

# Minoan and Mycenaean Art

*3000 BC to 1100 BC*

## Minoan Art

Also, referred to as Cretan art because it evolved on the island of Crete, the Minoan art, along with the Mycenaean art, are included in the Greek art. Both the former arts contribute to the creation and progress of art and culture of Greece. The history of both the Minoan and Mycenaean arts is in a way the history of Greek art in the pre-Hellenic period.

The Minoan art progressed on the island of Crete, which has a great coast; surrounded by bays, straits, archipelagos, and isles of numerous sizes, big and small. This provided the convenience of natural harbours to the Minoans. Therefore, since a very early stage, they devoted their attention to 'navigation' as their source of occupation and used it to establish trade relations with the neighbouring countries.

The tag 'Minoan Art' is derived from the name of the famous King Minos. Many stories related to King Minos are told in Greek mythology and fables.

The Minoans, unlike the Egyptians, are seen to have been non-believers in 'life after death', and found absorbed in enjoying the comforts of life. Their favourite sport was conducting 'Bull Fights'.

There is no definite cause that can be ascertained as to how the Minoan civilization ended abruptly. Certain inferences that are drawn in this regard are: the Minoans may have not been able to withstand the more powerful and aggressive tribal forces that existed then, or may have been swept by natural calamities such as tsunami, earthquake fire, or may have declined due to systematic plundering by certain foreign invaders.

## Sculpture

There are no large sculptures found in Crete. Architecture existed but scarcely. Not much importance looks to have been attached to religion in

Minoan life, which is why there are no temples. But little artefacts seem to have been produced in abundance to export them to foreign regions. Resource material like brass, ivory, gold, copper, silver, terracotta were being used to make sculptures. Two terracotta sculptures of Knossos of the period 1600 BC are well-known. Probably these could have been idols of deities. Among these, in the design on the hands, body and head of one of the deities, coils of three large serpents are drawn. The bodies of these deities are conically shaped, with wide, bulging eyes and bow-shaped eyebrows. Gauging from all these attributes, it is said that these may have been influenced by Mesopotamian art. Certain carved, miniature sculptures of brass and stone too have been found in the excavation; probably used for decorating the home interiors. Some of the stone sculptures are seen to have carvings designed on them. Limestones have been used for these creations. Of these, the two vessels, Boxer Vase and Harvester Vase are famous for engravings done on them. The Minoans were also adept at metallurgy, which manifests itself in the low-relief works seen to have been created on the golden dining crockery of those times. The low relief impact has been brought about by striking the back side of golden sheets. This method is called the 'Repousse Technique'. The 'Cafiopela' and 'Octopus vase' utensils are very famous. Some of these have human figures and landscapes depicted on them.

## **Architecture**

The Minoans had used several types of resource-material in their architecture, like clay, limestone and gypsum walls, wooden beams and use of stones for the foundation or fortification. The Trabeated Structure design is seen to be largely used in Minoan architecture. The temples are conspicuously absent here.

### **The Knossos Palace**

The archaeological finds in Crete were discovered by Arthur Evans. When he began excavation at Knossos, he unearthed a palace there. This edifice, which is said to have been built three times has no fortification and was destroyed around the period 1000 BC. Crete had many palaces. The palace of Knossos is the largest of all and most famous. It may have been built around the year 2000 BC, and existed for 600 years. Huge and solidly built palaces were characteristic of Minoan architecture. The Knossos

palace was huge and spacious, with sitting rooms, lobbies, balconies and different chambers. These chambers are found to be designed in a way that in consideration of sunlight in varying seasons, they could be brought into use at separate times of the day. There was a big central courtyard and wide-stepped large stairways in the palace. These stairs were placed over wooden columns. These columns were special as they had no foundation and slightly tapered downwards from the capital to the base. The capital form used to be designed like a rim or square-shaped. The Doric Capital of the Greek art during the Hellenic period was based on this design. The plot seen at the north-west may have been designed purposefully for a drama theatre. There is a space that seems like a circular stage. This spot may have been used for plays or sports competitions, which seem to have been a part of Minoan life. Looking at a specific part of the palace which looks like a deity chamber, the king seems to himself have been a spiritual preceptor.

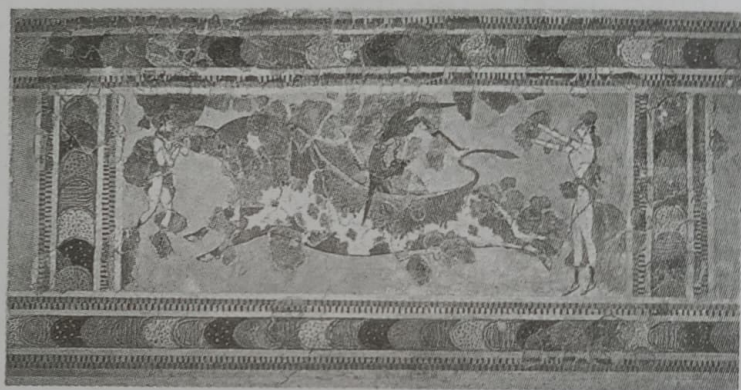
Palaces designed like the Knossos, but not as huge, were built at Phaistos and Hagia Triada. Pillars have been used on a large scale here. Since both these structures are atop hills, the height of the hills has been kept intact to build them. These palaces have open railings with a roof above. The palaces do not have huge entrance gates. Moreover, there does not seem to be any pre-determined plan or systematic design. The walls are adorned with colourful murals.

## **Visual Art**

Minoan visual art is manifested through the murals drawn in their palaces. These murals seem to have been created with pure technical methods. In this technique, the first step is plastering and pictures are drawn and coloured in wet plaster. Hence, due to the drying up of the colours along with the plaster these murals have endured the test of time and still look fresh. These murals had to be executed with great confidence and within no time, since once the mural walls went dry, no corrections or changes could be made.

The Minoans have adorned the walls of the palaces with murals and bas-reliefs. The colours used for the murals are shining and bright. The subjects in these murals are beautiful landscapes, huge palaces, royal processions, dance and male sports. Scenes of war or aggression are

absent here. One can notice from this the self-willed, independent and worldly perspective of the Minoans. The attires of males in the pictures are simple, but the female costumes are attractive and affluent-looking. The latter are also shown to be covered with ornaments and jewellery. The love for nature and the ocean are also reflected through these murals. On one of the gallery walls of the Knossos palace, a beautiful coloured scene of a shore has been depicted. The oceanic waves are shown by wavy lines, while a mountain range is shown by overlapping three mountains. Pictures of aquatic animals like fish, octopus, etc. are seen besides figures of



flowers, deers, monkeys, and birds. Thus, Minoan art was based on natural forms. There is no use of perspective seen here to create an illusion of space in these pictures. They are coloured flat and yet the minute details are drawn realistically. The human figures are depicted as slim and tall.

## Pottery

The chief occupation of the Minoans was making earthen and metal wares. They are considered the most proficient metallurgists of the ancient world. They exported these goods to regions such as Asia Minor, Egypt, Greece, and Western Europe. The amazing utensils made from metals such as gold, silver and brass are regarded as characteristic of the art and artisanship of the Cretan island. The clay vessels that were produced were of different shapes ranging from those as thin as the egg outer crust to the very thick ones. They also made a huge vase-shaped robust vessel to store grains. A variety is seen in the colourful decoration done on clay wares. On some vessels, we can see geometrical forms, whereas on others, pictures of aquatic creatures such as fish, conches, shells, octopus, are found.

Curvy and wavy-shaped forms are seen in the design. Utensils with a grade of shines – immense shine, lesser shine and no shine at all were produced. While colouring vessels they painted pictures with light and dull colours on deep hued backgrounds, and dark colours on light and dull backgrounds. There seems to have been no use of human forms nor any incident depiction while decorating the clay wares.

## **Mycenaean Art**

As we gathered information about Cretan art and culture due to the excavations conducted by Arthur Evans, so did we come to know of Mycenaean art and civilization, thanks to excavations by Heinrich Schliemann in the period between 1874 to 1890. During the period 1500 BC in Southern Greece, the Mycenaean civilization evolved. Homer in his epic poem, 'Iliad', has mentioned the names of cities like Mycenae, Tiryns, Thebes.

Around the year 1600 BC, Greek tribal mobs, in attempts to colonize these regions, battled against each other, and built forts for protection. The Minoans did not feel the need to build defence walls around their cities, but the Mycenaeans erected fortification and built fortresses. The thickness of the walls of the fortification around the city of Tiryns is 9 metres.

## **Architecture**

The Mycenaeans aped the Minoan art techniques while making artefacts of metal and clay. But they seem to have made their own impression in architecture by making use of grand arches and building structures meant for separate occasions. The cities Tiryns and Mycenae were basically forts built on hills. Considering that the chief motive in erecting these structures was security, stone blocks were used on a large scale for construction. These were piled one over the other with the gaps in between filled with clay-mixed lime. The forts housed the abodes and offices of kings and chieftains. These forts had broad and solid defence walls, which had huge entrance gates. Certain paths in the fortification being arched, led to the entrance. Some abodes were equipped with large halls. These abodes, called 'megaron' were designed in three parts. Beginning first with an open space having sheds for animals, it is followed by a cloister, behind which there were meeting rectangular rooms; with an

oven in the centre surrounded by four columns. This Megaron, it is said, later may have provided the base for the Greeks to imagine the *sanctorum* for their temples.

Another prominent feature in the Mycenaean architecture, akin to the fort structures, are the 'tombs'. These are of two types. One that is dug straight into the ground at right angle is the ordinary tomb of the earliest type. But the ones discovered on excavation on the slopes of the hill are of a different kind. There are small and big chambers in these tombs and the roofs over it are fixed in the walls and are built over the stones protruding from the walls. The tomb identified as the 'Treasury of Atreus' at Mycenae is a fine example of this second kind. There is a path of arched tent-like roofs. It was possible to go under the dome through this path. Oblations offered to the dead were kept here. There was a rectangular tomb to one side of this dome. Unlike the cave tombs in Egypt, these may have been built to preserve the memory of brave warriors. Like Minoan architecture, there are no temples to be seen in Mycenaean constructions either.

## **Sculpture**

There is not much really in the form of architectural models available even in Mycenaean Sculpture, owing to no religious fanfare to be seen even here. Thus, sculpture did not receive special encouragement.

A fine example of architecture is the 'lion gate' of the palace. This may probably have been built around 1200 BC. It's an entering gateway built in the fortification wall of the palace. The upper part of the gate is a little tent-shaped. There are two strong pillars to support the heavy beam from the bottom. There's a stone block of 10 feet in height placed atop that beam, and on it there are reliefs of two lions that stand on two feet, as in the royal insignia, facing a pillar between them. Their two hind legs touch the ground adjacent to the column base. The heads of the lions are missing now. The pillar in between the lions tapers towards the bottom. Like the one at Knossos. The pillar capital is shaped a bit like a rim and atop it is a large, engraved square stone block.

## Murals

There are murals in Mycenae and Tiryns and they are painted using methods that have been used in the murals at Minoan. Pictures have been depicted in a horizontal band and the motifs that feature across these are men and women, hunters, battles, and scenes of bull leaping exercises. Like the Minoan murals, the images in here also, are colourful and decorative. From the style of the Mycenaean murals, they can be said to have been commissioned to artists of the Cretan island.

## Ceramics and Metalworks

Though the Mycenaean artisans produced objects having shapes and solidity like the Minoan ones, yet the former could not match the colourful decorative aspects of the latter's designs. Objects were made using metals: gold, silver, copper, brass. Owing to their martial inclination, the Mycenaean seem to have obviously attributed greater significance to weapons. The ivory design created on a copper dagger is worth seeing. An animated scene of a lion's hunt is engraved within the dagger's shape and decorated with ivory.

The golden cups found at Vaphio in Southern Sparta are excellent examples of Mycenaean artisanship. These cups are made using two sheets of gold. The proficiency of the Mycenaean artisans is revealed through the decorative high and low reliefs designed on the cups. On the visible surface of the cups, there is relieved adornment, with embossing done by striking the cup from the inner side. On the artefacts, we find scenes of hunting and battles, as well as geometric designs.

About 700 years after the decline of the Mycenaean civilization, the art-affluent Greek culture began to evolve. The gap between the decline of one and the rise of the latter civilizations is referred to as the 'Dark Ages', as there is no information available about this phase.

The Cretan, or Minoan and Mycenaean era, (3000 BC to 1100 BC) is also referred to as pre-Hellenic period. As per this classification, the latter Greek era is known as the Hellenic Period.