

THE ROLE OF LANDSCAPE IN MINOAN ART

By

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Introduction

It has been said that in Minoan art, we find “some of the world’s first landscape paintings.”¹ However, Minoan landscape differs from more modern kinds of landscape in important respects, suggesting that the purpose of landscape in Minoan society may have differed from the purpose of landscape in modern society. In this paper I will consider the role of landscape painting in Minoan art and culture by a careful analysis of paintings from Crete and Thera. I will begin by providing a review of recent scholarship on the possible meanings and purposes of landscape art. Next, I will consider the role of landscape painting in Minoan art by a careful analysis of paintings from Crete and Thera and their formal similarities and differences from modern landscape art. I will continue by considering the suggestion, often made in the literature, that all Minoan landscape art is of a religious nature, and its counter-suggestion that the paintings were made for primarily aesthetic purposes. I will then consider a third possibility, that Minoan landscape painting was a form of ritual activity directed at maintaining a relationship between humans and their environment.

Landscape: Background and Definition

Landscape is not the same as land. Land refers to unmediated physical space. In contrast, landscape can refer to land which is perceived through a lens of cultural conditioning and selected for the degree to which it satisfies expectations of a “good

¹ Morgan 2005: 26; cf. Chapin 2004: 47.

view” or to such a perception that has been represented artistically.² It can also refer to land that has been mediated by human agency into a garden or a park.³ The key determinant of landscape, as opposed to land, then, is mediacy.

There are those who believe the appreciation of landscape and even the preference for certain kinds of landscape are universal. One such theorist is Jay Appleton, who believes that the aesthetic pleasure found in a particular scene depends upon prominent features acting as signs regarding the environmental conditions that are favorable to primitive survival.⁴ The strategic advantages of cover and a broad, unimpeded perspective for lookout purposes then become highly desirable. This theory predicts that people would prefer landscapes with broad, open spaces seen from a high vantage point. Modern research into whether landscape preference is biologically determined tends to confirm that “modern humans retain a partly genetic predisposition to like or visually prefer natural settings having savannah-like or park-like properties, such as spatial openness, scattered trees or small groupings of trees, and relatively uniform grassy ground surfaces.”⁵

Other theorists argue that the appreciation of landscape and the preference for one type of landscape over another is culturally conditioned. Denis Cosgrove, for example,

² Andrews 1999: 1.

³ Early in its history, “landscape” referred to the territorial possession of a town or city. See Andrews 1999: 28.

⁴ Appleton 1975: 69.

⁵ Kellert and Wilson 1993: chapters 3 and 4. cf. Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid’s project known as “The People’s Choice.” Thousands of interviewees were questioned about their preferences for paintings with regard to categories such as favorite subject matter, favorite colors, favorite forms, and so on. The results were tabulated by country and each country’s “Most Wanted” painting was produced by a computer in accordance with these preferences. The various “Most Wanted” paintings were remarkably consistent in appearance. The weakness of this experiment in terms of its usefulness for my discussion stems from its being synchronic, while my paper is diachronic.

believes that landscape is a ‘way of seeing’ conditioned by cultural and historical forces.⁶ In his view, the emergence of landscape as an independent genre in the 16th century corresponds to early modern capitalism and the replacement of feudal systems of land tenure with the commodification of land. Those who tend and whose lives are completely dependent on the land relate to it as “insiders” and do not see it as landscape. Land becomes landscape, and therefore aestheticized, as its dependency value is replaced with capital value.

Landscape can play a number of roles in society: recreational, aesthetic, communicative, spiritual. The various forms that landscape takes in art may be determined by the role of landscape within a given society. In very urban societies, landscape seems to have a recreational value as a retreat from the demands of urban living. In Augustan Rome, urban pressures drove the claustrophobic citizen to seek refuge from the enclosed spaces of the city in the open countryside. Landscape allowed for the “glad animal movements” which Wordsworth valued in his childhood and thus acquired a recreational value. Augustan writers such as Vergil (in his *Georgics*) and Horace (in his *Epodes*) combined this recreational value with an aesthetic value. Landscape can also have communicative value, as a means of social engagement between humans and the physical environment.⁷ In the early Christian writers, landscape had a spiritual role, as the refuge from worldly concerns. Landscape can also have metaphorical or narrative uses. In the 13th century, Petrarch synthesized the recreational and aesthetic roles of landscape in Augustan literature with the spiritual meaning of the wilderness in

⁶ Cosgrove 1984: 19.

⁷ See Herva 2006.

early Christian thought to construct landscape as a “metaphorical analogue for solitude and spiritual purity.”⁸

Prior to the 16th century, landscape was rarely treated as a subject of painting in its own right.⁹ Instead, it was used to fill in the background of paintings that were primarily figure paintings. In 1656, it was defined by T. Blount, in his *Glossographia*, as a “Parergon, Paisage or By-work, which is an expressing of the Land, by Hills, Woods, Castles, Valleys, Rivers, Cities, &c. as far as may be shewed in our Horizon.”¹⁰ Thus, everything in a picture that was not part of the figures is “Landskip, Parergon, or by-work.” In such paintings, where the figure is dominant and the landscape occupies a hierarchically subordinate position, the lowly landscape tends to function metaphorically by creating a dialectic with the elevated figure; the figure dignifies the landscape, but the landscape provides “contextual substance and corroborative metaphysical force” to the figure.¹¹ As *parerga*, landscape could also have a recreational function. Bishop Paolo Giovio’s 1527 *Dialogue* describes *parerga* as *divertissements* in relation to Dosso Dossi: “the elegant talent of Dosso of Ferrara is proven in his proper works [*justis operibus*], but most of all in those things that are called *pererga*. For in pursuing with pleasurable labor the delightful diversions of painting, he used to depict...all those sorts of things so agreeable to the eyes in an extravagant and festive manner.”¹²

Landscape’s different roles and functions call for different formal attributes. In Christian iconography, the ascetic’s anchorage is often depicted as rocky and mountainous. In such cases, Sinai stands as a representative of spiritual penance. In the

⁸ Andrews 1999: 34.

⁹ Ruskin 1876: 149.

¹⁰ “Landskip.” Blount 1707: unnumbered page.

¹¹ Andrews 1999: 28.

¹² Andrews 1999: 29.

recreational landscape of Vergil and Horace, landscape takes on the attributes of good pasturage or vineyard. Instead of penance and remoteness, the emphasis is on the human utility of the land. Landscapes whose primary role is aesthetic can take on different forms depending on which aesthetic values are being met. For example, a “beautiful” landscape may be characterized by symmetry, gracefulness and a lightness of touch; while a “picturesque” landscape may be characterized by asymmetry and effects such as “scumbling” and thick impasto.

In more recent times, landscape came to be its own genre of painting, with traits such as a deemphasis on the human figure and a greater interest in such “sublime” features as gnarly roots and craggy mountains than in such “beautiful” properties as symmetry, grace, and lightness that distinguished it from the “bywork” landscape painting of previous eras.¹³ This new landscape art’s formal dissimilarities from Renaissance landscape art indicates a difference in purpose; Andrews suggests it is the psychological need for transcendent experience provided by the sublime.¹⁴

Dataset/Catalogue of Select Images

The following is a short catalog of Minoan landscape paintings. Each painting is given an entry with a short description of its contents and a more detailed look at those aspects that are relevant to later discussion.

1) **The Saffron Gatherer** (fig. 1). A monkey is standing on a rugged ground line from which crocuses sprout and collects their flowers in three bowls. There appears

¹³ Ruskin 1876: 149.

¹⁴ Andrews 1999: 129-39.

to be another, upside-down ground line above the monkey, from which more crocuses hang down toward the monkey. The eye is arrested in the foreground by the rocks and the monkey, which are surrounded by empty space. There are no objects depicted behind the monkey which might lead the eye deeper into space.

2) **The Partridge Frieze from the Caravanserai** (fig. 2): As restored by Maria Shaw¹⁵, this painting depicts 10 partridges and two hoopoes along with two different kinds of grass and some kind of a fruit tree. The plants and animals are supported by a wavy ground line against a multicolored background with abstract, wavy features in it. The fruit tree is shown at the same scale as the partridges and one of the partridges overlaps it. If this reproduction is correct, the artist may have been trying to represent depth by showing the overlapping of distant objects by nearer objects and the diminishing size of distant objects.¹⁶ As in the Saffron Gatherer, there is an upside-down ground line above the birds. This appears only in the left hand side of the composition.

3) **The Monkeys and Birds Frieze from the House of the Frescoes** (fig. 3): Monkeys and birds inhabit a landscape consisting of a wavy multicolored ground line with a variety of plants growing out of it. The ground shoots vertically upward in places and sprouts tendrils that snake over the heads of the monkeys. The undersides of these tendrils become upside-down ground lines over the monkeys' heads, and the upper sides become right-side up ground lines, doubling the lower ground line the monkeys rest upon. Two monkeys stand on this upper, right-side-up ground line. Two rivers ("waterfalls," according to Immerwahr¹⁷) wind through the composition, extending from the upper to the lower borders. There is some overlapping of plants in front of the rivers and of areas

¹⁵ Shaw 2005: 93.

¹⁶ Palyvou 2005: 186.

¹⁷ Immerwahr 1990: 46.

of ground over other areas of ground. The background is multicolored. On the left wall, the background is red; on the other two walls, it is white.

4) **The Monkeys and Kids from Beta 6, Akrotiri** (figs. 4a, 4b): Several monkeys frolic on a jungle-gym-like setting consisting of a honeycomb of tiered ground lines extending upward and to the sides. The background is negative space carved out by the ground-structure. The kids also appear to stand on tiered ground lines framing empty space.

5) **The Spring Fresco from Delta 2, Akrotiri** (fig. 5a): Like the Saffron Gatherer, the Spring Fresco has rocks, one kind of animal (swallows), and one kind of plant (lilies). The rocks form a rough wave pattern, but the contours of the individual crests of this wave differ one from the other. Below the surface lie petaloid objects with concentric internal contours that may represent subterranean rocks. Like the waves in the rocks, these petaloid objects are similar to each other in shape, although each one is unique in its exact contour, color, number of nested contours, and so on. Also like the rocks, the lilies exhibit variation within a general pattern. For the most part, there is one lily plant on both the trough and the crest of each wave in the ground line, there are three stalks per plant, and there are three blossoms per stalk; however, there are exceptions to all of these patterns. The swallows are depicted with great sensitivity, grace, and personality. The strokes of the brush are sure and taper gracefully to points at the end of the wings; where the birds fly in pairs, their movements are complementary,¹⁸ in one case creating a revolving motion of the sort for which Minoan art is well-known.¹⁹

¹⁸ Similar to the Flying Fish from Melos (fig. 5b); Groenewegen-Frankfort described each pair of fish as having “movement and counter-movement.” 1951: 198-99.

¹⁹ Walberg 1986: 91.

6) **The Miniature Fresco from the West House, Akrotiri** (fig. 6a-c): This frieze covers the upper section of all four walls in Room 5, but only three walls have survived in any significant degree. On the North wall (fig. 6a) is a panorama apparently viewed from the sea²⁰ made up of a series of vignettes organized around several towns. To the left of the first town, a group of men meet on a hill; the hill is mostly inferred from the men's position relative to the town, but is represented by a simple black line and some blue and yellow areas of color which may represent ground. Above the town, a group of women carry water from a well in jugs on their heads and a man leads sheep away from, and another man leads cattle toward, a corral around a tree. To the right of the town, a group of soldiers departs. Below the town, there is seashore and at least one ship at sea. A group of drowning men flounder in the water.

On the East wall (the "Nilotic Scene") (fig. 6b), a river winds horizontally along a landscape featuring rocks, palms, various plants, a cat, waterfowl, a griffin, and a deer. The artist has used the technique of situating the bases of some of the palms on the "near," or lower side of the river, and allowing the trunks to extend upward so that they overlap the river in order to represent depth.

On the south wall of the same room (fig. 6c) (the "Flotilla Fresco"), there is a town on a projection of land on either side of the composition surrounding a harbor with a fleet of ships sailing in it. The two projections of land are described with mountains and the towns are situated within them. The town on the left (the "departure town") is bounded by rivers, one of which flows out of the composition onto the east wall. A lion stalks deer along the river's edge. There is a vignette on the right side of the composition (the "arrival town") involving men running along a mountainous ground line to a lookout

²⁰ Younger 2011: 170.

tower. A woman stands on a balcony of the arrival town holding a boy's hand and waves at the arriving ships. Dolphins frolic in the sea.

7) **Lily and Iris Frieze from Amnisos** (fig. 7): In a park-like setting, lilies and irises grow out of planters against a red, uneven ground. The ground line forms a rough, wave-like pattern, with smaller waves along its contour. The background is empty and white. Cameron restores a goddess at left, but no evidence supports this.²¹

8) **The paintings from Xeste 3, Akrotiri** (figs. 8 a-d): On the ground floor is the Lustral Basin scene (fig. 8a). There are three figures on a rocky ground line. From left to right, the first figure is a young woman with a full head of hair and a traditional Cretan flounced skirt and open bodice called the "Necklace Swinger" after the thread of beads in her left hand. The middle figure (the "Wounded Girl") sits on a rock, wearing a skirt of vertical lappets. Her left foot is bleeding. Her hairstyle is slightly different from the first woman's, but there are no shaved portions. The third figure (the "Veiled Girl") dances in a spotted, full-bodied veil. Portions of her head are shaved. Above this scene, on the first floor, are wall paintings in two rooms, Rooms 3a and 3b, which are different parts of the same composition. In Room 3a on the East Wall (fig. 8b), an adolescent and young girls pluck crocuses on rocks. The ground line has the same rough, wavy line we have become accustomed to, but the smaller waves along the contour of the big waves are much shallower and longer than in, for example, the Saffron Gatherer from Knossos (fig. 1) or the Partridge Frieze from the House of the Frescoes (fig. 2). The ground is seen in cross-section; its interior consists of multicolored bands and vertically oriented scaley structures with nested contours inside them, which probably represent foreground rocks.

²¹ Immerwahr 1990: 180, Am no. 3

Behind (or, perhaps, surrounding) the figures, in what would normally be empty, negative space, there is a pattern of crocus plants.

On the North Wall of 3a, first floor (fig. 8c), the pattern of crocus plants continues from the East Wall. The ground line disappears, however, replaced with an assembled wooden platform on short piers with a raised central dais on which a goddess sits with a griffin on a leash. To the left of the platform, a girl stands emptying a small basket of crocuses into a large panier. Stepping up to the platform, a monkey stands erect like a human and offers crocuses to the goddess from another panier.

Also on the first floor, in Room 3b (fig. 8d), a duck flies among reeds growing out of a wavy ground line with flattened omega curves, perhaps representing roots, extending down into the subterranean cross-section. The tops of more reeds are seen beneath the flattened omega curves, perhaps indicating that this ground line represented the upper edge of a tiered ground-structure such as those seen in the Monkeys and Birds fresco, with reeds from a lower ground line overlapping the upper ground structure.

9) **Room 14, Ayia Triada** (fig. 9): Three sides of the small room are decorated with paintings. As one enters the room, on the left wall a woman kneels on a red ground. The ground is in three tiers; a lower one sends up a vertical outcrop which ends halfway up the wall, sending out tendrils in either direction; it is on this level that the woman kneels. This ground level in turn sends up two vertical outcrops which also end in another, horizontal tier of ground. Several different species of plant grow on the ground. The background is white, negative space.

Looking straight ahead, the viewer sees a wall with a woman in a slightly bent pose on a green ground. Behind her, to the left, is another platform. Like the woman on

the left-hand wall, she wears typical Minoan flounced skirt and open bodice. Grasses grow on the ground. The background is white, negative space. On the right-hand wall, there is a scene of cats and agrimia on pieces of disconnected, floating ground. The agrimia are in flying gallops; the cats step lightly with their backs hunched. A variety of plants grow on both the upper and lower sides of the various areas of floating ground. The background is white, negative space; the areas of floating ground consist of broad, multicolored, vertical stripes.

Other paintings may represent nature, such as the grass and mouse from the Southeast House, Knossos (fig. 10), but the fragments are too small to present the kind of vista implied by the term “landscape.” Still other paintings show animals with no context. The antelopes from Beta 1 are an example of this kind of painting (fig. 11). Others are easily dismissed as “wallpaper,” or pattern, motifs. These include the sea daffodils from the House of the Ladies and the crocuses from Xeste 3, Room 3a (1st floor) (see figs. 12, 8b). Their repetitive placement in a pattern renders them ineffectual as landscape, because it prevents them from being descriptive of a place.

Trends

1) Lack of Depth

There is little depth for the eye to penetrate into in these paintings. In several paintings, such as the Saffron Gatherer and the Monkeys and Kids from Beta 1, there is only empty space behind the foreground. Furthermore, despite some attempts at perspective, such as in the Partridge Frieze from the Caravanserai (fig. 2), in which a fruit

tree is rendered at the same size as a partridge which overlaps it – possibly in an effort to show that it is far away, and in the Nilotic Scene (fig. 6b), in which overlapping represents nearness/farness, the Minoans rarely engaged in such experiments.

2) “Worm’s Eye” Vantage Point

Many of the paintings (Spring Fresco in fig. 5a; Lilies and Irises Frieze in fig. 7; Lustral Basin, Saffron Gatherers and Duck and Reeds, Xeste 3 in figs. 8a-d) adopt a “worm’s eye view” perspective, in which the eye is at the level of the ground.

3) Stratified or Floating Ground Line

In several of the paintings, ground structures are stacked on top of each other, with negative space between them (Monkeys and Birds Frieze, House of the Frescoes in fig. 3; Monkeys and Kids from Beta 6 in figs. 4a-b), or upside-down ground lines that may be the undersides of such stacked ground structures occur over the heads of the figures (Saffron Gatherer in fig. 1), or discreet clumps of earth float above, below, and around each other (Ayia Triada, right wall in fig. 9). Often, there are plants growing on both the tops and the bottoms of the floating ground structures (Saffron Gatherer in fig. 1; Ayia Triada, right wall in fig. 9). Vertical faces of stone often have horizontal tendrils protruding out from them (Spring Fresco in fig. 5a, Monkeys and Kids, Beta 6 in figs. 4a-b).

4) Nearness, Immediacy

Except for the North and South Wall of the Miniature Fresco in the West House, the paintings are all viewed from a nearby or immediate vantage point.

5) Few People

There are few people in Minoan landscapes. The three examples are Ayia Triada (fig. 9), the Miniature Frieze from the West House (figs. 6a-c), and the paintings from Xeste 3 (figs. 8a-d).

Discussion of the Trends

As Blount defined it, landscape is a “Parergon, Paisage or By-work, which is an expressing of the Land, by Hills, Woods, Castles, Valleys, Rivers, Cities, &c. as far as may be shewed in our Horizon.” This definition takes for granted that the viewer has an elevated vantage point into a vista broad enough to encompass such objects as “woods, castles, valleys, rivers, cities, &c.” In “human’s eye” view (that is, a view from the perspective of an average height person standing on the ground), the heads of most people are at approximately the level of the horizon, and their feet are planted at a given distance below the horizon according to how far away from the viewer they are (see fig. 13). In order to encompass as much landscape as Blount envisioned, most paintings have to adopt a slightly elevated, or “bird’s eye” view (fig. 14), where, on flat land, the heads of figures are below horizon level, and their feet are placed somewhere on the plane of

the ground, which is tilted up from the bottom of the canvas to the horizon. This can be seen in Da Messina's *Crucifixion* (fig. 15). There is a good reason for this painting to take a slightly bird's eye viewpoint: the need to include Christ elevated on the Cross. However, this vantage point is part of what allows Da Messina to render a landscape similar in comprehensiveness to what Blount envisions. Some Renaissance and post-Renaissance paintings achieve such comprehensiveness of landscape from a kneeling, or crouching human viewpoint (for example, Bellini's *Madonna of the Meadow* in fig. 16; Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* in fig. 17), but it is impossible to render from a worm's eye view perspective (i.e., looking up from the ground) (fig. 18). Thus, the angle of view should be pointed somewhat down from a slight elevation, so that details of the country are visible below the horizon, rather than up from a low position, which would tend to push the horizon in the direction of the bottom of the canvas.

Appleton, followed by Kellert and Wilson, believes that a preference for the kind of broad, penetrating vista Blount describes is part of our genetic inheritance as humans.

It should be thus apparent that many Minoan "landscapes" do not fit Blount's definition of landscape. Minoan landscape does not often depict the horizon at a slight bird's eye view or human's eye view. More often what we see instead is a ground line from worm's eye view such as in the Xeste 3 Lustral Basin scene (fig. 8a). Everything below the horizon is subterranean, and the earth is in effect viewed in cross-section. Rather than being situated at a given depth by the placement of their feet between the bottom of the canvas and the horizon, figures stand on the top of the ground line.

The Miniature Frieze (6a-c) demonstrates that the Minoans possessed the technology of human's or bird's eye views. On all three walls, the angle of view is

pointed down from a position which is elevated slightly above the level of a human's head, pushing the horizon up toward the top of the composition and causing human figures and other human-scale objects (lions, griffins, deer) to be positioned somewhere between the horizon and the bottom of the composition. However, Minoan artists did not use this kind of perspective very often.

Because of their low vantage point, many of what we might have considered to be Minoan landscapes appear not to be landscapes at all, at least by Blount's and the OED's definition. Clearly, Blount's and the OED's notions of what constitutes a landscape are anachronistic, and the Minoan artists did not feel the need to satisfy requirements of a penetrating view.

One image that is not easy to categorize with respect to its perspective is the Saffron Gatherers from Room 3a, first floor, Xeste 3 (figs. 8b-c). The rock-like features below the horizon either represent foreground or subterranean rocks. If they represented foreground rocks, it would raise an issue with respect to the representation of the ground line as identical with the horizon. Representing the ground line upon which the figures stand as the horizon would be "incorrect" unless we were looking at a foreground pile of rocks that obscured the distant horizon and the figures happened to be standing precisely on its upper contour. In such a case, we would have to be looking at the figures from approximately the level of their feet, which would be equivalent to a "worm's eye view."

If the features below the horizon represented subterranean rocks, it would indicate that the ground was viewed in cross-section, and the ground line was identical with the horizon. This would also indicate a "worm's eye view." As one would expect of this kind of perspective, the soles of the women's feet rest upon the ground line/horizon.

According to “correct” perspective, every object should also meet the ground at the horizon, and the top of every object should be situated at a given distance above the horizon that is lower or higher according to how large and how far away it is (see fig. 18). Some of the crocus plants do obey this principle, and meet the ground at the horizon. However, distributed in a pattern above the ground line/horizon are a large number of other crocus plants that do not obey this principle. Instead, their bottoms are situated at different distances above the ground line.

I am not sure exactly how to read these plants. Either they are simply a “wallpaper” pattern employed to fill up the negative space, or they are meant to represent the field of crocuses in which the ladies stand expanding into the distance. If the former, they would be similar to the “checkered” skies of medieval landscape painting (see fig. 19), which serve primarily to decorate, but they would also reinforce the subject of the painting – the collecting of crocuses.

If the latter, we would have to rethink the perspective of this painting. The artist would have had to conceive the plane of the ground as tilted up toward a horizon which is higher than the top of the composition, and therefore to have adopted an elevated, bird’s eye viewpoint. If such is the case, the ground line on which the ladies stand, and the subterranean rocks beneath them, cannot be explained. Although it is not the horizon, which is hoisted up and out of the composition, the ground line still appears to be the top edge of a cross-section of the earth that includes subterranean rocks. From a bird’s eye perspective, however, there would be no cross-section; the surface of the earth would take up the whole field of view below the horizon.

This apparent contradiction could be explained by saying the artist has simply combined two forms of perspective into one picture. This would not be out of character for the Minoan artist, who may have adopted more than one viewpoint in the Spring Fresco (fig. 5a), for example; Doumas thinks the artist viewed one bird straight on and another looking up.²²

There may also be another example of such mixed viewpoints from Xeste 3. Room 9 (second floor) (fig. 21) shows long, undulating, cloth-like forms which are pinned together in various places by being threaded through “curtain rings.” The rings are angled away from the center of the composition in such a way that the rings on the right show their left sides and the rings on the left show their right side, as if in one-point perspective. This is one of the few examples of Aegean art that might be understood to use “scientific” perspective of the kind developed in the Renaissance. Because of the rarity of this kind of image, it is not unlikely that the artist did not intend to use one-point perspective, but instead simply showed some rings from one angle and other rings from another angle. If so, this would lend further credibility to the idea that the artist of Room 3a, first floor, also combined two different vantages in one painting. However, the fact that the plants are nearly identical in size and shape and that they are distributed across the composition in such a perfect pattern indicates to me that they were simply background decoration or “wallpaper” motifs.

The trend of stratified or floating ground lines is closely related to this preference for the “worm’s eye view.” In scenes such as the left and right walls at Ayia Triada (fig. 9) and the Monkeys and Birds Frieze from the House of the Frescoes (fig. 3), the artist may have been attempting to render depth by showing some objects on top of others,

²² Doumas 1992: 100.

perhaps following the Egyptian convention. But unlike the Egyptian, who imagined a ground plane tilted upward upon which figures rested in higher and lower registers, the Minoan felt the need to render ground structures above one another for the higher figures. It is as if all the figures, even those receding into the distance, are viewed from “worm’s eye perspective,” and the ground plane is not tilted up toward the top of the composition; instead, to render the higher figures, the artist had to adopt a new “worm’s eye” view and insert a new ground structure.

This hybrid between “bird’s eye” and “worm’s eye” views, showing more distant figures stacked on top of nearer figures as if on an upward-tilted ground plane, but including a ground line/horizon upon which each higher register of figures stands, may be complicated in the case of the Monkeys and Birds Frieze (fig. 3) by the two “rivers” weaving through the composition from top to bottom. The inclusion of the rivers definitely indicates a ground plane tilted toward the top of the composition, but the figures do not stand on it; instead they stand on stacked ground lines. In this painting, the artist seems to have allowed both kinds of perspective to exist side by side in one picture. Alternatively, as Immerwahr believes, the two features may be waterfalls – in which case there is no complication of perspective. However, due to their winding, horizontal movement, they do not accurately represent the appearance of waterfalls, and their identification as rivers seems more likely.

The trend of nearness/immediacy is also related to the preference for “worm’s eye” or very low perspective. In order for anything to be visible from such a low vantage point, it has to be close. Because of the nearness/immediacy of objects in paintings such as the Partridge Frieze from the Caravanserai (fig. 2), distant objects cannot be rendered

or are overlapped and obscured by even the smallest nearby objects, as the fruit tree in this painting is by the bird.

The major exceptions to all or most of these trends – limited range of types of objects depicted, “worm’s eye” view, stratified or floating ground lines, nearness and immediacy – are the Monkeys and Birds (fig. 3) and the Miniature (fig.8, a-c) Friezes. Although the Monkeys and Birds Frieze does represent the trends of “worm’s eye” view, stratified or floating ground lines, and nearness and immediacy, these do not limit the artist’s ability to take in a comprehensive view. The painting depicts a dazzling variety of species²³ and includes the geographical features of the two rivers. The two rivers, viewed from “bird’s eye” view, make an appearance despite the limitation of the “worm’s eye” view of the stratified ground lines because the artist is content with the two different views coexisting in the same picture.

The Miniature Frieze (figs. 6a-c) is entirely viewed in “bird’s eye” view and portions of it (the North and South Walls) are viewed from a great distance. Furthermore, in the North Wall the artist is looking toward land from a position out at sea,²⁴ and in the South Wall the artist is viewing the scene from a position inside the caldera.²⁵ This has enabled the artist to include a wide variety of geographical details and to include many diverse objects.

The only other Minoan paintings that might be thought to show people in landscape are the Lustral Basin (fig. 8a) and Saffron Gatherers (fig. 8b-c) of Xeste 3. However, both of these may be urban scenes. The function of the lustral basin is much

²³ Chapin 2004: 48.

²⁴ Younger 2011: 170.

²⁵ Strasser 2010: 6.

debated, but it may have been used in rituals involving menstruation.²⁶ If this is so, the painting may well represent a scene having to do with the ritual cleansing and seclusion of a menstruating girl, activities that would have taken place indoors in the lustral basin. The rock with crocus plants would then represent the use of saffron as an emmenagogue,²⁷ rather than an actual feature of the painting's setting. On the first floor, the setting in which the girls collect crocuses may not be part of a natural environment at all, but a simulated natural environment in which girls can enact the gathering of flowers within the safety of the city and under adult supervision.²⁸

The Role of Landscape in Minoan Art: The Current Debate

The surprising (for its time) emphasis on pure landscape in Minoan art has prompted much commentary from scholars. Many have assumed that the Minoans were especially nature-centric or even “environmentalists” in the modern sense. “The Thera *Weltanschauung*, at least as it is depicted in the wall paintings, is deeply environmental,” say P. Warren and P. Nomikos,²⁹ and this critical assessment seems also to apply to Crete and the other arts as well.³⁰

While the art does suggest an environmental outlook, as Warren and Nomikos say, scholars such as these may have also formed their notions of nature-centric Minoans in conjunction with another notion – that of the peaceful Minoans – that goes back as far as

²⁶ Rehak 2004: 94.

²⁷ Younger 2005: 96.

²⁸ Shaw 1993: 685.

²⁹ Warren and Nomikos 2000: unnumbered page.

³⁰ For example, Lyvia Morgan says, “Minoan painting, particularly in the town and country houses (as opposed to the palaces) is quintessentially concerned with the natural world.” Morgan 2005: 26.

Evans. Evans developed this idea because he did not notice significant fortifications around Minoan sites.³¹ However, Evans' peace-loving Minoans have been called into question in recent decades by new discoveries and re-analysis of old discoveries. For example, the discovery of the butchered bones of children at Knossos,³² which Warren speculated was part of a ritual human sacrifice and cannibalism,³³ suggested the violent treatment of war captives. This discovery was supplemented by the findings from Anemospilia, which also suggested human sacrifice.³⁴ Furthermore, the renewal of focus on the fortifications of Minoan Crete has undermined Evans' picture of an unfortified safe haven.³⁵

The nature-loving Minoan is closely related to the peace-loving Minoan in the scholarly imagination, as the ironic title of Chester Starr's article reviewing the evidence for a warlike society ("Minoan Flower Lovers") makes clear.³⁶ Recently, the idea of the "flower loving Minoan" has been revisited with the suggestion that many of the activities we once understood as religious, such as pillar and tree worship and the privileging of "sacred" spaces, were in fact forms of engagement with the environment by an ecologically oriented civilization.³⁷ The Minoans' "environmentalism" is often assumed to be religious in character, as the landscape is assumed to be the domain of the goddess (to whom nature is of special concern) and therefore sacred. However, Herva suggests that we rethink our notions of the sacred in approaching the Minoan relationship with the land.

³¹ Evans 1901: 132.

³² Wall et al. 1986.

³³ Warren 1981.

³⁴ Sakellarakis 1981.

³⁵ Alexiou 1979.

³⁶ Starr 1984.

³⁷ Herva 2006: 587.

While it is undeniable that there is much natural imagery and much that could be described as landscape in Minoan art, a great deal of it does not fit into the category of landscape as it is defined for modern purposes. This raises questions about the specific ways that Minoan landscape painting differed from modern landscape painting and the purposes to which the Minoans put landscape that led it to be developed along different lines.

Evans thought of the role of landscape in Minoan art in terms of his own period and social environment. In describing the paintings from the “House of the Frescoes” from Knossos, Evans said:

The house itself was quite a small one... Yet the citizen, we may suppose, of the petty burgher class who had his habitation here is shown by the remains that have come down to us – a mere fraction of the whole – to have been a man of cultivated taste. The painted decoration of the walls is unrivalled of its kind for its picturesque setting, and the many coloured effect is enhanced, not only by the varied choice of flowers, but the convention of the rocks cut like agates to show their brilliant veins.³⁸

With these lines, Evans reveals his prejudices by imputing the existence of a “petty burgher class,” “cultivated taste,” and modern aesthetic notions such as the “picturesque” in Bronze Age Crete. As Chapin points out,³⁹ Evans understood landscape painting from the point of view of an upper-class Englishman of the Victorian era; it was to him, rather as to the viewer postulated by Ruskin, a cultivated diversion in the “cultured home of the small burgher” which represented “not only the high standard of civilized life in the great days of Minoan Crete, but the wide diffusion of culture among all classes.”⁴⁰ The view of art reflected in the above quote was that of aesthetic appreciation and decoration, gratifying to “taste” and a desire for such effects as the “picturesque.” Such a view is

³⁸ Evans 1928: 466-67.

³⁹ Chapin 2004: 48.

⁴⁰ Evans 1928: 406.

entirely secular. The role of landscape Evans envisions here is an aesthetic one. Earlier, Evans had commented on the dolphin fresco in the “Queen’s Megaron” at Knossos that it may have been similar in function to the landscape paintings on blind walls in Italian villas, meant to trick the eye into believing “the illusion of a free outlook.”⁴¹ Here, Evans imagines a recreational role for landscape.

Today, much of the scholarly discussion over the role of landscape art in Minoan culture centers on whether or not the concept of landscape itself should be understood as sacred in character. Nanno Marinatos is inclined to see religious significance in the genre of landscape itself.⁴² As Marinatos points out, the concept of “art for art’s sake” is anachronistic when applied to the Minoans. Contemporary Egyptian and Mesopotamian art was never divorced from a symbolic and generally sacred function, and to assume that the Minoans made art for the sheer aesthetic appreciation of it would seem to impute a greater degree of 21st century modernity to their civilization than is justified without corroborating evidence. Moreover, she finds specific plants to be more or less symbolic of the goddess. For example, since lilies and crocuses often appear as decoration on offering tables and as offerings on altars, Marinatos finds them especially symbolic.⁴³ In her view, the combining of seasons (by showing plants, such as the spring-blossoming lily and the autumn-blossoming crocus, that do not occur together in nature) and environments (such as marsh, indicated by papyrus, and upland rocky areas, indicated by

⁴¹ Evans 1902: 59.

⁴² N. Marinatos 1984: 96.

⁴³ N. Marinatos 1993: 195.

crocuses) is also especially sacred.⁴⁴ Chapin agrees that hybridization is a sign of religious significance, although she refers specifically to hybrid plants and animals.⁴⁵

Despite Nanno Marinatos' conviction that all Minoan landscape art is sacred, the current debate over whether or not Minoan landscape art is sacred is carried out mostly with reference to one painting in particular: the Spring Fresco (fig. 5a).⁴⁶ As Hollinshead observed, this painting is sufficiently well-preserved to permit art historical and stylistic analysis without troubling questions of restoration, and its context and archaeological setting are well-known and documented.⁴⁷ Spyridon Marinatos believes that this painting represents reawakening in the spring,⁴⁸ and Nanno Marinatos, in agreeing that the painting represents reawakening, believes it is symbolic of the goddess, in whose honor the painting served as a backdrop for ritual.⁴⁹ Immerwahr also believes the painting is sacred, and the room in which it occurs was a shrine.⁵⁰ Her reasoning is that the room is a small ground-floor room which only communicates with the court outside, and that the finds in the room suggested cult activity.⁵¹ Those finds included a "bed" with jars underneath it that contained the remains of onions and barley,⁵² additional large storage jars, amphorae, ewers and spouted pitchers, goblets, drinking cups, and a vessel which may have been a chamberpot along the walls; two ceramic roasting grills and a three-legged cooking pot in the northwest corner; much pottery and some loomweights inside the hollow space formed by the restoration-era north wall and the original north wall; and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Chapin 2004: 56.

⁴⁶ Chapin 1997: 12.

⁴⁷ Hollinshead 1989: 339.

⁴⁸ Marinatos, S. 1971: 49-52.

⁴⁹ Marinatos, N. 1984: 94.

⁵⁰ Immerwahr 1990: 46.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² S. Marinatos 1971: 42-43, pls. 106-108.

metal objects such as three sickles, a knife, a dagger, and three frying pans.⁵³ In addition to these interpretations of the mural as sacred which are derived from the springtime reawakening as a backdrop for the goddess, K.P. Foster has argued that the Spring Fresco represents a divine epiphany in the form of the swallows.⁵⁴

In contrast to those scholars who argue for a religious function for the Spring Fresco, Doumas believes that we do not have sufficient evidence to say this fresco was sacred in character.⁵⁵ Furthermore, although Chapin agrees with those scholars who find a sacred purpose in this landscape, she disagrees with Immerwahr about whether the finds from the room indicate that the room was a shrine, concluding that the archaeological evidence indicated a re-use of the room and that the finds were inconclusive as to whether the room functioned as a shrine.⁵⁶ Hollinshead also finds no demonstrable religious function for any of the finds from Delta 2 and concludes that the room was probably used as part of the private quarters of an important person decorated for secular purposes to create a “safe and aesthetically pleasing environment.”⁵⁷

Despite concluding that Delta 2 was not a shrine, Hollinshead concedes that the Spring Fresco may have had religious significance because 1) she concludes that special care was taken to have the red lilies painted, out of their natural sequence, at the end of what she assumes was the upward trajectory of the painting’s completion by a specialized botanical expert, and 2) red lilies’ appearance on an altar on the east wall of Xeste 3, first floor and in other contexts which she is willing to accept as religious suggest religious

⁵³ S. Marinatos 1971: 20-25, 34-36, 38-45, pls. 28-41, 64c, 65, 67a, 70, 72, 75a, 76a, 77, 78a, 88b, 89, 91a, 98a, 101-08. S. Marinatos 1971: 11-13, pls. 12-13a.

⁵⁴ Foster 1995.

⁵⁵ Doumas 1992: 100.

⁵⁶ Chapin 1997: 12.

⁵⁷ Hollinshead 1989: 351.

symbolism for the plant. However, she concludes that despite red lilies' sometimes having religious overtones, they need not always have them in every circumstance and that the painting was more likely of a secular nature.

Some Comments On the Current Debate

I would argue that, despite some evidence, the case for a religious function for Minoan landscape painting in general cannot be demonstrably made. While the specific examples of sacred plants provided by Marinatos are supported by ample evidence – there are examples of crocuses on offering tables from Thera (fig.21), lilies adorning an altar from Xeste 3 (fig. 22), and a painted representation of crocuses being offered to a divinity (fig. 8c) – it is nevertheless a leap to infer from the religious associations of certain plants that all natural imagery was sacred in character. Furthermore, although Marinatos makes an excellent point about autumn and spring both representing renewal in the Mediterranean, and therefore the conflation of the two of them signifying renewal and rebirth, these notions need not necessarily have had as much religious significance to the Minoans as Marinatos imagines. Even atheists can celebrate the sense of renewal that comes with autumn or spring in the Mediterranean, even to the point of wanting to represent the natural phenomena which stimulate this sense of refreshment artistically.

Neither can the Spring Fresco of Delta 2 be conclusively shown to be of a religious nature, or the room itself a shrine. Nanno Marinatos seems simply to assert that there is “symbolism” in the painting, arguing from similarity to other Minoan landscapes

which she in turn reads as sacred by analogy to contemporary Egyptian practice.⁵⁸

However, as Marinatos herself concedes, at least one of the functions of Egyptian art – “the propagation of official ideology revolving around the ruler” – seems not to play a role in Minoan art. Therefore, it seems that Minoan art cannot be completely read in terms of Egyptian art.

In addition, despite Immerwahr’s contention that the finds in Delta 2 suggested a shrine, they are mostly characterized by their everyday utility. Most of them have something to do with storage, preparation or cooking of food, and it would be tempting to see the room as a kitchen were it not for the bed, the chamberpot, and a few other non-culinary objects such as the loomweights which suggest a domestic room. In fact, Immerwahr points to only one out of more than 200 pieces of pottery, the nipples ewer from Thera IV, pl. 71,⁵⁹ which she derives from the EM anthropomorphic rhyton with pierced breasts for pouring, as having cultic associations. Furthermore, she describes the large piece of furniture found in the room as a “couch,”⁶⁰ but it is elsewhere referred to as a “bed,”⁶¹ and Immerwahr smooths over the difficulty it presents by simply saying it was probably placed in the room “after the pumice had begun to fall.”⁶² However, this assertion is not supported by any evidence.

The objects found in Delta 2’s connection with cooking may partly account for Nanno Marinatos’ identification of Delta 2’s context as ritual, as she elsewhere draws a close connection between cult and ritual dining – finding in the cooking equipment of Room 6 from the West House evidence of a ritual function for the suite that included

⁵⁸ N. Marinatos 1984: 94, 31-33.

⁵⁹ Immerwahr 1990: 46, n. 19.

⁶⁰ Immerwahr 1990: 47.

⁶¹ Hollinshead 1989: 351.

⁶² Immerwahr 1990: 47.

Room 5.⁶³ Nevertheless, even if dining were always carried out according to cultic ritual, which cannot be proven, the primary purpose of a dining hall is not the same as the primary purpose of a shrine.

Despite the lack of evidence for a religious function for the Spring Fresco, it is difficult to refute Nanno Marinatos' contention that art was generally deployed in the service of ritual in the ancient world, and that the concept of "art for art's sake" is a development of a later stage of civilization.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, those scholars who have declined to infer a religious function for the Spring Fresco have tended to offer a purely aesthetic or recreational purpose in place of a ritual one. For example, in contradicting the idea that the fresco had a religious purpose, Hollinshead reverts to Evans' notion of the "aesthetically pleasing" and of art as a form of decoration. One notable exception is Chapin, who although she agrees that the Spring Fresco and paintings like it were probably religious in nature, believes that they might have served as a means of impressing the common people with the power of the elite.⁶⁵ Chapin sees the period of LMIA as analogous to the Italian Renaissance, with artists competing by attempting to stand out with innovations in style and technique for commissions from wealthy patrons who dictated the contents of the work.⁶⁶

An Alternative Theory of the Role of Landscape in Minoan Art

⁶³ N. Marinatos 1984: 34.

⁶⁴ N. Marinatos 1984: 31; cf. Immerwahr 1990: 46.

⁶⁵ Chapin 2004.

⁶⁶ Chapin 1997: 24.

It is, of course, impossible to say exactly to what purpose the Minoans put their landscape painting in the absence of written accounts from actual Minoans about why they painted such works. To say that all landscapes were sacred because the landscape was conceived as the domain of a goddess seems like pure speculation. However, while it would probably be going too far to say that the Minoans did not get aesthetic satisfaction out of landscape paintings or find them pleasing to look at, it would seem anachronistic to assume that their motives were purely aesthetic or recreational.

Perhaps one way out of this impasse is to compare the formal qualities of the paintings (about which we need not speculate) to the formal qualities of the landscape painting of other periods about which we do know the purpose of landscape in their art. In the Renaissance, landscape served as a narrative or metaphorical adjunct to figure painting. This hierarchically subordinate role was formally indicated by the relatively small size of the landscape compared to the figures. Landscape could also serve a recreational role, as indicated by the words of Bishop Paolo Giovio quoted above. Furthermore, landscape generally took a form very similar to that described by Appleton, Kellert and Wilson, depicting a biologically advantageously commanding view of a savannah-like territory – perhaps indicating that landscape gratified instinctive desires to stake out defensible territory (see fig. 17).

Minoan landscape does not share these qualities with Renaissance art. In the rare instances where figures occur in Minoan landscape art, they are very small compared to the landscape (for example in the Miniature Fresco from the West House in figs. 6a-c), and the only instance in which they take up any sizeable surface area is in the case of Ayia Triada (fig. 9). Thus, Minoan landscape did not serve a narrative or metaphorical

role adjunct to figure painting. Landscape also tended not to take a commanding view of a savannah-like territory; instead, as discussed above, it generally presented a “worm’s eye” point of view with no perspective for the eye to penetrate. Thus, the role of landscape in Minoan art, whatever it may be, seems to be different from the role of landscape in Renaissance art.

Beginning in the 16th century, landscape painting became a genre unto itself and took on qualities that distinguished it from the “bywork” landscape of the Renaissance. These paintings sought aesthetic qualities such as the “picturesque” and “sublime.” The picturesque described the anti-classical and irregular quality of Claude Lorrain’s paintings (fig. 23) and the work of his emulators. It carried with it a reactionary political viewpoint against the urbanization and systematization of life brought about by the industrial revolution. In doing so, it romanticized the pastoral and the reclamation of land from the works of humans represented by ruins. The sublime referred to the aesthetic pleasure one might get from a good horror movie; that is, aesthetic pleasure in something that is not beautiful, but terrifying. In painting, this took the form of awe-inspiring subjects and vertiginous compositions. (See fig. 24) As Andrews points out,⁶⁷ this aesthetic experience allows people to transcend themselves, as they lose their sense of self in an overwhelming sensation. In this way, it combines the aesthetic with the spiritual. Both of these aesthetic categories represented an anti-Enlightenment, Romantic point of view, as they emphasized the primitive and instinctual over the rational.

Minoan landscape art shares some qualities with the painting of this period. For example, the irregularity and lack of symmetry of the Monkeys and Birds Frieze (fig. 3) is comparable to the unbalanced compositions of Claude Lorrain’s paintings (fig. 23).

⁶⁷ Andrews 1999: 129-49.

The relative absence of the human figure from Minoan landscape compositions is also comparable to post-16th century landscape painting. These qualities are similar to the picturesque qualities described above, and explain why Evans was inclined to describe the Monkeys and Birds Frieze as “picturesque.” While the picturesque movement’s political motives of resisting the onset of the industrial revolution and its aestheticism cannot be imputed to the Minoans, the formal qualities Minoan landscape painting shares with post-16th century landscape art seem to show the Minoans had an interest in rendering nature and natural forms in a (relative to contemporary Egyptian art) non-formalized way.

Despite sharing some qualities, Minoan and post-16th century landscape painting have just as many important differences. Particularly, there is no sense of the sublime in Minoan landscape. There are no ruins in Minoan landscape art, no images of threatening nature such as storms or volcanic eruptions, and Minoan landscape painting does not emphasize the awesome or terrifying in a way that would suggest it had the aesthetic/spiritual purpose of providing a transcendent experience to the viewer. Nature is benign and human in scale. This brief comparison of Minoan and modern landscape art highlights the informality and humanity of Minoan landscape painting.

As mentioned above, Cosgrove believes that the aesthetic appreciation of landscape is only possible when the land is viewed from a detached, or “outsider,” perspective.⁶⁸ Andrews points out that since we are increasingly aware of the stresses on the environment caused by human activity and our own dependence on the environmental health of the planet, we have all recently become insiders with respect to the land.⁶⁹ Thus,

⁶⁸ Cosgrove 1984: 19.

⁶⁹ Andrews 1999: 21-22.

in Andrews' view, landscape may already be over as a stage in the cultural evolution of the West. This raises some interesting questions. Assuming Cosgrove and Andrews are right, would it have been possible for the Minoans to understand the Western concept of "landscape?" Could the differences in their landscape art stem, at least to some extent, from the fact that they (probably) did not share the same "outsider" relationship with the land with our capitalist society?

Andrews contrasts Cosgrove's notion of a historically and culturally contingent sense of landscape with scholars such as Clark, Appleton, and Kellert and Wilson who view landscape appreciation as a universal human quality. However, studies such as Kellert's and Wilson's need not be read as a contradiction of Cosgrove's "outsider" theory. It is interesting to note that the kind of landscape preferred by Appleton and the subjects of Kellert's and Wilson's study are representative of the kind of landscape typically seen in post-Renaissance Western art. Since Kellert's and Wilson's study, and others like it, can only tell us about the aesthetic preferences of *modern* humans, it cannot tell us if landscape appreciation and preferences are universal over time. Therefore it is possible that the "universal" tendency to prefer a savannah-like landscape with penetrating views is in fact no contradiction of Cosgrove at all, but simply a reflection of modern capitalist society. Perhaps when and only when the outsider's perspective makes landscape possible, people begin to select favorite views according to biologically determined criteria. Alternatively, perhaps the "universality" of preference for landscapes similar to those seen in post-Renaissance art is the result of expectations bred by familiarity.

This possibility renders the Minoan landscapes all the more intriguing. If (as seems likely) Minoan civilization did not share the same outsider's relationship with the land that our society has, why do we find in its art the "world's first landscape paintings?" I suggest that the answer may lie to some extent in the formal differences between Minoan and modern landscape art. While, as discussed above, Minoan art shares with modern landscape an emphasis on nature itself to the near exclusion of human figures, which would suggest a similarity of purpose in celebrating and aggrandizing nature, it differs from modern landscape art in many important ways. For example, unlike modern landscape art, Minoan landscape art does not present deep vistas, but instead the eye is usually arrested near the surface of the painting. Thus, one of the ways Minoan landscape painting differs from modern landscape painting is in not satisfying the supposedly "universal" criterion of preference for landscapes that show commanding, distant views. This either shows that Minoan "landscape" paintings were not landscapes at all, but simply nature paintings, or that this "universal" criterion is in fact culturally and historically contingent.

It may be that, as insiders to the land, the Minoans were not capable of appreciating landscape for its aesthetic qualities, or even of perceiving "landscape" in the sense described above on page one – that is, a perception that is mediated by a cultural inheritance of aestheticized images. If this were true, it would call into question the positions of Evans and Hollinshead that the paintings were meant purely for aesthetics.

This raises the question of whether we can posit any alternative theories of the purpose of Minoan landscape art other than the highly speculative ones of Marinatos or

Foster. Such a theory would inevitably be just as speculative as those, but may add a new dimension to the discussion.

One possible alternative interpretation is suggested by Vesa-Pekka Herva's article, "Flower-Lovers, After All?" As Herva points out, one of the assumptions that underlies the religious theories of Marinatos and many others is that the Minoans worshipped deities in the sense familiar to us from Egyptian and Greek religion.⁷⁰ While this assumption may seem relatively safe, Herva suggests, as a thought experiment, that we reconsider what is classified as "religious" in Minoan culture. According to this suggestion, the Minoan rituals associated with nature (such as "tree worship," baetyl-hugging, or the placement and tending of peak sanctuaries) may not relate so much to the gods, imagined as divine beings, as to the environment, in which the Minoans saw themselves as one of many interdependent components. As Herva sees it, the world in ecological terms is mostly about relationships and process. Inhabitants build relationships with and bestow dignity upon the "non-human persons" of their environment by engaging with them continuously over time. By engaging in practical activities directed toward natural objects and sites, Herva's putative "ecological" Minoans may have been recognizing and relating to them as partners in an organism-environment system.

This suggestion opens up new avenues of interpretation for Minoan landscape art. As Minoans may have engaged in such practical exercises as baetyl-hugging, tree-shaking and sanctuary-keeping for the purposes of maintaining a relationship with their environment, it is also possible that their landscape art, so distinctively naturalistic and celebratory of nature, may have served the exact same purpose. While this suggestion cannot be proven, it provides an interpretive model that could explain the abundance of

⁷⁰ Herva 2006: 587.

landscape in Minoan art in a way that neither relies on anachronistic ideas about “art for art’s sake” nor requires speculation about the nature and identities of the Minoan gods.

Conclusion

Landscape art can serve a variety of purposes within a society. Although we are accustomed today to consider landscape art to have purely aesthetic value, even that aesthetic value can have political or spiritual overtones. However, Egyptian and Mesopotamian art were never divorced from their purposes of honoring the gods, reinforcing religious ideas or propagating the power of the ruler; therefore, it is surprising that many scholars see Minoan landscape art as having purely aesthetic value. Nevertheless, the elaborate religious symbolism that other scholars have read in the work is often difficult to prove.

Herva's suggestion of Minoan nature rituals as a kind of social engagement with the environment opens up a new possibility for the interpretation of Minoan landscape art as a practice similarly aimed at building a relationship with nature. While this suggestion cannot be proven, it may enrich our understanding of this genre by providing a third possibility of interpretation that does not depend on either anachronistic notions of "art for art's sake" or theologizing.

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Fig. 1



Monkey, Phanourakis - Knossos
Πίθηκος, αποκατάσταση του Φανουράκη - Κνωσός

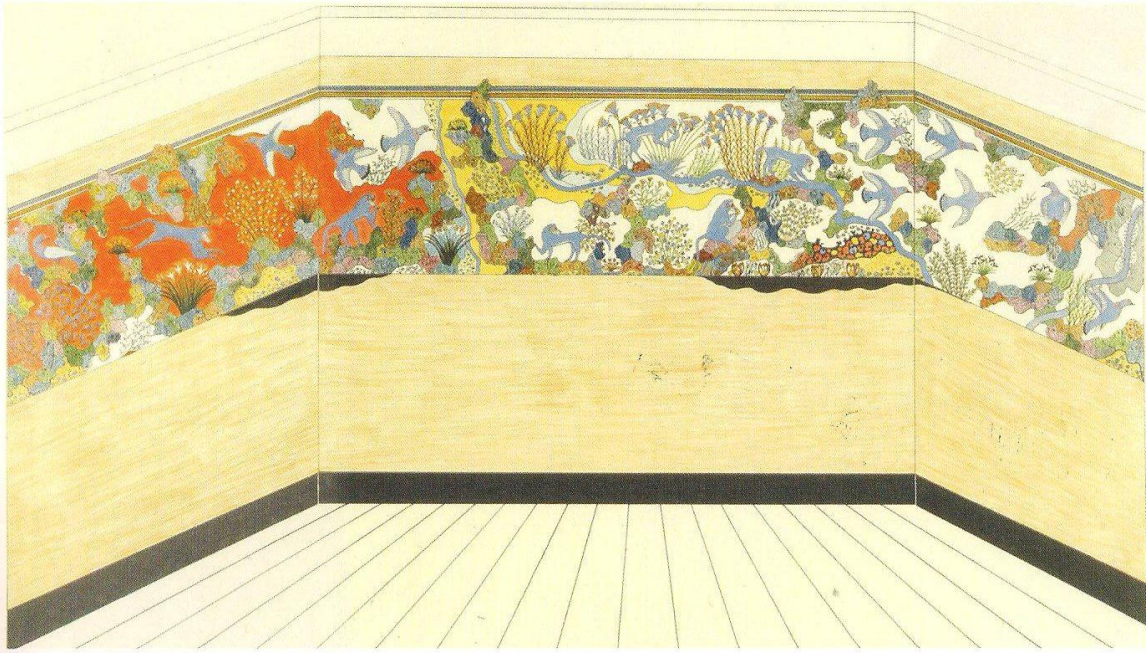
The Saffron Gatherer. From Evely, Doniert. 1999. *Fresco: A Passport Into the Past. Minoan Crete Through the Eyes of Mark Cameron*. Athens: British School at Athens and the N.P. Goulandris Foundation – Museum of Cycladic Art, 121.

Fig. 2



The Partridge Frieze from the Caravanserai, Knossos. From Morgan, Lyvia, ed. (2005). *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. London: British School at Athens. Plate Foldout A.

Fig. 3



The Monkeys and Birds Frieze from the House of the Frescoes, Knossos. From Morgan, Lyvia, ed. (2005). *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. London: British School at Athens. Plate 5.1.

Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b



Monkeys and Kids from Beta 6, Akrotiri. From Doumas, Christos (1992). *The Wall-Paintings of Thera*. Athens: The Thera Foundation. Plates 85-86, 91.

Fig. 5a



The Spring Fresco. From Morgan, Lyvia, ed. (2005). *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. London: British School at Athens. Plate I.1.

Fig. 5b



Flying fish from Melos. From Walberg, Gisela (1986). *Tradition and Innovation: Essays in Minoan Art*. Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, p. 97.

Fig. 6a



The North Wall, West House.

Fig. 6b



The East Wall, West House (the "Nilotic Scene")

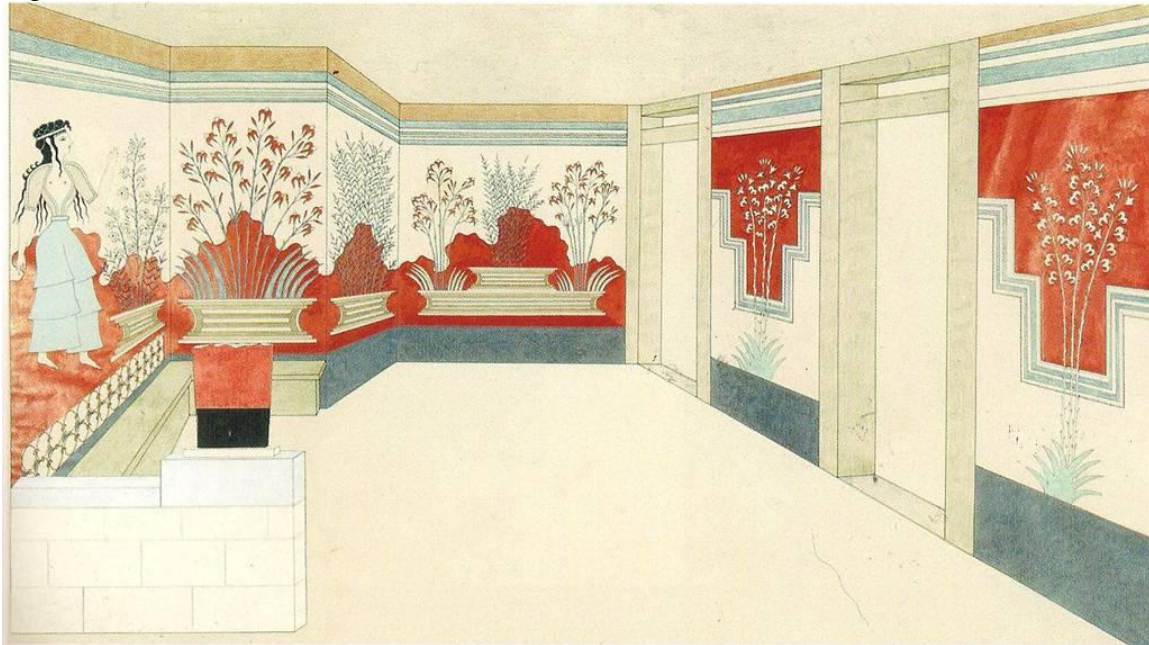
Fig. 6c



The South Wall, West House.

The Miniature Frieze. From Dumas, Christos (1992). *The Wall-Paintings of Thera*. Athens: The Thera Foundation. Plates 26, 30, and 35.

Fig. 7



The Lily and Iris Frieze, Amnisos. From Morgan, Lyvia, ed. (2005). *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. London: British School at Athens. Plate I.1.

Fig. 8a



The Lustral Basin Scene, Xeste 3.

Fig. 8b



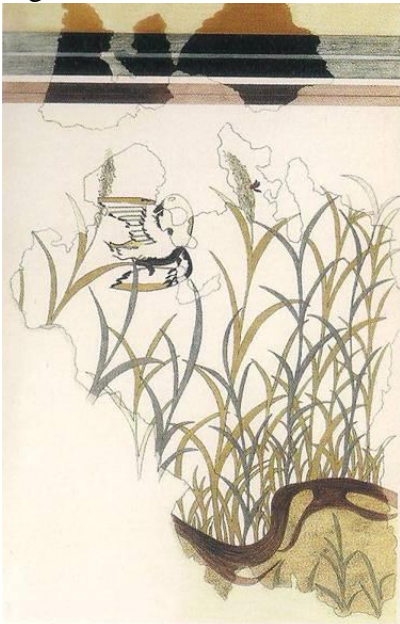
Room 3a, East Wall, Xeste 3

Fig. 8c



Room 3a, North Wall, Xeste 3.

Fig. 8d



Room 3b, First Floor, Xeste 3.

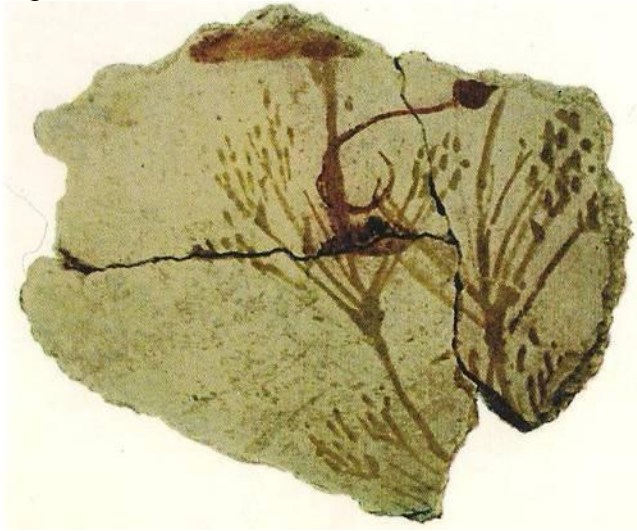
8a-8c from Doulas, Christos (1992). *The Wall-Paintings of Thera*. Athens: The Thera Foundation. Plates 100, 116, 122. 8d from From Morgan, Lyvia, ed. (2005). *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. London: British School at Athens. Plate 3.3.

Fig. 9



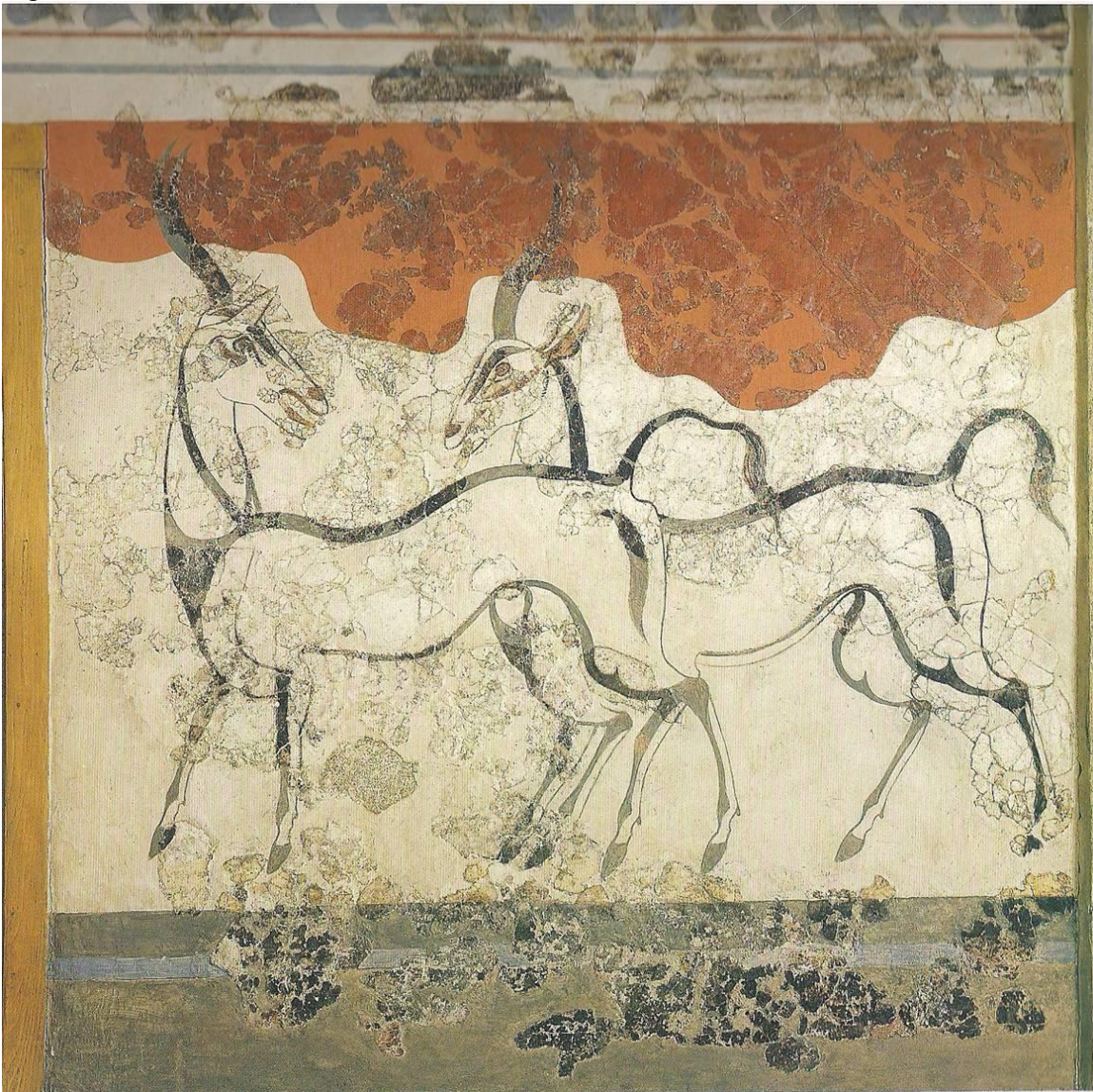
Room 14, Ayia Triada. From Morgan, Lyvia, ed. (2005). *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. London: British School at Athens. Plate 2.3.

Fig. 10



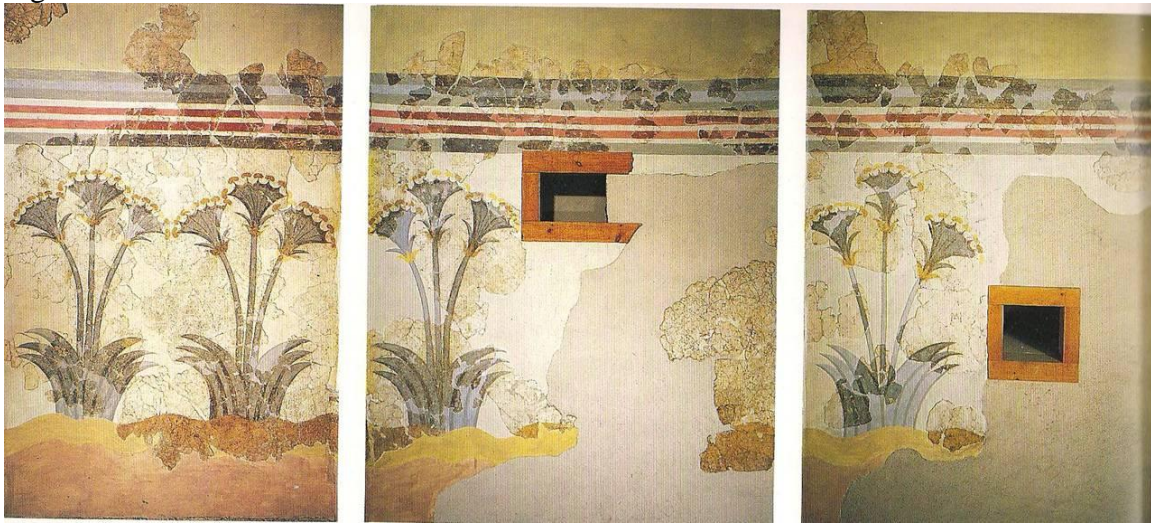
Grass and Mouse from the Southeast House, Knossos. From Morgan, Lyvia, ed. (2005). *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. London: British School at Athens. Plate 2.1a.

Fig. 11



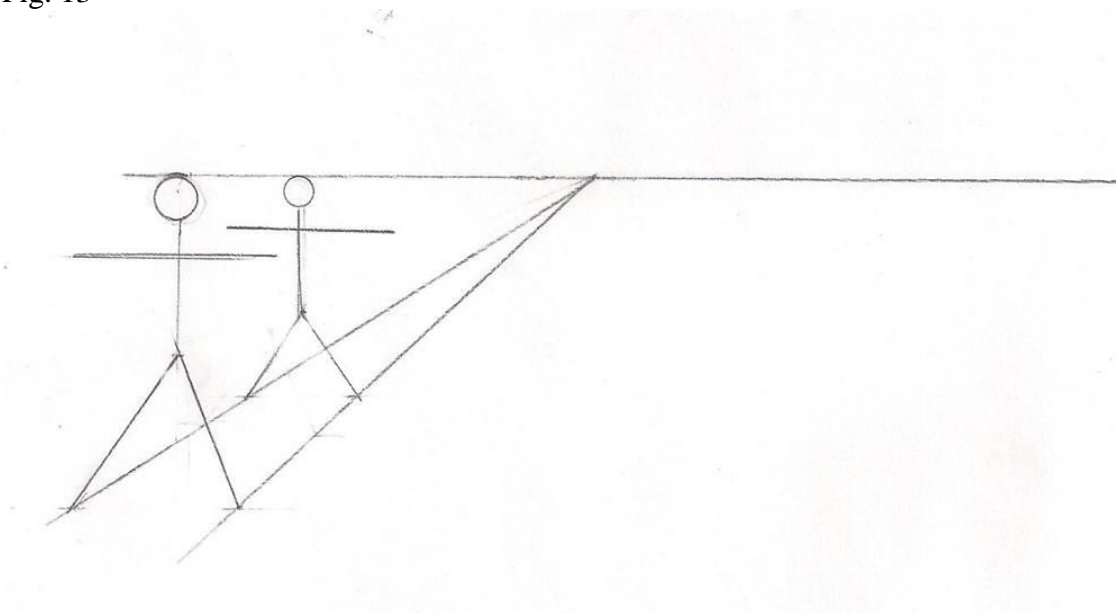
Antelopes, Beta 1. From Doumas, Christos (1992). *The Wall-Paintings of Thera*. Athens: The Thera Foundation. Plate 83.

Fig. 12



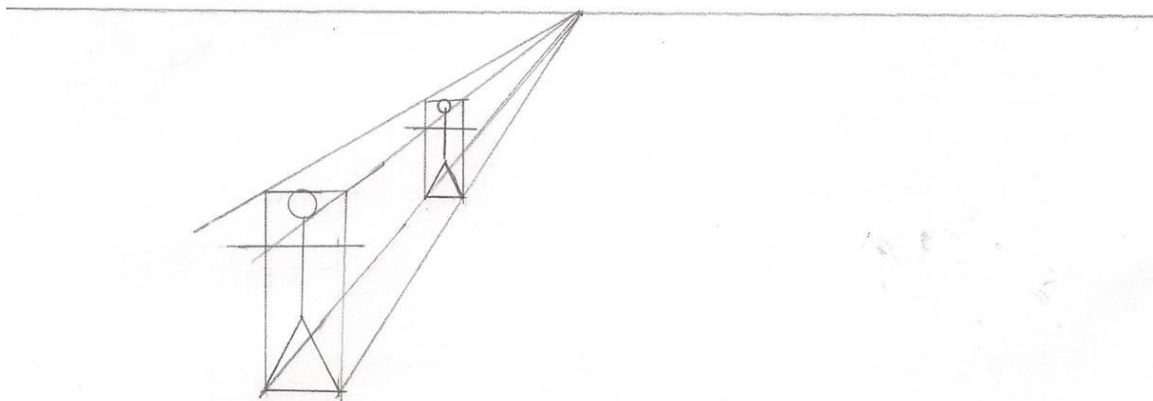
Sea Daffodils from the House of the Ladies. From Doumas, Christos (1992). *The Wall-Paintings of Thera*. Athens: The Thera Foundation. Plates 2,3, and 4.

Fig. 13



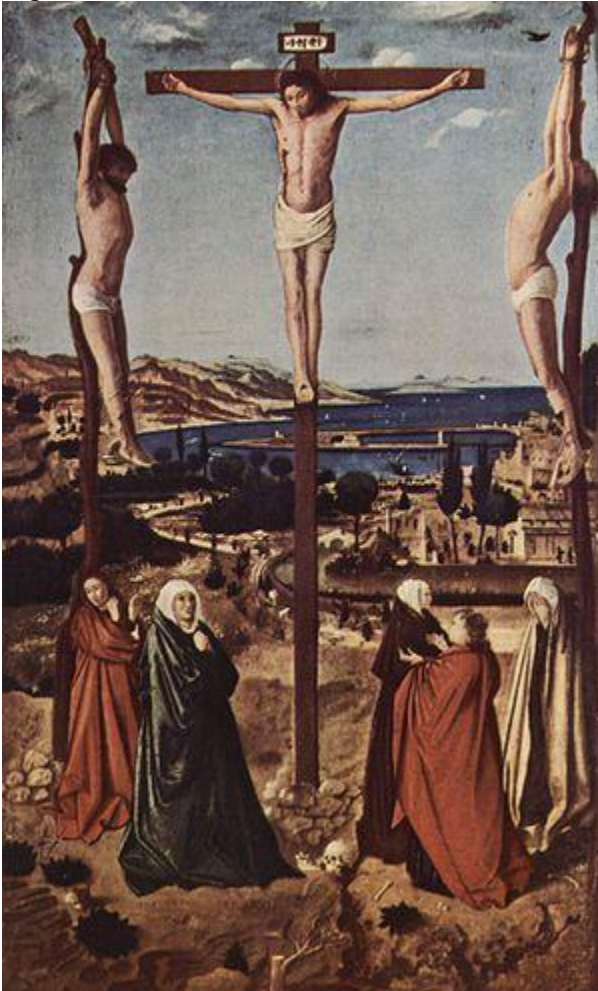
Receding figures in normal human's eye perspective.

Fig. 14



Receding figures in slightly elevated bird's eye perspective

Fig. 15



Antonello Da Messina, Crucifixion.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion_\(Antonello_da_Messina\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion_(Antonello_da_Messina))

Fig. 16



Giovanni Bellini, Madonna of the Meadow.

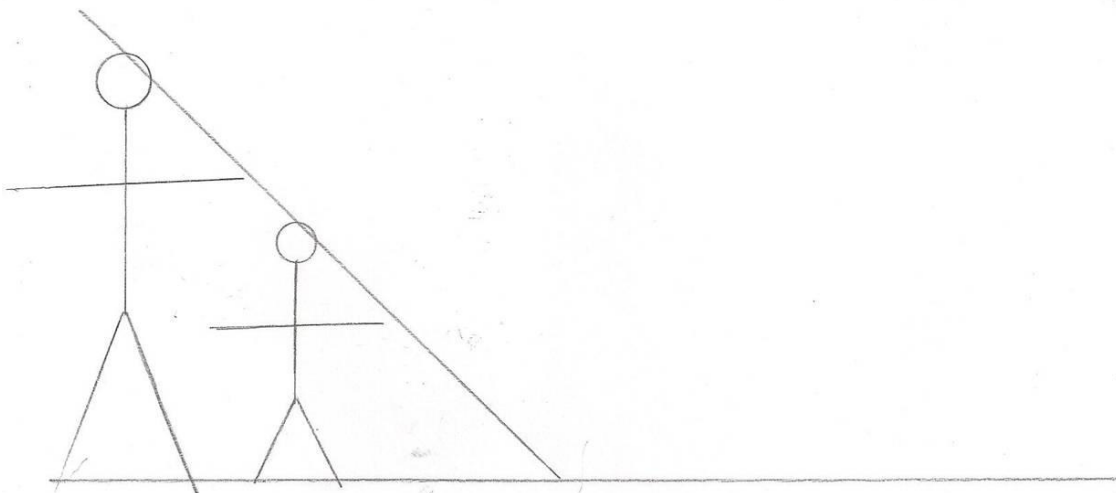
<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-bellini-madonna-of-the-meadow>

Fig. 17



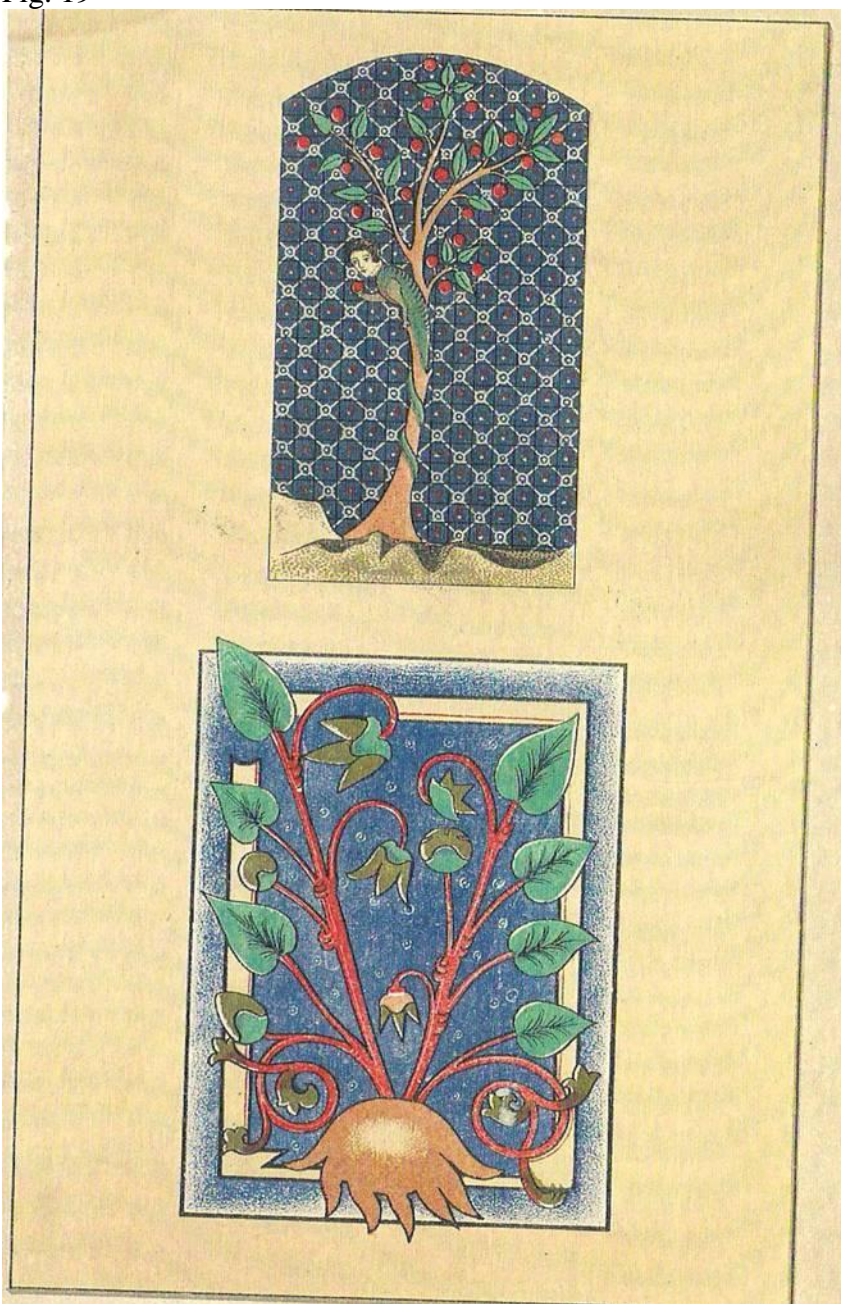
Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleeping_Venus_\(Giorgione\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleeping_Venus_(Giorgione))

Fig. 18



Figures receding in worm's eye perspective.

Fig. 19



Checked sky in Medieval landscape. From Ruskin, John (1876). *Modern Painters (Vol. III)*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 209.

Fig. 20



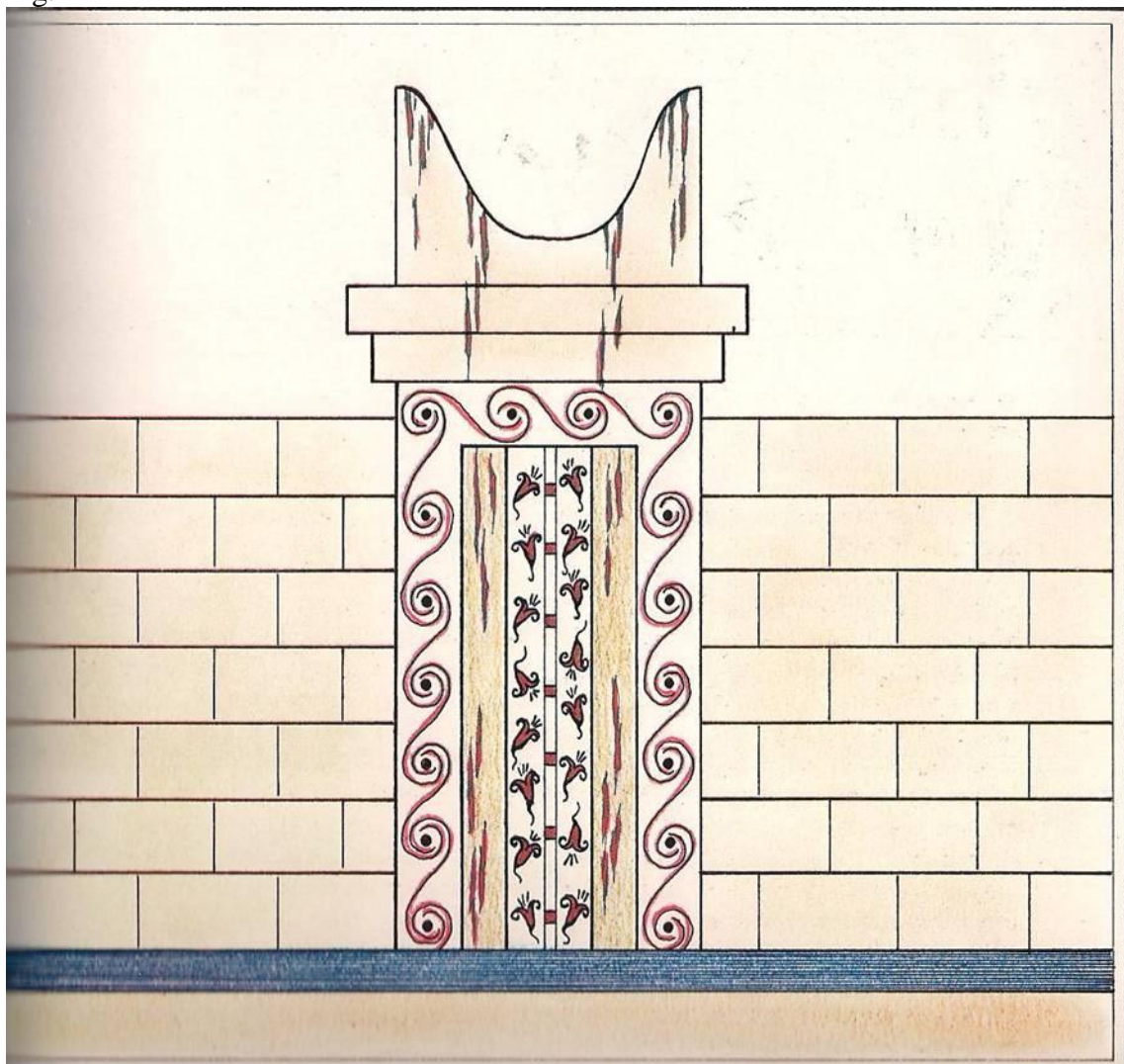
Room 9 (second floor), Xeste 3: Rosettes. From Doulas, Christos. 1992. *The Wall-Paintings of Thera*. Athens: The Thera Foundation, 137.

Fig. 21



Offering table painted with crocuses, Thera. From Marinatos, Nanno. 1984. *Art and Religion in Thera: Reconstructing a Bronze Age Society*. Athens: D. & I. Mathouliakis, 88.

Fig. 22



Altar with red lilies painted on it. From Marinatos, Nanno. 1984. *Art and Religion in Thera: Reconstructing a Bronze Age Society*. Athens: D. & I. Mathouliakis, 75.

Fig. 23



Claude Lorrain, *Landscape With the Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah* ("The Mill"), 1648. From Andrews, Malcolm. 1999. *Landscape and Western Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fig. 24



Frederic Edwin Church, <http://volcanism.wordpress.com/2009/04/04/saturday-volcano-art-frederic-edwin-church-cotopaxi-1862/>

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