

Aegean Imagery and the Syntax of Viewing

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In his famous Oxford lecture on art history and the social sciences E. Gombrich commented on one of the differences between art history and archaeology with the following words:

“On a purely practical level the archaeologist is saved from the agony of selection by the relative scarcity of his evidence.”¹

In the case of Classical Archaeology this is undoubtedly true, although none of us would ever think that this relative scarcity of evidence has made the scientific pursuits of archaeologists in any way easier. As far as Aegean Archaeology is concerned, things are, however, more difficult since the agony of selection in fact turns to an agony of collection. Even after more than 100 years of intensive scientific research, the material, pictorial and written evidence remains too scattered, prohibiting in most cases a proper understanding of ancient realities. This fact has determined from the very beginning not only the ‘field of possibilities’ of Aegean Archaeology, but also its trajectory. The scarcity of evidence was one of the main forces that propelled the crucial turn toward archaeological theory since the early 1970s, initiating the most dramatic paradigm shift in the discipline’s history. Since then, Aegean archaeologists have been adopting a variety of theoretical models aspiring to fill some of the numerous gaps in the material evidence. Today, it is clear that Aegean archaeology has to invest in theory or at least in a sophisticated method of data evaluation and argumentation in order to reach the level of depth and complexity Classical Archaeology already possesses. Our sources are simply so fragmentary that they can be regarded not as a reflection but as a distortion of historical reality, if one confines himself to a purely descriptive method of what is preserved.

Despite this need for theory, the question that arises within the scope of our workshop on the social significance of images is whether a shift from a traditional history of ancient art to a theory-oriented archaeology of perception is possible. There can be no doubt that such an endeavour has some serious limitations. In an ideal case, the main objective of such an approach should be to reconstruct specific viewing situations, by focusing on the various devices that produced the viewing experience. Not the isolated image but the complex social interaction among image, viewers and context can be the only adequate approach, since the dominant meaning emerges from this social interaction. Borrowing and modifying a term from modern film theory, I would like to define the target of this kind of approach as the *visualistic apparatus*. In film theory, the term *cinematic apparatus*² refers to the traditional space of the cinema that includes a darkened theatre, the seating arrangement, the movie screen, the film projector, film and sound, and the psychological disposition of the spectator. The way in which the spectator is positioned within this darkened room between the hidden projector at the back and the screen at the front determines his sensual experience in the movie-viewing context: Here, a fictional world is disguised as something real in which he/she is participating as a passive observer. An Aegean visualistic apparatus would accordingly encompass the perceptual conditions to which the viewer was exposed: space, light conditions, the image carrier, the image itself, his/her psychological or intellectual disposition. All these elements guided the conscious focusing of sensory attention and determined the beholder’s visual experience³. Following J.L. Baudry’s analysis of the cinematic apparatus theory, one may ask in the Aegean context whether the material apparatus in which the images were embedded, produced specific ideological effects and to what extent these effects were shaped by the dominant ideology⁴. Our sources, however, do not allow for such a holistic approach. Without having the opportunity to access the viewer as a subject or his thoughts as written testimony and without being able to reconstruct a viewing situation in

¹ Gombrich 1975, 34.

² The term was coined by J.L. Baudry under the influence of L. Althusser’s concept of the ‘ideological state apparatus’, see Baudry 1986a; 1986b; further de Lauretis and Heath 1980; Heath 1981, 221–35; Stam et al. 1992, 145–49.

³ For an attempt to reconstruct an Aegean visualistic apparatus see the pathbreaking study of Palyvou (2000) on concepts of space in Aegean Bronze Age art and architecture; see also Palyvou in this volume.

⁴ Baudry 1986a, 288.

detail, we are forced to set a very modest aim. We have to develop explanatory models *a posteriori* (i.e. on the basis of the evidence at hand); models that take full advantage of our sources, yet without making things more complicated than they already are. If we want now to reduce the *visualistic apparatus* to its most basic elements, then we have to deal with the triangle of subject, object and predicate (viewer, image and the act of viewing). This basic triangle is neither an innovative theoretical construct nor an attempt to apply a linguistic approach to Aegean images. It provides, however, a very simple and effective instrument which will help me to structure my rather unsystematic considerations and marginal comments on the perception of Aegean imagery. My aim is not to provide a coherent theoretical model but a coherent matrix of methodological determinants that may help us to approach various aspects of spectatorship in the Bronze Age Aegean⁵. What about space? Within the framework of this ‘syntactic’ scheme for the explanation of Aegean visual language, space will be something more than a simple adverbial determinant. It will operate as the key variable for defining each of these three elements. Although I will try to discuss different types of images, in the last part of my paper I will focus particularly on mural paintings. Frescoes and stucco reliefs encourage an attempt to treat them in relation to their spatial context and provide therefore the most fertile field for the study of visual perception in the Aegean Bronze Age. Given the constraints of space, the treatment of the issues in all these cases is intended to be provocative and essayistic rather than systematic. My basic aim is thus to demonstrate the potential of these approaches and not to thoroughly exploit it.



FIG. 1 The Knossian Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco depicting an enthusiastic crowd (after Siebenmorgen 2000, fig. 66).

⁵ This approach is certainly one-sided, since it confines itself to the social framework of visual perception in Aegean societies. For a more comprehensive study of visibility in the Aegean Bronze Age, it would be essential to apply current methods of cognitive neuroscience for exploring the neurophysiological aspects of this communicative action, see for instance Clausberg 1999; Breidbach 2000; Singer 2004; Stafford 2004.

1. The Aegean viewer: the great stranger

Let us start with the subject, the viewer, this great stranger in the context of our enquiry. What do we know about the Aegean viewer? The first interesting thing is that we can see him. In the Knossian miniature frescoes, we see crowds attending – partly with enthusiastic gestures – what must have been a festival, athletic competition or ceremonial event⁶ (fig. 1). These people are not supportive figures, included only to give the scene some form of topicality⁷. They occupy a very prominent part of the entire composition, emphasizing the communal character of the picture⁸. It is worth exploring the meaning of this composition, since depictions of an audience are extremely rare in ancient imagery⁹, yet a thorough discussion of this issue would lead us far beyond the scope of the present paper. What is most significant, is that these spectators were not necessarily identical with the viewers of static Aegean images. A laconic observation by T. Palaima brings to the point what we know from many ancient cultures and can take as social fact in the case of Aegean societies: “Iconography offers little evidence about the cultural attitudes of rural shepherds”¹⁰. In an Aegean context, we can even go a step further by assuming that the iconography at our disposal offers little evidence of the cultural attitudes of the ordinary people of an urban center such as Knossos or Mycenae. Why actually? A common feature of both cultures is the enigmatic absence of images in public spaces. If we leave aside the religious sphere and the countless statuettes which filled the open and closed spaces of Minoan and Mycenaean cult sites, the domestic and sepulchral spheres in both societies remained virtually aniconic. The only exceptions to this rule come from the very beginning and from a very late moment of Mycenaean culture: the grave stelae¹¹ and the Lion Gate relief¹² at Mycenae (fig. 2). In apparent contrast to the contemporaneous Near Eastern cultures, Bronze Age Aegean societies lacked a tradition of life-sized or monumental sculpture¹³. The only medium or large size images known to us are frescoes and stucco reliefs which – given their delicate nature – were, as a rule, displayed in the interior of palaces or elite buildings. As such, they addressed only a limited audience, the resident elite and its guests, i.e. other elite members or high officials¹⁴. Consequently, the perception of painted images in the Bronze Age Aegean was mainly a privilege of the upper classes¹⁵. The populace of Minoan and



FIG. 2 The Lion Gate Relief from Mycenae: a rare instance of an image in a ‘public’ space (after Marinatos and Hirmer 1973, pl. 163).

⁶ Evans 1921, 527–28, fig. 384; 1930, 33, fig. 15 B; 35–36, fig. 18; 46–60, figs. 28–35, pls. XVI–XVII; Immerwahr 1990, 63–67.

⁷ Lorenz 2007, 677; further Lorenz 2008, 187–201.

⁸ See Laser 1987, 83: “Das Publikum ist der eigentliche ‘Nährboden’ des Agons”; see also Panagiotopoulos 2006a, 131.

⁹ For the most significant examples of the very weak evidence see the enthusiastic crowd attending the funeral games for Patroklos on the Sophilos dinos (Boardman 1974, 18, fig. 26) and the attendants of athletic games depicted in some Etruscan tombs (Herrmann 1992, 87, fig. 1). For the issue of spectatorship in Roman art see Lorenz 2007. In the latter case we deal however with human or mythical spectators who fulfill the role of ‘commentators’ on the images’ semantic content, guiding the real viewer “how to look at what is depicted” (Lorenz 2007, 666, 672).

¹⁰ Palaima 1999, 370.

¹¹ Karo 1930, 29–35, pls. V–X; Younger 1997.

¹² See recently Blakolmer 2011, 68–71 (with references to previous research).

¹³ The large terracotta statues from the ‘temple’ at Ayia Irini on Keos (Caskey 1986) comprise the single exception to this rule.

¹⁴ A very useful hermeneutic tool for the interpretation of frescoes and stucco reliefs embellishing the representative rooms of elite buildings is provided in Hillier and Hanson’s classical study on the social logic of space, in which different patterns of encounter between inhabitants and strangers/visitors have been explored, see Hillier and Hanson 1984, esp. 17, 19, 82, 123, 140, 146, 163–97. J. Berger’s comment on the role of Renaissance painting as ‘symbolic capital’ for its proprietors may also help us understand the significance of these images for the spectator-residents of Aegean palaces and elite houses: “The pictures in a Florentine palace represented a kind of microcosm in which the proprietor, thanks to his artists, had recreated within easy reach and in as real a form as possible, all those features of the world to which he was attached”, see Berger 2008, 80.

¹⁵ This assumption is based on the traditional understanding of the function of Minoan palaces as exclusive and not integrative social spaces, see Panagiotopoulos 2006b, esp. 32–35.

Mycenaean urban centers and settlements seems to have lived in an un-pictorial social landscape, which contained only miniature-size images on seals, seal rings, or medium-size images painted on pottery, carved in stone and ivory relief or shaped in figurines from several materials. Given this fact, one may wonder to what extent the masses really participated in and identified themselves with the elite's visual language and shared remembrance. We may assume that this iconic void in the public sphere was filled by other types of 'images'¹⁶. In a pre-modern society lacking a pronounced visual language in public spaces, architecture may have fulfilled beyond its specific practical function an iconic one, serving as a substitute for the missing pictures. For instance, the Cyclopean fortification of the Mycenaean citadels possessed a very strong iconic quality, serving not only as a defensive device but also as a massive border between elite and common people, thus cementing social inequality. Ritual or public performances, on the other hand, produced ephemeral, yet powerful images. On certain festive occasions, such motion pictures filled the neutral social space with dramatic action.

If we now suppose that the target audience of Aegean images was the wealthy elite, then it becomes apparent that the social distance or the social tension between the patron of the images and the spectator must have been drastically reduced or even abolished, since both of them came from the same social group. The future observer had probably already played a role in the conception of the work and could easily identify himself with it. This introverted aspect of Aegean imagery which applies to most of its pictures is crucial for understanding what most of them really aimed at. They 'lived' in segregated spatial entities, in closed and self-contained areas which shaped the living space of Aegean elites. The images did not intend to inform, impress, guide, awe or even frighten ordinary people. They reflected the life and collective memory of the privileged classes, satisfied their elevated aesthetic demands or responded to specific ritual necessities. Even if this observation is nothing terribly new, it may open up a new perspective on how to understand the extreme ambiguity of Aegean imagery. Gods, mythical heroes (?) or significant mortals appear as a rule without any distinctive attributes engaged in activities that are not easily defined¹⁷. The artists seem to have omitted many details because they were redundant from the perspective of the cultivated viewer, thus leaving for the ignorant archaeologists a series of unsolved enigmas of identification¹⁸. In this respect, Minoan and Mycenaean imagery remained throughout their history essentially 'unhistorical'¹⁹.

2. The image: toward an Aegean *decorum*?

If we turn from the subject to the object of visual perception, i.e. the image, we move onto much firmer ground, even if it is hard to tell whether we will ever be able to understand its *raison d'être*. Aegean images comprised a semantic skin covering the neutral surface of buildings and artifacts and filling them with meaning. The unbroken bond between images and their bearers resulted in a specific manner of visual presentation, a specific materiality and a specific social function that determined their 'iconic energy'²⁰. In previous research, the thematic ideas of this versatile visual language have been intensively treated either in isolation or as a whole, so that it is truly difficult to provide a substantially new insight into their manifold symbolic

¹⁶ This term is used here in its broad sense including not only 'works of art' but also architecture and performances.

¹⁷ For the ambiguity of divine images see Blakolmer 2010, esp. 40: "Hence, only in few cases does the Aegean vocabulary of iconographic formulae allow a relatively clear definition and delimitation of a deity, whereas in most instances we have to deal with generic anthropomorphic figures"; also Blakolmer 2010, 43: "Especially the evidence of Late Minoan and Mycenaean clay figurines elucidates that the goddess' image was treated by artists as an iconic stereotype of sanctity and, therefore, does not allow any further conclusions about any individual deity"; see also Blakolmer 2010, 50–56.

¹⁸ Contrary to Blakolmer (2010, 56) who assumes here an 'intentional ambiguity' which allegedly enabled the adorants to recognize in an unspecific divine image whichever deity they wished to worship, it seems more plausible that this ambiguity is a problem of our etic perspective. There can be little doubt that a generic divine image standing in a specific sacral context was recognized by worshipers with consistency as a particular deity.

¹⁹ For the use of this term see Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, 186: "Cretan civilization is unhistorical not only in the sense that the modern historian happens to be unable to write an articulate account of its past, a record in which events and personalities have name and character, but because it lacked the desire for monumental statement, pictorial or otherwise. We find no interest in single human achievement, no need to emphasize, to rescue its significance".

²⁰ Stoellger 2008, 186. As to their social function, Aegean images – and most ancient images generally – must have been symbolically 'ordered' and employed with a distinct intention in a clearly defined horizon aiming at an unambiguous affect on the spectator. Stoellger (2008, 188) characterizes such images as 'dependent' and juxtaposes them to 'independent' ones which are not subject to any specific intentionality.

contents. Therefore, I would like to concentrate on the rather neglected, yet crucial matter of the cognitive framework that regulated the production, display and circulation of these images. The richness of the artistic vocabulary, the evident sense of a thematic and stylistic freedom and the unconventional subject themes have lead researchers to the implicit assumption that in Minoan art ‘anything goes’. This is however not true. A closer look at Minoan visual language reveals a series of rules or limitations in action. These rules seem to have operated at different levels, including subject matter, style, bearer and position of an image and became even more pronounced in Mycenaean imagery. The boundaries or unwritten rules of Aegean artistic production – that were probably shaped gradually over several generations or even centuries of unbroken tradition – may be defined as an elementary form of *decorum*²¹. An Aegean *decorum* could be comprehended at a very general level as a set of principles determining the appropriateness of subject, style and location of an image²². Let me provide several examples covering some of the aforementioned levels.

One of the main precepts of the Aegean visual *decorum* determined the relationship between images and writing. What immediately springs to mind when considering the history of the two main communicative codes of the Aegean Bronze Age is the fact of their absolute separation. Apart from the occasional combination of seal impression and inscription on Minoan and Mycenaean nodules and some very isolated exceptions of drawings on the versos of Linear B tablets²³ or inscribed vases with painted decoration²⁴, texts and images did not coexist. It is important to stress that even in the sporadic cases of juxtaposition of the two media in Minoan and Mycenaean administration, seal motifs and inscriptions seem to have conveyed different kinds of information without ever referring to each other. In sharp contrast to most Near Eastern cultures, writing never penetrated the hermetically closed and self-contained sphere of pictorial representation, either for labeling or for commenting on an image. Why texts and images lived two separate lives in the Bronze Age Aegean is hard to tell.

The constraints of an Aegean *decorum* also become tangible in the case of pottery decoration. A remarkable phenomenon in the history of Aegean crafts is the persistency of pottery painters in avoiding human and animal figures in action²⁵. For more than sixteen centuries Minoan and Mycenaean potters embellished their clay vessels with charming linear, floral or even animal motifs in a rich variety of complex compositions (fig. 3). These motifs may in some cases have had a symbolic content, yet they were void of any activity²⁶. Only with the emergence of the pictorial pottery in LH IIIA did vases become bearers of active pictures²⁷. Seeking an explanation for what appears to be an absolute term in most parts of the history of Aegean pottery, we can only assume the existence of a strict hierarchical relationship between the vase’s shape and decoration. In this branch of craftsmanship, decoration seems to have fulfilled nothing more than the role of a delightful skin covering the vase’s surface and remained always the subordinated element²⁸. This is a dramatic contrast to



FIG. 3 ‘Marine Style’ amphora: pottery decoration as a delightful skin covering the vase’s surface (after Siebenmorgen 2000, fig. 189).

²¹ On the essential Roman value of *decor* or *decorum* (‘appropriateness’) see Perry 2005, 28–49.

²² The determining influence of the patron’s intension(s) was part of this set of rules, see Hägg 1985, 209–10.

²³ Palaima 1992, 64–71, pl. XX. Following Palaima’s thorough comments, it becomes apparent that in most of these cases the verso drawings were not inspired by the recto texts.

²⁴ Raison 1968, 184, no. Z 1715, pls. CXVI–CXVIII. In this case, the ‘image’ is nothing more than a combination of abstract motifs. The same also applies to the linear decoration of inscribed stirrup jars.

²⁵ According to Schiering (1998, 216, 227) the main reason for this phenomenon was the vases’ convex surface that provides an unsuitable field for the depiction of humans and most animals.

²⁶ A notable exception to this rule is the unusually rich body of pictorial pottery from Akrotiri which reveals a distinct tendency towards ‘active scenes’, see Marthari 2000.

²⁷ Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982.

²⁸ For the visual perception of pottery decoration which was heavily determined by its three-dimensional bearer see the enlightening comments by Müller 1925, 117–19.

black- and red-figure Attic vases which despite their uncontested practical and aesthetic quality were degraded to bearers of images of mythical, ritual or profane action²⁹. The remarkable iconic turn of pottery from LH IIIA to LH IIIC with the emergence and flourishing of the ‘pictorial style’³⁰ is not easy to explain (fig. 4). The suggestion that this development can be explained by the decline of other artistic traditions of affluent visual language, such as frescoes and seal carving, is not very convincing³¹. The principal motor behind this phenomenon must have been a new *habitus* of a specific social class which began to employ mythical and/or historical images for its self-representation in new arenas of social interaction. These images seem therefore to suggest the emergence of a ‘private taste’ that was independent from palatial fashions³².



FIG. 4 Mycenaean pictorial pottery (after Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, pl. IV.49): expression of a new ‘private taste’?

What about style? A conceptual framework determining the appropriateness of style seems to have influenced the various modes of visual representation on different media. In the context of Aegean societies, an imaginary *paragone*³³ debate would have had an uncontested winner: not painting but relief and sculpture. It is apparent that each of the main branches of Aegean artistic production adopted and preserved throughout its history a distinctive mode of visual representation ranging from a perfect *mimesis* of real life to a total distortion of the same. Minoan stucco reliefs stick to a very naturalistic rendering of human and animal bodies³⁴. The same applies to carved or engraved reliefs and sculpture made out of stone, clay, ivory and other materials, which despite their small or even miniature size, display a remarkable interest in human or animal anatomy and motion³⁵. The absolute masterpiece of this tendency to realism, the ‘Palaikastro kouros’³⁶ (fig. 5) reached a level of naturalistic imitation which can only be compared with late Archaic and Classical sculpture³⁷.



FIG. 5 The ‘Palaikastro kouros’, detail of the left arm: a *tour de force* of Minoan realistic depiction (after MacGillivray et al. 2000, pl. D, b).

Two-dimensional images, on the other hand, developed a strongly conventional style of rendering. Even in the heyday of Minoan naturalism, the outline of a figure received much more attention than the body it enclosed³⁸. These images owed their arresting vitality not to a detailed *mimesis* of nature but to a spontaneous and fresh rendering of form and motion through vibrant lines, while the surfaces of humans, animals and plants show a uniform color without any internal markings and thus are stripped of any kind of realism³⁹ (fig. 6).

²⁹ Schiering 1998, 213–16, figs. 65–66.

³⁰ On the pictorial style see Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982; Sakellarakis 1992; Crouwel and Morris 1996; Hiller 2006.

³¹ Younger 1981, 270; 1987, 58; Rutter 1992, 62.

³² Cf. the more or less contemporaneous development of a sepulchral imagery that in style and subject matter diverged from palatial artistic principles, Panagiotopoulos 2007, esp. 212. For ‘official’ vs. ‘private’ art see further Hägg 1985, 209.

³³ The term refers to the heated debate among Renaissance intellectual circles over which art, painting or sculpture, was superior in imitating the forms of nature more successfully.

³⁴ Snijder 1936, 42–44.

³⁵ Schiering 1998, 227.

³⁶ Musgrave 2000.

³⁷ A group of stucco reliefs depicting forearms and hands from the Knossian palace (Evans 1930, 504–7, figs. 350–52) clearly demonstrates that the stunning anatomic accuracy of the ‘Palaikastro kouros’ was not a unique achievement but rather an artistic tendency in Neopalatial Crete.

³⁸ Nevertheless, human figures are depicted in some cases without any proper outline, see for instance the Fishermen from the West House at Akrotiri; cf. further Cameron 1975, 387; Hood 1985, 24.

³⁹ For the first ingenious stylistic analysis of Minoan naturalism in painting see Reisinger 1912, 15–16; further Snijder 1936, 34–35, 38–39, 41, who underlines the lack of any organic structure in the human and animal bodies which give the impression of stretchy, rubbery figures; see also Hood 1985, 24.

This specific conventionalism of Aegean two-dimensional images for which the term ‘colored silhouettes’⁴⁰ seems very apt indeed, can be effectively compared with the ‘silhouette art’ of Paleolithic cave paintings⁴¹. As for the pottery, we have – as already mentioned above – on the one hand an obvious preference for floral and marine motifs and on the other a neglect of animal and human figures. Aegean potters failed to develop a vocabulary for the representation of human and natural activity. When humans appear, they show a frightening degree of abstraction reaching in some cases the level of caricature⁴² (fig. 7). From the perfect mimesis, through naturalistic rendering and conventionalized style to caricature, the different branches of Aegean craftsmanship followed disparate trajectories. This stylistic divergence cannot be attributed only to the crystallization of different professional idioms, in other words to different artistic traditions transmitted more or less unconsciously from generation to generation. In the case of Aegean vase-painters, the primitive style in which human figures were rendered was certainly not the result of inability but obviously of disinterest or intention. For them, a mimetic illusionism of naturalistic images was clearly either unimportant or inappropriate.

In a different social sphere, we can push these observations a step further by speaking not only about a *decorum* but also about the existence of a canon determining the appropriation of images. In daily administrative practices at Minoan and Mycenaean palatial centers, officials of various ranks used seals engraved with a wide variety of motifs. These motifs served in their majority as markers of personal identity, even if in some instances they could have been used to demonstrate the affiliation of an individual to a specific group⁴³. It seems apparent that within a closed and strictly hierarchical administrative system, the theme, style and quality of a seal image were to a great extent determined by the administrative or social status of the seal owner. Even if it is impossible to ascribe these motifs to eponym persons, it is more than obvious that the appropriation and use of a specific motif as indicator of personal or administrative iden-



FIG. 6 The expressiveness of Minoan ‘colored silhouettes’: wild animals in the fresco from Room 14 at Villa A of Hagia Triada (after Evelyn 1999, 111).

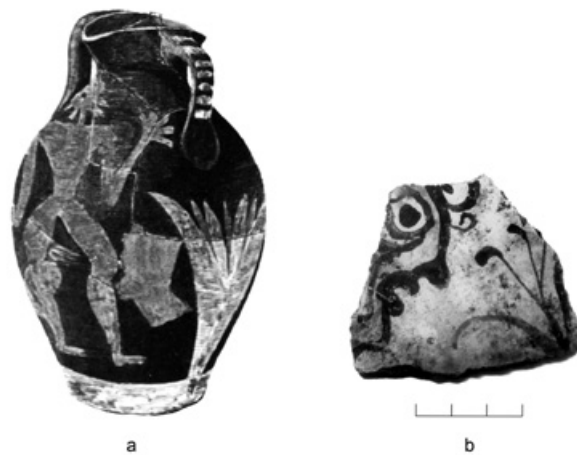


FIG. 7 Depictions of humans on Aegean pottery: **a:** amphora from Phaistos (after Walberg 1986, fig. 4); **b:** sherd from Akrotiri (after Marthari 2000, fig. 16).

⁴⁰ See Snijder 1936, 35 (‘farbige Silhouetten’).

⁴¹ Pigeaud 2005, 2007. See further Leroi-Gourhan 1992, 223: “the lines express the essential elements of the shape of the subject represented, without rendering the fine nuances of real, visible contours” (cited in Pigeaud 2007, 410); also Snijder 1936, 68. For the ‘primitive’ aspects of Minoan imagery see Hood 1985.

⁴² Schiering 1998, 200–3, figs. 54–56; further Poursat 1985, 52, figs. 1–3. For a notable exception, a beautiful female head depicted on a Palace Style amphora from Knossos, see Schiering 1998, 203, fig. 58.

⁴³ This is likely for the so-called ‘look alikes’, i.e. very similar yet not identical seal motifs which may have been used for indicating not a person but a family, clan or institution, see Panagiotopoulos 2010, 305.



FIG. 8 Viewing context and the symbolic content of an image: seal impression on a Neopalatial nodule from Khania (CMS V Suppl. 1A, no. 137).

tity was regulated by a sphragistic canon. There is a deep reservoir of relevant evidence from the Near East which makes evident that the seal's subject matter and quality were directly reliant on the administrative position of the seal owner⁴⁴. The most apparent demonstration of this principle in the Aegean world is the group of 60 nodules from Thebes⁴⁵. Here, the owner of the single ring among 14 different seals, which also shows the most elaborate design of the whole series, can be identified by means of the inscriptions as the most important individual among his companions, possibly a Mycenaean 'collector'⁴⁶. The regulated appropriation of images within the framework of a palatial sealing system clearly demonstrates that a study of Aegean images in isolation would lead us to a dead-end. Our main pursuit must be to embed these images in specific subsystems of social interaction in order to be able to comprehend their meaning. There is one very telling example which – in my view –

makes the necessity of embeddedness more than apparent, since it clearly implies that in some cases symbolic meaning was determined less by the theme and more by the position of an image within a cautiously woven web of visual representation. A Neopalatial nodule from Khania (CMS V Suppl. 1A, no. 137) bears a seal impression with the mirror-inverted depiction of two pairs of shepherds milking their sheep (fig. 8). Before we forejudge that Palaima's aforementioned statement is wrong⁴⁷ let us try to embed this motif into its original social context. Who can have stood behind this image? Nothing points to a person or a social group from the pasturelands on the Cretan mountains. The seal impression was made by a golden ring with highest quality engraving. The symmetrical duplication of the depicted action grants the whole composition an undeniable emblematic quality. The person who identified himself by means of this bucolic image was not a shepherd but obviously a high official from the palatial center of Khania. Even if it is not easy to elucidate the reasons behind the choice of the motif as the administrative fingerprint of a prominent individual, this piece possesses an exceptional two-fold significance. On the one hand, it reveals that the semiotic meaning of an image changed in different viewing contexts. On the other hand, it helps us to comprehend the uniqueness of Aegean imagery within the context of Bronze Age cultural traditions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. This uniqueness was not – or not only – a matter of subject or style, but of the social significance attached to specific motifs. The Egyptian art of the 18th Dynasty produced some remarkable representations of the natural world which are no less vivid and naturalistic than those known to us from the Aegean⁴⁸. Yet, these themes served always as background or complementary decoration to the main scene, never exceeding the level of 'secondary' motifs. What makes Aegean societies unique in the context of Near Eastern cultures is the fact that they employed such 'trivial' or unconventional themes for shaping the core of the elite's programmatic visual language. Through a new positioning, the motifs could acquire a new meaning and therefore a totally new dimension of social significance.

3. Viewing

In the last part of my approach, I would like to focus on the heart of the matter, namely the ways of viewing. The basic aim will be to very briefly discuss some of the factors that determined visual perception in the Aegean world. It is worth beginning with the aspect of size. Although treatment of the scale in which images were made may at first appear to be a not especially innovative approach, this aspect is both self-evident and important. Given the limits of time I would like to deal with only two types of images, the smallest and the biggest: on the one hand seals and on the other hand frescoes.

⁴⁴ Porada 1980, 10; Herbordt 1992, 159–60; Bleibtreu 1997, 92.

⁴⁵ Piteros et al. 1990. Unfortunately, the seal motifs of this extremely important assemblage of inscribed nodules remain unpublished.

⁴⁶ Piteros et al. 1990, 147–48, n. 128; 176, n. 317. The seal motif (E), one of the most emblematic scenes of Aegean glyptic, depicts an enthroned female figure flanked by a pair of griffins and a pair of 'Minoan demons', see Aravantinos 2010, 94, top row, middle.

⁴⁷ See *supra* p. 65.

⁴⁸ See for instance one of the masterpieces of Egyptian wall painting, the hunting scene in the tomb of Kenamun (de Garis Davies 1930, pls. 48–50).

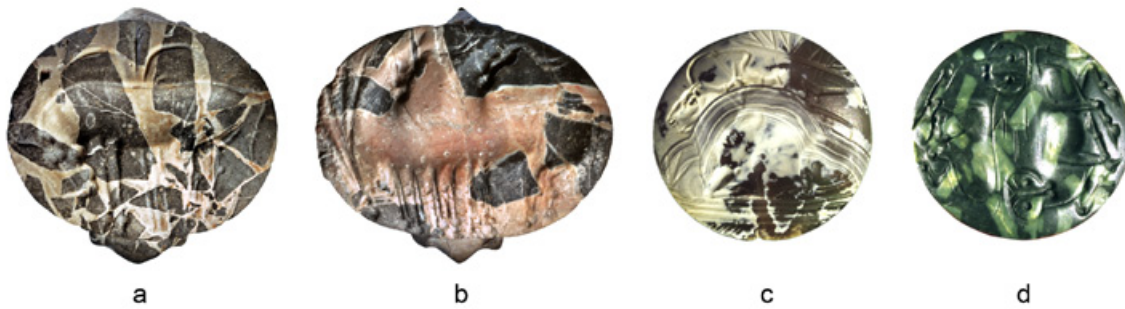


Fig. 9 The illegibility of seal images: engraved designs on seals made of colored or veined stones: **a:** CMS V Suppl. 1A, no. 197; **b:** CMS V Suppl. 1A, no. 198; **c:** CMS II.3, no. 271; **d:** CMS II.3, no. 310.

If we leave aside the purely decorative motifs, the vast bulk of Aegean iconography consists of seal images. We are used to studying this rich iconographic material in high magnification and tend to neglect the fact that it must have been extremely difficult for the ancient viewer to see these pictures. The problem arose not only from the miniature size of seals or sealings but was also related to the material on which seal images appeared. There were actually two possibilities for viewing these images, either on the original as a negative motif (intaglio) or on a clay sealing as a positive one. The engraved design on the seals was in many cases – especially on those made out of colored or veined stones – virtually illegible⁴⁹ (fig. 9). The positive design on the sealing was – in the case of a fine clay nodule – more discernible. Yet the sealings’ strictly profane context of use (the sphere of everyday administrative activities) did not provide an ideal setting for viewing an image. As J. Betts aptly expressed it: “The Cretan ‘office-boy’ was presumably not inclined to scrutinise each sealing with the precision of the modern scholar”⁵⁰. How can we come to terms with the fact that the vast majority of the Aegean action images known to us could not be properly seen by ancient viewers? This very upsetting fact can only be compared – admittedly in a quite different scale – to the inability of the Roman – and modern – viewers to see the Trajan’s column reliefs⁵¹. There is one simple way to untie this Gordian knot, by assuming, as F. Blakolmer has already suggested, that seal designs reproduced or – to be more specific – ‘extracted’ images from other art genres such as relief vases and large-scale stucco reliefs⁵². Yet this assumption can be valid only for a part and not for the whole of this rich imagery.

Turning our attention to mural paintings, we see a variety of scales, ranging from the so-called miniature frescoes, to under life-sized, to life-sized frescoes. The difference in size undoubtedly reflected a deliberate difference in visual impact. The procession frescoes, with their almost life-sized proportions and the formal arrangement of repetitive figures incarnated what we could describe as ‘monumental’ in Aegean art⁵³. The rigid procession scheme of figures exuding an air of dignity possessed an emblematic quality and aspired to impress the viewer. On the other hand, the medium-sized or miniature friezes with their great wealth of detail appear to have had a narrative intent and thus a didactic quality.

The systematic study of frescoes in their original viewing context appears to be very promising. In recent years, a long series of important theoretical advances on the issue of the manifold relationship between image and space were made in the field of Classical Archaeology. The main focus of these studies was not the naive premise of using imagery as a key for the interpretation of room function but an attempt to explore the ways in which images interacted with spaces and the viewers, and to elucidate the structuring of domestic space by means of an iconographic program into public/representative – private/intimate. The Heidelberg Institute of Classical Archaeology has been actively involved in this new discourse on ancient images. Two PhD dissertations under the supervision of T. Hölscher studied the symbolic functions of images in Roman houses,

⁴⁹ For the necessity to move the seal in order to be able to clearly discern the entire seal motif see Kyrieleis 1968, 8–9. According to Kyrieleis, this ‘cinetic component’ was intentional as it harmonically corresponded to the pronounced mobility of many seal images.

⁵⁰ Betts 1967, 21.

⁵¹ For the impossibility of proper visual perception and its implications for the communicative role of this monument see the enlightening comments by Settis 1992; further Baumer et al. 1991, 262–63.

⁵² Blakolmer 2010 and in this volume.

⁵³ On Aegean procession frescoes see among others Peterson 1981; Immerwahr 1990, 88–89, 114–18; Blakolmer 2007; 2008.

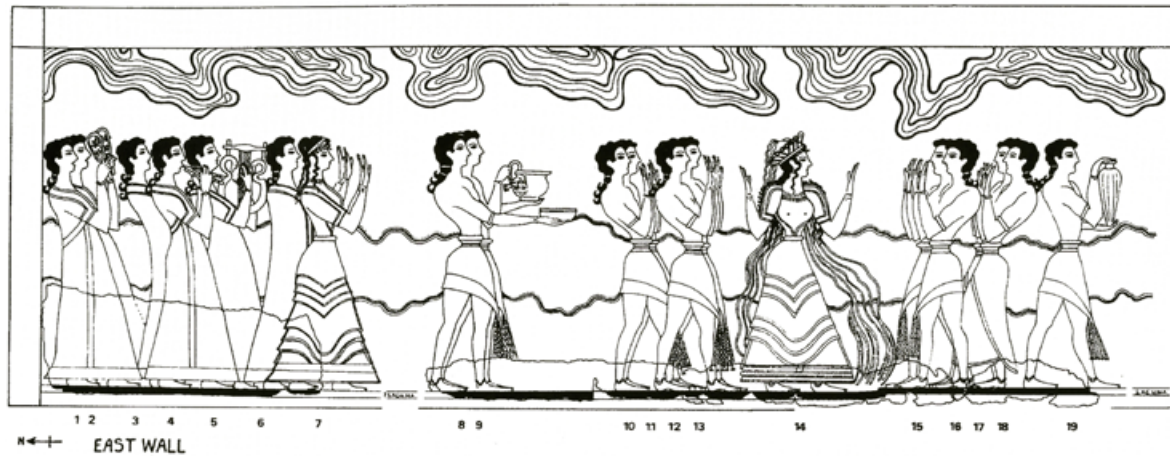


FIG. 10 Affirmative/enhancing images: the Knossian Procession Fresco. Reconstruction by M.A.S. Cameron (after Evelyn 1999, 229).

dealing with mosaics⁵⁴ and mural paintings⁵⁵. Both works launched different explanatory models for understanding the complex relationship between space, image and spectator. S. Muth classified the mythological themes of the mosaics into functional, socio-hierarchical and ambient⁵⁶. Expanding Muth's classification, K. Lorenz proposed a new taxonomy which referred not to the relationship between image and viewer but to the semantic ties linking images together. Taking the combination and mutual dependency of pictures in one room or building as basic criterion, she defined four types of semantic interplay: affirmative, complementary, contrasting and consecutive⁵⁷. Building upon these approaches, I would like to suggest a new and slightly divergent scheme for classifying Aegean mural paintings which is based on the relationship – or better the interaction – between image and its spatial context⁵⁸. If we look at these images from a purely spatial perspective (according to their meaningful relationship with the space which they decorated) we can postulate four categories⁵⁹: affirmative/enhancing, negating/contrasting, complementary and neutral/ambiental. The main purpose of this classification is to accentuate the functional character of Aegean frescoes⁶⁰ by showing in which ways the thoughtful combination of room and image produced a variety of spaces invested with different symbolic meanings.

1. Affirmative/enhancing images are in harmony with the practical function of a space and can thus only confirm or enhance this function by means of a visual statement⁶¹. A good example of a mural painting with an affirmative/enhancing capacity is the Knossian Procession fresco including life-sized male offering-bearers and some female figures, which occupied a large part of the long corridor leading from the West Porch Entrance to the heart of the palace⁶² (fig. 10). Being in full accordance with the function of the

⁵⁴ Muth 1998.

⁵⁵ Lorenz 2008.

⁵⁶ Muth 1998, 60–71.

⁵⁷ Lorenz 2008, 272–328.

⁵⁸ For two very insightful approaches to this important topic see also Palyvou and Güntel-Maschek in this volume.

⁵⁹ For previous attempts of a classification of Aegean frescoes on the basis of a direct relationship between depicted theme and room function see Hägg 1985; Marinatos 1984, esp. 32–33; 1985. Hägg and – to a lesser extent – Marinatos are convinced that the subject of the depicted scenes was somehow related to the rituals/activities taking place in the rooms. As demonstrated below, this is plausible only for some examples among the rich corpus of Aegean frescoes and stucco reliefs.

⁶⁰ See Marinatos 1984, 32–33. It must be stressed here that the definition of these four types remains arbitrary, since there are some grey zones between them, as indicated below.

⁶¹ Cf. Marinatos 1984, 32: “Ritual scenes depicting actual ceremonies which are carried out in the very room they decorate”. Following Marinatos, Palyvou (2000, 429) defines this form of relationship between space and image as a ‘projection’ technique: “It has been suggested that actions and rituals possibly taking place within the room are projected on the walls like a photograph, capturing a momentous event. [...] These pictures convey a very strong feeling of involvement: one might almost recognise oneself among the figures in the procession”.

⁶² Hägg 1985, 210–11, fig. 1; Boulotis 1987; Immerwahr 1990, 88–90, 174–75, Kn no. 22; Güntel-Maschek 2011, 132–34. For frescoes of affirmative/enhancing character in entrances see Güntel-Maschek 2011, 126–29, 131–32. Based on Cameron 1970, 165–66, Hägg (1985, 210–11) ascribes to the procession frescoes a second, more practical function as ‘sign-posts’.

corridor as the backdrop for such processions, the mural painting mirrored a specific ceremonial practice which was taking place in the very same locale. The fresco enriched or enhanced the atmospheric impact of this corridor that corresponded to a particular 'way of seeing'. The nexus of architectural context and image obviously allowed for a mimetic experience of the depicted action. The splendor and gravity of the procession participants, and the solemnity of the ceremony in which they were involved, induced the viewer/visitor to adopt a decent attitude.

2. Negating/contrasting images are in disharmony with the function of their spatial context and generate a kind of counter-space⁶³. A negating/contrasting function is apparent in the case of mural paintings decorating some small and dark rooms in palaces or elite houses that involve images celebrating nature⁶⁴ (fig. 11). These landscapes were sometimes enriched with an action image, probably representing a ritual. In all these cases the brilliant colors of the frescoes – even their subject matter – could be visually perceived mainly by means of artificial light. The dramatic contrast between the architectural space (a small dark room) and the subject matter of the frescoes (a colorful, vivid landscape), as well as the complete coverage of the walls' surface with a landscape picture, makes it apparent that the image negated the actual character of its architectural space by creating a different space.
3. Complementary images interact with the function of a room thus creating a third or virtual space consisting of the actual space and the space of painted images. The so-called Throne Room of the Knossian palace can be regarded as the ideal example for this third category (fig. 12). On the north wall of this room, a real throne is flanked by two antithetic griffins⁶⁵. Based on the common iconographic scheme of



FIG. 11 Contrasting/negating images: the Spring Fresco from Building Complex Delta in Akrotiri, Thera (after Marinatos and Hirmer 1973, pl. XXXVII).

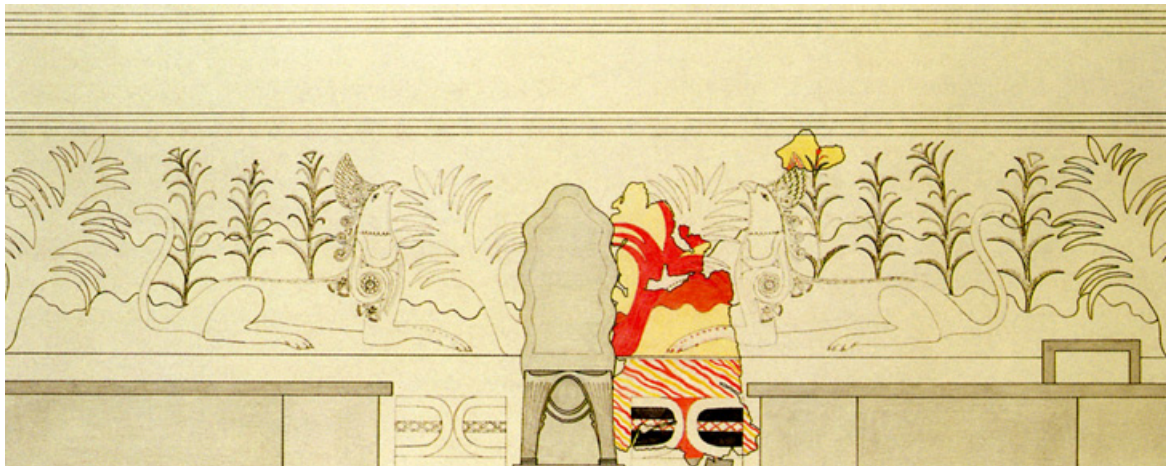


FIG. 12 Complementary images: throne and wall painting in the Knossian Throne Room. Drawing by M.A.S. Cameron (after Evelyn 1999, 203, top row).

⁶³ According to Marinatos 1984, 32, these images "[...] enlarge the conceptual and spatial boundaries of the room [...]".

⁶⁴ Marinatos 1984, 85–96; Panagiotopoulos 2008, 135–40.

⁶⁵ For the Knossian Throne Room see Evans 1935, 901–41; Reusch 1958; Mirié 1979; Niemeier 1986; Immerwahr 1990, 96–98, 176; Shank 2007, 162–64; Blakolmer 2011, 64–66.

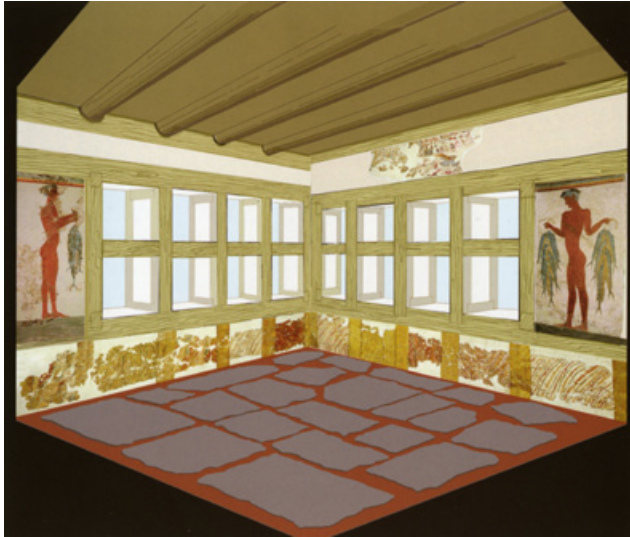


Fig. 13 Ambiental images: The miniature fresco in Room 5 of the West House in Akrotiri, Thera. Computer reconstruction by C. Palyvou (after Palyvou 2005, pl. 3A).

a pair of antithetic griffins flanking a goddess, H. Reusch suggested that the throne was occupied by a priestess or a goddess in the course of an epiphany ritual⁶⁶. Following Reusch's persuasive hypothesis, which was later elaborated by W.-D. Niemeier⁶⁷, this spatial constellation made the throne and its occupant part of the composition⁶⁸. It provided an illusionistic 'prospect' which was stimulated by the synchronization of real and painted action. The person sitting on the throne entered the fantasy of the image and participated in its reenactment. He/she penetrated the iconic space, a compact, hermetically closed area which was clearly separated from actual space and created a new dimension of perception, a 'third space' or virtual space containing both living organisms and still images. The images belonging to this third type were activated by rituals and/or by the viewing process itself.

4. 'Ambiental' images do not have any form of interaction with their spatial context⁶⁹. An 'ambiental' function can be ascribed to the 'miniature frescoes' comprising panels and friezes with small figures and clearly defined frames (fig. 13). We can assume that these scenes did not generate a straightforward interaction with the room they decorated either by enhancing, negating or complementing its original function, but instead only created an ambience which satisfied the high aesthetic or intellectual demands of the cultivated viewer⁷⁰.

4. Concluding remarks

A study of the Aegean visualistic apparatus has to focus on its most tangible elements: the viewer, the image and the ways of interaction between viewer, image and space. Aegean images were embedded in closed spheres of social interaction. They comprised not a visual rhetoric – the aim of which was to persuade – but a visual dialogue with cultivated viewers who – depending upon the context – approached each image with

⁶⁶ Reusch 1958, 346–58; further Mirié 1979, 72–74.

⁶⁷ Niemeier 1986, 74–92.

⁶⁸ A similar viewing situation can be assumed for the western wall of the Throne Room, where the door leading to the 'Inner Sanctuary' was flanked by another pair of griffins. According to Niemeier 1986, 76–83, this was the place where the priestess as epiphany of her goddess must have made her first appearance before she took place on the throne. One has to agree with Morgan 2005, 26, who ascribes a similar illusionistic effect to frescoes of our second group ('negating/contrasting'), acknowledging, however, their 'contrasting' character: "One of the extraordinary features of Minoan paintings in their original context is their tendency to envelop the spectator in a total environment. In many cases, the paintings covered the entire surfaces of three or four walls, so that the person entering the room was immediately surrounded by the painted world. This was particularly effective in scenes from nature, *where interior was perceptually transformed into exterior*, much as with the illusionistic landscapes of Pompeii" (my italics); see further Morgan 2005, 27: "In the large-scale paintings, in particular, a sense of spatial depth – while far from the perspective illusionism of Greco-Roman painting – must have added to the impression of being an integral part of the painted world. Such enveloping of the spectator within the painted space has no real parallels in the ancient world at this time". Morgan includes, however, under the term 'large-scale paintings' almost everything that was not panel painting filled with miniature figures. The classification proposed here is based not only on size but also on subject matter and its semantic relationship to the actual function of the built space in which this was embedded.

⁶⁹ For a precise definition of the term 'ambiental' in this context see Muth 1998, 55–56, 61, 67–68.

⁷⁰ Hägg's assumption that in the case of the miniature friezes in Knossos, Akrotiri and Tylissos a close connection existed between the 'festivals' depicted and the rooms in which they were painted is unconvincing, see Hägg 1985, 212. For a similar hypothesis see also Marinatos 1984, 32: "Scenes which are relevant to the function of the space in which they exist but do not reproduce the actual ceremony performed in it". The weakness of this assumption becomes apparent when Marinatos 1984, 34–51 – on the basis of the alleged direct correlation between room function and image – is forced to identify Room 5 of the West House at Akrotiri as a shrine, suggesting that this room provided the venue for a part of the festival depicted in the miniature frieze.

different expectations. As a whole, the pictures held a mirror in front of the beholder reflecting his beliefs, dreams, social identity and way of life. Given the fact that our evidence is too fragmentary, the aforementioned observations are highly speculative and can be only regarded as a contribution to a story – and not a history – of perception in Aegean societies.

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