

Analysis of the Aesthetic Anthropological Art Theory

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Module Name: Art and Representation in the Ancient Near East

Module Code: HPAH7016

Word Count: 3460

This analysis seeks to outline the anthropological art theory of aesthetics and examine its usefulness when looking at ancient art by referring to depictions of landscapes from the Hall of Frescoes in Knossos, Crete and the Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud, Assyria. To begin with, I shall offer an explanation of the theory. Aesthetics is the appreciation and the pleasure taken from looking at something perceived ‘beautiful’. It is the visual effect (or, as Hamilakis is keen to stress, *affect*) upon a viewer as the thing elicits a response.¹ For the purpose of this analysis, ‘effect’ shall mean the feelings evoked upon seeing a ‘beautiful’ work of art, whilst ‘affect’ is the tangible reaction. Both terms shall be used interchangeably throughout this work. Building upon this, it is important to note that aesthetics can be multi-sensorial and an embodied response to art, which is the ‘affect’ Hamilakis discusses.² Simply put, aesthetics encompasses the affect of an art object upon a viewer, including how a person may experience and respond to the piece of art.³ Naturally, one must be aware of the cultural context of the object and place our judgement of its aesthetic within this. As Steel remarks, to understand the significance of “the beautification of an object” we must have an understanding of how the object was culturally made and experienced in its original context.⁴ As mentioned earlier, we shall examine the usefulness of this theory when looking at ancient art through two case studies; the first of which will focus on the so-called ‘Monkeys and Birds fresco’ from the House of Frescoes in Knossos.

¹ Sonik (2022) 537; Hamilakis (2014) 125.

² Steel (2023) 4.

³ Steel (2023) 4.

⁴ Steel (2023) 3.

First, I shall provide a little context to the House of Frescoes, which has been dated to LM I A (c. 1600-1500BC).⁵ It is a small, Neopalatial Minoan building situated to the west of the Palace at Knossos and was first excavated by Sir Arthur Evans in 1923.⁶ The frescoes were found within a small section of Room D-4, named Space E, fragmented and stacked upon each other, making it difficult to discern their original location and appearance - Space E can be seen circled in Figure 1.⁷ The jumbled nature of the frescos has thus lead to multiple restorations, many of which are now

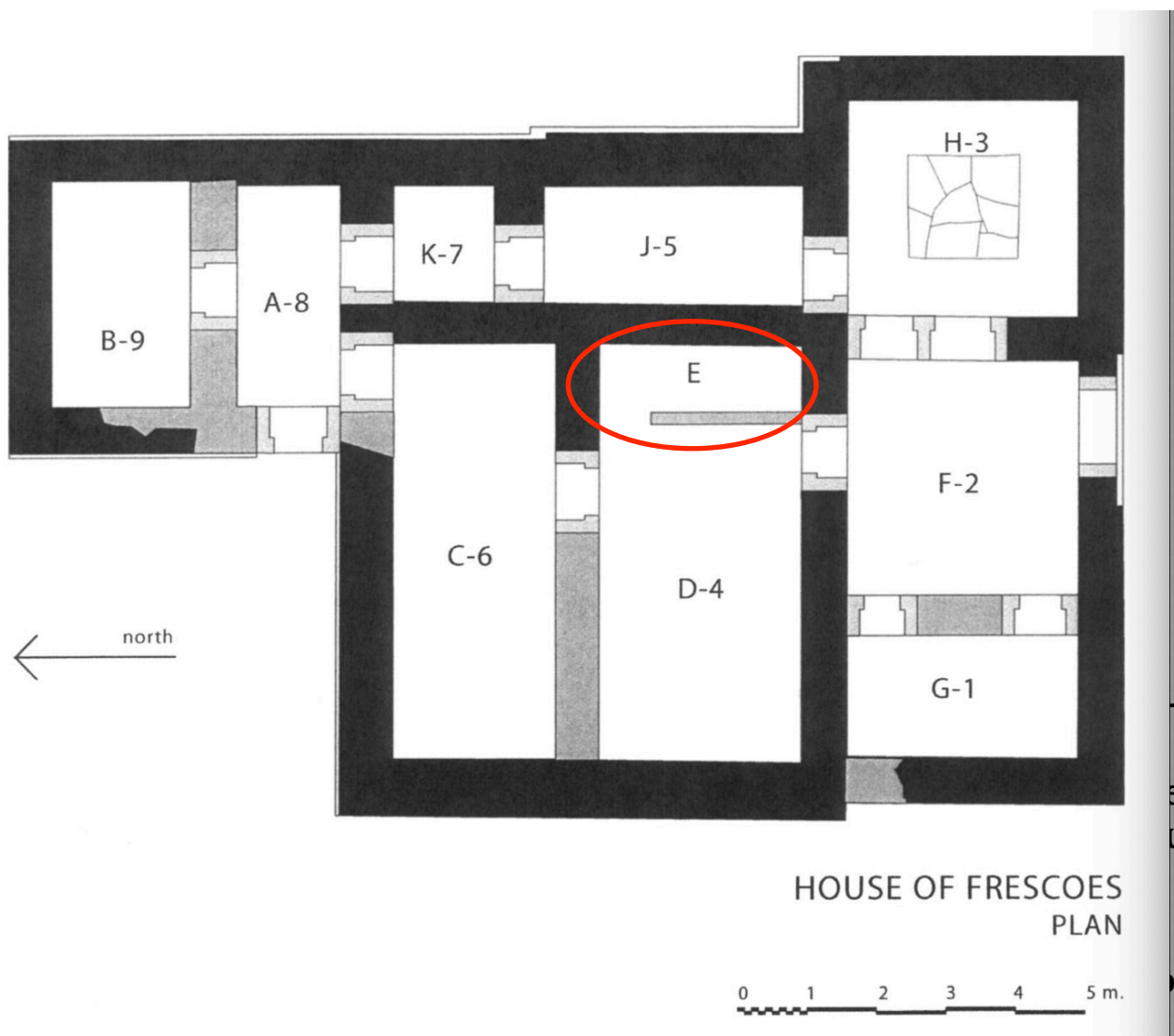


Figure 1: Plan of the rooms in the House of Frescoes at Knossos. Space E has been circled.

⁵ Chapin and Shaw (2006) 58.

⁶ Chapin and Shaw (2006) 57.

⁷ Chapin and Shaw (2006) 57-58.



Figure 2: Reconstructions of the 'Monkeys and Birds' fresco from the House of Frescoes in Knossos. The coloured photo shows the original fragments surrounded by the reconstruction.

widely seen as incorrect.⁸ This is an issue that shall be addressed later in this analysis. The 'Monkeys and Birds' fresco is perhaps the most famous of the frescos to come from Knossos, and has been the subject of much scholarly debate.⁹ The fresco, as seen in Figure 2, is one that has suffered from extensive reconstructions and as such this analysis will focus only on the original fragments - seen in the coloured photo as the three-dimensional, rougher pieces of plaster. With this example, we may discern a weakness in using the theory of aesthetics to study ancient art. The composition of the image has been damaged by time and the deliberate stripping and deposition of the frescoes into Space E and as such, we are not able to necessarily call it 'beautiful' by looking at

⁸ Chapin (2004) 53.

⁹ See Chapin and Shaw (2006), Chapin (2004) for some examples.

it just the fragments. We struggle to have a phenomenological response as the material and surface of the work has been damaged.¹⁰ The imagined reconstruction is certainly a marvellous and awe-inspiring sight but we cannot judge the fresco from a modern restoration. Here, the aesthetics of the art object are stretched thin as the image is broken up and removed from its original context (on the wall of a room, where it can interact with its surroundings) and the feelings evoked as we look upon the fragments are not necessarily positive. It is impossible for the true beauty of the fresco to be revealed to us because of its unfortunate damaged state and as such, we cannot fully appreciate the fresco for what it is - a truly remarkable piece of artistry. As many scholars have argued, and I am inclined to agree with them, the fresco is a wonderful example of an idealised, timeless landscape and one of abundance and fertility.¹¹ The use of naturalism in spite of the religious connotations entices you in, evoking pleasure and peace as one is able to truly experience the landscape depicted. It is with this acknowledgement that a strength of the aesthetic theory is emphasised. The art, a momentary and unmoving object, is transient due to its content and though we cannot see the whole composition, what we do see elicits a response in us.¹² We feel moved by the tranquility of the scene which conjures feelings of peace and somewhere undisturbed by human interference - the flowers, animals, and rocky terrain that can be determined among the fragments - and find it pleasing and beautiful still. It is perhaps a testament to the artist that even though the fresco is far beyond the glory of its original state, beauty is still able to be found and experienced within it.

Furthermore, the colours of the fragments are still clear, if not as bright as they would have been in antiquity, and one can appreciate the pleasing use of ochre, red, yellow and blue to create a vibrant and inviting landscape. Though the image has been reduced to mere fragments, the inspiring use of colour allows the viewer to be transported (psychologically) to this lush landscape - it is easy

¹⁰ Bahrani (2014) 32.

¹¹ Chapin (2004) 48-49, 56-57.

¹² Adorno (1997) 84.

to imagine the smell of the flowers, the warmth of the sun and the chattering of the monkeys. After all (as was mentioned earlier) the fragments are not so incomplete that we cannot discern parts of the image - such as the long, thin tail of a blue monkey or the carefully painted lilies and crocuses. It is important to make clear here that it is not just the colours themselves that we find beautiful but how they have been used. It is their arrangement within the fresco that is particularly pleasurable to the eye.¹³ The clever use of a plain background allows the blue of the monkeys to stand out and the pairing of ochre and blue brings a sense of vitality to the image that we can experience as viewers. One almost wishes to run their hands across the painting, to trace the line of the monkey with their finger or lean forward to smell the lilies, adding to the multi-sensorial aspect of the aesthetic experience. We appreciate the image so much that it begins to affect our other senses and we are no longer just viewing it but *seeing* it - a distinction that Steel stresses.¹⁴ This embodied response leads the way for the art to be experienced wholly.¹⁵ It is this that we may call, to borrow from Hagberg, the “aesthetic experience”.¹⁶ The feelings that emerge from the process of understanding these works, even if they are incomplete, are a part of the aesthetic engagement with an object. One is experiencing the art and all that it entails, a matter which is highly sensorial, and one is thus able to appreciate it because of this.¹⁷ As was discussed earlier, the vibrancy of the colours only add to the sense of tranquility evoked in us by the scene. It adds a vitality that we cannot help but appreciate and find beautiful, in spite of the incomplete image. Naturally, we cannot help but wonder if the reaction would be the same if the fresco lacked the delicate use of colour that it does - would we still find it beautiful or experience it in the same way? The answer is likely no, we would not but

¹³ Layton (1991) 13.

¹⁴ Steel (2023) 3.

¹⁵ Iseminger (2004) 48-49.

¹⁶ Hagberg (2018) 64.

¹⁷ Iseminger (2004) 36, 37, 48-49.

that is not always the case. It is this that remains key when considering the aesthetic theory. Whilst an obvious point to make, it is something I feel must be stressed: the theory works only when there are some kind of ‘aesthetic properties’ that exist by virtue of (as Zangwill defined it) ‘non-aesthetic properties’.¹⁸ However, it is up to an individual to define this. One may see something that is ‘ugly’ as an aesthetic by nature of its colour (or lack thereof), shape, or movement even when another does not. In this, the aesthetic theory is unique from other anthropological art theories. It remains personal in the same way the sensorial reactions and experiences to art does and is also flexible, stretching to accommodate the subjective idea of ‘aesthetic’ that varies from person to person.

The cultural context of an object too, as Steel reminds us, is imperative to keep in mind when judging the aesthetic value of art.¹⁹ The ‘Monkeys and Birds’ fresco is made beautiful as it was intended for decoration in what was likely a ceremonial building - a claim bolstered by finds of a ‘libation table’ and ‘votive stone ladle’ alongside a jug decorated with the notorious Minoan Double Axe symbol.²⁰ The content of the fresco supports this theory too as it is seen as a divine scene, speaking of eternal spring and the renewal of nature.²¹ Though some scholars have argued that the plants depicted may serve medicinal or economic functions, the buildings context favours the religious theory, which I agree with.²² The fresco decorated the walls of a building where the activities that took place were done in worship of the gods, a sacred and significant act. While beautiful decoration would not be necessary, as the wall paintings have no physical effect upon the activities (though one could argue they did indeed participate, if passively, as they interacted with their environment by nature of light), it does bring pleasure. It is a place of respect to the gods and

¹⁸ Zangwill (2007) 36-37.

¹⁹ Steel (2023) 4, 5.

²⁰ Chapin and Shaw (2006) 65.

²¹ Chapin (2004) 48-49.

²² Chapin (2004) 54.

so why should it not be beautified via decoration? The core of the aesthetic theory is held here - the visual effect when perceiving the beautiful. Pleasure is evoked from the surroundings in a place that is dedicated to the divine and where their presence can be felt. It may even be seen as a symbol of the Minoan's respect to their gods, that they beatify the areas devoted to their worship. Whilst it holds the function of a religious scene we may also perceive the fresco as the old time notion of 'art for art's sake'.²³ That it holds some aesthetic value to some is enough and we may look at it this way thanks to the theory of aesthetics, again underscoring its usefulness when considering ancient art.²⁴ However, it is important to note that with the frescoes found removed from their original context, and their location within the House of Frescoes only hypothesised, it is difficult to *truly* determine their function. Despite this, the fresco has been compared to others that are similar in both composition and location, such as the Saffron Gatherers from Xeste 3, Thera, and I believe that the frescoes were meant to contain much in the way of divine imagery but did not have an active role within the room.²⁵ Nonetheless, not knowing their true function does not remove the artwork's ability to affect the viewer through its aesthetic qualities as we still feel the same when we see it. In the case of this fresco, the function has very little impact in how we perceive the image as a scene of timeless tranquility.

The second case study we shall look at to examine the usefulness of aesthetics as a way of analysing ancient art are the wall decorations from the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II (who ruled from 883-859BC) located at Nimrud, ancient Kalhu, in Assyria, now modern day Northern Iraq. The palace has been circled in Figure 3.²⁶ In particular, we shall look at the carvings of the

²³ See Bahrani (2014) 36 for more on this.

²⁴ Zangwill (2007) 118.

²⁵ Chapin and Shaw (2006) 83; Chapin (2004) 55-56.

²⁶ Crawford, Harper and Pittman (1980) 7; Porter (1993) 129.

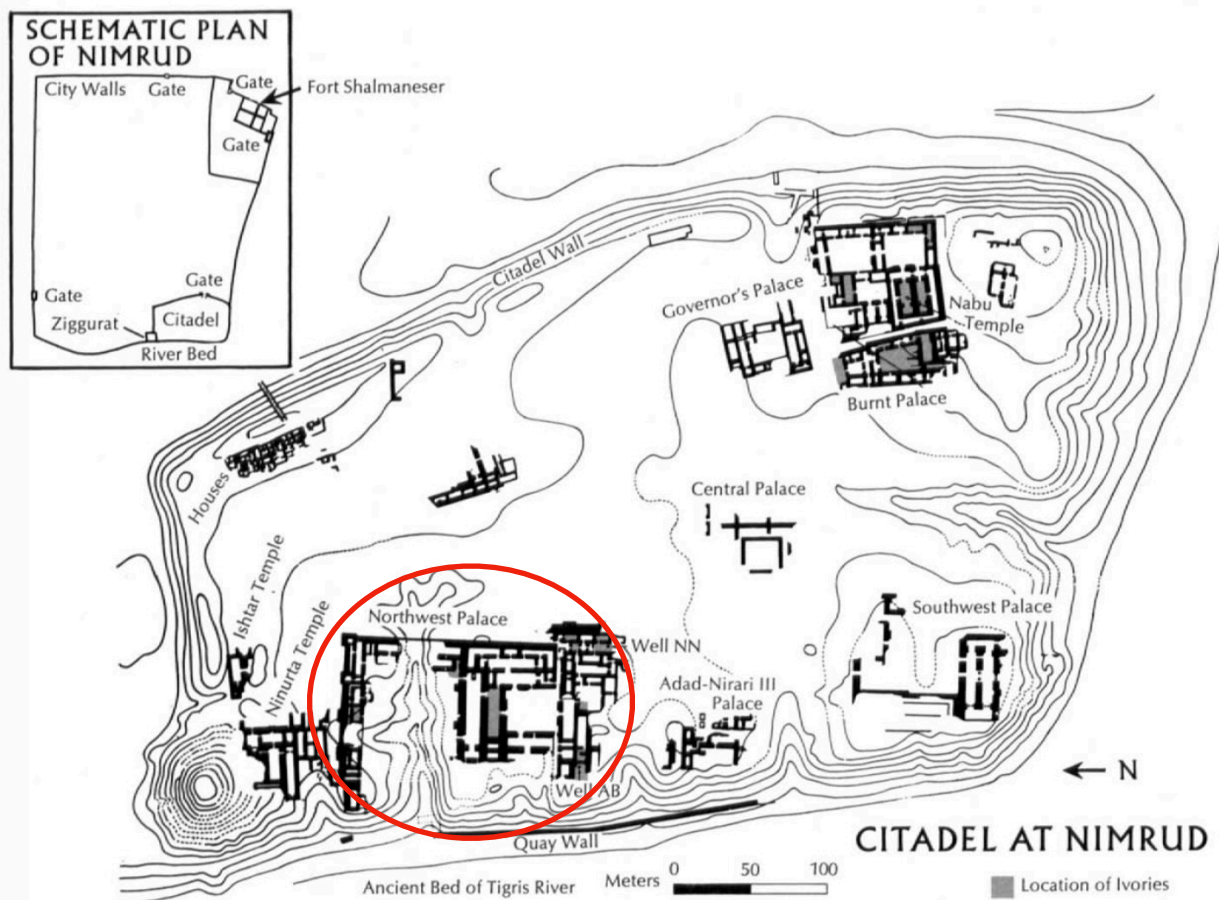


Figure 3: A contour map of the citadel at Nimrud. The northwest palace has been circled.

‘Sacred Tree’ in Room I of the Palace, where there are 96 trees depicted in a two-register arrangement.²⁷ This very repetitive use of the same symbol suggests its importance and hints at a function beyond the beautiful - something that we shall return to later in this analysis. The ‘Sacred Tree’ (which is shown in Figure 4) consists of a trunk set upon a base, topped with palm fronds arranged in a palmette and stems and garlands coming out of the trunk to form a volute.²⁸ Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the image is its symmetry - one could almost imagine splitting the pictorial decoration in half and both sides of the tree matching exactly. It creates a rather visually engaging display and as such is able to evoke a feeling of appreciation to the skill of the

²⁷ Albenda (1994) 123.

²⁸ Albenda (1994) 124.



Figure 4: Close-up of the ‘Sacred Tree’ wall decorations featuring human-head and bird-head divinities, from the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud, Assyria.

craftsperson. It is through the theory of aesthetics that we, as viewers, are able to appreciate the composition of the artwork and it is thus able to affect us (as an object that has its own agency, engaging with viewers socially).²⁹ As Zangwill rather convincingly argues, it is these ‘non-aesthetic properties’, the careful shape and composition of the Tree, that allows the beauty and elegance of

²⁹ Layton (1991) 13.

the iconography to shine through; and it is this beauty that we as a viewer acknowledge and react to, both emotionally and physically.³⁰ Unlike the 'Monkeys and Birds' fresco from Knossos, this wall decoration carved from limestone panels is far more tactile and we can experience pleasure and appreciation with more than just our eyes.³¹ One almost wishes to run their fingers across the carved relief and feel the cleverness of the maker under their touch or mimic the winged men in the upper register and touch the Sacred Tree to experience the picture the way the inhabitants of the Northwest Palace may have.

This is more significant when we consider the context surrounding the creation of this wall decoration. Mesopotamian art is seen as 'official art' which is meant to serve the city and its rulers and would be commissioned or dictated by the king himself or other important officials.³² There is no intent behind the person who created this, no agency being conferred through the image skilfully crafted by their hands - there is only the need to make an image beautiful as has been dictated by the king, to decorate the king's palace. It is this, then, that highlights one of the strengths of the theory of aesthetics. By looking at ancient art via this theory, the beauty of an object is acknowledged regardless of the means of creation. By this I mean that this wall decoration was made beautiful because as an image that would grace the halls of a king it *had* to be and not because of any artistic intent of the craftsperson. There was no room for experimenting or innovation, as can be seen in the clever hybrid plants depicted in the House of Frescoes.³³ Yet, when looking at it through an aesthetic perspective, this is irrelevant. It is enough that the composition of the image is perfectly symmetrical, that care has been taken to carve details into the palm tree and the wings of the deities. We as viewers are taken aback by the elegance of the wall decoration and find it pleasing to look at.

³⁰ Zangwill (2007) 37.

³¹ Crawford, Harper and Pittman (1980) 16 on building material.

³² Sonik (2013) 269.

³³ Sonik (2013) 269-270; Chapin (2004) 54, 55.

Whilst there must be some intention for a work of art to play an aesthetic role, the origins of these intentions is of no consequence when it, as we perceive it now and when placed within its context, it has succeeded in its role.³⁴

As with the fresco, the physical context of the wall decoration should be addressed as well as the cultural context in which it was made if we wish to judge the usefulness of the aesthetic theory. Room I, where this carving was discovered, had stone floor slabs that are generally used for rooms with liquid and a niche in some walls that had drains beneath them, suggesting a place for bathing or cleansing.³⁵ The Room's close proximity to the Throne Room however suggests that this was not a private, domestic space but rather had a more ceremonial value, a notion emphasised by the representations of divinities in the wall decorations.³⁶ The presence of the divinities next to these Sacred Trees and precisely what they are doing when considering the use of the room has been the subject of much scholarly debate.³⁷ Personally, I am inclined towards Russell's theory that the divinities are performing a purifying function - they play the role of exercising or repelling evil spirits from the room, thus protecting what is within whilst they themselves are being 'purified' through ritual bathing and cleansing.³⁸ The winged creatures are often depicted by doorways, holding a bucket and purifier in their hands and play an apotropaic function in blessing those who enter the room and protecting it from outside threats.³⁹ Their very placement within the room not only allows them to perform a function but implies a level of care in the decoration that one can

³⁴ Zangwill (2007) 47.

³⁵ Russell (1998) 672; Crawford, Harper and Pittman (1980) 20.

³⁶ Russell (1998) 672-673.

³⁷ Porter (1993) and Crawford, Harper and Pittman (1980) for pollination and fertility; Russell (1998) for purification of evil spirits.

³⁸ Russell (1980) 691.

³⁹ Russell (1980) 675.

experience. Deliberate thought has been used to consider where these carvings should be placed in the room, including the direction each figure faces and their poses, and this intent can be felt as we look upon them. The ‘pinecones’ held within the hands of these divinities, theorised to be a ‘male pollen cluster’ used to ritually pollinate the trees by scholars, is argued by Russell to simply just be as pinecone, as it is written in Assyrian texts to be an object which is used in exorcisms.⁴⁰ This wall decoration therefore, unlike the fresco we looked at before, has a genuine function beyond beautifying a place (though this is a part of its purpose too). It is here that we may see one of the drawbacks in using the aesthetic theory to approach and analyse ancient art. Though we are able to draw much from the decoration itself concerning its function, when it is loaded with symbols and meaning as this wall decoration is, reducing it to the ‘beautiful’ feels reductive. We may appreciate the carefully carved lines, the delicate use of colour to highlight certain parts of the figures, the symmetry but it is more difficult to feel completely enveloped by the imagery as we are with the fresco.⁴¹ As Bahrani says, Mesopotamian art generally straddles the line between ‘real’ and ‘not real’, hovering between worlds in order to emphasise the wishes of the king.⁴² This is not to say it functions as propaganda or something else equally as subtractive but rather that Mesopotamian art develops its own social agency that can carry messages and “produce effects in the real”.⁴³ Thus, the iconography of the artwork sits apart from us, though actively participating with its apotropaic function, and makes using the theory of aesthetics to analyse feel overly simplistic. It may even be argued that because the art is so removed from us, we may only feel the ‘effect’ not the ‘affect’ of it - it is difficult for us, as viewers in the modern day, to have an embodied response. Despite this, one may argue that we feel the effects produced by the art *because* we are looking upon it and

⁴⁰ See Porter (1993) for pollination example; Russell (1980) 692.

⁴¹ Crawford, Harper and Pittman (1980) 27 on colour.

⁴² Bahrani (2014) 43.

⁴³ Bahrani (2014) 37, 39.

appreciating (*seeing!*) the beauty of it. I believe that the real strength of the theory lies in its subjectiveness and flexibility and that even the artwork that is filled with agency and symbolism can be appreciated aesthetically whilst those other characteristics are acknowledged.

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Figure 1: Plan of the rooms in the House of Frescoes at Knossos. (Chapin and Shaw (2006) fig. 1).

Figure 2: Reconstructions of the ‘Monkeys and Birds’ fresco from the House of Frescoes in Knossos. Black and white photo from: [Monkeys-and-blue-birds-fresco-from-the-House-of-the-Frescoes-Knossos-from-Cameron_fig15_305442706](#) Coloured photo from: [File:Wall painting of monkeys in a landscape from Knossos \(House of the Frescoes\) - Heraklion AM - 04.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) Both accessed on: Saturday 15th April 2023.

Figure 3: A contour map of the citadel at Nimrud. (Crawford, Harper and Pittman (1980) fig. 3).

Figure 4: Close-up of the ‘Sacred Tree’ wall decorations featuring human-head and bird-head divinities, from the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud, Assyria. (Crawford, Harper and Pittman (1980) fig. 15).