

Interpreting Ancient Figurines: context comparison, and prehistoric art.

By R.G. Lesure

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Review by Charlotte Booth

This book is essentially about archaeological theory, using figurines as a case in point. Lesure has a good balance between theory and examples and almost anecdotal evidence to support what he has suggested or wishes to discredit. The main theme of the research is a comparison of universalist and Contextualist methodology, which are normally applied in isolation of each other. The aim of most Universalists is to find one "rule" or "theory" which can be applied across cultures and even time. Contextualists on the other hand, look at individual contexts, with the general view that "one theory does not fit all".

Chapter one looks at the general Universalist approach to female figurines, which since the 1960s is that all figurines, regardless of origin, or whether they display overtly sexual characteristics or totally sexless imagery were attributed to an ancient mother goddess or fertility cult. Even though Ucko questioned the identification of some figurines from the Mediterranean and Near East, stating some were clearly male and others may have been used as toys, this theory is still widely adopted and used.

Lesure condemns this "first impressions approach". Although female figurines may look the same at first glance, on closer inspection the figurines display different characteristics which could indicate some other reason for being manufactured. This is further expanded in chapter two with a breakdown of the Contextualist approach, which he tests using figurines from different parts of the world and different time periods. He emphasises that the traditional "male/female" categorisation is not adequate, and instead they should be analysed on attributes. He raises the issues that figures with a penis are not necessarily male, and figures with breasts are not necessarily female. He also indicates that the omission of male/female characteristics may also hold some significance. Such figures may be designed to be ambiguous and therefore it is inappropriate to assign a categorisation to them.

Chapter three offers a new approach to the analysis of figurines, which is a combination of Universalism and Contextualism which simply changes the focus of the questions asked of the archaeological record. Lesure presents a model which investigates subject matter, form and social context, with a heavy focus on form. He is hoping to be able to produce a Universalist theory using Contextualist methods, and believes that to achieve this it is important when questioning to adopt as many modes and methodologies as possible, as to choose a preferred one at the abandonment of others limits the interpretive field, hindering the process of producing a universalist model.

Chapters four, five and six are case studies where he applies this method of questioning to the archaeological record using space and time specific collections of figurines. He draws the conclusions that whilst some collections of figurines can provide a "window on society" view, giving us information about social culture, other figurines do not, and are clearly representative of something from a wider social context. This in itself is an interesting development in the Contextualist viewpoint.

He determines that whilst asking questions about the similarities and differences are important, the resulting interpretations are in fact the key elements which can be compared across cultures in some cases. He therefore concludes that it is possible to create Universalist laws through a Contextualist approach, by comparing, not individual artefacts, but complete contexts and Contextualist interpretations. By doing this it is possible to get universal laws that can be applied on a macro-scale.

This book is well written and well researched, and is clearly aimed at a scholarship familiar with the figurines under discussion. However, that said, as an academic with a general archaeological background and only a basic knowledge of the subject matter, I found it informative and interesting. I was able to follow the arguments, as Lesure gave explanations for many of the archaeological terms used, making the book accessible to a wider audience. However, it would have been greatly improved by more photographs of examples and there is a lot of reference to image types, which no one other than an expert would be familiar. He is however trying to aim at a wider audience by using for example calendar years rather than the more archaeological BP (Before Present), and I think this does help. However, the cost of the book, ensures it will only be purchased by academics with a particular interest in figurines or archaeological theory.