

## Towards an Archaeology of Everyday Aesthetics

Robin Skeates

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*The concept of aesthetics has long been marginalized in archaeology. It was originally formulated in the eighteenth century as part of an appreciation of Greek art and was fundamentally concerned with appreciating a quasi-universal idea of beauty; and as archaeologists and anthropologists recognised the distortion created by applying it to material from non-Western and pre-modern art, it fell into disfavour. An alternative anthropological approach pioneered by Howard Morphy regards aesthetics as the study of the affects of the physical properties of objects on the senses and the qualitative evaluation of those properties; this converges with the emerging philosophical study of 'everyday aesthetics'. This article explores how archaeologists could apply these concepts, particularly through a study of Maltese Neolithic everyday aesthetics.*

### **Aesthetics and archaeology: looking back and forward**

Tensions over objects, art, beauty and aesthetics are not only an enduring feature of the history of archaeology, but are of growing interest in contemporary archaeological and museological discourse. In the first half of this article, I therefore take stock of thinking in this field: to chart and to evaluate critically the history of the relationship between aesthetics and archaeology since the eighteenth century, and to establish a platform upon which to construct new questions and research. Two key trends emerge from this review. The first, since the nineteenth century, is a general reluctance on the part of archaeologists to engage with aesthetics. The second, since 1994, is

the dominance of an anthropological approach to aesthetics in archaeology. By contrast, philosophical aesthetics has so far only contributed marginally to archaeologies of aesthetics, despite its potential to pose new questions remaining considerable. In the second half of this article I then focus on 'everyday aesthetics', which is an area of inquiry that has been attracting growing attention from philosophers and which is particularly pertinent to archaeological interests. I also explore the relevance of both aesthetics in general and everyday aesthetics in particular to the archaeologically defined Maltese Temple Culture, dated to *c.* 3400–2500 cal BC. This exercise inevitably results in more questions than answers: questions that have the potential to deepen scholarly understandings of the material and sensory dimensions of past societies.

### **A brief history of the relationship between aesthetics and archaeology**

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, the growing popularity of Hellenistic taste played a fundamental role in constructing collections of ancient architecture, sculpture and artefacts as 'art'. A key example is provided by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), who reformed antiquarian aesthetics and defined canonical terms of art history (Winckelmann 1755; 1764). However, by the twentieth century, some of the intellectual weaknesses of antiquarian aesthetics were being voiced by both prehistorians and historical archaeologists. In general, there was a growing preference for 'facts' over 'ideas' (e.g. Hawkes 1954). More specifically, it was increasingly recognized that not only Winckelmann, but generations after him, had uncritically idealized the ancient Greeks—exempting them from normal standards of analysis. Indeed, it can be claimed that by the 1950s and '60s the whole project of philosophical aesthetics was in the doldrums (e.g. Passmore 1951). Nevertheless, connoisseurship continued to be practised and

praised throughout the century by collectors and scholars of ancient art, who frequently appealed to the universal aesthetic appeal of ancient 'masterpieces'. Colin Renfrew's work illustrates the complexity of the issue. He defended the pleasurable 'personal aesthetic experience of the archaeologist' (Renfrew 1994, 266) and the 'esteem of the connoisseur' (Renfrew 2003, 57). However, he also expressed some unease at using the term 'art' to describe these objects, rejected the claim that there are universals in aesthetics and censured the illicit trade in antiquities.

*From the 1960s to today: critical reflections on archaeology, art and aesthetics*

Building on earlier critiques, archaeologists informed by the purportedly scientifically rigorous 'processual' school of archaeological thought have—since the 1960s—persistently questioned, even rejected, the place of art, aesthetics and beauty in archaeology, although (perhaps surprisingly) they have been willing to talk about symbols and symbolism. Indeed, archaeological inquiries into art and aesthetics have been branded 'analytically lax', 'unquantifiable', 'uncritical', 'irrelevant' (e.g. Smith 1994, 260). More specifically, archaeologists are warned that their own aesthetic attitudes and tastes do not necessarily equate with those of the makers of the objects of archaeological study (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1990, 12–21; cf. Gell 1998; Pinney & Thomas 2001).

*Archaeologies of aesthetics since the early 1990s*

Given the vehemence of such critiques, it is no surprise that there has been a widespread reluctance on the part of most archaeologists to engage with aesthetics. Indeed, for most of the twentieth century aesthetics was relegated to the side-lines of archaeological method and theory (e.g. Johnson 1999). But, by vacating this intellectual space, archaeologists left the field open to anthropologists and philosophers, who have proposed their own

interpretations of ancient (and contemporary) aesthetics, sometimes under-informed by growing archaeological knowledge, but also increasingly offering a stimulus to new archaeological thinking.

Since the early 1990s, an anthropologically informed approach to aesthetics has dominated new archaeological thought. This has led to the replacement of the rather narrow definition of aesthetics, characterized by ethnocentricity, decontextualization and exaggerated 'aestheticism', first held by antiquarians and perpetuated by collectors and others throughout much of the twentieth century. In place of this, a broader reconceptualization of ancient aesthetics in terms of sensory experience and perception (ultimately derived from the Greek notion of *aisthētikos*, via Alexander Baumgarten's (1735) 'science of how things are cognized by means of the senses') has been promoted by scholars whose interests straddle both anthropology and archaeology (e.g. Gosden 2001; Morphy 1994). They have built upon slightly earlier and contemporary debates within the anthropology of art and aesthetics (e.g. Coote & Shelton 1992), some of which have even sought to move 'beyond aesthetics' in interpreting art in traditional and post-colonial contexts (e.g. Pinney & Thomas 2001).

In 1994, the anthropologist Howard Morphy published a seminal article in which he sought to promote a concept of aesthetics that could apply cross-culturally, including across past cultures. He defined aesthetics as 'the effect of the physical properties of objects on the senses and the qualitative evaluation of those properties' (Morphy 1994, 258). His examples of the physical and formal dimensions of things included hardness, heaviness, lightness, brilliance, asymmetry, and so on. Morphy argued that the qualitative perception, interpretation and evaluation of the bodily sensations caused by these properties vary according to context and culture. He went on to propose a methodology for the archaeological interpretation of aesthetics (similar to that widely employed in contextual archaeology, and also in

relational approaches). This would involve: the identification of the particular range of aesthetic qualities manifest in the material culture that had been selected by the producing culture; the relating of those qualities to contexts of occurrence, to categories of objects and to particular dimensions of power, such as high status, low status, spiritual power, and so on; the reconstruction of the context of seeing the object: 'how it was approached, in what light it was seen, what the emotional state of the viewer was, and so on' (Morphy 1994, 259); the formulation of hypotheses to reflect upon how an aesthetic system affected the members of a culture and how it contributed to the process of social reproduction; and consideration of the time-depth of a particular aesthetic tradition and associated technological trajectories. However, Morphy's clear and helpful advice to archaeologists did not, initially, have the impact that it deserved. This may, in part, have been due to the warm reception given by archaeologists to Alfred Gell's (1998) book, *Art and Agency*, which—as Morphy (2009) later critiqued—largely excluded aesthetics from the definition and analysis of art.

In 2001, Chris Gosden reignited archaeological interest by editing an influential thematic issue of the journal *World Archaeology* dedicated to 'Archaeology and aesthetics' (Gosden 2001). This drew particular inspiration from Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton's edited volume on *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, a book that was symptomatic of a resurgence of anthropological interest in the study of non-Western art and aesthetics (Coote & Shelton 1992). Gosden distanced himself from the antiquarian archaeologists' traditional concern with fine art, beauty and the refinement of taste, and instead adopted the anthropologically informed view of aesthetics as related to the sensory (and technical) qualities, emotional impacts, uses and evaluations of objects (as well as bodies and landscapes) in varying places and times and to their shaping of social relations. A significant number of other

archaeologists closely followed suit (e.g. Flohr Sørensen 2013; Giles 2008; Stevenson 2007).

Parallel to this twenty-first century investment in an anthropological archaeology of aesthetics, a smaller group of archaeological theorists has come to aesthetics through the work of the literary theorist, Terry Eagleton, on *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Eagleton 1990). This book presents a Marxist critique of the concept of the aesthetic in modern Western thought, focusing on the complex and contradictory relations between aesthetics and the construction of the dominant political ideologies of modern class-society in Europe. Such thinking has led archaeologists, with their core interest in material culture, to explore how aesthetic forms have been used to materialize ideologies (e.g. Smith 2000).

A quite distinct take on the archaeology of aesthetics has been provided by an assortment of scholars (including philosophers) interested in evolutionary psychology and aesthetics (e.g. Currie 2011). Their focus has been on early human aesthetic preferences and evolutionary processes. They have argued that aesthetic factors, sensitivity and choices entered into solutions to adaptive problems faced by early humans and that, over time, these became encoded in our genetic makeup. As a consequence, these scholars have retained the idea of the universality of aesthetics.

Alongside these three relatively coherent strands of thought about aesthetics and archaeology, there has been a proliferation of archaeological publications that have mobilized 'aesthetics' in a variety of contexts with even more varied meanings, assumptions, connotations and results. On the one hand, these often reflect the persistent 'indeterminacy of definition' of aesthetics (Eagleton 1990, 3), which has undermined its successful articulation in archaeological method and theory. But, on the other hand, some examples reflect the rich potential of aesthetics to contribute to new interpretations of a wide range of contemporary archaeological topics. This revival of interest in

the archaeology of aesthetics parallels a resurgence of scholarship in philosophical aesthetics, including work on the aesthetics of everyday life.

Artefact studies have successfully begun to explore the aesthetic qualities, hierarchies and embodied experiences of materials and objects in a range of past societies, both explicitly and under the heading of ‘materiality’ (e.g. Chapman 2011; Shanks 1995). Indeed, there is scope for much more work of this kind. The aesthetic dimensions of special depositions, including human burials, have also been thoughtfully considered by a few archaeologists (e.g. Stevenson 2007). Related to this, aesthetics (including, to a certain extent, feminist aesthetics, part of which has been concerned with women’s treatment within the ‘languages of art’: Devereaux 2003) has profitably informed archaeological interpretations of the gendered human body. In particular, various past cultures are thought to have promoted ideals of male and female beauty (e.g. Treherne 1995). Archaeological studies of architecture, places and landscapes have also benefited from thinking about aesthetics. For example, in an excellent interpretative work that combines ethno-historical and archaeological data, Alice Samson argues that an aesthetic of domestic beauty, related to ideas of domestic harmony, stability and good social life, was maintained by Pre-Colombian societies in the Dominican Republic, who placed stress on ‘the beauty of the everyday’, ranging from body ornamentation to cooking utensils to house façades (Samson 2001). A few archaeologists have also commented reflexively on the aesthetics of archaeological practice and process (e.g. Renfrew 2003, 42–5).

### **Lessons for an archaeology of aesthetics**

Some fundamental lessons can be learnt from this review of archaeologies of aesthetics, perhaps the most important being that—whatever we think about ‘art’ and related cross-cultural generalizations—aesthetics *does* have a place in

archaeology, and that a new and fruitful relationship can be established between aesthetics and archaeology if we follow some basic ground rules.

First, archaeologists must provide clearer (more careful and specific) definitions of aesthetics and related terms. (After all, how can we fully establish whether aesthetics has a role to play in archaeology if it is unclear what we mean by this term?) Here, a start *might* be made by acknowledging a basic distinction between aesthetics as referring, on the one hand, to something about the object or material (its properties and potentialities) and, on the other hand, aesthetics as referring to something about the subject or the subject's experience of the object in terms of perceptual responses to things informed by biologically rooted preferences and culturally specific valuations. This distinction has its roots in Immanuel Kant's influential eighteenth-century conception of aesthetic perception as 'disinterested' perception of an object, and informs the way that philosopher Jerrold Levinson (2003, 6–7) understands aesthetics. It is also comparable to Howard Morphy's (1994) position. However, as Lambros Malafouris (2011) has emphasized, we must discuss just how useful this dichotomy is, and even seek to bridge it, particularly when considering the situated, embodied, aesthetic actions and experiences involved in the making of affective objects. Relational theorists would surely agree.

Second, we must remain critically aware of the aesthetic biases of archaeologists and of archaeological practice, and therefore cautious in our interpretations of the aesthetics of past societies. Here, for example, we might ask whether the term 'beautiful' remains useful or too discriminating and value-laden when it comes to assessing the aesthetic properties and impact of things. David Lewis-Williams (1990, 12–21) has highlighted this point particularly clearly with reference to archaeological attempts to understand San rock art in southern Africa. Third, archaeologists would benefit from returning again to Morphy's (1994) clear anthropological vision for an



archaeology of aesthetics, which—more than 20 years on—remains the only publication to deal explicitly with an archaeological method and theory for aesthetics. His emphasis on a contextual interpretative approach is one with which many archaeological theorists would still agree. However, closer attention now needs to be given to the technical processes, skill and creativity of makers and their engagement with materials.

Fourth, even if we accept a degree of universality in aesthetics (and the related argument that, due to the high degree of our perceptual and bodily commonality, we can enter into the art and aesthetics of other cultures), archaeologists (like anthropologists) are well placed and advised to emphasize the cultural specificity and contextual variability of aesthetics. This is the kind of balance that Morphy originally advocated.

Fifth, in order to help take the analytical agenda further, we should ask more questions about aesthetics and archaeology. Some, stemming from the discussion below of everyday aesthetics, are posed at the end of this paper.

### **Everyday aesthetics**

Building upon this broad foundation and upon Morphy's vision in particular (which so usefully combines material patterning with culturally specific systems of aesthetic evaluation), I now wish to focus on everyday aesthetics, which is particularly relevant to archaeological theory and its contemporary concerns with materiality, the senses, experience, practice, context, and much more besides.

Everyday aesthetics refers to a current movement in the field of philosophy of art (and in cultural studies, visual culture studies and relational theory) which challenges traditional art-centred aesthetic theory and associated modern Western binary distinctions, such as those between fine and popular art, art and craft, aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences, ritual

and mundane, and humans and their environment. Although avant-garde artists have persistently blurred these conventional boundaries through art-forms such as ready-mades, performance art, pop and kitsch art, they remain enshrined in theory. By contrast, everyday aesthetics recognizes art as continuous with everyday experience and acknowledges the possibility of a wide range of aesthetic experiences involving familiar objects and routine practices and events (e.g. Irvin 2008; Light & Smith 2005; Melchionne 2013; Saito 2007; Sartwell 1995). This aesthetic response is generally one of pleasure and satisfaction and of meaning and identity, measured against culturally defined ideals of 'rightness', perfection, beauty and order. (It also has the potential to be contrasted with negative aesthetic qualities, such as ugly sights, harsh sounds and messy arrangements.) Consciousness of this experience can range from unreflected to contemplative; and this is something we, as analysts, have to be aware of, for it requires us to attend to everyday aesthetic issues that are often taken for granted. (It may help, then, for us to recall our sense of wonder, delight or strangeness when discovering and contemplating the values and meanings of now familiar archaeological things, whilst avoiding the trap of becoming judgemental aesthetes.) But, less innocently, we should also consider the aesthetic strategies that govern everyday aesthetics and help to legitimize power, construct knowledge and present identities within particular economic, social and political contexts (Mandoki 2007). For example, in Nazi Germany, a particular constellation of aesthetic strategies combined and transformed religion, art, propaganda, monumentality, politics and terror (Mandoki 1999). At the same time, we must acknowledge some of the criticisms of everyday aesthetics: the risk that it is becoming a catch-all category for all that is not defined as fine art or natural beauty, and the difficulty of distinguishing everyday routines from extra-ordinary events, ceremonies and rituals.

Some examples help to demonstrate the breadth of this field as well as its relevance to archaeological areas of inquiry. Powerful sacred objects and ritual performances connected with religious beliefs and devotion are often created with great skill and experienced as deeply moving and beautiful (Sartwell 1995; cf. Garcia-Rivera 2014). Debate continues as to whether or not they should be denied designation either as ‘art’ or as ‘everyday aesthetics’ (with the Japanese tea ceremony being a particularly contentious example), but since they often reference and give meaning to everyday life, I favour the latter. Sport and athletics, and comparable traditional activities such as warfare and hunting, are also admissible candidates, with their generally acknowledged grace and beauty and desire to achieve a perfect performance. So too are ‘craft’ objects—primarily useful objects, skilfully made and pleasing to use—which, despite their historic separation from fine art, are replete with sensuous qualities, like size, shape, colour, texture, sound, sometimes smell, and the arrangement of parts (Saito 2007). Human bodies are also a key dimension of everyday aesthetics, along with their hairstyles, clothing, body ornaments and perfume. But perhaps the largest and most taken-for-granted components of everyday aesthetics are built environments and their associated landscapes. (There are also some overlaps here with environmental aesthetics, including aesthetics of nature, landscape architecture and environmental design.) Dwelling within these, groups of people can strengthen their attachment to places by arranging and decorating their homes, gardens and memorials, often with very specific aesthetic effects (such as harmony, balance, neatness and cleanliness), achieved with skill and aimed at creating a pleasing effect (Lee 2010). Aspects of daily routines within these spaces can also give pleasure—some deeply embedded in past practices, enriched by memories and nostalgia. Good cooking, for example, which in almost all cultures goes beyond the satisfaction of hunger or the demands of nutrition, is often used to create dramatic and refined multi-sensory fusions of

great smells, tastes, textures and sights. Refined social forms and interactions, including polished manners, can also form part of everyday aesthetics and provide motivational support for social projects undertaken in pursuit of moral and other values. Everyday aesthetics can, thus, contribute to (but does not equate with) 'habitus', or the sense of one's place and role within a lived environment (Bourdieu 1977). In a few cases, it might even be possible to claim that certain communities and cultures are aesthetically constituted, particularly around the political goal of social harmony and order (Berleant 1999). This may be going one step too far for most anthropologists, but the example of the 'bovine aesthetic' of the pastoralist Nilotes of Southern Sudan, whose ways of perceiving, appreciating, enjoying, describing and acting in their world are dominated by the physical qualities of their cattle (Coote 1992), certainly shows how pervasive everyday aesthetics can be.

### **Everyday aesthetics in Temple Period Malta**

Might some of these ideas help us understand the sensational Maltese Temple Culture, dated to c. 3400–2500 cal BC? This archaeological culture is well known for its above-ground megalithic 'temples' where rituals of life were celebrated and matching underground 'hypogea' where mortuary rites were performed, while we know less about associated dwelling places and landscapes. I have considered the sensory archaeology of prehistoric Malta in detail elsewhere (Skeates 2010); here, I explore some linkages, by considering the culturally specific aesthetics of everyday life through pottery, the built environment and the gendered human body, before finally turning to the issue of aesthetic change. More specifically, I move between archaeological evidence and theory to undertake as close an analysis of the archaeological data as currently seems possible. I make no apology for sprinkling my text with words like 'pleasure', 'harmony', 'satisfaction', 'beauty' and 'ugly',

which—although bordering on the speculative—are keywords in aesthetic theory and are intended to be thought provoking. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the available archaeological data on the Maltese Temple Culture, most of which were excavated unsystematically and without detailed recording over a century ago. These problems hold back in-depth contextual analysis and empirical study, but also encourage us to return again in future research to the details of the original materials and of the changes to which they have been subjected since their discovery.

The Maltese Temple Culture was characterized by a pervasive sense of order. This was—I contend—reinforced by an aesthetic strategy which sought pleasure and harmony in the repetition of formal, symmetrical and sensory relations between people, places, things and events (cf. Creese; DeMarrais; Zedeño, all in this issue). This aesthetic order was widely practised, with the beauty of the everyday used ideologically to reflect back upon and perpetuate the stability of the wider cultural order, albeit with potential variations, even tensions, between different individuals and groups within society.

Let us begin with the aesthetics of Temple Culture pottery. This was ubiquitously used and deposited in large quantities, in and around sanctuaries, burials and houses, and was, therefore, a fundamental component of everyday life. It has traditionally been divided into three styles, Ġgantija, Saflieni and Tarxien, each with somewhat distinct visual and tactile aesthetic properties (Trump 1963), as well as internal variability. It was finely crafted in a variety of symmetrical storage and serving forms, and sometimes ornamented, including by finely scratched red- and white-filled lines forming curvilinear and geometric motifs and occasional naturalistic representations, as on the ‘bull-and-goat plate’ from Hal Saflieni hypogeum. The combined tactility and visual appeal of the vessels’ surfaces is also evident, ranging from plain polished surfaces to a piece decorated by the maker’s fingers being dragged across the surface of the soft clay which, despite its antiquity and

reproduction here in photographic form, retains a powerful sensory immediacy (Fig. 1). The culturally specific elaboration and refining of this pottery, particularly during the Tarxien phase, arguably reflects a wider cultural process of ritualization and aestheticization of life in the Maltese Islands during the Temple Period. I would even go one step further to speculate that the aesthetics of this pottery—both the manipulation of its physical properties and the evaluation of their effect on the senses—actively participated in a culturally constructed ideology of domestic beauty, harmony, stability, order and good community life, played out in practice by makers and users across a variety of contexts (albeit not always in a consciously aesthetic state).

<Figure 1 near here>

This leads us on to the aesthetics of the Temple Culture's monumental built environment, places and islandscape. Over 30 'temples' were constructed strategically across the Maltese Islands, evolving out of domestic shrines and settlements, and built out of, yet coming to dominate, the islandscape. Each one developed according to local conditions. Nevertheless, each one also shared a range of stylistic features. On the outside, these included a roughly D-shaped structure with a concave façade and central axis, 'trilithon' doorways, raised thresholds and corbelled walls. Indeed, the form of the Maltese temple became a powerful symbol in its own right, inscribed onto temple facades and modelled into stone and clay replicas (Fig. 2). On the inside, another recurrent set of stylistic features evolved. For example, the 'trilithon' (two vertical stones with a lintel across the top) was established as a simple, recognizable and recurrent architectural motif, embedded in doorways, corridors and 'altars', their impact magnified by the monumental settings. Likewise, a visual and tactile decorative motif of

multiple drilled holes (possibly filled and contrasted with coloured paste) connected large stone vessels, altars and adjacent walls. These structural and decorative architectural forms shared a fundamental aesthetic propensity for geometric symmetry and repetition. One can imagine this aesthetic playing an active part in spectacular (and possibly gendered) ritual performances experienced in and around these awe-inspiring spaces. Within these, positively evaluated multi-sensory engagements between people and carefully crafted things were arguably used by community and/or religious leaders to reflect and reinforce the order and satisfactions of the community and the glory of the gods.

<Figure 2 near here>

Underground ‘hypogea’, comprising rock-cut mortuary complexes elaborated out of natural caves, were structurally paired with the largest of these ‘temples’, spatially, symbolically and aesthetically. The two prime examples are Ħal Saflieni hypogeum, located not far from the extensive Tarxien temple complex, and the Xagħra Circle, situated on the same plateau as the Ġgantija and Santa Verna temples. A visit to the well-preserved rock-cut architecture of the former is particularly memorable, with its labyrinthine combination of corridors, chambers, doorways, stairways and interior decorations extending over three levels, and echoing many of the architectural features of the above-ground temples. Colourful funerary rites were repeatedly performed by living relatives in and around these overwhelmingly affective places. These rites centred on the deposition and successive reassembling of the bodies and bones of the deceased along with a rich repertoire of artefacts designed to stimulate the senses, including an eye-catching variety of portable figurative artworks, symbolically powerful polished greenstone axe-amulets (Fig. 3) and familiar pottery (some

presumably containing food and drink offered to the deceased and the gods). Aesthetics comprised an affective part of these mortuary rituals, the aesthetically appealing spaces and objects arguably helping emotionally charged mourners cope with and overcome the loss of relatives and community members, but also helping to express feelings about the contradictions of death and beauty.

<Figure 3 near here>

Gendered human bodies connected, animated and gave meaning to these places and objects. There are, of course, multiple scholarly perspectives on the human body, which, in terms of aesthetics, range from the universalizing position of art historian John Onians (2015), that there is a cross-cultural association of the female form with beauty, to the critical attitude of sociologist Ruth Holliday, that beauty is a gendered and political construction through which women and their bodies are objectified with reference to social ideals and stereotypes (Holliday & Hassard 2001). The large corpus of Maltese Temple Culture figurines, idols and sculptures is particularly pertinent to this debate. Traditionally, scholars have focused attention on the Maltese representations of naked and clothed female bodies, including the celebrated Haġar Qim 'Venus' (Fig. 4) and Ħal Saflieni 'Sleeping Lady' and the corpulent 'Fat Ladies'. But the full figurative repertoire is more complex, with individuals modelled in clay and stone, in standing, sitting and lying postures, and with a variety of hairstyles, and representations also comprising embracing and seated couples, a set of idols completed in varying degrees of abstraction, 'grotesque' and maimed bodies (Fig. 5), phalli, animals and hybrid forms (Malone 2008; Vella Gregory 2005). (Contemporary mortuary practices also actively reconfigured the human body: Malone & Stoddart 2009.) Archival research on the structured deposition contexts of



these figurines is also enriching our contextual understanding of them. The aesthetics of these objects therefore has to be approached with caution. One starting point is to draw attention to the sensory qualities of the modelled and carved materials, including their size, shape, colour, polish and tactility, which offer us insights into the aesthetic conventions, choices, satisfactions and achievements of their makers. We can also consider the aesthetic impact of experiencing and evaluating these objects and their agency: in magically serving and pleasing the deceased and gods, and in reinforcing socially constructed ideals regarding the gendered body. One such notion (found across many traditional cultures) might have been of big female bodies as beautiful, well-fed, healthy and fertile—a message that could have been underlined by the juxtaposition of aesthetically pleasing figurines with corpses, animal forms and the ‘ugly’ representations of distorted and diseased (even dead) bodies found at Haġar Qim (cf. Taube & Taube 2009). Contrasts of scale between, for example, human bodies, the immense temple buildings and the miniature figurines and models were also mobilized affectively (Vella Gregory 2016). All this reinforced the Temple Culture’s particular aesthetic emphasis on the repetition of formal, symmetrical and sensory relations, which was significantly more marked in the Maltese Islands than elsewhere in the Central Mediterranean region in the fourth and third millennia BC, presumably due to their relative insularity and associated social tensions.

<Figures 4 & 5 near here>

Despite its own emphasis on and (to a certain extent) achievement of long-term cultural stability, the Maltese Temple Culture and its aesthetic system were eventually replaced by the radically different Tarxien Cemetery Culture, from around 2400 cal BC, through a transformation process that saw the appearance of new, exotic and hybrid people, ideas, material things and

aesthetics on the Maltese Islands. Novel representations of boats, the first gleaming metalwork on the islands, new decorated abstract forms of figurines, and the iconoclastic defacing and burial of Temple Culture monuments and artworks, all speak of the establishment of a new aesthetic order, with an emphasis on the mobility and fluidity of people and things. This raises the question of when, how and why aesthetic sensibilities change. Like David Wengrow, I would regard this process as primarily a political one, in which 'polities establish and maintain themselves by altering the sensuous environment of human experience' (Wengrow 2001, 169).

## **Conclusions**

Despite the need to avoid the deep-rooted biases of antiquarian connoisseurship and modernist aesthetics, engaging with aesthetics retains the potential to enrich archaeological theory and interpretations of the material and sensory dimensions of past societies. Attending contextually to everyday aesthetics, in particular, can enhance our understandings of how a specific aesthetic tradition affected the members of a culture and how it contributed to their everyday process of social reproduction, as I have tried to show in the case of the Maltese Temple Culture. It also highlights an important set of questions for archaeologists: What aspects and categories of materials, objects, persons and places were deemed aesthetically pleasing (or undesirable) in past societies? How and why did makers produce beautiful things? What creative acts of choice did they make, within the constraints of established aesthetic orders? In what ways did past people become attached to affective things? How did those people experience and evaluate these things? How might these values have varied and been strategically transformed over space and time? And why, in particular, is aesthetics so often associated with ritual practice and religious belief? Whether or not we

find the concept of ‘beauty’ unhelpful, thinking about aesthetics and seeking to define some of its variability in archaeological remains will help us make sense of the past.

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*Robin Skeates*

*Department of Archaeology*

*Durham University*

*South Road*

*Durham DH1 3LE*

*UK*

*Email: robin.skeates@durham.ac.uk*

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### **Author biography**

**Robin Skeates** is a Professor and Head of Archaeology at Durham University. He is a specialist in the prehistoric archaeology of the Central Mediterranean region. His publications explore a wide variety of themes within the

overlapping inter-disciplinary fields of material, visual and sensual culture studies, and museum and heritage studies. His current archaeological fieldwork focusses on the human uses of caves in Italy. He is General Editor of the *European Journal of Archaeology*.

**Figure 1.** *Decorated pottery from the Ġgantija Temples, Gozo (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). (Photograph: R. Skeates.)*

**Figure 2.** *Limestone model of a Maltese 'temple' from the Ta Haġrat temples (National Museum of Archaeology, Malta). 4.5 cm long. (Photograph: R. Skeates.)*

**Figure 3.** *Polished greenstone 'axe-amulets' from Hal Saflieni hypogeum (National Museum of Archaeology, Malta). (Photograph: R. Skeates.)*

**Figure 4.** *The Haġar Qim 'Venus' (National Museum of Archaeology, Malta). (Photograph: R. Skeates.)*

**Figure 5.** *Figurine pierced by fragments of shell from the Tarxien temples (National Museum of Archaeology, Malta). (Photograph: R. Skeates.)*