ONE

THEORISING 'MEANING IN THE MAKING'

ANCIENT, PREHISTORIC OR PROTOHISTORIC ART?

When we think of 'ancient art', it is probably the architecture, sculpture and paintings of Greece, Rome and Egypt that come to mind. These are archetypes that form our vision of ancient art.[1] That they occur in literate cultures in which art and text go hand-in-hand is hardly a coincidence. As suggested in a recent Companion to Greek Art, Classical archaeologists 'would rarely, if ever, speak of the Athena Parthenos, a gold and ivory cult statue designed by the sculptor Pheidias, without referencing Pliny or Pausanias'.[2] Herein we find another clue to the apparent accessibility of the art of these cultures: that artists may also be named, in this case Pheidias. We might feel that this focus on what Smith and Plantzos call the 'triumvirate' of architecture, sculpture and painting is perfectly reasonable, if these art forms are prevalent, and their study produces rich results. The downside, however, is that it leaves 'much of the rest relegated to the ill-defined catch-all phrase of "minor arts"'.[3]

This bias towards 'major' over 'minor' arts becomes much more problematic when we try to explore other versions of ancient art: versions that may have little sculpture or painting to speak of, or that do not go hand-in-hand with texts. If we have in mind various kinds of prehistoric art, then of course by definition we will not have any kind of interaction between art and text to consider. If such art is then in a sense more isolated, lacking such interaction with other cultural outputs, does this make the treatment of prehistoric art

intrinsically more challenging? Presumably it does make it a different kind of exploration, if one of the main preoccupations of the Classical art historian, for example, is the relationship between art, literature and history.[4] Some prehistoric art is thus hardly treatable under the same rubric as Classical art if such considerations simply do not arise. And to go to some of the very earliest ancient art, in the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic, a division between major and minor arts makes little sense.[5] Yes, there may be some parietal art, but much of what we call art in these periods is small-scale and seems closely concerned with bodily adornment. Most art historians, with some interesting exceptions,[6] are unlikely to give it much attention.

Perhaps one solution is to separate (earlier) prehistoric from (later) ancient art. Yet, what happens to those forms of art that fall in between the two? A prime example is the art of the Bronze Age Aegean. With a timespan from c. 3000 to 1100 BC, it is a largely prehistoric period, though towards the middle part of the Late Bronze Age the deciphered Linear B script appears. Texts do occur in the Middle Bronze Age – Linear A and Cretan Hieroglyphic – but both remain undeciphered. Many of the specialists working in these periods certainly consider themselves prehistorians; and the field is habitually called 'Aegean prehistory', which has the advantage of including the Neolithic period within its broader research questions. In French scholarship, the term 'protohistoire' is used to capture the in-betweenness of the Bronze Age periods in the Aegean – still prehistory, but with texts nonetheless. Protohistory also conveys the sense of this coming a little before the 'history' of first millennium Greece – and of course, in the same geographical locale. Pre- and proto-historic scholarship tends to use the term 'Aegean' rather than Greek because it better incorporates coastal Anatolia, very much part of this world in the third and second millennia BC.

The art of the Bronze Age Aegean is sometimes included in general overviews of ancient Greek art – perhaps increasingly so.[7] Yet, Bronze Age art has little by way of sculpture, architecture and painting, certainly when compared to Classical Greece; and there are no named artists, and nothing by way of art–text relations. And as has been noted by Polychronopoulou, when Bronze Age art was first revealed, scholars struggled with how to treat it, settling on a description of Mycenaean art as a primitive precursor to the true arts of Classical Greece.[8] For the Bronze Age Aegean to be included in textbooks on Greek art involves a delicate balancing act between a recognition that these minor arts deserve attention in their own right, while at the same time they are being implicitly contrasted with the later major arts of the Classical period.[9]

My aim here is not to propose a radical demarcation of prehistoric, protohistoric and ancient art. What I do wish to highlight is the rather limited view of ancient art that comes from regarding it as so closely tied to text. If we are

concerned primarily with the relations between art, literature and history, then it is perhaps inevitable that the major arts come to the fore (since presumably minor arts will feature less in literature and history). But if we loosen this connection, and prise ancient art away from texts, then perhaps it becomes possible to construct a much broader sense of ancient art that can span prehistory, protohistory and history. For that matter, why stop there? Why differentiate something separately 'ancient'? This question is an interesting one, as would be the goal of uniting many different kinds of ancient art. This is not the aim of this book, though, as that becomes a far bigger project. My aim here is more immediate and modest: to use the evidence from the Aegean Bronze Age to show how it can very usefully disrupt some assumptions about ancient art. Arguably due to its transitional, protohistoric status, it attracts quite different kinds of scholarship – both art-historical on the one hand (perhaps in part stemming from its perceived status as pre-Hellenic or Classical archaeology), and anthropological on the other. Let us not pretend, however, that these distinct strands currently are in productive dialogue. The art-historical research lives quite separately from anthropological enquiry, in many cases. The art-historical tradition is mostly atheoretical, drawing little if anything from current art theory, and certainly not from anthropological theory; while the anthropological tradition is quite good at handling everyday material culture, but tends to avoid artworks. And yet by treating artworks and artefacts together using ideas from both art theory and anthropological archaeology, we might give ourselves new interpretative possibilities.

WHAT'S NEW?

The irony is that some of the above may not have seemed all that new in the mid to late nineteenth century. There was then already a reaction against the Enlightenment admiration of individual masterpieces. This was when the study of the past was essentially antiquarian, before the discipline of archaeology had formed. The antiquarian collecting of Classical Greek art in the mid-eighteenth century was led by Winckelmann's intellectualisation and appreciation of Greek ideals of beauty.[10] Outstanding pieces of great beauty were literally put on a pedestal and expected to represent the ideals of an entire ancient culture. The practice of collecting removed such pieces from their context, an act of isolation facilitating their fetishised appreciation. Those from Classical Greece could also, of course, be discussed in relation to the literature and history of the time, which provided a different kind of ideational if not material context.

What is then interesting is how the challenge to this pure, aesthetic approach came about at least in part through the archaeological discovery of prehistoric cultures. Johannes Ranke, for example, writing in 1879, and

influenced by the earlier writings of Gottfried Semper, argued that the everyday objects uncovered from prehistory should be included in our accounts of early art.[11] Others writing at this time, like Alexander Conze, expressed similar sentiments, as did Alois Riegl a little later. The 1870s were when Heinrich Schliemann embarked on his journey of remarkable archaeological discoveries in Greece, and this can hardly be coincidental. One might also consider the contribution of the anthropological collecting of all kinds of 'everyday' things at this time too, with Pitt Rivers the prime example.[12] All of these developments serve to underscore the 'materialist' approach of Semper.

Of course, part of the attraction for these scholars of getting to think about such minor arts was the possibility of charting evolutionary pathways in art's development. This seems common to both art history and anthropology, another sign of their relatively close relationship at this time. We can find in early works, such as those of Semper and Riegl, certain evolutionary ideas that some forms of art are more 'primitive' than others. The more primitive forms are those that remain close to the materials that inspire them – as in the example often taken from Semper, of geometric decoration deriving from basketry forms.[13] It is this phenomenon that is also identified in the Anglo-Saxon literature by Colley March and Haddon and dubbed 'skeuomorphism'.[14] Within the primitive societies in which such artistic expression exists, artefactual change comes about as a material prerogative, rather than through the expression of any individual mental genius. However, in more developed societies, with more advanced forms of expression, the material imperative is transcended by conceptually driven, more abstracted artefacts (i.e., major arts).[15] Change is then wrought by minds, not materials. This was a significant reversal that Riegl introduced to counter Semper's perceived materialism.[16] Rampley has argued that Riegl's countering of Semper was influenced by ethnography, yet another indication of the closeness of art history and anthropology at the beginning of the twentieth century; here too one should mention Aby Warburg, famously drawn to ethnography, and indeed also influenced by Semper.[17]

So, the inclusion of all kinds of seemingly everyday things in a reformed art history in the latter part of the nineteenth century might appear quite promising for the study of prehistoric cultures, including the Bronze Age Aegean. But with Riegl's influence, it led to an evolutionary framework in which the major arts of later, more evolved cultures were simply shown to develop from the minor arts of earlier, more primitive cultures. This gave a certain depth to art history, but of a kind that kept the prehistoric firmly in its place and on a quite different level from later cultures. When we look specifically at the Bronze Age Aegean and consider how the study of its art panned out over the early part of the twentieth century, moving from Schliemann's discoveries at Troy and Mycenae to Evans's at Knossos, it is interesting that the art historians who attempt an art-historical

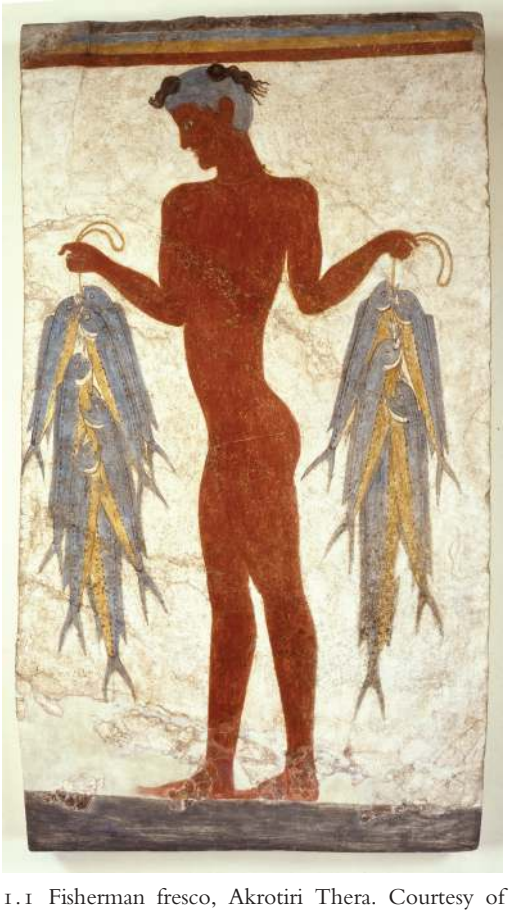
synthesis with these findings are largely working in the German tradition.[18] That is to say, they continue to follow this line from Semper, Conze and Riegl of the value of more everyday items, and not only major arts, which are of course somewhat absent from the prehistoric Aegean. Perhaps their accounts are excessively essentialising and 'mentalist', but at least they are going beyond Classical Greece to pursue art histories in what is essentially prehistory (especially at that time, before the decipherment of Linear B).

Thus, although the move towards the study of more humble materials initiated by Semper in the 1850s was in many ways very progressive, it found itself trapped within a mentalist, evolutionary framework that ultimately did not permit a rounded evaluation of prehistoric 'minor' arts. And this outlook did persist well into the twentieth century. But while the evolutionary and essentialising premises may have been shaken off, many of the mentalist assumptions seem to linger, with the notion that art is a prism, through which one can see more clearly and immediately into the minds of the ancients, still quite prevalent. One can even trace it through to works on Aegean Bronze Age art in the second half of the twentieth century, with Pierre Demargne's 1964 *Naissance de l'art grec*, to Reynold Higgins' 1967 *Minoan and Mycenaean Art*, and Sinclair Hood's 1978 *The Arts in Prehistoric Greece*. A persistent privileging of major over minor arts probably comes in part from the weight of Classical archaeology pushing back upon the treatment of these earlier periods. And we should not pick these works out for special criticism, since 'hylomorphism' – the idea that mind imposes form on material – continues to be a very common if implicit idea.[19]

THE LOCUS OF CREATIVITY IN MINOR/MAJOR ARTS

The problem with the privileging of exquisite artworks at the expense of more mundane objects is that it implicitly suggests that creativity lies in the former and not in the latter. It also reinforces the notion that the locus of creativity is in some mental domain, where ideas are generated and subsequently executed in material form. If one agrees with this, then it makes perfect sense to focus heavily on those artworks that appear to be the most abstracted from nature, as it is these that by extension ought to show the richest mental content. If it is the higher arts that are more mentally pure, then it is these that we should focus upon if we really wish to transcend the material and get to the ancients' thoughts and beliefs. But let us pause for a moment and see what this does for our understanding of Aegean Bronze Age art. Let us take the Aegean art form that is so often credited with a kind of artistic freedom and creativity – the Theran wall paintings.

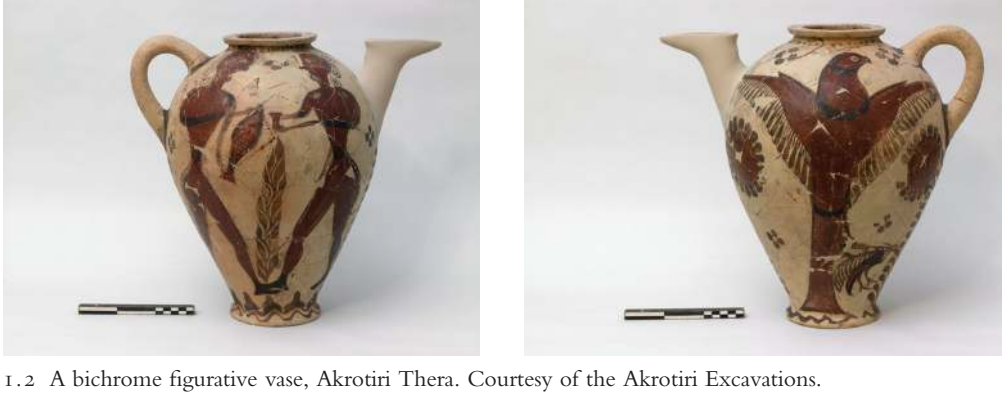
Within a representational paradigm, it seems quite logical to see these objects as the most expressive form of art in the ancient Aegean (Figure 1.1).



1.1 Fisherman fresco, Akrotiri Thera. Courtesy of the Akrotiri Excavations.

They appear to come from nowhere – figurative painting at this scale is entirely new. We even read sometimes of these including the first life-size male nudes in the history of art. With the creation of line seen in such painting, surely it is acceptable to say that we are witnessing a release from material imperative, and the freedom of creative choice? And when the freedom of movement in Minoan wall painting is contrasted with the rigidity of Egyptian examples, we see the dream of the distant roots of Western art subconsciously expressed.[20] It has been further argued that other existing art forms – minor ones, of course – are somehow rendered mute and lose their innovative edge in the face of this artistic move, with seals now merely recapitulating narrative scenes devised in the medium of fresco.[21]

In this way, the Theran wall paintings are placed on a pedestal and revered as major arts. This might be seen in some sense as a progressive move, because at least it does recognise that this prehistoric society was capable of major arts, which are not the sole preserve of the later historical periods of Classical Greece. But these frescoes are anything but typical of the artistic output of the Bronze Age Aegean. They are relatively few and far between, with a high concentration in one place in one period (Thera, Late Minoan IA). Artistic expression goes way beyond the frescoes, despite the disproportionate attention they receive. And far from rendering mute other art forms, as Blakolmer suggests, the other side of the coin is that they owe their emergence to a preexisting tradition of figural representation, particularly in glyptic; hence the transfer from three dimensions to a two-dimensional form was a development embedded in this tradition.[22] Indeed, some of the earliest figural frescoes, the acrobats and bulls from Knossos, are in high relief,[23] and so could quite conceivably be connected to the long tradition of relief carving in stone. Moreover, the Theran wall paintings are prefigured by narrative scenes on pottery, with a tall jug bearing a scene of human figures pouring a libation (Figure 1.2), a bathtub with a hunting scene and a barrel jar depicting a griffin.[24] Figurative fresco, for all its



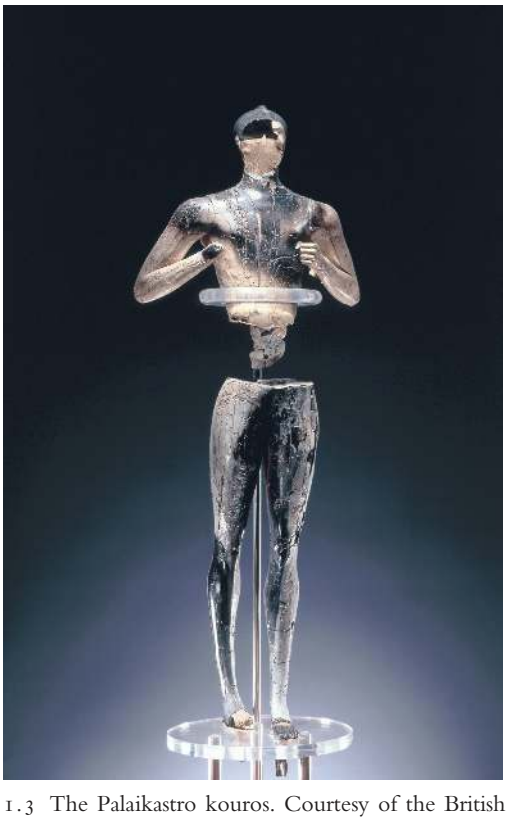
1.2 A bichrome figurative vase, Akrotiri Thera. Courtesy of the Akrotiri Excavations.

creativity, piggybacks on the figuration in glyptic, which rather robs it of some of its freedom, given the functional nature of some glyptic (for sealings used in administration), the closeness of seals to the human body, and their miniature scale, a form often dismissed as banal, playful or child-like.

For the Bronze Age Aegean at least, it makes little sense to ascribe creativity to the major arts alone. Not only are they few and far between, but the so-called minor arts see an enormous amount of creative change. When one looks at the variation and innovation in glyptic, for example, it becomes difficult to really think of it as in any way 'minor'. However, this is certainly not to say that glyptic is just as 'mental' and free from material imperative as wall paintings. The argument I develop in this book is aimed at escaping from this hopeless material vs. mental impasse. What I want to do above all is show **how** creativity is often played out *through* and *with* materials, not as some mentally transcendent (hylomorphic) exercise. In a way, it is to recognise that Semper was on to something. But while Semper's legacy, too, became mired in the hylomorphic way of thinking, what we must do to avoid this is carefully to lay down a model for the mind that shows how it extends into the material world.[25] A key part of this model is the idea of scaffolding, such that ideas can piggyback on, and emerge through, materials and material practices. There is some theoretical groundwork that needs to be done, and we will come to this later in the chapter. What I want to do first though – as I will throughout the book – is work through this idea of scaffolding with some Aegean Bronze Age examples.

SCAFFOLDING A MASTERPIECE?

We have already briefly discussed the Theran wall paintings as attracting a lot of attention as early examples of 'major arts' in a prehistoric setting. Another of the major arts, sculpture, is almost entirely missing from the Bronze Age Aegean – those sculpted pieces in stone that do exist are far too small or crude to warrant



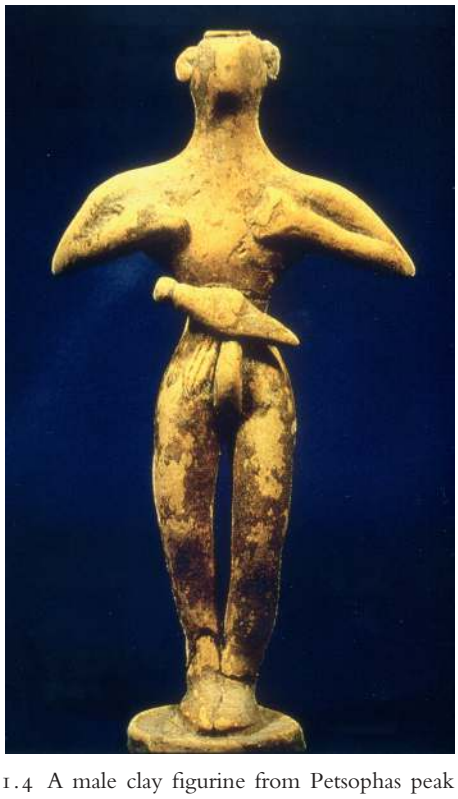
1.3 The Palaikastro kouros. Courtesy of the British School at Athens.

serious attention (or so the cliché goes). And certainly, there is none of the life-size or monumental sculpture so admired from Archaic and Classical Greece. And yet there is one piece that is not that far off – it may only be 50 cm tall, but the exotic materials and exquisite workmanship of the so-called Palaikastro kouros have garnered it the kind of attention usually reserved for major arts (Figure 1.3). It is without doubt an extraordinary piece – indeed it is utterly unique – and fully deserves our awe and admiration.

The figure is 'lithochryselephantine' – a composite creation with a stone head, ivory body and gold belt and sandals. The detail in the carving of its veined hands and feet is quite breath-taking. It was found in the Bronze Age settlement of Roussolakkos at Palaikastro, painstakingly excavated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and published in impressive detail.[26] The excavators believe that the building in which it was probably housed contained a shrine in the Late Minoan IB period. It was at the end of this period, c.1450 BC, that the building (and indeed much of the town) was destroyed by fire, with the kouros caught up in this destruction. The fineness of the figure's materials and craftsmanship contribute to the sense that this must have been a representation of a deity, a young male god. Moreover, it is hard to resist the notion that this was the product of considerable planning, design, creativity and imagination. In other words, an artist thought this through. It is an externalisation of sophisticated thought. The object's origin lies in the mental domain – this is where the creativity originated. The materials have bended to the artist's will, as demonstrated by the artist's ability to fit together such different materials as ivory, gold and stone. Thanks to the artist's clear mental mastery of the materials, it is as if one is encouraged to seek out the sophisticated mind behind the masterpiece – as if there may be new ways of thinking captured there, in turn stimulating creative response for living in new ways. Thus, 'art' as creative output can influence the course of events and contribute to our projects and goals in life and for life.

However, another figure found nearby bears the same pose of symmetrical hands to torso gesture,[27] but differs in being less tall, made of terracotta,

and with much less refinement and detail (Figure 1.4). The terracotta figure was found on the peak sanctuary of Petsophas, just above the settlement of Roussolakkos at Palaikastro, and so in all likelihood is a cult object, taken up to the peak by a worshipper and offered as a votive of some sort. The kouros was found in the settlement itself, in and next to what the excavators believe was a shrine. So, both are most probably cult figures, though the kouros is interpreted as a deity and the clay figure as a worshipper.



1.4 A male clay figurine from Petsophas peak sanctuary. Courtesy of the British School at Athens.

Neither the material nor the form of the terracotta figurine suggests any notable planning or forethought. It does not appear to be the product of a sophisticated mind. Indeed, its simplicity is such that one might even say a child could have made it. One would not say that the maker has mastered the materials – if anything, it looks as if the materials are dictating to the maker – the legs look just like two sausages of clay rolled out.[28] Given the relatively straightforward output, or effect, one assumes the viewer is not going to invest too much energy in discerning the cause – because there appears not to be a sophisticated mind behind this, and hence little scope for exploring new ways of living and being towards which that creative mind might lead.

While we might recognise that both objects 'represent' something, the kouros seems to represent something more complex. The terracotta figurine presumably worked perfectly well in a given cult practice, substituting for the worshipper – but the kouros suggests even a new way of thinking about that cult practice. It is this added content, or value, that presumably encourages us to think of the kouros as an 'artwork', but not the terracotta figurine. It does not just symbolise something – it raises the whole issue of what it means to symbolise.

And yet, the terracotta figurine is not derivative of the kouros; in fact, quite the opposite. The terracotta figurine is a precursor to the kouros and provides its context. There was a long tradition through the Early and Middle Bronze Age of worship at the Petsophas peak sanctuary, with many figurines of this kind deposited at the peak, presumably in some form of votive dedication.[29]