Minoan, Mycenean and Geometric art

Terms Useful for the Understanding of Minoan and Mycenaean Art

Early Helladic/Cycladic/Minoan period: ca. 3000-2000 BCE. People are mainly non-Greeks. Greeks arrive in Greece maybe in 2200 BCE.

Middle Helladic/Cycladic/Minoan period: ca. 2000-1650/1550 BCE. Palaces first built on Crete, destroyed by an earthquake ca. 1650 or 1550 BCE and rebuilt.

Late Helladic/Cycladic/Minoan period: ca. 1650/1550-1150 BCE. Santorini/Thera erupted c. 1630 BCE. All of the palaces save Knossos were destroyed ca. 1450 BCE. Knossos burned soon after 1400 BCE (at which time it was controlled by Mycenean Greeks). Mycenaean civilization arose at beginning of this period, collapsed at its end.

The Early Bronze Age

Cycladic Figures: marble statues and statuettes made during the Early Cycladic period (c. 2800-2200) and found in graves. These seem very abstract, because they have schematic bodies and oval, back-tilted heads with only, at times, a nose, and no other features. In fact, the other features appear to have been painted. The most common type is a nude female with her legs together and the arms folded across her chest. Male figures are rarer, but often represent musicians. Heads unattached to bodies are also known. The identity of these figures is unknown. They are usually fairly small, but examples up to five feet in height are known.

Lerna: site in the Argolid in southern Greece which has a large, palatial like building (called the “House of the Tiles” from its roofing) dated to the Early Helladic Perod (destroyed c. 2200 BCE). The House included some clay seal impressions that are interesting.

Minoan Crete

Minos: legendary king of Crete in Greek myth. His son was the Minotaur, a bull-headed, man-bodied monster who ate human flesh.

Labyrinth: the "House of the Double Axe," apparently the name of the palace at Knossos, the largest of the Cretan palaces. To the Greeks, the palace seemed like a maze, thus the modern meaning of the word.

Minoan Religion: Little is truly known, although it seems likely that the main goddess was Mother Earth. Bull vaulting seems to have been a cultic ritual, and the double axe was sacred. The bull likely represented the masculine principle.
Knossos, Mallia, Phaistos, Kato Zakro: sites of Minoan palaces between ca. 2000-1450 BCE; Knossos alone survived to around 1380 BCE. The relationships of the palaces, which are not far apart, is unknown; that is, we don’t know if they were ruled by the same or different people. All of the palaces had a complex series of rooms arranged around a large central court (all but Kato Zakro, where the court is smaller due to lack of space), with storerooms, shrines, workshops, and public rooms, as well as domestic quarters. They were built of plastered rubble on a stone foundation, with timber framing (the general appearance of Minoan houses is preserved in some faience or glass paste plaques of 2000-1550 BCE). The palaces had multiple floors, and used wooden columns that tapered downwards.

Minoan Writing: there are two kinds of Minoan scripts. A hieroglyphic-like script similar to ancient Egyptian writing was used in the Middle Minoan period (to 1700). It was probably cumbersome and little used. Linear A, a script which was incised into clay tablets, looks more like Near Eastern cuneiform, and is the basis for Mycenean Linear B. It was probably a syllabic script. Neither Minoan script can be read.

“Snake Goddesses:” faience figurines (Height c. 11-12 inches) used in a shrine at Knossos destroyed around 1550 BC. They show three women (goddesses or priestesses) in long flounced skirts and bodices that expose the breasts (Minoan female dress) and elaborate headgear holding snakes.

Rhyton: generally a conical cup without a foot (and thus requiring a stand). Often carved in stone or made of metal, and plastic (i.e. sculptural), probably used exclusively in ritual. The Harvester Vase and the Bull’s-Head rhyton are the most famous Minoan examples, both made c. 1500, archaeologists think.

Minoan Frescoes: painted on wet plaster in an impressionistic style, these are very fragmentary, but present glimpses of Minoan societal values; the best-preserved on Crete have been found at Knossos. The best preserved in general date to before 1630 and are on Thera. Some Minoan frescoes show signs of influence from Egypt (Bird and Monkey fresco).

Toreador Fresco: Bull-vaulting ceremonies are depicted in a famous scene of c. 1450, which shows three male(?) athletes in action.

Kamares Ware: a polychrome style of light-on-dark decoration seen on Middle Minoan pottery ca. 1900-1600 BCE. The motifs are generally pretty abstract, but based on the natural world.

Marine Style: a style of Late Minoan IB pottery (probably ca. 1500-1450 BCE) which uses motifs taken from the sea in a free and impressionistic style. A similar style can be seen on contemporary frescoes in the palaces.

Thera: an island (sometimes called Santorini) which exploded in a volcanic eruption ca. 1630 BCE. Thera had a Minoan outpost on it called (today) Akrotiri; it has the best-
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preserved Minoan-style frescoes. These often depict rituals (Crocus Gathering), but also, at times, sagas (Miniature fresco). Akrotiri also preserves houses in the Cretan style (West House).

**Mycenean Greece**

**Peloponnessos**: "the island of Pelops." The near-island of southern Greece, connected to central Greece only by a narrow isthmus. Named after Pelops, the founder of the ruling dynasty at Mycenae according to Greek mythology. Pelops defeated (and killed) the king of the area around Olympia in a chariot race, then married the king’s daughter.

**Linear B**: a syllabic script in early Greek used by the Mycenaean kings to inventory their possessions and keep records on clay tablets. Based on the undeciphered Minoan Linear A.

**Megaron**: the significant unit in Mycenaean architecture. Entered on the short side, it has porch, a smaller foreroom and large rear room with a central hearth. Used for the throne rooms of Mycenaean palaces.

**Mycenae**: a fortified citadel with a palace in southeastern Greece (the district later called the Argolid). In the *Iliad*, the King of Mycenae (Agamemnon) is the most important ruler, but was killed by his wife (Clytemnestra) and her lover when he came home from the Trojan war. The main gate at Mycenae is called the Lion Gate from the relief of opposed lions facing a central column which was placed over the entrance ca. 1250 BCE. Mycenae's shaft graves, deep tombs containing incredible wealth, such as the enlaid *niello* daggers, gold masks, and gold rings, date ca. 1600-1500 BCE, and represent the beginnings of Mycenaean civilization. The palace at Mycenae was destroyed ca. 1100 BCE. Mycenae also has a small cult center that had a somewhat crude head of a god in ivory, as well frescoes.

**Tiryns**: another fortified Mycenaean citadel with a palace, located just south (10 miles away!) of Mycenae. Notable for its "Cyclopean" walls and vaulted galleries built ca. 1300-1200. Also the home of Herakles in myth. Destroyed ca. 1100 BCE.

**Pylos**: an unfortified Mycenaean palace in the southwestern Peloponnessos; the home of Nestor in the *Iliad*. The place there is well-preserved, and includes a notable throne room (megaron) with wall-paintings, including a scene of battle between Greeks and skin-clad barbarians. Built c. 1300, destroyed c. 1200 BCE.

"The Treasury of Atreus:" the best preserved and biggest *Tholos* (round) tomb, elaborate corbel-vaulted royal mausolea. Built near Mycenae ca. 1250 BCE; had an elaborately decorated doorway and a side chamber.

**Niello Daggers**: found in tombs (notably the Shaft Graves at Mycenae, c. 1500), these have gold enlays depicting combat, hunts and other scenes. The enlays are set in a black, asphalt-like substance called niello. The technique comes from the ancient Near East.
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**Vapheio Cups**: two golden cups found in a royal tomb near Sparta, and dating ca. 1500-1450 BCE. They bear relief scenes of the capture of bulls; the subject matter and the style are Minoan. One cup shows the bull captured through enticing him with a cow, the other shows the bull escaping attempts to net him.

**The Warrior Vase**: a krater (mixing bowl, height 16”) showing warriors marching off to battle while their women watch and mourn. Made at Mycenae ca. 1200-1100 BCE. The style is kind of comic-like.

**Mycenean Octopus Vase**: made ca. 1200-1150 this shows a rigidly frontal octopus with its legs arranged in a symmetrical pattern. It shows the Mycenean schematization and organization of Minoan style.

**Troy**: a fortified town in northwestern Asia Minor (modern Turkey) sacked by the Greeks ca. 1250-1225 BCE. This campaign formed the basis for Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Troy's most glorious period (Troy VI) ended ca. 1300 BCE.

**Vase Forms**

**Amphora**: a two-handled storage jar used to store food (both grain and oil. These can have handles at the midpoint of the body ("Belly-handled) or rising from the shoulder to the rim (Neck-handled). A “stirrup jar” is a kind of amphora made in the Mycenean age with the handles on the shoulder and attached to a short neck (thus looking like stirrups)-it is obviously for liquids.

**Krater**: a deep bowl with two handles. Used to mix water and wine.

**Kylix**: a wine cup with a broad, spreading bowl and two handles. Usually the foot is stemmed (like a wine glass).

**Oinochoe**: a pitcher with its rim pinched to form a pouring spout.

**Olpe**: a pitcher with a broad outturned rim.

**The Protogeometric and Geometric Ages, 1050-70 BCE**

**Protogeometric Period**: ca. 1050-900 BCE. Succeeds the "Submycenaen" age (1150-1050), and constitutes with it the Greek Dark Ages. Notable at Athens for its simple if well-made pottery decorated with concentric circles. There is almost no figural art from this period.

**Geometric Period**: the period between ca. 900 and 700 BC, when Greek pottery was decorated with predominantly geometric motifs. Athens was the artistic leader. The period when colonization began, and when the Greeks adapted the alphabet from the script used by the Phoenicians. The Homeric poems (*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) were written down late in the Geometric Age, beginning Greek literature.
**Geometric Architecture:** most geometric buildings were built of mud-brick walls with wood columns on stone foundations. A large (length 55 yards) temple-like building with an apsidal end was built at Lefkandi on Euboea after 1000 BCE. It may have originally been a “palace.” The burial of a warrior in it (together with horses) suggests that it became a hero shrine (heroon). It seems to have had a colonnade or continuous series of columns erected around it in the 9th century, when a large cemetery in front of the building was created. The cemetery included a terracotta statuette of a centaur that was buried in two graves. A slightly later building of the same form at nearby Eretria are the earliest temple of Apollo (8th century). The earliest Temple of Hera at Samos was long and narrow, with a single row of wooden columns down the center of its cella (interior cult room); it dates to the 8th century. A similar temple was found at Eretria near a diminutive apsidal building. These are probably successive versions of the Temple of Apollo. A small temple at Dreros on Crete had central columns and a shelf with bronze cult statuettes on it. Some small models of shrines (or houses) found in sanctuaries probably date to the late 8th century, and provide a picture of what these early temples looked like (the actual buildings survive only in foundations).

**Geometric sculpture:** The earliest real example of Greek sculpture is the terracotta centaur found in the cemetery at Lefkandi, and is dated to the 10th century. Large bronze tripod cauldrons were given as prizes for athletic victory at Olympia, were the games were traditionally founded in 776 BCE. These often had small solid-cast bronze figures attached to their large ring handles, notably of horse (an expensive form of transportation). The geometricized horses made towards the end of the 8th century are particularly elegant in their abstract stylization. Other figurines, whether attached to tripods or freestanding, include warriors, either wielding spears or driving chariots. These have stylized physiques, but appear to be nude except for a helmet and a belt. An ivory figurine of a nude woman wearing a conical hat (height 9\(\frac{1}{2}\)”) found in Athens shows the outside influences on Greek art: it is a close imitation of contemporary Syrian images of the fertility goddess Astarte. The scanty remains also remind us that the bulk of Geometric sculpture was probably in wood, and has been lost.

**Athenian Geometric Funerary Vases:** Early and Middle Geometric vases (9th century) made in Athens have elegant non-figural (in the main) decoration which enhances the form of the vases, with circular and other non-continuous motifs located in the handle-zones. The other parts of the vases have continuous motifs, notably the meander or key pattern. In the Late Geometric period (8th century) more and more schematized human figures appear, painted in dark slip with little internal detail (except for an eye). The vases most obviously elaborately decorated were enormous (height 4-6 feet), and were used to mark graves. Amphorae or storage jars were used for women, kraters or mixing bowls for wine and water were used for men. The scenes on these usually show the laying out of the dead for public viewing (prothesis) and the procession to the grave (ekphora). The prothesis includes the dead person on a bier (often much larger than the other figures), and mourners. The ekphora (carrying to the grave), which is mainly limited to males, shows warriors in chariots, and may include the dead man lying on his bier in a chariot.

**Geometric Narrative Pottery:** most of the figural scenes on geometric pottery show scenes of funerals, but a few vases may show mythic or narrative sense. A pitcher made
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in Athens ca. 730 BCE shows two Siamese twins fighting a warrior, and may reflect Nestor’s story in *The Iliad* of fighting the twin sons of Molione. A krater has made at Thebes ca. 730 BC shows a man leading a woman onto a ship (Menelaus and Helen? Theseus and Ariadne? Or simply a farewell between man and wife?). A krater found in southern Italy dated to the late 8\textsuperscript{th} century shows a shipwreck, perhaps a scene from *The Odyssey*. These may show the earliest Greek story-telling (narrative) in art after the Bronze Age.
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TERMS FOR GREEK MYTH AND LEGEND

Greek Gods

Athena: virgin goddess of wisdom and the arts. Patroness of Athens and heros. Zeus is her only parent; she was born from his head. Generally wears a helmet, the *aegis* (a snaky-fringed shawl) with the *gorgoneion* on her chest, and carries a spear.

Ares: god of war and lover of Aphrodite.

Aphrodite: goddess of love and female beauty. Her husband is Hephaistos, her lover Ares, her son Eros (Lat.=Cupid).

Eros: son of Aphrodite. The winged god of desire who shoots arrows into unsuspecting humans, making them horny (“erotic”).

Hermes: the herald god. Also god of travellers, merchants, thieves, and the conductor of souls to the underworld. Wears a broad-brimmed traveller's hat (the *petasos*), carries a herald's wand (the *caduceus*), often has winged sandals.

Zeus: Father and ruler of the gods. A weather god, his weapon is the thunderbolt. His best known cult was at Olympia; other important ones at Nemea and Dodona.

Hera: wife and sister of Zeus, goddess of marriage and the family. Major sanctuaries were on Samos and near Argos.

Hades: god of the underworld and brother of Zeus. His wife is Persephone.

Demeter: goddess of grain, mother of Persephone. Her main sanctuary was at Eleusis in Attica, and is a mystery religion whose central "truth" was revealed only to initiates.

Persephone: daughter of Demeter. She was carried off by Hades, and lived one-half of the year in the Underworld (Fall and Winter), during which time Demeter mourned. In Spring and Summer she returned to Earth, and the Earth rejoiced.

Apollo: god of culture (esp. music), healing, and prophesy. His main sanctuaries are at Delphi, Delos, and (Didyma near Miletus). His weapon is the bow, but he often carries a lyre (a musical instrument like a harp).

Artemis: Apollo's twin sister, generally a virgin huntress goddess whose weapon is the bow. Also the goddess of birth (?), and, at her most important sanctuary at Ephesus in Ionia, clearly a mother-goddess whose cult-image was multi-breasted.

Poseidon: god of the sea, also of horses and earthquakes. Brother of Zeus, who he resembles. His weapon is the trident.

Dionysos: god of wine and the untamable forces of Nature. His male followers are Satyrs (goat-tailed nature demons), Sileni (horse-tailed nature demons), generally depicted as obviously horny. His female followers are Maenads (who wield thyrsoi, leaf-tipped staffs, and tear animals apart). All are generally seen in a riotous drinking party.

Cybele: a mother goddess worshipped much in Asia Minor and early honored by the Greeks. She generally rides a chariot drawn by lions.

Monsters and other Critters in Greek Myth

Gorgons: three snaky-haired sisters with wings (usually) who turn those who look at them into stone. The only mortal sister, Medusa, was killed by Perseus, who gave her head (the gorgoneion) to Athena.

Pegasus: winged horse ridden by Bellerophon when he killed the Chimaera (a monster). Pegasus' mother was Medusa.

Cerberus: three-headed watchdog of the Underworld.

Centaur: half-horse, half-man. They were all killed by the Lapiths after they misbehaved at the wedding feast of Perithoos. The centaur Nessos was killed by Herakles after he tried to steal Herakles' wife. Can also have deep knowledge of nature: Achilles was raised by a Centaur.

Calydonian Boar: giant pig who raised havoc before killed by Greek heroes led by Meleager.

Nemean Lion: invulnerable lion strangled by Herakles, who skins him with his claws and wears his skin thereafter.

Sphinx: has lion's body, woman's head, winged. Done in by Oedipus.

Siren: has bird's body, woman's head. Sings alluringly to Odysseus.

Polyphemus: a Cyclops (Greek=one-eyed), rustic giant blinded by Odysseus.

Heros and Other Mythic Figures

Herakles: muscular and lusty hero who completed twelve great labors as well as other deeds; upon his death became a god. Wear lion skin, wields a club and a bow. Son of Zeus.
Pelops: hero from Asia Minor who comes to Elis and sought the hand of Hippodameia, daughter of King Oinomaus. To marry her, one had to defeat Oinomaus' invincible chariot team in a race. Pelops cheated and won, gave his name to the Peloponnensos, and became its king, but his family was accursed. For some of his descendents see, below, Agamemnon, Aegisthus, Orestes, Menelaus.

Peleus: Achilles' father, husband (briefly) of Thetis. Participated in the Calydonian Boar Hunt and Herales' Battle with the Amazons.

Dioskouroi: sons of Zeus, minor gods and stars. Names are Castor and Polydeuces. Participate in voyage of the Argo, rape of the daughters of Leukippus, also rustle cattle.

The Voyage of the Argo: led by Jason from the Thessalian city of Iolkos to steal the Golden Fleece from Colchis at the end of the Black Sea, the Argo was staffed with many heros. The fleece was stolen with the aid of the Princess of Colchis, Medea.

Medea: witch from Colchis, married Jason. Years later he attempted to dump her, whereupon she killed her children by him. Later turned up at Athens to make trouble for Theseus.

Theseus: Athenian King and hero. Becomes an important hero under the Athenian democracy. Killed the Minotaur.

Perithoos: King of the Lapiths in Thessaly, friend of Theseus. Together with him kill Centaurs, try to steal Persephone from the Underworld.

Amazons: a mythic race of warrior women who (supposedly) lived between the Black and the Caspian Seas. Dangerously attractive to men. Theseus married one (Antiope).

Meleager: the main hero of the Calydonian Boar Hunt. Kills boar, but also his mother's brothers. She kills him by burning the log which preserved his soul (you have to be there to understand this one).

Oedipus: Theban hero and king who defeats the Spdinx, inadvertently kills his father and marries his mother. When he figures this out, he blinded himself.

Europa: Phoenician princess who was seduced by Zeus in the form of a bull. He swam to Crete with her on his back, and left her there pregnant with Minos.

Perseus: hero who killed Medusa, then rescued Andromeda (a Trojan Princess) from a sea-monster.

Battle of Gods and Giants: the gods are attacked by and defeat the evil giants. Used by the Greeks as an allegory of justice conquering evil. Herakles takes part in this.
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The Trojan War Cycle

**Achilles**: main hero of the *Iliad*, and main Greek hero of Trojan War. Son of Peleus, a hero, and a minor sea goddess, Thetis.

Patroklos: Achilles' special friend in the *Iliad*. Kills Sarpedon, later killed by Hector, whereupon Achilles gets mad and kills Hector.

**Nestor**: aged and "wise" King of Pylos in the *Iliad*.

**Penthesilea**: Amazon queen killed by Achilles at Troy.

**Hector**: Priam's son and the main Trojan hero of the *Iliad*. Killed by Achilles.

**Agamemnon**: King of Mycenae in the *Iliad*, leader of the Greeks at Troy. Killed by his wife Klytemnестra when he returned to Mycenae.

**Menelaus**: brother of Agamemnon, king of Sparta, husband of Helen.

**Klytemnестra**: wife of Agamemnon, she was seduced by his half-brother Aegisthus while her husband was at Troy (she was irked at her husband because he sacrificed their daughter to Artemis). She killed Agamemnon when he returned to Mycenae, and was later killed by their son Orestes (as was Aegisthus).

**Paris**: Trojan Prince, son of Priam. Seduced Helen and started the Trojan War. Earlier won Aphrodite's favored by judging her most beautiful in the "Judgement of Paris," a beauty contest between Hera, Aphrodite and Athena.

**Helen**: sister of the Dioskouroi, daughter of Zeus and the most beautiful woman in the world. Married Menelaus, then seduced by Paris to start the Trojan War.

**Priam**: King of Troy during the Trojan War. Killed during the sack of Troy by Achilles' son Neoptolemos.

**Cassandra**: daughter of Priam, a seeress who no one would believe. Raped at the Sack of Troy. Later taken by Agamemnon to Mycenae, where Klytemnестra killed her.

**Ajax**: muscular Aeginetan hero in the *Iliad*. He killed himself after he went mad when not awarded Achilles' armor after A's death.

**Odysseus**: wily Greek hero of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. King of Ithaca, a small island off the western coast of Greece.

**Penelope**: Odysseus' equally wily wife.