Art of the Aegean Region

Cycladic  Minoan  Mycenaean
Where is the Aegean Sea?
Cycladic Art

- **Cycladic art** is the art and sculpture of the ancient Cycladic civilization, existing in the islands of the Aegean Sea from 3300 - 2000 BCE.
- Art mainly manifested itself in the form of marble idols, often used as offerings to the dead.
- Idols possessed a flat, geometric quality, giving them a striking resemblance to today's modern art.
- A majority of the statues are female, depicted nude, and with arms folded across the stomach.
- It is unknown whether these idols depict a goddess, or merely Cycladic women.
Where are the Cycladic Islands?

- The Cyclades, a group of islands in the southwestern Aegean, comprises some thirty small islands and numerous islets.
- The ancient Greeks called them *kyklades*, imagining them as a circle (*kyklos*) around the sacred island of Delos, the site of the holiest sanctuary to Apollo.
- Marble female figure,
- ca. 2600-2400 BCE
- Early Cycladic

- Metropolitan Museum of Art
- New York
• **Marble seated harp player**
• ca. 2800-2700 BCE
• Late Early Cycladic I-Early Cycladic II
• Metropolitan Museum of Art
• New York
Aegean Art Key Notes

• Two distinct cultures, Minoan and Mycenaean, developed in the Aegean region.
• Minoan art is marked by graceful ease and a delight in all forms of life.
• Mycenaean monuments reflect a protected and fortified environment.
The Island of Crete and the Minoan Civilization
The site of Minoan civilization, the island of Crete, is off the southern coast of Greece.
Map of the Prehistoric Aegean

Crete is the largest of the Aegean islands, 150 miles long and 36 miles wide, for a total of 5,400 square miles.
The Prehistoric Aegean
The Minoans

- It is impossible to talk about early Greek history without introducing the Minoans.
- The Minoans were not Greeks nor do they appear to be closely related.
- However, they helped to shape the early Greek civilization, later immortalized by Homer and other Greek poets.
- The Minoans have left a stunning visual legacy (paintings, sophisticated palaces and varied artwork) as well as large quantities of written records.
• Unfortunately, unlike the writings of the Egyptians and Babylonians which shed light on such things as social organization, religious beliefs and historical events, Minoan writings discovered so far are simply inventory records.

• An added complication is that scholars have been only been able to decipher a small portion of their written language.

• Sir Robert Evans, a British archaeologist working in Crete in the 1920’s, spent his entire life trying to decipher or break the Minoan language called Linear A and Linear B.
Linear A (top) and B (bottom) clay tablets.
• Linear B was deciphered by a 30 year old man, Michael Varshew, who at age 14 heard Evans talk about the mysterious language-symbols.

• It took him 16 years to decipher Linear B.

• He proved that the Minoan language and Linear B predated Greek by a 1000 years.

• Before he could decipher the older Linear A, Varshew died in an auto accident in 1956.
Role of Women in Crete

- Crete was a matriarchal theocracy, ruled by a queen-priest.
- The culture demonstrated a relatively high status for women.
- Women had access to ALL professions, including the manufacture of pottery, which was distributed throughout the world.
- Little is known of the Minoan religious beliefs because scholars have been unable to decipher much of the Minoan language.
- However, remains of their artwork suggest a polytheistic framework featuring various goddesses, including a mother deity.
Minoan Art

• Sir Arthur Evans, the British archaeologist, characterized the Bronze Age culture of Crete as Minoan, after the legendary King Minos.
The Legend of King Minos

- **The Labyrinth at Knossos**
- According to ancient Greek myths, the great Greek King Aegeus was forced to pay tribute to King Minos of the Minoans, whose kingdom was on the island we now call Crete.
- Every year the tribute included seven young men and seven young maidens. Underground far below King Minos' palace at the city of Knossos lay a huge maze or labyrinth built for the king by his master architect.
- Inside the maze Minos kept a monster called the Minotaur. The Minotaur was a frightening creature that was half man and half bull.
- The fourteen young people from Greece would be released into the labyrinth, where they would become hopelessly lost and eventually be eaten by the Minotaur.
- According to the legend, King Aegeus' son, Thesesus, decided to volunteer as one of the sacrificial victims, so that he could try to kill the Minotaur.
- Thesesus did kill the Minotaur, and then he followed the trail of twine he had laid down beginning at the entrance of the labyrinth to find his way out of the maze.
• From the material Evan’s excavated at Knossos, he devised a chronological order for Minoan civilization on Crete.
• His Early, Middle, and Late Minoan periods, each with three subdivisions, roughly followed the three part division of Egyptian history.
• Our knowledge of Early Minoan Crete comes primarily from burials and a number of excavated settlement sites.
• Artifacts of this period indicate that advances were made in stone working, metalworking, and pottery.
• The Minoans were gifted artists and the subject matter of their artworks seems to have been heavily influenced by aesthetic considerations. What does that mean?

• Some have suggested that they may have loved art for its own sake, which would be an enormous change in the way art was traditionally created and used in other societies at that time. How?

• But more research on that possibility is needed.
Palace at Knossos
The Old Palace Period, 1900-1700 BCE
The Old Palace Period

• Around 1900 BCE, Minoan civilization on Crete reached a peak with the establishment of centers, that concentrated political and economic power, as well as artistic activity.
• These buildings, referred to as palaces by Evans, were built at Knossos in the northern part of Crete, and at Phaistos in the south.
• These palaces are distinguished by their arrangement around a paved central court and surrounded by sophisticated masonry.
• In general, there were no defensive walls, although a network of watchtowers punctuating key roads on the island has been identified.
palace at Knossos. Aerial view. (Crete), Greece, ca. 1700–1400 BCE
Minotaur: A monster who was half man and half bull, to whom young Athenian men and women were sacrificed in the Cretan labyrinth until Theseus killed him.
Palace at Knossos

- Elaborate royal residence with 1400 rooms and 3-5 stories high.
- The palace was built in the center of the city and housed 80,000 people.
- Knossos was built on the site of two previous stone palaces, each destroyed by successive catastrophes.
- Cretans had a water system that piped water from the river to the palace and out to sea.
- To increase the water pressure, the pipes were made smaller and smaller in width as they reached the palace.
Detail of Palace
Palace at Knossos. Stairwell in the residential quarter. (Crete), Greece, ca. 1700–1400 BCE.
Extensive trade led to Minoan wealth and prosperity

- Successful and extensive trade resulted in a Minoan society which was wealthy and archaeological evidence suggests that wealth was widely shared throughout the community.
- The standard of living was high. Located within the palace complexes were sophisticated plumbing, frescoes, plaster reliefs and open courtyards.
- People had leisure time and devoted a good portion of it to sports, religion and the arts.
Workshops at the palace complex

• Many manufacturing workshops, which produced fine goods for export, were centrally located within the palace complexes.

• During this period Minoan artists developed extraordinarily sophisticated metalwork.

• They created new and elegant ceramic styles, thanks in part to the invention of the potter’s wheel.
Kamares Ware Jug
2000-1900 BCE
• **KAMARES WARE JUG**

• The term "Kamares" is from the Kamares Cave, in the mountains above Phaistos.

• Compared to Egyptian imagery, the Kamares pot is freer and more curvilinear.
PENDANT OF GOLD BEES 1700 BCE, gold

Bees are often the symbol of a strong work ethic. Aegean women had jewelry made from gold, rock crystal, amethyst and carnelian.
Second Palace Period

After a terrible earthquake in 1700 BCE destroyed Knossos, the Minoans rebuilt a new palace using the Old Palace as its core.
• In typical Minoan fashion, the rebuilt palace, consisting of: religious, residential, manufacturing and warehouse spaces was organized around a large central courtyard.
• A few steps from the central courtyard was the room Evans called the throne room.
• To the west, an impressive staircase led to the Hall of Double Axes.
- The columns that supported the palace were made of wood.
- A typically Aegean feature.
- They were made of tree trunks that were inverted so that the columns would taper at the base.
- A structural sound idea because the larger wider portion was at the top supporting the weight of the roof above.
Queen’s Megaron, Knossos
The Throne Room
The replica of the Ladies in Blue Fresco. The original adorned the large ante-chamber of the Throne Room in the East Wing of the palace.
Minoan Sculpture

• Surviving Minoan sculpture consists mainly of finely crafted religious works in wood, ivory, precious metal and stone.

• Female figurines holding snakes were made on Crete as early as 6000 BCE.

• They may have been symbolic of water, regeneration, and protection of the home.
Snake Goddess, from the palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1600 BCE. Faience, approx. 1' 1 1/2” high. Archaeological Museum, Herakleion.
• Interesting as both ritual object and work of art.
• Found in a pit in one of the palace’s storerooms.
• The women is a commanding and perhaps even frightening presence.
• There is a leopard sitting on her head, possibly a symbol of royalty.
• Dressed in typical Minoan fashion with an open bodice and flounced skirt.
• Realistic and expressive elements combine to create a lively and hypnotic feeling.
Minoan Stone Vases

- The Minoans were magnificent stone workers
- They created stone vessels for everyday use as well as stone vessels called, rhytons for ceremonial rituals.
- These pieces were all found in fragments, which suggests they were broken in some type of ritual.
Harvester Vase
Second Palace Period

• Egg shaped rhyton
• Only 4.5 inches in diameter
• May have been covered in gold leaf
• A rowdy procession of 27 men have been crowded onto its upper surface
• Piece is exceptional for the freedom of movement represented
• The figures overlap and jostle each other as they make their way around the vase
• The figures appear exuberant and joyous
• Much different from the seriously marching Egyptians we have been studying
Bull’s Head Rhyton
Second Palace Period

- Bulls appear quite often in Minoan art
- Rendered with great intensity
- **Stone** ritual vessel, 12” high
- Incised lines in the stone were filled with white powder to add details
- Horns are wood gilded with gold leaf (restored)
The Bull motif appears throughout art history:

- Bull capitals on Persian pyramids
- The Sumerian Bull Lyre
- Bull’s tail on King Narmer's belt
- Minotaur fresco
- However there is no evidence that the Minoans worshipped a bull god
Minoan Ceramics
Second Palace Period
Minoan Marine Style Pottery
Octopus Flask
Second Palace Period
• Marine scenes celebrated Crete’s sea power, which was at its height.
• Artist captured the grace and energy of the natural forms even though they are stylized.
• Overall pattern reinforces the spherical shape of the flask.
Minoan Wall Painting

Minoan painters covered the palace walls with landscape scenes and scenes of human activities
Minoan Murals

- **Buon Fresco**: frescos painted on the wet plaster surface of a wall. The painting becomes a part of the finished wall. (more permanent)
- **Fresco Secco**: frescos painted on the surface of an already dried plaster wall. (not so permanent)
- Like the Egyptians the Minoans filled in the outlines of their figures with unshaded areas of flat color.
- Other than that there is little resemblance between Egyptian and Minoan wall painting.
• Minoan painting displays, elegant drawing and linear contours, filled with bright colors.
• Both profile and full face views are common.
• Stylized in such a way that natural form becomes decorative pattern
• But at the same time captures the impression of the human figure in motion.
The wall paintings of Thera are the earliest examples of large-scale painting in Europe. Their main features are their freedom of composition and unrestrained movement.
Landscape with swallows from Akrotiri, Thera, Greece ca. 1650 BCE. Fresco, approx. 7' 6" high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.
Landscape with swallows. Detail
Late Minoan Period

About 1450 BCE, a conquering people from mainland Greece, called the Mycenaean, arrived in Crete.
Bull Leaping Fresco at Knossos

- 1450-1375 BCE
- About 24.5” high
- One of the most famous and well preserved paintings from the Minoan civilization depicts a scene of Bull leaping.
- The restored panel is one of a group of paintings which feature bulls as their subject.
- The action may represent an initiation or fertility ritual.
Bull Leaping Fresco
Palace at Knossos
• Three young figures dance around a dappled bull.
• The light skinned woman on the right seems prepared to catch the flipping man in the center.
• The other pale skinned women on the left appears to be grabbing the bull by its horns as she prepares to make her leap.
• The scene is framed my a geometric design of repeating discs called a chariot wheel motif.
Minoan Metalworking

The skills of Minoan metalworkers made them highly sought after on mainland Greece.
Gold ring with a depiction of a bull-leaping scene from Phourni, Crete. Before 2000 BC.
Vapheio Cup

- One of two cups found near Sparta on mainland Greece.
- Either made by a Minoan or a Minoan trained metalworker.
- Relief designs were executed by hammering on the inside of the cup.
- The handles were attached with rivets.
- The cup is only 3.5” high.
Vapheio Cup
1650-1450 BCE
The Mycenaean invaders appear to have continued to use Crete as a base for many years. But by 1400 BCE, the center of political and cultural power in the Aegean had shifted to mainland Greece, which at the time was home to many wealthy warrior kings.
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