation have surpassed the heavy requirements for art to be realistic and stereotypically ‘beautiful’ to be accepted, and are now creating many works of art to differing realism scales, as if almost full circle to how art was perceived in the ancient world.

As can be seen above, the approach of aesthetic art can be a heavy task. Many scholars have produced multiple pieces of work in an attempt to interpret the ancient world through the lens of aestheticism. For example, Karen Sonik’s 2022 chapter entitled “The Distant Eye and the Ekphrastic Image: Thinking Through Aesthetics and Art for the Senses” attempts to examine the senses, primarily by using how they are entangled with aesthetics and art within their use. One major issue that Sonik brings up regarding modern aestheticism is how it is 2D. Statues such as those previously mentioned above were not necessarily created just to be looked at, yet that is all that can be achieved by the public today, and the only way in which you or I could ever interact with Michaelangelo’s David is through sight. However, this may not have been how they were initially intended to be. The feel of the material used in these statues could be coarse or rough, allowing us to gain an insight into how they were constructed. The sound made when tapping on an object greatly increases the connection between the person and the object, and the problem with museums is that this interaction is mostly taken away and, although I am fully aware of why

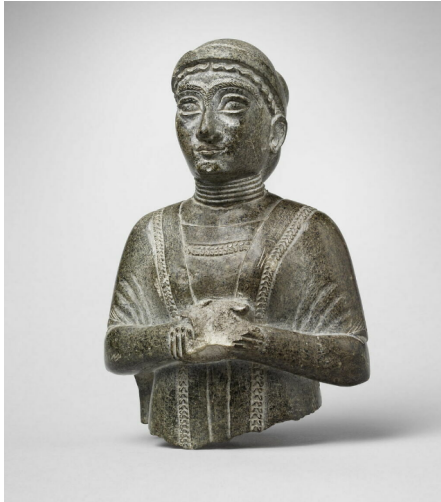
museums have these safety precautions in, I do still believe that there is much that the public misses when attempting to interact with an object. All of these senses combined could add or subtract from the level of aestheticism that an object has, yet the chance to explore these interactions has mostly been removed. This most likely was not the case in the ancient world, as art was such a prominent aspect of life. Egyptian ancestor busts were small statues that were placed on shrines in the homes of the people, where they worshiped their deceased ancestors. An example of one of these busts can be seen on the right, and archaeologists generally agree that these would have been interacted with by using more than just the sense of sight. These objects would have been handled, cradled or patted rather regularly, and it is very difficult for an object such as these to seem three dimensional to the general public when they are displayed in a glass case, or even on a website. However, it is also rather apparent that there are many anthropologists who try to differ their work from the aesthetic approach. For example, Robert Layton has produced many journals and books discussing anthropological approaches to art. *The Anthropology of Art* and *Art and Agency: A Reassessment* are two of the most recognised books that Layton has published on the topic. However, in both texts, Layton does not shy away from discussing the problems of using the aesthetic appreciation across cultures, and ensures to avoid using aesthetic or visual communication within his interpretations. Although I will not be discussing the issues brought forward in full detail, it is clear that the fact that he ensures to avoid such topics would clearly suggest to scholars, including myself, that there are many issues that need to be addressed when using this anthropological approach. I will attempt to discuss some of these issues later on in this paper.



Now that a rather detailed background of the aesthetic approach in terms of both modern and contemporary ideologies have been discussed, I will now attempt to provide an insight into the general aesthetic trends of the Ancient Near East. From my own research, I have found that the general ‘trend’ for figurine appearance was vastly different across the area that is known as the ‘Ancient Near East’. To begin, I will look at figurines or artistic depictions that I would describe as realistic, bordering on hyper-realism. The first of these depictions are the frescoes found at Akrotiri, a small village that belonged to the Cycladic Island which is known as modern-day Santorini.

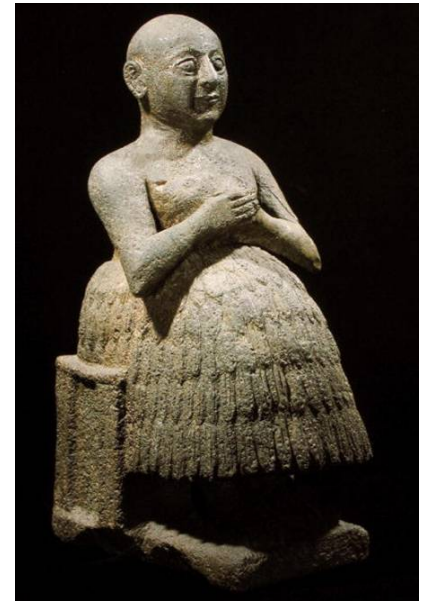


This is an island just off the coast of Greece. Although many frescos were discovered, the one in particular that I will look at is known as the Saffron Gatherers (right). Dating to around the 16th century BC, it is clear from the image that the fresco depicts a clear Cycladic woman of the time, with elegant clothes on and a specific attention to detail being made on the hair. Using modern interpretations, I would definitely describe this piece of artwork as ‘aesthetically pleasing’, although the issues regarding this interpretation will be provided later on. Although slightly



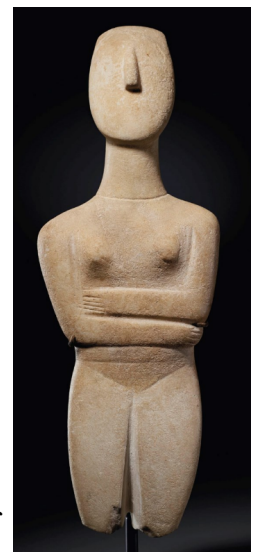
earlier than the Saffron Gatherers fresco, I have come across a statue that I would argue has only a slightly less level of realism. This is the Woman with a Shawl statue, found at Girsu- modern day Telloh in Iraq (Left). Dating to around 2120 BC, this statue is one of the most intricate I have ever seen for this specific area and time period. When I was first shown this object in class, my fellow classmates and I were taken aback with the sheer sight of the art piece. The material used definitely increases the ‘beauty’ of the object, and it is very apparent that the creator was of utmost talent. Again, even by using

modern-interpretations I would argue that this statue is aesthetically pleasing. The final statue that I have found that has elements of realism within it is not so dissimilar from the Girsu shawl woman. This is the seated statue of Dudu, a scribe from Mesopotamia. This statue can be seen on the right, and I would argue that it features the same level of realism as the woman with a shawl. This seated statue was found in Mesopotamia, and dates to around 2400 BC, much closer to the woman with a shawl. Although the material difference is drastic, which I would argue makes the statue of Dudu seem less intricate, a clear comparison between the two can be made. Although they are not as realistic as the Saffron Gatherers, I would argue that the personality of the person being depicted can be gathered merely by looking at these figurines.



Unlike the above ‘realistic’ statues and depictions, I have also come across many ancient artistic depictions that are more ‘basic’ when observing from a modern perspective, yet that does not mean that these objects are any less aesthetic in their own right. The first of these ‘unrealistic’ statues is one found at Khirokitia, Cyprus. This object can be seen on the left, and is the earliest artistic object that I will look at in this paper, dating to between the 7th and 4th millennium BC. Upon first glance, it is very clear that this statue is much less detailed than the previous mentioned. Although this could simply be due to the extreme age difference between the artefacts, I would personally disagree. This is because I am more inclined

to believe that the previous statues would have been made in more important circumstances, and the Khirokitia statue may have been more general in terms of



why it was created. Another common form of ancient art that I would consider somewhat similar to the Khirokitia statue would be those known as the Cycladic Folded Arms Figurines (one of these figurines being shown on the above, right). Although it is without question that the cycladic figure features more detailing on the person, such as differentiating the arms and having breasts, both figures are still a long way from being fully realistic. However, these folded arm figurines date to around the 3rd-2nd millennium BC, making them



considerably younger than their Khirokitia counterparts. Due to this difference in age, I would argue that the more detailed approach could have come down to an influx of proper tools, or maybe simply the evolution of an idea. Nonetheless, I would still argue that the folded arm figurine is quite aesthetically pleasing. The final example of Ancient Near-Eastern art that I will be discussing is the group of figurines known simply as the Tell Asmar Hoard. Featuring 12 clay figurines that date to around 2900BC (although only 8 have been photographed in the image above), a clear trend can be seen across the figurines. Beady eyes, crossed arms and the lack of much other detail would clearly suggest that the eyes and arms held significance in one way or another. However, I would argue that the most interesting feature is indeed the eyes. In most figurines I have looked at across my studies of the near East, almost all have only featured small eyes, or none at all. Due to the Tell Asmar Hoard being an anomaly in this case, I am pointed to believe that the eyes suggest that the figurines depict gods- who watch over the public and ‘see all’, although that is my own interpretation and not based on any fact. Nonetheless, again it is clear that this collection of figurines is also aesthetically pleasing in some aspects, as the beady eyes definitely catch the eye of a viewer.

Overall, as can be seen from the information provided above, I would definitively argue that the anthropological approach of aesthetics could be incredibly used to interpret ancient art from the near East. However, there are some issues that I have noted along the way, and would like to touch upon. Firstly, the main issue I have uncovered is that there needs to be extra caution surrounding the implication or application of modern-day ideas of aestheticism. For example, as I mentioned earlier on in this paper, many modern-scholars would see a figure such as that at Khirokitia and would argue how it is unimpressive, basic and lacks beauty. However, those interpretations only focus on the visual aspect, and do not take into account the context the figurine was made in, the purpose the figurine had and also how it would have been interacted with in a contemporary situation. Personally, I feel that these all need to be taken into

consideration before judging an artistic piece on how aesthetic it is. Another issue which I found myself acting on at some points is suggesting that realism and aestheticism are synonymous with one another. Although this can be the case, it is not a rule that is set in stone. I found myself describing objects as less aesthetic or beautiful because they are not as realistic as other figurines, which is something I should not base my interpretations on- each object is unique, and should solely be judged on it's own contextual history. In conclusion, if these issues are taken into consideration and an attempt to avoid them is made, then I do feel that the approach of aesthetics can greatly help both archaeologists and anthropologists in interpreting any piece of art from any time period across the globe.

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