

Title: Exploring the aesthetic of Red Polished figurative art: the beautifully made...made beautiful

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Exploring the aesthetic of Red Polished figurative art: the beautifully made...made beautiful

Louise Steel

Abstract

There is a rich body of three-dimensional art from Prehistoric Bronze Age Cyprus made in the Red Polished ware. This paper focuses on the Early Cypriot figured bowls from Bellapais *Vounoi*; it draws upon previous discussions of the materiality of the Red Polished corpus, and how these objects were entangled within human-object relations, with the aim to shed light on how human encounters with these objects created new social and material worlds in the Prehistoric Bronze Age. The primary focus is a consideration of the ancient aesthetic, questioning why modern scholarship has tended to move away from viewing ancient modelled worlds as 'art'. In part this draws upon Gell's notion of enchantment, which recognises that art objects are 'beautifully made or made beautiful' (Gell 1992: 43). It invites us to consider that rather than attempting to infer meaning from such material we should bear in mind Bloch's cautionary tale of Malagasy carvings; these did not 'mean' anything, but simply 'made the wood beautiful' (Bloch 2005: 41). Are we reading too much into our interpretations – might the Red Polished figurative corpus simply represent beautiful objects made for pleasure, commissioned and enjoyed by an individual and buried with them as a favourite or valued possession?

Introduction

This paper examines the rich and lively ceramic tradition that developed on the north coast of Cyprus, focusing on a small group of elaborate, apparently ceremonial vases with modelled figurative decoration found at the site of Bellapais *Vounoi*,¹ in the Early Cypriot (EC) period (**Table 1**). Specifically, it interrogates archaeological interpretations of ancient art, which typically attempt to infer meaning encoded in objects and are embedded in semiotic approaches to the material world (see Layton 1991: 99–103; Haaland & Haaland 1996; Steel 2013b; Jones & Cochrane 2018: 9–10, 117–18). More recently scholars have drawn upon Gell's (1998) seminal work on art and agency (see also Campbell 2001; Chua & Elliott 2015; Jones & Cochrane 2018: 11, 20–21), focusing on how art objects mediate social relations (see for example Webb 2016; Govier 2017). This paper however, questions why modern scholarship tends not to consider ancient (and in particular prehistoric) art as art – that is to say, why do we largely ignore the aesthetic aspect, the notion that ancient craftsmen (artists?) were making something beautiful to be appreciated for its visual or tactile qualities – and instead explores the production of art as being embedded in culturally defined notions of aesthetics.

Aesthetics

To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world
of meanings.

(Sontag 1967: 7)

Rather than trying to identify meaning embedded in the EC figurative pottery from the north coast of Cyprus in this paper, we will explore the creation and consumption of such material within an understanding of an aesthetic crafting tradition relative to the community at

Bellapais *Vounoi*. Aesthetics, from the ancient Greek, means perception by the senses, '[t]he science of sensuous perception...or the perception of the beautiful' (Layton 1991: 12). Thinking about the aesthetics of ancient art is potentially problematic. Aesthetic values are culturally contingent and we should be wary of applying our own aesthetic values and judgement of ancient objects in an attempt to categorise them as 'art'; instead, we should attempt to situate our analysis of a potential art object within its own cultural context (Layton 1991; Campbell 2001; Bloch 2005), and be aware that what might be categorised as art, or even simply something beautiful, might include the utilitarian (see below). A classic ethnographic example which helps bring into clear focus such an emphasis on the visual and sensual appeal of craft production in a domestic context is Bloch's 'cautionary tale of the attempts at interpretation' (2005: 39) of Malagasy wooden house carvings. These carvings resisted Bloch's attempts to infer meaning; they did not *signify* or *communicate* anything, nor were they intended to *represent* the world. Instead, his informants noted that the decoration simply 'made the wood beautiful' (Bloch 2005: 41) and this beauty was an extension of the making and being, indeed the very materiality of the wood. While he draws attention to the aesthetic appreciation of decoration, Bloch also emphasises the importance of cultural context; namely, to understand the significance of the beautification of an object we need to understand (or at least to investigate) how it is/was culturally constituted (see also Campbell 2001: 118).

Karen Sonik (2021: 530–531, 534–535) draws attention to the western construction of aesthetics in the 18th and 19th century, centred around the contemplation of fine art that was made specifically to be viewed at a distance. Like Howes (2006: 162, 164), she problematises the western privileging of sight as the highest, most noble of the senses. Essentially, sight is viewed as being more intellectual and disembodied, whereas the other senses are more corporeal and centred around embodied engagement with the material world. Sonik also makes a distinction between *viewing*, rather than *seeing* the art object, the latter which involves a richer reciprocal interaction between the art and the observer (Sonik 2021: 532). Of particular note is the focus on non-utilitarian, decorative elite objects that are placed in glass cases in museums and galleries (see also Howes 2006: 168) and removed from all sensory engagement excepting the remote gaze. This deliberate, disembodied staging of an object behind a glass barrier effectively removes it from its cultural context of consumption and isolates it 'from its [own] world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus transforms it into an art object *like our own*' (Alpers 1991: 27, my emphasis). Inevitably, the 'museum effect' (Alpers 1991: 27) objectifies 'art' – it becomes remote and is no longer something with which to physically and sensually interact. Furthermore, while western consumption of art privileges the final product, the thing made to be displayed and viewed (Sonik 2021: 531), Ingold (1993: 161) draws our attention to the significance attached by many non-Western societies to the innate performativity (and we might also extrapolate the sensory experiences) involved in the actual creation of an art work. The act of creating a painting, pot or sculpture for example, might be considered more important than the end product itself. People are concerned with the ways in which art moves through their lives – how it is created/performed and by whom, who owns or possesses it and how it is used (Geertz 1983: 97). Morphy (2006: 303) suggests 'it is precisely the potential of objects to be aesthetically or expressively productive beyond the control of their creator that makes them into works of art'.

We should consider the possibility that art is produced simply with the intention that it is pleasing, both to make and for the final appeal of the object. For example, miniature human

figures formed from left over clay by the women potters of the Bosman, New Guinea ‘were made purely for pleasure, and kept in the house to look at’ (Layton 1991: 13). Moreover, it does not need to be functional. Even so, the example of the Malagasy wooden house carvings (see above) demonstrates that making things beautiful can, and does, also extend to the everyday object and that aesthetic appeal might be intentionally embedded in daily household items. Certainly, ethnographic studies, such as Firth’s (2006) investigation of wooden headrests from Tikopia in the southwest Pacific reveal how more modest and practical objects have aesthetic value. We can extrapolate this to the prehistoric Cypriot context; the decorative terracotta spindle whorls, for example – crafted in the Red Polished tradition (**Fig. 1**) and decorated with asymmetric incised geometric and circular designs filled with added white chalk paste (Crewe 1998: 46–49) – illustrate the potential vibrancy of the mundane (cf. Bennett 2010) and thus how the quotidian material world might become animated. Indeed, beauty might be recognised in the perfect functional ability of an object, the simplicity and elegance in its design, as exemplified by 20th century Scandinavian design (Fallan 2012). There is additionally a scale of judgment involved in aesthetics: a standard to be achieved or specific characteristics that need to be created. Some artists are inevitably better than others, and so, by implication, are some artworks.

<Figure 1 about here>

Thinking more holistically about aesthetics as a sensual, embodied response to art, inevitably draws us not only to the visual, but equally the auditory, olfactory and tactile senses. Certainly, multiple ethnographies that have attended to the interplay of the senses highlight how different societies have their own sensorial hierarchy, linked to their construction of the social order, and might well prioritise touch, taste, smell or hearing over sight (Howes 2006: 164). Multisensoriality is embedded within the materiality of human existence and informs how people engage with and construct their material worlds – the things people make and use are an extension of their somatic sensory experiences (Howes 2006: 161–166). The gifts crafted from shell that circulate in the kula ring, for example, have sonic, visual and kinetic properties that are intrinsically related to the Massim hierarchy of sensing and construction of self-identity (Howes 2006: 165). This draws us inexorably to the materiality of art and the properties of the material(s) from which it is crafted. The materiality of the hardwood is key to the beauty of the Malagasy house carvings; these not only honoured the hardness of heartwood but were also viewed as an essential element of the material, an extension of the making and being of the wood (Bloch 2005: 43–44). Focusing on the sensorial and material core of aesthetics encourages us to think about the affect of ancient art – the sensory and emotional responses, indeed the pleasure, evoked by viewing, handling, listening to, participating in (for example song/dance), and perhaps even the physical creation of the art object. All the senses might be intimately entangled in the aesthetic appreciation of an art object.

Aesthetics, therefore encompass the affect of an art object, how people experience, feel, appreciate and respond to it (Campbell 2001: 118; Morphy 2006). How people learn to recognise and appreciate beauty is culturally situated and the artisan-craftsman-artist will draw upon a set of conventional devices (signs, techniques, iconographies, colour schemes etc.), effectively an artistic vocabulary or tradition that is meaningful within the wider social context (Campbell 2001: 118; Bennett 2006: 514; Morphy 2006: 302). The essential qualities of aesthetics are formal organisation, balanced composition, and perceptions of harmony, rhythm and proportion, but equally perhaps, the careful use of asymmetry. Understandings of these qualities will of course be culturally negotiated within a specific aesthetic system: the form of a vase, for example, or its careful surface treatment, colouring and decoration. These qualities we might classify as style or iconography. The artist (craftsman) draws upon a set of

conventional designs, devices and images, to create an artistic tradition, which represents a culturally specific perception and representation of the world. We should also consider that art does not necessarily aim to represent the world; it is frequently performative – the act of creating being as important as the finished object (see discussion above). Equally, it might be a personal, individual emotional response, or simply the wish or need to create something that is pleasing to the senses. For Geertz (1983: 98) the aesthetic appreciation of form is integral to cultural interaction and the reification of social systems. He notes for example, how the Yoruba of west Africa equate the careful execution and clarity of lines carved into their wooden sculptures with their concept of civilisation. Likewise, qualities of brilliance are intrinsic to the aesthetic appeal of the paintings produced by Yolngu artists of northeast Arnhem land, Australia and this is linked to their concept of *bir'yun* (the shimmering quality of light), which endows a painting with ancestral power and beauty (Morphy 2006: 308–314). These culturally defined notions of beauty represent learned experiences which are situated within a system of representation reflecting a community's experiential world. Aesthetics therefore, encompasses a body of ideas related to the beliefs, ideology and values of a cultural group (Bennett 2006: 515) as much as its ideals of beauty. Thinking about the aesthetics of ancient art within a sensory archaeology perspective and taking account of its materiality (both the human object engagement and the properties of things, cf. Ingold 2013: 27) allows us to consider different ways of engaging with ancient art (objects) and thinking about how they might have been embedded in past lifeways.

Cypriot Figurative Pottery in the Early-Middle Bronze Age

The Early-Middle Cypriot (EC-MC) period (**Fig. 2; Table 1**) might be classified as a traditional society, 'ranging from several hundred to several thousand people in size and characterized by relatively uncentralized political systems' (Spielmann 2002: 195). The material world of EC-MC Cyprus was primarily crafted in clay, at least as far as can be documented archaeologically. Indeed, a vibrant ceramic tradition flourished on the island, with many regional traditions. For the most part the pottery was undecorated, or perhaps adorned with incised motifs, such as the distinctive MC I-II ceramic style identified at Deneia, characterised by Red Polished Black-topped bowls decorated with closely executed incised designs, most notably concentric circles (Webb 2009). Some Red Polished pottery had relief decoration, typically linear or geometric motifs (Herscher 1997: 25), but a discrete group of vases, largely from the north coast cemeteries at Bellapais *Vounoi* and Lapithos *Vrysi tou Barba* were adorned with animal and human figures modelled in the round. This figurative tradition first emerged in EC I and persisted into the MC period. Ellen Herscher (1997) has subdivided it into three main groups on chronological and stylistic grounds. The earliest figurative motifs adorned beak-spouted jugs and comprise vertical wavy bands identified as snakes. These jugs, mainly from Bellapais *Vounoi* and Lapithos *Vrysi tou Barba*, first appeared in EC I and survived into the MC period, becoming more stylised over time. Quadrupeds (typically stags), modelled in the round and placed on the shoulder of jugs and amphorae, appeared in EC III-MC I. These tend to be isolated motifs or might be incorporated within a geometric decorative schema (Herscher 1997: 26). There are also relief animal heads (rams and bulls) sometimes combined with the wavy band motif (Herscher 1997: 27). The final chronological group Herscher identified dates to the MC period and comprises large open vessels and jugs embellished with complex figural compositions of humans engaged in a variety of activities (Herscher 1997: 28; see also Morris 1985: 264–288, pl. 290–302, figs, 488–494, 500–501, 505). In fact, the sequence of the Red Polished modelled figurative repertoire is more complex than suggested by Herscher, as has been revealed by Daisy Knox's (2012) detailed study of the material. The earliest modelled animal

head protomes and quadrupeds placed around the rims of large ceremonial bowls first appeared in EC I at Bellapais *Vounoi* (Knox 2012: 129–135; 2013; see also Webb 2016). Modelled birds were first added to bowls in EC III, becoming predominant between EC III–MC I. Scenic models, plank composites, bucranial wall models and anthropomorphic vessels also develop in EC III and are more widely distributed, for example in the centre of the island, in contrast to the apparent emphasis on the north coast in EC I. By the end of the MC I period however, there is an apparent decline in modelled figurative art on the island (Knox 2012: 137, 143, 155–156, map 3).

<Figure 2 and Table 1 about here>

There is therefore, plentiful rich ceramic material to allow us to explore the development of a peculiarly Cypriot aesthetic in the later third millennium BC. Previously, I have explored the Red Polished scenic compositions, including the *Vounous* Bowl, and the plank figures, with the aim of demonstrating how this material encoded social knowledge and communicated messages of social structure, identities and personhood (Steel 2013a: 216–223; 2013b, 2021). Here however, I will be examining a discrete group of Red Polished figurative vessels dating to EC I, specifically to investigate how such objects might be considered from an aesthetic perspective. The focus is a group of 14 large bowls and one basin adorned with modelled animals and animal head protomes placed around the rim and elaborate incised decoration on the body, which were deposited in tombs at Bellapais *Vounoi*, Cemetery A (**Table 2**; Stewart & Stewart 1950: pls. LXXIX–LXXXV, LXXXIX–XCII, XCIX.1; Webb & Frankel 2010: 199–200, figs. 13a–b, 14; Webb and Frankel 2013: 64, fig. 5). These can be divided into three main groups:

- Deep bowls (standing between around 16 and 24cm in height) with multiple modelled animal heads and discs attached to the rim, three of which have a ‘hilt projection’ (**Fig. 3**);
- Tall pedestalled bowls (between around 23 and 53 cm in height), with modelled tulip bowls and animals placed around rim (**Fig. 4**);
- Basin (around 23 cm in height) with three extant miniature bowls on rim, each with pair of animal protomes and a disc attached to the rim (Stewart & Stewart 1950, pl. LXXXIXb).

<Figures 3 and 4 about here>

These vessels, which have been described as ‘visually attractive...[and] emblematic of Early Cypriot art and iconography’ (Knox 2013: 47), stand at the beginning of a long figurative tradition that developed at Bellapais *Vounoi* (henceforth *Vounoi*) in EC I and persisted into EC III–MC I, when there was a significant expansion in the modelled figurative repertoire (see discussion above; Knox 2012: 129–156). They were seemingly made to be placed in tombs rather than for daily use in the settlement; however, although we might assume that their primary function was funerary, they were not part of a standardised set of burial items that were incorporated within formally prescribed elements of mortuary ritual (Knox 2013). The bowls stand out for their careful, specialist crafting, their size and their intricate design and structure, which suggest they were intended to be viewed and perhaps aesthetically appreciated, rather than being practical, functional objects. This is reiterated by the lack of use-wear identified on their surface and their good preservation, most notably the modelled decoration, the potential fragility of which would have been susceptible to breakage if handled repeatedly. Consequently, we might assume that these were not intended to be integrated in practices involving regular and repeated handling but were designed to be a feast for the eyes. Nonetheless, we might consider the potential handling of these vessels by specialist practitioners who had the appropriate esoteric knowledge of how to manipulate

them in ceremonial performance, as has previously been discussed by Jennifer Webb (2016; see discussion below).

Daisy Knox (2013) has completed a detailed analysis of the chronological and spatial distribution of the ceremonial bowls from *Vounoi*, as well as other EC modelled figurative objects, to assess their use and cultural signification. She highlighted the apparent exclusivity of the figurative iconography at *Vounoi* (see also Webb & Frankel 2010: 201) – something to which we will return – but overall noted a lack of significant patterning in their distribution. Knox concluded that these objects were designed to display identities in the mortuary arena. Jennifer Webb and David Frankel’s meticulous examination of funerary practices at *Vounoi* includes a discussion of the ‘exceptional array of elaborate ceramics’ (2010: 199) from Site A. They draw particular attention to the development of a complex animal iconography in the round as well as the pairs of apparent sun discs (cf. Stewart 1962: 293) on the deep bowls and suggest that these objects stand apart from pottery made for daily household use, but instead were produced specifically for funerary and possibly other ceremonies. More recently, Jennifer Webb (2016) has explored the ceremonial pottery used in funerary ritual at *Vounoi* through the lens of performativity and embodied praxis. She examines the bowls under discussion here, together with the distinctive tulip bowls, as an assemblage that came together as part of a deliberate display of personhood and identity; specifically, she investigates the embodied relationship between people and objects and how these items were incorporated within bodily practice and ritual performances at the graveside. She draws particular attention to a pedestalled bowl from Tomb 160A which had two clay pegs in the rim to which detachable animal models might be affixed; a pair of separately modelled animals – boar and stag – intended to be attached to these pegs were found at the base of the vase. This example illustrates how these pedestalled bowls might have been physically manipulated as part of the performative embodied actions involved in the funerary ritual.

Ceremonial Production and Craft Specialists

Complex ritual vases have been identified in one third of the tombs at *Vounoi*. There seems to have been an emphasis on prestige serving vessels, which were associated with animal remains, suggesting that funerary rituals performed with these objects included feasting as a last communion with the dead (Herscher 1997; Webb and Frankel 2010: 197). Clearly the emphasis was on costly funerary ceremony and the production of distinctive and visually appealing objects by specialist potters, which were intended to be used by individuals who had the requisite body knowledge of how to handle and interact with these vases (Webb 2016: 59–60). As such, these vessels embodied the symbolic, cultural and economic capital of the EC community at *Vounoi*. We might suppose that the display and manipulation of these bowls produced a heightened reaction when used in a liminal mortuary space. Skilled crafting effectively provides an interface between the known physical world and supernatural realms (Helms 1993). Certainly, ethnographic analogy illustrates how pottery intended for ritual use would be made by a potter-artist with the necessary technical skills along with the appropriate esoteric knowledge of cosmological designs and their ritual meaning (Appadurai 1986: 42; Spielmann 2002: 199–200). This then might provide the cultural context for the production of the *Vounoi* bowls and illustrate how they were embedded within ritual praxis and emergent belief systems.

These figurative vessels represent a style exclusive to *Vounoi* (Knox 2012, 2013; Webb 2016) and were plausibly the product of a specialist workshop, demonstrating ‘a technically achieved level of excellence’ (Gell 1992: 42). Given their decorative elaboration, as well as the apparent lack of practicality or functionality beyond the visual, we might consider these

to be as art objects certainly within Gell's (1992) definition of technological enchantment. The skills involved in their manufacture were beyond those involved in the production of daily pottery within the household; instead, they were enchanted items intended to captivate and were both 'beautifully made [and] made beautiful' (Gell 1992: 43). The effect produced by this incredible feat of making Gell characterises as captivation: a special type of agency embedded in their making that separates art objects from wider material culture (Campbell 2001: 99–100). Exploring the evidence for these technical skills inevitably reveals an EC aesthetic at *Vounoi*. As a result, and in the spirit of Bloch's cautionary tale, this paper seeks to move interpretation away from the almost impossible task of trying to discern meaning – especially in the absence of informants who might be able to aid our interpretations – but rather to consider the visual and tactile impact of these objects and thus what they might reveal about an ancient aesthetic appreciation and beautification of the clay.

Aesthetics of EC Figurative Pottery

The figurative vessels were large, seemingly impractical and non-utilitarian and were not intended for household consumption. Instead, their *visual* impact seems to be the primary concern; they were deliberately designed to enchant, or captivate. Given the lack of use-wear and the fragile decoration, tactile engagement with these objects would presumably have been limited, perhaps reserved for practitioners with appropriate knowledge of handling these vessels (see above) or otherwise for special events, such as a funerary ritual; nonetheless we should not dismiss the appeal of the smoothed and burnished surface, which appears inviting to the touch. It is worth noting that this haptic engagement was not exclusive to (the specialised use of) these, but rather drew upon the daily physical interaction of people and Red Polished pottery in the household. As noted above, aesthetics are not exclusive to the exotic and the humble daily domestic materials are might equally be made beautiful. The potter-artist evidently made a very careful selection from the Red Polished ceramic repertoire to achieve a certain effect, or aesthetic, drawing upon their skills in working with the clay to create elegant and balanced forms, deliberate use of slips and firing techniques to produce a specific surface finish and applying a range of decorative techniques such as fine incision, geometric designs and modelled figurative designs. These worked together, and indeed still do, to captivate those who used, handled and viewed the pottery.

The potter-artists, drawing upon both their technical expertise in forming pottery as well as their skills modelling figures in the round, worked with the clay to shape balanced vessels. The deep bowls had an even piriform profile with an in-turned rim on which the modelled decoration was balanced, leaning inwards in line with the profile of the bowl, and a narrow disc base. The pedestalled bowls comprised a tall cylindrical (slightly concave) stem supporting a wide hemispherical bowl and the modelled decoration was positioned symmetrically around the rim: the miniature bowls were placed opposite each other as were the animal head protomes. This symmetrical balance was disrupted in the example of bowl 17 from Tomb 160A (Stewart & Stewart 1950: pl. LXXXV) which had three miniature tulip bowls and two modelled quadrupeds spaced evenly around the rim. Care was clearly taken placing the modelled figures – aligning them with the flow of the vessel's profile as well as spacing them regularly – to achieve a particular aesthetic.

The choice of surface colour was a 'primary aspect of [Red Polished] pottery aesthetics and style' (Frankel & Webb 2009: 4; see also Webb and Frankel 2013: 65) and a variety of techniques were used to deliberately create the visually attractive finish of the vessels. The application of a finely prepared iron rich slip to the leather-hard clay vessel, which was then smoothed and burnished prior to firing, resulted in the pottery's characteristic lustrous finish.

This certainly brings to mind Morphy's (2006: 311–313) discussion of the Yolngu *bir'yun*: a shimmering quality of light that engenders an emotional response in the viewer. He describes this as a cross-cultural effect, albeit one that is mediated by very different cultural situations to produce distinctive and unique items. In EC *Vounoi*, the ideal was the deep vivid colour and lustre of the vessels (see Webb and Frankel 2013: figs 3, 5). There were moreover, subtle variations in the surface treatment of the pottery, drawing upon – and drawing attention to – the pyrotechnical skill of the potters. Some vessels had an even reddish surface colour; on others the rim, upper body and interior of the bowl had been fired in reducing conditions, while the lower body was fired bright red (**Fig 5**). This mottled effect accentuated the sinuous form of the vase in what Webb describes as a 'formal and controlled aesthetic' (2016: 60). Certainly, the surface treatment demonstrates considerable control over firing conditions, all the more impressive considering the bowls had to be fired upturned and rested on the delicate modelled decoration in the kiln.

<Figure 5 about here>

There was 'a considerable degree of iconographic complexity' (Webb & Frankel 2010: 202) in EC figurative pottery from *Vounoi*. The focus was on modelled animal imagery with a clear preference for bovines, but other animals (sheep/goat, stags, birds and pigs) are also represented. Their possible meaning has been the subject of discussion, centred around our understanding of EC symbolic and economic capital. Here, however, I propose that we might consider the possibility of these being purely decorative devices, integral to the EC cultural tradition. The choice of representation conforms to Gordon Bennett's discussion (2006) of how cultures represent beauty: the potter-artist drew upon a range of conventional images reflecting the EC world view. The positioning of the figurative imagery was very carefully considered: the high pedestalled bowls were adorned with whole animals or animal heads alternating with miniature tulip bowls. While I do not presuppose there was necessarily any symbolic meaning encoded in these figured designs, the animals appear to reference the economic and cultural capital of the EC community at *Vounoi* while the choice of tulip bowl explicitly alludes to ritual performance within the tombs, which was centred around drinking from specialist vessels designed to be held in two hands and passed around between a select group of participants (Webb 2016: 56). These models were regularly placed around the rim of the pedestalled bowls, with a degree of symmetry and separated by empty space. The deep bowls were decorated with modelled animal heads and pairs of discs decorated with incised decoration (concentric circles or ray motifs), with no space between the individual models. Instead, the modelled devices are closely packed, which clearly shaped haptic engagement with the objects, specifically the ability or otherwise to consume any liquids they might have contained. Interestingly, there is no overlap in the decorative schema of the two vessel types, suggesting a degree of prescription in decorative designs and practice. The basin from Tomb 153 (Stewart & Stewart 1950: pl. LXXXIXb) makes playful reference to the modelled decoration of the deep bowls: around the rim there are four miniature bowls (mimicking the deep open form of the basin) each topped with a pair of animal head protomes and a rectangular projection decorated with incised concentric circles. There is the clear sense that these vessels belong to a common local tradition, perhaps being produced in a single workshop, possibly by the same potter-artist, but equally the idiosyncrasies of figured motifs on each vessel illustrate a degree of liveliness and experimentation in their design and construction.

A range of carefully executed incised geometric linear and circular motifs covered the body of the deep bowls and the body and stem of the pedestalled bowls (**Figs 3, 4**). These included multiple zigzag lines, concentric rectangles, as well as concentric circles, hooked crosses, lozenges composed of diagonal lines and free field dotted motifs. These were very carefully

and precisely applied to cover the surface of the vessel and were filled with white paste. There is no consistent or repeated application of the incised decoration but rather considerable variation and individuality, reflecting the individuality of the modelled designs discussed above. Typically, the motifs were organised in a horizontal arrangement, sometimes in regular bands such as the deep bowl from Tomb 160A (Stewart & Stewart 1950: pl. XXIIIb), but the motifs might also be applied vertically, such as over the bowl and base of the pedestalled bowl from Tomb 111 (**Fig. 4**; Stewart & Stewart 1950: pl. LXXXI). The basin from Tomb 153 had no incised decoration on the body, but the miniature bowls around its rim were covered by multiple short horizontal or slanted incisions arranged in vertical bands. The modelled decoration (quadrupeds, animal heads and bowls) on the other vessels were also adorned with a variety of incised motifs; and the projecting discs were adorned with various motifs that emphasised their circular shape such as concentric and rayed circles (**Figs 3, 5**). This incised embellishment, which stands out for its intricacy and lack of uniformity, is reminiscent of other elaborately decorated Red Polished vessels from the site, in particular the tulip vases (Webb 2016: 56, figs. 8.2, 8.3a) and reflects a culturally constituted stylistic language that appealed to the inhabitants of EC *Vounoi*. To paraphrase Bennett (2006: 516), these motifs illustrate the ‘act of creative perception where the embodiment’ of the EC aesthetic was located. Webb and Frankel (2010: 202–203) have suggested that the imagery of these vessels referenced a developing complex cosmology and understanding of symbolic worlds which centred on horned animals such as cattle but equally on observing the planetary bodies and constellations visible in the night sky. While we might not be able to demonstrate whether these designs held any meaning, this does bring to mind Geertz’s (1983: 98) correlation of aesthetic appreciation and the materialisation of symbolic worlds. Alternatively, we should not discount a simpler and less esoteric notion that the decoration might simply have been added to make the clay beautiful (cf. Bloch 2005: 41). Like the Malagasy carvings discussed by Bloch (2005: 42–43), this aesthetic was embedded not just in the properties of the material but also within the production of objects that were socially meaningful. As Webb and Frankel note (2013: 65) ‘status and aesthetic value appear to have been strongly embedded in material culture... [and] played an important role in the articulation of social categories...individual actions and situated social practice’.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have set out to demonstrate that the Red Polished figurative style from EC *Vounoi* (and possibly by extension other, non-figurative vessels as well) should be considered as an art form made for the aesthetic appreciation of the clay and the captivation of the potter’s skill. These vessels certainly align with Gell’s (1992) concept of technology of enchantment, being technically proficient and also the beautiful, made beautifully. But I would also suggest that there is room to think about these vessels as objects that were made to appeal to an EC visual and tactile aesthetic; they were designed to evoke a specific emotional response in the viewer, one who was able to appreciate them because of their cultural background. Thinking about the aesthetic necessitates a consideration of technological skills, stylistic choices and iconography and inevitably brings the potter-artist into the discussion as much as the consumer or viewer. Ironically, given Gell’s disenchantment with aesthetics, I would argue that taking aesthetics into consideration and thinking about how materials were made beautiful, allows us to reflect upon how these art objects might have been embedded within ancient lifeways; aesthetics give us a glimpse into the values of an ancient community and perhaps also the social relations linking producer and consumer in a web of culturally learned experiences and a shared system of classification and representation.

<Table 2 here>

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Illustrations

Figure 1: Red Polished spindle whorl Met. Acc. No. 74.51.909. Photo © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 2: Map of EC-MC Cyprus. Drawing L. Steel.

Figure 3: Deep bowls from Bellapais *Vounoi*, after Webb 2016: fig. 8.4a.

Figure 4: Pedestalled bowl from Bellapais *Vounoi* Tomb 111, after Webb and Frankel 2010: fig. 13b.

Figure 5: Bowl from Bellapais *Vounoi* Tomb 91. Photo © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Tables

Table 1: Approximates Dates for the Early and Middle Bronze Ages on Cyprus. After Webb 2019: Table 1.

Table 2: Bellapais *Vounoi* Cemetery A: Tombs with Bowls Decorated with Modelled Figures.

Notes

¹ Although known as Bellapais *Vounous* in the archaeological literature since the original publication of the excavations (Stewart & Stewart 1950) the correct site name is *Vounoi* (Βουνοί meaning ‘low hills’). *Vounous* (τους Βουνούς) is the word in the accusative plural case. See Webb 2017.