

PATTERNS IN THE SEA: INSIGHT INTO THE ARTISTIC VISION OF THE AEGEANS

In Aegean art ¹ of the Bronze Age, depictions of the sea and sea life abound. They are found in almost all media: pottery, seals, metal work, relief vases, ivory carving and wallpainting. When comparisons are sought in the art of the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian traditions to the east, it is striking how few there are. In neither of the two older traditions, nor in those derivative traditions of lands nearby which do have a sea coast, is there any creation to compare with the seascapes of the Aegean. If, then, the depiction of the sea is a characteristically Aegean artistic predilection, is it possible that a careful analysis of the iconography of the sea will bring us closer to an understanding of the peculiar artistic vision of the Aegeans? The *Thalassa Conference* provides the opportunity to investigate just that question. This paper seeks to analyse the iconography of the sea in Aegean art, to compare and contrast the Aegean creations with those of the older traditions to the east, and, out of these insights to develop a consistent theory of Aegean art.

Rivers and water in the Mesopotamian and Egyptian artistic traditions

We may begin by considering how the watery domain has been represented in art before the experiments of the Aegean peoples. The two seminal traditions of the ancient Near East, Mesopotamia and Egypt, did not treat the open sea as a subject for art. This is simply explained by the fact that neither had the sea as an integral part of their natural world and there was therefore no need to develop an artistic vocabulary to express it. Instead, they each depicted the watery domains they knew, their great rivers.

In the Mesopotamian tradition, the waters of the Euphrates River appear as background to the exploits of the gods or as a symbol of their powers. Cylinder seal designs of the Early Sumerian Period show reed boats with high prows and sterns being propelled along but the waters of the river are not specifically marked, while in the Early Dynastic period, one relief vase shows a mythological scene where water streams from the hands of the central figure and

1 The discussion here will not enter into the identity of Minoan as compared to Mycenaean art. See among others, E.T. VERMEULE, *The Art of the Shaft Graves* (1975); S.A. IMMERWAHR, "Mycenaeans at Thera: Some reflections on the Paintings from the West House", *Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean in Ancient History and Prehistory* (1977); R. LAFFINEUR, "Iconographie minoenne et iconographie mycénienne à l'époque des tombes à fosse", *L'iconographie minoenne. Actes de la Table Ronde d'Athènes (21-22 avril 1983)*, BCH suppl XI (1985). I have now begun to argue that continuing such an enquiry remains a largely unprofitable exercise until it is possible to date crucial early pieces more accurately, J.L. CROWLEY, "Minoan Influence on Mycenaean Art: Chronological Problems with the Prototypes", *High, Middle or Low? Acts of an International Colloquium on Absolute Chronology held at the University of Gothenburg 20-22 August 1987 Part 3* (1989), p. 124-41. For difficulties in establishing accurate dating see particularly M. LANG, *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia II The Frescoes* (1969), p. 3-9 and G. A. WALBERG, *Tradition and Innovation. Essays in Minoan Art* (1986), p. 60-72.

another vase indicates water by the guilloche design around the base ². In the Akkadian Period, the iconography of the gods becomes more clearly defined and water is regularly shown as the attribute of one of the gods.

Pl. LIX, 1 shows an Akkadian cylinder seal with a mythological scene set on the Scale Mountain which is the appropriate setting for the exploits of the gods. The protagonists can be identified with some degree of surety because of the attributes depicted. All are great gods for they wear horned helmets and one, Ea, God of Wisdom and the Subterranean Waters, has streams of water flowing down from his shoulders shown as wavy lines with fish swimming between them.

This motif of water streaming down also forms part of the Flowing Vase motif ³. Gudea of Lagash had a statue of himself carved holding the Flowing Vase ⁴ and it is used again to great effect with the water-dispensing goddesses in the Palace of Zimrilim at Mari ⁵.

These few examples serve to remind us that landscape itself is not an interest for the Mesopotamian artist. The river is a setting for the exploits of the gods just as is the mountain ⁶ and for each a symbolic rendering is provided, in the river "space" on the seals and with the Scale Mountain in various media. Water too is treated in a symbolic way and depicted as the attribute of a deity while vegetation finds its place in the art overwhelmingly as one of the variants of the Sacred Tree motif ⁷. The viewer of Mesopotamian art comes to an artificially constructed environment peopled with strange deities and hybrid creatures that bears little resemblance to the world around. Malraux' statement that "... the *primum mobile* of Mesopotamian art is the sacred, rendered in a vein of fantasy" ⁸ assesses most accurately an art created out of the religious imagination.

In the Egyptian tradition, river scenes are among the earliest subjects for artistic endeavour as befits a land dependent on the annual inundation of the Nile for its life. In the Old Kingdom, the theme of Hunting in the Marshes ⁹ becomes a regular subject for tomb paintings along with the Meal in the Tomb and the Produce of the Estates. In the mastaba of Ti, the owner of the tomb hunts a hippopotamus with his servants in one of the clearest statements of the type ¹⁰. The water is depicted by a pattern of vertical zig-zags which does not cover the bodies of the fish, crocodile and hippopotami in the water. In another series of reliefs showing the Produce of the Estates, servants are shown taking cattle across a ford in the river and the water is again shown with the vertical zig-zag pattern though on this occasion the legs of humans and animals are delineated thus suggesting the transparency of the water ¹¹. Already at this time the artistic formulas were set. As Stevenson Smith reminds us, we are given "... a kind of diagram of a thing as man knew it to be, not as it appears to the eye under transitory circumstances" ¹². With the human figure this means creating a distinct form of combination

2 E. STROMMINGER, *The Art of Mesopotamia* (1964), pl. 17 for the cylinder seal and pl. 38 and 39 for the two relief vases.

3 For a full treatment of the motif see E.D. VAN BUREN, *The Flowing Vase and the God with Streams* (1933).

4 P. AMIET, *Art of the Ancient Near East* (1980), pl. 52.

5 In the central lower panel of the Investiture Wallpainting in the main courtyard, A. PARROT, *Sumer* (1960), pl. 346 and again with the statue of the goddess from the Throne Room, AMIET, *op. cit.*, pl. 62.

6 H. FRANKFORT, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (1954), p. 6 and 56 explains succinctly the concept of the mountain in Mesopotamian religion and describes the Scale Mountain as "the religious landscape *par excellence*".

7 On the importance of the Sacred Tree motif see H. FRANKFORT, *Cylinder Seals* (1939), p. 204-205.

8 A. PARROT, *Sumer* (1960). In the Preface, p. xix, by André Malraux.

9 The reed marshes in Egyptian art in many ways parallel the Scale Mountain as the religious landscape. However their artistic treatment never sees them fully removed from the natural world into the symbolic.

10 K. MICHALOWSKI, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (1969), pl. 76. See also the construction of boats, pl. 18.

11 ID., *op. cit.*, pl. 239.

12 W. STEVENSON SMITH, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* (1965), p. 1.

pose for the standing and seated figure and, so far as landscape is concerned, this means placing the feet of men and animals firmly on something at the base of the picture which can function as a groundline.

Pl. LIX, 2 shows the theme of Hunting in the Marshes continuing through into the New Kingdom with a scene from Dynasty XVIII of the type that had been set in the Old Kingdom. Here Menna is shown twice, hunting with both his hunting stick and with his harpoon. The water of the River Nile is coloured blue and has the distinctive vertical zig-zags which signify water. Aquatic life is shown superimposed in profile on the surface.

In all cases where the river (and the papyrus marsh) is meant, the water is drawn as a band across the base of the picture. When an ornamental pool is meant the water is confined by the border of the pool shown in plan. One further example underlines the artificial way that water is depicted in Egyptian art. The zig-zag pattern, used in one or three lines horizontally is also the sign for water in Egyptian hieroglyphics¹³.

Notwithstanding this, the Egyptian artists were extremely faithful to their experience of the natural world and consistently included detail of skin, hair, scale, feather, flower, leaf and minor action which still has the power to evoke for the viewer the palpable world around. The viewer, as it were, has first consciously to ignore all the rules of artistic composition and allow the detail to convey the real world. It is a tribute to the consummate skill of the Egyptian artist that the careful profile view and the anchorage to the groundline does not destroy the delight of seeing the animals and birds in their habitat¹⁴ and that the rigid constructs of body shape do not negate the life or individuality of the people portrayed¹⁵.

There are two important things to note at this point in our discussion. The first is that there is no deep experience with the open sea and the Mesopotamian and Egyptian artistic traditions have developed iconographies to deal with their river scenes, their symbolism for water and the relation of water to gods and humans in their culture. The second is that both these traditions have very early developed a set of artistic rules which complements the cast of mind each has about the world around them and the deities that control it.

Depictions of the sea in Aegean art

By contrast, the Aegean peoples have had the sea as a shaping experience in their lives for millennia. When in the Bronze Age, they come to represent their relation with the sea in art, it is as an experience true to them and their very own creation, not copied from the older traditions. To begin the iconographical analysis we take two of the most characteristic seascapes in Aegean art, the silver Siege Rhyton from Mycenae and the Ship Fresco from Akrotiri.

Pl. LIX, 3 shows the line drawing of the design on the silver Siege Rhyton. Though the piece is damaged, it is clear that a coastal city is being besieged and that the sea shallows are shown by the tricurved arch pattern at the base. The acropolis is outlined against the sky and on the shore defenders stand against attackers who come from the sea. Yet more attackers are in the sea, swimming to the shore¹⁶.

13 A. GARDINER, *Egyptian Grammar* (1979), p. 490-91.

14 Consider the geese in the wallpainting from the Tomb of Atet at Meidum, Dynasty IV, MICHALOWSKI, *op. cit.*, pl. 194.

15 One example is the wood relief of Hesi-Re, discussed by STEVENSON SMITH, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

16 It is also possible that these figures in the water are shipwrecked sailors similar to the figures in the water in a section of the miniature fresco from the West House and to the figures on a niello blade. There is not sufficient of the siege rhyton to show unequivocally whether the figures are clearly swimming or whether their limbs are uncontrolled, thus indicating drowning.

Pl. LIX, 4 shows a section of the Ship Fresco with ships sailing across the sea accompanied by dolphins gambolling in the waves. This time there is no pattern, the sea being handled as a blue-grey background against which much varied activity is seen. In the full fresco, seaside towns and their immediate hinterland are shown as well as crowds of humans focussing on the farewell or arrival of the flotilla.

What are the rules of artistic composition that have produced these two pictures ? Clearly the viewpoint for the two compositions is the human eye. The eye of the artist has glimpsed the siege scene and the flotilla scene and recorded them much as they have impinged on the retina. This makes the scenes immediately accessible to viewers because they can place their eye in the place of the artist's eye and can read the scene by reference to their own visual experience of the world. They find no barrier of artistic construct as with the Mesopotamian and Egyptian formulas. I shall return to the significance of this point of contrast between the Aegean and the eastern artistic traditions at a later stage but for the moment, I wish to pursue the visual impetus of Aegean artistic creativity.

There is a primary visual component to the art. The pictures initially have been composed as the eye sees from a vantage point and subsequently alterations have been made. For example, in the Ship Fresco, the size of the dolphins as compared to the men in the ships or even the ships themselves has been increased. With the Siege Rhyton, a tricurved arch pattern has been placed to subtend the composition and we are to read it as a code for the shallows through which men swim inshore to the city being besieged.

What is the connection between the initial visual component and the alterations ? Art historians generally deny any connection and say that this is simply another example of the disparate nature of Aegean art with sometimes a "natural" depiction being given like the seascape in the Ship Fresco, with sometimes a "formulaic" addition being inserted like the enlarged dolphins and with sometimes an "artificial" rendition being employed like the tricurved arch pattern. If, however, we do not accept this fragmented picture of Aegean artistic inspiration but insist on trying to find the connections between the apparent disparate features, the special example of the sea can help us.

Reality and creativity: transmuting the visual imprint

Let us stop for a moment and attempt to recreate the artistic endeavour of depicting the sea. First consider the sea itself. How does it appear to the human eye ?

Now when the Aegeans, or any other people for that matter, come to look at the sea, they meet it as patterns on the beach left by the retreating tide, as waves beating on the shore, as shallows waded in or as sea swell looked down upon from a boat or a cliff. The modern camera can frame the image for us at any instant.

Pl. LIX, 5 shows the patterns on the shore made by the retreating tide. Note that the marks left form a series of overlapping loops, each with an extra little runnel out at the tip.

Pl. LIX, 6 shows the waves, aided by a stiff breeze, breaking on the beach. Again the shape of the wave is not a simple arc but rather a curve with an additional loop at its crest, incessantly moving.

Pl. LIX, 7 shows sunlight in the shallows. This is the hardest of all to capture in a photograph. The shine of the light in the water may be here but the quality of incessant movement is not completely conveyed by any one snapshot frame recording the state of any one instant. The reflections constantly play in a shining fluid pattern.

Pl. LIX, 8 shows a modern liner sailing across the sea where the sea swell has been highlighted by the afternoon sun. At times the pattern the waves form is a diamond net pattern, at others an all over pattern of arcs and loops and runnels. Again the suggestion of the sea never being still is something to note.

Now if I asked you to consider these four photographic images, to add to them your visual experience of the sea over the years and then to create a pattern which most truly reflects

the sea in all its various forms and which especially suggests its always moving quality, what would you draw? May I suggest that you would create a tricurved arch pattern. Indeed, far from it being an artificial design, created simply as a symbol for the sea, you could not do much better than a tricurved arch pattern to render all human experience of the sea, its marks on the shore, the pattern of waves, the transparent light-dappled shallows, the sea swell and, above all, the unceasing movement.

With this example of the sea I believe we are at the beginning of understanding the creative impulse of the Aegeans. Their artistic creativity starts with the initial visual imprint but they are not interested in giving only one instantaneous image. They are concerned to give to the viewer the essential quality of the entity. Further, in order to convey the essential characteristics most clearly to the viewer, they will play with the image in various ways, using all their artistic skills.

Let us look again at the Siege Rhyton design. The overall composition is that of the photographic image. However, if it were left in that original state, the main subject matter, the attack on the city, would not be clear because the detail of city walls and human protagonists would be so small as to be insignificant. Accordingly, the important subjects have been enlarged so they can be rendered in more detail like the archers and slingers in characteristic pose and the people in the besieged city with their anguish expressed in gesture. This Aegean artistic convention for treating large scale compositions I have termed the Mountain View Perspective¹⁷. Not a true perspective, the concept forms part of the theory we are currently explaining.

Turning now to the Ship Fresco, we can see that it too is composed in the Mountain View Perspective and the same factors are at work. The composition begins as a panorama viewed from a vantage point, in this case a mountain side on a nearby island or another ship at sea. However, the relative sizes of the various elements have been altered from that pertaining in the real world (i.e. as recorded in the initial visual imprint on the artist's mind) to enlarge important components. Thus the ships and certain important persons on the welcoming shore are of great size and the dolphins are of increased size even in relation to the ships. With the dolphins, the initial image of a leaping dolphin is very clear still but it is overworked for the aim is to present not any particular dolphin but "dolphinness". The markings, sometimes of different species, are clearly shown and always the pose of the dolphin is in its most characteristic movement as the human experiences it, leaping up out of the water to breathe and play with its human fellow travellers on the sea. The practical artist has further worked on the essential image to emphasise the beauty and lithe movement of the dolphin and we have the finished image in the picture, striking in its clarity and fully evocative of the power and playfulness of the dolphin. With our new insight into the tricurved arch pattern, it should not surprise us to note that the arcs of the dolphins form an undulating pattern across the composition suggesting the movement of the sea as well as the ships upon it.

The "thalassa" theory

From the example of the sea we may begin to develop a theory of the artistic vision of the Aegeans which perhaps we should call the "thalassa" theory. The initial perception is visual but this is then transmuted because the thinking artist seeks to convey the very essence of the subject and the resulting image is then polished by the practical artist who is sensitive to the final effect on the viewer. These three stages in Aegean artistic creativity we may term the initial image, the essential image and the elaborated image.

17 J.L. CROWLEY, *The Aegean and the East* (1989), p. 147, 164.

The initial image is the visual imprint on the artist's retina. Taken directly from real life, inserted in the mind by the eye, the basic initial image is retained in the art however much it is overworked by the next two activities in the creative sequence. It is this retention of the basic initial image which subtends the human viewpoint in Aegean art and which gives the immediacy of contact with the viewer.

The essential image is the refinement of the initial image to account for all the experience of the subject in the real world. It may be that the myriad examples of natural forms reveal an intrinsic pattern as we have seen with the sea. The emotion of a human may be captured in an oft-repeated gesture. The aggression of an animal attack may be caught in the climactic point where the predator crunches through the spine of the quarry. The potency of human ritual may find its expression in the depiction of an annual procession or ceremony. Extracting the essence of the entity or of the action is a human capacity and thus the human viewpoint in the art is reinforced.

The elaborated image is the result of the overworking of the initial and essential images with all the artistic tricks at the disposal of the trained artist¹⁸. The Aegean artist is sensitive to the world around¹⁹, free to innovate and desirous of a relationship with the viewer. The artist's aims are clarity for communication and drama for effect. The particular techniques used are:

- enlargement - to signal the most significant features (e.g. important people in a scene)
- exaggeration - to create effect (e.g. excessive delineation of muscles in a predator)
- isolation - the removal of immediate background to achieve clarity
(e.g. focus on duellists in a glen)

When the creative sequence, initial image, essential image, elaborated image, works at its highest pitch it produces the Icon. I have argued elsewhere that the Icon is the compositional imperative of Aegean art and likened the Icon and its elements to the themes and standard epithets of oral poetry²⁰. Here parallels, even equations, with the formulaic nature of oral poetry can most clearly be drawn; standard epithets with elements of artistic detail, metrical phrase units with the larger motifs and Icons, standard themes with the Icons.

Testing the "thalassa" theory

Thus far the "thalassa" theory of sequentially refined images holds well for the sea, its creatures and human activity within its compass. It is now time to test the theory on a variety of Aegean compositions apart from those relating to the sea.

Pl. LX, 9 shows a foliate and spiral design in the interior of a large Kamares bowl. It combines foliate and spiralforn elements to form an intricate design. The initial images here are those of nature; the shape of a leaf or a petal, a tendril curling from a vine, the spiral of a snail shell or sea shell. All are then subjected to that desire to see through the incidental example to the intrinsic pattern which suggests all leaves and all spiralling natural forms. The essential is extracted and this becomes a basis for further play in design. In non-representational art the design can take over and a process of abstraction continues. However, I would argue that the link with nature, that wellspring of Aegean inspiration, is never

18 Much more work needs to be done in the area of "pattern books", of "workshops" and "schools" of Aegean artists and on artists' mobility.

19 As indeed was the Egyptian, who, however, at the outset became enmeshed in artistic conventions that constrained the expression of this sensitivity and allowed only small areas of freedom for naturalistic portrayals. *Supra*, n. 14-15.

20 J.L. CROWLEY, "Subject Matter in Aegean Art: the Crucial Changes", *Aegaeum* 3 (1989), p. 203-14, particularly the section, "Art Theory: Icons and Prototypicals", p. 208-11. In this article, art theory was approached from the iconographical point of view. Some of the principles guiding artistic composition under the icon imperative were outlined and they are here more fully discussed.

completely broken. The designs never fully lose touch with the natural world which provides the original imprint though the initial image is transmuted to create a subtle design fully exploiting the torsional implications of the natural forms.

Pl. LX, 10 shows an agrimi in a flying leap on a relief rhyton from Zakro. The initial image of the indigenous wild goat leaping down a rocky hill side has been worked over to ensure that all its strength and agility is conveyed. The essence of the animal is most aptly captured in the characteristic pose. Indeed the creation of the three allied motifs of flying gallop, flying leap and reverse twist show the artist trying to convey the strength, speed and agility of the animal in all its movements. The fascination with movement which we identified in the example of the sea is here too. The practical artist at work again secures clarity for the composition by removing most of the background markings a little distant from the outline of the goat so there is no misunderstanding on the part of the viewer.

Pl. LX, 11 shows a cat stalking a bird on a wallpainting from Hagia Triada. What could be more characteristic of a cat? All the concentration and lithe endeavour of the feline is admirably conveyed in this little vignette. Again, it is not a camera shot of what happened for the artist has worked over the initial image. The bush which looks so deceptively natural with its fronds growing freely in fact has every leaf carefully arranged to show the viewer its full plan shape.

Pl. LX, 12 shows four women in a dance or worship scene. The composition is handled in the Mountain View Perspective. The women are freely placed against the landscape which is indicated by small plant clumps. The initial image was no doubt the ritual or dance often seen performed. What then of the next process I have suggested, the extracting of the essential features or the most characteristic action? It is here too. Movement is part of this representation and is suggested by the pose of the women. However the essence of what is conveyed is not any individual dance or any particular performance of the ritual. Rather it is the dance/ritual repeated ... last year's, this year's, next year's. This time, I believe that the truth the artist wishes to convey is the repeated act and the potency of the repeated act.

Pl. LX, 13 shows an animal attack of the utmost aggressiveness. A monstrous lion leaps on the back of a great bull to crunch through his spine and bring him down. Yet it is not simply an animal attack as it might happen in the wild. Everything is dramatised, exaggerated. Both animals are huge and powerful. Their muscles are excessively delineated. The speed of the bull in his flight is encapsulated in the flying gallop. The ferocity of the lion is indicated by it literally climbing on to the bull and holding on with all paws. The composition is conceived at the climactic point of the action. All these alterations to an initial visual imprint are in there to extract the essence of the attack and convey it clearly and with maximum effect on the viewer in a superb icon of aggression.

Thus far the "thalassa" theory of sequentially refined images appears to explain and bring together the various disparate aspects of Aegean art. Previously the tricurved arch pattern was designated an artificial construct while the spiralforn and foliate patterns and their interplay were looked upon as separate from representational art. Usually the fresco with the stalking cat and the seal with the marauding lion were used as examples of the difference between Minoan and Mycenaean art. However I argue that they are all Aegean and created out of the same artistic vision.

When the time comes to create symbols, the process of sequentially refining the images can produce Icons powerful in their effect on the viewer.

Pl. LX, 14 shows a male of superhuman size atop a city. King and god have both been argued. Certainly it is a grand statement of power and authority even if the key to the iconography is lost to us and we cannot appreciate the nuances of meaning ²¹.

An alternative source of artistic inspiration

The final question we must pose is whether the "thalassa" theory encompasses all Aegean art and it appears that there are two classes of composition that are not created out of this artistic vision. One is the set of compositions which have been called tectonic, geometric, analytical. I

21 E. HALLAGER, *The Master Impression* (1985).

would search for their artistic inspiration in a cast of mind that sees the abstract shape first and then constrains the natural world to fit into the prearranged schema. These compositions seek pattern too but it is imposed from without, not extracted as the essence of an intrinsic patterning. Of course the artist uses all the tricks as with the "thalassa" theory and is as insistent on communication with, and effect on, the viewer as before. Let us return to the subject of the sea to look at a design composed according to this analytical model.

Pl. LX, 15 shows a seascape on a gold repousse cup from Dendra. Here the four octopuses are each swimming in their own area with no overlap. Even their tentacles do not cross but are all neatly combed out. Look more closely and you will see that the whole design has been quartered and the seascape made into four neat repetitive components to fit the sections.

All of these features are contrary to the inspiration proposed for the previous works. The overall composition is not treated as a whole either by a convention such as the Mountain View Perspective or by a rapport principle that would wrap the whole surface of the cup in its interlocking design. Nor does the composition flow out of the very nature of the subject as the octopus on the lentoid flask from Palaikastro would show ²². This is not the patterning argued out of the sea but an imposed order which belongs to the geometry of the right angle. The first two steps in the creative sequence are different. The artist's skill still uses tricks and we still have a successful icon but the inspiration for it is almost diametrically opposite to that of the "thalassa" compositions. It should be noted that this, the second patterning principle in Aegean art, is not the dominant one in the greatest period of artistic creativity, the Transition from Middle to Late Bronze.

Foreign influence on Aegean art

The other class of Aegean compositions which is not covered by the "thalassa" theory is the set of works inspired by foreign models. These include compositions using the Antithetical Group and Mirror Reverse motifs, sphinx and griffin ²³.

Pl. LX, 16 shows two sphinxes in a mirror reverse composition. Both of these motifs are imported from an older tradition to the East, in this case Egypt.

The formality of pose and composition identified in this piece closely compares with the neat organisation of the above repousse piece created under the analytical inspiration. Indeed this analytical cast of mind may well help the assimilation of such foreign motifs since they are usually compatible with its severe, static and geometrical principles. As with the analytical inspiration, these imported motifs are not so important in the great creative periods of Aegean art though their legacy is felt to the end of the Mycenaean period.

Reviewing Aegean art history discussions

The example of the sea has provided the insight for the development of my "thalassa" theory of Aegean art. However the need for a comprehensive theory had already been apparent to me for some time because the iconographical point of view of my recent work highlighted the shortcomings of theories of art formed primarily to deal with the examples of one artistic media. Along with other scholars, I had become dissatisfied with the prevailing theories of Minoan and

22 S. MARINATOS, *Crete and Mycenae* (1960), pl. 87. See also the stirrup jar from Gournia, WALBERG, *op. cit.*, fig. 108.

23 J.L. CROWLEY, *The Aegean and the East* (1989), p. 19-23, 24-27, 40-45, 46-53.

Mycenaean art ²⁴, not so much because they seemed totally incorrect, but rather because they seemed merely partial explanations. For discussion sake we may review the theories as the "naturalistic", "mobility", "eidetic", "abstract" and "formulaic" theories named from the emphasis laid on a particular aspect of the art in their exposition.

With the "naturalistic" theory, Minoan art was praised for its rendering of the world of nature. Naturalism was equated with "spontaneity" and "joie de vivre", with "freedom" in the depiction of landscape and delight in the use of colour. Rodenwaldt found in the frescoes a fairyland of beauty ²⁵. Stevenson Smith more prosaically allowed that the landscape compositions were composed in a "Cavalier Perspective" which, while not a true perspective, nevertheless provided an explanation for the placement of figures in apparent gay abandon on the two-dimensional canvas ²⁶.

With the "mobility" theory, stress was placed on the interest in portraying movement. Here "freedom" was again a key word and even "undisciplined" was brought in to describe the dancers with attenuated feet who seemed to float in the air and the rushing animals portrayed in the flying gallop. Kantor paid tribute to the Aegean artists' skill in this area in her treatment of the Aegean Animal Style ²⁷. Groenewegen-Frankfort saw the fluidity of figures as the expression of a characteristic Minoan view of life, a view encapsulated in her terms "serious play" and "absolute mobility" ²⁸.

With the "eidetic" theory, emphasis was given to the visual memory of the artist, with some suggestion of a certain primitiveness in both the ability and the resulting artistic production. Snijder thought that Minoan artists were true eidetics ²⁹ while Furumark spoke of the "action flash" in relation to human and animal action. Boardman's perceptive comment on circular animal compositions allowed just such eidetic creativity ³⁰.

With the "abstract" theory attention was drawn to the importance of abstract shapes determining the compositions of both decorative and representational subjects. Matz defined the "whirling movement", "torsion" and "unending rapport" concepts ³¹. Furumark engaged in the differentiation between "pictorial" and "pictorialised" motifs ³². Most recently Walberg has taken "tradition and innovation" as her theme to stress that the design principles established in Early and Middle Minoan art continue to dictate composition to the end of the era we are discussing. "Minoan art ... shows a constant shifting back and forth between abstract and representational motifs and a sophisticated play with formal possibilities." ³³

With the "formulaic" theory it was the repetition of motifs and themes in the art that attracted the attention of scholars. Vermeule, describing the characteristics of the art of the mainland palaces, detected, "... a formulaic quality in every field of Mycenaean art, which is a conservative influence, just as formulas in Greek epic poetry are repeated unchangingly so long

24 Gisela Walberg concludes her introduction with the hope "that a fresh look at Minoan art will modify some views and correct some currently held clichés", WALBERG, *op. cit.*, p. 4. I have the same hope for the wider consideration of the art of the Aegean in the Bronze Age.

25 G. RODENWALDT, *Der Fries des Megarons von Mycenae* (1921), p. 1.

26 W. STEVENSON SMITH, *Interconnections in the Ancient Near East* (1965), p. 63.

27 H.J. KANTOR, *The Aegean and the Orient in the Second Millennium B.C.* (1947), p. 92-99.

28 H.A. GROENEWEGEN-FRANKFORT, *Arrest and Movement. An Essay on Space and Time in the representational Art of the ancient Near East* (1951), p. 185-216, particularly p. 195 and 206.

29 G.A.S. SNIJDER, *Kretische Kunst* (1936), p. 79-105, 135-56.

30 J. BOARDMAN, *Greek Gems and Finger Rings* (1970), p. 25-26. He sees in the circular compositions of reclining animals the replication of the pose as seen from above.

31 F. MATZ, *Die Frühkretischen Siegel* (1928), particularly p. 156-66.

32 A. FURUMARK, *The Mycenaean Pottery. Analysis and Classification* (1941), p. 133-35.

33 WALBERG, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

as they are pleasing and partly honest" ³⁴. Morgan has extended this to explain in detail how the motifs are created and transmitted. The repertoire of the practical artist includes devices to achieve clarity and motifs to illustrate detail ³⁵. Such repeated motifs, rock forms and plant clumps, comprise the concentric and enclosed compositions which were a codification of the Cavalier Perspective of the natural landscape.

These theories were not mutually exclusive for often, while stressing some facet of the art, they strove to explain other aspects which the author also found significant. Thus the modern art term of "impressionism" was used by many authors for both the treatment of landscape and the treatment of movement. Groenewegen-Frankfort saw as an important feature of her "mobility" theory the arrangements in the composition which produce S shape and circular patterns by the balance of movement and countermovement ³⁶. However there did not seem to be any possibility of integrating the insights of all the theories into one consistent and comprehensive theory.

Moreover none of these theories could reconcile the opposites in the art. How could you have "naturalism" with plants showing several different species on the one stem ³⁷ and dolphins showing the characteristics of at least two species ³⁸? How could the abstract patterns based on torsion and rapport be reconciled to the clearly eidetic features of the flying gallop and the animal attack? Indeed the prevailing theories could not reconcile them and some of the authors went wrong when they exceeded the bounds of their insight and, in an endeavour to produce a consistent theory of art, constrained the evidence to fit their particular theory. Others left their insights as a partial explanation of the art and, as such, they remained satisfactory, especially when one stayed within the media from which the theory emanated, like ceramics or glyptics.

However the "thalassa" theory provides just that integration of insights and just that reconciliation of opposites. It holds that Aegean art is the outward expression of a view of life that sees the incidental example but sees through it to the eternal truth. The art, reflecting this view of reality, gives both the immanent object or action and the patterning of all such objects and the essence of all such actions. This vision of reality is close to being sacramental but is more properly described as quintessential.

The "thalassa" theory integrates earlier insights in the following ways:

- "naturalism" by showing delight in physical detail;
- "mobility" by recognising movement as an essential quality of life;
- "eidetic" by retaining the immediacy of the initial visual component;
- "abstract" by allowing sensitivity to the patterns and the dynamism in living forms;
- "formulaic" by explaining the processes of creating the artistic motif, theme and Icon.

So the enquiry into the depiction of the sea in Aegean art has produced a proposal of the quintessential view of life and the "thalassa" theory of art that gives it expression. It is a theory of human viewpoint and of innovative artists. The particular blend of visual, experiential and practical components proposed here, has the capacity to reconcile the heretofore seemingly disparate features of Aegean art. It is a convincing theory in its simplicity and comprehensiveness.

34 E.T. VERMEULE, *Greece in the Bronze Age* (1972), p. 186. This theme has recently been taken up by S. P. MORRIS, "A Tale of Two Cities: The Miniature Frescoes from Thera and the Origins of Greek Poetry", *American Journal of Archaeology* 93 (1989), p. 511-35.

35 L. MORGAN, *The Miniature Wall Paintings of Thera. A Study in Aegean Culture and Iconography* (1988), particularly p. 33-35 on coastal rocks, which is a model of iconographical analysis.

36 GROENEWEGEN-FRANKFORT, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

37 EVANS, *PM II2*, p. 454.

38 MORGAN, *op. cit.*, p. 60-63.

Conclusion

In conclusion may I return to the comparisons with Mesopotamian and Egyptian art and to the visual experiences of the artist and the viewer.

In Aegean art the subject matter is more accessible to viewers than the complications of Egyptian and Mesopotamian religious iconography and artistic rules allow in their traditions. Aegean artists invite us into their world and try by various artistic tricks to evoke a response from us. However I believe there is another reason for this immediate rapport with Aegean art and it is the primary reason. The Aegean artist's eye has registered the scene and has recreated it in art from exactly that viewpoint. Thus when the viewer comes to read the art, the response can be immediate because our eye replaces the artist's and there is no further barrier to understanding. In no other ancient art is this the case. Consider the tales of Mesopotamian deities. It is not a human perspective. No viewer is really there on the Scale Mountain watching the events unfold. In the carefully contrived scenes of the Egyptian superimposed register system where everything is shown in diagram form, it is all like a counting house and the very care with which the scene has been arranged keeps the viewer at a remove. The Aegean artist has given us the human point of view which has evaded the Mesopotamian preoccupied with the gods and the Egyptian constrained by artistic conventions. The immediacy of access by the viewer whose eye replaces the artist's eye simply reinforces the humanism implicit in both the quintessential view of life and the Thalassa Theory of art which makes it manifest.

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