MAN and the NATURAL WORLD: ANCIENT AEGEAN ART
(Cycladic, Minoan, and Mycenaean Art and Architecture)
AEGEAN ART

Online Links:

Cycladic Harp Player – Smarthistory

Mycenae – Smarthistory

Lion Gate at Mycenae – Smarthistory

Video on Knossos (no dialogue) – YouTube

Minoans Ancient Civilizations of Crete - YouTube

Rick Steves Visit to Mycenae - YouTube
Most of the Cycladic sculptures, like many of their Stone Age predecessors, represent nude women. The Cycladic examples often are women with their arms folded across their abdomens.

The sculptures, which excavators have found both in graves and settlements, vary in height from a few inches to almost life-size. The sculptor rendered the human body in a highly schematic manner. Large simple triangles dominate the form – the head, the body itself (which tapers off from exceptionally broad shoulders to tiny feet), and the incised triangular pubis.

The feet have the toes pointed downward, so the figurine cannot stand upright and must have been placed on its back in the grave-lying down, like the deceased.
Archaeologists speculate whether the Syros statuette and the many other similar Cycladic figurines known today represent dead women or fertility figures or goddesses.

In any case, the sculptors took pains to emphasize the breasts as well as the public area. In the Syros statuette, a slight swelling of the belly may suggest pregnancy.

Traces of paint found on some of the Cycladic figurines indicate that at least parts of these sculptures were colored. The now almost featureless faces would have had painted mouths in addition to the sculpted noses. Red and blue necklaces and bracelets, as well as painted dots on the cheeks and necks, characterize a number of the surviving figurines.
Palace of Knossos, Crete, c. 1700-1370 BCE

The largest Cretan palace— at Knossos— was the legendary home of King Minos. Here, the hero Theseus hunted the bull-man Minotaur in his labyrinth. According to the myth, after defeating the monster, Theseus found his way out of the mazelike complex only with the aid of the king’s daughter, Ariadne. She had given Theseus a spindle of thread to mark his path through the labyrinth and safely find his way out again.
While some scholars continue to believe that Minoan “palaces” were the residences and administrative centers of hereditary rulers, the evidence has suggested to others that Minoan society was not ruled by kings drawn from a royal family, but by a confederation of aristocrats or aristocratic families who established a fluid and evolving power hierarchy. In this light, some scholars interpret these elaborate complexes not primarily as residences, but as sites of periodic ceremony and ritual, perhaps enacted by a community that gathered within the courtyards that are their core architectural feature.
The rooms at Knossos were arranged around a courtyard in the center of the palace. This is where the famous bull-leaping ceremony, shown on wall paintings, may have taken place. Young acrobats would grab the horns of a bull and turn a somersault over its back. This ritual may have had some religious purpose. The young men and women who performed the dance were honored by the Minoans.
The so-called *Toreador Fresco* is perhaps the best-known wall painting from Knossos. It represents a charging bull, two girls, and one boy. The girl at the left grasps the bull’s horns, the boy somersaults over his back, and the girl at the right stands ready to catch him. Given the sacred character of the bull in the Minoan era and the myth of the Minotaur, it is believed that this fresco depicts a ritual sport, possibly involving the sacrifice of the bull, or the athletes, or both. As in Egyptian paintings, females are depicted with lighter skin color than males, and in each case a profile head is combined with a frontal eye.
The Knossos palace was a rambling structure built against the upper slopes and across the top of a low hill that rises from a fertile plain. All around the palace proper were mansions and villas of the Minoan elite.

At the northwest corner of the palace is a theater-like area with steps on two sides that may have served as seats. This arrangement is a possible forerunner of the later Greek theater. Its purpose is unknown, but the feature also appears in the Phaistos palace.
Spring Fresco, from room Delta 2, Akrotiri, Thera, c. 1650-1625 BCE
The frescoes at Akrotiri include the first pure landscape paintings we know of. Not even the most adventurous Egyptian artist of the Middle Kingdom would have devoted an entire composition to the out-of-doors.

The geographical location of Thera, north of Crete, places it squarely within the trading and seafaring routes between the Aegean, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. To date, archaeologists have uncovered large portions of an ancient and affluent town. The paved, winding streets and houses of stone and mud-brick indicate a high standard of living. Homes had basements for storage, workroom space, and upper-story living quarters. Mills attached to houses reflect an active farming as well as seafaring economy. Interior baths and toilets were connected with clay pipes to an extensive drainage and sewage system under the streets.
During the Old Palace period, Minoans developed elegant new types of ceramics, spurred in part by the introduction of the potter’s wheel early in the second millennium BCE. One type is called Kamares ware, named after the cave on Mount Ida overlooking the architectural complex at Phaistos, in southern Crete.

Motifs, whether spirals, coils, petals, or leaves, are repeated around the pots, urging the eye to move. Human figures are excluded altogether. Raised designs of diagonal ridges and patterns of dots, bosses, or prickles—so-called “barbotine decoration” — show that decorators explored texture as well as color.
The central motif of this vase is a great leaping fish and perhaps a fishnet surrounded by a host of curvilinear abstract patterns including waves and spirals. The swirling lines evoke life in the sea, and both the abstract and the natural forms beautifully complement the shape of the vessel.
Octopus Flask, from Palaikastro, Crete, c. 1450 BCE

The sea and the creatures that inhabit it also inspired the late Minoan Marine Style octopus flask. The tentacles of the octopus reach out over the curving surfaces of the vessel, embracing the piece and emphasizing its volume. The flask is a masterful realization of the relationship between the vessel’s decoration and its shape, always a problem for the vase painter. This later jar, which is contemporaneous with the new palaces at Knossos and elsewhere, differs markedly from its Kamares ware predecessor in color. Not only is the octopus more muted in tone, but the Late Minoan art also reversed the earlier scheme and place dark silhouettes on a light ground.
A number of stone ritual vases (rhyta, sing. rhyton) were decorated with relief scenes. Some have been found with flakes of gold leaf still attached, so that it is probably that all were originally gilt. The Harvester Vase is a rhyton made of steatite and in the shape of an ostrich egg, but only the upper part is preserved. The sculpted scene shows an elderly man with long hair, ceremonial dress, and staff, leading a procession of workmen. They carry winnowing fans for the harvest. At the back of the vase, a figure shakes a “sistrum” (a musical instrument) with his right hand, keeping time with his left, while behind him a trio join him in song, mouths wide open.
The uneven arrangement of elements reinforces the boisterousness of the scene. The men have large, coarse features and sinewy bodies so thin that their ribs stick out. Perhaps they have suffered a lean time, which gives them all the more reason to celebrate a good harvest. The vase depicts a group of 27 males including four bare-headed singers, with the rest wearing breech-cloths and carrying hoes. They are led by a figure described as a “long-haired priest in a scaly ritual cloak.”
Snake Goddess, from the palace of Knossos, Crete, c. 1600 BCE, faience

Surviving Minoan sculpture consists mainly of small, finely executed works, largely on religious subjects, in wood, ivory, precious metals, stone, and faience (low-fired opaque glass-like silicate). The Woman of Goddess with Snakes from the palace of Knossos is intriguing both as a ritual object and as a work of art. Female figurines incorporating serpents were fashioned on Crete as far back as 6,000 BCE and may have been associated-as they were elsewhere-with water, regenerative power, and protection of the home.

The nearly foot-tall faience figurine from Knossos was found with other ceremonial objects in a pit in one of the palace’s temple storerooms. Bare-breasted, arms extended, and brandishing a snake in each hand, the woman is a commanding presence. A wild cat is perched on her crown, which is ornamented with circles resembling those on the headdresses of earlier such statues. This shapely figure is dressed in a fitted, open bodice with an apron over a typically Minoan long tiered skirt.
The motif of a male or female deity dominating animals, referred to as the “Master” or “Mistress of the Beasts,” occurs earlier in the ancient Near East and later in Greek art. As creatures of the earth, snakes were associated with fertility and agriculture, and did not have the evil connotations with which they later became endowed in the West.

Life-size bare-breasted female figures in clay, fragments of which were discovered on the island of Kea in the Cyclades, would appear to have been not unlike the small snake goddesses in form. They were all found together in what may have been a temple, the only instance as yet discovered of such a building in the Aegean at the period. Apart from the snake goddess, there are few explicitly religious images in Minoan sculpture or painting. Nor is there any historical scene, nor even a single portrait which can be identified as that of a ruler.
In the 1860s, Heinrich Schliemann, a successful young German businessman, became an archaeologist. Schliemann was convinced that certain Greek myths were based on historical events. He focused his search on the legends of the Trojan War, and its heroes described by Homer. In 1870, Schliemann first excavated the site of Troy on the west coast of Turkey. Years later he excavated Mycenae, the legendary city of Agamemnon, in the northeast of the Peloponnese, on the Greek mainland. The subsequent excavations of other similar Greek sites have revealed that a Mycenaean culture flourished between 1600 and 1200 BCE. After the eruption of Thera, the Aegean was dominated by the Mycenaean, who began by conquering Crete and ruling the island from Knossos.
The Lion Gate crowned the entrance to the citadel of Mycenae. Its opening is framed by a post-and-lintel structure, and the triangular section over the lintel consists of a relieving triangle. This was formed by corbelling, or arranging layers, called courses, of stones so that each level projects beyond the lower one. When the stones meet at the top they create an arch.

Filling in the triangle is a relief of two lions placing their paws on a concave Minoan altar. They flank a Minoan-style column, which is a symbol of the Nature Goddess. The relief is thus an image showing the lions obedient to the goddess as “Mistress of the Beasts,” and the power immanent in her symbol. The heads of the lions are missing. Originally they were carved separately to project frontally and fulfill their traditional role as guardians of an entrance.
Unlike the nobility, most of the citizens lived in small stone and mud-brick houses below the citadel. In times of siege, they sought refuge within its walls. The defensive fortifications of the Mycenaean cities reflect a society more involved in war than were the Minoans, and thus more concerned with protection from invaders.

These considerations led to building the thick, monumental walls that surround most Mycenaean citadels. They were constructed of large, rough-cut-, irregular blocks of stone... Because of the enormous weight of such stones, the later Greek called the walls Cyclopaean.
The most dramatic surviving structure at Mycenae exemplifies the culmination of Mycenaean royal tomb architecture in the thirteenth century BCE. This tomb, or tholos (Greek for ‘round building’), has been called both the Treasury of Atreus and the tomb of Agamemnon, who was Atreus’ son. It is not known who was buried there, but because of its enormous size, it was doubtless intended for royalty.

The tholos was entered through a dromos, or roadway, 118 feet long, whose walls were faced with rectangular stone blocks. Once the dead body had been placed inside the tholos, the door was closed and the entrance walled up with stones until such time as it had to be reopened for later burials. All that would have been visible from the exterior was the mound of earth covering the tomb and the dromos.
Funerary mask, from Grave Circle A, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1500 BCE, beaten gold

This mask is a good example of the goldwork found in royal Mycenaean graves, although the gold itself was imported. The mask may have covered the face of a ruler once thought to have been Agamemnon, but in fact his identity is unknown. Despite stylizations such as the scroll-shaped ears, the more distinctive features— the thin lips and curved mustache—are those of a particular person, indicating that this was a death mask.

Made of hammered gold sheets (using a technique called repoussé), these masks would have covered the faces of the deceased, completing a finely made costume of durable materials. The eyes appear closed on this example, as was the more common practice, although occasionally they were open.
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ACTIVITIES and REVIEW
STUDENT PRESENTATION #1:

What stylistic features seen in these two frescoes are characteristic of the art of the ancient Minoans? Analyze ways in which these Minoan frescoes reflect this ancient culture’s relationship with the natural world.
In what ways does the ancient Minoan site of Knossos differ from the Mycenaean citadel on the Greek mainland? What may account for these differences?
The site of **Tlatilco**, in the western portion of the Valley of Mexico, is well known for its distinctive figurines, which were among the earliest produced in Mesoamerica. This example is prototypical of a variety often referred to as "pretty ladies." Characteristically, the figurine is completely nude, revealing an exaggerated contrast in proportions, from heavy thighs and hips to stumpy feet and a wasp waist.

The short arms extend away from the body in a pose that has led to the additional designation as "dancers." Tlatilco figurines document a fascination with physical deformities, the most common being two-headed or fused-head females. The works may depict an extremely rare deformity known as **diprosopus**, literally "two-faced" conjoined twins (almost always stillborn), who would have struck Tlatilco natives as otherworldly and supernatural. Diprosopus imagery was probably implemented to symbolize duality, a fundamental concept ubiquitous to Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican religions.
The analysis of the burial materials also provide information about Tlatilco’s social ranking, specialized activities and inter-regional connections.

Evidence of long-distance trade, such as seashells, jade ornaments, iron-ore mirrors, marine turtle shells and pearl oyster pendants have been found in some burials, suggesting not only the presence of pan-Mesoamerican connections, but also the existence at Tlatilco of social groups with preferential access to these exotic goods.

Finally, the finding of such luxury items in child burials would suggest the existence at Tlatilco of some sort of hereditary system, where people, presumably leaders, were allowed to take out of circulation precious and exotic goods and bury them with infants—who could not have possibly acquired them by themselves—therefore marking an example of early inherited social inequality.
Although little is known for certain about these works, how do their visual characteristic offer clues to both similarities and differences in the way they possibly functioned within the cultures that created them?
Machu Picchu, Peru, Inka, 15th century

Built in the fifteenth century Machu Picchu was abandoned when the Inca Empire was conquered by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. It was not until 1911 that the archaeological complex was made known to the outside world.

The approximately 200 structures making up this outstanding religious, ceremonial, astronomical and agricultural center are set on a steep ridge, crisscrossed by stone terraces. Following a rigorous plan the city is divided into a lower and upper part, separating the farming from residential areas, with a large square between the two.

To this day, many of Machu Picchu’s mysteries remain unresolved, including the exact role it may have played in the Incas’ sophisticated understanding of astronomy and domestication of wild plant species.
Although much is still unknown about these sites, what clues about their builders do they provide in the way these complexes were situated within the landscape and designed to accommodate specific needs or practices?