Minoan Art
Fourth Lecture, First Term, 1957

The civilization of Mesopotamia and Egypt never entirely passed out of the living memory of Western people. The civilization of Ancient Crete, however, certainly did, and has only been recovered by archaeologists in recent years. The excavations of the ancient city of Troy in Asia Minor in 1871 by Heinrich Schliemann, led him to dig in Southern Greece at Mycenae. In the shaft graves which he exposed he discovered a great wealth of treasure much of it gold—as for instance, these gold cups. The style of this newly discovered art was quite unlike the art of Greece as we know it from the tenth century B.C. onwards. Where was the centre of this culture? Speculation led to the island of Crete as a likely centre. And in 1900 Sir Arthur Evans purchased the site of the city of Knossos and began to uncover a culture which he has called the Minoan culture. The name being derived from the legendary King of Minos of Crete, of classical literature. Evans published his results in his 4 volume Palace of Minos, a beautifully illustrated book which you may consult in the Bailieu Library.

The ancient civilization of Crete, occupied, roughly, the two thousand years of the Bronze Age, that is from 3,000 to 1,000B.C. Evans divided the culture into three main phases, Early Minoan, Middle Minoan, and Late Minoan. Broadly speaking, we may say the Early Minoan parallels roughly in time the Old Kingdom of Egypt, Middle Minoan parallels the Middle Kingdom, and Late Minoan the New Kingdom. But the correspondences are by no means exact. Evans further subdivided each of his main periods into three subdivisions: this gave him nine subdivisions, Early Minoan I, Early Minoan II, Early Minoan III, Middle Minoan I, Middle Minoan II, and so on. This provided Evans with what archaeologists call a relative chronology—a relative chronology makes it possible to indicate how much earlier or later in date items found in excavations are to one another without concerning oneself with the exact date in years or the absolute chronology.

Early Minoan art covers the period from ca 2750 to 2,000BC.* Most of the finds are from Eastern Crete, especially from the island of Mochlos and from Vasilike. The period witnesses the transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age, and there is considerable Egyptian influence. The emergence of a distinct Minoan style may be discerned however in the painted pottery. Neolithic pottery is usually dull red or black and often burnished on the surface by rubbing with some abrasive instrument. Decoration being confined to geometric devices: triangles, rectangles, chevrons, zig-zags. Neolithic design was almost invariably abstract, non-representational. In our slide, the upper designs are of this type, rectangles, hatched triangle, chevrons, the battle-axe motifs. All these designs are from Early Minoan pottery. But already curvilinear motifs have appeared concentric semi-circles, chain and spiral patterns, and patterns recalling plant-growth, organic patterns we may call them. And we even catch the beginnings of naturalism, a small horned head has been placed on top of one
of the double-axe designs, to make a primitive representation of a ram or mouflon. This tendency to turn abstract design into pictorial forms in a feature of Minoan art.

Early Minoan sculpture consists mostly of primitive marble figurines in which natural forms are rendered by means of simple geometric and yet highly expressive forms. They were probably associated with fertility cults and the worship of the mother-goddess, almost universal in Neolithic cultures. But in Early Minoan times the craft of the sculptor developed rapidly. In our next slide we have a green steatite lid of a box found at Mochlos. The pattern retains Neolithic affiliations in its sequence of hatched triangles, but the handle has been rendered in the form of a dog, and it is a great, sprawling village dog. Professor Dale Trendall never failed to inform his lasses in classical archaeology at Sydney University that this same sprawling village dog is still to be seen on any walk in Crete.

The Middle Minoan Period dates from about 2000 to 1580 BC. If we turn again to our map, we may note that this period witnesses the rise of great palaces at Knossos, in the north and Paestos in the south of the island. The centres of population are now in the centre of the island. Trade contacts have been developed with Asia Minor, Cyprus, the ports of the Levant to the east, and above all with Egypt. Trading relationships with XII Dynasty Egypt were particularly close.

Decorative art develops greater freedom. If we contrast the simple rectilinear and curvilinear designs of the Early Minoan patterns which we have already studied, in our next slide, with some Middle Minoan pottery patterns, we find a greater sense of freedom, more variety in the use of line, greater contrasts of tone, and of motif, the introduction of organic designs, leaves, and sea-motifs, such as fish, and tiny sea-creatures. Crete, we must remind ourselves, was essentially a maritime civilization; its wealth depended upon maritime trade.

The technique of potting developed quickly during Middle Minoan times. Early Minoan pottery was hand made, like Neolithic pottery. Middle Minoan I saw the introduction of the slow wheel, Middle Minoan II the introduction of the quick wheel. The quick wheel made it possible to obtain a pottery fabric of almost egg-shell thinness. The most famous Middle Minoan pottery is called Kamares ware, from the site in central Crete where it was found. A ware is a distinctive type of ceramic, distinctive in its fabric, that is, the physical qualities of its clays, and in its glazes, and the style of the decoration. Here, in our next slide are two Kamares bowls, one featuring an octopus,* the lower a crocus design.* Note both the great precision of the drawing revealing a genuine observation of nature, and note how admirably the Cretan artist has related his design to the shape of the bowl. The Minoan vase painters possessed a superb capacity to relate their designs to the shapes and the forms they were to fill. In our next slide e may note wow far this Kamares war has moved from the rectilinear decoration of Early Minoan times—spiral, radiating and ovoid patterns
The Kamares painters applied white, red and orange paints to a black background, and they were clearly interested in the kinds of effect which could be obtained by relating light areas to dark areas. Toward the end of the Middle Minoan Period, during the Middle Minoan III, shapes became more elongated and designs are mainly white on black. This small vase is one of a set recovered from the Palace of Knossos. Notice how beautifully the design grows up to flower with the swell of the vase, a most successful piece of design.

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The sculpture of the Middle Minoan Period is represented for us I a number of small clay figurines. Here is the Petsofa figurine. Not the bell skirt, the high pointed collar open to the waist, and the conical bag-like hat. The other figurine from the same group represents a man with a dagger slung across the waist. You will notice that his flesh is painted a dark brown, but the woman’s is white, as in Egyptian art. You will note too that the strong light on dark patterns of the skirt remind us of Kamares ware pottery of the same period. To the same period belongs also the Snake Goddess found in the Palace of Knossos. In her right hand she holds a snake, it coils over her shoulder and her left hand holds the tail. The costume is typically Minoan: a tall conical hat, a bodice laced tightly beneath the breasts, a broad bell-like skirt, over which an apron hangs from the waist, both in the front and the back. Found with the snake goddess was her votary, in our next slide, she is seen holding a snake in either hand, and dressed in a somewhat similar costume. She wears a flat cap however, on which is seated a small spotted animal, other a leopard or a cat. The snake goddess was almost certainly a goddess of the underworld. Parallels to her cult may be in certain Mesopotamian goddesses, such as this Goddess who holds a vase from which water flows, and you will notice the similarity of the costume, the bell-like skirt, and the suggestion of flounces, as in the Cretan votary figurine. With this Snake goddess as also found a relief panel of a goat suckling her kid: a finely rhythmic design which calls to mind the animal naturalism of Palaeolithic art. And with it was found an equally fine cow and calf relief.

During the Middle Minoan Times Crete maintained a maritime trade supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean: but during the Late Minoan times (1550-1100) the influence appears to have begun to decline slowly. However, Late Minoan Art provides us with some of the finest example of Minoan Art. Crete was in commercial contact with Egypt and the influence of the Egyptian mural paintings is apparent. Here is a mural from Knossos showing birds in a landscape. Note the landscape treatment: the fern fronds and the shorthand method of treating rocks. A similar landscape shows a blue bird rising from a flowering landscape full of bright gay colours. Our next slide is known as the Saffron Gatherer. Again we may note the conventionalized rock treatment and the carefully drawn flowers. Our next slide, the so-called Priest King
Fresco, may remind us of Egyptian work, but the treatment is lighter and more graceful in spirit. There is already something Mediterranean about it.

In our next slide, the Scared Grove fresco from Knossos, we meet a crowd that has assembled for a festival of some kind. The Minoan artist has represented the crowd by drawing many heads in serried ranks, and below we meet a group of young woman, dancers apparently, dressed in a costume rather like that of the Snake goddess, again we met that free flowing line and sense of grace which endows Minoan art with a flavour akin to the Rococo art of the eighteenth century.

The same spirit is to be found in the sculpture. Bull baiting and fighting was popular. In our next slide a toreador is seen leaping across the horns of a bull. In our next slide the bull appears to have impaled the toreador. But note the splendid play of muscle and action. The same spirit of animation is to be found in our next slide, of the Harvester Vase. A procession of young men have hoisted their pitchforks above their heads and are going out to the harvest in fine fettle. One man is rattling a sistrum, and they appear to be singing, or shouting at the top of their voices. There is a fine free rhythmical movement, and an atmosphere of happiness and festivity is conveyed.

The freedom and grace so apparent in the frescoes and sculpture is apparent also in the pottery. Note the fine freedom of the design of this octopus vase from Palaikastro, or the very beautiful and restrained design of this lily vase a masterpiece of its kind. The Minoans, indeed, had a splendid feeling for the organic decoration of a vase—pattern and surface being blended into one harmonious design. And indeed of all the pre-classical cultures the art of Crete is closest in spirit to that of Greek art, the emergence of which I shall attempt to deal with in my next lecture.