

BETWEEN THE LAND, SEA, AND SKY:  
SOME WORDS ON THE ART OF THE MINOAN  
CIVILIZATION OF BRONZE AGE CRETE

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Crete's mystery is extremely deep.  
Whoever sets foot on this island senses  
a mysterious force branching warmly  
and beneficently through his veins,  
senses his soul begin to grow

*Nikos Kazantzakis*

**Abstract.** Usually, our knowledge of history, society, and culture is based on the written sources. However, the Minoan texts are extremely few. Thus, the Minoan art appears to be almost the only source of our knowledge of the Minoan civilization and culture. This paper attempts to analyze the phenomenon of the Minoan art of Bronze Age Crete. Discovered by A. Evans, the Minoan civilization — an Aegean Bronze Age civilization — flourished on the island of Crete and some other Aegean islands, in particular on Thera/Santorini with its settlement of Akrotiri. For quite a long time, the Minoan civilization had been labeled as peaceful making reference to Minoan Thalassocracy, “Pax Minoica”, and a rather small number of fortifications. The lack of written information has given vent to researchers’ fantasy and the idea of the Minoan culture as the Golden Age of humanity was not accidental: the Minoan artists portrayed life as a continuous flow of beauty, an endless game, in which fleeting emotions and joy become the spring of happiness. Later, the conception of peaceful Minoans was re-evaluated. Evans’s reconstructions were subjected to serious criticism from the standpoint of contemporary archeology. However, we can “throw out the baby with the bath water”. We do not have to accept everything Evans stated about the Minoans, but we should be grateful for his profound inquiry into the unknown world of the human past. The Minoan art is important for contemporary humans because it draws attention to a harmonious life in the world of here and now; it carries an incredible power of inspiration and beauty; it brings a feeling of lightness, joy and a happy flight of a soul into our lives. And that really matters.

**Keywords:** Minoan Art, Minoan civilization, Arthur Evans, Crete, Palace of Knossos, Minoan frescoes.

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## Introduction

**Relevance of the study.** The world around us is so beautiful that it is almost impossible to pass by blooming flowers, full moon, frolicking animals, blazing sunsets, ever changing deep sea, unique landscapes, good-looking people and remain indifferent. We stand in reverence and gratitude facing with something that is more than our habitual perceptions—with something that leads us to the new spiritual heights. One of the cultures whose art is permeated with a sense of beauty woven from the sun and sea was the Minoan culture.

The Minoan civilization—an Aegean Bronze Age civilization—flourished on the island of Crete and some other Aegean islands, in particular on Thera/Santorini with its settlement of Akrotiri. According to the widespread hypothesis, the eruption of the Santorini volcano destroyed the Minoan civilization of Crete; this formed the basis of the legend of Atlantis, which was described by Plato in his “Timaeus” and “Critias” dialogues [20]. Still now, the lost city of Atlantis is one of the most enduring myths. Many suggestions have been put forward as to Atlantis location; Crete and Santorini are among them. Many of the details of the Atlantis legend fit with what is known about Crete and the Minoan civilization. On the other hand, the history of the Minoan civilization does not correlate with the location and time of existence indicated by Plato. Some explorers suggest that such inconsistencies are just the result of the mistaken translation [12], while others totally deny the Cretan/Santorini hypothesis of Atlantis [7]. “Description given by Plato of Atlantis can be matched to numerous places around the world; and so the probability is that no site will ever be confirmed as Atlantis, even if Atlantis is real. Any archeological site would have to come complete with a sigh saying “This is Atlantis”, otherwise doubts would always exist” [25].

The Minoan civilization was discovered by the prominent British archeologist Arthur Evans (1851–1941). He excavated the ruins of the ancient city of Knossos. Starting his work in Crete in March 1900, he was amused: “The extraordinary phenomenon: nothing Greek—nothing Roman—perhaps one single fragment of late black varnished ware among tens of thousands. Nay its great period [that of Knossos] goes at least well back to pre-Mycenaean period” [11, p. 317]. Evans was so enthusiastic about his findings that he devoted the rest of his life to the re-discovered civilization, which he called the Minoan civilization. It was named after King Minos, the legendary ruler of Crete and the son of Zeus and Europa. Along with Evans, after the liberation of Crete from Turkish control in 1898, a number of archeological interventions have been carried out by Italian archeologists at Phaistos, British at Kato Zakro, American at Gournia.

Archeologists use two systems of chronology of the Minoan civilization. The first was created by Evans and modified by the other archeologists: Early Minoan/Early Bronze Age (c. 3600 — c. 2100 BCE); Middle Minoan/Middle Bronze Age (c. 2100 — c. 1600 BCE); Late Minoan/Late Bronze Age (c. 1600 — c. 1100 BCE). Another Minoan civilization timeline was introduced by a renowned Greek archeologist Nikolaos Platon (1909–1992). It is based on the development of the architectural complexes—palaces at Knossos, Phaistos, Malia, and Kato Zakro. Platon divided the Minoan civilization into Prepalatial (c. 3500 — c. 1900 BCE); Protopalatial/Old Palace Period (c. 1900 —

c. 1750 BCE); Neopalatial/New Palace Period (c. 1750 — c. 1500); Postpalatial (c. 1500 — c. 1100 BCE) [24].

For the years of excavation, thousands of square meters of wonderful palaces were dug out: complex corridor systems, rooms with beautiful paintings, light wells, storerooms, water supply and sewerage systems, bath rooms, etc. For quite a long time, Minoan civilization had been labeled as peaceful making reference to Minoan Thalassocracy, “Pax Minoica”, and a rather small number of fortifications [1]. Later, the conception of peaceful Minoans was re-evaluated [2; 17; 23]. Nevertheless, the palaces are not associated with fortresses. On the contrary, there are palaces of opulence and splendor surrounded by the mountains, olive groves, amazing flowering of the plains, warm velvety sea. All this beauty influenced ancient Minoans’ lives and shaped their culture and art.

Key points and ideas for the exploration of the re-discovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Minoan culture were developed by A. Evans, H. Boyd, F. Halbherr, M. Ventris, J.C. Poursat, D.G. Howarth, N. Platon, S. Marinatos, and many others. The Minoan art was studied by F. Matz, H. Th. Bossert. Contemporary research into DNA from teeth taken from Bronze Age Cretan skeletons showed that ancient Cretans — representatives of the Minoan civilization — had the principal relationships to “Neolithic, ancient and modern European populations” [16]. In recent years, new findings, which can shed some light on this mysterious civilization, have been made by G. Rethemiotakis, M. Tsipopoulou, M. Prent. Some explorers even try to introduce the concept of the Minoan Great Goddess into the domain of gender studies and psychology [3; 5; 6]. However still now, there are more questions than answers. History, culture and art of the Minoan civilization are to be studied in the frame of transdisciplinary paradigm.

**The purpose of the study.** This paper attempts to analyze the phenomenon of the Minoan art of Bronze Age Crete.

**The research methodology.** Exploratory research design was used to conduct this study. The author has used the hermeneutic approach, comparative-historical and cultural-historical methods, as well as anthropological integrative approach.

## **The Minoan Art: Joyful Admiration for the World**

Usually, our knowledge of history, society, culture is based on the written sources. However, the Minoan texts are extremely few. Thus, the Minoan culture looks like a book with colorful illustrations, but without text. Indeed, Knossos palace wall murals can be compared to movies without sound — religious processions are moving towards the Goddess, ships are sailing, acrobats are risking their lives playing with a bull, beautiful ladies are watching something interesting, but unfortunately we cannot understand what they are talking about. The lack of written information has given vent to researchers’ fantasy and the idea of the Minoan culture as the Golden Age of humanity was not accidental. This is an art where everything is joyful, serene and simple without hesitation, doubt and dream; where life is a continuous flow of beauty, an endless game, in which fleeting emotions and joy become the spring of happiness [19].

Everything in the palace of Knossos (the biggest one, 22.000 sq. meters and 1.400 rooms) speaks about the desire to make daily life as comfortable and pleasant as possible — it is light and cool here even on the hottest days. It was achieved by replacing the windows with the light wells. The fragile and decorative form of columns tapering downwards is the feature of Cretan architecture. There is nothing bulky, overwhelming. The art of Minoan Crete is atectonic, weightless. Palaces have picturesque composition, different levels are combined into the whole palace complex — seems architectures try to avoid any regular plan. Light wells and stairs, porticos and galleries, balconies and terraces all together create the effect of surprise, the contrast of light and shadow, spatial dynamics. The palaces were oriented towards sacred mountains, “many of them having an important peak sanctuary on top of them, or, in the case of Phaistos, a sacred cave” [21]. The palaces and mountain sanctuaries can be seen as two parts of one unified system.

Minoan art emphasizes frontal, profile, and overhead views. Sometimes frontal and profile views are combined. Distant objects are sometimes shown slightly smaller [14]. Human life is balancing between the upper and lower worlds embracing both of them. One of the most famous frescoes is the Bull-Leaping Fresco from Knossos (little after 1550 BCE), which is restored of several stucco panels.



The Bull-Leaping Fresco. The Palace of Knossos, Heraklion, Crete  
(Author's photo archive)

We see a huge frantically energetic bull whose deliberately elongated figure fills almost the entire fresco. In front of him, behind him and on him, there are slender but strong acrobats playing the deathly dangerous game with the furious animal. The artist marked both the upper and lower boundaries of the world, the bull rushes in the “undefined” world space [19]. The space “overturms on” the viewer; the horizon line goes beyond the fresco. This composition is so vivid and lightweight, that we perceive it as an easy and pleasant fleeting vision. Despite the danger, the artist showed the elegant game. Games with a bull apparently had magical overtones and were related to religious beliefs and ceremonies. This fresco has created debates among researchers over the identities of the human figures regarding their color of the skin. Evans introduced the hypothesis that white (or lighter) skin indicated females, while red (or darker) skin — males. Wolfe proposes the other possibility to interpret

the different body colors, that is, as “a temporal sequence of steps in the representation of the individual carrying out the leap... it is possible that this is the action of only one figure, one of extreme athletic capabilities, which can be seen with his realistic musculature; and of high social rank, because of the elaborate hairstyle, which is adorned with ribbons and other decoration. Regardless, there are many possibilities for the identity of the leaping figure, but they all represent the ceremonial action of bull-leaping and its importance within Minoan culture” [26].

Nevertheless, sticking to the traditional interpretation of white figures as females and dark as males, we can mention that Minoan women took part even in these risky, dangerous “corridas” alongside men. In general, it seems that women were the center of the Minoan world. It can be said that the entire Minoan culture bears the stamp of femininity — typically female tastes and inclinations. Sculptors and artists preferred miniature forms, small details; used smooth, wavy lines; avoided sharply outlined, angular figures and objects; liked bright colors in wall and vase paintings. Men in the Minoan art are as good-looking as women; they can sometimes be distinguished by their color only.

The Minoan paintings are perhaps the most complete and wonderful expression of the Minoan artistic ideal. Comparing to the art of Egypt and Mesopotamia, these paintings reveal a completely new, exciting world. Neopalatial Knossos fresco the “Ladies in Blue” (c. 1650 — c. 1550 BCE) depicts three white-skinned beautiful women with narrow waists, long necks, bare breasts; they are adorned with sophisticated necklaces, bracelets, hair decorations. Perhaps, they are court ladies or even priestesses: they are dressed the same fashion as the Minoan goddesses/priestesses with snakes, whose figurines were found in the Palace of Knossos. But regardless of who they are, these women who personify the moment in its fullness and beauty are so exciting today.



The Ladies in Blue Fresco. The Palace of Knossos, Heraklion, Crete  
(Author’s photo archive)

A fragment of a wall painting shows the profile of a young girl. A big frontal eye is depicted the same way as eyes in Egyptian paintings. But the spirit of the painting is completely different. This image with a lively face,

cherry mouth, playful dark curls does not seem to be so ancient coming from the darkness of the centuries. The sacral knot worn at the back of her neck may indicate that this lady is a priestess or even a goddess. The painting is lively and vibrant and at the same time accurate and laconic. It expresses inspiration and naturalism of the Minoan art. It is clear why Evans immediately called the girl “La Parisienne” as she was thought to epitomize feminine beauty and elegance of that time. This figure belongs to a larger composition the “Camp Stool Fresco” (c. 1450 — c. 1300 BCE) that shows standing and seated figures on camp stools raising cup and kylikes.



La Parisienne Fresco. The Heraklion Archeological Museum, Crete  
Author's photo archive

It is no accident that the Minoan artists paid much attention to the women's world. Dating back to Evans and his discoveries [10], it was believed that Minoan women had occupied a privileged place in the Minoan society: the Minoan “center of gravity” was shifted towards women. The amazing images of the court ladies found in the Palace of Knossos got researchers thinking about it. It is difficult to find any close analogies both in the ancient Eastern art and the art of classical Greece. Minoan women seem to be free in their actions and desires — they are depicted without men or in the foreground of a picture.

Minoan preeminent deity was the Mother Goddess/Great Goddess who embodied fertility, birthing, nursing, power, protection; who mediated between life, death and rebirth, the known and unknown; who had power over the natural world [6]. It seems that Minoan Crete was a Goddess-centered and women-centered society. Thus, women in the Minoan art are given great respect, “women were important, perhaps because they had some kind of privileged access to the mysteries of nature and the spirit world” [15, p. 54].

The “Prince of the Lilies” Fresco (c. 1550 BCE) is a famous ancient Minoan fresco, which was found in fragments and restored according to an artist’s vision. A young handsome man is depicted against the red background. He is wearing a crown adorned with lilies; hence, the other name of the fresco is the “Priest-King”. His stance indicates that he is pulling something or someone with his left hand. However, his left arm was missing and the interpretation of his gesture is unknown. This young man is refined and elegant, but he is not weak — his well developed muscles, excellent posture and calm self-confidence indicate he could participate in bull-leaping. In general, people in the Minoan art are beautiful. Perhaps, for a Minoan artist there was nothing more admirable than beauty in all its forms.



The “Prince of the Lilies” Fresco. The Palace of Knossos, Heraklion, Crete  
Author’s photo archive

## Observing the Minoan Art through the Lens of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The Minoan artists lived in the very moment, and this moment brought charm and beauty into their creativity. The Minoan art deified the natural world. Humans, flowers, birds, bees, dolphins, octopuses, corals, starfishes are equal inhabitants of the Minoan masterpieces — frescoes, magnificent vases, glyptics, jewellery. The sea was dominant for Minoans, thus, many motifs were borrowed from the sea depths. We clearly feel the love of the artists for the sea, for the eternal movement that reigns in it. The endless blue sky, deep green-blue-purple sea, blossoming groves “gave” their bright colors to the Minoan artists. The Minoans enriched the world art with fluidity and movement as the basis of the artistic image; with the wavy patterns; with the desire to capture



the very moment. In many ways it is close to the artistic vision of a modern human.

The Minoan artworks available to us today are to a large extent the restorations, reconstructions, and artistic variations. Even the Minoan world, according to some researchers, was invented by Evans [13]. Archeological excavations in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century challenged the very idea of the peaceful Minoans and the Golden Age of humanity: “Soon after the 1960s, when the Minoans had been conscripted into the popular imagination as a prehistoric version of hippie culture (lilies pointing to the ancient equivalent of flower power), the archaeological mood changed. Some controversial discoveries close to Knossos of children’s bones (carrying suspicious marks of butchery) raised the nasty possibility that the peace-loving Minoans had actually been human sacrificers. New research projects in the 1970s and 1980s focused on the networks of roads and fortifications with which the prehistoric elite of the palace of Knossos had strictly controlled their home territory — while scholarly attention also turned to the high-quality state-of-the-art weaponry that had generally been ignored in favor of Evans’s “lustral areas”, “bull dancers”, “saffron gatherers”, and lilies. So much for the pax Minoica” [4].

Evans’s reconstructions were subjected to serious criticism from the standpoint of contemporary archeology. However, we can “throw out the baby with the bath water”. We do not have to accept everything he stated about the Minoans, but we should be grateful for his profound inquiry into the unknown world of the human past. Furthermore, as Nietzsche emphasized, there are no facts, only interpretations. And human history is a long chain of more or less successful interpretations that may vanish in the daylight of the new truth [8].

The Minoan art is important for contemporary humans because it draws attention to a harmonious life in the world of here and now; it carries an incredible power of inspiration and beauty. Humans, animals, fish, birds, flowers in their harmonious interaction act as a central point of the artistic space — they make us dream of the Golden Age of humanity. Probably under the influence of the Minoan art, I. Yefremov wrote his magnificent novel “Thais of Athens”. Numerous images of beautiful women in the dominant positions of the Great Goddess led to the idea of the Cretan matriarchy (or Cretan matrilineal society) and inspired scientists to undertake new research in the domain of gender and feminist studies. For example, a feminist historian and theologian C. Christ made the Goddess movement a recognizable international cultural movement.

## Conclusions

The Minoan art reflects a joyful and slightly childish perception of life. The Minoan paintings with bright colors seem to be a hymn of earthly joy and beauty that brings comfort and reconciliation with reality [9]. As I. Yefremov described it, “The impossibly beautiful Cretan art never portrayed military heroics. Images of victorious kings, tortured victims, tied and humiliated prisoners of war were absent from these palaces and temples. Instead, the art was of nature: animals, flowers, sea waves, trees, and people walking among them, primarily women. Ritual sacrifices and bull games, strange animals never seen either in Hellas or on the shores of Finikia were all portrayed in these frescoes.



The sophistication of their taste and perception of beauty amazed Helenians, who considered themselves to be above all people in the Ecumene. The delicate paintings were full of joy, light and purity of color. There were statues of women, animals and domestic pets, amazing seashells made of ceramic, but no mighty heroes, swinging swords or raising heavy shields and spears. Where else in the world was there a country that dedicated all of its art to the harmonious connection between people and nature, and above all to women?" [27, p. 17].

Hardly ever in the history of humankind there was a society that did not know wars, conflicts, suffering, and pain. And the Minoan world was not an exception. But the Minoan art has the power to bring a feeling of lightness, joy and a happy flight of a soul into our lives, to "develop the experience necessary for the evolution of the Universe — the discovery of a new beauty" [18, p. 93]. And that really matters.

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