

Chapter 1

AEGEAN PAINTING IN THE  
BRONZE AGE

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*The frescoes discovered on the Palace site constitute a new epoch  
in the history of painting.*

SIR ARTHUR EVANS, MARCH 1901<sup>1</sup>

ON 5 APRIL 1900, new excavations led by Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos, Crete, were barely two weeks old when a mysterious figure in fresco was uncovered near the south propylon (Fig. 1.1). “A great day”, Evans recorded in his journal as he noted the figure’s noble profile, beautifully modeled arms, and tiny waist. It was, he observed “far and away the most remarkable human figure of the Mycenaean Age that has yet come to light.” Evans noted how even his workmen felt the painting’s spell, regarding its discovery as miraculous, the icon of a saint. The next morning, the Cretan man posted to guard the new find told a story of how the wrathful saint had woken him at midnight. The animals lowed and neighed, and there was, he said, “something about – but of a ghostly kind – φαντάζει [*fandázi*] – it spooks!”<sup>2</sup>

This incident more than a century ago encapsulates the reception of Aegean Bronze Age art, in which, even today, a lively mixture of fact, imagination, and emotion continues to influence its interpretation. In the case of the Cupbearer Fresco, as it came to be called, the fresco helped to identify and define the painting tradition of prehistoric Crete. Before Evans’s excavation at Knossos, almost nothing was known of the island’s early habitation. In contrast, Mycenaean archaeology had been established decades earlier as a field of study by Heinrich Schliemann,



**Figure 1.1** Knossos, palace: Cupbearer Fresco. LM IB–IIIA1, c. 1625/1525–1350 B.C. Crete, Herakleion Museum. (Photo: A. P. Chapin)

who, in his pursuit of the historical truth underlying tales of the Trojan War, had opened excavations at Troy, Mycenae, and Tiryns in the 1870s and 1880s. Yet where Schliemann ignored the first fragments of fresco uncovered at Mycenae (Fig. 1.2),<sup>3</sup> Evans extolled the paintings of Knossos.

Consequently, even though the Cupbearer Fresco was by no means the first Aegean fresco to be discovered, Evans employed it and others

to draw international attention to Knossos and to publicize the quality of its surviving artwork. At the same time, Evans quickly recognized that Knossos was not Mycenaean (the culminating phase of Bronze Age culture on the Greek mainland), but the product of a distinctly different culture. He re-identified his “Palace of Mycenaean Kings” as the “Palace of Minos” and named the culture “Minoan” after the legendary ruler of Knossos.<sup>4</sup> In addition to promoting the excellence of his finds, he strove to place them in the context of the great artistic traditions of antiquity, and his persistent and favorable comparison of Minoan art with that of the Classical world helped to establish prehistoric Minoan painting as a completely new and equally worthy artistic tradition. In the Cupbearer Fresco, for example, he saw an “almost classically Greek profile” that showed “an advance in human portraiture foreign to Egyptian art, and only achieved by the artists of classical Greece.”<sup>5</sup>

Today our understanding of prehistoric Aegean painting is far more extensive and detailed. A growing volume of archaeological and scientific information continues to shape our understanding of these prehistoric peoples, but the historical and literary texts that would throw light on their history, culture, and religion remain missing despite the fact that both the Minoans on Crete and the Mycenaeans of mainland Greece developed writing systems. The stories preserved in later Greek mythology – tales of Theseus and the Minotaur, for instance, or the epic of the Trojan War – might conceivably have some basis in fact, but they cannot be relied upon for valid insights into prehistory. As a result, our knowledge and understanding of Aegean art and culture depend almost exclusively on analysis of the fragmentary remains discovered in archaeological fieldwork. This chapter reviews the evidence for major monuments of Minoan, Cycladic, and Mycenaean painting, on both plaster and terracotta. It offers a critique of the conjectures and controversies dominating current scholarly research and places the monuments



Figure 1.2 Mycenae,  
Ramp House deposit:  
women at the window.  
LH IIIA, c. 1425–1300  
B.C. Athens, National  
Museum. (Photo: A. P.  
Chapin)

within their cultural contexts as currently understood. Finally, the text examines these artworks as evidence of the distinctive identity and outstanding achievement of Bronze Age Aegean painting.

AEGEAN GEOGRAPHY

Aegean art as an art historical period takes its name from the Aegean Sea, which is that piece of the Mediterranean bounded by mainland Greece to the north and west, modern Turkey on the east, and Crete to the south. Shaped by powerful plate tectonics, the Aegean is a rugged and mountainous region frequently rocked by earthquakes. Overland travel is slow and difficult, so sailing traditionally provided the primary means of transportation. Arable soil remains scarce, and early inhabitants also looked to the sea for important food resources. The Aegean Sea thus supports, separates, and links the three most important geographic regions of prehistoric Greek civilization – Crete, the Cycladic Islands, and the Greek mainland. Each area is defined by a regional distinctiveness that is

balanced by shared commonalities, creating a complex and shifting web of cultural relationships that are subsumed under the label “Aegean”.

AEGEAN CHRONOLOGY

Bronze Age Aegean chronology is a complicated topic with a large bibliography (Fig. 1.3).<sup>6</sup> In general terms, Greek prehistory is divided into two eras: the Stone Age, with its stone tool technologies, and the Bronze Age, characterized by the introduction of metallurgy. These eras are divided into Early, Middle, and Late periods, which, in the Bronze Age, correspond roughly to the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms of Egypt (c. 3000–1100 B.C.). The cultural distinctiveness of the three principal geographic zones of the Aegean – Crete, the Cycladic Islands, and the Greek mainland – necessitates regional designations: “Minoan” for Crete, “Cycladic” for the Cyclades, and “Helladic” for the Greek mainland. Each of these regional chronologies is further divided into phases and sub-phases from the study of relative chronology, principally



through stylistic analyses of pottery. Architectural chronologies based on the construction phases of monumental buildings have also been identified for the Aegean. After more than a century of excavation and study, these regional relative chronologies are well developed and most Aegean archaeological sites can be dated to specific phases of prehistory.

Attaching calendrical dates to these ceramic and architectural phases, however, remains difficult and controversial. Lacking historical sources, early archaeologists relied upon correspondences with Egyptian and Near Eastern archaeology to assign calendrical dates to the various phases of the Aegean Bronze Age. Recent advances in scientific technology, however, have yielded new – but sometimes conflicting – evidence for absolute (calendrical) dating. The most spectacular example of this problem is illustrated by efforts to date the eruption of the Santorini volcano in the Cycladic Islands. Ceramic studies demonstrate that the affluent prehistoric town of Akrotiri was buried by volcanic deposits in the first phase of the Late Bronze Age (Late Cycladic I), and comparisons with known historical chronologies in Egypt and the Near East suggest an eruption date of c. 1500 B.C. But radiocarbon testing and dendrochronological dating of organic samples buried in the volcanic ash place the event in the late seventeenth century B.C., more than one hundred years earlier than historical comparisons would suggest. The proposed dates cannot both be right, and scholars today who need to assign calendrical years to art historical monuments are thus left with following either the “high” chronology suggested by scientific data or the older “low” chronology supported by historical comparanda (Fig. 1.3).<sup>7</sup>

THE RISE OF MINOAN PICTORIAL  
PAINTING ON CRETE

**A**gricultural immigrants settled on Crete around 7000 B.C., but Aegean pictorial

painting did not appear until complex palatial culture arose in the Middle Bronze Age, after c. 2000 B.C. In the intervening millennia of subsistence living, the early population began in the Final Neolithic period, c. 3500 B.C., to cover some floors and walls of their more important buildings with monochrome red plaster made of lime mixed with clay. This practice continued into the Early Bronze Age and anticipated the frescoes of the later Bronze Age.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the third millennium B.C., the Early Minoan (EM) population of Crete expressed only modest and small-scale interest in pictorial art. Seal stones, associated with the rise of local trade and economic complexity, were usually decorated with abstract patterns favoring random lines, crosshatching, and cross designs, but some, such as a seal from EM II Mochlos, were ornamented with pictorial designs that anticipate later figural art (CD/W 1.1a).<sup>9</sup> By the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age, a growing and increasingly stratified population was regularly trading with Egypt and the Near East, and foreign influence is sometimes evident in new seal designs. An ivory cylinder seal from Tholos B at Platanos in the Mesara Plain dated to Middle Minoan IA (MM IA), for example, reflects Syrian influence in its imported material and head-to-tail (*tête-bêche*) lion design (CD/W 1.1b).<sup>10</sup> Another ivory seal from Platanos depicts dolphins swimming about a sailing ship (CD/W 1.1c).<sup>11</sup> MM II seal impressions from Phaistos introduce the Minoan “genius”, a mythical creature imitating the Egyptian goddess of childbirth, Tauret (CD/W 1.1d),<sup>12</sup> and the griffin, a fantastic creature from Near Eastern art with a lion’s body and the head and wings of a raptor (CD/W 1.1e).<sup>13</sup> Native interests are reflected in a seal impression depicting an *agrimi*, a wild goat indigenous to Crete, cornered on a high rock by two dogs (CD/W 1.1f).<sup>14</sup>

Ceramic decoration also favored abstract designs for much of the Early and Middle Bronze Age. Early Minoan ceramic production was regional, and decoration typically favored linear

AEGEAN CHRONOLOGY					
Traditional Chronology Dates B.C.E.	High Chronology Dates B.C.E.	Crete	Greek Mainland	Cycladic Islands	
Before 3000 to about 2000		EM I	EH I	EC I Grotta-Pelos Group Kampos Group	Early Prepalatial Period
		EM IIA	EH II	EC II Keros-Syros Group Kastri Group	
		EM IIB			EC III Phylakopi I Group
		EM III			
2000–1625	2000–1725	MM IA	MH I	MC I	Protopalatial Period of First (“Old”) Palaces on Crete
		MM IB	MH II	MC II	
		MM IIA			
		MM IIB			
		MM IIIA	MH III	MC III	Neopalatial Period of Second (“New”) Palaces on Crete
		MM IIIB			
1625–1525	1725–1625	LM IA	LH I	LC I	LM IA: Theran Eruption
1525–1450	1625–1500	LM IB	LH IIA	LC II	Late LM IB: widespread destruction across Crete
1450–1425	1500–1425	LM II	LH IIB		Final Palatial Period on Crete: Mycenaean at Knossos?
1425–1300	1425–1300	LM IIIA	LH IIIA	LC III	Mycenaean palaces built; Knossos destroyed in LM IIIA or IIIB
1300–1200	1300–1200	LM IIIB	LH IIIB		
1200–1125	1200–1125	LM IIIC	LH IIIC		Postpalatial Period: Fall of Mycenaean civilization

Figure 1.3 Aegean chronology.

patterns (incised or painted). In EM IIB, c. 2200 B.C., mottled designs produced by controlled firing were characteristic of Vasilike Ware and express a developed artistic aesthetic.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary ceramics introduced trickle decoration, a simple but striking approach to ceramic painting that persisted for centuries. An EM IIB pithos from Myrtos, Crete, for example, was decorated with thick blobs of paint (slip) that were allowed to run down the sides of the jar (CD/W 1.2).<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Spatter Ware, a fine ware of the MM IB period (c. 1900 B.C.) manufactured around Petras in eastern Crete, was produced by splattering light-colored vase surfaces with reddish-brown or dark brown slip (CD/W 1.3).<sup>17</sup> The resulting designs are vivid, dynamic, and fully abstract, and although it may seem a simple task to generate the splatter effect, the painting process required careful control of materials. Like the later “Jackson Pollock style” of Late Minoan (LM) I ceramics, this form of ceramic decoration may have been influenced by a desire to imitate abstract patterns found in nature, including speckled or banded rocks, sand, or eggshells.<sup>18</sup> Yet these decorative styles also reveal a developed taste for abstract art and a process-oriented means of creating it. As such, they anticipate contemporary Western art movements, particularly abstract expressionism, by more than three thousand years.

The Middle Bronze Age (c. 1900 B.C.) also saw the establishment of a palatial civilization on Crete. Peak sanctuaries were founded on Cretan mountaintops as important foci of religious belief, and work began on the first palace at Knossos in late MM IA or early MM IB, with additional palace construction occurring in MM IB at Phaistos and Mallia.<sup>19</sup> These palaces – the hallmarks of Minoan civilization – functioned for centuries as important ceremonial, religious, economic, and bureaucratic centers, but our understanding of these buildings in the early phases of the Protopalatial period of the Middle Bronze Age is incomplete. Extant remains date primarily to the early Late Bronze Age (the

Neopalatial period, c. 1500 or 1450 B.C.), when the palaces are characterized by large central courts, west courts, labyrinthine plans, and areas for storage, cult practice, and craft production. They were multi-storied, built of ashlar, wood, rubble, and mud-brick, and used open shafts (light wells) to illuminate interior rooms. “Minoan halls”, which became widespread in the Neopalatial period, employed pier-and-door partitions (*polythyra*) to create flexible circulation patterns in areas of the palace that may have had ceremonial or residential functions. Ironically, although these structures are called “palaces”, it still is not entirely clear that they were the residences of royal authority. After more than a century of excavation, there are still no identifiable portraits of rulers, no historical documents naming kings or queens, and little archaeological evidence that royal families lived in the palaces.<sup>20</sup>

Evidence for painted plaster in the Protopalatial period (c. 1900–1750/1700 B.C.) demonstrates technical advances in the introduction of a high-purity lime plaster and improved pigments but no pictorial designs.<sup>21</sup> Among the earliest examples is a floor fresco of repeating brown quatrefoils decorating Protopalatial Phaistos.<sup>22</sup> The Loomweight Basement at Knossos produced a MM IIB dado design of curving bands painted in yellow, gray, red, and white, perhaps imitating variegated stone (CD/W 1.4).<sup>23</sup> The use of string impressions to mark upper border bands demonstrates the true fresco technique of painting on wet plaster. A piece of MM IIB relief fresco was uncovered in the Knossos Royal Road excavations of 1957–1961,<sup>24</sup> and plaster fragments sponge-painted with imitation conglomerate stone were found in monumental Building AA at Kommos; their MM II date seems likely and their technical excellence is notable.<sup>25</sup>

Kamare Ware, the finest pottery of the Protopalatial period, employed elegant curvilinear motifs and early pictorial designs that anticipate elements of later monumental wall painting. Named for the cave on Mount Ida in which the

pottery was first found, Kamares Ware is a wheel-made ceramic characterized by light-on-dark polychrome decoration in red, orange, yellow, and white on a dark background.<sup>26</sup> A jug from the palace at Phaistos represents the “Classical Kamares” style (Plate 1.1).<sup>27</sup> The globular shape of the jug’s dark body is enhanced by a torsional design of creamy white radiating spirals and balanced by abstract patterns in white and red to either side. Its raised spout embellished by a molded dot encircled in white evokes the likeness of a bird’s head atop a fat round body, imparting an organic quality to the ceramic decoration that enlivens even non-pictorial Minoan art.

A large MM III Post-Kamares amphora from Knossos decorated with white palm trees illustrates how individual abstract elements from earlier Kamares decoration were combined to form pictorial subjects (Fig. 1.4).<sup>28</sup> The artist used repetitions of antithetic J-spirals to paint the trunk and leaves of the palm trees; palm fruits were then added in red to enhance the likeness.<sup>29</sup> While the highly pictorial quality of this vase suggests inspiration from wall painting, there is scant evidence for contemporary pictorial frescoes. Gisela Walberg has therefore suggested that early Minoan fresco painters borrowed pictorial motifs from vase painters rather than the reverse and that the two groups of artists may have worked closely with one another.<sup>30</sup>

Middle Cycladic (MC) bichrome vases recently discovered at Akrotiri on the island of Thera may lend support to this hypothesis. Painted in red and black with fully pictorial subjects, one jug preserves a libation scene with two male figures, and a large tub features an expansive landscape of goats, birds, crocuses, and a hunter.<sup>31</sup> A later example of this tradition, a bichrome pithos jar painted in the advanced stage of the Middle Cycladic period and found as an heirloom in Akrotiri’s West House, preserves two subjects: a terrestrial scene with a bull, two goats, plants, and flowers; and a marine subject with leaping dolphins and flying ducks (Fig. 1.5).<sup>32</sup> Although the painting style seems simple

and undeveloped, the scene nonetheless possesses a closely observed sense of intimacy. The wide-eyed dolphins arch their bodies above a lively rendition of a choppy sea, streaming droplets of water behind them. The ducks, abstractly rendered with little detail, nevertheless seem startled and strain to lift from the water. This class of painted decoration, as observed by Christos Doumas, anticipates the subjects and style of later frescoes.<sup>33</sup> The pictorial designs, moreover, do not depend on Kamares painting, but rather seem to reflect an independent artistic tradition.<sup>34</sup>

From an archaeological perspective, an Aegean-wide network of trade and exchange existed in the Early and Middle Bronze Ages and extended to Cyprus, Syria-Palestine, and Egypt. The rise of the palaces on Crete and the need for the Minoan palatial elite to communicate with their people, combined with significant exposure to the monumental artistic traditions of Egypt and the Near East, probably provided the inspiration for the transformation of small-scale pictorial efforts represented by seal decoration and ceramic painting into monumental painting. But the last key ingredient – space upon which to paint – became available only after earthquakes and fires destroyed Minoan sites across Crete and brought the Protopalatial period to a close. The major rebuilding of MM III inaugurated the Neopalatial period and also heralded the birth of Aegean monumental wall painting.

## AEGEAN PAINTING IN THE NEOPALATIAL PERIOD

The Neopalatial period, traditionally dated c. 1700–1450 B.C. (or c. 1750–1500 B.C. in the high chronology), represents the florescence of Minoan civilization and art. The palaces at Knossos, Mallia, and Kommos were rebuilt, and new palaces were founded at Galatas and Kato Zakros. Smaller palatial structures were constructed at Gournia,





**Figure 1.4** Knossos, palace: Post-Kamares amphora with palm trees. MM III, c. 1725 B.C. (high chronology) or c. 1625 B.C. (low chronology). Crete, Herakleion Museum. (Photo: Hirmer Archive)





**Figure 1.5** Akrotiri, Thera, West House: bichrome pithos with dolphins. MC, c. 1725 B.C. (high chronology) or c. 1625 B.C. (low chronology). Thera, Museum of Prehistoric Thera. (Photo: Courtesy, Thera Excavations; Doumas [1992])

Petras, and elsewhere, and a hotel, or caravanse-  
rai, was established at Zominthos, on the Minoan  
road to the sacred cave on Mount Ida. Some peak  
sanctuaries, such as the one on the summit of  
Mount Juktas, were embellished with monumen-  
tal architecture and received numerous offerings,  
while others founded in the Protopalatial period  
went out of use. Significantly, a new type of build-  
ing, the Minoan “villa”, became popular through-  
out Crete. Smaller than a palace but larger than an  
ordinary house, Minoan villas incorporated a vari-  
ety of palatial features into their structures, includ-  
ing ashlar stone construction, stepped facades,  
courts, pier-and-door partitions (*polythyra*), stone

piers, wooden columns, light wells, lustral basins,  
and fresco decoration. Many of the archaeological  
finds from villas, moreover, seem palatial in both  
quality and quantity, suggesting that the inhabit-  
ants of these villas were members of an elite class  
who enjoyed affluence and participated in the gov-  
ernance of Minoan Crete. Finally, thriving towns  
at Ayia Triada, Gournia, Kato Zakros, Kommos,  
Mochlos, Palaikastro, and Pseira demonstrate that  
the “average” Minoan shared in the economic and  
artistic prosperity of the time.<sup>35</sup>

Identifying the first pictorial wall paintings,  
however, remains difficult. The archaeological con-  
texts of fragmentary frescoes are often mixed, and

**Figure 1.6** Knossos, palace: Saffron Gatherer Fresco. Probably MM IIIA, c. 1750 B.C. (high chronology) or c. 1650 B.C. (low chronology). Crete, Herakleion Museum. (Watercolor drawing: 938.66.3 by Piet de Jong, Toronto, with permission of the Royal Ontario Museum © ROM)



early excavators were not always careful in their documentation. Frescoes, moreover, can remain on walls for decades or centuries, as demonstrated by Michelangelo’s famous frescoes in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, now five hundred years old. A building’s destruction date does not necessarily indicate when a fresco was painted, but provides only a *terminus ante quem*, or the date before which it must have been painted. Conversely, a building’s construction date provides the *terminus post quem*, or the time after which a fresco was painted. The long and complicated architectural histories of many prehistoric buildings, characterized by frequent repair and remodeling, mean that dating Minoan frescoes remains a difficult and uncertain exercise.

The Saffron Gatherer Fresco from the palace at Knossos illustrates these problems. Sir Arthur Evans, together with Émile Gilliéron, père, restored a fresco (discovered in 1900) depicting a blue boy, naked but for a harness, collecting saffron crocuses in a rocky landscape (CD/W 1.5). Evans noted that certain details of the composition had a Kamares character: low bowls in the composition are painted with white spots and red bands on dark ground, typical of Kamares Ware,

and the shapes of the crocus flowers find parallels in Kamares decoration as well. He assigned the fresco a date of MM IIB and declared it “the only example of a figured wall-painting surviving from the Early Palace walls.”<sup>36</sup> Then the problems began. The composition’s early date was questioned as early as 1936 on the basis of the mixed stratigraphy of the fresco’s find-spot, and since then, dates ranging from MM IIIA to LM IIIB have been proposed.<sup>37</sup> In 1939, J. D. S. Pendlebury recognized a tail among the fresco fragments and correctly re-identified the blue boy as a monkey (Fig. 1.6).<sup>38</sup> A revised reconstruction incorporating fragments of a second monkey in a frieze-like arrangement was put forward in 1947, and in 1974 Mark Cameron added a third monkey.<sup>39</sup> Today, the archaeological context of the Saffron Gatherer Fresco remains uncertain, leaving the Kamares character of the painted vases and flowers as the best evidence for the fresco’s date. Renewed study finds good parallels with MM III Kamares Ware, thereby suggesting, but not proving, an early (MM IIIA) date for this composition in the eighteenth or seventeenth century B.C.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately very few pictorial frescoes can be dated by archaeological context to the earliest phase