



Introduction

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This book has three purposes. First, it is an attempt to put on the table the category of the figurine as a key conceptual and material problematic in the art history of antiquity. It does so through comparative juxtaposition of close-focused papers drawn from deep art-historical engagement with specific ancient cultures, all but the last from the first millennium BCE; the cultures addressed being ancient Greek, ancient Chinese, Mesoamerican before the arrival of Europeans, and Roman in late antiquity. Second, in doing so, and alongside other books in this series by the same authors, it makes a claim for comparative conversation across the disciplines that constitute the art history of the ancient world, through finding categories and models of discourse that may offer fertile ground for comparison and antithesis.¹ Third, it challenges the implicit assumption made in the very rich and astute literature on prehistoric figurines, that there is no interest or mileage in the study of this category of artifact in historical contexts where literary texts and documents, inscriptions or surviving terminologies can be adduced alongside material culture.² Notably, the end of the archaeologically attested figurine in a

¹ For reflections on the comparative exercise in art history, see Elsner 2017. For examples of such comparison, see the volume on sarcophagi published as *RES* 61/2 (2012), guest edited by Wu Hung and Jaś Elsner; Brittenham 2017, 2019; Neer 2019; Wolf 2019. Specifically for comparative figurines: Lesure, 2017.

² The monumental *Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Figurines*—Insoll 2017b—seems to make this assumption since it does not examine at any stage over its nearly one thousand pages either the existence or the conceptual value of post-prehistoric figurines—including the virtual disappearance of this category of material culture in certain historical contexts. The volume is highly laudable both for its explicit comparativity of 34 chapters treating figurine production and usage across prehistoric Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australasia, and Europe, and for its exceptional scope. But in not touching at all on historical contexts, it reflects a worrying throwback to the unfortunate division between a world of “real” archaeology and one that is vitiated by being “text-assisted,” “text-aided,” even “text-hindered”: See for example Little 1992 or Smith 1997, 6, who refers to the problems of “text-hindered archaeology.”

very widespread landscape, where it had been ubiquitous for millennia (on which see Jaś Elsner’s chapter in this volume), and its continuing existence in other landscapes, are matters of substance for understanding both the nature of this kind of object and its importance, including in prehistory.

This book concerns figurines as archaeologically attested materials from literate cultures with surviving documents, that have no direct links of contiguity, appropriation, or influence in relation to each other. The specific cultures concerned are ancient China, pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and the Greco-Roman Mediterranean. Our definition of “ancient” is not one of absolute dates but an empirical and epistemological one of artifacts knowable and study-able in ways shared by all these cultures as academic subjects—that is, through archaeology and also through some forms of documentary material (literary and epigraphic) from within their source civilizations. Thus Mesoamerican objects from the fifteenth century CE are from this point of view no less “ancient” than figurines found in Han tombs in the third century BCE or Roman villas in say the first century CE, though in strictly chronological terms they may be more than a millennium and a half later. The collective archaeology of figurines, as surviving objects from all these cultures, differs from that of say figurines in the European Neolithic because there is a textual record within those cultures which makes the study of their artifacts historical rather than prehistoric.

It is not easy to find a set of emic definitions of figurines that intersect across a variety of highly distinctive cultures, many unconnected by any historical link. In Chinese the term *Yong*, from a fourth-century BCE definition, discussed at length by Wu Hung in his chapter in this book, means sculpted human and animal images created for mortuary purposes, potentially with intimations of substitution and of ritual use.³ Strikingly, from a Western viewpoint, the notion of *Yong* includes the potential for but does not certainly imply miniaturization or portability—concepts that a modern archaeologist is likely to associate with the English term “figurine.”⁴ The Mesoamerican cultures appear to have left us no trace of a defining concept that corresponds to what we might mean by “figurine.” Greek offers a variety of terms—many with the potential implication of sanctity like *bretas*, *agalma*, *eikon*, *eidolon*, and some with intimations of substitution and relative size like *kolossos*—which in different ways cover aspects of the phenomenon but extend beyond it also.⁵ Latin, likewise, is rich in terms—*signum*, *sigillum*, *simulacrum*, *imago*—which overlap but do not discretely frame the figurine as modernity may

³ Mencius, Book 1 part A. 4, tr. Lau 2003, 10–11 (bilingual edition) where the view is attributed to Confucius in the sixth century BCE.

⁴ This is one reason that it is dangerous to import Western notions of miniaturization in relation to figurines into analysis of Chinese materials, as for instance Sebtschka 2015.

⁵ In the 1920s, the great philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff argued that the word *kolossos* only came to have intimations of size in Greek from the first century BCE: Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1927, 169. But his conclusions have been contested and nuanced: see e.g. Dickie 1996 and Kosmetatou 2003.

understand it. Insofar as I can see, none of these terminologies definitively or constitutively concern the issues of scale and miniaturization that are key to modern understandings.⁶ As Richard Neer argues in his chapter in this volume about archaic and Classical Greece, “the idea of a large figurine may seem like sophistry, but it is a natural consequence of taking smallness as an aesthetic category rather than a mathematical one.”⁷ In the Greek context, whether small or large, the kinds of statuary we see as figurines were effectively *thaumasta*—objects capable of wonder. In her chapter on Olmec figurines from the southern Gulf lowlands of Mexico, Claudia Brittenham makes the case that this class of objects in both clay and stone (not self-standing and hence made to be handled) existed in a subtle discursive relationship with other kinds of scaled artifacts, including monumental forms like colossal heads, pyramids, and stelae. The defining issue is not miniaturization or portability as such, but these qualities within a large material semiotics of scale and stasis, all operating around the specific size and mobility of the human body. These models, drawn from conceptual systems created by different cultures, cut the cake of how to understand the objects we call “figurines” differently from the modern category as constructed by current scholarship. The contemporary concept of the figurine as understood in Western archaeology and art history is, in other words, *etic*—a modern heuristic construct that is applied for formal reasons to the archaeological or art-historical record by modern interpreters.

And for good reasons. In the archaeology of antique cultures—Mesoamerican, Andean, Chinese, and Mediterranean, including Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Western Europe from the deepest Palaeolithic—figurines, in the sense of figured, portable miniatures are extraordinary for their ubiquity in the archaeological record. Moreover, within archaeology, they have come to occupy a remarkable role amongst the diverse kinds of data disinterred from the earth. For by contrast with clay shards, axe heads, arrow heads and the like, the figurine—typically miniature, anthropomorphic or animal shaped—is the art-historical and aesthetically inflected special case, archaeology’s inevitable “irruption of sensibility” in relation “to a select element of material culture.”⁸ The figurine represents the “degree-zero” point of archaeology’s disciplinary relation to its art-historical dimension: The figurine’s evocation of human or animal form raising “some indication of the non-materialistic side of [its] makers’ lives,”⁹ which has been taken to allude to their religious beliefs or ritual practices,¹⁰ even “the possible presence of the transcendent.”¹¹ The art-historical special case of figurines within

⁶ For some discussion of definitions, see Insoll 2017a, 4–6, starting with the OED’s “a small carved or sculptured figure” (see <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70095?redirectedFrom=figurine#eid>); also Bailey 2005, 26–44 on “miniaturism and dimensionality” and Martin and Langin-Hooper 2018, 3–6.

⁷ See p. 35.

⁸ Broodbank 2000, 58.

⁹ Ucko 1968, xv.

¹⁰ Ucko 1968, xv.

¹¹ Renfrew 1985, 364.

the normatively materialist approaches of archaeology is matched by what has been described as a special rise in the discursive register of their descriptive and interpretative treatment,¹² archaeology's special case of that ekphrastic discourse of loving description, which has been central to art history since antiquity itself.¹³

At the same time, the figurine—most commonly made from cheap materials like clay—is art history's most archaeological object: not (usually) at the high end of elite patronage, although there are many exceptions, nor of especially grand aesthetic pretensions, but at the same time a whole work of art in its own right, though figurines are more often treated merely as contextualizing evidence. In general, in the game of the art-historical survey, figurines serve as the opening gesture—art history's "primitive" beginning, its prehistoric base-line. Indeed, in terms of free-standing sculpture, even in cases where objects have no base and are made to be handled or laid flat, we may propose that the figurine is art history's "degree-zero" object of independent analysis. It is not only a key conceptual point in both disciplines independently, but it is an essential node in their interface.

We will not attempt here to define figurines reductively, but rather to signal a spectrum of key aspects against which a vast range of material and visual culture may be thought about, to provide a relatively defined conceptual space within which figurines may be understood and perhaps cross-culturally compared. First, materials. In principle (and despite those who have insisted, following simply the huge numbers in the material record, that the typical figurine is made of clay),¹⁴ figurines may be made of any material from the most cheap and humble such as clay, corn cobs, cloth, paper, bone, wax, glass and via a gradation of ever more expensive materials, such as ivory, increasingly precious metals from lead and bronze to silver and gold, semi-precious and precious stones. Figurines may be hand-made one-off or produced in numbers by replication, using technologies such as molding and casting. They may be formed of malleable clay or metal or of stones on an increasingly difficult curve when it comes to fashioning and carving. The question of materials and media gives rise to cognitive issues which concern the body but may be differently interpreted across cultures—one thinks of the coolness of bronze or rock crystal compared with the relative warmth of bone or textile, the hardness of jade beside wood or clay.

Second, figuration. What figurines have in common is some element of figuration of human or animal forms—with no need of any impulse to mimesis, although some, like the mold-cast clay figurines from the Boeotian town of Tanagra in northern Greece or the terracotta army of the first Chinese emperor,

¹² Bailey 2005, 20–3. ¹³ E.g. Elsner 2010.

¹⁴ Speaking of the wide range of "figurine materiality" Insoll notes "above all, fired and, to a lesser extent, unfired clay." See Insoll 2017a, 7.

may show remarkable mimetic qualities. Figurines are largely types of animal or human figures, although the application of certain kinds of human attributes to pillars such as the weapons and armor attached to trophies in Greek and Roman culture, or Aztec flint knives with eyes and teeth, and other attributes, arguably extends the anthropomorphic into areas of relative aniconism. The figure may allow for distortions of all kinds: one thinks of Greek Baubo figures with legs, bare bellies, and genitals, that themselves have become faces (see Fig. 1.6, p. 31).¹⁵ What is at stake here is not realism or anatomical accuracy but the potential to evoke the human or animal form, even if distended or otherwise reshaped, and the place of the part-object and the transitional object in human experience.

Third, there is the problem of scale. Most figurines are miniatures; although some, like the first emperor's generals, discussed here by Wu Hung, or Precolumbian insect sculptures, small though they are, may be more than life-size (and one may repeat that the Chinese term *Yong* appears not to offer any determinant of size but rather to carry connotations of funerary function). In cases of seriality—where many similar figurines exist perhaps over a long period of production, as in the Cycladic figures that were made in the Aegean islands from the fourth to the second millennium—scale is one fundamental variable across a given corpus. It is not always clear what the differences in meaning or significance may be between differently sized members of such a corpus, but they are susceptible to different functions, and there is the possibility for like objects of different sizes to entice varieties of narratives about their potential relations. Such issues may be equally the case for kouroi from ancient Greece and for Teotihuacan obsidian figurines from Mexico.

Unlike the issue of size, which is a measurable absolute, that of scale is always relative—relative to the viewer, relative to other kinds of objects that formally look like a given figurine or may be part of its context of use or deposition. There is a fundamental arbitrariness in the figurine's relationship to its potential referent; there is a range of undetermined potentiality in precisely how and what it signifies. A small figurine may nonetheless be the site of the presence of a powerful god, for example, as discussed by Richard Neer in his chapter. The arbitrariness of reduction or enlargement in a figurine's reference to (or representation of) its prototype is arguably the space for the uncanniness, vitality, and animation, which such objects can always potentially demonstrate. That is, the figurine—as one in a series of similar images but of multiple sizes—has a distinctive unclarity of closure about both its meanings and its potential referents.

Scale in the form of miniaturization, whether on the most simple level of mundane children's play with dolls and other toys (however profoundly reflective of

¹⁵ See e.g. Olender 1990; Barrow 2018, 41–2, 72–4.

underlying psychopathological drives this may be)¹⁶ or on the much grander social level of divine images that may be carried, washed and fed in ritual (as discussed in the third section of Jaś Elsner's chapter), is one of the triggers for that distinctive thematic of the figurine's affect in enticing feelings from its handlers and viewers (not only in antiquity). The enticement of subjectivity—from positive feelings of affection to ones of fear or cursing (in the magical uses of such objects)—is key to the issue of animation. Once power is granted to the miniature object, then the problem of how to control it becomes fundamental. Here questions of cultivation and movement through portability, of hiding and absconding the object through burial for example, of tying it down, of regulating it through ritual procedure or assemblage or other social protocols become essential. Small worlds (as in chess pieces, soldiers, toys, or household shrines) imply games with rules, which allow the threat of animation to remain in the realm of a “what if” fantasy rather than a potential reality intervening in one's own lived world. One entailment of smallness is handleability and portability—both themes enabling agency through the participation of the viewing or handling subject. In this sense, occupying a minuscule place on the scale of size enables the figurine to occupy a space on the spectrum of movement and stasis, becoming potentially portable in the way colossal or monumental object is not.

Alongside the universally applicable, although always contextually specific, theme of scale, goes the crucial question of touch. Figurines are largely made to be handled, as discussed by Claudia Brittenham in this volume. One may argue that the differentiation of forms of free-standing sculpture across cultures is underlined by the issue of touch—from the figurine which may be cupped in a hand, worn as an amulet on the body, held up as a kind of statuette by one or two hands, to those forms of life-size and over-life-size statuary where the beholder's body is necessarily separated from the object and effectively moves from a haptic to an optic regime of relationship. The handling of a figurine—even in a public context—is the eliciting of a kind of intimacy, a placement of the handler's subjectivity in relation to the object. That has particular ramifications for viewers in relation to contexts of death or religion, which are extremely frequent for figurines in all cultures. Effectively one aspect of the power of figurines is their role in regulating the self: they construct the handler in relation to and in dialogue with the object being handled; they offer a plastic model of thinking the self as potentially replicated in miniature, as well as of thinking through difference by means of seriality and its range of differentiations.

The figurine as the object of handling—often handled by its user as it was handled in its manufacture by its maker—is a base-line for thinking about statuary in general. The fact that the forms of so much large-scale statuary are made

¹⁶ E.g. Klein 1997; Winnicott 1971, 1–2, 14, 38–52.

present in miniature in figurines, may be a function of miniaturized replication of a prior monumental type, but may equally be domestication of the monumental or the experimentation with form that comes prior to its expression on a large format. In this sense a corpus of figurines, in their seriality and in the differences between them, may be the evidence for the evolving thinking of artists with regard to all forms of experimentation and the making of art.

Art-historically speaking, the figurine as touchable object engages the viewer in a different way from flat art—whether relief sculpture or painting. In particular it elicits different models of narrative relationship to what it depicts, since in part the viewer is engaged in and addressed by the objects of the narrative—makes up his or her stories in direct tactile relationship with the object through play, in psychic fantasy, via ritual action. Unlike the voyeuristic relationship of viewing, as if from the outside, the neatly framed pictorial narrative, the viewer as handler is always potentially and without protection *within* the narrative of figurines. Maya terminology speaks of “caring for images,”¹⁷ and we may see the tangibility of affect in relation to figurines to be a fundamental drive for a distinctive visuality of the sculptural and three-dimensional. It is through this visuality, as a relationship of narrative-making from the beholder’s end, that figurines have a particular power in creating “what if” worlds—representations of past and future (including within the mortuary realm of the dead), kinds of social questioning (that may be both supportive and subversive of normative culture), models of conceptually imagining space and temporality both like and unlike the viewer’s own social and political experience. Multiple tiny figures—whether in ancient Egyptian or early Chinese tombs—may have the effect of rendering a small space seem large to its deceased occupant, the narrative of presence among the figurines playing out as a fantasy of what the dead will see and think in the long twilight of their buried afterlife.

In formal terms the narrative issue has a relation to the problem of bases. Many made to stand like a human being or an animal, and this may be by being placed in the earth (as in many Olmec examples) or on a flat or a raised base, sometimes supported by struts.¹⁸ But many—from Cycladic figures, via jointed dolls to numerous Mesoamerican instances—only “live” when held and otherwise lie down or flop. Museum displays—constructing complex methods to make the objects “stand”—often distort them by imposing modern aesthetic norms of how they might be experienced. But the range from hand-held, via base-set to hung from a roof or, we suspect, around the neck, is great and in all such cases—across cultures—opens differing and nuanced models of narrative interrogation.

¹⁷ Houston and Stuart 1996, 294.

¹⁸ See Anguissola 2018, 191–8, 203.

The issue of the series—again one found in all the cultures we examine here—and of sheer numbers raises fundamental questions. Is the figurine to be thought of as an individual and special object, a one-off work of art, or as a representative of its type, an item in an assemblage? The themes of replication and aura that Walter Benjamin thought so important about the work of art in the moment of modernity,¹⁹ are in fact among the most potent and ancient problems of visual and material culture, as witnessed above all by the figurine. Questions of collecting and of the creation of history through assemblages, which viewers know as brought together over different times, are potentially in play. At the same time seriality always raises the problem of its end-point—in smallness or hugeness, or in the expense of a medium so great that it claims uniqueness.

An unproblematized working assumption of what a figurine is, gives three special qualities—smallness, figuration (whether of human or animal features), and portability. Though the concept is not fully defined there, this is the assumption of the many essays in the outstanding comparative discussion of figurines in Timothy Insoll's landmark volume *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Figurines* (2017).²⁰ Since that book draws on materials from periods where no emic or internal discussions survive, it has been necessary for archaeology to construct—on the basis of a vast swathe of empirical evidence—a working definition of a real category for contemporary analytic usage. The problem in this procedure is, inevitably, that such a definition must start from the assumptions, classifications, and intellectual structures of the Western academy as it turns to the comparative investigation of the rich range of materials at hand: the risks of Eurocentrism and colonial or post-colonial bias (however aware of the issues the practitioner may be) are insuperable because there is no emic control, no voice internal to the cultures examined to give its own spin. The immense value of taking an art-historical, but rigorously comparative, approach that places the investigation in periods where we do have texts which give us some concepts internal to the cultures we study, is that we find ourselves discombobulating the initial starting point. What the findings of this volume imply is that—at any rate in the Chinese, Greek, and Mesoamerican examples we examine—the issues are not smallness, figuration, and portability but rather a spectrum of relative scale (from larger than human to miniature), a spectrum of relative figuration (from the very schematic to the spectacularly realistic), and a spectrum within the poles of mobility and stasis (in which the portable is mobile). Those spectra, classified by a kind of funerary shadowing of the living world in ancient China, or by wonder in relation to the divine world (for example) in ancient Greece, exist in an entirely

¹⁹ See Benjamin 2003.

²⁰ Insoll 2017b.

relational dynamic to the basic unit of the human body (or the animal body for zoomorphic figurines)—in terms of all three axes of scale, figuration, and mobility/stasis.

In their ubiquity, seriality, scale, and interactive relationships, figurines make visible issues fundamental to all categories of ancient art, at the same time as they pose, by the very definition of the class, issues of figuration and representation central to all art-historical analysis. Too often studied only for typological or chronological information, figurines have much to contribute to a general reflection about the disciplines of art history—and archaeology—and much to reveal about the meanings of art throughout the ancient world.

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