

Minoan Art

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Minoan art has several unique characteristics, and the Minoan civilization was influenced by many things, including myths and legends. In this lesson, you will learn about characteristics and examples of Minoan sculpture, pottery, and fresco painting. This lesson covers:



BIG IDEA

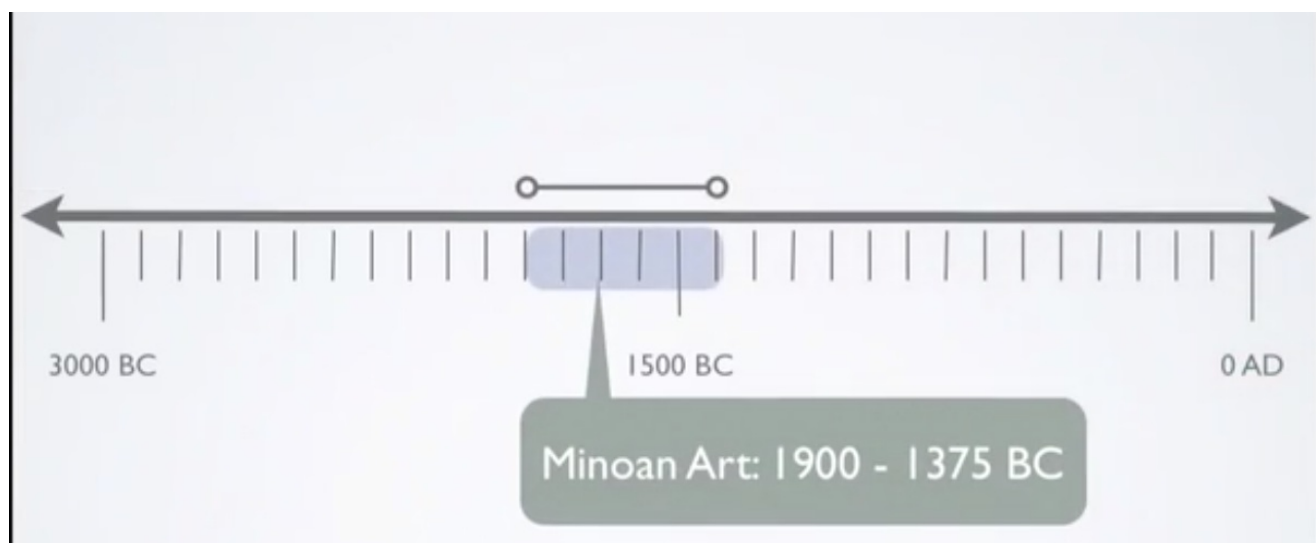
Minoan civilization was a major cultural and military power in the Aegean region in its day, centered on the island of Crete.

1. Time Period and Location: Minoan Art

The artwork examined in this lesson falls between 1900 BC and 1375 BC. Just southeast of Greece, surrounded by the Aegean Sea, is the island of Crete. This civilization had strong ties to ancient Greece.

Within this region is a geological, or tectonic plate, fault line, which lies at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea right by Crete. It makes a divide between the Eurasian Plate above and African plate below. As these plates move, they create a lot of geological disturbances and earthquakes, as well as volcanic activity.

The timeline below highlights the time period covered in this lesson.



DID YOU KNOW

A volcanic eruption ten times as large as the Mount Saint Helen's eruption on the present-day island of Santorini likely contributed to the eventual demise of Minoan civilization.

2. King Minos and the Minotaur

The fabled Minotaur and the myth associated with it is an important Greek myth with strong connections to the Minoan civilization. The bull is an important animal figure in Greek mythology, and it seems to be of particular importance to the people of Crete. It is an image that comes up repeatedly in Cretan artwork.

According to the myth, the **Minotaur** was a creature held captive in a **labyrinth**, or maze, by King Minos. With the head and tail of a bull and the body of a man, the Minotaur was a horrible creature that enjoyed eating people. He was actually the love child of the king's wife and a sacred bull. Eventually he was slain by the mythical hero Theseus, who became the eventual king of the city-state of Athens.

Sometime between 1900 and 1903, an archaeologist named Arthur Evans grew interested in searching for the lost kingdom due to the legend of King Minos and the Minotaur. Upon discovering likely ruins, he labeled the civilization **Minoan** after the mythical king. It was Evans who discovered the ancient site of Knossos in northern Crete.



TERMS TO KNOW

Minotaur

A mythological half-man, half-bull that lived on Crete

Labyrinth

A maze, or series of intricate and confusing passageways, so-called because of the labrys (double-headed axe) symbols found on walls of structures of Crete

Minoan

Relating to the Bronze Age civilization that existed on the island of Crete, named after the mythological King Minos

3. Knossos

Remember, Crete was an area of many geological disturbances. Because of the earthquakes, the palace complex was severely damaged over time. Rooms and passageways are thought to have shifted considerably. The maze-like quality of the complex, as well the term labyrinth, is how Minoan palaces came to be associated with mazes. This palace complex was made of stone, constructed using the post-and-lintel technique.



DID YOU KNOW

The Greeks refer to the complex as a labyrinth due to its frequent use of the decorative double-axe motif, called a labrys.

The ruins of Knossos, shown below, did not always look this way, of course.



Palace of Knossos

1700-1400 BC

Crete, Greece

4. Themes in Minoan Art

The Minoan civilization became a powerful force within the Aegean and gradually annexed more and more of the surrounding territory, particularly the Cycladic Islands (the Cyclades). A theme of nature began to surface in Minoan art, which became more dynamic than Egyptian art. A sense of liveliness or energy is a characteristic seen throughout Minoan works of art.

IN CONTEXT

As you view the following works of art, notice the recurring theme of nature and the liveliness and energy projected by these artists.

First, take a look at this image:



Goddess with Snakes

1700-1550 BC

Tin-glazed pottery (faience)

This is a sculpture of a goddess holding snakes, aptly named the “Goddess with Snakes.” It is thought that it is likely an image of man, or woman in this case, demonstrating dominance over nature. The snakes represent fertility and agriculture.

Continuing on, here is another work of art, a ceramic work called the “Octopus Flask”:



Octopus Flask

1500-1450 BC

Ceramic

Notice the dynamic rendering of the octopus, with its squirming legs and a rather detailed suction cups. This is a prime example of the liveliness and energy depicted in Minoan art. The iconography relates the Minoans' connection with the sea, on which they depended for their livelihood.

5. Minoan Art and Fresco

Continuing the nature theme, the example below was taken from a home on Thera, one of the Cycladic

Islands. It is the “Saffron Gatherers” **fresco**, which is a type of painting using water-based paints on fresh plaster. It depicts the collection of saffron crocus flowers by a young girl. Saffron was, and really remains, an expensive spice that probably was one of the principal spices that Crete traded among the other Aegean civilizations.



Young Girl Gathering Saffron Crocus Flowers

1500 BC

Buon (wet) Fresco

This work of art is also a great example of **buon fresco**, or wet fresco. The pigments are applied as the plaster is still drying, which allows the image to set inside the plaster and become a permanent part of the wall. Minoans created both wet and dry frescoes, also known as **fresco secco**.

This next work of art, a fresco of a springtime landscape, is another example from Thera.



Fresco of Springtime Landscape

Before 1630 BC

Buon (wet) Fresco

This fresco is important in that it is the first example of a landscape-only image in ancient art.

Finally, possibly the most recognized image of a fresco from the Palace of Knossos, the work of art below depicts what is thought to be a ritualistic scene:



Bull Leaping (from palace at Knossos)

1550-1450 BC

Buon (wet) Fresco

Another work of art, it perhaps depicts a scene of sacrifice, and it shows the importance of the bull in Minoan culture. It may depict three athletes, or it could be three different poses of one athlete jumping over the bull, beginning, middle, and end. This is a much more dynamic image than what we've seen in Egyptian art.



TERMS TO KNOW

Fresco Painting

Painting in water-based paints on fresh plaster

Buon Fresco

A type of fresco in which the plaster is still wet and the paint bonds with the plaster

Fresco Secco

Dry fresco, so called because it involves painting on the wall after the plaster has already dried



SUMMARY

Minoan civilization and art was influenced by many things, including myths and legends. In this lesson, you explored the **time period and location of Minoan art** and learned about **King Minos and the Minotaur**.

You also learned about the **Knossos**, one of the Minoan palaces that came to be associated with mazes.

Finally, **themes in Minoan art** and **Minoan art and the fresco** were covered. A theme of nature began

to show up in Minoan art, and works of art became more dynamic, with their sense of liveliness or energy, than Egyptian art.

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