

6.1 Aegean Art

WHILE THE CIVILIZATIONS in Egypt and Mesopotamia were flourishing, two distinct cultures developed along the Aegean Sea. One was on the island of Crete and is termed Minoan (after Minos, the Cretan king). The other was on the mainland of Greece at the city of Mycenae. For a long time both civilizations were considered mythological. They were known only through the *Iliad* by Homer. It was not until the late nineteenth century that these cities and their art were unearthed by archaeologists. These Aegean civilizations were the forerunners of Greek culture.

The Minoans were by far the richest of the Aegean civilizations. Bounded by the sea, the Cretans created a luxurious, relaxed way of life quite distinct from any other. Several "palace" centers developed on the island of Crete. The most important center was the huge complex at Knossos, called the Palace of Minos. The sprawling palace (fig. 6-1) contained many rooms, running water, a sewage system, theater, storerooms (fig. 6-2), terraces and elaborately decorated quarters for the rulers. Many *frescoes* (plaster wall paintings) decorated the interior of the palace. These frescoes provide a good idea of how these people lived.

The Mycenaeans were warriors instead of traders. They built citadels rather than pleasure palaces. Their hilltop fortresses were surrounded by walls of enormous stone blocks. The blocks were so large that later Greeks thought they were the work of the Cyclopes, a mythical race of one-eyed giants.

Key Notes

- Two distinct cultures, Minoan and Mycenaean, develop in the Aegean region.
- Minoan art is marked by a graceful ease and a delight in all forms of life.
- Mycenaean monuments reflect a protected and fortified environment.

Vocabulary

fresco

6-2 Storerooms housed jars of wine, grain, oil and honey. View of jars in storeroom, Palace at Knossos, Crete.



Special Feature

Bull Dance Fresco

The Minoans and Mycenaeans appear to have had very different lifestyles. There is no specific historic reference that ties the two groups together. Both brought a remarkable vibrancy and extraordinary sense of beauty to their art.

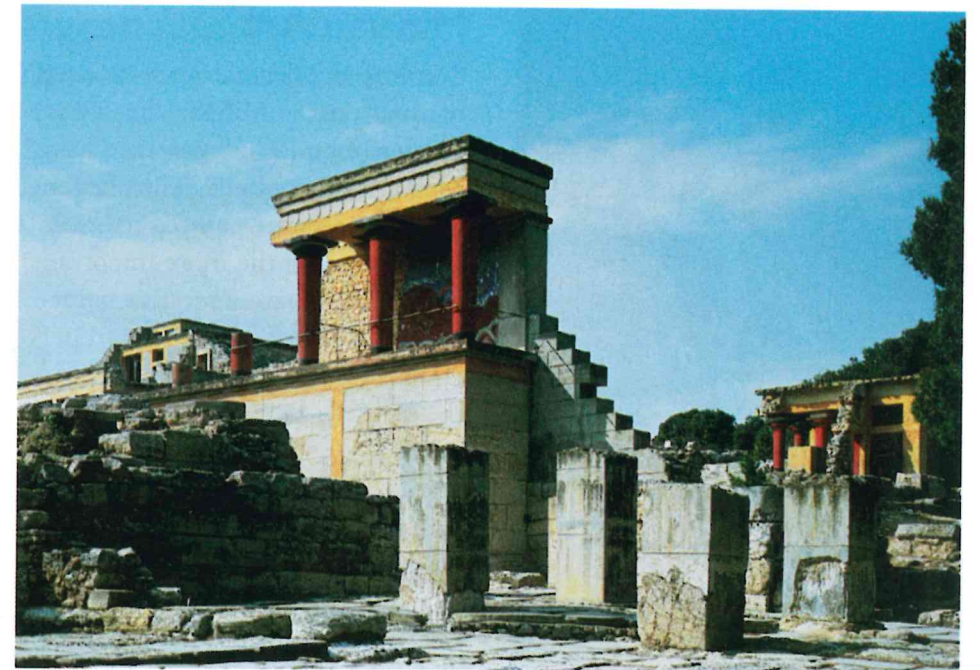
These attributes are present in the *Bull Dance* (fig. 6-3) fresco from the Minoan Palace of Knossos. It is the largest Minoan wall painting discovered so far. The fresco shows a ritual game in which the participants energetically vault over the bull's back. Two of the slim-waisted athletes are girls, denoted by their



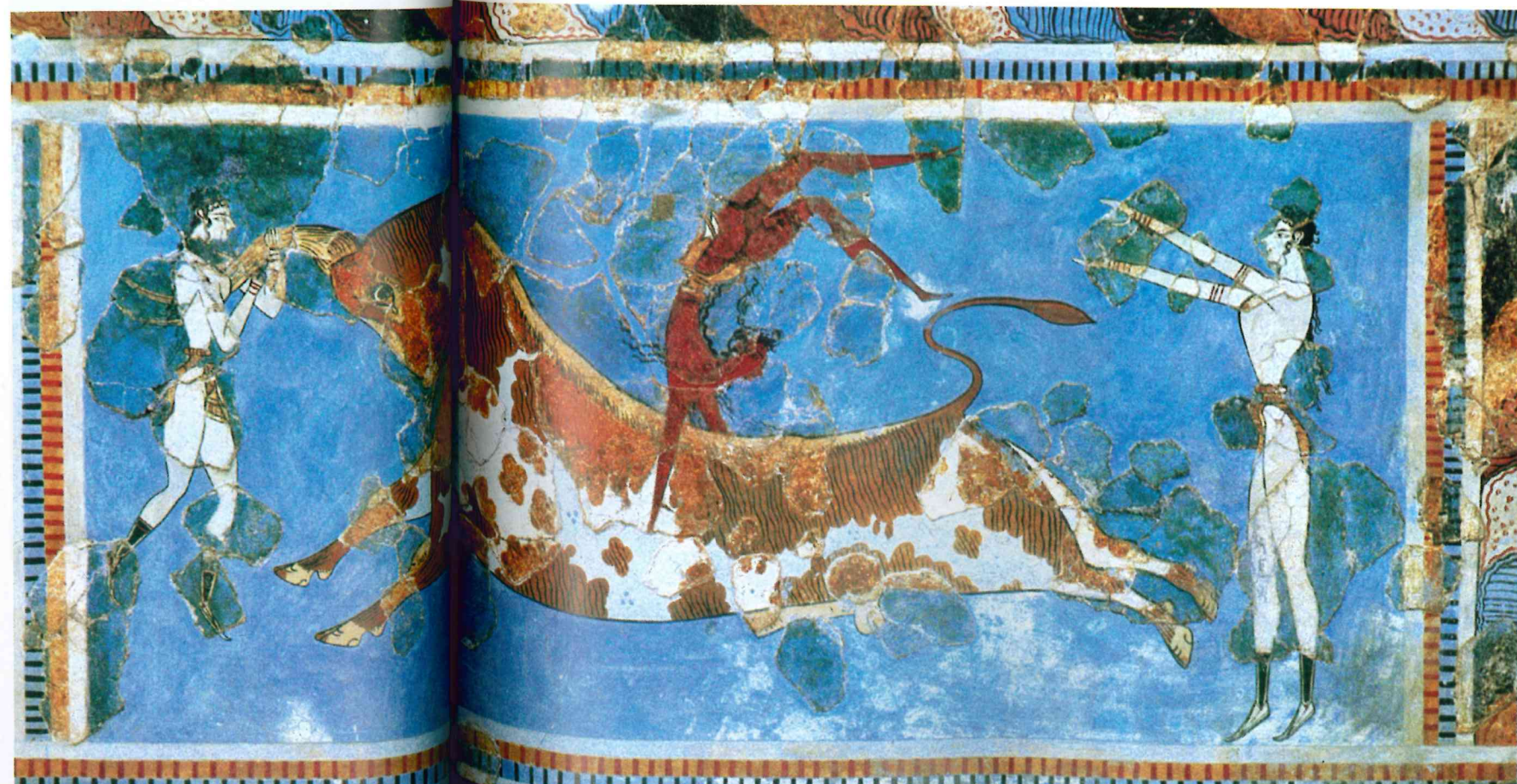
lighter skin color. There are so many depictions of bulls in Minoan painting and sculpture that the bull undoubtedly was a sacred animal. It is clear that bull-vaulting had something to do with a religious custom. We see an echo of this custom in the Greek legend of the youths and maidens sacrificed to the minotaur.

There is a certain ambiguity to the fresco that prevents us from understanding exactly what is going on here. The artist has idealized the ritual by stressing its harmonious, playful aspect rather than trying to provide the viewer with a factual representation of the event.

No temple architecture has been found on Crete or in Mycenae. Objects related in some way to religion (such as the *Bull Dance* fresco) have been found. Often, however, these objects raise more questions than they answer.



6-1 The plan of this palace is so complex that it survived in Greek legend as the labyrinth of the Minotaur. Palace at Knossos, Crete, about 1600-1400 BC.



6-3 The young vaulters in this mural may have been Minoan gymnasts. *Bull Dance*, from the Palace at Knossos, about 1500 BC. Fresco, 31 1/2" (80 cm) high, including border. Archaeological Museum, Heraklion, Crete.