

The Use of Aesthetics in Understanding Ancient Near Eastern and Aegean Art

Abstract

This paper discusses the understanding and use of aesthetics within western academia, how this has changed across time, and new understandings of aesthetics. Three quite different pieces ancient art from Lagash, Thera, and Elam are then considered, initially focussing on their aesthetics, and then considering how an understanding of ancient aesthetics can help inform alternative anthropological approaches used in the modern world to examine ancient art and society. Some brief conclusions are discussed in the summary.

Towards an understanding of Aesthetics

In his 1935 work “The Development of Sumerian Art” Leonard Wooley bluntly dismissed early Mesopotamian relief sculpture as “deplorable in composition, with excessive ornament that is an outrage to design” (Wooley, quoted in Bahrani, 2014: 26-27). In doing so this provides us with an insight not so much into the art itself, but more into the aesthetic values of mid 20th century academia. Viewed out of original context, far removed both in time and distance from the original culture, as Zainab Bahrani (2014: 8) points out ancient art was (and sometimes still is) perceived in western scholarship as discrete, mediated by a visual appeal to western eyes, and with meanings assessed primarily in terms of religious, political, and cultural symbolism. Though not always the case, the prevailing culture was of museum viewed subjective appreciation of ancient art, with art as objects, categorised as non-utilitarian, viewed and evaluated through western eyes and aesthetics. This is Guyer's “deliberately distant and disembodied form of attention” (Guyer, quoted in Sonik, 2021: 530).

Whilst obviously a simplification, this long-established discourse nonetheless led Alfred Gell (1992: 42-43) to describe western aesthetic appreciation of art as an act of faith, literally “aesthetic awe bordering on the religious”. Gell advocated completely disregarding aesthetic judgements to achieve a less subjective understanding/evaluation of art, in addition to removing the other western preoccupations with social, political, or religious communication (Gell, 1992: 43). Another reassessment is the Cheirotic approach of Bailey (2014: 27-44), emphasising the making, handling and feel of objects, favouring a fuller sensory engagement with smaller, portable, and previously marginalised objects. This is echoed by Karen Sonik (2021, pg:532), who commented on the difference between viewing an object as a finished product as opposed to actually “*seeing it*” (my italics) in the sense of a much fuller physical engagement. And like Bailey, Sonik (2021: 530) also sees the western concept of viewing an object as favouring sight as the most intellectual of the senses. However, academic paradigms are difficult to overturn, for example when Bolton asks (2001: 98-99), whether aesthetics is useful to determine whether an object is a work of art or not, this illustrates the difficulty of abandoning established preconceptions. The idea that art must be identified as an object to be art in the first place, as opposed to for example being a performance of the act of making, does highlight Gell's point.

However, by focussing so exclusively on the production of art within society, we risk ignoring the perceptual effect on the viewer, we lose sight of Bahrani's “clear sense of aestheticizing a work” (Bahrani, 2014: 9). Art can entrance the senses, it is “the perception of the beautiful” (Layton, 1991: 12). Whether an object is functional or not, ancient societies experienced art through their senses as we do, seeing its composition, understanding the narrative, seeing the balance and harmony of composition, proportion, the fineness of the draftsmanship, the detail of the carving, feeling and seeing the materials, the colouration and lustre, experiencing the tactile pleasure of its making.

Together these create a sensory effect, intriguing and asking questions of the recipient's perception and values.

An aesthetic impression is created in many ways, sheer artistic virtuosity, the feel of an object, the colouration, lustre or sheen, the use of exotic or expensive materials. The qualities can apply to purely functional objects, which as outlined by Gell (1998: 74), become more effective because of the added utility (and value) that art can create, how communicative they are. To communicate a message to the recipient more effectively, to enhance the agency of a representation, or to just simply 'look good' (Bloch, 2005: 41) the aesthetics of an object – its appeal, its effect of the observer – makes these effects more pronounced, more visceral.

The aesthetic perceptions of an individual spring from culture and society, as do the value judgements made by artists to make an art beautiful. These values are part of the concepts that shape our understanding of the world and are transmitted within the prevailing culture of society.

The Spring Fresco, Akrotiri

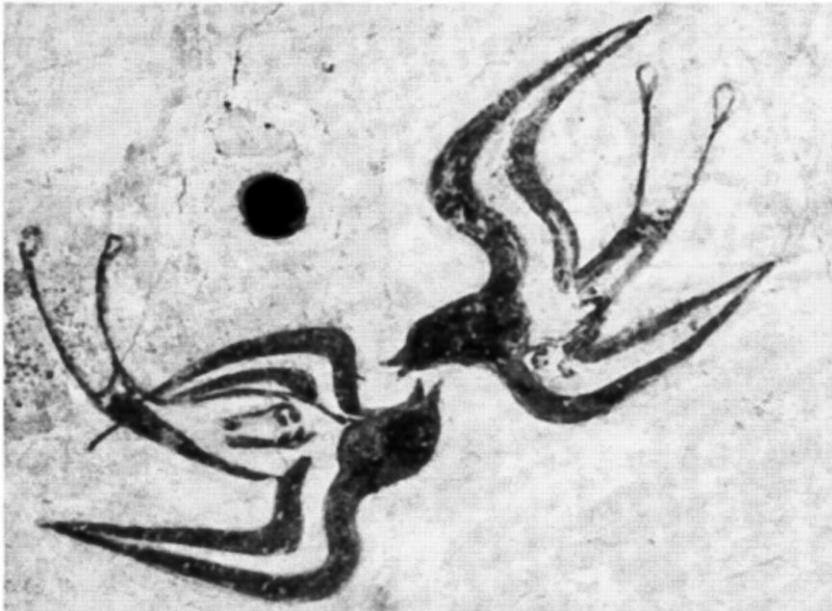


Fig. 1: Swallows 3 & 4, Delta 2. In Foster, 1995: 413, accessed online on 3-4-2022 at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/506942>



Fig. 2. Room 2, Building Delta in Akrotiri. Accessed online on 3-4-2022 at: [the swallows of akrotiri - Bing](#)

The Spring Frescoes of Room 2 in Building Delta in Akrotiri, Thera are vibrant, virtually intact Bronze Age frescoes (Figs. 1 & 3). Completed between the Theran earthquakes and before the eruption which subsequently devastated the island in around 1627 BCE, the frescoes were preserved in situ at that precise moment in time. Visible with minimal restoration (and thus complications of interpretation), we can see fine usage of space and colour, superb draftsmanship in bold and tapering lines, and a degree of depth created by spatial foreshortening. The swallows are closely observed, in places with a single curvilinear brush stroke (Fig. 1), and clearly from life, representing a specific species, *Hirundo Rustica* (the Barn Swallow). Karen Foster noted the remarkable similarity between the swallows in the Spring Fresco and the portrayal of swallows by the American artist Audubon (Foster, 1995: 414), especially the tucked wing and rotated body of the lower bird in the twisting mid-air encounter (compare Figs. 1 and 3). The landscape is depicted against a background of unpainted white plaster, giving lightness to the fresco and contrasting strongly with the Theran colour palette of black, red, yellow, and blue (Sinclair, 2014: 8). And whilst highly stylised, the colouration is a recognisably Theran and volcanic. Notably absent is green vegetation, for which yellow substitutes, which whilst the norm in Aegean frescoes is also quite accurate for the average Mediterranean summer. Stylistically Hollinshead (1989: 353) regards the work as a collaboration between artists specialising in flora and fauna, resulting in an intense, almost riotous, naturalistic effect.

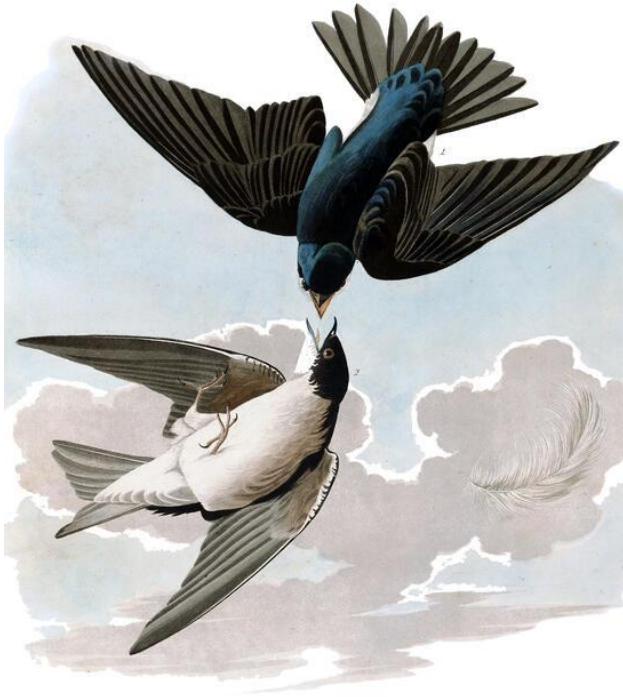


Fig. 3. Swallows in flight, Audubon. Accessed online on 3-4-2022 at: [audubon green-blue or white bellied swallow - Bing images](#)

The usage of room 2, and by extension the purpose of the frescoes, is much debated, and hampered by a lack of texts or unambiguous archaeological evidence. Nanno Marinatos suggests implied symbolism of spring and fertility (quoted by Hollinshead, 1989: 352), and Karen Foster (1995) sees a cultic space, partly based on the representations of swallows within Bronze Age glyptic art, and partly from the presence of a baetyl within the room (interestingly, baetyls sometimes occur on ritualistic Minoan seal-stones in association with swallows – Foster, 1995: 417). Hollinshead doubts this, pointedly noting “a crucifix may hang on the wall of a room without making it a shrine”, and identifies room 5 as a sleeping refuge, without excluding previous or intended future ritual usage (Hollinshead, 1989: 349-354).

Irrespective of any interpretations of symbolism, what we can see in Aegean/Minoan world is that the naturalistic, and almost extravagant fresco depictions of animals and landscapes are widespread across the late Bronze Age (Immerwahr, 1989, Plates: 17, 30, XIII). In this context, the Spring Fresco belongs to the common culture of the Bronze Age Aegean, it was their world, their lived environment. In contrast to the more formal relief carvings of Mesopotamia with their abundant political and religious symbolism, the Spring Fresco seems to represent an appreciation of beauty in the landscape, pointing to the significance of landscape within Aegean society. While we can only theorise about other symbolism, we can understand this art is intended to induce an aesthetic appreciation of the world around the artist and viewer, a mesmerising sensory experience of an imagined landscape that approaches a visual ekphrasis, uncannily reminiscent of Sappho¹.

Gudea of Lagash



Fig. 4. Statue of Gudea of Lagash. British Museum. Accessed online on 3-4-2022 at: [Collection search / British Museum](#)

This image of Gudea of Lagash, one of twenty similar statues of this ruler, shows Gudea modelled with a broad chest, well-muscled arms, hands clasped in supplication with a composed, imperturbable smile. The characteristic expression, the fine modelling, and sheen of the dark green diorite all work together to produce such an impressive, compelling presence that thousands of years later it became an inspiration for Surrealist art (Bahrani, 2014: 15-20), memorably inspiring one observer to poetry².

From cuneiform inscriptions on several statues, Irene Winter (2009: 259-260) observes that the well-developed arms specifically indicate “an arm put by god”, his barrel of a chest “one who was endowed with life and vitality”, and his large ears a ruler “wide of ear” - attentive/approachable. The visual symbolism of an able ruler is repeated throughout portrayals of Gudea (Figs: 3, 4 and 5) creating idealised, official images of an ideal ruler. The visual appeal of the statue is enhanced by the materiality of diorite, an imported material, “From the mountain of Magan he brought down diorite, and he fashioned it into a statue of himself” (translation in Edzard, 1997: 35). As well as its fine polished sheen, diorite was an expensive and exotic material, its acquisition and use involving an investment of time, energy, and skill, signalling the wealth and power of Gudea. This political and social communication is explicitly made in inscriptions on other statues of Gudea (Figs. 5 & 6), “He installed the statue in order to convey messages” (translation in Edzard, 1997: 36).



Figs. 5 & 6: Seated statues of Gudea of Lagash showing inscriptions. The Louvre. Accessed online on 3-4-2022 at: [statue - Louvre Collections](#)

Karen Sonik (2021: 545) has emphasised the importance of the intimacy of Mesopotamian art. The perfectly formed royal body heightens the effect of the object when in immediate close proximity to the viewer, more fully engaging all the senses, not just sight, and enhancing the viewers response because this is Mesopotamia, not a museum, and there is no disinterested remote viewing. Like Bahrani, Sonik (2021: 544-545) argues the lack of any discourse on aesthetics in ancient Mesopotamia does not mean that this culture did not see objects value aesthetics, as the production of art images shows a critical awareness of how the enhanced visibility of an image could multiply the symbolism of the art. Referring specifically to Gudea, Winter (1992: 21-27) describes the agency his image held, the ritual process of animation to bring life to the representation, for which the image was required to be “endowed with the rulers own features”. Similar ritual inscriptions for Sulgi of Ur make clear a king's image needed to be “made brilliant like the heavenly stars before good eyes” (Klein, quoted in Winter, 1992: 27). To secure life³ and agency for the image, it had to be an ideal aesthetic representation of the ruler for the onlooker. This is Gell’s enchanted technology (1992: 43-44), but in contrast to Gell we can only understand the image of Gudea is enhanced by its sensory appeal by considering aesthetics, not disregarding it.

The American poet Jane Hirschfield explores in detail the tensions between memory – Mnemosyne, the gift of remembrance - and subsequent written narrative. Hirschfield sees the inception of the alphabet/writing as conceptually altering collective memory, which became more fixed, more permanent (Hirschfield: 176-190). In giving life to the representation of Gudea, the statue bore his name for all time, it was Gudea. We see him as the Sumerians would have seen him, the imperturbable image of a good ruler through the aesthetic appeal of his image, “a king in his office of kingship” (Winter, 2009: 269).

The Guennol Lioness



Fig: 7 to 11. *The Guennol Lioness*. Accessed online on 3-4-2022 at: [the guennol lioness - Bing images](#)

The Guennol Lioness is a small anthropomorphic figurine just under 8.5 centimetres high, easily held in the palm of the hand, and yet giving an impression of strength and monumentality out of all proportion to its size. Edith Porada (1950: 223-226) describes the object as carved with a high degree of plasticity from highly polished white limestone, with remarkable sculpting giving intricate modelling of the head, and a use of contrasting angular sets to demonstrate a powerful musculature. Drillings on the lower back and neck suggest the addition of a tail and a mane, possibly following the style of Elamite cylinder seals from the same period (see Fig. 5). Holes on the thighs are presumed to be attachment points for lower legs, and Porada (1950: 224) points to a stylistically similar bull figurine of the same period with silver lower legs, noting the lioness itself has traces of copper on one thigh, probably contact deposits from silver alloy. Sinclair (2014: 12) notes the aesthetic appeal

the glowing and shimmering lustre that such valuable materials can provide, and together with the virtuosity of the carving this is intentional use of technology to enchant an object as proposed by Gell (1998: 42-43), imparting an astonishing visual effect to the onlooker.

The leonines in the Elamite seal impressions in Fig. 5 show an immediate stylistic resemblance to the musculature and the clasped hand pose of the figurine. Both Porada and Donald Hansen (1970: 13) briefly discuss potential meanings and symbolism of this and other similar figurines without conclusion, and as with much ancient art we must accept that although this was a literate society, we have no texts to illuminate these ideas. Leonine portraiture in wider ancient Middle Eastern art is widespread, as are depictions of anthropomorphic figures, so the images and accompanying symbolism were obviously understood in Bronze Age Middle Eastern culture. The symbolism, the unique morphologies (see Figs. 13 & 14), would have been part of the aesthetic milieu of the society. This figurine belongs to an early part of this tradition, as a hugely impressive and visually spectacular piece of portable art. The figurine and its agency are enchanted by its sublime technology, its effect on the on recipient. This is the power of immense appeal, an intentional sensory experience produced through aesthetics.

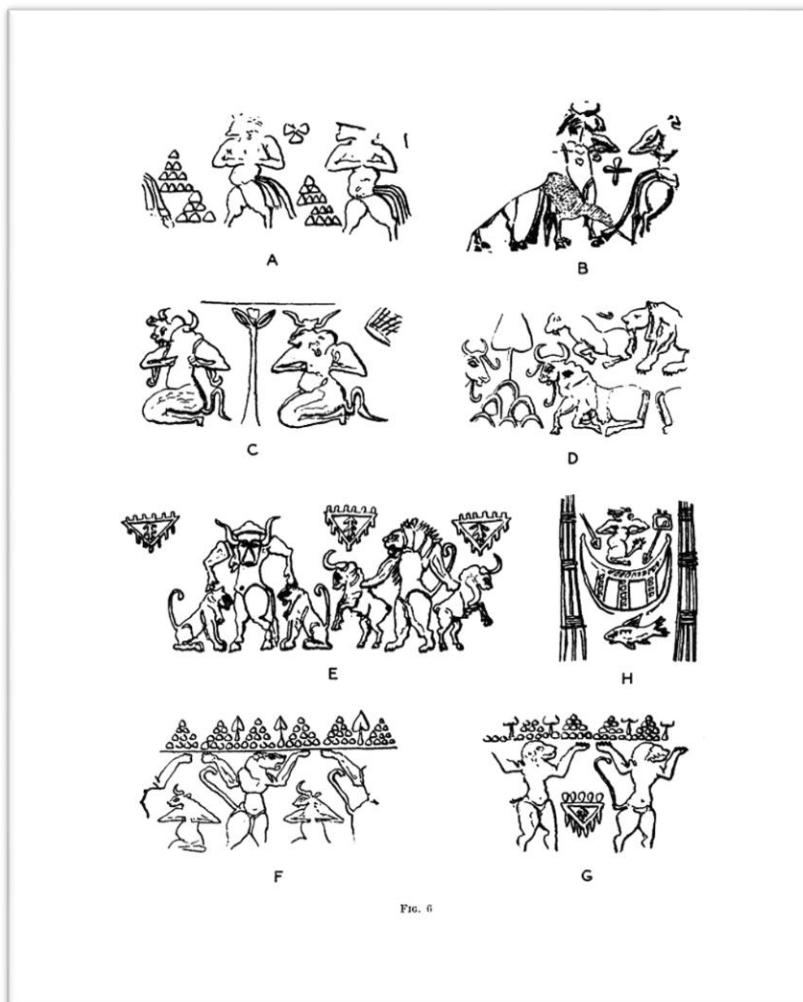


Fig. 12. Proto-Elamite cylinder seal impressions (Porada, 1950: 6). Accessed online on 3-4-2022 at: [A Leonine Figure of the Protoliterate Period of Mesopotamia on JSTOR \(uwtstd.ac.uk\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2344444)



Fig. 13. *Proto-Elamite Sculpture*. Accessed online on 3-4-2022 at: [Search the Collection - The Metropolitan Museum of Art \(metmuseum.org\)](https://www.metmuseum.org/search-the-collection)



Fig: 14. Proto-Elamite Sculpture. Accessed online on 3-4-2022 at: [proto elamite sculptures - Bing images](#)

Summary

Taken together the case studies above demonstrate how an understanding of the aesthetic dimension of art is not only itself useful, but also underpins other anthropological evaluations of ancient art.

The naturalistic swallows of the spring frescoes also provoke an immediate aesthetic response. The line and rhythm of the artist demonstrates virtuosity and skill, producing a simple aesthetic pleasure in the viewer. As Gell described (1992: 42), these are beautiful images which have been made beautifully, the virtuosity of the artist enchanting art an item. However as opposed to disregarding aesthetics, the images are enhanced *precisely by* their aesthetic appeal, to us to the Therans. Aesthetics also highlight a wider cultural importance of highly stylised landscapes, encapsulating a powerful of expression of Theran culture irrespective of any yet unknown embedded symbolic or iconographical meanings. To appreciate these frescos, to see them as the Therans did in their world, is our way of viewing and understanding them, providing the material to explore their symbolism and meaning.

To encounter an impressive, highly stylised anthropomorphic figurine such as the Guerroc Lioness would have posed the same visceral perceptual questions to the Elamite senses as it does to us. The fine materials, size and lustre would have encouraged touch and handling, its proximity prompting a powerful sensory reaction. Made with virtuosity, itself to be admired and appreciated, the enchanted technology would present an exotic, mythical world to the viewer. We can easily imagine how making such a unique image would have been an intense experience, the creation of a thing of beauty. The iconography or symbolism within the object, and therefore of wider Elamite culture, would have been enhanced through the lens of this intense aesthetic experience.

Going further, our understanding of Sumerian society and culture via its corpus of literature provides a clear understanding of the statue of Gudea, the messages being communicated to the viewer, the ritual aspects of the statue, its agency and iconography. We can understand how and why the statue was made, the expense and prestige involved, and we understand how the visual appeal more effectively communicates these meanings. We see Gudea in the same way the Sumerians saw him, his smile, his bearing, are impressively clear. The meaning of the statue, its life and agency, the very reason for its existence, depend on its aesthetic resonance with their society.

It is difficult not to agree with the holistic approach of Zainab Bahrani (2014: 152-153) who argues that we should not regard ancient art as an addendum illustrating social and cultural systems. Neither should we disregard aesthetics as Gell suggested, as effect of art within the ancient society for which it was created was dependant on its reception, how it appealed to their senses as mediated by their culture. This is Bahrani's "Phenomenological presence of images and monuments" (2014: 152). In appreciating an image and understanding its aesthetic effects we open a window into ancient society and see how the sensuous impact of art helped to communicate iconography, political and social messaging, symbolism, enhanced agency, and not least the aesthetical appeal of the art itself and therefore how and why it was created. We can interpret art as ancient societies did with an aesthetic interpretation which may differ, but which is always an inherent, intentional, and essential part of the art. This understanding then critically assists other ways of interpreting ancient art.

Footnotes

1. "Here, cold springs / sing softly / amid the branches: /the ground is shady with roses; / from trembling young leaves, / a deep drowsiness pours" (Sappho, translation in Hirschfield, pg:130).
2. "I smile at him, but he is far from me / See how he smiles, see how Gudea smiles" (Laurence Joseph, translation in Bahrani, 2014, pg:24).
3. "Ningirsu has decreed a long life for Gudea" (Edzard, 1997: 36)

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