

BOOK REVIEW

The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Figurines. Edited by TIMOTHY INSOLL. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xxv + 931. Hardcover, \$175. ISBN 978-0-199-67561-6.

The Oxford Handbook series continues to grow and, every year, Oxford University Press publishes additional volumes in a variety of disciplines. In addition to their many handbooks on various aspects of classical antiquity, the Oxford Handbook series also has several handbooks examining different aspects of prehistoric life. These include handbooks focusing on general topics, like the archaeology and anthropology of hunter-gatherers. The Oxford Handbook series also has volumes that study specific media of Prehistoric era, like rock art, and, in 2017, *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Figurines* (OHPF).

Like other handbooks, OHPF compiles essays from forty-six leading scholars in the discipline of prehistoric art to give the reader a comprehensive understanding of the figurines of this era. Edited by Timothy Insoll, OHPF is over nine hundred pages long and has thirty-eight chapters. The book covers a large chronological period, from the Middle Paleolithic through the second millennium BCE. Arranged geographically, OHPF covers all the continents except for Antarctica. OHPF has a contextual and interdisciplinary approach, attempting to place these figurines into their larger social and historical contexts, and thus the authors examine these artworks from a variety of angles, from their function and subject matter to their chronology and meaning.

OHPF is divided into six parts and is predominantly arranged by geography: 1.) Introduction; 2.) Africa; 3.) The Ameri-

cas; 4.) Asia; 5.) Australasia and the Pacific; and 6) Europe. Part 1 is different from the other five sections in that it contains three thematic chapters: one on the various approaches to the study of figurines; another on prehistoric figurines as related to human bodies; and a third on the different approaches to the interpretation of prehistoric figurines. Each of the chapters within Parts 2–6 focuses on one area of that region. For example, Part 4 has chapters on prehistoric figurines in Anatolia, the Indus civilization, and Iran (among a few others). Within this geographical framework, individual works are examined. For example, in Chapter 4, Alice Stevenson examines Predynastic Egyptian figurines, focusing on its formal aspects and their probable function in funerary rites. In Chapter 18, George F. Lau reexamines figurines from the Andes of South America and how these works were special and utilized in various social rituals.

The most important strength of OHPF is how comprehensive it is and, while it is not the first book to focus prehistoric figurines, it is the first to attempt to examine prehistoric figurines from all over the world. For example, Douglass W. Bailey's *Prehistoric Figurines: Representations of Corporeality in the Neolithic* (Routledge 2005) focuses on prehistoric figurines but within the confines of Neolithic Europe. Another book, Richard G. Lesure's *Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art* (Cambridge 2001) examines figurines from all over the world but concentrates only on the difficulties of interpreting these works. Therefore, OHPF is the first book of its kind, inclusive and comprehensive.

Furthermore, the methodology of OHPF is on par with current research trends in art history and archaeology. It is comparative, examining figurines from all parts of the globe to see what similarities and differences they might have. In addition, because the contributors of OHPF each have their own focus, the resulting book is inherently interdisciplinary and attempts to place these figurines within their cultural and historical contexts.

Another strength of OHPF is that it is easy to incorporate additional chapters by adding new research to the online ver-

sion of the book. In this way, new content can easily be added to the OHPF, ensuring that it remains current with research on prehistoric figurines.

It is difficult to nitpick the Oxford Handbook series because the volumes are written by experts and the research is comprehensive and exhaustive, but there are a few practical concerns. First, as with any other Oxford Handbook, OHPF is expensive: the hardcover costs \$175. However, one does not have to buy the entire book, but instead can purchase PDFs of individual chapters on the Oxford Handbook Series website.

The second criticism is the lack of color photographs, which is not unique to OHPF as the whole series of Oxford Handbooks has black and white photographs. However, in OHPF the black and white photographs are not as distracting because OHPF includes many drawings and reconstructions that do not need to be in color.

Finally, there is only one chapter for Part 5 (Australasia and the Pacific), whereas other geographical regions get several chapters. This single chapter focuses on the wooden figurines of Easter Island. While this seems unbalanced, one can presume that the lack of chapters in Part 5 is most likely due to the lack of remains of prehistoric figurines in this region of the globe.

In sum, OHPF is an invaluable resource for scholars of prehistoric art because of its comprehensive examination of one of the most ubiquitous finds of that era: the figurine. The authors explore a breadth of geographic regions and types of figurines, placing each its historical context in order to learn more about that mysterious era.

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