A Pebble for Your Thoughts: Reconsidering Aesthetics, Art, and Value in the Context of Cycladic Marble Sculpting

Alexander Aston
Keble College, University of Oxford
alexander.aston@keble.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

Aesthetics as commonly understood is bound up in Western notions of beauty, taste, discernment, worthiness, and superiority. One need only peruse 19th-century writings on 'primitive art', or how cultural gatekeepers of refinement and respectability responded to every innovative musical trend of the 20th century, to appreciate that aesthetics is enmeshed within notions of cultural supremacy and hierarchies of value. This paper argues that for archaeological analysis of aesthetic experience to generate productive insight into cultural dynamics, it must return to the term's conceptual foundations as the perception and feeling of things. The archaeology of aesthetics can benefit from the perspective of material engagement, which examines how recursive relationships between materials, perception, skill, and social interaction constitute subjective and intersubjective experiences of affective value. To demonstrate such an approach, this paper engages in a brief case study of Cycladic sculpting, examining the relationships between the properties of marble and the development of skill, attention, and social interaction. The paper concludes with a reflection upon how aesthetic experience is intrinsic to the semiotics of value and collective identity.

Disentangling Aesthetics, Art, and Value

There are few histories that reveal the conceptual fusion of aesthetics, art, and capitalist notions of value in Western culture as forcefully as the story of the Early Bronze Age Cycladic figurines. The story of the figurines demonstrates why aesthetics, to be a useful framework of analysis for archaeologists, must be disentangled from the cultural logics of art and market economies. When the artefacts first began to gain recognition by the archaeological community in the 19th century, they were situated within the framework of 'primitive art' and labelled with descriptions such as "small monsters", "grotesque", "barbaric", and "repulsively ugly" (Gill and Chippindale 1993: 605). However, with the fluorescence of modernism and the avant-garde, perception of the figurines began to transform radically. Picasso, Giacometti, Moore, Hepworth, Brancusi and Modigliani were inspired by Cycladic sculpture (see Bach 2006; Gill and Chippindale 1993). Modernist aesthetic values and tastes which sought purity and simplicity of form reframed judgements of Cycladica from primitive monstrosities to expressions of unparalleled artistic virtuosity. The reverence suddenly afforded the figurines instigated one of the most intensive episodes of archaeological looting in the 20th century (Gill and Chippindale 1993). The cultural prestige of the arts and the property logics of 'authenticity' turned Cycladic figurines into a significant commodity in the oligarchic money laundering institution known as the art market. For decades Cycladica were mined from the islands and transformed into elite private property. Such extractivist operations only began to subside when the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the antiquities trade began to curtail demand (see Brodie and Renfrew 2005). The modern history of Cycladica exemplifies both the cultural contingency of aesthetic appreciation, as well as the modern ideological relationship between art, individualism, commodity value and private property. Traditional aesthetic concepts participate in this ideological construction by naturalising Western notions of beauty, taste, worthiness, and superiority. Utilising Material Engagement Theory (MET) and enactivist approaches to aesthetics (Burnett and Gallagher 2020; Hicks and Prezioso 2021; Malafouris 2011; Malafouris and Koukouti 2020), this paper argues that for the archaeological analysis of aesthetic experience to generate productive insight, it must return to the term's conceptual foundations as the perception

and feeling of things.

Since the first half of the 20th century, Cycladic figurines have been approached from an art historical perspective and the cultural values placed upon marble sculpting in the Western tradition. This has led to a general focus on the visual presentation of individual pieces and the search for stylistic similarities for the purposes of categorisation (e.g., Getz-Preziosi 1995; Renfrew 1991). Athena Hadji has critiqued these approaches for their susceptibility to anachronistic values and theoretical concerns such as methodological individualism as well as an emphasis on the passive visual presentation of modern curatorial practices (Hadji 2016). Our concepts of 'art' obfuscate, as Hadji notes, "that this class of artefacts were probably destined for a broader somatic experience" (Hadji 2016: 34). In subordinating the archaeological evidence to Western cultural assumptions and biases about aesthetic experience and value, we also conceptualise past cultures within an ideological matrix of individualism and commodity culture. Such framings are readily apparent in the effort expended to identify specific sculpting 'masters' responsible for Cycladic figurines (e.g., Getz-Preziosi 1987) as well as in interpretations that situate the artefacts within the commodity logics of prestige goods (see Aston 2021a: 157–238 for a critique). Rather, archaeology would benefit from approaching artefacts with the understanding that "body, brain and environment form one system in which aesthetic experience can be simultaneously and variously characterised as sensory-motor, affective, cultural and cognitive" (Burnett and Gallagher 2020: 173). Aesthetic consciousness can be understood to emerge from these constitutive processes in a developmental continuum of pre-reflective kinaesthetic activity and reflective valuation (see Malafouris and Koukouti 2020: 212). Intrinsic to this process are the affective states (feelings, moods, and emotions) that arise through enskilment, display and collective appraisal. The relationship between materials, skilled performance, shared attention, and reflective valuation can be examined as a self-reinforcing dynamic which engenders the arousal, positive valence, and motivational intensity of aesthetic practices. In this light, it is useful to investigate how the developmental entwining of persons, materials, skill, and performative displays generate culturally contingent forms of affective value, such that the significance of and demand for an aesthetic tradition stems from its capacity to incorporate persons

into meaningful social-emotional relationships.

This article gestures at how the archaeology of aesthetic experience might reconceptualise the relationship between materials, perception, affect and value by investigating the emergence of Cycladic sculpting. For over half a millennium, depictions of folded-arm females dominated images of the body in the Cyclades. While there are a great variety of micro-styles, there are several characteristics that are universal to the folded-arm figurines. Generally, the only marble feature on the face was an angular nose. The pieces are clearly sexed with individually rounded breasts above the folded arms and subtle incisions along the pubis. The legs are differentiated but undivided and slightly bent at the knees. The stability and consistency of posture, bodily details and gender clearly express common aesthetic principles and a shared conceptual development. Many of the figurines had painted details including eyes and hair as well as more individuating features such as jewellery and abstract patterns. The consistency of the 'canonical' styles unequivocally demonstrates a collective icon of the body that was generated through marble. As I have argued elsewhere, the figurines formed part of a distributed semiotic system that supported the regional coordination of Cycladic society through ritual practices (Aston 2020, 2021a).

While the figurines have been afforded a great deal of attention, the lowly Cycladic Sea pebble has been largely overlooked (and literally discarded at times) despite the substantial evidence for its significance in Cycladic culture (Aston 2020: 598–601). It is my view that the attention-capturing properties and interactive possibilities of marble sea stones provided essential developmental scaffolding for Cycladic enskilment and aesthetic valuation of marble. Pebbles provided an abundant medium with which to learn how to shape marble as well as a natural template for producing the schematic style figurines, the most common and enduring form of Cycladic sculpture. I argue that such sea stones were a developmental catalyst for the schematic pieces and undergirded the enskilment through which the folded-arm figurines emerged (**fig. 1**). The argument that schematic figurines produced from pebbles provided a key foundation of the sculpting traditions is supported by both the assemblages and chronologies of the early Cycladic record. Sea pebbles, often

found in association with schematics, have been discovered in grave and settlement contexts ranging from the Neolithic and throughout the Early Bronze Age (see Doumas 1977, 2017; Nymo et al. 2013; Rambach 2017; Renfrew 2017b; Zapheiropoulou 2008). Marble schematics, which first appear in the Neolithic, are the most common form of Cycladic sculpture during the Grotta-Pelos period (ca. 3200–2700 BCE) and are the last style of figurines to be produced before the extinction of the tradition in the early Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000–1900 BCE). Of further note, many of the 'Apeiranthos' schematics from the Keros-Syros period (ca. 2800–2300 BCE) have ovoid heads with shaped noses revealing a close association with the folded-arm styles (see Marthari 2017; Renfrew 2017a). Ultimately, the relationship between pebbles, schematics, and the development of skill illuminates how engagement and transgenerational enculturation with simple materials can give rise to a unique aesthetic consciousness with complex social institutions and value forms.

Shaping the Earth

The foundations of aesthetic experience and tradition reside in the relationship between environment, materials, and perception. In the Cyclades, marble outcrops are common throughout the islands, lining the beaches with sea stones, and forming terrestrial deposits that extend deep into their interiors. While marble is plentiful across the archipelago, the stone is most prevalent on the central islands of Paros and Naxos, the likely epicentre of early Cycladic colonisation (Broodbank 2000: 116–117). The seafarers that became the first Cycladic islanders beached their vessels atop pebbles that were radiant in the sun and luminescent beneath the moon. Exploring their new homes, they would have quickly discovered the red-tarnished stones with glittering cores scattered across the landscape. The fine marbles of the Cyclades invite experimentation. Undoubtedly, the prehistoric cultures of the ancient Aegean had numerous techniques that enabled them to think through the potential uses of the materials in their environment. It is likely that the first forms of engagement with marble, following physical inspection, were attempts to knap the stone. Through knapping, individuals would have been trying to discover if they could produce consistent patterns with well-honed crafting

techniques. Engagement with the weight, durability, hardness, texture, breakage, and surface features informed how Cycladic people began to think (and feel) through the possibilities of marble. The islanders would have quickly learned that marble does not produce the conchoidal fracture patterns necessary for traditional lithic industries. The porous and homogenous structure of marble randomly distributes the energy of knapping blows, leading to irregular breakages. However, the rough, crystalline faces formed from such breakages likely encouraged examination of the stone's suitability for grinding and polishing, leading to further discovery.

The physical properties of materials both afford and constrain the possibilities of engagement and aesthetic experience. Marble is a metamorphic rock with fine grained, isotropic crystalline structures that are relatively homogenous depending on the purity of carbonate rocks from which it forms. Recrystallisation during metamorphosis gives the rock a porous configuration that is water absorbent, softening the marble in situ, leading to its gradual hardening through evaporation when exposed (Tambakopoulos and Maniatis 2017). These physical properties make marble a highly malleable, translucent, and robust substance. Marble efficiently and predictably transfers kinetic energy, transforming the artisan's subtle and detailed actions into stable patterns. Steady and relatively light applications of consistent pressure with a coarse abrasive material can shape and smooth marble, allowing for intricate detail through consistent, rhythmic motor routines.

Emery is considered the most likely tool employed by Cycladic sculptors. The stone is a granular and extremely hard metamorphic rock that is found in abundance on Naxos. The material provides excellent surfaces for all the actions required in shaping Cycladic figurines. A limited number of experimental studies utilising emery to produce Cycladic figurines have demonstrated that skilled practitioners could produce simple schematic pieces from sea pebbles in a matter of hours, and more complex figurines in a few dozen (Oustinoff 1987; Oustinoff and Fitton 1984; Papadatos and Venieris 2017). Critically, these studies show that it was reasonably easy to learn the basics of sculpting, that the necessary materials were readily available, and that production was quick for a skilled crafter. However, these experiments bridged

processes of intergenerational en-skilment that are measured in centuries.

As with all natural phenomena, skill develops from the simple to the complex. Some of the earliest marble figurines found to date come from the Neolithic settlement on Saliagos, a small islet that formed as rising sea levels separated Paros and Antiparos. The site is believed to have been occupied for possibly five hundred years with radiocarbon dates placing the settlement between 5200 and 4500 BCE (Renfrew 2017b). Collections of stones found at Saliagos, as well as other sites, suggest that Cycladic people first experimented with the marble sea stones (**fig. 2**). Renfrew separates marble pieces found at the original site into three categories, "pebbles, schematic and nat-uralistic" (Renfrew 2017b: 24). The pebbles are flat, oblong stones that have been "polished", but it is unclear whether this is due to human action (Renfrew 2017b: 28). If the pebbles were rounded by hand, their similarity to the ubiquitous marble sea stones would hardly have gone unnoticed. The application of Occam's razor leads to the conclusion that the pebbles found in early Cycladic contexts are sea stones due to their availability and lower investment of time and energy.

Regardless, pebbles held significance to some degree or another throughout the Early Bronze Age and were deposited with relative frequency in Grotta-Pelos cemeteries, often accompanying schematics (see Rambach 2017). The detection of a painted eye on a pebble from a grave on Despotiko from this same period reveals both valuation of the objects as well as a clear association with the body and suggests a continuity with the later painting of folded-arm figurines (Hendrix 2003: 430). Of further note is the ritual deposition of sea stones at Dhaskalio-Kavos (Nymo et al. 2013) which, as I have argued elsewhere, provided a gestalt resource for conceptualising the magnitudes of visitors to the site over time (Aston 2020: 12–15). Irrespective of the specific meanings or uses of the pebbles, there can be little doubt that they were objects of significance in the Early Bronze Age Cyclades.

The ways in which materials capture attention and shape interactive possibilities catalyse the development of skill. The finds from Saliagos reveal much about the origins of Cycladic sculpting. Three schematic figures were found

alongside the marble pebbles at the site (Renfrew 2017b). One of the clearly crafted forms is a thick symmetrical piece that conforms generally to the shape of more delicate schematic figurines (**fig. 3**). Its dimensions are quite like the three oblong pebbles that were found. However, it has two protruding nubs that are reminiscent of the 'arms' found on schematic pieces. It is quite plausible that this piece was an experiment, used for training, or simply unfinished. The clustering of pebbles and schematics in the same archaeological context is indicative of a conceptual relationship between an ostensibly raw, sea-formed material and the manufactured schematics. The dimensions and characteristics of marble sea stones provide an excellent template for schematic figurines, and utilising sea stones significantly reduces the labour required to acquire and process the material. Numerous pebbles with the general proportions and smooth features of schematic pieces are readily at hand during a quick stroll on most beaches in the Cyclades. The simplest hypothesis, given the evidence, is that significant aspects of Cycladic enskilment with marble originated through engagement with sea stones.

Eliciting Form

Aesthetic traditions emerge from a developmental continuum that entwines individual enskilment with transgenerational enculturation. The first sculptures were produced from pieces that could be held in the hand, forming the locus around which the rest of the body engaged the material with a repertoire of pecking, cutting, scraping, drilling, abrading, grinding, and polishing techniques. Individual sensorimotor routines initiated specific changes in the marble, and by shaping recognisable patterns in marble, the crafter worked to direct attention and fine motor skills to further elicit form. In this way, crafting provided perceptual feedback that elicited behavioural responses, resulting in a recursive process of transformations in stone, perception, and action. As Malafouris states, "the tool guides the grip, the grip shapes the hand, the hand makes the tool, and engaging the tool shapes the mind" (Malafouris 2013: 174). The first experiments with marble were probably acts of fiddling and discovery undertaken in free moments. As individuals became more habituated to the stone's interactive possibilities, exploratory actions coalesced into work rhythms and behavioural sequences that structured the flow of pro-

duction (Wynn and Coolidge 2014). Over time, individual learning cohered into the procedures and methods that are the hallmarks of expert performance and teachable experience.

Schematics created from pebbles appear to have been central to the enskilment process which generated the Cycladic sculpting traditions. Developmentally, this makes intuitive sense, as the schematic figurines would have functioned well as a means of training the basic motions, techniques, and forms of the craft.[1] These simple figurines likely blurred the lines between learning and play, training device and toy (Bailey 2014). Pebbles provided plentiful, symmetrical templates upon which to learn sculpting techniques and rapidly produce completed forms. The argument that schematic figurines provided a developmental locus through which Cycladic sculpting traditions were enculturated helps to explain their duration long after the cultural centrality of the figurines had been displaced. Several putative roles for the schematics have been discussed, such as charms or other ritualistic devices (Sotirakopoulou 2005) or as "less expensive" alternatives to the folded-arm figurines (Hoffman 2002: 545). The multiplicity of meanings and relationships that the schematic pieces were likely to have substantiated are ultimately unknowable. Regardless, it is important to recognise that such pieces formed part of the environment in which Cycladic children developed.[2] In this light, the schematic pieces can be understood as critical developmental scaffolding for learning about the meaning, uses and creation of marble forms.

At Saliagos there were two, more delicately shaped, schematic figurines. One is only a fragment of an elongated neck; however, the other is a fully intact 'violin' piece, by far the most impressive marble artefact found at the site (**fig. 4**). Finely crafted with a rounded torso, arm stumps and an extended

1 With no previous experience I was able to use a piece of emery to shape a schematic form from a marble sea pebble measuring 2.5×3.5 centimetres in roughly thirty minutes.

2 It is worth noting that Grave 77 at Panayia on Paros, which is considered a child's grave, contained a violin schematic (Rambach 2017: 66).

neck bearing a notch, the piece shares a striking resemblance with the schematic figurines that were created throughout the entire phase of the Cycladic sculpting traditions. The piece is small but elegantly symmetrical, combining rectilinear and curvilinear lines to suggest a body and appendages. The long arms and necks, round waists, deep grooves, angles, and curves that form the schematic pieces required the full repertoire of sensorimotor skills necessary to create Cycladic sculpture. The symmetry of the piece shows that individual characteristics were subordinated to the conceptual unity of the whole. Importantly, humans have heightened perception of and attention to symmetry (Kootstra et al. 2008; Sasaki et al. 2005) involving a distinct neural network that includes the extrastriate areas of the human brain (Bertamini and Makin 2014). The perception of visual symmetry in novel and abstract patterns spontaneously produces positive affect (Pecchinenda et al. 2014) and studies show a robust preference for symmetry in human bodies (Bertamini et al. 2013; Rhodes et al. 1998; Tovée et al. 2000). The Saliagos violin schematic reveals not only significant attentional focus directed towards marble and the development of sculpting techniques, but also pleasurable affective states elicited from the perception and creation of symmetry.

The responsiveness of the human perceptual system to symmetry and bodies can be related to the discussion of peak shift phenomena in neuroaesthetics (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999). Peak shift describes the significant directional biases of behavioural responses to the perception of exaggerated characteristics. Given that symmetry, human bodies, and exaggerated features capture attention, it is possible to posit an important feedback loop in the development of Cycladic sculpting. The more that the first experiments produced distinctly recognisable patterns, particularly those that resembled the body, the more these activities reinforced curiosity, exploration, and experimentation. However, a shortcoming of neuroaesthetic accounts is that they tend to view material culture as an epiphenomenon of neural activation patterns (see Hicks and Prezioso 2021 for a critique). Peak shift phenomena should not be viewed as a source of behaviour, but as a pattern of attentional reinforcement that supports human engagement and learning. Marble was not merely a passive substance upon which Cycladic brains imposed themselves, but an active participant that helped structure attention and suggested

patterns of engagement to the first sculptors.

The existence of neural architecture and developmental processes that support perception of the body has several implications upon the feedback dynamics involved in Cycladic sculpting. Perception and interaction with the human form is central to human cognitive development and evolution, forming the foundations of our intersubjective realities (Aston 2019). The human form triggers activity across areas of the brain involved in perception, proprioception, body schema, attentional focus, self-concept, and individuation (Downing et al. 2004; Haxby et al. 2000; Peelen and Downing 2007). Body selective neural networks are integrated into the nonlinear dynamics of brains, bodies, and environments, enabling humans to engage in complex behaviour. Hadji (2016: 35) articulates this entanglement in relation to crafting:

> "objects are made by a conscious subject, they also shape individual cognition literally through muscular training and neuronal adaptation; thus they open new gateways to some of the statistically possible trillions of synapses in the human brain".

For example, the extrastriate body area is involved in the perception of one's own body parts and those of other people, as well as goal-directed motor actions (Astafiev et al. 2004). This relationship suggests that kinaesthetic and visual feedback from sculpting was activating areas of the brain implicated in distinguishing self and others. Studies have also revealed that the extrastriate body area integrates haptic perception of bodies even when visual perception of the body is obscured (Costantini et al. 2011). In other words, shaping marble bodies elicited dense neural feedback in regions of the brain that support the perception, identification, and engagement of the body.[3]

3 It is important to note that aesthetic experience is not reducible to patterns such as symmetry and perceptual dynamics in the nervous system in some universalising sense. Rather, such evidence can help to identify constituent processes in the emergence of culturally contingent forms of aesthetic consciousness.

The foundations of aesthetic experience lie in the relationship between materials, attention, and engagement. Malafouris and Koukouti (2020: 212) state that "aesthetic consciousness can be distinguished from other types of consciousness in that it embodies a special mode of immersive attention". Cycladic figurines are a particularly robust example of the relationship between bodies, attention, and intersubjectivity, and the artefacts can be understood as attention capturing technologies (Aston 2020: 594–597). The relationship between material properties, making and intersubjectivity enables us to understand how unique, culturally contingent forms of aesthetic consciousness can emerge. The ability to generate attentional focus is central to the development of social cognition. Children scaffold the development of joint attention on objects and shared attention between individuals through gaze following, gesture and focusing upon and mimicking adults (Behne et al. 2005; Carpenter et al. 1998; Tomasello and Carpenter 2007; Tomasello et al. 2005; Warneken and Tomasello 2007). It is through shared attention and exploratory actions that children learn the culturally canonical uses of artefacts, which arguably underpin the development of concept formation (Alessandroni 2020; Alessandroni and Rodríguez 2019). Material culture's ability to mediate attention and interaction provides affordances for action and semiotic resources which coordinate the development and enculturation of intersubjectivity (see Aston 2019, 2020, 2021a). The way in which adults engaged with the pieces shaped the attentional space through which meaningful and culturally appropriate interactions with the sculptures were learned. Furthermore, while the significance of haptic perception is obvious during the crafting process, the importance of tactile interactions with finished pieces should not be overlooked. The physical handling and performances with the objects were an important means through which associative learning and affective attachments developed. It was through transgenerational engagement with marble that Cycladic people generated a distinctive cultural aesthetics and semiotics that was bound together by material properties, perceptual dynamics, skilled behaviour, and performative ritual.

Conclusion: The Value of Aesthetics

Cycladic fascination with marble sea stones appears to have catalysed a roughly 3000-year process of transgenerational enskilment and collective value formation. Through haptic and visual feedback, the Cycladic marble sculptors could elicit two fundamental patterns in marble, curvilinear and rectilinear contours. Through the affordances of marble emerged a crafting tradition that persisted for millennia and reshaped Cycladic concepts of the body, identity and community, not as preformed ideas that were imposed upon the material but as an outcome of these interactions. Skill brings together "the resistances of materials, bodily gestures and the flows of sensory experience, [and] rhythmically couples action and perception along paths of movement" (Ingold 2011: 16). Likewise, the presentation and apprehension of skilfully made objects supports collective attention, shared understanding, and communal performances. The role of marble pebbles within the Cycladic sculpting traditions helps to reveal how materials, perception, skill, and interaction are embedded within developmental processes and social relationships that generate unique, culturally contingent forms of aesthetic experience.

Enskilment with the material properties of marble facilitated the emergence of collective sign relations and ritual performances on a regional scale, a reality made apparent by the iconicity of the folded-arm figurines and their intentional destruction, transportation, and deposition on the island of Keros. The nested relationships between making and social organisation reveal the multiple dimensions of aesthetic experience as embodied, materially constituted and socially enacted phenomena. This perspective allows us to engage in not only an archaeology of past aesthetic experience, but to also examine our own cultural experiences of aesthetics more effectively. This dynamic can be observed in parallel through the history of Cycladic figurines. Hundreds, if not thousands of Cycladic figurines were ritualistically broken, and their fragments deposited on the island of Keros (Renfrew 2015). Akin to a sand mandala, a significant part of the Cycladic aesthetic experience of the sculptures was constituted through the destruction of the objects. No single act could contrast more profoundly with the modern practice of preserving the artefacts behind glass cases. The affective experiences of the sculptures were

partially generated through smashing them into pieces, involving the physical force required to break large marble artefacts, the sounds of breakage, the tactility and heft of fragments, all plausibly within contexts of collective attention. Such performative acts generated the "affective attunement" of the aesthetic relationship with the materials (Malafouris and Koukouti 2020) in ways that helped to substantiate the meaning of the figurines as material signs of collective value and identity (Aston 2020, 2021a). As I have written previously, "ritual can be understood as a cognitive strategy that lends a kind of 'object permanence' to social relationships by organising energetic flows of persons and materials into enduring patterns of interaction" (Aston 2021b: 11). The aesthetic dimensions of ritual help to generate the affective valence of social relationships and substantiate their value.

Some four thousand years after the extinction of Cycladic sculpting traditions, the Aegean archaeological record was ritualistically fragmented and reincorporated into a different relationship of value and identity. Once again, performative actions and collective attention involving the figurines were used to generate the affective attachments and meanings of a different society. The grandiloquent claims of artistic geniuses, hushed observation and tasteful judgement of the displayed figurines, the rise and fall of the auction hammer, the re-entombment of the artefacts into private collections, are all a form of ritual observation and reification of our own peculiar cultural nexus of art, individualism, property, and commodity. Art has been culturally positioned as a vehicle of transcendental experience through which human genius and creativity escape the brute, mechanistic rationality of modernity, with the concept of beauty functioning as a substitute for the divine in secular society. Art objects, conceptualised within the logics of Cartesian substance dualism, are viewed as pure manifestations of the mind's symbolic capacities (see also Aston 2021b). It is this abstraction of art that gives it its distinctive cultural value in the contemporary world. Seen as irreducible to instrumental and functionalist logics, art becomes a speculative commodity par excellence—material abstractions with near limitless capacity to accommodate monetary abstraction. The archaeology of aesthetic experience should be decoupled from the framing of art as a property of creative genius imprinted upon materials. Aesthetic experience is invariably entwined with ideology because it is impossible to

extricate perception, affect and material culture from social interaction. All value forms and ritual practices are laden with distinct, culturally contingent forms of aesthetic consciousness. The critical task for archaeologists is to be aware of our own cultural matrix of aesthetics, personhood, art, ritual, and value.

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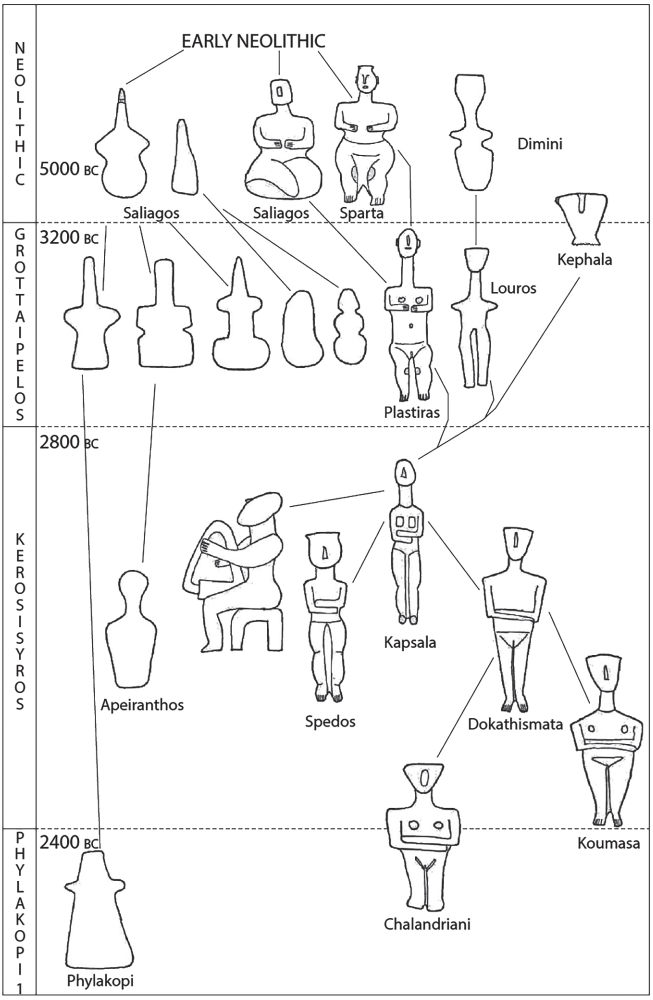

Fig. 1. Major typologies of Cycladic figurines. After Renfrew 2018: Figure 1.2.

Fig. 2. Marble pebbles from Saliagos. After Renfrew 2017b: Figure 3.10.

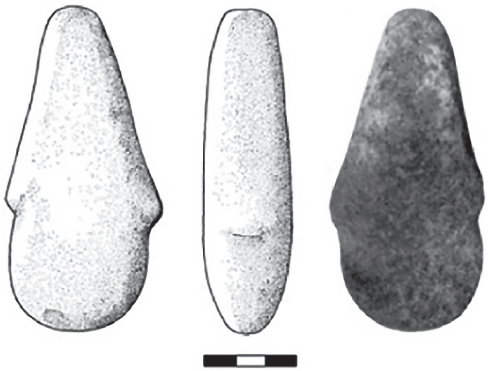

Fig. 3. Shaped marble piece from Saliagos. After Renfrew 2017b: Figure 3.9.

Fig. 4. Saliagos violin piece, Archaeological Museum of Paros. After Renfrew 2017b: Figure 3.7.