

The ‘Death of the Painter’ Towards a Radical Archaeology of (Minoan) Images

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Abstract: The largest part of this paper undertakes a review of the history of research on Minoan images from the beginning of A. Evans’ excavations at Knossos to the present. In an attempt to outline the intellectual development in this scientific field, some important methodological advances as well as shortcomings of previous research are revisited. A special emphasis is given to the potential and limitations of the study of Minoan imagery, as these have been determined by the pertinent evidence and the applied methodology over the past 120 years. Based on this retrospective, some major methodological challenges that arise for the current and future research are discussed. The last part of the paper makes a provocative suggestion for a different reading of Minoan images that drastically opposes the traditional way of their understanding¹.

Prolegomena

The recent story of Minoan images began with a capital misunderstanding. In the first days of the Knossos excavation, the fresco of the famous ‘Cupbearer’ was uncovered. While A. Evans enthusiastically reported the discovery of large fresco pieces of a female (!) figure (**Fig. 1**; MacGillivray 2000: 178–179; see also McDonald & Thomas 1990: 120–122), the workers mistook them for the icon of a Christian saint (Evans 1928: 708). Soon after these first naïve identifications, the pioneers of Minoan archaeology started their intellectual encounter with Bronze Age Cretan imagery, pursuing its understanding on the basis of what seemed to be a rational scientific methodology, yet leaning upon a rather limited amount of pertinent sources and comparanda. The contribution of Evans himself was crucial, since his unrivalled reconstruction of Minoan culture in the *Palace of Minos* set the foundations for the modern interpretation of Minoan imagery – yet not avoiding further misunderstandings. The most notable among them was his interpretation of the fragmentary fresco of the ‘Saffron Gatherer’ as a human adolescent (Evans 1921: 265, pl. IV: “... a young girl rather than a boy”). Although he was puzzled by the blue tint, he did not realise that this was the colour convention for monkeys and not humans (**Fig. 2**; Platon 1947; see also Morgan 2005b: 23–24). During the long period in which the volumes of the *Palace of Minos* were written and shortly after the completion of this impressive *tour de force*, archaeologists from different academic traditions published some ground-breaking articles on Minoan art and images. The next generations of scholars which continued the work of the pioneers had the privilege of a steadily increasing body of archaeological and iconographical evidence. Yet, if we want to put it bluntly, all of them had to operate in much the same way as in the case of the misinterpreted ‘Cupbearer’, since they also tried to understand what they saw on the basis of their knowledge and the parallels known to them, falling quite often into the trap of misunderstandings and anachronisms. For several decades, archaeologists who engaged intensively with Minoan images avoided reflecting on their subject and discussing issues of methodology. As Michael Wedde observed in a 1992 paper: “Decoding pictorial data, is for the Aegean archaeologist, a quotidian experience, yet serious confrontations with the act of interpretation are conspicuously rare in the relevant literature” (Wedde 1992: 181–182). Only in the last decades has this attitude changed, as the result of individual achievements and external stimuli from the methodological advances in other disciplines. The pages that follow will tell the story of previous research on Minoan imagery as a continuous tension between insights, riddles, and lapses that have determined our current frame of interpretation.

¹ The present article owes its existence to the kind invitation of my colleague and friend Fritz Blakolmer to participate in this collective volume. My sincere thanks go to Sarah Finlayson for polishing the English text.



Fig. 1. The first sketch of the 'Cupbearer' fresco from Knossos as a female figure in Evans' 1900 notebook, p. 19 (after MacGillivray 2000: fig. after p. 184)



Fig. 2. The 'Saffron Gatherer' from Knossos as a human adolescent (after Evans 1921: 265, pl. IV)

Previous achievements and pitfalls

In the *Palace of Minos*, Arthur Evans offered a first systematic treatment of Minoan imagery (Evans 1921–1935). Without a proper methodological background for the study of ancient iconography, yet with his impressive breadth of knowledge, capacity for synthesis, and ingenious assumptions, he succeeded in embedding these images into the first synthesis of Minoan society. His approach, which was based on a painstaking analysis of the evidence at hand and acknowledged related evidence from Near Eastern cultures and ancient Greece, was focused especially on the pictorial themes, whereas the aspects of style and composition received, unsurprisingly, less attention.

A more advanced treatment of Minoan imagery, yet with a different focus, was conducted already before and during Evans' monumental publication. Mainly between the two wars, several German classical archaeologists with very strong competence in art history published a series of extremely thoughtful and innovative articles and books implementing and elaborating the methods of the famous Vienna school of art history. Particularly worth mentioning among these first pioneers are the works by Ernst Reisinger on Cretan vase painting (Reisinger 1912), Alois Gotsmich on the development of the Cretan ornamental style (Gotsmich 1923), Friedrich Matz on the evolution of Minoan style, mostly based on the seal motifs of Early Minoan seals (Matz 1928), and finally Valentin Müller on the Minoan depiction of space (Müller 1925). An apex in this development of groundbreaking methods was the inspiring and controversial book of Geerto A. S. Snijder who – based on experimental psychology – tried to explain the unique character of Minoan art by arguing that the Bronze Age Cretans were eidetics, *i. e.* individuals with the exceptional ability of mentally projecting an image upon a surface and drawing it (Snijder 1936; Snyder 1980). Leaving aside the controversial part of Snijder's book, his work is full of thoughtful insights and congenial comments on the character of Minoan style which imbued purely conventional depictions of organic forms with an air of vigor and vitality (see Snijder 1936: 46–49). It is true that these studies showed a clear emphasis on formalistic issues, thoroughly exploring ornamental rather than figurative motifs in particular. Yet, this approach was essential for understanding Minoan iconography, since form and style are – no less than the pictorial themes themselves – an expression of group identity and mentality (see Corbey, Layton & Tanner 2004: 371)².

² See also Morgan 1988: 12: "Throughout, the distinction that we are dealing with meaning rather than form is maintained; but, if rigidly applied, this can be a dangerous distinction. In order to elicit meaning, it is essential first to be able to interpret the form in which it appears".

This influential school of thought came to an abrupt end with WW II. In the post-war era, research activities by German scholars on Crete became extremely limited due to the traumatic experience of German occupation of the island. This is one of the reasons why Minoan archaeology could not evolve to an academic field – or at least subfield – in German universities to the same extent as in several other Western states. One of the few German scholars who remained active beyond this dramatic hiatus, continuing his work and expanding his research scopes and methods, was Friedrich Matz. His study on Minoan epiphany and cult images published in 1958 marked a decisive step forward within the aforementioned German tradition (Matz 1958). Moving from a critique of style to iconography and even further to iconology, he discussed the pertinent iconographical material on the basis of a thoughtful and complex argumentation (Fig. 3). This masterful analysis comprised the first approach to the crucial aspects of mediality and perception in the history of Minoan imagery, long before these issues attracted proper scientific interest.



Fig. 3. Gold ring with epiphany scene (CMS VI, no. 281; courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg)

The engagement with Minoan images in the second half of the 20th century took a quite different trajectory. Helene Kantor's article "The Aegean and the Orient in the Second Millennium BC", which appeared in 1947, focusing on the interregional circulation of artefacts, images, and styles across the Mediterranean region, was definitely a benchmark. This very influential study may have been in itself an admirable pioneering achievement, yet it had simultaneously a positive and a negative impact on subsequent research. For several decades, archaeologists following Kantor have been trying to pinpoint the origins of artefacts, images, styles and techniques and to map their distribution in the Aegean and the Near East, having the illusion that they interpret a phenomenon by simply describing it. What in its time was a pioneering contribution has led, unfortunately, to an intellectually undemanding scholarly tradition, which has been mostly descriptive in nature. The main problem with this approach, which has been quite popular, is that scholars isolated specific pictorial themes or single motifs and studied their distribution in space and time across different media, paying less attention to their meaningful association within the overall composition, its medium and spatial context. There is no better way to demonstrate the methodological pitfalls of such an approach than the work of the Swiss experimental artist Ursus Wehrli, who in his series "Tidying Up Art" (Wehrli 2002), deconstructs famous paintings into their 'elementary particles' which are then rearranged following a



Fig. 4. 'Tidying up' W. Kandinsky's Red Spot II: a visual metaphor for the traditional approach to Minoan images (after Wehrli 2002: 8–9)

stringent typological order (**Fig. 4**). In a similar way, previous research focussed on the motifs themselves and their classification according to valid archaeological typologies, but thereby losing sight of the whole that bounded all these single elements of a pictorial composition together as parts of a meaningful entity.

While the mainstream blindly adopted Kantor's method, degrading the study of Minoan (and Mycenaean) images to a monotonous quest for iconographic parallels, a few scholars attempted a more systematic approach, implementing proper analytical tools relating to composition and style. The most notable among these works was the inspiring study by Henriette A. Groenewegen-Frankfort who, starting from a thorough analysis of the stylistic principles, attempted to explain the unique character of Minoan images and thus to solve the 'Cretan enigma' (Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951: 185–216). She regarded the principle of 'absolute mobility' that permeates this pictorial tradition from its early stages as the essence of Minoan 'ritual play' which formed the dominant subject of Minoan images, in contrast to the ubiquitous depiction of human deeds in the art of the ancient Near East. This work remained for several decades an isolated achievement and found, unfortunately, no followers. A chance for a more dynamic and systematic approach in the study of Minoan images was certainly lost with the untimely death of two of the most promising scholars of their generation, Mark Cameron and Bernd Kaiser, who left us their doctoral dissertations on Knossian wall paintings (Cameron 1974) and Minoan reliefs (Kaiser 1976) as a valuable scholarly legacy.

The intellectual movement of the New Archaeology, which revolutionised the methods and scopes of archaeological disciplines, did not really affect the study of ancient images. Neither the processual nor the post-processual stages of this line of thought showed any real interest in iconography, focusing instead on environment, social processes and cultural practices, rather than issues of visuality or mediality. Unsurprisingly, images have been underrepresented or are even missing in collective volumes or companions on archaeological theory and method (see for example Preucel 1991; Dark 1995; Preucel & Hodder 1996; Thomas 2000; Bintliff 2004; Harris & Cipolla 2017).

From the late 1960's onwards, one crucial development in the study of Minoan imagery was the launching of the *Corpus of Minoan and Mycenaean Seals (CMS)*, the only corpus that was realised in Aegean archaeology. In the course of this long-term project, by far the richest medium of Minoan images has been documented in a comprehensive and exemplary manner. The impressive collective work that has been conducted in the *CMS* for more than half a century has not only refined our analytical methods and terminology but also provided a crucial contribution to numerous aspects of Minoan imagery through the monographs and papers published in the *Beiheft* series.

If we now turn to the more recent history of research and attempt an overview of what happened in the last four decades, the first thing that springs into mind is that within this period there have been virtually no monographic treatments of Minoan iconography as a whole. Gisela Walberg's excellent study on abstract and representational motifs in different genres of Minoan 'art' remains an isolated exception (Walberg 1986). Here, Walberg tells the story of Minoan art – to be more specific, the story of Minoan stylistic expression – as a dynamic relationship of tradition and innovation, in the course of which several generations of Minoan artists were recreating inherited formulas. In recent handbooks on Aegean archaeology, there is no individual chapter dedicated to Minoan images. The latter are, as a rule, discussed only within other thematic fields (Shelmerdine 2008; Cline 2012; see however Schäfer 1998: 148–157). In other handbooks with a narrower thematic focus on art and/or architecture (Hood 1978; Higgins 1981; Preziosi & Hitchcock 1999; Betancourt 2007; Poursat 2008), images are considered as part of 'art', a term that in a premodern context is, as we all know, purely conventional (see Preziosi & Hitchcock 1999: 20–24)³. The lack of monographs, which

³ 'Art' normally refers to the finer specimens of material culture that not only reveal high technical skills and strong aesthetic expression but also fulfil the role of a medium of visual communication, see Corbey, Layton & Turner 2004: 357–359.

could have enhanced the development of methods and analytical tools, is certainly a limitation in the field's history of research. Books that meet the claim of providing a methodological compass, such as Heinrich Schäfer's *Principles of Egyptian Art* in Egyptology (Schäfer 1980) or Tonio Hölscher's *The Language of Images in Roman Art* in classical archaeology (Hölscher 2004)⁴, have never been written for Minoan iconography. What we do have instead is a modest amount of collective volumes and numerous individual papers. Regarded as a whole, this scholarly work demonstrates the impressive range of research questions, hypotheses and insights, yet takes quite different directions within a continuously growing, heterogeneous body of scientific research. The collective volumes that have provided, and still provide, a very solid point of departure for further analyses – and at the same time offer a very good overview of the status quo in the study of Minoan iconography for the respective period in which they were published – resulted from four international conferences between 1983 and 2013. The only conference which has been exclusively dedicated to Minoan iconography was the first among them, which took place in Athens in 1983 (Darcque & Poursat 1985). The individual papers not only highlighted the importance of images for understanding the society of Bronze Age Crete (and Thera), but also demonstrated how their study is woven into several crucial aspects of Minoan culture, such as elite ideology, identity, religion and cultural transfer. Almost a decade later, the unbroken and growing interest in this field became evident in the *AEGAEUM* conference on Aegean Bronze Age iconography in Hobart (Laffineur & Crowley 1992). This volume still remains the most comprehensive and versatile collection of papers on Aegean imagery, including also some essays on methodological issues. Five years later (1996), the acts of a second *AEGAEUM* conference dedicated to craftsmanship appeared, containing several papers focusing on art and iconography (Laffineur & Betancourt 1997). The 1997 international conference on the wall paintings from Thera, the papers of which were published a couple of years later (Sherratt 2000a), produced several substantial contributions discussing the Minoan material. This volume not only summarized the current state of research in the late 1990's, but also vividly demonstrated the potential of interdisciplinary approaches for the history of Aegean wall-paintings and art in general. The most up to date publication is the recently published volume on the 'dialogue' between wall-painting and vase-painting (Vlachopoulos 2018). This deftly chosen subject responds to a need in recent research, since most of the monographs and articles on Minoan images have been studying them only within single branches of Minoan craftsmanship, such as wall-painting (Immerwahr 1990) and seal engraving (Crowley 2013). The interrelations between these images from different artistic media to each other have only sporadically been systematically explored (see more recently on this topic Blakolmer 2007a; 2007b; 2010a; 2012; 2016b; 2018; Egan 2008). Finally, a further collective volume which is worth mentioning was edited by Lyvia Morgan as a tribute to Mark Cameron, including a fine collection of papers on Aegean wall painting (Morgan 2005a).

The most decisive methodological advances within the period of fruitful scientific dialogue in which these collective volumes appeared lie in its early phase. The two most solid and refreshing contributions to the study of Minoan images were developed outside the rapidly growing movement of theoretical archaeology and were, in fact, – for the reasons outlined above – individual achievements. It was a happy coincidence that the systematic study and publication of the most complex Aegean pictorial composition, the miniature frescoes from the West House at Akrotiri, was undertaken by Lyvia Morgan. In this case, a pictorial document of paramount importance underwent a thorough analysis that set the treatment of Aegean images on a firm methodological foundation. In her monograph and a series of related articles, Morgan developed and applied a systematic iconographical approach in an exemplary way (Morgan 1985; 1988; 1989; 2000). Starting with the intractable problem of decoding the meaning of images in a society without written sources, she underlined that the only way to untie this 'Gordian knot' would be a comparative iconography. With this term,

⁴ For the original German publications see Schäfer 1919; Hölscher 1987.

Morgan meant a relational approach that systematically explores the popularity of an image within a pictorial tradition and its juxtaposition in relation to other images (Morgan 1988: 11–12). The core of her analytical approach was the study of associations that relate to “the syntactic structures which generate complex meaning” (Morgan 1985: 14). According to Morgan, the following methodological steps have to be taken: “... analyse the morphology and syntax of the Minoan iconographic language, observe everything within its context, utilize the various methods of cross-referencing, check and recheck our own (personal and cultural) hermeneutic assumptions, remaining constantly aware of the ‘limits of inference’ ...” (Morgan 1985: 18–19). Morgan defined the structural principles of a visual language as an ‘idiom’, a “conventional mode of expression peculiar to a particular culture” and not only to a particular artist (Morgan 1985: 9)⁵. Morgan’s idiom refers both to morphology (*i. e.* the way in which things are depicted) as well as syntax (the spatial relationship between the depicted elements).

A couple of years later, Michael Wedde has, in the same vein, demonstrated the hermeneutical potential of syntax analysis, introducing the terms ‘cluster’ and ‘pictorial architecture’ (Wedde 1992: 182–185). He has defined a ‘cluster’ as a homogeneous group of images which employ the same components that are normally arranged in the same or a similar way (*cf.* Niemeier 1989). The term ‘pictorial architecture’ denotes the specific arrangement of these components. Such a cluster of images, in which limited variations may occur, is based on an ‘original image’, a master-type. On this well thought-out methodological basis, Wedde assumed that “the scholar can, through systematic analysis of the pictorial architecture, the components, the parts, and the support, arrive at an approximation of the narrative system, that is, suggest a tentative interpretation of the message” (Wedde 1992: 182). The main merit of Morgan’s and Wedde’s rigorous analyses was that they outlined a methodological approach which opened the way for an encounter with Aegean images that was much more fruitful than the unadventurous quest for iconographic parallels (see Y. Sakellarakis’ comment on Morgan’s paper, Morgan 1985: 19).

Despite the fact that neither Morgan nor Wedde explicitly mentioned it, Erwin Panofsky’s iconological method was inherent in their approaches. Panofsky’s tripartite analytical scheme, which formed the dominant methodological paradigm in art history and classical archaeology in the second half of the 20th century, refers to three different levels of meaning of an image: a) primary or natural subject matter (or pre-iconographical description), in which one has simply to describe and define what is depicted, b) secondary or conventional subject-matter (or iconographical analysis) in which the depicted motif(s) or action(s) have to be identified or named as specific object(s), person(s) or theme(s) and c) intrinsic meaning or content (iconological interpretation), which refers to the underlying principles of an image that reflect the attitude of the social group in which it was produced, in other words its ‘symbolical’ values. Panofsky’s method exemplified the three basic steps of visual analysis: to describe, to identify, and to interpret, and while the first level demands only some basic form of visual understanding, the second relies on written sources, and the third (according to Panofsky the main scope of iconology) presupposes a thorough knowledge of the specific cultural context and the history of cultural symbols of a given era. Only in this way is it possible to decipher the intended message, looking at the image not as something isolated but as the product of a specific cultural environment. Interestingly, Panofsky’s step-by-step approach has never been employed consistently in Aegean archaeology. Yet, an awareness of these three stages is apparent in several cases. For instance, the entries of the *CMS* volumes provide a strictly pre-iconographical description of images which is totally free from biased terminology and interpretation. On the other hand, Mor-

⁵ What Morgan defines as idiom is nothing else than E. Gombrich’s *schemata*, *i. e.* different modes of depicting the world. The impressive variation of style of artistic tradition in space and time is what Gombrich (1960) defined as the ‘riddle of style’; for exploring the question of whether this is a matter of perception or conventionalism (and thus culturally embedded), see Lopes 1992.

gan and most Aegean scholars have mainly focused on the level of iconographical interpretation, which means nothing further than identification or at least an attempt at it (see Schäfer 1998: 150)⁶. The method of iconographical associations has as its main objective iconic identification and thus a basic understanding of persons, roles, gestures and activities (Schäfer 1998: 149–150). The common practice of previous research has been to start with this level and then move back and forth from iconographical to iconological concerns (see for example Hallager's study on the famous 'Master Impression', Hallager 1985; further Schäfer 1998: 150–151). This is, however, a rather problematic approach, since the risk of circular argumentation is high when one does not differentiate between the levels of iconic identification and symbolic message (see also below).

Beyond the contributions by Morgan and Wedde, the methodological advances in the study of Minoan images have been rather modest. The scientific dialogue in the last decades has certainly profited from a general awareness of archaeological method and theory, for which Aegean archaeology has been – since the early stage of the New Archaeology – a willing recipient. Yet, despite the admirable attempts of the last generations of scholars to employ theoretical models, the methodology relating to the interpretation of Minoan images remains rather static. The main problem is that in the majority of theory-inspired approaches, images have still been regarded almost exclusively as visual evidence and therefore as a means to an end, rather than the actual object of scientific enquiry⁷. Only in exceptional cases have pictorial themes been treated as stylistic or compositional elements (see the discussion on the semantic complexities of Minoan three-dimensional anthropomorphic representations by Murphy 2012, or her illuminating approach to the depiction of movement and dance in Minoan imagery, Murphy 2015). A special mention deserves here Iris Tzachili's thought-provoking monograph on the vases with applied plastic figures from the Vrysinas peak sanctuary, in which she discusses several key issues relating to the phenomenology of the Cretan landscape and its artistic perception (Tzachili 2011). As long as images are employed as common archaeological sources for providing information about a society, without any theoretical reflection on the ways in which these pictures depict the world, one loses sight of the most paramount aspect of their original function and fails to see iconography as a form of mediation of symbolic meaning. Symptomatic of this scientific trend in Minoan archaeology is the fact that the collected volume, edited by Yannis Hamilakis, for challenging traditional interpretations of Minoan culture on the basis of current theoretical models, includes several inspiring papers which use iconographical evidence, yet none are dedicated to this medium of communication as such (see Hamilakis 2002). A couple of years later, an international conference for young scholars which was organised in Heidelberg, after an open call for papers, with the aim of discussing the perspectives of Minoan archaeology for the 21st century, did not receive enough paper proposals to organize a separate session on iconography (Cappel *et alii* 2015: VII).

Outside the field of Aegean archaeology, the study of images experienced a major paradigm shift in the same period. The turn of the 21st century marked a series of cultural turns that gradually transformed social disciplines, including among others the iconic/pictorial/visual turn (see Boehm 1994: 11–38; Mitchell 1994: 11–34; 2005; Elkins 1999; 2003; Maar & Burda 2004; Belting 2005; 2007). These overlapping terms refer to the necessity of a more intensive, interdisciplinary reflection about images and visibility, and especially about the ways in which meaning is produced by non-verbal forms of communication. In the course of the emergence of a new theory of images, the latter shifted from 'sources' to self-reliant objects of scientific enquiry, making the urge for new analytical approaches to the understanding of visual communication apparent. The image was liberated from the sterile environment of a museum and brought back into its original spatial and social context. The new focus of art history and archaeology should, therefore, be not just on pictures but on "a

⁶ See Morgan 1985: 15: "It is the recurrent use of associations which most persuasively reveals meaning".

complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality” (as John Mitchell has put it, see Mitchell 1994: 36). Considering not the isolated image but the complex social interaction between an image, its medium and context, as well as with its viewers, can be the only adequate approach, since the dominant meaning emerges out of this social interaction. This new line of thought has not aspired to replace, but only to complement the old formalist, iconographical, and iconological models, leading to a more inclusive study of visual artefacts. Following the footsteps of art history, which has gradually evolved to a science of images, archaeology experienced a major shift of interest from the circumstances under which an image was produced to issues of mediality and phenomenology. These methodological advances exposed one of the main problems of previous research on Minoan images, where issues of materiality and visibility played a secondary, if any, role. Irrespective of their material ‘texture’, medium, size and viewing context, Minoan images have been discussed far too often as pictograms of a consistent visual language. The unavoidable disregard of their dramatically different materialities and scales sustained this misleading impression of their visual uniformity. Symptomatic of this is the case of Minoan seal motifs, which thanks to the *CMS* project have been studied with an admirable thoroughness; the subject matter monopolised the attention of scholars, who only sporadically raised questions relating to their miniature format, the tension between positive and negative, and last but not least, their visibility. The potential of these external theoretical stimuli for the study of Minoan iconography has been explored in a conference dedicated to Minoan images and architecture (Panagiotopoulos & Günkel-Maschek 2012). In this volume and in a further paper published in the same year, Ute Günkel-Maschek explored the dynamic relationship between wall paintings and built space, focusing on the notion of ‘pictorial space’ (see Günkel-Maschek 2012a; 2012b). Clairy Palyvou has approached the same topic from an architect’s perspective, providing valuable insights into issues of architectural design and phenomenology that relate to images (Palyvou 2000; 2012).

A final remark in this unavoidably selective overview of previous scholarship, relates to the way in which the scientific dialogue in the past decades was conducted. It is remarkable that despite the fruitful intellectual exchange and numerous publications that built up on, elaborated or questioned arguments by others, there have been virtually no proper debates, which as a common scientific practice stimulate research and contribute to a refinement of scientific arguments and methodology. Apart from discussions relating to single images, such as the Priest-King (Coulomb 1979; Niemeier 1987; 1988; Shaw 2004; see also Sherratt 2000b; 2005), there have been hardly any issues of Minoan imagery that have caused academic controversies. The single, yet notable, exception was the debate referring to the Tell el-Dab’a fresco paintings – and related ‘Aegean’/‘Minoan’ frescoes in Syria and the Levant – which was nevertheless mostly confined to a single aspect of this extraordinary ensemble, namely the nationality of the painters⁸.

Where do we stand now?

The question that inevitably comes up after a retrospective look at the long history of scholarly engagement is where we stand now. How, and to what extent, has the research of the recent years advanced our knowledge about Minoan images? Which strengths and weaknesses of previous research determine the potential, and limits, of current and future studies on this topic?

⁷ See, for example, the recent discussions on body/embodiment and gender (Alberti 2002; Simandiraki & Grimshaw 2009; Simandiraki-Grimshaw 2010; 2013; 2015; Simandiraki-Grimshaw & Stevens 2012; several further contributions in Mina *et alii* 2016) or man-animal relationships (Shapland 2010; 2013) to mention only some among several excellent recent publications which extensively used iconographical evidence.

⁸ See Negbi 1994; Niemeier & Niemeier 1998; Sherratt 1994; Sherratt & Sherratt 1998; furthermore von Rügen 2013 and 2015, where the methodological problems of this one-sided traditional approach are exposed.

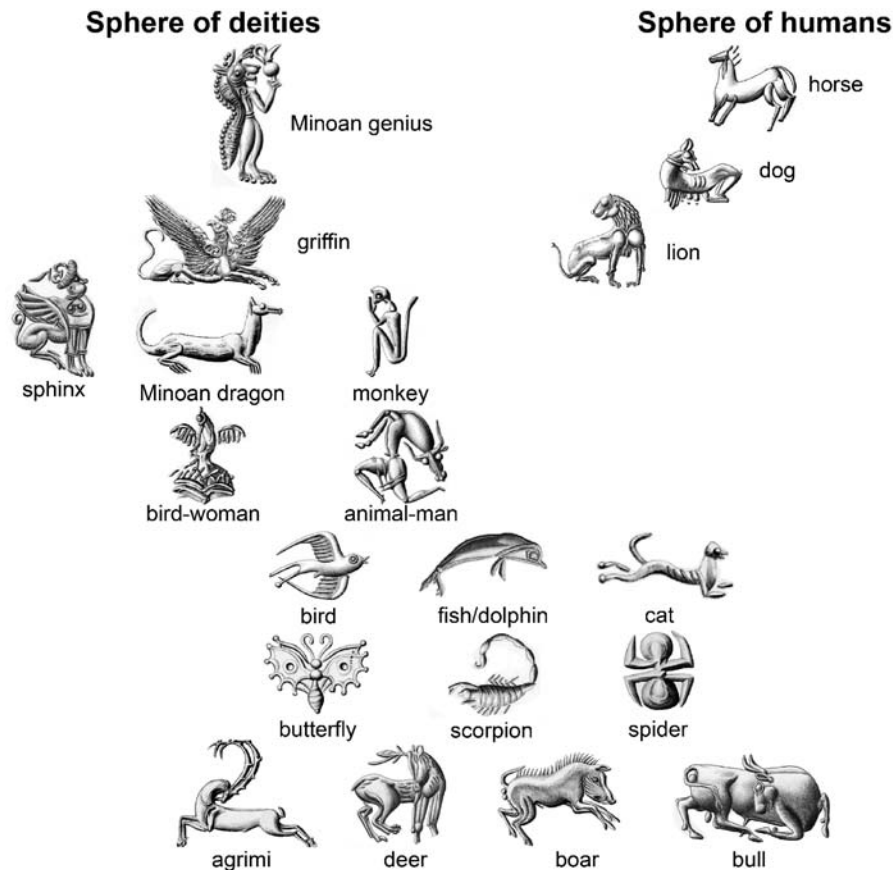


Fig. 5. Mapping the visual hierarchy of natural and supernatural creatures (after Blakolmer 2016a: 166, Diagram 19)

Especially after the aforementioned iconic turn, it has become apparent that the range of potential analytical methods for understanding ancient images is impressively broad, including iconographic, formal, semiotic, functionalist, aesthetic, structuralist, deconstructivist, critical, hermeneutic, and processual approaches (see Corbey, Layton & Tanner 2004: 361–362). Several of them have been already applied in the field of Aegean archaeology. Yet here, the most prominent means of iconographic analysis remains the one established by Morgan and Wedde (see above), although Wedde's paper, unhappily, received much less attention. The study of single motifs as parts of compositional entities, the detection of their associations with other motifs, and the understanding of the rules of pictorial syntax/architecture are very reliable ways for pursuing an interpretation of their meaning. The hermeneutical potential of this approach has been lucidly demonstrated in recent years by Fritz Blakolmer. His recently published, masterful analysis of Minoan and Mycenaean iconography of animals and supernatural creatures uses exactly these principles of analogies and embedment – supported by quantitative arguments – for elucidating the symbolic character and hierarchical position of real and fantastic creatures in Aegean imagery and thus ideology (Blakolmer 2016a). Based on particular patterns in their position in a specific iconographical context, and especially of their relations to gods, humans, and to each other, Blakolmer reconstructs a “virtual master plan” (Blakolmer 2016a: 98), a sort of visual canon which determined the roles and combined appearance of animals and fantastic creatures (Fig. 5). Given the absence of written sources, this relational method – a kind of ‘iconographical profiling’ – appears to be the only promising path for understanding the character, role, and symbolism of the protagonists of its imagery, being either deities, humans, animals or supernatural creatures (see especially Blakolmer 2016a: 167–170; further Blakolmer 2008). Blakolmer succeeds not only in clarifying the hierarchical position of natural or supernatural creatures, but also in outlining how different spheres of their occurrence might give us a hint about Minoan

conceptual categories (Blakolmer 2016a: 173–175). A very similar method is currently being applied by Ute Günkel-Maschek in the course of an on-going project on Minoan images. In her attempt to reconstruct and interpret Minoan frescoed spaces associated with ritual action, Günkel-Maschek employs concept maps for visualising the conceptual relations between individual pictorial elements (see Günkel-Maschek in this volume). Such concept-maps display ‘concepts’ as nodes in a visual system of relationships. Instead of filling the nodes with text labels, Günkel-Maschek uses the Minoan pictorial elements themselves for creating icon-based ‘concept maps’. She employs modern phraseology only for naming the links between them. The result is – as in the case of Blakolmer’s virtual master plan – a visual system of relations between Minoan pictorial elements that makes their iconographical connections (or, following Morgan, ‘associations’) perceptible. In this manner, it is possible to visualize the structures of Minoan pictorial syntax by simply demonstrating which elements belong together, and how. The fact that these concept maps, in the case of Günkel-Maschek’s project, are digital tools has the advantage of collecting and arranging a substantial amount of relevant data and thus opens up the possibility of detecting associations between pictorial elements or patterns that could not be detected by conventional methods. Finally, Günkel-Maschek’s awareness of elucidating Minoan conceptual categories by refraining from using modern terminology is congruent with the current urge for an approach that is free of anachronisms. Such an emic perspective is evident in recent publications (see for example Shapland 2010: 109–112; also, Blakolmer 2016a: 99, with n. 4), and will certainly be an indispensable methodological requirement for future research.

And here is the point at which the old problem returns to haunt us. The well-tested approach of iconographical associations, which, for the time being, provides the most reliable path for engaging with Minoan images, faces a serious methodological obstacle, which is nothing other than the ambiguity of Minoan imagery. Pictures tend generally to be ambiguous, certainly more ambiguous than texts⁹. Beyond this general level, Minoan images show a pronounced ambiguity, which makes understanding them an even harder task. Our problem has two sides. A correct interpretation of an image requires both an intrinsic and extrinsic precondition: sufficient resemblance to the depicted (intrinsic), and experience of resemblance on the part of the viewer (extrinsic, see Hopkins 1998: 106–114; see further Morgan’s ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ ambiguity, Morgan 1989: 145). Let us start with the latter. The problem here is not the degree of resemblance of an image to what it depicts, but the fact that we often have no clues about the identity of the latter. The already mentioned lack of written evidence is a decisive drawback since there are no labels, legends or literary texts that might help us to throw some light on their semantic content. The danger of misinterpretation is here almost unavoidable, given the fact that the Minoans must have had quite different cognitive schemes from ours (see Morgan 1985: 6)¹⁰. If we return now to the first point, it has already been stressed that Minoan images show a profound ambiguity that makes the task of iconic identification even trickier. Pictorial indeterminacy, which quite theoretically can refer to many properties people possess, is very clear in the case of Minoan imagery with respect to (social) identity and role, and perhaps even age or sex. The lack of clear iconographical distinctions between gods, heroes, and humans makes every attempt at interpretation extremely difficult (**Fig. 6**; see Blakolmer 2010b: 22–24, 37–38, 40–41). At this point, it is crucial to clarify that – contrary to Morgan – ambiguity lies only in the perception of the modern interpreter, the archaeologist, and is not at any rate an artist’s intention (see Morgan 1989: 145–146 and N. Marinatos’ response, *ibid.* 161). Most, if not all, an-

⁹ As Morgan (1985: 7) has rightly emphasized, meaning is not intrinsic to an image.

¹⁰ The most persuading – and amusing – argument for the cultural specificity of taxonomies is Jorge Luis Borges’ well-known essay “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language” in which he refers to the Chinese encyclopaedia “Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge” that divides animals into 14 categories including: those that belong to the emperor, embalmed ones, those who are trained, suckling pigs, mermaids, fabulous ones, etc. (Borges 1999: 231). Despite the obviously fictive character of this encyclopaedia, Borges’ list succeeds to shake the foundation of our familiar classification of animals which goes back to Aristotle and alerts us from the danger of biased and anachronistic interpretations.

cient images were produced with a very specific and unequivocal message, no matter whether they might subsequently have acquired different or further semantic connotations. Thus, multiple meaning is the result of the later biography, or of the inherent ambiguity of these images, and does not reflect the artist's intention¹¹. According to R. Hopkins, there is a logical framework of depiction according to which: "... no pictures depict a particular without ascribing some properties to it" (Hopkins 1998: 24). Is it unavoidable, then, to conclude that the generic way of representing gods in Minoan imagery means that these depictions do not refer to any particular deity, as Blakolmer (2010b: esp. 42–45, 50–61) has argued after an excellent analysis of the pertinent evidence? The present author would not exclude an alternative hypothesis, according to which the semantic determinacy of Minoan images – or the lack thereof – was not an absolute but a relational value. What in a certain context, or from a certain perspective, seems to be generic and allowing more than one interpretation (god or priestess), could have been perceived as something very specific in a different context. To give an example, goddesses without attributes might be depicted from the perspective of the modern scholar in a rather generic manner, yet, for the (educated?) Minoan beholder at the place in which these images were created and viewed, they could have been recognisable as a particular deity. Therefore, it is possible that the semantic determinacy of Minoan images was not dependent – or not exclusively dependent – on the depiction mode but also, or mainly, on the viewing situation¹².



Fig. 6. Gold ring from Isopata: the inherent ambiguity of Minoan images (CMS II 3, no. 51; courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg)

Is there any possibility in the future to tackle the problem of dealing with indeterminate pictorial content more effectively than previous research? A potential way to do this leads to what one could define in our case as an iconological paradox. The iconological approach, which has been described above, is normally implemented following what seems to be a logical sequence: from the pre-iconographical through the iconographical to the iconological level. The paradox in the case of the Minoan evidence is that we are often forced to jump from the first (the pre-iconographical) to the last level (iconological level), since the latter may give us some hints for the middle one (iconographical). To be more specific, in Minoan Crete the intrinsic meaning of an image – at least in a very general manner – might be deciphered more easily than its conventional subject matter (the iconic identification). A telling example for this paradoxical situation is the iconography of Knossian bull-leaping (Fig. 7). The question about the identity of the leapers (aristocrats, professional athletes or slaves), or the action (sport, ritual, or state ceremony) which has to be answered at the iconographical level must remain open given the lack of written evidence or substantial unequivocal visual hints. At the iconological level, the verdict is considerably clearer. In the Neopalatial period, bull-leaping scenes were by far the most important theme of Knossian imagery. They occupied a very

¹¹ This is in dramatic contrast to modern art and architecture which tend to be ambivalent since the enigmatic nature of a monument ensures its persistence in time, see Jencks 2005: 196–197.

¹² The difficulty of recognizing, for example, specific deities of the Minoan pantheon in iconography might thus be explained with the argument that there was no need for such visual clarification either because gods/goddesses acted always in isolation and never together with other deities in the same scene or because the beholder could identify them as a specific divinity without any visual clarification through attributes. For the first possibility see also Blakolmer 2010b: 40–41: "One essential problem in all attempts to define distinct divinities is the fact that more than one deity is represented in one image only very sporadically, so that for the Minoan artists and beholders there was actually no real necessity for a visual differentiation of deities".

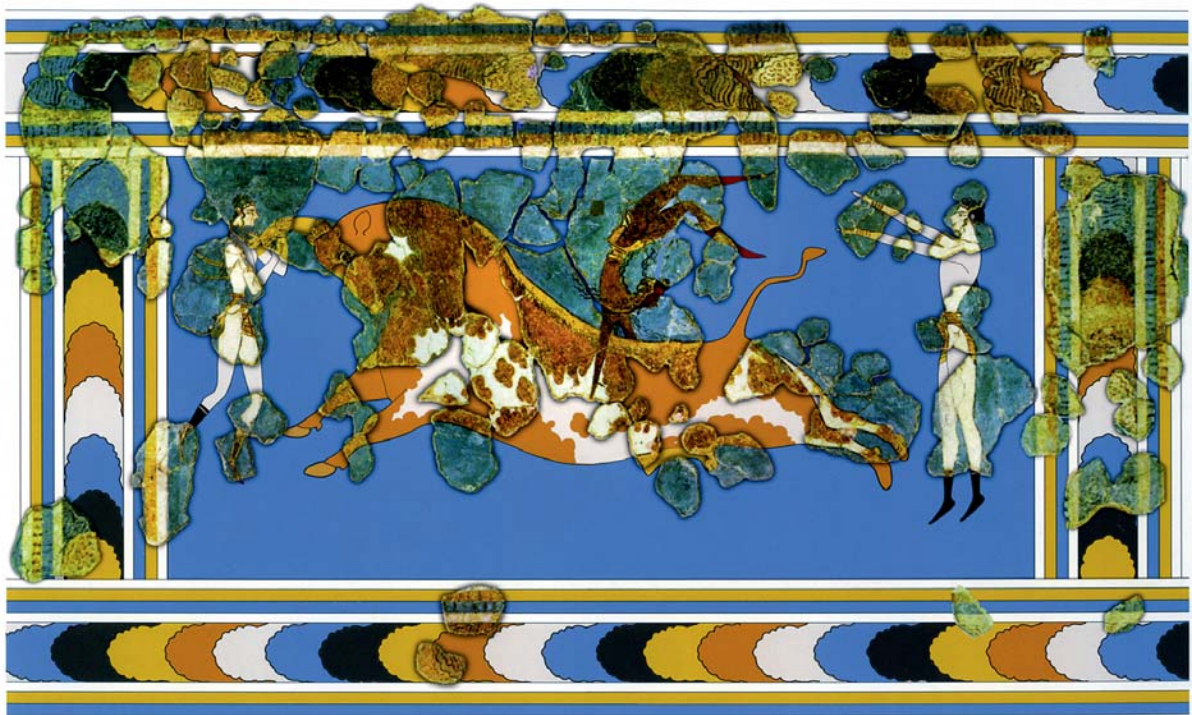


Fig. 7. Knossian bull-leaping fresco: the twist from the iconological to the iconographical level (after Marinatos & Palyvou 2007: 119, fig. 104)

prominent position not only within the iconographic programme of the Knossian palace, but also in most of the high prestige visual media of Neopalatial society, being depicted on gold-rings, relief stone vases, and ivory carving. This outstanding visual prominence leaves no doubt that the depicted action was at the core of the Knossian elite identity. As a consequence, it cannot have been a profane athletic activity in which slaves or professional athletes were participating, but a state ceremony or ritual in which young elite members performed this dramatic ritual in front of an audience (Panagiotopoulos 2006: 127–133). By demonstrating their exceptional physical and mental strengths in front of the king, the elite, and the crowd, the young aristocrats could have legitimised their claims for a high social and political status (Panagiotopoulos 2006: 132–133). In the *Palace of Minos*, Evans' comments on this ritual play provide a proper iconological statement and probably capture the very essence of these images: "... the flower of the Minoan race, executing, in many cases under a direct religious sanction, feats of bravery and skill in which the whole population took a passionate delight" (Evans 1930: 232). If we accept this hypothesis, it can be argued that the apparent high significance of this image (iconological level) might elucidate the identity of the participating young men (iconographical level). Therefore, it seems worthwhile to approach the usually enigmatic conventional subject-matter of an image both from the pre-iconographical description and the iconological interpretation – or at least a pseudo-iconological, since the only thing we can grasp is the social significance and less the actual symbolic content of an image, which remains hypothetical.

Summing up, it becomes apparent that the current and future study of Minoan images requires first and foremost methodological flexibility and a dynamic hermeneutical approach. The scholar who engages himself/herself with this subject has not only to possess contextual awareness, reflective awareness, and the capacity for analysing the structural principles of visual language, as Morgan (1985: 6, n. 2) has underlined, but also the ability to move back and forth from the iconographical to the iconological level. Only through such a methodological flexibility can we adopt an emic perspective, which is the only adequate way to approach this visual language.

The present paper (admittedly with a different title) could have ended here. The following, last part formulates a provocative argument for the study of Minoan images which aspires not to question but rather to extend the methodology of previous research.

Towards a radical archaeology of Minoan images

All previous generations of scholars engaging with Minoan imagery (including the generation of the present author) regarded the cultural context of a visual artefact as the dominant analytical frame for its interpretation. The historical understanding of an image meant nothing more than discovering the intentions of the artist and/or commissioner or, at a more general level, of the social/political/cultural circumstances that lead to its creation. This clear objective was pursued by taking as the main point of reference the relatable artistic production. Yet, due to the repeatedly lamented lack of written evidence, archaeologists were forced to interpret images using the ambiguous evidence of other images as their basic means of understanding. The problems that are inherent in this method are, as underlined above, obvious and raise a series of crucial questions: How can we avoid our 'reading' of Minoan images having more in common with our imaginative fantasy, and less with their original intended symbolic message? How can we minimize the risk of anachronistic interpretation, which is dictated by our own cognitive framework and then imposed on our research objective? Can we put these images, from a diachronic point of view, into a proper perspective? Is there one?

An alternative to such intentionalist explanations, which have been the dominant paradigm not only in the study of Minoan imagery but in art history and literary criticism in general, has been proposed already some decades ago by Roland Barthes, in his provocative essay *The death of the artist* (first published in English [Barthes 1967] and one year later in French [Barthes 1968]). Barthes raised his voice against the 'tyranny of the author', which forced criticism to narrow the meaning of a text to a single 'authoritative' interpretation, instead of elaborating its polysemous vitality (see also Iversen 1986: 71–72). Pleading for a critical analysis that focuses not on the author's intention but on the reader, Barthes argued that a text stands as a multifaceted manifestation of concepts, beliefs, and ideas that an author has not created but borrowed from elsewhere. He closed his provocative article by announcing that the death of the author means nothing else than the birth of the reader, as accord-

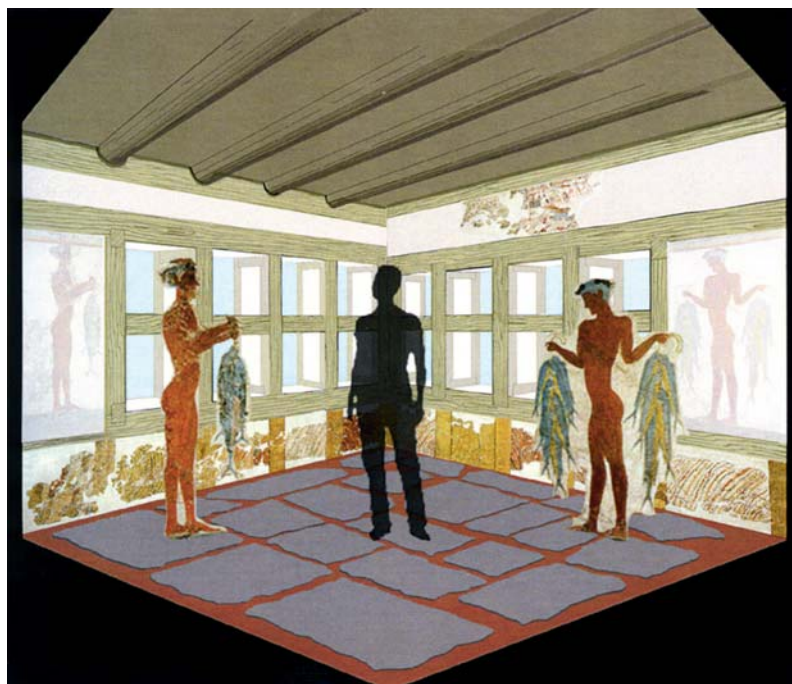


Fig. 8. Akrotiri, West House, Room 5: practicing the traditional and the radical approach (after Palyvou 2012: 13, fig. 5)

ing to him “the true locus of writing is reading”, the conceptual space in which all the paths of which the text is constituted meet. In his view, it is the reader who defined the meaning of a text and not the author. Therefore, if we want to explore the text as a unity, it is wiser to look not at its origin but at its destination.

Can this radical approach open a new perspective for the study of Minoan images? At first sight, any method that diminishes the importance of the artist seems to offer a huge hermeneutical advantage for us, given the fact that he/she is a total and nameless stranger, who remains beyond our analytical reach. Yet, the question that immediately arises here is whether such an approach focusing on the modern beholder, the scholar, can bring us a step forward in our attempt to understand Minoan visual language. To claim that artists can have no supremacy over viewers, and that images can convey no meaning or intent other than what the viewer experiences, would definitely not advance our understanding of Minoan iconography. At this point, one has to confess that the actual target of previous research on Minoan imagery was not the anonymous artists and their intentions, since in a prehistoric society it is virtually impossible to reach the level of the individual. All interpretative efforts have been striving to elucidate not the personality of the artists but their relation to their own culture, and thus to understand the circumstances to which their work owed its existence¹³. The focus of traditional research was always addressed not at a personal but at a collective level. From this background, the critical theory proposed by Barthes cannot be applied as a methodological straightjacket for the study of Minoan images, but rather as a warning that authorial intent – as this has been commonly reconstructed by the study of iconographical associations – cannot be the only objective of their scientific analysis. A further theoretical impulse from the field of literary criticism may help us here to shape a more targeted methodological approach for meeting the challenge of visual interpretation. The Heidelberg philologist J. Schwindt recently proposed a provocative way of engaging with Latin literature. Introducing the term ‘athematic reading’, he has pleaded for an evaluation of Latin texts that goes against the traditional method of relating them to the cultural contexts in which they originally appeared and were perceived (Schwindt 2015: 240). Neither the intention of the text nor the author, but the underlying principles that determine the production of meaning and the ways in which this meaning is transmitted must be, according to Schwindt, the focus of philological analysis. Through this radical philological approach, which relates to the roots and not the cultural embeddedness of a text, one may gain much more insight about its emergence, production process and history (Schwindt 2015: 240–242). If we want to employ a similar thematic reading in our case, then we have to adopt not the historical approach of previous research, but an ahistorical one, in the course of which Minoan images will not be confronted with their context or their parallels but evaluated on the basis of their aesthetic and semiotic capacities by employing the entire arsenal of theoretical models at our disposal. Such a diachronic perspective shifts the focus from the question of attribution of meaning – which is anyway, in several cases, futile due to the lack of pertinent sources, and therefore remains as a rule fully hypothetical – to other aspects of an image that are more easily perceptible to the modern beholder. These may include the structural principles of style, composition, and perception. They reflect – not less than the pictorial content itself – collective beliefs or collective attitudes of a premodern society, yet with the main advantage that they are more tangible to the modern scholar, who can exploit them by applying the entire arsenal of current archaeological theory. In contrast to the traditional method of inference on the basis of the alleged meaning of related images, this approach is based not on hypotheses, but on observations which can be more verifiable than in the case of the traditional method. The crucial point of this radical proposal is that an thematic reading does not refer only to the modern perception of an image. By observing some of the inherent – and thus diachronic – qualities of a picture relating to

¹³ This is actually what intention as an analytical term means, see Baxandall 1985: 42: “It is not a reconstituted historical state of mind ... but a relation between the object and its circumstances”; further Baxandall 1985: 109: “The account of intention is not a narrative of what went on in the painter’s mind but an analytical construct about his ends and means”.

composition, style and visual impact, and by analysing them by current scientific means, it may be possible to grasp some aspects of the original (ancient) mindset. The best argument that such an approach can be viable is provided by previous research itself which has already offered us excellent examples of athematic readings of Minoan imagery. The work of the pioneers on the Minoan principles of composition and style which was outlined at the beginning of the present article, Groenewegen-Frankfort's analysis of the space-time character of Minoan art and Palyvou's enlightening approach to questions of the visual perception of wall paintings, are all issues that relate to diachronic aspects of these images which can still be understood in a way similar to their original viewing situation. The revival of the scientific interest in these aspects of an image could help us to start producing some hard facts and not only soft interpretations (see Wedde 1992: 182). The following example, which is admittedly not part of what we define as proper Minoan imagery, yet very close to it, might illustrate both the differences and the complementarity of the traditional and radical approaches: the lavishly painted Room 5 of the West House at Akrotiri still poses one of the biggest challenges for anyone engaging with the study of Aegean images (**Fig. 8**). Following the traditional method, one would attempt a historical reading of the famous miniature frieze, striving to extract meaning from its pictorial content by identifying the depicted events. On the one hand, there is little hope that this approach would provide anything beyond soft interpretations, as was the case with earlier attempts. On the other hand, an ahistorical reading of the two fishermen decorating the north and south corner of the room would demonstrate that both figures are facing each other, embracing, through their gazes, the beholder who stands, at more or less eye-level, in the middle of the room, and creating the illusion that they come out of the walls to move towards him/her, as Palyvou has convincingly argued (Palyvou 2012: 12, figs. 5–6). This insightful observation can be considered as a hard fact, since this very arrangement of the painted figures cannot have been coincidental but the result of a thoughtful visual strategy. There is no place for anachronisms in the reconstruction of this exceptional aesthetic experience because the impact on the modern and ancient viewer is most probably similar.

Summing up, the plea for an athematic reading of Minoan images does not mean giving up historical explanation for the sake of visual hermeneutics. Its aim is to make the modern scholar aware that there is an alternative approach to Minoan images, according to which aspects of style and perception can be at least as significant as the picture content if we want to understand the basics of visual communication in Minoan society. An athematic reading can thus provide only a complementary method to the traditional approach to Minoan images, and has to be combined with this established research tradition which must remain essential also in the future. Such a comprehensive and flexible analytical method can help us to evaluate Minoan imagery not as a historical source but as a creative process.

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