Minoan Murals at Knossos
A Brief History

By Christine Vaillancourt

The Minoan, or Bronze Age civilization of Crete, which began about 3000 B.C., was undiscovered until Sir Arthur Evans of England began his excavation of the palace of Knossos in 1900. The art of this culture was unique in that it was neither oriental nor Egyptian.

The Minoan civilization had reached its peak between 1700 and 1450 B.C. People lived in cities and had systems of government. They could write, and knew something of science. They traded goods with other countries. All this was going on while Europe was still living in the Neolithic, or New Stone Age. But many questions about this culture still puzzle us. Was the rise of a high civilization due to the influx of people from other war-ravaged lands? Was it war or an earthquake that destroyed the great palaces at Knossos and Phaistos about 1700 B.C.? Was the mass destruction that happened on the island in the middle of the 15th century B.C. due to natural causes or a war? Is the system of writing, used during the latest period of the Cretan Bronze Age, some form of Greek? Earlier Minoan script has not yet been deciphered. How did the breathtaking murals and pottery from this period acquire their highly individualistic style?

Crete is 150 miles long east to west and the widest part is only 35 miles. The island lies in an earthquake prone area in the Aegean Sea, a part of the Mediterranean. The island has natural beauty, fertile soil, and a pleasant climate due to its proximity to the equator. Today, Crete is the southernmost province of Greece. Asia and Egypt are located to the south and east. Crete’s friendly climate was the reason for the establishment of the first high civilization in Europe. The Mediterranean has no tides. Due to the gradual melting of the polar caps, many ancient towns or cities of Crete are near the shore beneath the sea.

The Minoan civilization lasted about 2000 years during the Bronze Age. The Dorian Greeks were the last invaders who took over Crete near the end of the Bronze Age. Then Crete became part of Greece in the Iron Age. The island was one of the main artistic and cultural centers of Greece in Geometric and Archaic times from the 9th to 7th centuries B.C. During the following Classical period, its culture had a slow period because of its division among a number of warring states. In 67 B.C. Crete was conquered by the Romans and remained so for about 800 years, a mostly peaceful and prosperous period. About 825 AD, Crete was taken over by the Arabs. It was acquired by Venice in the Fourth Crusade in 1204 AD for 500 years in which Crete was stripped of its Cypress trees to build Venetian ships, houses, and to make charcoal. Then it was in the hands of the Turks at the end of the 17th century. Finally, after many revolts, Crete gained its independence in 1898. In 1909 it became part of Greece.

Knossos on Crete had been an important city during later Greek and Roman times. The palace was the center of an ancient legend. King Minos supposedly occupied the palace around 1600 B.C. As the story goes, the palace labyrinth imprisoned the Minotaur who was half man and half bull. The Knossos palace was much larger than any known Mycenaean one (a civilization on the Greek mainland), and had its own style. The palace evolved during reconstructions over five hundred years. During its last period the Minoans were under the influence of the Mycenaean (later Greeks called them Archaeans, it is believed) from the Greek mainland shortly after 1500 B.C. The murals studied in this lesson are from about 1600 B.C. to about 1450 B.C. The art and architecture are at times a blend of Minoan and Mycenaean influences. The Mycenaean murals on the Greek mainland are more formal, less playful, and often depicted war scenes, contrary to Minoan art.

Evans realized that this civilization was older than the Mycenaean civilization from the Greek mainland. Therefore he called the Bronze Age civilization of Crete "Minoan" after Minos, which he thought was a royal title for all kings of Crete, not just a name of one king.
Painted walls had a long history in Crete. Early Minoan house walls were plastered and painted red or brown. In the first palaces of Knossos and Phaestos (2000-1700 B.C.) there some evidence to show that walls were decorated with decorative designs painted on the plaster which we call frescoes.

The paintings were done on dry plaster rather than on wet plaster as was done during the Renaissance. The base was a lime-plaster, a mixture of lime and clay. An organic binding agent such as albumen (white of an egg) was most likely added to the pigments to make them stick to the plaster. The colors in general were black (carbonaceous shale), white (hydrate of lime), red (hematite), yellow (ochre), blue (silicate of copper), and green (blue and yellow mixed).

Occasionally the scene to be painted was modeled in very low relief to give a more three-dimensional effect. Often frescoes were framed by geometric patterns above and below. Unfortunately, all the frescoes were broken and incomplete, having crumbled when the walls collapsed. In addition, many were discolored by fire.

A few wall paintings survived from the time of the second palaces from around 1700 B.C. Most date after 1550 B.C. The themes usually depicted palace life, festivals or nature. The floors were sometimes painted. It is believed that an earthquake around 1550 B.C. destroyed many earlier paintings. No large war scenes can be found in Minoan art, and few hunting scenes. Instead, festive scenes of entertainment, rituals and games, which included woman as well, are prevalent. Men, women and animals were usually shown sideways as in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The vivid colors and the variations of movement, sometimes shown in stages like a filmstrip, add to the eye-catching individualistic style.

The Minoan people were un-warlike. Therefore their frescoes did not represent battles or aggression like so many other cultures. Crete did have a strong fleet for trading and cultural purposes instead of being used for conquering others. The scenes of palace life show processions, court ceremonial and religious festivals, adults and children playing games. Festivals were held at various stages of the growing seasons: they were religious and held in honor of the goddess -- the mistress of the animal world or of the mountains, the Queen of the Labyrinth or the Great Mother. Members of the royal family, especially the queen, played an important part in the ceremonies. An alabaster throne was found in the throne room of the palace of Knossos, where the queen would sit as the goddess, flanked by wall paintings of imaginary winged creatures called griffins.

Landscapes in the Late Minoan period around the end of the 16th century B.C. were remarkably life-like. The flowers and plants were often imaginary or highly stylized. For example, a rockrose is made symmetrical with six petals instead of the natural five. A favorite plant depicted in a variety of ways, sometimes hybridized with other flowers, was the papyrus from Egypt, but exotic in Crete. Wild roses blooming, crocuses and lilies, and parks with fountains were also subjects.

There was no attempt at perspective. Everything is shown on the same plane. The figures might vary in size depending on their importance, as in Egypt. Men were usually painted brown and women white as in Egypt. But the white figures engaged in bull-leaping on a fresco at Knossos appear to be women dressed like men.

The Campstool Fresco, c. 1550 B.C., shows pairs of young people seated on campstools and apparently drinking to each other's health. The best-preserved portion of this fresco is of a young woman, The Parisienne, named by archeologists due to her fashionable style. Perhaps the young men and women are engaged in religious rites of some kind. The Parisienne was one of a pair of twins, perhaps a pair of goddesses presiding at the rites.

The bull sports were popular subjects. Male and female acrobats are shown somersaulting over charging bulls.
Animals are painted in their natural habitats. There are enchanting life-like paintings of birds, monkeys, and a cat stalking a pheasant. Fragments of the famous Dolphin Fresco, c. 1600 B.C., that were found scattered on a bedroom floor in the Residential Quarter at Knossos, may have been part of a wall or floor above, destroyed in the 14th century B.C., along with many other wall paintings. The blue dolphins were from the room that Evans called the Queen's bedroom.

Crete society was structured, and seems to have been, free from a lot of unrest. Women enjoyed considerable freedom and a position of respect. Women participated in the religious ceremonies and even in the sports events. Therefore, the colorful murals, which reflect everyday life and nature, without war or aggression, have a childlike, happy quality, which adds to their uniqueness.

Somewhere between 1500 B.C. and 1470 B.C., an unprecedented volcanic explosion on the island of Thera north of Crete seriously destroyed the beautiful Cretan palace centers. More than half of Thera fell into the sea. The high waves and great tremors caused the Cretan palaces to be covered in lava and ash. The Minoan culture was in ruin. Reports of the catastrophe have been preserved in Egyptian sources and in the Greek legend of the destruction of Atlantis. Life continued on Crete on a smaller scale. By 1200 B.C. the urban centers were falling apart. By 1100 B.C., the Minoan culture of Crete was no longer significant.

Bibliography


