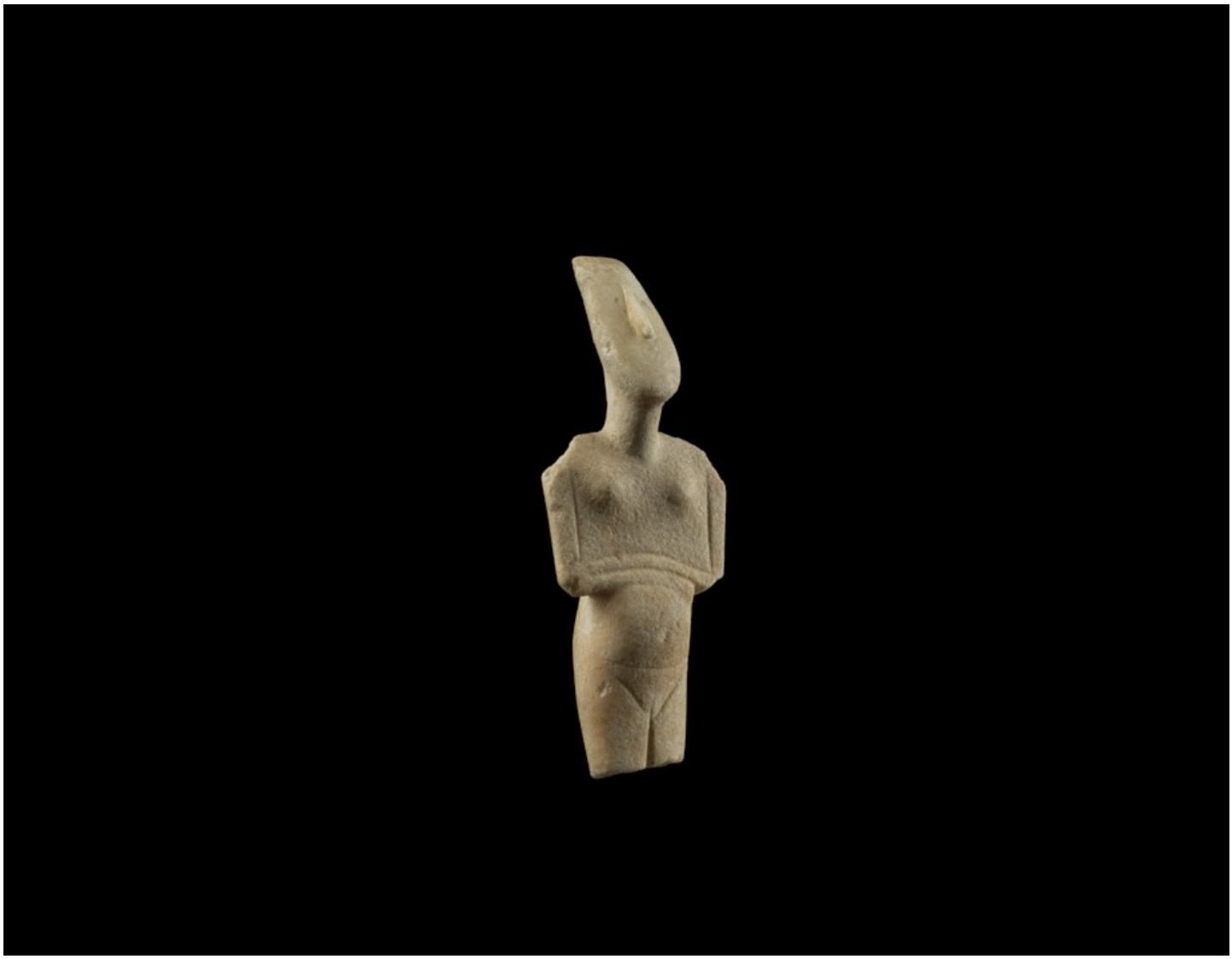
CROSS-CULTURAL CONNECTIONS: HUMANITY IN ABSTRACTED FORM

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Throughout history, the most consistent subject in every culture's artistic production has been themselves – that is, the representation of the human body, in one way or another. Today, this self-obsession is facilitated through easy access to cameras, social media, and mirrors; but it used to take a very different form. As early as seven thousand years ago, ancient humans were depicting themselves through sculptures in stone, wood, and bronze. Many societies portrayed the human form in abstracted fashion – a decision that has been previously misinterpreted as evidence of 'primitive' capabilities or understanding, but which, in fact, represents a conscious interpretation of how to capture the essence of humanity's visage.

Cycladic idols

In the sculptures of the Neolithic Cycladic period, the human body is rendered in the simplest of outlines. The majority of Cycladic idols are depicted in standing pose, with legs together and arms by their sides. The limbs are separated from the body with incised lines, sometimes with additional details of an incised line for a spine, or a triangular outline of the pubic region. The heads sit atop slender necks, generally with only a triangular nose sculpted (although research has shown the other facial features were often painted on). The meaning and use of these figures remains uncertain, and is likely to have changed over the five centuries in which they were produced.

Although some scholars have suggested the idols were linked to fertility and a 'Great Mother' goddess – certain figures have

modelled breasts and even a rounded stomach, suggesting pregnancy (image reference above) – many Cycladic sculptures present an androgyny, or a clear masculinity, that defies this. Other scholars have theorised that the idols may have been produced for funerary or apotropaic purposes.



Cycladic Idol. 2500-2000 B.C., Greece. Image: Courtesy David Aaron

Fertility Figures

The presence of fertility figurines is, however, better attested in other cultures in antiquity. For instance, in the Amlash culture of Iran, female figures with exaggerated hips and buttocks clearly place great emphasis on the reproductive capabilities of the female body (for a detailed discussion of Amlash art, please see our earlier journal post). So too, does a conjoined pair of standing female idols from neolithic Turkey (circa 7000 B.C.) place a great emphasis on the fecundity and sensuality of the women's bodies. Such idols are referred to as 'Venus figurines', falling into the same category as the famous Venus of Willendorf.

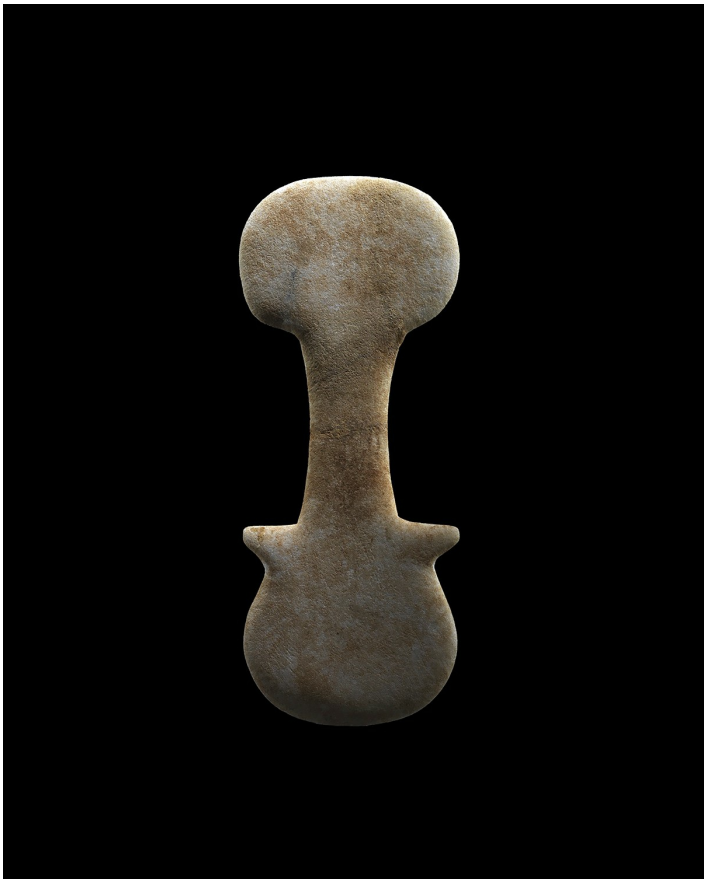


Female Idol, Syro-Hittite, 2000-1500 B.C. Image courtesy David Aaron

Anatolian Idols

In other ancient civilisations, all detail is dispensed with, creating highly refined and simplified, almost symbolic, figures. In third-millennium-B.C. Anatolia, anthropomorphic idols were crafted with varying degrees of resemblance to the human body. Greater “realism” is suggested in the Kilia group of idols, also known as ‘Stargazers’. With a rhomboidal body, Kilia idols typically feature articulated limbs and a distinct head with softly suggested facial features, akin to the Cycladic idols above.

At the other end of the abstract scale exists the Kusura Type, also referred to as ‘violin idols’ due to their resemblance to the string instrument. These near two-dimensional figures feature ovoid forms at either end (the ‘head’ and ‘body’), with two triangular projections or ‘arms’ on either side of a slender ‘neck’.



Large Anatolian Idol, Kusura Type, 2700-2100 B.C., Anatolia. Image: Courtesy David Aaron

Although each of these figures were crafted by disparate cultures at different times and geographical locations, there is a clear thread of commonality stretching between them. From the marble works of a group of small Greek islands, to the terracotta sculptures of inland Iran, to the highly stylised creations of ancient Anatolia, abstract and abstracted idols represent humanity's quest to capture its own image.

In their most reduced state, these idols still retain the essence of the body: a head, limbs, and torso. Even when representations are removed from naturalism, our modern eyes can easily recognise these idols as the image of our ancient counterparts. Whatever the specific purposes for which these figures were created, they all represent a common drive to record the human form in art. The enduring legacy produced by these idols continues to inspire artists to this day, and remains one of the few extant pieces of evidence that allows us to engage with ancient civilisations.



Pre-Dynastic Female Idol. Naqada II, Pre-Dynastic period, c.3600-3300 B.C., Egypt. Image: Courtesy David Aaron