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Richard G. Lesure
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Introduction

This book is about the comparison of objects that at first glance seem similar but that, on further reflection, cannot be compared. My interest is in the interpretive implications of that first glance.

The objects in question are small statuettes – figurines – made in clay, stone, and bone by unknown artisans, deep in prehistory. Although archaeologists have found vaguely similar figurines at prehistoric sites in different parts of the globe, the objects in question had no straightforward utilitarian purpose but were instead expressive and meaningful. Whatever those meanings were, we can be sure that they differed from place to place and epoch to epoch. In that sense, the figurines are not comparable.

Yet, when the figurine in hand reminds us of those from elsewhere, it can be difficult to resist the urge to compare. Indeed, in an earlier era of interpretation, archaeologists abandoned themselves to that impulse. They claimed that similarities among figurines bespoke similarities in meaning. If prehistoric figurines from different continents were predominantly female, then the objects must have been depictions of goddesses or perhaps a single primordial Goddess.

Archaeologists today congratulate themselves for being beyond that interpretation. We are not so naïve as to treat "female" as a stable category that would have the same meanings in all cultures. We also do not imagine a "primitive psychology" that would lead all prehistoric peoples to the primordial Goddess. Societies, we insist, are organized by culturally constructed – not predetermined – categories. Meaningful objects like figurines are to be understood *in context*, in an analysis sensitive to historical particulars.

The Problem

From the standpoint of this new contextualism, comparison can appear to be a suspect enterprise, compromised by the interpretive excesses of our predecessors. Analysts facing the practicalities of interpreting figurines continue to compare, but they avoid unseemly fanfare. The legitimacy of comparative glances between contexts is not the subject of explicit reflection.

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A basic premise of this book is that the similarities that seduced our predecessors actually *demand* comparison. Comparative efforts, however, should be brought into the open where they can be subjected to theoretical and empirical scrutiny. The question becomes: If the figurine being interpreted reminds us of others, should we banish the thought – or pay it serious attention?

Much of my discussion concerns a specific claim of resemblance: the idea that figurines were female, in one prehistoric context after another. The perception of recurring femaleness is of particular interest because it has prompted the most ambitious comparative claims (that figurines depict a primordial prehistoric Goddess) and the most vigorous particularistic responses (that "femaleness" in one context necessarily has nothing to do with "femaleness" in another). My basic question in this case becomes: If we perceive the figurine in hand to be female, should our interpretation take notice of numerous previous claims that figurines – from other contexts – were female? Or should we dismiss the thought? Furthermore, if we decide that such comparisons are relevant, how should we account for them? In the chapters that follow, I develop a framework within which such questions can be treated as empirical problems. In extended case studies, I consider the Paleolithic figurines of Eurasia, Neolithic figurines of the Near East, and Formative-period figurines of Mesoamerica.

Toward a Solution

In response to the stalemate between those who explain female figurines with reference to a universal process and those who reject such claims out of hand, I shift the question of whether to compare to another level. The goal is to establish grounds for making empirically informed assessments of the relevance of (particular) potential comparisons prior to interpretation. In other words, before deciding what to say about a set of ancient figurines, we would assess the relevance of any perceived resemblances to other figurines.

This is a perilous agenda. Archaeological evidence, it is widely agreed, is theoretically constituted.[1] In that sense, "evidence" cannot precede "interpretation." It is helpful, however, to view the analysis of figurines as a process with certain characteristic steps. Although all evidence is infused with theory, observations of figurines become increasingly loaded with theory during the course of analysis. Perhaps, then, the relevance of comparisons across contexts could be assessed early in the process when numerous interpretive paths are still available.

I suggest that the proper moment for such considerations is before material patterns are reformulated into the social terms from which interpretations are constructed. Pausing at that point, the analyst can glance ahead to a set of questions that are repeatedly posed of images. Scholars working from diverse theoretical perspectives ask similar questions because images – as material objects that depict something not present – elicit a characteristic set of questions. Although the entire set is worth posing, particular images may invite one question but discourage another.

A crude analysis of a fifteenth-century painting by Andrea Mantegna – actually, the mere beginning of a full art-historical analysis – illustrates the type of logic I use. The center of attention in Figure 1 is a scantily clad man shot full of arrows. We would never dream of interpreting this as an image of, for instance, the ideological constitution of masculinity in fifteenth-century Italy, even if that were a topic in which we were intensely interested. Instead, we identify the specific, named subject of the image: St. Sebastian at the moment of martyrdom. Of course, our identification in this case is aided by a rich documentary record that is unavailable for prehistory, but images invite certain types of interpretive statements and hinder others.

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Figure 1. Andrea Mantegna, *St. Sebastian*, ca. 1457–1459. Oil on wood, 68 by 30 cm. Image courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

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This painting demands iconographic analysis. The clothing (or lack thereof), the arrows jabbing out at all angles, the upward lift of the face, and the incongruous setting of the figure amid Classical architectural ruins lead us to dismiss any thought of the image as an illustration of an ordinary person of Mantegna's time. Much can be said of this brilliant, quirky image (note the form of a horseman in the cloud in the upper-left corner), but identification of the specific, intended subject of the painting is essential. When the observable features of this painting prompt us to ponder one question ("Who is depicted here?") instead of another ("How did fifteenth-century Venetian artists conceive of the masculine social self?"), we narrow the field of possible final interpretations – in both form and content – without having yet produced our answer ("St. Sebastian"). It is in this sense that empirical considerations can be brought into play "prior" to interpretation.

My purpose in this study is to systematize such observations as an aid to assessing the relevance of resemblances between contexts. The results are abstract, framed in terms of likelihood and probability. If figurines that resemble one another invite different questions from an analyst, then the resemblances are most likely superficial and irrelevant. If figurines in two cases instead elicit the same question (e.g., "What specific subject is depicted here?"), then even if the final interpretations are different, the modes of analysis employed and the general form of eventual answers are likely to resemble one another. An initial perception of resemblance in that case has a richness likely to yield interpretive similarities even among analysts working unbeknownst to one another.

These are the types of considerations that I enlist in my assessment of the interpretive relevance of similarities across contexts. My discussion pursues several interlocking goals. I develop a framework for the comparative analysis of prehistoric imagery, focusing particularly on the challenge of linking evidence to interpretation (Chapters 1–3). I also seek to establish the legitimacy – and, indeed, the importance – of three specific domains for cross-contextual interpretive work. Each case study (Chapters 4–6) addresses one of those domains. The three case studies constitute the major part of the book. The motivation in part is to give the analytical framework a difficult "test drive" in which both its possibilities and limitations become clear. However, I hope also to prove the framework by making substantive contributions in the case studies. My specific topics are: (1) Is there likely to be any cross-cultural explanation for femaleness in prehistoric figurines?; (2) What can we say about "Formative figurines" (from Mesoamerica) as a general phenomenon, and how should such statements relate to the interpretation of individual collections?; and (3) Should "goddesses" play a role in a narrative of Neolithic figurine making in the Near East? In the remainder of this introduction, I situate the research program with respect to a series of larger endeavors.

Pluralism in Archaeological Theory

My efforts here are inspired by a widespread recent trend toward pluralism in archaeological theory, particularly the idea that different approaches to understanding the past might be complementary rather than simply competitive. During the 1980s, competition reigned supreme. Archaeology appeared starkly disunified, divided into competing bastions of virtually incommensurate theories and methods.[2] A *processual* tradition viewed cross-cultural models that explained key transformations in social life – the origins of agriculture, the rise of urbanism – as the highest goal of the field. In contrast, a postprocessual, or *interpretive*, tradition viewed all cross-cultural generalizations with skepticism and emphasized instead the pervasiveness of meanings – understood to be unstable, contestable, and specific to an individual culture.

In the 1990s, that antagonism ebbed away.[3] Some investigators now find grounds for unity: Peter Kosso in the way arguments are constructed, Christine VanPool and Todd VanPool in

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an adherence to science, properly construed. Timothy Pauketat perceives the emergence of a new paradigm that transcends the opposition between processual and interpretive approaches.[4] Other scholars emphasize continued disunity but cast it in a positive light. Michelle Hegmon finds that "instead of theoretical animosity, there is refreshing dialogue." In her view, "theoretical disunity" is a source of "dynamism."[5] Allison Wylie argues that both processual and interpretive archaeologies recognize archaeological data as theory-laden but still capable of constraining claims about the past. For Wylie, disunity among the sources that archaeologists draw on to formulate their arguments is actually the source of constraints on speculation, yielding a "mitigated objectivity."[6] The prospect of disunity without rancor led Bruce Trigger to look toward a "pragmatic" theoretical future.[7]

In outlining a holistic theoretical synthesis, Trigger suggests that "although every early civilization was unique in its totality, some aspects were shaped by factors that were culturally specific, whereas others can be understood only in terms of cross-cultural generalizations."[8] Because the factors influencing social life are myriad and complex, satisfactory archaeological accounts of ancient societies require multiple forms of explanation. Thus, one challenge for a pluralist archaeology is how to choose among different interpretive strategies.[9]

Trigger's discussion provides an agenda for the comparison of prehistoric figurines. Any collection of figurines deserves to be richly *contextualized* – that is, studied as a unique cultural expression based on evidence from its context of recovery. Resemblances to other contexts might or might not be relevant, and they could conceivably be accounted for in different ways. There may be historical linkages among the contexts. Alternatively, resemblances could have been generated by similar causal processes unfolding independently in unrelated contexts. These two possibilities require different forms of explanation – *historicist* and *universalist* – to be selected as appropriate given a particular collection of archaeological materials.

I treat the processual and interpretive traditions pragmatically, as sources of conceptual tools to be drawn on as needed in the course of analysis. Although my efforts certainly fall into the school that Hegmon terms "processual-plus," I try to follow VanPool and VanPool's admonition to avoid reducing one approach to the other.[10] I address the issue of femaleness among prehistoric figurines by contemplating the possibility of a universalist explanation while simultaneously insisting that a potential analytical outcome must be that there is no common explanation for any perceived resemblances. I thus reject *both* the processual subterfuge of assuming that a common explanation must exist and shifting discussion to what that might be *and* the equally dogmatic interpretive denial that any common explanation could exist. Ideally, I would like to dismiss such theoretical presuppositions and look to the evidence in assessing the relevance of cross-contextual linkages. That goal, however, returns us to the acknowledgment – which Wylie identifies in both processual and interpretive traditions – that evidence does not exist before it is interpreted.

Stability of Evidence in the Face of Theory

Archaeologists seek to investigate one phenomenon (ancient social life) by observing a very different phenomenon (the archaeological record). Translation between the two is thus a central task. Wylie finds that archaeologists draw on different types of information to achieve that goal. When the information has diverse sources, it is often constituted by different theories. As a result of such diversity, evidence is (sometimes) capable of constraining or even overturning the framing assumptions of theory.[11] Wylie identifies two particularly important sources of this mitigated objectivity: (1) the *security* of the background knowledge used to link material evidence to social

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inference; and (2) a condition of theoretical *independence* between background knowledge and inferential conclusions.[12]

I intend to grapple with the challenge of comparison by making systematic use of the ways in which figurines impose constraints on interpretation. Both independence and security have a role in the interpretive tools that I introduce. Because my focus is on a single class of object, any independence would be what Wylie calls "vertical" – that is, independence occurring along a single strand of inference from material pattern to social cause. The security of the tools that I introduce is quite modest – I posit no determinate links between material pattern and social cause – however, it is nonetheless significant.

My efforts to promote the constraining effects of figurines as evidence center on the framework described in Chapter 3. That framework does not introduce any new methods. The idea instead is to systematize existing practices in order to enhance the possibility that evidence might resist the impositions of theory. Images solicit characteristic questions (e.g., "What does it depict?") posed independently by interpreters pursuing different theoretical agendas. Furthermore, analysts answer such questions by drawing on established strategies for linking evidence and interpretation. These are *art-historical methods* and, to a considerable degree, they are independent of the theoretical issues at play in the interpretation of prehistoric figurines. Figurine analysts already exploit this independence in developing their linking arguments, but they do not do so systematically when deciding whether to compare.

My framework also addresses the security of linking arguments used to build from observations of figurines to social interpretations. For Wylie, one dimension of security is the credibility of an imported theory in the field in which it was originally produced.[13] Of course, art history is hardly a source of stable theory. It may seem surprising that I draw on traditional analytical perspectives from that discipline rather than the latest theoretical currents. That decision is deliberate, and I make it with an eye toward security. Sources of chronic tensions – such as "form" versus "subject matter" in art history – point to fundamental intellectual cleavages, even if the way that scholars conceptualize the divide is always changing.

Another source of security – particularly pertinent to the issue of comparison but again modest in absolute terms – is found in the process of building interpretations based on observations of figurines. In Wylie's formulation, one strategy for enhancing the security of a linking argument is to eliminate alternative possible linkages.[14] Again, my approach is limited in comparison; the intent of my framework is to provide a systematic means of identifying alternative linking strategies and gauging how productive they might be. The purpose is not to eliminate alternatives but rather to weigh their prospects. For instance, some prehistoric figurines, like Mantegna's *St. Sebastian*, demand a concerted iconographic analysis, whereas others discourage it.

Linking Contexts in a World Art History

My scheme is to map out possible paths available for the analysis of images. Qualities of (particular) images can invite one type of analysis while hindering another. The goal is to enlist such observations in assessing the relevance of (particular) cross-contextual comparisons before any final decision is made (in any given instance) concerning the path that the interpretation will take. In Wylie's terms, I am attempting to develop tools to enhance the stability of inferential arguments elaborated from prehistoric figurines, based in part on an appeal to art-historical analyses of images.

I describe the scheme in Chapter 3, but it is useful to comment here on how this study relates to recent efforts by art historians to reconceptualize a Eurocentric endeavor into a "world art history."

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For James Elkins, that task is "far and away the most pressing problem facing the discipline."[15] A glance at some of the different directions that art historians have taken helps to clarify my goals.

Clearly, a "world" art history constitutes an expansion of scope of the discipline, involving (among other things) an extension to contexts previously ignored. How will a single subject matter be constructed from this diversity? In other words, what sort of *linkages between contexts* will be identified in a world art history? Although art historians have answered the question in several different ways, I pursue only one.

First, contexts may be linked by the transfer of objects and ideas among them. For David Carrier, contacts between distinct aesthetic traditions (European, Chinese, Indian, Islamic) should become the new central subject of art history, with contemporary multiculturalism (rather than European modernism) the new vantage point from which we look back at the history of art.[16] However, such an agenda has little relevance here.

A second approach posits linkages between contexts based on human psychology – for instance, universal aspects of people's responses to images. David Freedberg seeks to develop such a *theory of response* by undermining the divide between "high" and "low" art and the disjunction between the image and the real world – for, repeatedly, across contexts, people treat images as if the prototype resided within them. What seems clear in the case of pornography should not be ignored in the study of high art. Art historians "need not be ashamed to see the image come alive; indeed, we should speak of it."[17]

Douglass Bailey draws on such perspectives in his recent study of prehistoric figurines from Southeastern Europe.[18] He inquires into the cognitive effects of the general characteristics of figurines, particularly their miniaturism, dimensionality, and anthropomorphism. This is certainly an important category of work for the study of figurines,[19] but it is not the direction I take here. One problem is that when applied to a particular context, an approach based on theories of cognitive response tends to yield little beyond generalities.[20] The problem is exacerbated by empirical challenges of prehistoric settings. Freedberg's stunning exemplifications of the "power" of images derive ultimately from the documentary record of people's behavior *around* images, not from the images themselves. With the documentary record absent, comparison of figurines between two contexts from the standpoint of a theory of response tends to lead to a restatement of what we already knew at the outset, once we had determined that figurines were present in the two cases.

It is a third approach to the linking of contexts in a world art history that, in my view, holds the most promise for addressing problems of comparison in studies of prehistoric art. In this case, linkages between contexts are provided by principles of art-historical interpretation. David Summers envisions a world art history achieved not through borrowing from other disciplines but rather through attention to the "continuities and patterns demonstrated in generations of art-historical practice and research"[21] – an agenda that, from our perspective here, holds out prospects of independence and potentially even security as a contribution to linking arguments on prehistoric figurines. Summers's principles are intended to facilitate contextual analysis. Their universality means that they can be enlisted as tools of interpretation in radically diverse contexts. Of particular interest is that – in contrast to approaches based on a theory of response – attention is focused on detailed scrutiny of the qualities of works.

Summers's principles take the form of a near-overwhelming variety of concepts. Some relations of constraint are posited between them. For instance, *distinction* involves features of an artifact superimposed on its *configuration*, with the latter defined as those characteristics that suited the artifact for the purposes for which it was made. Images are *real metaphors* in which one object stands for something that is not present. Summers details numerous possibilities for the elaboration

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of real metaphors.[22] Two gouges may be recognizable as eyes if they occur in *relation* to one another at the top of a rock, whereas three-dimensional shaping moves an object toward *figuration*. Putting a face on something enhances the *presence* of a real metaphor by creating a front and a back and by making it possible for the viewer to address the object face to face.

The delineation of concepts of this sort is helpful and it is wonderful to encounter numerous prehistoric examples in Summers's book. In contrast to Carrier, he clearly envisions a world art history that embraces the prehistoric. It is distressing, however, to find Summers's actual analyses of prehistoric works to be repeatedly disappointing. Speculation on original symbolism looms large. In the end, then, I have not followed Summers's approach in detail. In the framework for the analysis of images described in Chapter 3, I attend to what I view as important "continuities and patterns demonstrated in generations of art-historical practice," reaching back in particular to George Kubler and Erwin Panofsky to delineate a simple map of analytical modes.

Goals of This Study

A few words of clarification on the goals and stance of this study may help forestall potential misinterpretations. The fact that I contemplate ambitious cross-contextual questions and give detailed attention to figurines of different world areas should not be taken as an indication that I am proposing an all-encompassing interpretation of figurines. The tools I develop are meant to promote rather than stifle interpretation. My framework is a source of suggestions, not a machine that spits out finished products. Still, I am claiming that the analytical strategies developed can be applied to radically different contexts. Justification of that claim has led me to apply the strategies well beyond my primary area of expertise (Mesoamerica).

The contextualization of individual collections is and will remain the most fundamental analytical activity in the study of prehistoric figurines. Still, I hope to establish the importance of certain domains of interpretive work other than context-specific analysis. Because these domains are regularly ignored – or even rejected as illegitimate paths of inquiry – some critique of "business as usual" in figurine studies is a necessary part of my argument. In the skeptical stance I adopt herein, no one has "proven" anything in our social interpretations of figurines; we have merely "argued" this or that. I am particularly interested in how we might assess the relative strengths of such arguments. In fact, I view comparison of *interpretations* as a solution to the problems raised by the comparison of *figurines*.

Finally, although this is a book on archaeological theory, there is little "theory" in these pages. By that, I mean that there is no exposition of a social theory concerning how ancient societies operated. Even the three lengthy case studies do not yield detailed social conclusions. My focus instead is on interpretive theory. It is my claim that at this moment, to advance archaeological theory (broadly construed), what we need is not more (social) theory but rather deeper *analysis* in the service of the theories we already have. Although my focus is on the process of analysis rather than interpretive end-products, this effort is intended merely as a contribution toward that larger endeavor that is the social interpretation of figurines.

Organization of the Book

My first three chapters identify important conceptual resources. Chapter 1 reviews the checkered history of universalist logic in the interpretation of figurines and argues that procedures of hypothesis testing developed in processual archaeology constitute an important heuristic tool. The testing

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of a universalist explanation for female figurines identifies important domains for comparative work. Chapter 2 examines the emerging strategy of contextualization in the study of prehistoric figurines and explores its larger implications, including its opposition to universalism and its challenge to ambitious comparison. The way forward is to base comparison on contextualist principles. Although an oppositional tension between contextualism and universalism is inevitable, the two interpenetrate in the domain of rhetoric.

In Chapter 3, further attention to rhetoric yields a framework for understanding the interpretation of imagery and, derived from that, a guide to comparison. The basic goal is to take advantage of the way in which patterning in particular collections of figurines is propitious for the application of certain analytical procedures while simultaneously discouraging to others. Comparison thus can shift to an abstract level in which the question is no longer whether figurines from two different collections meant the same thing but, instead, how likely it is that analytical engagement with observed patterning will produce similar interpretations.

Chapters 4 through 6 each apply the framework to a distinct domain for comparative work. Universalist explanation at the largest of scales is the topic of Chapter 4, which assesses the likelihood of a common explanation for femaleness as a theme in Paleolithic figurines from Eurasia, Pre-Pottery Neolithic figurines from the Near East, and Formative figurines from Mesoamerica. Chapter 5 considers the use of universalist logic in context-specific interpretations, where it is often a critical link in the argument. The problem concerns the unexamined implications of such implicitly universalist claims for historically related cases of figurine making. Formative Mesoamerica provides a case study in which the goal is to enlist the framework proposed in Chapter 3 to adjudicate between competing general understandings of figurines.

Chapter 6 returns to the problem of grand history, a topic signaled in Chapter 1 as fruitful for comparative effort but one in which analysis ventures onto the perilous territory of the Goddess. My framework again has a role in that it can highlight the texture of figurine patterning across long time spans – texture that should prompt reformulated choices among analytical procedures. I ultimately separate the Goddess narrative from grand history as a category of analysis; we should discard the former but retain the latter. Indeed, to finally put the Goddess to rest, it will probably be necessary to make interpretive progress on the large-scale empirical resonances that form the characteristic subject of grand history.

Chapter 7 pulls the various strands of the argument together to contribute, first, to the general problem of how incomparable figurines are to be compared and, second, to the question of femaleness as a cross-contextual resemblance between figurines.

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Chapter 1

Universalist Explanation and Prehistoric Figurines

"The first god was a goddess!" proclaimed Etienne Renaud in 1929. A dozen tiny figurines from Arizona, perhaps two thousand years old, were the immediate inspiration for Renaud's "bold paradox." Just inches tall, they were roughly shaped in clay with crude facial features and punctate designs suggesting clothing or ornamentation. All had prominent, modeled breasts. To Renaud, these were "fetishes of the feminine principle of fecundity and reproduction" depicting "a goddess of life." He supported this contention by embarking on a world tour of ancient female imagery. The itinerary included Western Europe, the Balkans, Southern Russia, Anatolia, Cyprus, Crete, Egypt, and the Near East before he crossed the Atlantic again to finish in Nicaragua and Panama. In case after case, female figurines appeared in the most ancient archaeological strata. Surely, this revealed a deeply rooted "worship of the life-giving mother" and "betray[ed] the same psychology in primitive man of different continents."[1]

Renaud's article succinctly lays out a once-common universalist vision in the study of prehistoric figurines. The goal was to account for the perception that the earliest prehistoric figurines, everywhere, were female. Today, archaeologists are immediately suspicious of Renaud's sweeping cross-cultural generalizations. His drawings, in which a single image stands for each region (Egypt, Crete, Nicaragua), at best seem quaintly amusing. We now insist on serious attention to local variation and context. We also are suspicious of the assumption that the category "female" is stable across contexts. Ambitious cross-cultural explanations are regarded with skepticism. Faced with resemblances between contexts, archaeologists explain them in historicist terms (as the result of the direct transmission of ideas between contexts) or dismiss them as irrelevant.

Still, despite accumulated evidence and greater interpretive sophistication, the most ambitiously cross-cultural of Renaud's claims of resemblance have not quietly disappeared. Although no longer a center of attention, they nevertheless percolate on a back burner. At what we would now identify as the sites of early agricultural villages in many places – the Near East, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, parts of India and Pakistan, Mesoamerica, and parts of South and North America – archaeologists find small clay or stone figurines. They often identify the figures

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