

Herakleion Museum, Crete Published in Cassone (www.cassone-art.com)

The reopening of the Herakleion Archaeological Museum in May 2014, after a seven year closure, merits celebration. Once again, we can absorb the rich evidence, in art and material culture, of the earliest advanced civilization in Europe, named Minoan after the legendary king Minos. The British Museum, the Louvre and the National Museum in Athens all show a few examples of Minoan art representing a single chapter in their long sequences of ancient societies, but in Herakleion the full scope of Cretan culture comes to life in a single place. Compared with other middle-eastern peoples, the Minoans stand out as pleasure-loving; their decorative pottery, abundant flowers and elegantly dressed women convey a hedonistic life in the palaces.

Well written explanations, in English as well as Greek, clarify the historical context of each section of the museum's inventory. They deal with the successive eras, and such themes as craft traditions, religious practices, and the Mycenaean possession of the island after the collapse of Minoan power. However, individual labels are lacking. The brilliantly conceived and well-lit displays make it easy to view the thousands of artefacts without monotony. Similar items grouped in a lively way emphasize the individuality of artists working within a common tradition.

Observing the vast array of fascinating items, as early as the Neolithic era, we can discover the origins of an artistic expression that appears intrinsically Cretan. Products from the third millennium BCE already show a sophisticated sense of design which flowers during the Bronze Age and reached a peak around 1700 BCE when the great Minoan palaces were rebuilt. Utilitarian goods, objects for religious ritual and symbols of royal power combine with scenes in frescoes to convey a rich picture of life in the palaces. Cretan potters experimented freely with the interplay of volume and surface. Some pots, showing remarkable restraint, present highly refined versions of traditional forms ornamented only with lines, while others revel in exuberant pattern making. Whether entirely abstract or figurative, they possess a daring asymmetry. Plain lines, spiraling shapes, birds or marine creatures such as octopi enliven the surfaces in a provocative manner.

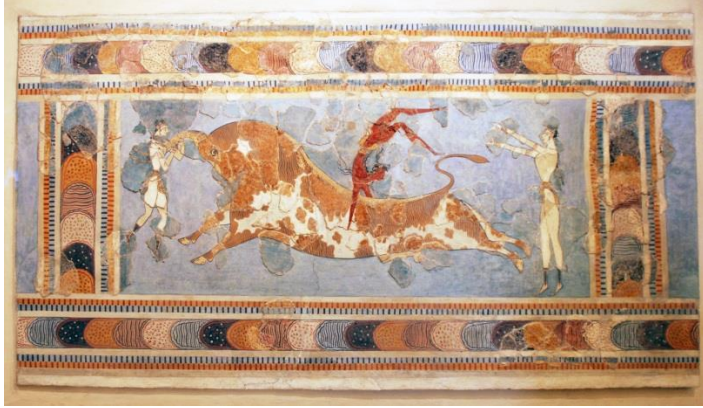


1 Beak Spouted jug from Southern Crete 2600-2300 BCE 2 Beak spouted Kemares ware jug from Phaistos c. 1800 BCE

For all the tangible evidence of life in the Cretan palaces, mysteries remain. We know that the Palace of Knossos was more than a royal residence; it functioned as the administrative and economic centre of the island while subsidiary palaces, perhaps occupied by lesser rulers, controlled other districts. The lack of fortifications around the palaces makes it clear that regional powers lived in peace with each other, and that the Minoan Navy protected the island from external attack. The supreme power of a king, as embodied in the legend of Minos is easy to accept. However, in the absence of written chronicles, we know nothing of the antecedents or successors of Minos. Religion was obviously important in Minoan Crete, but its nature remains a mystery. Does the powerful figure generally known as the snake goddess actually a goddess or was she a priestess?



We may wonder whether the story of Theseus and the Minotaur can be based on historical fact. Ancient legends tell us that Minos compelled the Athenians to sacrifice the flower of their youth, seven men and seven maidens, each year, to the Minotaur, and that Theseus, son of the king of Athens volunteered to go as one of the victims, With the help of Minos's daughter Ariadne, he slew the Minotaur and escaped with Ariadne. A visit to the museum leaves no doubt that daring athletes, grasping the horns of bulls and leaping over them, entertained the palace dwellers at Knossos. A fresco and several carvings illustrate the dangerous sport. Were these young people really sent from Athens?



Many scholars criticize Sir Arthur Evans for his restoration of the Palace of Knossos, on the basis of conjecture, but evidence in the museum makes it easy to see how he reached some of his conclusions. Fragments of a fresco, restored by artists in Evans's team, show the characteristic columns tapering towards the ground, and swelling at the top into rounded capitals. In the reconstruction, motifs resembling stylized bulls' horns, for which he found evidence on the site, crown the tops of walls. Scenes of life in the palace help us to visualise this unique culture.

When the new palaces were built after destruction of the old ones, Minoan architects who had seen stone walls torn apart by earthquakes, relied on wood for structural cohesion. They placed long wooden beams horizontally in the walls, between several courses of stone; wooden lintels spanned doors and windows; inverted tree trunks served as columns to support upper stories and roofs. By the time that Sir Arthur Evans was excavating the site, all the wood had rotted away, leaving voids in the compacted soil deposited around them. Columns and beams left their imprint on the soil, providing evidence of their form and of the pigments that covered them. This enabled Evans to replace them in concrete and thus to support masonry that would otherwise have collapsed entirely. Many experts deplore the restoration based on guesswork, but the alternative archaeological approach would have left little more than foundations and piles of rubble.

While the museum reveals the nature of Cretan civilization far more vividly than it did when I visited it twenty years ago, the palace of Knossos seems disappointing. In response to the huge crowds, movement through the partially reconstructed ruins is restricted and some spaces are inaccessible. I suggest going to the museum one day and reaching the palace early the next morning. Together they offer a vivid experience. Frequent buses run to Knossos from a stop opposite the museum.