

# Into the labyrinth: research methods and the study of Minoan iconography

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## Abstract

Even after a century of focused investigation, Minoan iconography presents numerous challenges to scholarship. Lacking literary and historical sources, the subjects of this strikingly naturalistic and graceful art form remain persistently anonymous. Divine beings cannot be reliably distinguished from humans playing priestly roles, and only a few mythical monsters can be recognized from one composition to another. Academic literature on the topic is abundant, yet consensus on even the most important points of identification (e.g., the ‘Great Goddess’ problem) is lacking. This essay investigates the methodological problems confronting the study of Minoan iconography, reviews current approaches to the subject, and suggests directions for future research.

## Keywords

Minoan iconography – Minoan ‘Great Goddess’ – The ‘Mistress of Animals’ Akrotiri, Thera – ‘Priest-King’ Knossos

## Introducing the question

‘I want to believe’<sup>1</sup>

As students and scholars of ancient art, we all want to believe that Minoan iconography can be deciphered. The images, after all, are compelling. They appear to describe ideal worlds of lush nature with flowering plants and exotic beasts, beautiful people dressed in fine clothes, religious rituals, and skilled athletes engaged in contests of strength and agility.<sup>2</sup> Today Minoan art is widely

<sup>1</sup> Poster in the office of FBI Special Agent Fox Mulder in the TV series, *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> On Minoan culture, see Fitton 2002; Shelmerdine 2008, 77-229; on art, see Hood 1978.

recognized as a distinctive idiom, graceful and sophisticated, idealized and naturalistic. The artworks demonstrate a mastery of form and technique that engage the contemporary viewer in a subtle seduction, one that tempts us to understand them as faithful mirrors of a distant but distinctly ‘Minoan’ view of the world. And as scholars, we respond in full. We want to believe in the truth of the images and we accept them as constituting a coherent visual language, one that preserves and communicates important messages from an otherwise enigmatic culture, long fallen and almost forgotten until its resurrection through archaeology just over a century ago.

But as enticing as the study of Minoan iconography may be to the contemporary viewer, the time has come to acknowledge that a century of scholarship has raised more questions than it has answered. Few figures in Minoan art can be securely identified from one composition to another.<sup>3</sup> Similar images are confusing for their differences, and tracing iconographic interconnections produces a gossamer web of association rather than a solid framework for building interpretation. But that has not prevented scholars, including this author, from delving into Minoan imagery. A search for ‘iconography’ in *Nestor*, the on-line Aegean bibliographic database hosted by the University of Cincinnati’s Department of Classics, yields dozens of studies from the last five years alone, and more than 170 published since 1957, when the bibliography was begun. Moreover, that total does not take into account the investigations of individual motifs that do not include ‘iconography’ in the title. After so much intense scrutiny, one might expect scholars to have achieved a clearer understanding of Minoan pictorial art, but that has not happened. This essay considers how and why Minoan iconographic study became lost in its own labyrinth. This is followed by a review of current methodological approaches and suggestions for future research.

### The Basics: Terms and Methodology

The word ‘iconography’ comes from the Greek εἰκών (‘image,’ or ‘likeness’) and γράφειν (‘to write’) and literally means ‘image writing’.<sup>4</sup> In art history, iconography is the study of visual subject matter.<sup>5</sup> A work of art is understood as a visual document to be decoded by the art historian, who explains the artwork’s meaning and cultural significance. As practiced in the 20th century by Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) and others, methods of iconographic analysis draw from the

<sup>3</sup> Blakolmer 2010. Some mythological beings (e.g., the Minoan genius) were inspired by contemporary Egyptian demons and can be identified as characters in Minoan iconography (Weingarten 2013).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Iconography,’ *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, unabridged, 2nd edition, 1968, print.

<sup>5</sup> This is a vast topic. For an overview, see Lash 1996.

humanistic tradition, semiotics, and the psychology of perception.<sup>6</sup> The methodological key is to link the image under study to a text that illuminates its meaning. By such means, various religious, mythological, and historical subjects can be identified and interpreted within their social contexts. This approach works well for historical European artworks, but presents a significant problem for the Minoan art historian, for whom no texts are available. A review of Panofsky's three-part method for iconographic investigation in relation to Minoan imagery offers a useful measure of the challenges facing Aegean scholars today.

*Panofsky and iconographic investigation*

Panofsky's mode of artistic investigation distinguishes iconography – the study of subject matter – from iconology, which he defined as the study of meaning.<sup>7</sup> While many scholars today gloss over the distinction, these two concepts play important roles in Panofsky's method. For Panofsky, the first level of study is *pre-iconographical description* in which the viewer works with what can be recognized in an artwork without reference to outside sources. This stage of investigation utilizes the viewer's familiarity with objects and events. The second level is *iconographical analysis*, in which the viewer links the artistic motifs with themes, concepts, and/or conventional meanings recognizable from literary and historical sources. At this stage, the image is identified with a known story or distinguishable character. At the third level of *iconological interpretation*, the viewer deciphers the meaning of an image by further taking into account the artwork's cultural era, its artistic style, the wishes of its patron, etc., to arrive at its deepest levels of significance. For Panofsky, this mode of analysis ascertains 'those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – qualified by one personality and condensed into one work'.<sup>8</sup>

Panofsky's three-part model, then, can be usefully summarized as *description*, *identification*, and *interpretation*. While the first level of analysis can be done visually, the second and third levels require knowledge of the historical, literary, and religious foundations of a civilization – sources which do not survive for Minoan Crete. By this measure, Minoan iconographers should forever be limited to Panofsky's first level of descriptive analysis, and any further investigation of Minoan iconography would be regarded as methodologically unsound. But, as Judith Weingarten succinctly writes with regard to Aegean glyptic art, 'Description by

<sup>6</sup> Panofsky 1939; 1955. For an introduction to Panofsky's method, its sources, its impact on art history, and its critics, see Hatt & Klonk 2006, 96-119.

<sup>7</sup> Panofsky 1939; 1955.

<sup>8</sup> Panofsky 1955, 30.

itself explains nothing.<sup>9</sup> For iconographers past and present, the challenge has been to read and reconstruct the iconography and iconology of Minoan art without the benefit of texts. This problem is explored below through the example of the putative Minoan ‘Great Goddess’ of nature and her possible depiction in the frescoes of Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera.

### A picture book without a text<sup>10</sup>: the problem of the Minoan ‘Great Goddess’

Archaeologists have sought to make sense of Minoan culture since its discovery in major excavations of the early 20th century at sites such as Knossos, Phaistos, Malia, and Ayia Triada. Among its beautiful but often fragmentary artefacts are images of women, many of which are notable for their compositional prominence and their apparent religious associations. Early efforts to understand this imagery gave rise to one of the most famous, and most analysed, problems of iconographic interpretation, the identification of a Minoan ‘Great Goddess’ of nature. Much has now been written on the important role played by Sir Arthur Evans (1851-1941), excavator of the palace at Knossos, in framing this academic discourse.<sup>11</sup> Recent investigations reveal that Evans’s highly influential readings of Minoan art and culture were shaped as much by his own preconceptions as by the actual evidence from archaeology.<sup>12</sup> Evans (perhaps self-servingly) believed in the primacy of the Minoans among the early cultures of the Aegean, but he also perceived that Minoan Crete belonged to a greater eastern Mediterranean cultural *koine*, allowing him to cite parallels with contemporary cultures of Egypt and the Near East. Further, he was influenced by contemporary views on so-called primitive religion, particularly the existence of a universal Mother Goddess and her rising and dying Son, advocated by Sir James Frazer (1854-1941).<sup>13</sup> For Evans, the prominence of female figures in Minoan art – each similar to one another but not identical – was evidence for the worship of a single great goddess of nature who appeared in art in many forms, each with different attributes.<sup>14</sup> In Evans’s view, the Minoan reverence for a universal goddess was akin to monotheism, and Minos was her son, interpreted not as a king of legend but as a dynastic title, like ‘pharaoh’ in Egypt.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Weingarten 2005, 354.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Nilsson’s (1950, 7) famous line about the study of prehistoric religion runs, ‘The evidence is purely archaeological, it has come down to us as a picture book without text, and our first concern is to furnish a text to the pictures.’

<sup>11</sup> Marinatos 1993, 8; Goodison & Morris 1998, 113, 125; Morris 2006; Eller 2012.

<sup>12</sup> MacGillivray 2000; Gere 2009; Schoep 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Frazer 1894; 1922; Goodison & Morris 1998, 113; Gere 2009, 123-124; Eller 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Evans 1921-1935, vol. II, I, 277.

<sup>15</sup> Evans 1921-1935, vol. I, 3-6.

These views resonated in the early 20th century culture, and indeed, many prominent female figures in Minoan art are still, to this day, commonly identified as goddesses despite the fact that their prehistoric identities remain unclear (e.g., the ‘Snake Goddess’ figurine of Knossos).<sup>16</sup> The difficulty is that the pictorial evidence for a single nature goddess is ambiguous at best, and her presumed iconography is fluid, multivalent, and inconsistent.<sup>17</sup> It is not the purpose of this essay to engage the ‘Goddess problem’ – other scholars have done that, but without building academic consensus.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the goal is to clarify the problems facing Minoan iconographers through a review of the best artistic evidence, the LC I Mistress of Animals Fresco and its companion Crocus Gatherers Fresco, from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri. While these frescoes are Thera in origin and show Cycladic elements of artistic style, their iconography and cultural contexts are undeniably connected with Neopalatial Minoan Crete of the corresponding LM IA period.

*Case Study: The Mistress of Animals of Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera*

Situated at the heart of an extensive pictorial program covering much of the entire building, this striking fresco depicts a finely-dressed young woman seated on a stepped platform erected in a crocus-filled landscape (fig. 1).<sup>19</sup> She wears a Minoan-style flounced skirt, a sheer garment enlivened with crocus decoration, and necklaces with duck and dragonfly pendants. She is attended by a leashed griffin, and she accepts a handful of saffron from an oversized blue monkey. Before her, a girl pours crocus flowers into a large basket, while her companions in the adjacent Crocus Gatherers Fresco pick crocuses in a rocky landscape. From the perspective of iconographic analysis, Panofsky’s initial stage of investigation identified as *description* seems relatively clear and simple, mainly because the objects painted in the fresco are recognizable today. The preliminary stage of *iconographical analysis* also seems relatively straightforward, as the seated figure’s elevated position, large scale, animal attendant, and supernatural protector, all point toward a divine identity.

In scholarly literature, the seated figure is further identified as a nature goddess or a *Potnia theron* (mistress of animals), and her votaries, the Crocus Gatherers,

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the captions in Hood 1978, 133, fig. 123; Fitton 2002, pl. 6. On the issue, Morris 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Much has been written on this point. For a summary, Fitton 2002, 175-178; for discussion, Blakolmer 2010, esp. 37-39; for interpretation, Marinatos 1993, 147-166; in support of polytheism, Nilsson 1950; Goodison & Morris 1998; Moss 2005; Gulizio & Nakassis 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Marinatos (1993) made a strong effort, but in response, see Wright 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Thera VII, 32-38; Dumas 1992, 130-131, pls. 122, 125, 126.



Figure 1: The Mistress of Animals Fresco, Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera.  
Drawings: Ray Porter & Paul Rehak.

are viewed as local Theran girls engaged in a flower-gathering ritual in honour of the goddess.<sup>20</sup> But what precisely does this mean? Does the seated figure represent the Great Goddess of nature, as postulated by Evans long before the Theran fresco was discovered? Or does she represent some other divinity?<sup>21</sup> Part of the problem for the modern viewer is that Neopalatial artists did not embrace a codified iconographic system in which specific attributes were consistently associated with particular deities.<sup>22</sup> That is not to say that individual iconographic elements do not repeat in other artworks – they do, and often, but in subtly different forms and arrangements. Prominent female figures in flounced skirts, for instance, sit on various platforms and seats, on the ground, or near trees (fig. 2). Sometimes they are accompanied by floating figures (divine epiphanies?) and/or human-looking figures (priests? votaries?), and occasionally they sit in the company of animals such as *agrimia* (real world) or griffins (mythic realm).<sup>23</sup> Monkeys, griffins, and crocus flowers all reappear in Minoan and Theran artworks in a variety of media and compositional arrangements.<sup>24</sup> And yet, Xeste 3's exact combination of pictorial elements is found nowhere else in the Aegean. No other artwork depicts a

<sup>20</sup> *Thera* VII, 37; Marinatos 1984, 70; Dumas 1992, 130-131; Vlachopoulos 2007b, 113.

<sup>21</sup> Blakolmer 2010, 37-39. Vlachopoulos (2007b, 115-116) sees her as the major Aegean divinity. Goodison & Morris (1998, 126-127) caution that modern viewers may be essentializing this prehistoric divinity as belonging only to nature.

<sup>22</sup> Marinatos 1993, 165-166; Blakolmer 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Rehak 1995, 102-106, pls. 36-38; see too the new ivory pyxis from Mochlos (Soles 2016, 249-251, pls LXXXI-LXXXII.)

<sup>24</sup> Griffins: Morgan 2010; crocuses: Day 2011; monkeys: Pareja 2017.

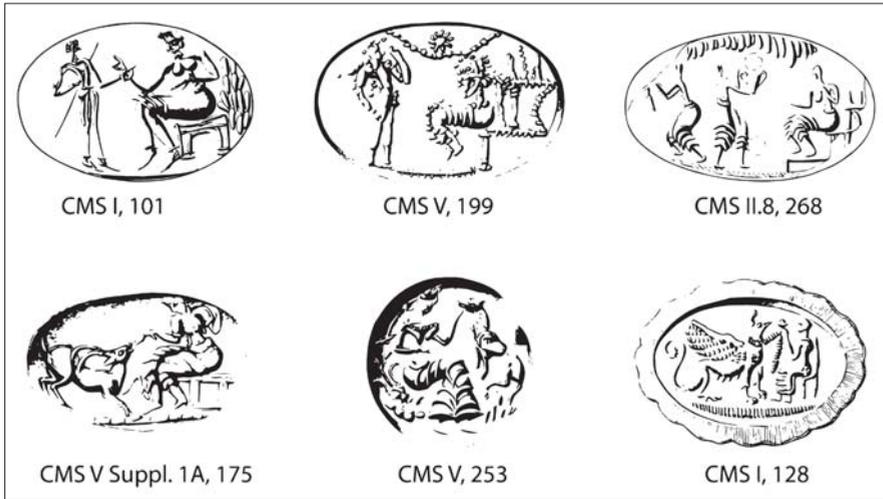


Figure 2: Iconographic comparanda to the Mistress of Animals, Xeste 3. Drawings: Anne Chapin.

monkey presenting a handful of saffron to an enthroned female guarded by a griffin.<sup>25</sup> This means that the specific personage depicted in Xeste 3 cannot be recognized (with 100% certainty) anywhere else, nor can she be securely associated with Evans's Great Goddess.<sup>26</sup> For now, she is simply the Mistress of Animals of Xeste 3.

Unfortunately, the difficulties of identification only deepen when narrative events are considered. Does the fresco depict a goddess appearing before a Crocus Gatherer in a moment of divine epiphany, or is the enthroned figure a priestess playing the role of a goddess in an enacted epiphany?<sup>27</sup> Each reading presents problems. For instance, one Crocus Gatherer appears to gaze directly at the goddess, suggesting that the deity is visible (and therefore corporeal – so an enacted epiphany?). Yet the griffin and oversize monkey should signal a supernatural event (so a divine epiphany?) – but if so, how are the girls to be understood as real Theran adolescents engaged in a flower-gathering ceremony? Might the composition instead represent a mythological narrative?<sup>28</sup> Or could it depict the ritual

<sup>25</sup> Similar, however, is ring from Kalyvia (*CMS* II.3, 103) depicting an 'adorant...approaching the goddess in the company of a monkey' (Wedde 1992, 199, pl. 47.16).

<sup>26</sup> For a possible appearance of the same Theran deity in the 'Porter's Lodge' of Sector Alpha, Akrotiri, see Vlachopoulos 2007a, 135.

<sup>27</sup> For enacted epiphany in Minoan religion, see Hägg 1986; against, Wedde 1992, 198-201. On epiphany in later Greek religion, see Platt 2014 and Petridou 2016.

<sup>28</sup> For comparisons with later Greek mythology, see Marinatos 1984, 72; Vlachopoulos 2007b, 115-116.

performance of a sacred play? At this time, the problem seems unsolvable, partly because the fresco's narrative ambiguity facilitates multiple readings of the figures and events. Unfortunately for scholars, narrative flexibility is typical of Minoan religious art.<sup>29</sup>

**'Threads snap. You would lose your way in the labyrinth.'**<sup>30</sup>

The example of the Xeste 3 Mistress of Animals brings us to an uncomfortable truth – that past and current approaches to Minoan religious iconography have not produced the desired results and convincingly decoded the imagery. Scholarly consensus is lacking on even the most basic issues of identification, such as the presumed 'Great Goddess' of nature. Nor are current approaches likely to solve this particular iconographic mystery in the foreseeable future, given the limitations of existing evidence. Lacking textual verification, scholars today seem truly stuck at Panofsky's first level of analysis – description. Without texts, there is no reliable means to identify any given figure in Minoan art nor can any composition be interpreted except in a provisional, speculative manner. Moreover, the problem worsens when the surviving physical evidence is fragmentary or poorly documented.

*Case Study: The 'Priest-King' Fresco from Knossos*

Perhaps the most iconic of all Minoan artworks is also one of the most enigmatic (fig 3). Excavated in 1901 from different spots imprecisely recorded along the North-South Corridor of the Knossos palace, the non-joining fragments of today's Priest-King Fresco were initially assigned by Evans to three different figures.<sup>31</sup> But by 1905, Evans favoured the restoration of a single figure, an athletic, long-haired young man wearing Minoan male costume (a belted loincloth and a codpiece) with a *waz*-lily garland draped across his shoulders and a feathered *waz*-lily crown upon his head.<sup>32</sup> Evans then used Egyptian comparanda to support his identification of a sacred Priest-King of Knossos,<sup>33</sup> and just like that, Evans supplied what had previously been missing in Minoan archaeology – the image of a ruler, someone to sit on the throne of Knossos. That Frazer's ideas of the prehistoric Great Goddess and her young Son were already widely popular among academics and

<sup>29</sup> Cain 2001; Blakolmer 2010, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Wilde 1891, 144.

<sup>31</sup> Evans 1900-1901, 15-16, fig. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Sherratt 2000, 11-12, fig. 14. An early restoration made by Emile Gilliéron *père* (1850-1924) dates to around 1905.

<sup>33</sup> Evans 1921-1935, vol. II, 2, 778-779.



Figure 3: The 'Priest-King' Fresco, Knossos. Photographs: Anne Chapin.

the general public alike meant that the Priest-King Fresco restoration was generally well received.<sup>34</sup>

But voices of dissension grew by the 1970s. Physician Jean Coulomb observed that the flexion and slant of the Priest-King's left pectoral muscle indicated that the extended arm had to have been raised higher, and using that information, he deconstructed Evans's fresco restoration and assigned the Priest-King's torso to a boxer facing right.<sup>35</sup> Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier agreed that the pieces of the Priest-King belong to separate figures, but for him, the torso's raised arm identify a male

<sup>34</sup> Sherratt 2000, 8-10; Schoep 2018, 23-24.

<sup>35</sup> Coulomb 1979. However, a Minoan male figure facing right should have long black hair cascading down its neck, back, and shoulders (viewer's left), but none is visible today (Shaw 2004, 71-72). This observation casts significant doubt on Coulomb's restoration (and also that of Niemeier [1988]).

divinity facing right and holding a staff.<sup>36</sup> Mark Cameron suggested that the light tint of the Priest-King's skin could signify female gender, according to the Aegean colour convention, and that the fresco may represent a female athlete, perhaps a bull leaper.<sup>37</sup> Louise Hitchcock alternatively asked whether the fresco might depict a woman dressed as a man, much as the Queen Hatshepsut was represented in male guise as ruler of Egypt.<sup>38</sup> And today, possible evidence for a third gender is inferred from the ambiguity of the Priest-King's skin colour.<sup>39</sup>

So what to make of this sweeping array of observation and interpretation? In general, many in today's academic community doubt the veracity of Evans's restoration (with good reason) and, further, place little faith in both the study of Minoan iconography and the fragmentary artworks which form the basis of its investigation.<sup>40</sup> From a methodological point of view, how can any fresco be analysed and interpreted if its restoration is suspect?<sup>41</sup> How can any artwork be evaluated for cultural significance and meaning if its very description is open to doubt? And yet, as the example of the Priest-King Fresco shows, this seems to happen rather often. Indeed, the historical progression of interpretation brought to the fragmentary material may reveal more of 20th century concerns than it does of the fresco itself. That is, for Evans, the fresco demonstrated the existence of a sacred king who would be at home in the pages of *The Golden Bough*. By the late 1970s, the fresco was reconceived as a boxer engaged in a contest reminiscent of 1975's 'Thrilla in Manila' (between boxing greats Muhammad Ali and George Frazier), or as a female bull leaper consistent with the rising tide of feminist voices in the women's liberation movement. And today's sensitivity towards gender identity corresponds with current interest in gender ambiguity and third gender readings of the Priest-King. The seductive appeal of these ideas is that they find something of the present in the Minoan past; the danger is that there may be nothing verifiable in them beyond modern meaning. And while each re-evaluation of the Priest-King Fresco has raised important questions, the fact remains that any

<sup>36</sup> Niemeier 1988.

<sup>37</sup> Cameron 1975, vol. III, 122, 164-165.

<sup>38</sup> Hitchcock 2000.

<sup>39</sup> From class discussions.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Sherratt (2000, 19-20) is particularly biting: '...the efforts of later scholars [to identify and restore the Priest-King Fresco]...make use of precisely the kind of informed imagination which characterized the earlier reconstructions.... They cannot, on their own, be said to tell us anything genuinely new about Minoan art and iconography, and it is hard, in all honesty, to find much if any truly objective ground on which to choose between them and the Gilliérons' versions.'

<sup>41</sup> Criticisms of fresco restorations, particularly those by the Gilliérons (father and son), have been harsh. Cathy Gere (2009, 111) condemns them as 'almost complete inventions of these 20th-century artists.' On the influence of modernism (e.g., Art Nouveau) on fresco restoration, see Farnoux 1996; but alternatively, Blakolmer 2006.

interpretation – new or old – will remain suspect due to the problematic state of the primary evidence and the lack of literary or historical sources.

**‘No problem can be solved by the same kind of thinking that created it.’<sup>42</sup>**

So what to do? Given the problematic nature of the artistic evidence, there has been considerable effort in recent years to bring order out of confusion by strengthening the methodological approaches brought to the prehistoric imagery.<sup>43</sup> From this, three broad categories of research can be identified: those that focus on description and terminology, those that investigate specific motifs and themes, and those that apply innovative theoretical approaches to the artistic evidence.<sup>44</sup> What follows here is a brief overview of these methods rather than a review of individual studies.

‘Descriptive’ approaches employ the tools of visual analysis to investigate Minoan imagery to improve terminologies. Such studies seek to identify objects depicted in art, define compositional structures, describe figural gestures, and read pictorial hierarchies. Scholarly energy has focused on glyptic art, where images are exceptionally small and even Panofsky’s descriptive stratum of analysis presents significant challenges, but the study of frescoes and figurines have also benefited from such investigations.<sup>45</sup> The on-line CMS database in Arachne with its associated ‘value lists’, together with the related IconA Database, mark significant advances in sharing information and offering clear terminologies for pictorial motifs appearing on seals and sealings.<sup>46</sup> The aims of such projects are twofold: first, to establish a consistent vocabulary for describing motifs and types of compositions; and second, to develop a more neutral terminology that avoids conflating description and identification (e.g., ‘female figure’ instead of ‘goddess’ or ‘priestess’). The intention is to reduce the impact of unverified assumptions and unconscious prejudices through the application of carefully chosen descriptors. While these efforts have yet to decode the meanings of the images themselves, the development of a consistent vocabulary is foundational to future research.

A second category is typological and focuses on specific motifs or themes that appear in Minoan art. The investigations of epiphanic imagery cited above, for

<sup>42</sup> Quote popularly attributed to Albert Einstein.

<sup>43</sup> The EIKON conference of 1992 marked a significant step in this direction; see Laffineur and Crowley 1992.

<sup>44</sup> There are, of course, no strict divisions among these categories, and individual investigations typically employ multiple approaches.

<sup>45</sup> E.g., Krzyszkowska 2005; Crowley 2013; Morris 2001; Chapin 1995.

<sup>46</sup> See <http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/fakultaeten/philosophie/zaw/cms/>.

instance, are typological, as is Jo Day's analysis of the crocus motif.<sup>47</sup> Comparative approaches can be brought to typological study, particularly when the subjects under investigation appear in similar, contemporary form elsewhere in the Mediterranean (e.g., Minoan 'horns of consecration' or the 'Minoan genius').<sup>48</sup> A pitfall for comparative iconography, however, is that symbols, motifs, and themes appearing in one cultural context generally do not appear elsewhere with the exact same meaning, and meanings often change through time.<sup>49</sup> When carefully structured, however, typological investigations can offer valuable insights into facets of Minoan art and culture.

A third approach to Minoan iconography examines art through the application of theory drawn mostly from other fields of study. An important focus over the last several decades has been the study of age grades and rites of passage as revealed through art, archaeology, and ethnographic comparison. In the 1980s, Nannó Marinatos, inspired by the work of ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, initiated a long and productive line of investigation into Theran frescoes depicting coming-of-age ceremonies.<sup>50</sup> Robert Koehl similarly reconstructed Minoan ritual practice by relating Minoan depictions of youths to historical material.<sup>51</sup> Since then, gender theory, body theory, performance theory, and evolutionary theory have all been successfully applied to Minoan images of people.<sup>52</sup>

Other theoretical approaches integrate the study of iconography with the investigation of Minoan art in its architectural and archaeological contexts. In *Minoan Realities: Approaches to Images, Architecture and Society in the Aegean Bronze Age*, the design, perception, and experience of decorated architectural space move to the forefront of inquiry.<sup>53</sup> The subjects of wall painting are examined in relation to specific architectural configurations for insight into the social activities that took place within those spaces, and for the Minoan ideological and religious beliefs that conditioned them. A synthetic approach to Minoan iconography drawing from a variety of pictorial media is suggested.

Current interest in the materiality of objects also holds promise for Minoan iconographers. Object biographies, networks of interaction, concepts of hybridity, and recognizing entangled relationships among 'things' and people all provide scholars with enriched theoretical tools for investigating the cultural transmission

<sup>47</sup> Hägg 1986; Wedde 1992; Day 2011.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Banou 2008, or Weingarten 2013.

<sup>49</sup> For a cautionary tale, see reviews of Nannó Marinatos (2010) by Stephanie Budin (2011) and Judith Weingarten (2012).

<sup>50</sup> Marinatos 1984.

<sup>51</sup> Koehl 1986.

<sup>52</sup> The *Fylo* conference of 2005 seems to mark a point of maturity for these investigations (Kopaka 2009).

<sup>53</sup> Panagiotopoulos and Günkel-Maschek 2012.

of ideas, motifs, and themes relevant to iconographic study, particularly for objects that are traded or technologies that are shared.<sup>54</sup> In general, theory-laden studies are most successful when research questions are carefully focused within the limits of the evidence and when linkages between theory and imagery are strong.

These methodologies, however, still do not bring us any closer to identifying *who* is actually depicted in the Minoan frescoes. And, given the diverse range of theoretical approaches brought to the study of Minoan material culture, one might rightly ask why such old-fashioned questions should continue to be addressed, given the limits of the evidence. But the fact remains that establishing *who* is depicted in Minoan art is still too important a problem to ignore, even if no indisputable solutions are apparent today. Identifying the characters and narratives depicted in Minoan imagery, even in general terms, would illuminate our understandings of Minoan social, religious, and political structures in entirely new and probably unexpected ways. Determining the subjects of pictorial art would be, to paraphrase Neil Armstrong, a giant leap for Minoan studies.

So how to address this intractable problem? In the view of this author, four pieces of the puzzle are needed but not equally available: texts, improved methodologies, better evidence, and patience. Texts – ideally, an archive preserving works of history and literature – are unlikely to be discovered and deciphered any time soon, so methodologies must be improved to address the lack of textual sources. Joann Gulizio and Dimitri Nakassis, for instance, address the Minoan ‘Goddess problem’ through careful linguistic and contextual study of likely Minoan theonyms preserved on Mycenaean Linear B text found on Crete and identify strong evidence for Minoan polytheisms<sup>55</sup>. Vernon James Knight, a new world anthropologist, suggests that art historical and anthropological methodologies can be integrated with natural history and archaeological field data in order to advance the understanding of prehistoric iconography.<sup>56</sup> For Minoan iconographers, this might mean the continued research into the motifs and themes of Minoan art, together with further analysis of Minoan artistic conventions, with the goal of achieving consensus on how to read the imagery. Towards this end, Fritz Blakolmer makes a significant advance in his reading of Neopalatial Minoan Iconography as a relatively closed visual system of standardized *topoi* that originated in the major art forms of Knossos – specifically, the large stucco reliefs decorating the palace – and was widely disseminated via “top-down” mechanisms to other, imitative art forms, including glyptic art and ritual vessels<sup>57</sup>. Methodologies

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Feldman 2006; Brysbaert 2008; Hodder 2012; Maran & Stockhammer 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Gulizio & Nakassis 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Knight 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Blakolmer 2012.

drawn from semiotic theory are useful, but more investigation is needed and other approaches are viable.<sup>58</sup> These data could then be integrated with cautiously structured comparisons to relevant imagery in contemporary Egyptian and Near Eastern art. Documentary evidence derived from Linear B tablets (particularly those texts found on Crete) and information from historical Greek religion and culture could be brought in as ‘ethnographic’ analogy. When both art historical and comparative approaches to the prehistoric material yield mutually-supporting results, then – and only then – might scholars have developed a testable model for Minoan iconography that relates visual configurations in art (compositions) to inferred themes of reference (subject matter).

Thirdly, questions of physical evidence need to be addressed. While future finds may throw new light on Minoan iconography, museum storerooms are full of unpublished material, and well-known artefacts can benefit from renewed scientific study.<sup>59</sup> For example, if observers today are uncertain as to the original colour of the Priest-King’s skin, then the plaster surfaces could be examined with the tools of science. No amount of theory will make up for gaps in evidence, and it makes little sense to propose new readings when important data remain missing. From a practical standpoint, continued study and publication will be slow and expensive, and that means the last component – patience – is especially important for the future of Minoan iconographic study.

In conclusion, in the view of this author, systematic and incremental approaches to Minoan visual material offer the best (and perhaps the only) routes through the labyrinth of Minoan iconography. These efforts must be cautious and self-reflective; they must embrace theories of prehistoric iconography and apply methods that directly address the lack of textual sources. Possible paths of inquiry are multiple: some studies might focus further on theory and methodology, others might continue the investigation of specific categories of imagery, others still might concentrate on primary publication or the application of scientific technologies to the study of artistic material. In an era of mass communication and shared information, it seems impossible that progress will not be made. The truth is out there.<sup>60</sup> We just have to untangle our threads and find a way to it.

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Wedde 1992; Chapin 1995. Palyvou (2012) offers an alternative approach to investigating the structure of fresco painting.

<sup>59</sup> Galanakis, Tsitsa and Günkel-Maschek (2017) offer a model for future investigation.

<sup>60</sup> Tag line from *The X-Files* television series (1993-2002, 2016).

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