

Formal Analysis: Terracotta sheep or bull, Late Helladic IIIA, ca. 1400-1300BCE

The Terracotta sheep or bull from the Late Helladic IIIA period, ca. 1400-1300BCE can be found exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art 5th Ave in Gallery 151. From 2 feet away, the free-standing terracotta figurine of a sheep or bull, with a flat pulled out tail, four stubby legs, a head with rounded horns, and glaze painted details, can easily stand on the palm of one of my hands. Its exact dimensions are 3 1/8 inches (8 cm) in height and 4 7/8 inches (12.4 cm) in length.

The condition of the artifact is excellent. Except for a few hairline cracks on the most vulnerable extremities, everything is smooth and intact across the one-piece sculpture. Its excellent condition may be attributed to its simplistic geometric forms; there seem to be realistic considerations as to how the figurine will stand in the stubbiness of the extremities, and in how every extremity is attached securely (no connections are absurdly thin nor can be easily broken). Overall, the cylindrical body is raised by the legs around 1cm above the ground, the head is an isosceles triangle pyramid, the tail resembles a slab of dough partly pulled from a larger dough mound, and the legs are thick-set cylinders. All forms are softened and tapered without sharp edges and the head is given the most consideration with its different triangular form, additional parts (horns), and paint details. Paint lines are mostly continuous and evenly applied throughout the line, creating a sense of coherence, continuity, and uniformity across the design of the figurine. Some sections of the lines of paint finish are redder and more saturated, but the paint details are distinct and clear (could be repainted).

The figure follows frontal symmetry; divided by a vertical line from the center of the head, the left and right forms of the figure symmetrical to each other. Each leg mirrors the alignment of the leg on the other side, the horns also mirror each other in alignment, size, and in rounded trapezoidal shape, and the eyes as well are both similar-sized convex mounds and mirror each other's position on the head. The nose, positioned bottom center, wraps around the bottom planes of the head in one continuous line in the shape of a symmetrical bow tie. There are 3 thick brown paint bands on each of the legs. A thin red squiggly line divides the head from the top center where the horns of the head start, to the bottom center of the head. Line color is also used symmetrically on the head: the eyes are two concentric brown and red circles, and the horns are both darker brown and filled in with similar quality squiggly lines.

Where the artist(s) begins to deviate from frontal symmetry is in the paint details on the body. There are 5 petal-like continuous outlined shapes that cover the greater part of the body, none of them overlapping, and none of them filled in with paint. The size of the petals are relatively

similar, but 3 of the outlines have 3 petals, 2 of them have four petals, and the paint application varies for some outlines. A total of 13 small brown x's are interspersed unevenly in the spaces between the petals, and the left side (viewed from the front/head) has an almost perfectly horizontal line of 5 x's below one of its petal shapes while the right side does not.

Based on the figure alone, it is not clear what the petal-shaped outlines and x's represent, why the petal shapes are not filled in, whether the number of petals or x's matter, and why the petals and x's are arranged as such. As mentioned previously, the horns also are not filled in completely (they are filled with squiggly lines), which raises many more questions. Was the lack of colored-in solid shapes an artist's style and choice, a common style seen during the time, or perhaps a representation of surface quality? The name of this artifact suggests that this animal figurine is a sheep or bull. Perhaps the squiggly lines on the horn are representations of the ridges seen on the horns of sheep or bull? Perhaps the randomness of the petals on the body represent the randomness of fur, speckles, and debris-coated surfaces as seen in nature? Are the petals even arranged randomly, or is there a different method/purpose to their arrangement?

The basic geometric forms, continuous and mostly evenly applied lines, minimal sculpting of anatomical features, frontal symmetry, open composition of the paint details, and the relatively few and easy-to-count number of petals, x's, and paint details all lend to a feeling of simplicity. However, this simplicity is not due to the lack of handicraft skills or observation skills.

Viewing all the features together, there is evidence of thought processes taking place, translating and abstracting what is seen to simplified lines and forms. Observational skills are demonstrated in that the figurine mimics features of sheep/bulls in nature; the figurine has frontal symmetry, equally sized legs, and a head with 2 eyes and a nose. Animal body part to body part proportions roughly match those seen in nature, making the figurine identifiably a sheep/bull. By using concentric circles for the eyes, the artist(s) understand that the eye is comprised of more than 1 part. There is also some understanding of anatomy with the 3 bands of dark brown paint across each leg, representing the joints and multiple parts of the legs. In lieu of sculpting musculature, the artist(s) chooses to use line to identify different anatomical and non-anatomical features, to vary line thickness to show varying sizes of details, to abstract the eyes into 2 mounds, and to abstract the horns into simpler forms. Breaking away from nature, the figurine uses continuous, even lines, and makes the sculpture seem like it was created in one piece, a stylistic choice that evokes coherence and requires some handicraft skills. Perhaps the simplicity of the figure is in part due to the limitations of terracotta pottery at the time, however, by choosing not to carve out more detailed musculature, the artist(s) is also adapting his style to the available medium.

While the abstract naturalism of the figurine reveals the complex thought processes and coherent stylistic choices of the artist(s), unlike its contemporaries, the figurine has no clear purpose as a cooking/storage vessel. However, choosing to sculpt such an animal figurine suggests that this animal had some presence in hellenic food/society/religion/decoration.

