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Aegean Art

If we sail from the Nile Delta northwestward across the Mediterranean, our first glimpse of Europe will be the eastern tip of Crete. Beyond it, we find a scattered group of small islands, the Cyclades, and, a little farther on, the mainland of Greece, facing the coast of Asia Minor across the Aegean Sea. To archaeologists, "Aegean" is not merely a geographical term. They have adopted it to designate the civilizations that flourished in this area during the third and second millennia B.C.E., before the development of Greek civilization proper. There are three of these, closely interrelated yet distinct from each other: that of Crete, called Minoan after the legendary Cretan King Minos; that of the small islands north of Crete (Cycladic); and that of the Greek mainland (Helladic), which includes Mycenaean civilization. Each of them has in turn been divided into three phases, Early, Middle, and Late, which correspond, very roughly, to the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms in Egypt. The most important remains, and the greatest artistic achievements, date from the latter part of the Middle phase and from the Late phase.

Aegean civilization was long known only from Homer's account of the Trojan War in the *Iliad* and from Greek legends centering on Crete. The earliest excavations (by Heinrich Schliemann during the 1870s in Asia Minor and Greece and by Sir Arthur Evans in Crete shortly before 1900) were undertaken to test the factual core of these tales. Since then, a great amount of fascinating material has been brought to light—far more than the literary sources would lead us to expect. But even now our knowledge of Aegean civilization is very much more limited than our knowledge of Egypt or the ancient Near East. Unfortunately, our reading of the archaeological evidence has so far received limited aid from the written records of the Aegeans.

MINOAN SCRIPT AND LINEAR B. In Crete a system of writing was developed about 2000 B.C.E. A late form of this Minoan script, called Linear B, which was in use about six centuries later both in Crete and on the Greek mainland, was deciphered in the early 1950s. The language of Linear B is Greek, yet this apparently was not the language for which Minoan script was used before the fifteenth century B.C.E., so that being able to read Linear B does not help us to understand the great mass of earlier Minoan inscriptions. Moreover, the Linear B texts are largely palace inventories and administrative records, although they do reveal something about the history, religion, and political organization of the people who composed them. We thus lack a great deal of the background knowledge necessary for an understanding of Aegean art. Its forms, although linked both to Egypt and the Near East on the one hand and to later Greek art on the other, are no mere transition between these two worlds. They have a haunting beauty of their own that belongs to neither. Among the many strange qualities of Aegean art, and perhaps the most puzzling, is its air of freshness and spontaneity, which makes us forget how little we know of its meaning.

CYCLADIC ART

The people who inhabited the Cycladic Islands between about 2600 and 1100 B.C.E. buried their dead with marble idols of a peculiarly impressive kind. Almost all of them represent a standing nude female figure with arms folded across the chest (fig. 119), presumably the mother and fertility goddess known to us from Asia Minor and the ancient Near East, whose ancestry reaches far back to the Old Stone Age (see figs. 35, 45, and 46). They also share a distinctive shape, which at first glance recalls the angular, abstract qualities of Paleolithic and Neolithic sculpture: the flat, wedge shape of the body, the strong, columnar neck, the tilted, oval shield of the face, and the long, ridge-like nose. (Other features were painted in.) Within this narrowly defined and stable type, however, the Cycladic idols show wide variations in scale (from a few inches to lifesize) as well as form.

The best of them, such as that in figure 119, have a disciplined refinement utterly beyond the range of Paleolithic art. The longer we study this piece, the more we come to realize that its qualities can only be defined as "elegance" and "sophistication," however incongruous such terms may seem in this context. What an extraordinary feeling for the



119. Idol from Amorgos. 2500-1100 B.C.E. Marble, height 30". The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

organic structure of the body there is in the delicate curves of the outline, in the hints of convexity marking the knees and abdomen! Even if we discount its deceptively modern look, the figure seems a bold departure from anything we have seen before. There is no dearth of earlier fertility idols, but almost all of them betray their descent from the bulbous, heavy-bodied "Venus" figurines of the Old Stone Age [such as the Goddess of Willendorf]. In fact, the earliest Cycladic idols, too, were of that type. We do not know what made the Cycladic sculptors suppress the traditional fertility aspects of their female idols until they arrived at the lithe, "girlish" ideal of figure 119. Was there perhaps a radical change in the meaning or the ritual purposes of these statues?

We cannot even venture a guess to explain the mystery. Suffice it to say that the Cycladic sculptors of the second millennium B.C.E. produced the oldest lifesize figures of the female nude we know, and that for many hundreds of years they were the only ones to do so. In Greek art, we find very few nude female statues until the middle of the fourth century B.C.E., when Praxiteles and others began to create cult images of the nude Aphrodite (see fig. 207). It can hardly be coincidence that the most famous of these Venuses were made for sanctuaries on the Aegean Islands or the coast of Asia Minor, the region where the Cycladic idols had flourished.

MINOAN ART

Minoan civilization is by far the richest, as well as the strangest, of the Aegean world. What sets it apart, not only from Egypt and the Near East but also from the Classical civilization of Greece, is a lack of continuity that appears to have been caused by archaeological accidents, as well as historical forces. The different phases appear and disappear so abruptly that their fate must have been determined by sudden violent changes affecting the entire island. Yet the character of Minoan art, which is gay, even playful, and full of rhythmic motion, conveys no hint of such threats.

Architecture

The first of these unexpected shifts occurred about 2000 B.C.E. Until that time, during the thousand years of the Early Minoan era, the Cretans had not advanced much beyond the Neolithic level of village life, even though they seem to have engaged in some overseas trade that brought them contact with Egypt. Then they created not only their own system of writing but an urban civilization as well, centering on several great palaces. At least three of them, at Knossos, Phaistos, and Mallia, were built in short order. Little is left today of this sudden spurt of large-scale building activity. The three early palaces were all destroyed at the same time, about 1700 B.C.E., demolished, it seems, by a catastrophic earthquake. After a short interval, new and even larger structures appeared on the same sites, only to suffer destruction, in their turn, by another earthquake about 1450 B.C.E. These were abandoned, save for the palace at Knossos, which was occupied by the Mycenaeans, who took over the island almost immediately.

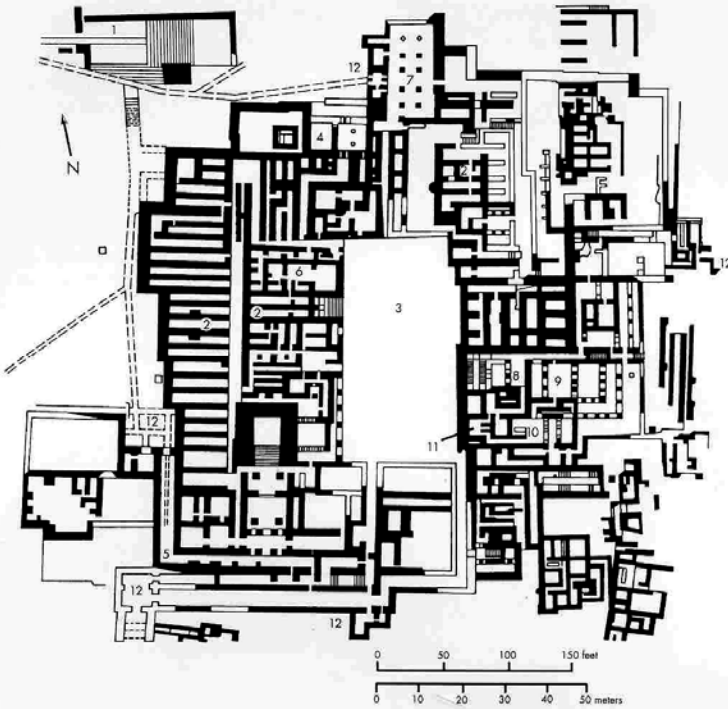
Minoan civilization, therefore, has a complicated chronology. Archaeologists divide the period that concerns us into the Old Palace period, comprising Middle Minoan I and Middle Minoan II, which together lasted from 2000 B.C.E. until about 1700 B.C.E. The New Palace period includes Middle Minoan III (1700-1670 B.C.E.), Late Minoan IA (1670-1620 B.C.E.), and Late Minoan IB (1620-1490/1450 B.C.E.). The eruption of the volcano on the island of Thera (Santorini) occurred during the New Palace period, at the end of Late Minoan IA. It did little damage to Crete, however, and ushered in the Late Minoan IB period, which marked the peak of Minoan civilization. For our purposes, we need only remember that the Old Palace period coincides roughly with the Middle Kingdom and the New Palace period with the onset of the New Kingdom in Egypt.

The "new" palaces are our main source of information on Minoan architecture. The one at Knossos, called the Palace of Minos, was the most ambitious, covering a large territory and composed of so many rooms that it survived in Greek legend as the labyrinth of the Minotaur (see fig. 120). It has been carefully excavated and partly restored. We cannot recapture the appearance of the building as a whole, but we can assume that the exterior probably did not look impressive compared with Assyrian or Persian palaces (see figs. 102 and 112). There was no striving for unified, monumental effect. The individual units are generally rather small and the ceilings low (figs. 121 and 122), so that even those parts of the structure that were several stories high could not have seemed very tall.

Nevertheless, the numerous porticoes, staircases, and air shafts must have given the palace a pleasantly open, airy quality. Some of the interiors, with their richly decorated walls, retain their atmosphere of intimate elegance to this day. The masonry construction of Minoan palaces is excellent throughout, but the columns were always of wood. Although none has survived (those in fig. 121 are reconstructions), their characteristic form (the smooth shaft tapering downward and topped by a wide, cushion-shaped capital) is known from representations in painting and sculpture. About the origins of

this type of column, which in some contexts could also serve as a religious symbol, or about its possible links with Egyptian architecture, we can say nothing at all. Who were the rulers that built these palaces? We do not know their names or deeds, except for the legendary Minos, but the archaeological evidence permits a few conjectures. They were not warrior princes, since no fortifications have been found anywhere in Minoan Crete, and military subjects are almost unknown in Minoan art. Nor is there any hint that they were sacred kings on the Egyptian or Mesopotamian model, although they may well have presided at religious festivals. The palaces certainly functioned as centers of religious life. However, the only parts that can be identified as places of worship are small chapels, suggesting that religious ceremonies took place out of doors, as well as at outlying shrines.

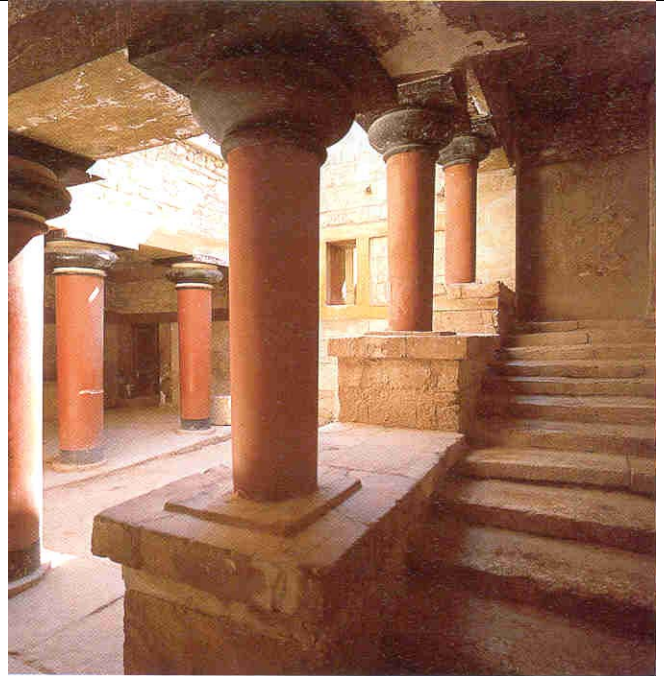
On the other hand, the many storerooms, workshops, and "offices" at Knossos indicate that the palace was not only a royal residence but a great center of administrative and commercial activity. Shipping and trade formed an important part of Minoan economic life, to judge from elaborate harbor installations and from Cretan export articles found in Egypt and elsewhere. Perhaps, then, the king should be viewed as the head of a merchant aristocracy. Just how much power he wielded and how far it extended are still open to debate.



120. Plan of the Palace of Minos, Knossos, Crete. The palace is organized in two wings, to east and west of a central court, and is on several levels: 1) stairway and theater area; 2) storerooms; 3) central court; 4) antechamber; 5) corridor of the procession; 6) throne room; 7) north pillar hall; 8) hall of the colonnade; 9) hall of the double axes; 10) queen's megaron; 11) queen's bath; 12) entrances and atriums



122 The Queen's Megaron, Palace of Minos, Knossos, Crete, c. 1500 BCE

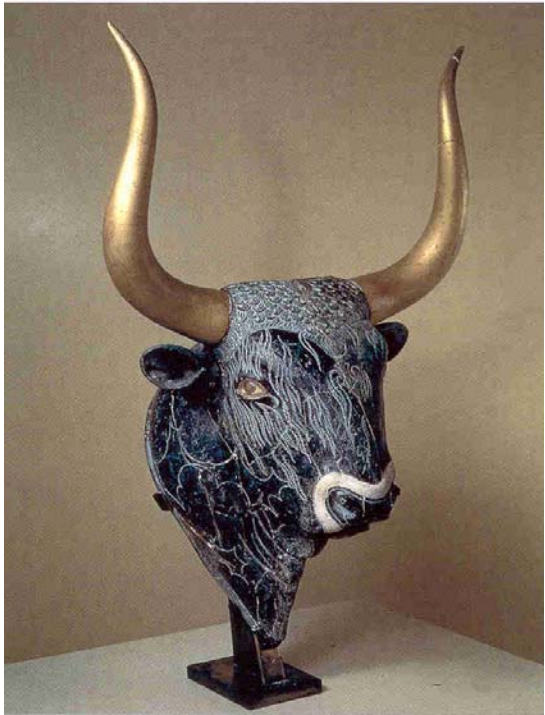


121 Staircase, east wing, Palace of Minos, Knossos, Crete, c. 1500 BCE

Sculpture

The religious life of Minoan Crete is even harder to define than the political or social order. It centered on certain sacred places, such as caves or groves; and its chief deity (or deities?) was female, akin to the mother and fertility goddesses we have encountered before. Since the Minoans had no temples, we are not surprised to find that they lacked large cult statues as well, but even on a small scale, religious subjects in Minoan art are few in number and of uncertain significance. Two statuettes of about 1600 B.C.E. from Knossos must represent the goddess in one of her several identities. One of them (fig. 123) shows her with three long snakes wound around her arms, body, and headdress. The meaning is clear: snakes are associated with earth deities and male fertility in many ancient religions, just as the bared breasts of our statuette suggest female fertility. The style of the statuette hints at a possible foreign source: the emphatically conical quality of the figure and the large eyes and heavy, arched eyebrows suggest a kinship—remote and indirect, perhaps through Asia Minor—with Mesopotamian art (compare fig. 99).

123. Snake Goddess, c. 1600 B.C.E. Faience, height 115/8" (29.5 cm). Museum, Heraklion, Crete.



124. Rhyton in the shape of a bull's head, from Knossos. c. 1500-1450 B.C.E. Serpentine, crystal, shell inlay (horns restored), height 8 1/8". Museum, Heraklion, Crete

Minoan civilization also featured a cult centering on bulls (see below). One of them is shown tamed on a splendid rhyton (drinking horn; fig. 124) carved from serpentine stone, with incised lines to indicate its shaggy fur, painted crystal eyes, and a shell-inlay muzzle, which create an astonishingly lifelike impression, despite its small size. (The horns are restored.) Not since the offering stand from Ur (fig. 93) have we seen such a magnificent beast in the round. Can it be that the Minoans learned how to carve from the artistic descendants of Mesopotamians more than a thousand years earlier?

Paintings, Pottery, and Reliefs

After the catastrophe that had wiped out the earlier palaces, there was what seems to our eyes an explosive increase in wealth and a remarkable outpouring of creative energy that produced most of what we have in Minoan architecture, sculpture, and painting. The most surprising aspect of this sudden efflorescence, however, is its great achievement in painting. Unfortunately, the murals that covered the walls of the new palaces have survived mainly in fragments, so that we rarely have a complete composition, let alone the design of an entire wall.

Amazingly enough, the settlement at Akrotiri on the island of Thera has been extensively excavated and a large number of frescoes recovered—the earliest Minoan examples we have. They belong to the Late Minoan IA period (that is, 1670-1620 B.C.E.), although they vary considerably in subject and style. Of these, the most remarkable is the scene of a young woman offering crocuses (the source of saffron) to a snake goddess, nicknamed "The Mistress of the Animals," who is seated on an altar with an oil jar (fig. 125). What an astonishing achievement it is, despite its fragmentary condition and the artist's difficulty with anatomy. (Note the awkward rendering of the maiden's left arm, for example.) The contrast between the girlish charm of the crocus bearer and the awesomeness of the goddess could hardly be more telling. We would recognize the latter's special status even without the snake in her hair—which makes her a clear forerunner of the Medusa—or the griffin behind her.



125. (above) Crocus Girl (left) and "The Mistress of the Animals" (right fragments from Akrotiri, Thera (Santorini). c. 1670-1620 B.C. National Archaeological Museum

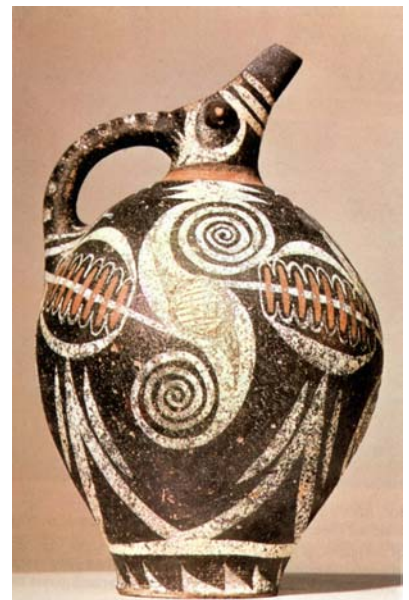
126. Landscape. Fresco from Akrotiri, Thera. c.1600-1500 B.C. National Archaeological Museum, Athens



landscapes we know of. Not even the most adventurous Egyptian artist of the Middle Kingdom would have dared to devote an entire composition to the out-of-doors. Our example (fig. 126) is a surprisingly successful evocation of the dunes along the coast of Thera, but our artist has invested the scene with a lively fantasy and sense of beauty that bespeak the same sense of wonderment we found in the confrontation between mortal and divinity.

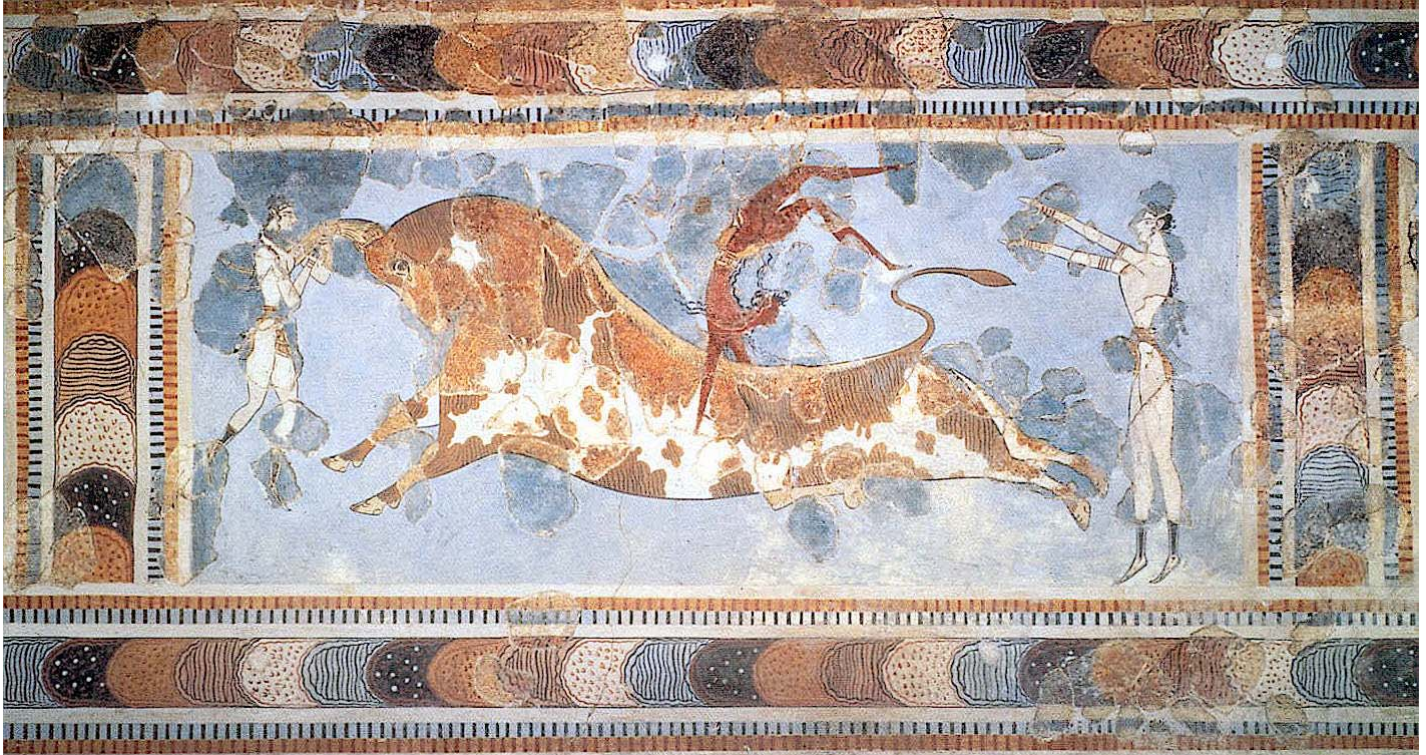
Marine life (as seen in the fish and dolphin fresco in fig. 122) was a favorite subject of Minoan painting after 1600 B.C.E., and the marine feeling pervades everything else as well. Instead of permanence and stability, we find a passion for rhythmic, undulating movement, and the forms themselves have an oddly weightless quality. They seem to float, or sway, in a world without gravity, as if the scene took place under water, even though a great many of them show animals and birds among luxuriant vegetation, as well as creatures of the sea. We sense this even in "The Toreador Fresco," the most dynamic Minoan mural recovered so far (fig. 127). (The darker patches are the original fragments on which the restoration is based.) The conventional title should not mislead us. What we see here is not a bullfight but a ritual game in which the performers vault over the back of the animal. Two of the slim-waisted athletes are girls, differentiated (as in Egyptian art) mainly

The flat forms, silhouetted against the landscape, recall Egyptian painting, and the acute observation of plants also suggests Egyptian art. If Minoan wall painting owes its origin to Egyptian influence, it betrays an attitude of mind very different from that of the Nile Valley. To the Minoans, nature was an enchanted realm that provided the focus of their attention from the very beginning, whereas Egyptian painters could explore it only by loosening the rules that governed them. The frescoes at Akrotiri include the first pure



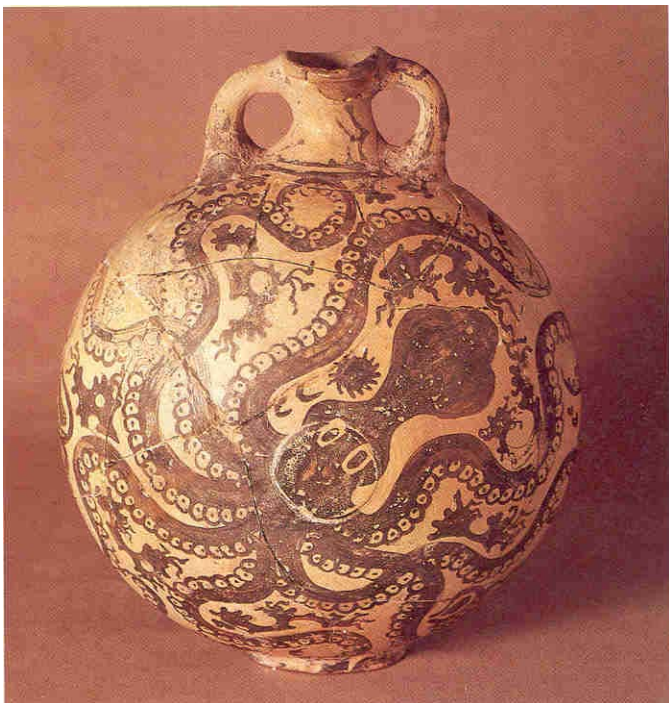
128. Beaked jug (Kamares style), from Phaistos, c. 1800 BCE, Height 10 5/8" Museum, Heraklion, Crete

by their lighter skin color. That the bull was a sacred animal and that bull-vaulting played an important role in Minoan religious life are beyond doubt. Scenes such as this still echo in the Greek legend of the youths and maidens sacrificed to the minotaur, half-animal, half-human. The three figures in all likelihood show successive phases of the same action. But if we try to "read" the fresco as a description of what actually went on during these performances, we find it strangely ambiguous. This does not mean that the Minoan artist was deficient. It would be absurd to find fault for failing to accomplish what was never intended in the first place. Fluid, effortless ease of movement was clearly more important than factual precision or dramatic power. The painting, as it were, idealizes the ritual by stressing its harmonious, playful aspect to the point that the participants behave like dolphins gamboling in the sea.



127. "The Toreador Fresco," c. 1500 BCE. Height including upper border c. 24 ½ ". Museum, Heraklion, Crete

129. "Octopus Vase," from Palaikastro, Crete. c. 1500 B.C.E. Height 11" (28 cm). Museum, Heraklion, Crete



The floating world of Minoan wall painting was an imaginative creation so rich and original that its influence can be felt throughout Minoan art during the era of the new palaces. At the time of the earlier palaces, between 2000 and 1700 B.C.E., Crete had developed a type of pottery (known as Kamares ware after the center where it was discovered) that was famous for its technical perfection and its dynamic, swirling ornament, consisting of organic abstractions filled with life (fig. 128). This in no way prepares us for the new repertory of designs drawn from plant and animal life. Some vessels are covered entirely with fish, shells, and octopuses, as if the ocean itself had been caught within them (fig. 129).

Monumental sculpture, had there been any, might have retained its independence, but the small-scale works to which the Minoan sculptor was confined are often closely akin to the style

of the murals. The splendidly observed mountain goat carved on a stone vase (fig. 130) leaps in the same "flying" movement as the bull of "The Toreador Fresco." (These mountain goats, too, were sacred animals.) Even more vivid is the relief on the so-called Harvester Vase (fig. 131; the lower part is lost): a procession of slim, muscular men, nude to the waist, carrying long-handled implements that look like a combination of scythe and rake. A harvest festival? Quite probably, although here again the lively rhythm of the composition takes precedence over descriptive clarity. Our view of the scene includes three singers led by a fourth who is swinging a sistrum (a rattle of Egyptian origin). They are bellowing with all their might, especially the "choirmaster," whose chest is so distended that the ribs press through the skin. What makes the entire relief so remarkable—in fact, unique—is its emphasis on physical strain, its energetic, raucous gaiety, which combines sharp observation with a consciously humorous intent. How many works of this sort, we wonder, did Minoan art produce? Only once have we met anything at all like it: in the relief of workmen carrying a beam (see fig. 84), carved almost two centuries later under the impact of the Akhenaten style. Is it possible that pieces similar to the Harvester Vase stimulated Egyptian artists during that brief but important period?



130. Leaping Mountain Goat, on a vase from the palace at Kato Zakro. c. 1500 B.C. Limestone, originally covered with gold foil, length of goat c. 410 (10.3 cm).



131. Harvester Vase, from Hagia Triada. c. 1550-1500 B.C.E. Steatite, width 4 ½ ". Museum, Heraklion, Crete

MYCENAEAN ART

Along the southeastern shores of the Greek mainland there were, during Late Helladic times (c. 1400-1100 B.C.E.), a number of settlements that corresponded in many ways to those of Minoan Crete. They, too, were grouped around palaces. Their inhabitants have come to be called Mycenaeans, after Mycenae, the most important of these settlements. Since the works of art unearthed there by excavation often showed a strikingly Minoan character, the Mycenaeans were at first regarded as having come from Crete, but it is now agreed that they were the descendants of the earliest Greek tribes, who had entered the country soon after 2000 B.C.E.

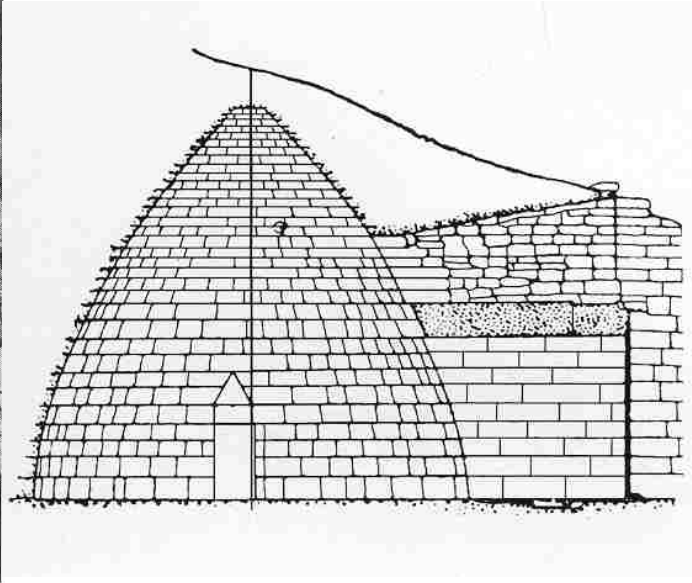
Tombs and Their Contents

For some 400 years, these people had led an inconspicuous pastoral existence in their new homeland. Their modest tombs have yielded only simple pottery and a few bronze weapons. Toward 1600 B.C.E., however, they suddenly began to bury their dead in deep shaft graves and, a little later, in conical stone chambers, known as beehive tombs. This development reached its height toward 1300 B.C.E. in impressive structures such as the one shown in figures 132 and 133, built of concentric layers of precisely cut stone blocks. Its discoverer thought it far too ambitious for a tomb and gave it the misleading name Treasury of Atreus. Burial places as elaborate as this can be matched only in Egypt during the same period.

The Treasury of Atreus had been robbed of its contents long ago, but other Mycenaean tombs were found intact, and what they yielded up caused even greater surprise: alongside the royal dead were placed masks of gold or silver, presumably to cover their faces. If so, these masks were similar in purpose (if not in style) to the masks found in pharaonic tombs of the Middle and New Kingdoms (compare fig. 85). There was considerable personal equipment—drinking vessels, jewelry, weapons—much of it gold and exquisite in workmanship. Some of these pieces, such as the magnificent gold vessel in the shape of a lion's head (fig. 134), show a boldly expressive style of smooth planes bounded by sharp ridges which suggests contact with the Near East, while others are so Minoan in flavor that they might be imports from Crete.



132. (left) Interior, Treasury of Atreus, Mycenae, Greece. c. 1300-1250 B.C.E.



133. Section, Treasury of Atreus

Of the latter kind are the two famous gold cups from a Mycenaean tomb at Vaphio (figs. 135 and 136). They must have been made about 1500 B.C.E., a few decades after the lion vessel, but where, for whom, and by whom? Here the problem "Minoan or Mycenaean?" becomes acute. The dispute is not as idle as it may seem, for it tests our ability to differentiate between the two neighboring cultures. It also forces us to consider every aspect of the cups. Do we find anything in their style or content that is un-Minoan? Our first impulse, surely, is to note the similarity of the human figures to those on the Harvester Vase) and the similarity of the bulls to the animal in "The Toreador Fresco." To be sure, the men on the Vaphio Cups are not engaged in the Cretan bull-vaulting game but in the far more mundane business of catching the animals on the range, but this subject also occurs in Minoan art. On the other hand, we cannot overlook the fact that the design on the cups does not quite match the continuous rhythmic movement of Minoan compositions and that the animals, for all their physical power, have the look of cattle rather than of sacred animals. They nevertheless differ only in degree, not kind, from the wonderfully sturdy leaping goat in figure 130. It would seem, on balance, that the cups are by a Minoan artist working for Mycenaean patrons.



134. Rhyton in the shape of a lion's head, from a shaft grave at Mycenae. c. 1550 B.C.E. Gold, height 8" (20.3 cm). National Archaeological Museum, Athens

MYCENAE, CRETE, AND EGYPT. In the sixteenth century B.C.E., Mycenae thus presents a strange picture. What appears to be an Egyptian influence on burial customs is combined with a strong artistic influence from Crete and with an extraordinary material wealth as expressed in the lavish use of gold.

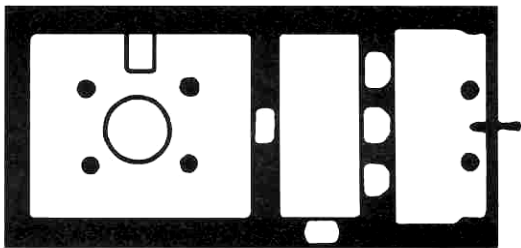


What we need is a triangular explanation that involves the Mycenaeans with Crete as well as Egypt about a century before the destruction of the new palaces. Such a theory—fascinating and imaginative, if hard to confirm in detail—runs about as follows: between 1700 and 1580 B.C.E., the Egyptians were trying to rid themselves of the Hyksos, who had seized the Nile Delta (see page 70). For this they gained the aid of warriors from Mycenae, who returned home laden with gold (of which Egypt alone had an ample supply) and deeply impressed with Egyptian funerary customs. The Minoans, not military but famous as sailors, ferried the Mycenaeans back and forth, so that they, too, had anew and closer contact with Egypt. This may help to account for their sudden prosperity toward 1600 B.C.E. as well as for the rapid development of naturalistic wall painting at that time. In fact, such a theory is supported by the recent discovery of a large group of Minoan frescoes in Egypt. The close relations between Crete and Mycenae, once established, were to last a long time.

Architecture

The great monuments of Mycenaean architecture were all built between 1400, when Linear B script began to appear, and 1200 B.C.E. Apart from such details as the shape of the columns or decorative motifs of various sorts, Mycenaean architecture owes little to the Minoan tradition. The palaces on the mainland were hilltop fortresses surrounded by defensive walls of huge stone blocks, a type of construction quite unknown in Crete but similar to the Hittite fortifications at Bogazkoy (see fig. 101).

The Lion Gate at Mycenae (fig. 137) is the most impressive remnant of these massive ramparts, which inspired such awe in the Greeks of later times that they were regarded as the work of the Cyclopes, a mythical race of one-eyed giants. Even the Treasury of Atreus, although built of smaller and more precisely shaped blocks, has a Cyclopean lintel (see fig. 132).



138. Plan of a Mycenaean megaron



137. The Lion Gate, Mycenae, Greece. 1250 BCE.

Another aspect of the Lion Gate foreign to the Minoan tradition is the great stone relief over the doorway. The two lions flanking a symbolic Minoan column have the same grim, heraldic majesty as the golden lion's head we encountered in figure 134. Their function as guardians of the gate, their tense, muscular bodies, and their symmetrical design again suggest an influence from the ancient Near East. We may at this point recall the Trojan War, which brought the Mycenaeans to Asia Minor soon after 1200 B.C.E. It seems likely, however, that they began to sally eastward across the Aegean, for trade or war, much earlier than that.

The center of the palace, at Mycenae and other mainland sites, was the royal audience hall, called the megaron. Only its plan is known for certain: a large rectangular room with a round hearth in the middle and four columns to support the roof beams (fig. 138). It was entered through a deep porch with two columns and an antechamber. This design is in essence no more than an enlarged version of the simple houses of earlier generations, for its ancestry can be traced back to Middle Helladic times. There may have been a rich decorative scheme of wall paintings and ornamental carvings to stress its dignity as the king's abode.

Sculpture

As in Crete, Mycenaean temple architecture was confined to modest structures with cult statues set apart from the palaces, which also included small shrines. A wide variety of gods were worshiped in them, although their exact identity is sometimes a matter of dispute. Mycenaean religion incorporated not only Minoan elements but also influences from Asia Minor, as well as deities of Greek origin inherited from their own forebears, including a number of the later Olympian gods such as Poseidon. But gods have an odd way of merging or exchanging their identities, so that the religious images in Mycenaean art are hard to interpret.

What, for instance, are we to make of the exquisite little ivory group (fig. 139) unearthed at Mycenae in 1939? The style of the piece—its richly curved shapes and easy, flexible body movements—still echoes Minoan art, though the carving has an unmistakably Near Eastern air (compare figs. 91 and 100).

The subject, however, is strange indeed. Two kneeling women, closely united, tend a single child. But whose is he? The natural interpretation would be to regard the now headless figure as the mother, since the child clings to her arm and turns toward her; the second woman, whose left hand rests on the other's shoulder, would then be the grandmother. Such three-generation family groups are a well-known subject in Christian art, in which we often find St. Anne, the Virgin Mary, and the Infant Christ combined in similar fashion.

It is the memory of these later works that colors our view of the Mycenaean ivory. Yet we search in vain for a subject in ancient religion that fits our reading of the group. On the other hand, there is a very widespread myth about the divine child who is abandoned by his mother and reared by nymphs, goddesses, or even animals. His name varies from place to place and includes Bacchus and Jupiter. We are thus forced to conclude that our ivory in all likelihood shows a motherless child god with his nurses. The real mystery, however, lies deeper: it is the tender play of gestures, the intimate human feeling, that binds the three figures together. Nowhere in the entire range of ancient art before the Greeks do we find gods—or people, for that matter—expressing affection with such warmth and eloquence.

Something quite basically new is reflected here, a familiar view of divine beings that makes even the Minoan snake goddess (fig. 123) seem awesome and remote. Was this change of attitude, and the ability to express it in art, a Mycenaean achievement? Or did they inherit it from the Minoans? However that may be, our ivory group opens up a dimension of experience that had never been accessible to Egypt or Mesopotamia.



139. Three Deities, from Mycenae. c. 1500-1400 B.C.E. Ivory, height 3". National Archaeological Museum, Athens