

Minoan Art

Comfort and decoration were equally important in Minoan life. The facades of buildings appear to have been brightly colored. The plastered walls inside were painted red, yellow or blue. In the more important rooms there were figurative paintings and occasionally stucco reliefs. Unfortunately, only fragments of these works remain, but they clearly show the vigor and spontaneity of Minoan art. Minoan culture and art was greatly influenced by the sea. Minoan frescoes were characterized by lightness and freely shaped forms. The forms had a rhythmic quality inspired by the sea.

The lively spontaneity of Minoan art, so representative of their style of life, is portrayed beautifully in the Queen's Megaron in the palace of Knossos. Here, the elaborate frescoes painted on the plastered walls depict many aspects of Cretan life. There are processions and ceremonies. Images from nature appear, such as birds, animals and flowers. The sea and its creatures, such as dolphins, are also featured.

6-5 Why do you think marine life was a favorite subject of Minoan artists?

Octopus Jar, about 1500 BC. 11" (28 cm) high, from Palaikastro. Archaeological Museum, Heraklion.

1150 BC
Colossal basalt sculptures of human heads, Olmec Civilization, Mexico

6-4 This poised young woman controls the snakes in what may have been a religious ritual.

Snake Goddess, about 1550 BC. Ivory and gold, 6" (16 cm) high, from Knossos. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Mrs. W. Scott Fitz.



6-6 The artist of this relief has chosen to depict a joyous aspect of the human character.

Harvester Vase, about 1500 BC. Steatite, 4 1/2" (11 cm) wide, from Haiga Triada. Archaeological Museum, Heraklion.

1600 BC
Colonization of the Pacific Islands

1500 BC
Spun cotton invented, India

World Cultural Timeline

Ψ Ω Η Φ

1200 BC
Pictograph writing

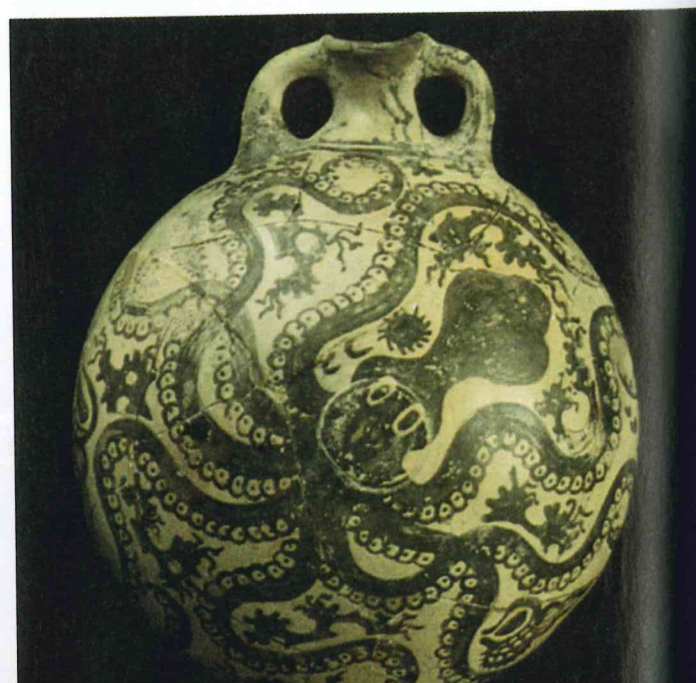


Minoan sculpture was small and, like the frescoes, probably decorated the living quarters of merchant rulers. The *Snake Goddess* (fig.6-4), carved from ivory and decorated with gold bands, may be the goddess of an unknown religion or simply a daring young woman playing with snakes.

Minoan pottery often was decorated with designs of plant and animal life. In the illustrated example, the octopus (fig.6-5) conforms so wonderfully with the contours of the vase that it seems to be floating in the open sea rather than painted on a hard, curving surface. The relief on the *Harvester Vase* (fig.6-6) brims with energy and life.

Muscular men with scythes and rakes appear to be celebrating a harvest festival. Three singers, led by a fourth, have burst into song. So great is their enthusiasm that the leader's chest is swelled enough to show his ribs.

The Minoan civilization came to an abrupt halt. The people disappeared and no one really knows what happened. Perhaps future archaeologists will answer this question.



Mycenaean Art

The outer gateway of the citadel at Mycenae is called the *Lion Gate* (fig.6-7). It is topped by a huge, triangular-shaped, carved stone slab. Depicted on the stone are two



6-7 These two lions flank a column which may represent the power of the Mycenaean king. Although the stone has been eroded with time, the straining muscles of the lions are still evident.

Lion Gate at Mycenae, about 1250 BC. Limestone relief sculpture, about 9 1/2' (3 m) high.



6-9 How does the artist make use of light and shadow to bring the relief to life? *Vaphio Cup*, about 1500 BC. Gold, about 3 1/2" (9 cm) high, from Laconia. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.



6-8 At one time this mask was thought to be the death mask of King Agamemnon from Homer's *Iliad*.

Funeral mask, about 1500 BC. Beaten gold, about 12" (30 cm) high, from Royal Tombs, Mycenae. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

majestic standing lions flanking a Minoan-type column. Notice the massive stone block that acts as a lintel over the opening. The other large blocks are cut to fit exactly together.

In 1876, excavations at Mycenae uncovered beehive tombs of massive proportions and sunken royal graves. The graves contained a dazzling display of objects in gold, silver and other metals. The *Funeral Mask* (fig.6-8) is a thin sheet of beaten gold. It was probably intended to cover the face of a deceased ruler of about 1500 BC.

The *Vaphio Cups* (figs.6-9) from a grave in Laconia are some of the most famous gold pieces found at Mycenae. The lively reliefs on these beautifully crafted works illustrate several ways the Mycenaeans captured wild bulls.

Recently, several ivory sculptures and some paintings have been uncovered. Still, little is known of the development of Mycenaean culture. Mycenaean history abruptly ended about 1100 BC when the Dorians invaded from the north.

By 1100 BC, the Bronze Age culture on the Greek mainland, attacked by various catastrophes, had collapsed. For the next four hundred years a dreary and subdued era swept Greece. Archaeological evidence for this period suggests material poverty and social insecurity on a grand scale. Gone was the joyful expression of the Minoans and the realistic art of the Mycenaeans.

Lesson 6.1 Review

- 1 Why did people suspect that the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations had existed even before archaeologists discovered their ruins?
- 2 Describe the Palace of Knossos.

Of which contemporary Spanish sport does this remind you?

- 4 List some characteristics of Minoan frescoes.
- 5 Draw a sketch of the *Lion Gate at Mycenae*.