

Archaeology, Art History, and the Art Market

One way the ancient world is fundamentally different from the world today is that ancient art is largely anonymous and undated. No equivalent exists in antiquity for the systematic signing and dating of artworks commonplace in the contemporary world. That is why the role of archaeology in the study of ancient art is so important. Only the scientific excavation of ancient monuments can establish their context. Exquisite and strikingly “modern” sculptures such as the marble Cycladic figurines we illustrate (FIGS. 4-1 and 4-2) may be appreciated as masterpieces when displayed in splendid isolation in glass cases in museums or private homes. But to understand the role these or any other artworks played in ancient society—in many cases, even to determine the date and place of origin of an object—the art historian must know where the piece was uncovered. Only when the context of an artwork is known can one go beyond an appreciation of its formal qualities and begin to analyze its place in art history—and in the society that produced it.

The extraordinary popularity of Cycladic figurines in recent decades has had unfortunate consequences. Clandestine treasure hunters, anxious to meet the insatiable demands of modern

collectors, have plundered many sites and smuggled their finds out of Greece to sell to the highest bidder on the international art market. Entire prehistoric cemeteries and towns have been destroyed because of the high esteem in which these sculptures are now held. Two British scholars have calculated that only about 10 percent of the known Cycladic marble statuettes come from secure archaeological contexts. Many of the rest are probably forgeries, produced mostly after World War II when developments in modern art fostered a new appreciation of these abstract renditions of human anatomy and created a boom in demand for “Cycladica” among collectors. For some categories of Cycladic sculptures—those of unusual type or size—not a single piece with a documented provenance exists. Those groups may be 20th-century inventions designed to fetch even higher prices due to their rarity. Consequently, most of the conclusions art historians have drawn about chronology, attribution to different workshops, range of types, and how the figurines were used are purely speculative. The importance of the information the original contexts would have provided cannot be overestimated. That information is, however, probably never recoverable.

reflects the same preference for simple geometric shapes and large flat planes as the female figures. Still, the artist showed a keen interest in recording the elegant shape of what must have been a prized possession: the harp with a duck-bill or swan-head ornament at the apex of its sound box. (Animal-headed instruments are well documented in contemporary Mesopotamia [see FIGS. 2-8 *bottom*, 2-9, and 2-10] and Egypt.)

In one instance, figurines of both a musician and a reclining woman were placed in a woman’s grave. This suggests that the lyre players are not images of dead men, but it does not prove that the female figurines represent dead women. The man might be entertaining the deceased herself, not her image. Given the absence of written documents in Greece at this date, as everywhere else in prehistoric times, art historians cannot be sure of the meaning of most artworks. Some Cycladic figurines have been found in settlements rather than cemeteries, and it is likely, in fact, that the same form took on different meanings in different contexts.

MINOAN ART

Architecture

A PALACE CULTURE EMERGES During the third millennium BCE, both on the Aegean Islands and on the Greek mainland, most settlements were small and consisted only of simple buildings. Only rarely were the dead buried with costly offerings such as the Cycladic statuettes just examined. In contrast, the opening centuries of the second millennium (the Middle Minoan period on Crete) are marked by the construction of large palaces. This first, or Old Palace, period came to an abrupt end around 1700 BCE, when these grand structures were destroyed, probably by an earthquake. Rebuilding began sometime after 1700 BCE, and the ensuing New Palace (Late Minoan) period is the golden age of Crete, an era when the first great Western civilization emerged.

The rebuilt palaces were large, comfortable, and handsome, with ample staircases and courtyards for pageants, ceremonies, and games. They also had storerooms, offices, and shrines that permitted these huge complexes to serve as the key administrative, commercial, and religious centers of Minoan life. The principal palace sites on Crete are at Knossos, Phaistos, Mallia, Kato Zakro, and Khania. All of the complexes were laid out along similar lines. Their size and number, as well as the rich finds they have yielded, attest to the power and prosperity of the Minoans.

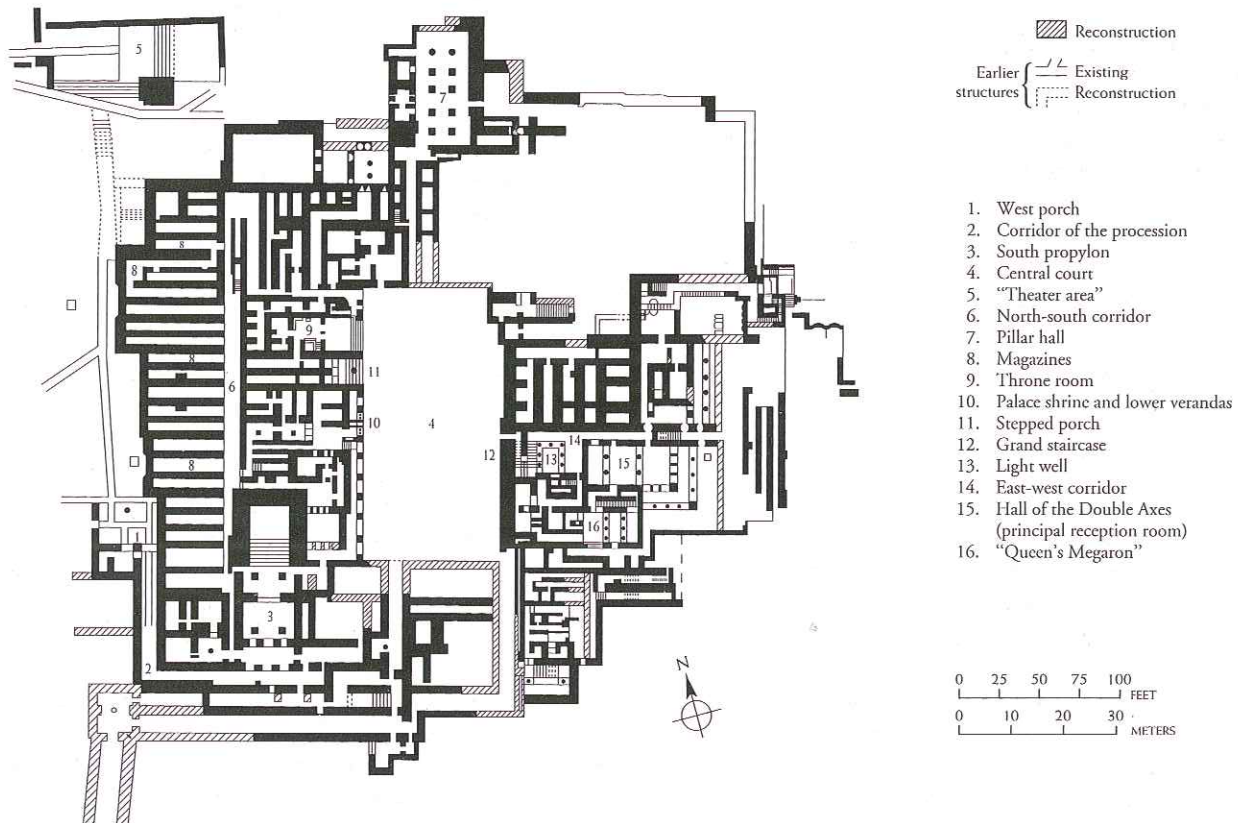
THE MINOTAUR’S LABYRINTH The largest of the palaces, at Knossos (FIGS. 4-3 and 4-4), was the legendary home of King Minos. Here, the hero Theseus was said to have battled with the bull-man Minotaur. According to the myth, after defeating the monster, Theseus found his way out of the mazelike complex only with the aid of the king’s daughter, Ariadne. She had given Theseus a spindle of thread to mark his path through the labyrinth and then safely out again. In fact, the English word *labyrinth* derives from the intricate plan and scores of rooms of the Knossos palace. *Labrys* means “double ax,” and it is a recurring motif in the Minoan palace, referring to sacrificial slaughter. The *labyrinth* was the “House of the Double Axes.”

Our aerial view (FIG. 4-3) reveals that the Knossos palace was a rambling structure built against the upper slopes and across the top of a low hill that rises from a fertile plain. All around the palace proper were mansions and villas of the Minoan elite. The great rectangular court (no. 4 in FIG. 4-4), with the palace units grouped around it, had been leveled in the time of the old palace. The new layout suggests that the later palace was carefully planned, with the court serving as the major organizing element.

A secondary organization of the palace plan involves two long corridors. On the west side of the court, a north-south corridor (no. 6) separates official and ceremonial rooms from the magazines (no. 8), where wine, grain, oil, and honey were stored in large jars. On the east side of the court, a smaller east-west corridor (no. 14)



4-3 Aerial view (looking northeast) of the palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1700–1400 BCE.



4-4 Plan of the palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1700–1400 BCE.



4-5 Stairwell in the residential quarter of the palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1700–1400 BCE.

separates the living quarters and reception rooms (to the south) from the workers' and servants' quarters (to the north). At the northwest corner of the palace is a theater-like area (no. 5) with steps on two sides that may have served as seats. This form is a possible forerunner of the later Greek theater (see FIG. 5-70). Its purpose is unknown, but it is a feature paralleled in the Phaistos palace.

The Cretan palaces were well constructed, with thick walls composed of rough, unshaped fieldstones embedded in clay. Ashlar masonry was used at building corners and around door and window openings. The Minoans also gave thought to such questions as drainage of rainwater. At Knossos, a remarkably efficient system of terracotta pipes underlies the enormous building.

The Knossos palace was complex not only in plan but also in elevation. It had as many as three stories around the central court and even more on the south and east sides where the terrain sloped off sharply. Interior staircases built around light and air wells (FIG. 4-5) provided necessary illumination and ventilation. Painted Minoan columns, originally fashioned of wood but which Evans restored in stone, are characterized by their bulbous, cushionlike capitals and distinctive shafts. The capitals resemble those of the later Greek Doric order (see "Doric and Ionic Temples," Chapter 5, page 116), but the shafts taper from a wide top to a narrower base—the opposite of both Egyptian and later Greek columns.

Painting

MINOAN PALACE FRESCOES Mural paintings liberally adorn the palace at Knossos, constituting one of its most striking aspects. The brightly painted walls and the red shafts and black capitals of the wooden columns provided an extraordinarily rich

effect. The paintings depict many aspects of Minoan life (bull-leaping, processions, and ceremonies) and of nature (birds, animals, flowers, and marine life).

From a ceremonial scene of uncertain significance comes the fragment (FIG. 4-6) dubbed *La Parisienne* (*The Parisian Woman*) on its discovery because of the elegant dress, elaborate coiffure, and full rouged lips of the young woman (perhaps a priestess or even a goddess) depicted. Although the representation is still convention-bound (note especially the oversized frontal eye in the profile head), the charm and freshness of the mural are undeniable. The painting method used is appropriate to the lively spirit of the Minoans. Unlike the Egyptians, who painted in fresco secco (dry fresco), the Minoans coated the rough fabric of their rubble walls with a fine white lime plaster and used a true (wet) fresco method (see "Fresco Painting," Chapter 19, page 530). The Minoan frescoes required rapid execution and great skill in achieving quick, almost impressionistic effects. The simple, light delicacy of the *Parisienne* painter's technique matches the vivacity of the subject.

BULL-LEAPING AT KNOSSOS Liveliness and spontaneity also characterize a fresco (FIG. 4-7) from the palace at Knossos depicting the Minoan ceremony of bull-leaping (see "Minoan Paintings Discovered in Egypt," page 91). Here, too, only fragments of the full composition have been recovered (the dark patches are original; the rest is a modern restoration). The Minoan artist painted the



4-6 Minoan woman or goddess (*La Parisienne*), from the palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1450–1400 BCE. Fragment of a fresco, approx. 10" high. Archaeological Museum, Herakleion.

Minoan Paintings Discovered in Egypt

Knowledge of ancient art and architecture grows daily as archaeologists uncover new paintings, sculptures, pots, and other objects, as well as remains of previously unknown buildings. Although excavators infrequently make a truly astounding discovery, that is what happened when, in the 1980s, an Austrian expedition to Tell el-Daba in the eastern Nile Delta explored a huge palace of the 16th century BCE.

Tell el-Daba, ancient Avaris (see MAP 3-1), was the capital city of the Hyksos. Until Ahmose, founder of the New Kingdom, drove them out around 1530 BCE, the Hyksos ruled the land of the Nile. The palatial complex the Austrians discovered was either built by Ahmose at the beginning of the 18th Dynasty, or built under the last Hyksos pharaoh and destroyed by Ahmose. The archaeologists uncovered the unexpected: pumice from the eruption of the Thera volcano (see “A Volcano Erupts,” page 94) and thousands of fragments of Aegean-style wall paintings.

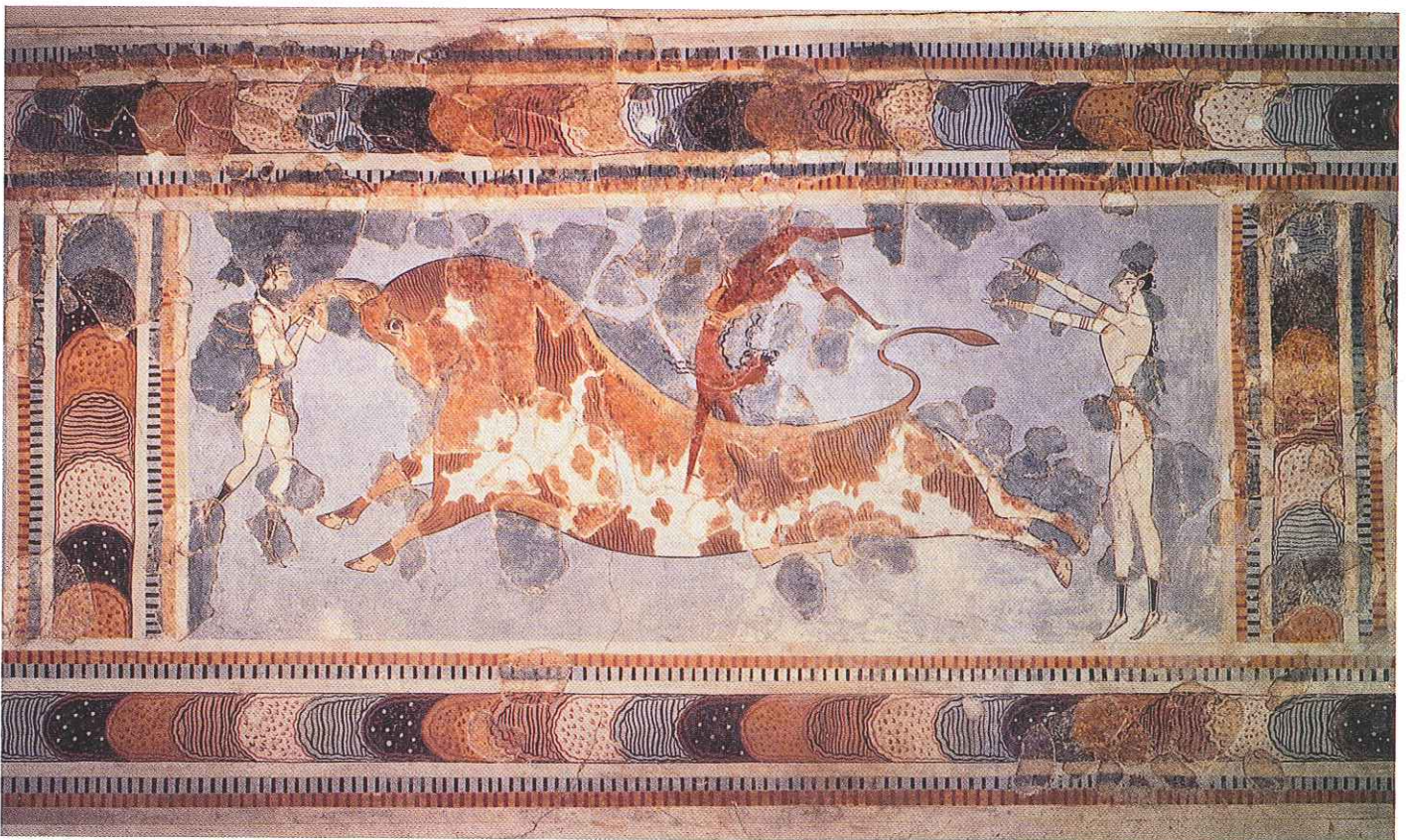
The most impressive of the Avaris murals depicts bull-leapers seen against a maze background that many believe is a topograph-

ical reference to the Minoan palace at Knossos. Not only is the subject of the painting Aegean but also the technique (primarily true fresco on lime plaster) and most aspects of style and iconography. Few doubt that Aegean rather than Egyptian artists decorated the palace, although there is little agreement as to why the Egyptians employed foreign painters or chose an Aegean subject.

Whatever the final answer to this archaeological and historical riddle, the excavations at Tell el-Daba have demonstrated that contacts between Egypt and the Aegean world were not confined to trade and politics. In fact, painted walls and floors of Aegean style, technique, and subject also have been discovered in recent years in a Canaanite palace at Tel Kabri in northern Israel. Similar finds had been made much earlier at Alalakh in Syria (see MAP 2-1 for both sites). Together these startling discoveries provide evidence for a rich international exchange of artists and ideas in the Mediterranean world at the middle of the second millennium BCE. Art historians can no longer study the great civilizations of Egypt, the Near East, and the Aegean in isolation.

young women (with fair skin) and the youth (with dark skin) according to the widely accepted ancient convention for distinguishing male and female. The young man is shown in the air, having, it seems, grasped the bull's horns and vaulted over its back in a perilous and extremely difficult acrobatic maneuver. The painter brilliantly suggested the powerful charge of the bull by elongating the animal's shape and using sweeping lines to form a funnel of energy,

beginning at the very narrow hindquarters of the bull and culminating in its large, sharp horns and galloping forelegs. The human figures also have stylized shapes, with typically Minoan pinched waists, and are highly animated. Although the profile pose with the full-view eye was a familiar convention in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the elegance of the Cretan figures, with their long, curly hair and proud and self-confident bearing, distinguishes them from all



4-7 Bull-leaping, from the palace at Knossos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1450–1400 BCE. Fresco, approx. 2' 8" high, including border. Archaeological Museum, Heraklion.

A Volcano Erupts, and the History of Art Is Revised

Today, ships bound for the beautiful Greek island of Santorini, with its picture-postcard white houses, churches, shops, and restaurants, weigh anchor in a bay beneath steep, crescent-shaped cliffs. Until about 20,000 BCE, however, ancient Thera had a roughly circular shape and gentler slopes. Then, suddenly, a volcanic eruption blew out the center of the island, leaving behind the moon-shaped main island and several lesser islands grouped around a bay that roughly corresponds to the shape of the gigantic ancient volcano. The volcano erupted again, thousands of years later, during the zenith of Aegean civilization.

Then, the site of Akrotiri, which Greek excavators gradually were uncovering, was buried by a pumice layer more than a yard deep in some areas and by an even larger volume of volcanic ash (tephra) that often exceeds five yards in depth, even after nearly 7 centuries of erosion. Tephra filled whole rooms, and boulders the volcano spewed forth pelted the walls of some houses. Closer to the volcano's cone, the tephra is almost 60 yards deep in places. In fact, the force of the eruption was so powerful that sea currents carried the pumice and wind blew the ash throughout the ancient Mediterranean, not only to Crete, Rhodes, and Cyprus but also as far away as Anatolia, Egypt (see "Minoan Paintings Discovered in Egypt," page 91), Syria, and Israel.

Until recently, most scholars embraced the theory formulated decades ago by Spyridon Marinatos, an eminent Greek archaeologist, that the otherwise unexplained demise of Minoan

civilization on Crete around 1500 BCE was the by-product of the volcanic eruption on Thera. According to Marinatos, devastating famine followed the rain of ash that fell on Crete. But archaeologists now know that after the eruption, life went on in Crete, if not on Thera. At one Cretan site, the Minoans collected Theraan pumice and deposited it in conical cups on a monumental stairway, possibly as a votive offering.

Teams of researchers, working closely in an impressive and most welcome interdisciplinary effort, have pinpointed 1628 BCE as the date of a major climatic event. They have studied tree rings at sites in Europe and in North America for evidence of retarded growth and have examined ice cores in Greenland for peak acidity layers. Both kinds of evidence testify to a significant disruption in weather patterns in that year. Today, most—but not all—scholars believe the cause of this disruption to be the cataclysmic volcanic eruption on Thera.

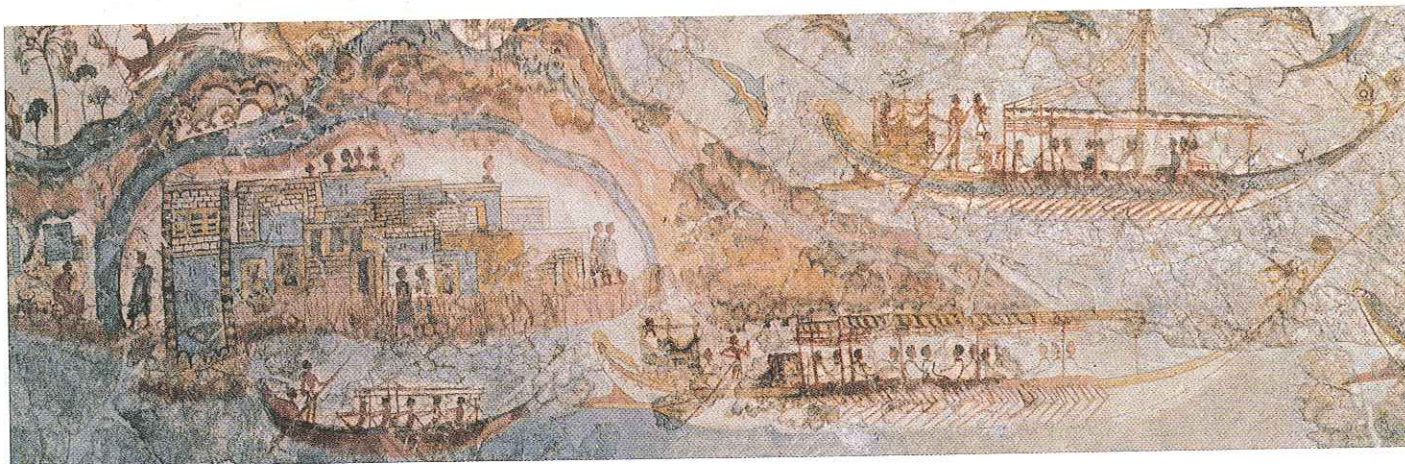
The revised date of the Theraan eruption has profound consequences for the chronology of Aegean art. The Akrotiri frescoes (FIGS. 4-8 and 4-9) are now thought to be at least 150 years older than they were considered not long ago. They predate by many decades the paintings from the Knossos palace (FIGS. 4-6 and 4-7). The discovery has implications for the dating of art objects from other areas as well because of the important interconnections between the Aegean, Egypt, and the Near East during the second millennium BCE.

Other early figure styles. The angularity of the figures seen in Egyptian wall paintings is modified by the curving Minoan line that suggests the elasticity of the living and moving being.

BURIED BY A VOLCANO Much better preserved than the Knossos frescoes are those uncovered much more recently in the excavations of Akrotiri on the volcanic island of Santorini (ancient Thera) in the Cyclades, some 60 miles north of Crete. In the Late Cycladic period, Thera was artistically, and possibly also politically, within the Minoan orbit. The mural paintings from Akrotiri are invaluable additions to the fragmentary and frequently misrestored frescoes from Crete. The excellent condition of the Theraan paintings is due to an enormous seismic explosion

on Santorini that buried Akrotiri in volcanic pumice and ash, making it a kind of Pompeii of the prehistoric Aegean (see "A Volcano Erupts, and the History of Art Is Revised," above). The Akrotiri frescoes decorated the walls of houses, not the walls of a great palace such as that at Knossos, and therefore the number of painted walls from the site is especially impressive.

SEAFARING IN THE CYCLADES One especially interesting Theraan fresco is filled with dozens of figures, ships, and buildings. This *Miniature Ships Fresco*, as it has been called, formed a frieze about 17 inches high at the top of at least three walls of a room in the so-called West House at Akrotiri. In our detail of the fresco (FIG. 4-8), a great fleet sails from one Aegean port headed for



4-8 Flotilla, detail of *Miniature Ships Fresco*, from Room 5, West House, Akrotiri, Thera (Cyclades), Greece, ca. 1650 BCE. Fresco, approx. 1' 5" high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.



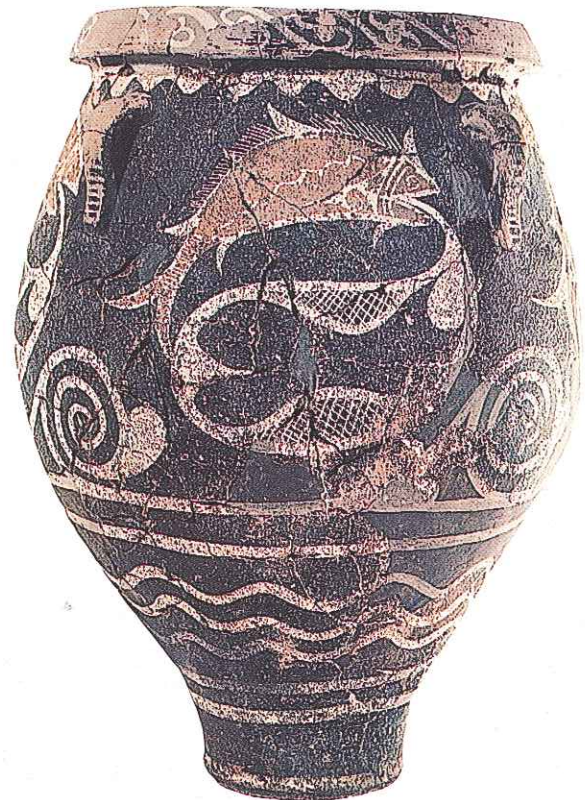
4-9 Landscape with swallows (*Spring Fresco*), from Room Delta 2, Akrotiri, Thera (Cyclades), Greece, ca. 1650 BCE. Fresco, approx. 7' 6" high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

another (not visible in the illustration), perhaps taking part in a sea festival or perhaps engaged in a naval campaign that calls to mind Homer's much later catalog of ships in the *Iliad*. Such a detailed representation of the movement of ships and people from port to port does not appear again until the Column of the Roman emperor Trajan (see FIG. 10-42) almost two millennia later. The details of ship design and sailing are carefully observed in the fresco, as if it were painted by one who knew ships well. Just as closely studied are the placement and poses of sailors, rowers, and passengers.

Little of the conventional stereotyping and repetition that appear in such representations throughout the history of art is evident in the Akrotiri fresco. Instead, the arrangement of figures and poses varies significantly according to each person's role—steering, tending to the sail, rowing, or simply sitting and conversing. Dolphins frolic about the ships, and on the left shore a lion pursues fleeing deer. The port—encircled by a river represented as arching above it—has quays, houses, and streets filled with men attentive to the coming and going of the ships. The whole composition has an openness and lightness that suggest the freedom of movement of a people born to the sea.

CELEBRATING NATURE The almost perfectly preserved mural paintings of another room from Akrotiri capture especially well the freshness and vitality of this vision of the Aegean world. In *Spring Fresco* (FIG. 4-9), nature itself is the sole subject, although the artist's aim was not to render the rocky island terrain realistically but, rather, to capture the landscape's essence and to express joy in the splendid surroundings. The irrationally undulating and vividly colored rocks, the graceful lilies swaying in the cool island breezes, and the darting swallows express the vigor of growth, the delicacy of flowering, and the lightness of birdsong and flight. In the lyrical language of curving line, the artist celebrated the rhythms of spring. This is the first known example of a pure landscape painting, one that not only has no humans but also has no narrative element (compare FIG. 1-18). The Thera *Spring Fresco* represents the polar opposite of the first efforts at mural painting in the caves of Paleolithic Europe, where animals (and occasionally humans) appeared as isolated figures without any indication of setting.

SEA LIFE ON POTTERY The love of nature manifested itself in Crete on the surfaces of painted vases even before the period of the new palaces. During the Middle Minoan period, Cretan potters fashioned sophisticated shapes using newly introduced potters' wheels, and decorated their vases in a distinctive and fully polychromatic style. These Kamares Ware vessels, named for the cave on the slope of Mount Ida where they were first discovered, have been found in quantity at Phaistos and Knossos. On our example (FIG. 4-10), as on other Kamares vases, creamy white and reddish-brown



4-10 Kamares Ware jar, from Phaistos (Crete), Greece, ca. 1800–1700 BCE. Approx. 1' 8" high. Archaeological Museum, Herakleion.