Minoan Art
First Term 1958

At the southern end of the Aegean Sea, Crete was situated in an excellent geographical position to receive cultural stimulus from Mesopotamia and the Near East, and also from the north, from Europe: and it enjoyed the natural protection afforded by the sea. And during the Bronze Age (an archaeological period which in the Near Eastern countries dates from around 3000BC to 1000BC) a flourishing civilization with strong individual characteristics arose and flourished. The rise of England, in relation to Northern Europe, many centuries later affords a rough parallel to the rise of Crete in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Bronze Age. Let us look at a map of the area.*

Nothing was known about the culture of Ancient Crete until Sir Arthur Evans purchased the site of the temple of Knossos in 1900 and began to uncover the ruins of the huge Palace of Knossos. He was following up the work of Heinrich Schliemann who had begun excavations at Troy in northern Asia Minor and later a Tiryns and Mycenae in the south of Greece, in 1890s. Evans revealed the presence of a highly civilized and flourishing Bronze Age civilization in Crete which he called Minoan, from the King Minos of Greek legend. The Minoan culture was found to be, unlike the great kingdoms of the Near East and Egypt, an essentially maritime culture based upon maritime supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean Minoan vessels traded with Egypt, the Levant, Cyprus and Asia Minor. In consequence the culture owes much to Egypt and the Near East, but the Minoans stamped their art with a strong personal quality of its own. There is a spirit of informality, almost of gaiety, a love of nature and of the sea, and a certain light heartedness which distinguishes Minoan art from the art of Egypt and the Ancient Orient. The Minoans leave the impression of being a busy, merchant trading folk without much thought to military defence. Of being a society in which religious worship was not identified with the political power of the State. The Minoan culture is, indeed, the first truly Mediterranean culture, and the first truly European culture—and it is remarkable how often it foreshadows the spiritual temper of European art in its love of the change, its adaptability, its capacity or free invention, its balance between the sacred and the secular.

Sir Arthur Evans divided these in turn into subdivisions of three each: EM1, EM2, EM3, MM1, MM2, MM3, LM1, LM2, LM3. This provided what archaeologists call a relative chronology whereby finds from excavation can be classed in relation to one another chronologically, even when their exact date in time is unknown.

The culture of Minoan Crete may be divided into four main phases
(1) Neolithic c 5000-2750
(2) Early Minoan 2750-2000
(3) Middle Minoan 2000-1580
(4) Late Minoan 1580-1100

Neolithic

The period when settled agricultural life emerges. Village life in communal apartments made of sun-dried brick.

Slides

2 Neolithic shards from Knossos
3 Figurine. Widely distributed over the Aegean area. Mother goddess type.

Early Minoan

4 Early Minoan designs.
5 EM1 Terracotta jug and hold all. Rectilinear patterns in a dull red varnish-latticework pattern.

Sculpture. Development of the figurines
6 Figurine from Hagia Triada
7 Figurine from Hagia Triada
8 Cf with Priest from Tel Asmar.
9 Cycladic Type Idols. Greater definition to the figure. Articulation.
10 Seated figure.
12 Bronze Dagger Blades.

Middle Minoan Period

This period which is dated from 2000 to 1580 witnesses a definite leap forward in Cretan civilization. During this period great palaces are built at Knossos, Phaestos, and Mallia. The period is roughly contemporary with the Middle Kingdom of Egypt and the Isin, Larso, Babylon period in Mesopotamia. The Cretan palaces were great temple-palace complexes deriving from the temples of Mesopotamia. They were built around one or more courtyards. The lower stories were built of limestone and the upper stories of mud brick. In Early Minoan times the walling had been of rough rubble masonry. But in the Middle Minoan Period square cut ashlar masonry based on Egyptian principles had developed. Considerable use of columns and verandas occur inside the courtyards. Columns supporting roofs tapered from top to bottom, the
opposite of the Greek principle. They were usually made from a single tree, upended, smoothed and placed in position.

Slides
13 Knossos – plan
14 House plan – EM1
15 Mallia. Western quarter of the Palace.
16 Knossos. Bath or Lustration site.

Middle Minoan Pottery

The Middle Minoan Period produced some notable painted pottery. The designs now develop from the rectilinear, triangles, lozenges, chevron pattern, to curvilinear motifs based upon natural, organic forms. Marine forms are especially popular, with radiating patterns from sea shells, and marine animals. The most important pottery fabric was called Kamares ware. It was a polychrome ware in which white, red and orange were applied to a black background. During early Middle Minoan 1 the slow pottery wheel was invented, and during Middle Minoan 2 the quick wheel was invented. This made possible the throwing of pots that were of almost eggshell thinness. Let us turn to some slides:

17 MMII Patterns
18 Stylized octopus
19 Jug with curvilinear forms
20 Terra cotta cup from Phaestos. Vase with radiating sunflower form
21 The Lily Vase. Toward the end of MMIII vase shapes became longer, plant forms extending up the vase became popular. This from Knossos.

Middle Minoan Sculpture.

22 Terra cotta figurine of a woman. Note wide bell skirt. The little flat cap. The narrow waist.
23 Male figure. Athletic type
24 Petsosfa Figurine White on black like Kamares ware, bell shaped skirt high peaked collar bare to the waist. Found in a shrine, probably a votive offering. From these figures Cretan woman give every appearance of being quite liberated.
25 Athletic male figure. Loin cloth and belt. Cretan dagger. Note convention of dark brown for men, white for women. This persists into Greek times.

Middle Minoan also produced some interesting small terracotta figurines which has been preserved for us. They are of special value since like the miniature fresco and sacred grove fresco that we have already seen, they preserve for us something of the
fashions of the times, and tell is also something about the nature of the Minoan religion.

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11 more remarkable—a group of statuettes and reliefs found in the Temple of Knossos. The Snake Goddess. Quite small—35 cm high—in faience. A purplish brown tiara round which curls a snake. This identifies her with those earth goddesses of Mesopotamian origin which we saw last week. Similar dress. Similar period. Tight short sleeved bodice, laced below the breast, embroidered with spiral designs. Pattern of lozenges on the hem—short apron down to the waist before and behind. In her hand she holds the head of a snake which coils around her shoulder—the left hand holds the tail.

12 The votary of the Snake Goddess. Grasps a snake in each hand. Costume resembles goddess. Pleated skirt. Flat cap on which is perched a cat or small leopard.

13 Cow and calf relief—Knossos. Very fine sense of observation and sympathy with nature. Fine rhythmic grouping.

14 Goat and kid relief

15 The Town Mosaic. MMIII collection of plaques—obviously meant to join up and make a panorama of a whole street. Large blocks of stone—half timbering used—horizontal stripes and rows of discs—the end of logs carrying a ceiling. Roof flat. Some have what look like attic. They may have been lanterns carrying light wells which we know were used in Minoan houses.

Another indication of Crete’s contact with the Near East is the wealth of seal-stones which have been found dating back to Early Minoan times.

15a Hatchet in the form of a Panther. Mallia, MMIII

16 Middle Minoan Seal Stones. Delightfully related to their space. Intaglio design. Pictographs were used for writing, and towards the end of the MM period a writing script was developed known as Linear A.

Toward the end of the fifteenth century BC a great disaster overtook all the cities of Crete. There are signs at Knossos and Phaestos and elsewhere of violent destruction and fire. An earthquake Ca 1580 has been suggested. This brought the Middle Minoan Period to a dramatic end.

During the Late Minoan Period Cretan art continued to flourish, but no longer was Crete in undisturbed possession of the maritime trade of the Eastern Mediterranean. Or this period sees the rapid development of a highly flourishing culture on the mainland of Greece at Mycenae and Tiryns. The Cretan culture however continued to flourish between 1580 and 1400 B.C. during which phases called LM1 and LM2 possibly at Knossos. About 1400 the Minoan culture again collapsed completely, on
this occasion it was probably an invasion from the mainland of Greece. Thenceforward for the next 300 years, that is from 1400 to 1100, the last three centuries of the Bronze Age, the Minoan culture was absorbed into the Mycenaean culture, which was centred upon the mainland of Greece, probably at Mycenae. Like the Minoan culture which it superseded the Mycenaean culture was a maritime empire based upon sea trade. During the 3 centuries from 1400 to 1100 the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean, Cyprus, Crete, the Levant and Egypt came under the influence of the Mycenaean culture far more completely than it had come under the earlier Minoan culture.

Let us look now at some examples of the Art of Late Minoan I and II, that is, from 1580 to 1400.

The earthquake of 1580 resulted in a good deal of remodelling and rebuilding at Knossos. **Late Minoan Frescoes** now reach a very high standard.

17 Toreador Fresco. LMI Acrobats leaping over bulls. Freedom and grace of line. Dynamic quality in the design. Lack of interest in ground line.
18 Toreador fresco from Knossos. The light drawing standing on toes. No sense or interest in mass r weight. Highly decorative quality. Note the suggestion of wind swept hair.
19 Our next slide is called the **Priest King Fresco**. One of the most famous of them all, also from Knossos. Decorative treatment of anatomy and flowers. Egyptian frontality, but how much lighter and more elegant in treatment. Emphasis upon curved lines. A certain roccoco grace of movement. Prettier design.
20 In our next slide I want you to compare the lilies in the fresco with the lilies on this case which is also Late Minoan II. You will notice that this vase painting style is based on floral motifs like the Kamenos ware of the Middle Minoan Period—but the treatment is much more conventionalised, less naturalistic. This is a style confined to the Palaces at Knossos and Pheastos, and it has therefore been called the Palace Style.

11 Our next slide shows a landscape rendered even more freely. From the House of the Frescoes in the Palace of Knossos. A Blue Bird among the rocks and grasses. The similarity of this work with some of the Egyptian frescoes of the 18th dynasty, with which Late Minoan I and II are contemporary is rather striking. And at this time Cretan contact with Egypt was closer than at any other time. There need be no doubt that Egyptian influence is present in these frescoes---but the spirit of the Cretan people is everywhere present.

The late Minoan Period was the period in which Minoan sculpture reached the peak of its achievement.
14 A bronze toreador from the Spencer Churchill collection. Again the toreador leaping over the bull. Sense of vitality and movement. The sculptor is seeking a general effect—which gives a peculiarly modern feeling to the work—the interest in rendering a suggestion of movement and nervous energy.

Among the most interesting examples of sculpture are found on vases made of black steatite—they are in quite low relief.

15 Here is the so-called Boxer vase—a conical rhyton from Hagi Triada. It is divided into four zones. Three show boxers. But one shows a scene from bull sports so popular. Bull baiting and bull fighting is of course an ancient Mediterranean sport. Athlete gored by a bull.
16 Our next slide is one of the finest examples of Minoan Sculpture, the Harvester Vase. A procession of lively harvesters being led out to the harvest with their pitchforks over their shoulders, by a fat man in a heavy quilted garment. Note the plant to suggest the landscape. They appear to be singing or shouting. Strong rhythmical movement of the figures. Atmosphere of happiness and festivity. And here an unusual feature. A not unsuccessful attempt to render 4 people marching abreast. Sense of space and depth.
17 Chieftain Cup from Hagia Triada / A young chieftain giving orders to his subordinates.

Let us turn now to some examples of Late Minoan Pottery

Late Minoan Pottery is a dark on light style, whereas Middle Minoan is light on dark.

18 Jar from Knossos. Designs are still naturalistic. Placed in zones.
19 Late Minoan vase from Palaikastro. Octopus. Continued interest in marine forms. Real feeling for the shape of the vessel, decorative freedom in the design.
20 Octopus vase from the Candia Museum—similar freedom.
21 Palace style—Red jars from Knossos. The LMII Palace style is much more conventionalized—Battle axes and rosettes.
22 The palace style however is peculiar to the Palace at Knossos—elsewhere the more naturalistic style persisted. Tulip vase from Palaikastro—splendid feeling for the shape of the vase. Delightful sense of pure decoration, a genuine feeling for nature, and a sense of restraint. The Minoan artist was wise enough to choose what he wanted for his vase decoration but retained a true sense of decorative values. The vase painter of Greece too often tries with fatal results to transfer more than his vase would take.

About the 1400, as I said, the Minoan culture crashed for a second time, possibly as a result of an invasion from the mainland, on this occasion never to recover. Its Leadership in trade and culture passed to the Mycenaean culture of the mainland. The 300 years from 1400 o 1100 B.C. during which Mycenaean art dominated the Eastern
Mediterranean, is of the greatest interest to the archaeologists, for it stands, among other things, on the threshold of the Hellenic civilization of Greece. But there is time now to look briefly at only a few examples.

X Cup from Vaphio near Sparta, shows the capture and domestication of wild bulls. We see an animation similar to that on the Harvester case. But already there is a firmness in the drawing that foreshadows the firmer draughtsmanship of the Greeks when compared with the Minoans.

X Gold cups from the shaft graves at Mycenae, excavated by Schliemann in the 1870s—rosette, and the embossed design of the dolphins, show the affinity with Cretan work.

X Gold mask from a shaft grave at Mycenae. It is a death mask of some ruler. It being a custom to cover the face of dead rulers with masks of gold foil.

The legends of the Trojan War as recorded by Homer and the acts of Agamemnon of Mycenae the leader of the Achaeans, have been identified with the Mycenaean Age. In Asia Minor nine superimposed settlements have been excavated at Troy. It is now generally believed that that Troy 7a, which was destroyed about 1190B.C. was the Homeric City. The destruction was probably due to a Mycenaean invasion, the memory of which lingered on, like romances of chivalry, into Hellenic times, and was recorded by Homer. However, by 1100 the Mycenaean culture itself began to collapse. The next three centuries were a kind of dark age of the ancient world: a period when the Bronze age was gradually giving way to the iron age. There was a great deal of movement of people over the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean, standards of living declined remarkably. The picture of society in Greece does not clear again until well after 1000B.C. and by that time we are beginning to witness the emergence of the Hellenic civilization of Greece, which will be traced in subsequent lectures.
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