

Review of: Feldman, M.H. (2002). 'Luxurious Forms: Redefining a Mediterranean "International Style," 1400–1200 B.C.E.' *The Art Bulletin* 84(1), pp. 6–29

Marian Feldman's 'Luxurious Forms: Redefining a Mediterranean "International Style," 1400–1200 B.C.E.' (2002) offers scholars and the public alike one of the most insightful reinterpretations of Late Bronze Age aesthetic and artistic connectivity in the eastern Mediterranean. Published at a time when archaeology and related disciplines were increasingly adopting theoretical frameworks surrounding cross-cultural entanglement, materiality and object agency (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Maran, 2005), Feldman's article reflects and contributes to this broader theoretical shift. Through a highly detailed analysis of hybridised luxury items, particularly inlays and ivories from Cyprus, Egypt and Ugarit, Feldman contends that the "international style" was not simply a unified artistic tradition rooted in a single cultural centre, but rather a transcultural *koine* moulded through artisan mobility, diplomatic negotiation and elite interaction. This review argues that Feldman's article is comprehensibly written, theoretically innovative and well-grounded in thorough visual analysis, despite its detachment from broader economic structures, which narrows the scope of her arguments.

One of Feldman's primary achievements is effectively challenging the diffusionist approach that dominated earlier discussions of the international style (Knappett, 2011). Instead of tracing iconography back to presumed centres of origin, she suggests that hybrid luxury objects belong to a collective visual *koine*, metaphorically arguing that such artistic styles were part of a common visual language, flexible enough to be continually remoulded in differing regional contexts whilst remaining widely intelligible. This application of reconceptualisation is central to Feldman's work, since it shifts the focus away from a methodology that simply traces stylistic origins and instead foregrounds the dynamic, negotiated and processual essence of artistic connectivity – an approach which underpins the article's theoretical innovation discussed in this review.

Feldman (2002, pp. 18–19) suggests that certain motifs, including griffins, rosette friezes, sphinxes and voluted palmettes, functioned as flexible features reimagined by artisans to articulate the elite identities within a broader cosmopolitan diplomatic milieu. The visual

examples of iconography and motifs on the artefacts in Feldman's figures and sketches strengthen the persuasiveness of her argument, allowing readers to appreciate and recognise the subtleties of her comparative analysis more effectively than text alone might achieve. Furthermore, this use of pictorial sources increases the accessibility of the paper for those who struggle with densely written analyses that lack visual aids, while also offering the reader a degree of agency to independently verify the iconographic patterns she highlights. Feldman builds on these broader stylistic patterns with a case study on luxury objects from the ancient port city of Ugarit, which incorporate Cypriot, Egyptian and Levantine characteristics in styles that cannot be credited to direct copying. She compares Egyptian smiting scenes with their Levantine reinterpretations, demonstrating how the foundations of motifs could be maintained whilst displaying shifted emphases to align with local political contexts and ideologies. The result is that of an internationalised yet regionally tailored artistic vocabulary. Feldman's use of the Amarna letters strengthens this point by placing these artefacts within a broader network of 'brotherhood' and gift exchange among the Great Kings of the wider region. The hybrid objects analysed in her article are revealed as active diplomatic agents - tangible material expressions of political relationships. This type of interpretive framework slots comfortably into an early 2000s theoretical interest in biographies and social lives of objects.

Despite the strengths of Feldman's model, it is arguably limited by its exclusive focus on elite contexts. The artefacts she analyses are almost entirely sourced from controlled diplomatic exchanges, high-status residences and palaces, which restricts deeper analysis to alternative groups and tiers of Late Bronze Age society. Later scholarship has suggested that the roles of itinerant craftsmen, merchants and sailors in sustaining long-distance trade networks extend far beyond the restricted diplomatic sphere of Feldman's *koine* (Broodbank, 2013; Knapp and Manning, 2016). This limited scope contributes further to the article's narrow engagement with the wider transnational economic framework underpinning exchange. Although Feldman does acknowledge that luxury goods circulated in conjunction with bulk goods and metals, her investigation fails to fully recognise the important role that logistical systems, maritime routes and trade mechanics played in shaping artistic interaction. This gap in her analysis arguably constrains the wider applicability of her theory, which underpins

the central critique of this review: that her otherwise innovative and insightful research lacks connection to the economic realities which contributed to the very mobility she highlights.

The continuing significance of Feldman's arguments and framework is evident in their thematic alignment with later scholarship on Bronze Age connectivity, elite exchange and hybridity, including the work of Bevan (2004), Zuckerman (2008), and Gunter (2009). Her repositioning of the international style as a transcultural *koine* has been widely adopted into later works relating to artisan mobility, cross-cultural exchange and hybridity, and it continues to stand as a conceptual anchor in studies of cross-cultural exchange in Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean. Scholars engaged in cosmopolitanism, negotiated identity and transcultural imagery have employed elements of Feldman's emphasis of intercultural reception and visual flexibility, which demonstrates the extensive relevance of her research and conclusions beyond the specific case studies discussed in the article (Van Wijngaarden, 2012; Steel, 2021).

When positioned within wider Bronze Age scholarship, Feldman's approach aligns closely with early twenty-first-century discussions and theories emphasising entanglement, materiality and multilayered connectivity. Her emphasis on the agency of objects and the socially embedded nature of hybrid imagery complements the approaches and developments in consumption studies (Steel, 2013), network-based archaeology (Knappett, 2011), and emerging models of transcultural interaction. Instead of framing connectivity solely through the rigid lens of political geographies or the mechanics of trade, Feldman outlines the communicative force that material culture holds, offering a complementary perspective to economically oriented approaches. The limitations identified earlier in this review indicate that subsequent scholarship – especially that which addresses broader economic frameworks and non-elite mobility – can develop, reshape and, in certain aspects, challenge the interpretive theory laid out by Feldman. Nonetheless, the article still serves as a vital tool for bridging the gap between earlier diffusionist attitudes and later relational, process-oriented approaches to understanding artistic exchange in the ancient Mediterranean.

In conclusion, Feldman's work can be seen as providing a compelling, sophisticated and thoughtful reinterpretation of the international style, foregrounding hybrid luxury items as primary agents in a transcultural *koine* driven by artisan mobility and diplomatic interaction.

Her combination of a clear comparative approach, theoretically informed analysis and visual material gives the article a heightened level of accessibility and persuasiveness, with this strength contributing to its continued relevance in academic discourse. Feldman's elite focus and limited investigation into wider economic structures do limit the applicability and viability of her conclusions, but it creates space for expansion from later research and scholarship. Nevertheless, Feldman's study endures as a foundational and innovative contribution, successfully offering insight into the dynamic, negotiated and relational nature of artistic exchange in the Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean.

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