

Minoan Art

Since the Minoan language, Linear A, has not been deciphered, we cannot read the written records left by their civilization. Minoan art, however, provides us with pictorial evidence about the Minoans and can be important for understanding their society and culture.

Painting

Perhaps the most impressive and evocative Minoan artworks are the brilliantly painted frescos that have been preserved in the ruins of Minoan palaces. Elements found in Egyptian painting, such as incorporating depicting people with one, frontal eye and painting men and women different colors, influenced Minoan painting. However, the Minoans made many of their own innovations. Unlike the Egyptians, who painted on dry walls, the Minoans painted on wet plaster, which allowed the paint to bind better but required quick execution before the plaster dried. This method resulted in paintings with fluid, rapid brushstrokes that suggested quick movement; this style of painting sharply contrasted the stiff and static art of the Egyptians.

Painted around 1500 BC, perhaps the best-known Minoan painting is the bull-jumping fresco at Knossos, also called the Toreador Fresco. Though it is clearly an image of a man jumping over a bull, it is uncertain what the fresco depicts: it could be a game, a religious ritual, a sacrifice, or many other things. Bulls were common subjects of Minoan art, indicating the importance of bulls in Minoan culture.

Another important fresco from Knossos is the boxing children fresco from the island of Santorini. It may be another example of a depiction of a game, but it also shows a controlled form of violence. There has been much scholarly debate as to how peaceful the Minoans were, and depictions of warfare were virtually nonexistent in Minoan art. However, such a boxing scene shows that there was violence in Minoan society, even if it was ritualized or simply a matter of sport.

Sculpture

The Minoans sculpted small objects made for dedication to the gods. Only a small portion of these have survived. These show strong influence from Egypt and Anatolia. A figurine called the "Snake Goddess," produced around 1600 BC, is perhaps the best known Minoan sculpture. In this sculpture, a very static female poses and her hands clutch writhing snakes. The "Snake Goddess" may inform us about Minoan society. It is one of many artistic depictions of women, and women seemed to have had an important place in Minoan society, having a much higher status than in contemporary mainland Greek culture. Some have gone so far as to suggest that Minoan society was a matriarchy, that is, ruled by women, though there is no real evidence of this. The sculpture could be a priestess, which may suggest that women had an important place in Minoan religion.

Bulls were also common subjects in Minoan sculpture. "Horns of Consecration," that is, sculpted horns, were common on the roofs of Minoan shrines and temples.

Their actual purpose is unclear, but this provides further indication of the importance of bulls in Minoans religion.

Pottery

While the Minoans created handmade pottery since their earliest settlements, the Protopalatial period saw an important new technology introduced to Crete: the potter's wheel. This allowed for the quick and efficient production of light and symmetrical pottery. Pottery has become vital for dating Minoan sites.

Minoans often decorated their pottery, and in many cases this decoration represented themes important to Minoan daily life. Octopi, starfish, dolphins, and other marine life were common decorations of Minoan pottery, representing the importance of ocean life for these sea-faring people. Plant and floral designs were also common on Minoan pottery, which showed the importance of nature to the Minoans. Toward the end of the Minoan Neopalatial period, a new type of style emerged, called the Marine Style. Minoans painted the entire surface of a pot with many different sea creatures as well as rocks, seaweed, and sponges, creating realistic underwater scenes. Such pottery shows us just how close the Minoans were to the sea.

Art after the Mycenaeans

With the coming of the Mycenaean occupiers to Crete around 1400 BC, there was no clear break with the Minoan past. Minoan artistic styles continued, though new themes gradually appeared in the art of the island. Depictions of soldiers and weapons became common as never before. Pottery became very similar to the sort produced on the Greek mainland. Slowly, the ruling Mycenaean Greek culture subsumed the Minoan civilization, though Minoan styles continued to have a strong influence. Thus, Minoan style art did not die out, rather artists integrated Minoan and Mycenaean styles.