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Figures in Cycladic Art

Cycladic figures come from a grouping of islands known as the Cyclades located in the Aegean Sea. The name derives from the Greek word for circle, *kyklos*, as the Ancient Greeks believed they formed a circle around the sacred island of Delos.\(^1\) Artistic growth and development in the Cyclades was centered around the main four islands, Paros, Naxos, Keros, and Thera, and was spurred on by the mineral resources found there as well as the vast deposits of high quality marble found on Paros and Naxos. This marble allowed for the creation the marble sculpture the area is now famous for.\(^2\)

The marble sculpture from the period, roughly 3200 B.C.E. to 2300 B.C.E.\(^3\), focuses on abstracted depictions of the naked human body. These figures can then be divided up into three main categories: the female nude, the male nude, and musician figures. The most common of the three by far is the female nude. Very few male figures have been found and the majority of them are in fact the musician figures. Therefore the female nude figure becomes a point of fascination as art historians try and piece together the varying forms found in the vast collection of figures as well as a potential meaning or use for them.

Although the female form is shown in a more simplified, abstracted state, two different varieties appear. These are known as the Spedos variety and the Khalandriani variety.\(^4\) The “1. Marble Female Figure” and “Upper Part of a Marble Female Figure” represent these respectively. Spedos figures are characterized by a larger variation in geometric shapes, more body divisions with the waist, knees, and ankles, a backward tilted head with an oval face, a large long nose, arms crossed with the left arm placed on top of the right, and an overall sense of a slim, elongation of the body.\(^5\) The Khalandriani figures on the other hand are characterized by a sense of angularity with a squared off torso and repetition of triangles and ninety-degree angles which can be seen in the shoulders and arms. These figures also lack the sense of elongation and are shorter and more squat which also makes them appear more self-contained than the Spedos.

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figures. The arms, although also crossed, are crossed with the right arm on top of the left. There is also a third more rare variety known as the Steatopygous type. This figure is a full bodied, curvy woman with large, rounded hips and buttocks. This variety is seen represented in “2. Marble Female Figure.”

Even with the different types of figurines and the vast number of them found, figuring out the purpose or being behind them has proved quite the puzzle. Although many of the figures were found in grave sites, many were also found in domestic sites and the single largest discovery of these figures was at Keros where fragments from over two-hundred figures were found with no evidence what-so-ever of human remains. This seems to disrupt any kind of the theory that the figures were used in burial practices or at least that does not fit as a full explanation of their purpose. It has also been suggested that they act as symbols of fertility or are somehow connected with a desire or honoring of female fertility. This is supported by the vast number of female figures found and earlier female nudes such as the Woman of Willendorf. Although the Steatopygous figures are more widely accepted to related to fertility, due to the exaggerated curves of the female body, this theory still has no definitive proof and does not completely explain the male and musician figures found. It also heavily relies on the interpretation of the meaning or purpose behind the Woman of Willendorf which is also a theory, not something definitively proven.

A third theory is that they represented votive figures which are a common occurrence in ancient art across a variety of cultures. This can be supported by the small size of some and the simple quantity of the figures found. Yet without more information about the religious practices of the ancient peoples living in the Cyclades it simply can not be accepted as anything more than a theory. Another theory suggests that the figures are a token of sorts which follows a person throughout their life. This is supported by remains of paint found which seem to resemble tattoos. Perhaps as person advanced through rites of passage, their figure was then painted or received similar tattoos to ones the actual person possessed. Again though, without more information, these are simply all theories, none of which can be definitively proven across all types of the figures.

It then becomes the question: what is their true meaning and purpose? With our limited knowledge of the peoples and time period, how can we discover this meaning? I would like to propose a lens with which to view the figures. It is one with which many people before have examined them, but I believe it helps us to not only view them as having a functional purpose, but helps us to connect with the pieces on a more emotional level which could help us interpret

their meaning. This lens then is the crossed arms. Aside from the musician figures who carry or hold instruments in their arms, all the figures, both male and female, cross their arms over their midsections. This has a variety of possible meanings. It could be a position of piety and worship which helps support the theory of them being votive figures. It could also be a way to emphasize the midsection or a gesture to protect the belly. For the female figures this helps support the theory of fertility tokens. It could also simply have a more mundane reason, the crossed arms help to prevent breakage over time as they are fully attached to the body. These three interpretations are valid, but I would like to suggest another. The gesture of crossed arms is a very human, sometimes very emotional one. We cross our arms when we feel nervous, scared, uncomfortable, or anxious, as a way of protecting ourselves. We cross our arms when we feel angry or when we are being stubborn. We even cross our arms when we are cold. Art over time has been a way for people to depict the world around them, represent their customs and rituals, but also as a way of figuring out that world and themselves, whether that means themselves as an individual or themselves in a broader sense, as human. Ancient art can be difficult to study as it can easily become separate from our own lives and it can be difficult to remember that a person sat creating each of these pieces. But finding a way to connect with the art, maybe on a more personal or emotional level, can help adjust that perspective. We will never definitively know the real purpose or meaning behind the Cycladic figures until we know more about the peoples who lived there. In the meantime though, exploring different interpretations and picking an aspect, such as the crossed arms, to focus on can help viewers to connect with the art and with a people from the distant past.

Bibliography


