Art in Western Europe

Neolithic art in Western Europe is most well-represented by its megalithic (large stone) monuments.

Figure 1:
View of Newgrange, Ireland

Newgrange is more than five hundred years older than the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, and predates Stonehenge by about a thousand years.

- Neolithic societies produced female and animal statues, engravings and elaborate pottery decoration in addition to megalithic structures.
- The Neolithic or New Stone Age was a period in human development that originated around 10,000 BC lasting until 3000 BC.
- Passage tombs or graves consist of narrow passages made of large stones and one or multiple burial chambers which have been covered in earth or stone. A common layout is the cruciform passage grave, characterized by a cross-shaped structure.
- Knowth is reputed to have approximately one third of all megalithic art in western Europe carved into its rock faces.
- The carvings at Newgrange are separated into ten categories consisting of curvilinear forms like circles, spirals, arcs, serpentiforms and dot-in-circles as well as rectilinear examples such as chevrons, lozenges, radials, parallel lines and offsets.
- The megalithic temples in Ggantija, Malta, have been theorized as possible sites of a fertility cult due to numerous associated figurines found on site.

Note: Curvilinear means “having bends” or “curved.” Rectilinear means “in a straight line.” Serpentiform means “having the form of a serpent.”
Figure 2: View of the eastern passage, Knowth, Ireland
The east-west orientation of the passages at Knowth suggests astronomical alignment with the equinoxes.

Figure 3: Entrance to megalithic temple at Ggantija, Malta
The Ġgantija temples are older than the pyramids of Egypt and have been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Neolithic Period

Also known as the New Stone Age, this was a period in human development that originated around 10,000 BC lasting until 3000 BC. Considered the last part of the Stone Age, the Neolithic is signified by a progression in behavioural and cultural characteristics including the cultivation of wild and domestic crops and the use of domesticated animals.

Agrarian societies first appeared in southeast Europe in the 7th millennium BC. Through migration and cultural diffusion, Neolithic traditions spread west and northwards to reach northwestern Europe by around 4500 BC.

Neolithic societies produced female and animal statues, engravings and elaborate pottery decoration but in western Europe it is most well-represented by its megalithic (large stone) monuments and passage tomb structures which have been found from Malta to Portugal, through France and Germany, and across southern England to most of Wales and Ireland.

Passage Tombs

Passage tombs or graves consist of narrow passages made of large stones, and one or multiple burial chambers which have been covered in earth or stone. Megaliths, or large stones, are commonly used in the construction of passage tombs and typically date to the Neolithic. A common layout is the cruciform passage grave, characterized by a cross-shaped structure.
Newgrange, Ireland

Newgrange is part of the Neolithic Bru na Boinne complex, a collection of passage tomb mounds built around 3200 BC and located in County Meath, Ireland (Figure 0).

The Newgrange monument is comprised of a large mound, built of alternating layers of earth and stones, covered with growing grass, and with flat white quartz stones studded around the circumference. The mound covers 4500 square meters of ground. Within it is a passage that stretches through the structure ending at three small chambers.

Newgrange contains various examples of abstract Neolithic art carved onto its rocks. The carvings are separated into 10 categories consisting of curvilinear forms like circles, spirals, arcs, serpentiforms and dot-in-circles as well as rectilinear examples such as chevrons, lozenges, radials, parallel lines and offsets.

There is no agreement as to what the site was used for, but it has been speculated that it had some form of religious significance due to its alignment with the rising sun which floods the stone room with light on the winter solstice.

Knowth, Ireland

Knowth is a Neolithic passage grave and monument located in the valley of the River Boyne in Ireland (Figure 1). Located in close proximity to similar sites such as Newgrange, Knowth consists of one large cruciform passage tomb, and 17 smaller satellite tombs, estimated to date between 2500 and 2000 BC.

Additionally, the monument contains three recesses and basin stones into which the cremated remains of the dead were placed. The right recess is larger and more elaborately decorated than the others, which is a typical trait of Irish passage graves though the reason is unknown. Many of the monuments at Knowth are known to have been megalithic tombs, and archaeologists speculate that most have religious significance.

Knowth is reputed to have approximately one third of all megalithic art in western Europe carved into its rock faces. Typical motifs include spirals, lozenges and serpentiform markings. Much of the art was carved on the backs of stones, which is a phenomenon known as hidden art. There are many theories for the function of hidden art, including a possible desire to hide images or the recycling of stones in order to use both sides.
Ggantija, Malta

The megalithic temple complexes of Ggantija on the Mediterranean islands of Gozo and Malta are notable for their gigantic Neolithic structures which date back to 3600 BC (Figure 2).

Situated at the end of the Xanghra plateau and facing towards the southeast, the temples are built in a clover leaf shape, with inner facing blocks marking the shape which was then filled with rubble, and leading to a series of semi-circular apses connected by a central passage.

The temples have been theorized as the possible site of a fertility cult due to numerous associated figurines found on site. The Hypogeum of Hal-Saflieni, located in Pola, Malta, is a subterranean structure excavated circa 2500 BC, the only prehistoric underground temple in the world, showing a degree of stone artistry unique to the Maltese islands.