

The Case of the Minoans and the Modern

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Similarities between Minoan art and Art Nouveau style have been noted ever since the early stage of the excavation at Knossos. While previous scholarship has discussed the possible influence of Art Nouveau on the restoration of Minoan art, the significance of this modern art style in constructing the early perceptions of the Minoans has not been demonstrated. This paper aims to present how the Minoans came to be associated with the idea of the modern through a historiographical analysis. By examining the written texts of Arthur Evans and early visitors to Knossos in relation to contemporary artistic development, I argue that Art Nouveau style and the general impression for the style played a defining role in forming the perception that the Minoans appeared to be more “modern” than other ancient civilizations contemporary to their time.

Introduction

The word “modern” has been used to describe the Minoans ever since the earliest stage of the excavation at Knossos. In his first excavation reports on Knossos, Arthur Evans employed the word “modern” repeatedly in commenting on various aspects of his discovery: Fresco designs of “a curious modern manner” covered the porch at the Western Court, the wall painting of the griffins in the Throne Room had a “remarkable and curiously modern feature,” and the image of a “hand and forearm grasping a lily spray” presented on a sealing had a “curiously modern aspect.”¹ He was also impressed by the building complex, which included structures that recalled “a modern class-room” and “modern semi-detached villas.”² His descriptions of building features such as “arrangements for securing privacy and comfort, together with sanitary conveniences in some ways ahead of anything the world was to see for the next three thousand years” and “windows of such a modern aspect... for which no analogy of classical civilization could have prepared us” demonstrated that the Minoan civilization appeared surprisingly modern to Evans as one that even surpassed later civilizations.³ It could be safely assumed that such points of view were also delivered in the many lectures and talks given by Evans. As a pioneer in Minoan archaeology, Evans set the tone for the discipline, where his ideas have profound influence to the present day.

While the building complex at Knossos is indeed remarkable, the continuous use of the word “modern” in describing the site, as well as the civilization, is questionable. Being the son of an antiquarian and the keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, Evans was no stranger to Western ancient world and new archaeological discoveries. Earlier in the 1870s, Heinrich Schliemann had already discovered the Mycenaean sites of Mycenae

and Tiryns, which provided valuable insight into Bronze Age Greece. These discoveries became important references for Evans’ interpretation of Knossos since he originally believed that he had discovered another Mycenaean site due to the architectural and artistic similarities. Yet Schliemann’s publications on Mycenae and Tiryns did not associate the Mycenaeans with the idea of the so-called “modern.” Another major reference for Evans’ interpretation was ancient Egypt: Evans drew countless parallels from ancient Egypt in his discussion on Knossos, including declaring that the early Cretan civilization was in “an ultimate indebtedness to Egyptian models” in one instance when he discussed the physiognomy of the Minoan houses.⁴ Since ancient Egypt was hardly associated with the idea of “modern,” Evans’ claim on the modern appearance of the Minoans seems to lack substantial support. How an ancient civilization that owed much to ancient Egypt and being similar to the Mycenaeans, both of which had not been described as “modern,” would appear modern in the eyes of Evans is puzzling. The following discussion attempts to understand how Evans’ thought process and opinions developed by examining his depictions of Minoan art in relation to the artistic environment at the turn of the 20th century.⁵

Decorativeness of Minoan Art

Why did Evans associate the Minoans with the idea of the modern? The conception of this view could be observed in his impressions of Minoan art. Evans found Minoan art “decorative,” an adjective he used frequently in describing Minoan frescoes, as well as containing many decorative elements. In the Southern Propylaeum, he found “decorative paintings” of “a succession of rosettes with brilliant red, white, black, and orange coloring;” some miniature fresco fragments included those “of a more decorative nature

with bands of spirals, scroll work, rosettes and other motifs;” and the column base at the Northern Portico was of “an exceptionally decorative kind of limestone.”⁶

Among the many examples, the Throne Room fresco of the griffins could provide a detailed examination (fig. 1). Evans described the fresco as such:

... on either side of this opening were painted two couchant griffins of a curiously decorative type... The monster is wingless, an unique peculiarity due perhaps to an approximation to the Egyptian sphinx. It bears a crest of peacock's plumes, showing that this Indian fowl was known to the East Mediterranean world long before the days of Solomon. Pendant flowers, and a volute terminating in a rosette adorn the neck, and a chain of jewels runs along its back. A remarkable and curiously modern feature is the hatching along the under-side of the body, which apparently represents



Figure 1. Throne Room Fresco from Knossos (After A. Evans 1921-1935, IV, Pl. XXXII. Digitized image courtesy of the Bibliotheken der Universität Heidelberg <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1921ga>).

shading... The griffins... were backed by a landscape of the same kind as that already described, showing a stream with water-plants and palm-trees behind. This location of the griffins in a flowery landscape is characteristic of contemporary Egyptian art, as illustrated by the Theban paintings. Above the zone containing these designs is a plain upper frieze consisting of two dark red bands bordered by pairs of white lines...⁷

In this passage, Evans observed a resemblance between Minoan art and ancient Egyptian art in terms of the form of the griffins and the background landscape in which they were placed. While the Minoan fresco showed characteristics that were similar to contemporary Egyptian paintings, Evans did not associate it with the idea of “ancient.” Instead, the idea of “modern” was conveyed.

This paradox could be explained by understanding Evans’ idea of “modern” in art representation. Based on his description, these Minoan griffins, although wingless like typical ancient Egyptian sphinxes, were much more decorative due to the various ornamental elements that adorned the griffins. In other words, the decorativeness of the griffins distanced this wall painting from ancient Egyptian examples. Removing all the descriptive words from the passage, it becomes obvious that the two terms that summed up Evans’ impression of the fresco were “curiously modern” and “curiously decorative.” This clearly illustrates the relation that Evans saw between “decorative” and “modern.” It could thus be suggested that the idea of associating “decorative quality” with “modernity” was more or less the view of Evans.

Characteristics of Art Nouveau

This idea of associating decorative quality with modernity was most certainly formed by

the art development at the time when Knossos was excavated. The turn of the 20th century witnessed the height of the Art Nouveau movement, which aimed to create art that matched the modern society.⁸ The movement took many forms across Europe and America. Originating in Belgium and popularized in France, Art Nouveau was *Jugendstil* in Germany, the Secession style in Austria and Hungary, the *Modernista* movement in Spain, *La Stile Liberty* in Italy, and associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement in England and America. While Art Nouveau style in each country had its own roots, its development in these countries interweaved with one another. Despite regional differences, some of the major characteristics across all regions were: decorative in style, inspired by nature, and abandoning the classical traditions being taught in academic institutions.

These three characteristics—decorative, inspired by nature, and abandoning classical traditions—matched what Evans saw in Minoan art. In addition to describing the decorative quality of frescoes discussed above, Evans compared the Minoan wall painting of a group of lilies, unearthed from the South-East House, to the wallpaper designs of William Morris, one of the forerunners of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain.⁹ He even pointed out “how similar all Cretan decoration is to Art Nouveau” in a conversation with the British art historian Kenneth Clark, who also stated that the frescoes at Knossos resembled “the style dix-neuf cent (the 19th century style).”¹⁰ The curvilinear and sinuous renderings in Minoan art, such as the use of spirals and wavy lines, corresponded to the organic feature of Art Nouveau style.¹¹ Evans also saw nature as a major part of Minoan art, considering the numerous motifs taken from this source. He used the term “naturalism,” which appeared frequently in his writings, to refer to “the

sudden spurt of interest in the living world of nature, the flowers and animals of Crete, as well as the rocks and marine life of its coastline.”¹² In other words, the Minoans appeared to him as a group of nature-loving people who lived in harmony with nature. Moreover, Evans viewed the Minoan representation of their surrounding world as “naturalistic,” meaning that they displayed a sense of animation and spontaneity.¹³ He commented, for example, that some flower petals in Minoan frescoes were “delineated as half detached by the passing breeze” as an evidence that Minoan artists tried to convey movement in their paintings.¹⁴ The enthusiasm for nature, which played an essential role in the Art Nouveau movement, was reflected in Evans’ impression and interpretation of Minoan art.

Furthermore, the style of Minoan art did not have much in common with that of classical Greek art in Evans’ view. The Minoan civilization, upon its discovery, was naturally compared with classical Greece due to its location of Crete and its connection with the Mycenaean civilization from the Greek mainland. In his discussion of the miniature frescoes, Evans stated that some of the Knossian drawings of female figures called to mind “the white Athenian *lekythoi* of a much later age,” but were “incomparably more modern, and display[ed] a vivacity and a fashionable pose quite foreign to classical art” (figs. 2 and 3).¹⁵ With such statements, he implied that Minoan art was, first, different from classical art, and second, modern, despite the fact that the Minoans were dated to a much earlier age. This idea of associating non-classical features with modernity also originated from the Art Nouveau movement. As a reaction against traditional aesthetic views, the Art Nouveau movement abandoned the artistic style of classical Greece taught in academic institutions. Consequently, the

aesthetic tastes that developed from following the classical tradition to avoiding it signified progress and the advancement of the modern age. In accordance with the non-classical preference, Art Nouveau artists, as well as the general public in Europe, were fascinated by art and ideas from the so-called “exotic lands,” such as Japanese, Indian, Moorish, and Turkish culture. Calling the griffin in the Throne Room fresco an “Indian fowl,” Evans’ description revealed his inclination of seeing the Minoans as non-classical and exotic.¹⁶

With its decorative, “naturalistic,” and non-classical characteristics, Minoan art resembled Art Nouveau style to Evans more than classical Greek art, which led to his impression that Minoan art had a modern appearance. This impression of art was then extended to how he viewed the civilization as a whole. For example, Evans described the scene in the Temple Fresco as an evidence of the Minoans performing “a more advanced and decorative form of Pillar Worship,” where the words “advanced” and “decorative” were placed together without much explanation of their exact meaning in relation to the form of worship (fig. 3).¹⁷

Modern Civilization as a Shared View

Evans’ perception of the Minoans as a “modern” civilization was soon to be shared, or confirmed, by other scholars. Edmond Pottier, a French scholar who visited the site of Knossos, exclaimed “*Mais, ce sont des*



Figure 2. Sacred Grove Fresco from Knossos (After A. Evans 1921-1935, III, Pl. XVIII. Digitized image courtesy of the Bibliotheken der Universität Heidelberg <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1921ga>).

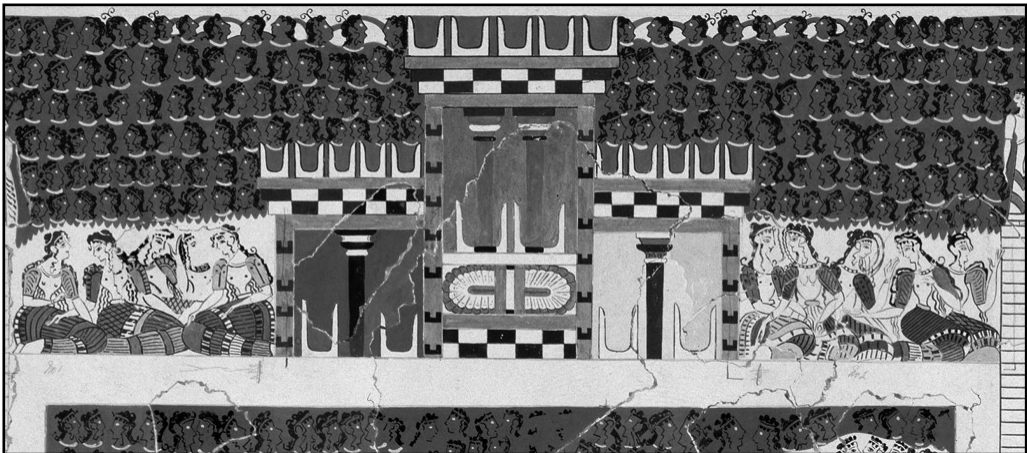


Figure 3. Temple Fresco from Knossos (After A. Evans 1921-1935, III, Pl. XVI. Digitized image courtesy of the Bibliotheken der Universität Heidelberg <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1921ga>).

parisiennes! (But, they are Parisians!)” at the sight of a fresco fragment of a female figure unearthed in 1901 (fig. 4).¹⁸ Preserved from the top to the chest, this female figure, known since as *la Parisienne*, had curly dark hair, elaborate clothing, and bright red lips, which reminded Pottier of modern women in Paris. He clearly expressed his thoughts on the “modern” appearance of the female figure:

Her disheveled hair; the provocative “kiss curl” on her forehead, her enormous eye and sensual mouth, stained a violent red in the original, her tunic with its blue, red, and black stripes, the mass of ribbons tossed over her shoulder in a “come-hither” gesture, this mixture of naïve archaism and spicy modernism, this quick sketch traced by a paintbrush on a wall at Knossos more



Figure 4. Fresco of *La Parisienne* from Knossos (After A. Evans 1921-1935, IV, Pl. XVI. Detail. Digitized image courtesy of the Bibliotheken der Universität Heidelberg <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1921ga>).

*than three thousand years ago to give us the impression of a Daumier or a Degas, this Pasiphaë who looks like a habituë of Parisian bars—everything about this work conspires to amaze us; in sum, there is something about the discovery of this unheard-of art that we find stunning, even scandalous.*¹⁹

In this description, Pottier presented his impression on the Minoan female figure as well as the modern women in Paris. The two, in his view, were comparable not only in their appearances, but also through the implication of their seductive characters. The fresco of *la Parisienne*, as a matter of fact, could hardly be perceived as a “scandalous” image. What made it scandalous was its association, made by Pottier, with the images of Parisian women under the paintbrush of Impressionist painters that often carried a social connotation of the time. Calling the female figure in the fresco “Pasiphaë,” the mythological figure who fell in love with a bull and gave birth to the Minotaur, although being somewhat abrupt, went well with the narrative of a scandalous woman. The parallel between “Pasiphaë” and “a habituë of Parisian bars” further strengthened the connection between Minoan women and modern Parisian women through their manner, which was not exactly presented in the fresco. Thus, Pottier’s interpretation of the figure was established upon his impression of modern women based on the fashionable appearance in modern standards.

Pottier visited Knossos and saw the fresco fragment only less than a year after the closing of the 1900 Paris Exposition, which ran from April 15th to November 12th, 1900. With the public enthusiasm over the exposition, it was not impossible that when Pottier exclaimed “*la Parisienne*” he had in mind the statue of *La Parisienne* at the top of Porte Binet, the main entryway of the exposition (fig. 5).²⁰ This exposition, likened to a vast “organism”

and an “immense reservoir of energy,” has been hailed as the hallmark of the French Art Nouveau movement.²¹ Porte Binet, designed by the architect René Binet, made a statement of the new aesthetics by combining zoological forms and decorative elements with oriental reference.²² The statue of *La Parisienne* itself was also a visual proclamation of the new era. Made by the sculptor Paul Moreau-Vauthier, *La Parisienne* represented a modern woman through her costume as well as her gesture. Her costume, designed by the couturier Jeanne Paquin, consisted of a long dress of delicate patterns, a cloak with ruffled fringes, and a headdress in the shape of the prow of a ship, which symbolized the motto of Paris, *Fluctuat nec mergitur*. She cast her look slightly upward and afar with her arms open in a welcoming gesture. Representing modernity and reflecting the modern taste, the Art Nouveau statue of *La Parisienne* drew both positive and negative criticism, ranging from “supple and vital” to “the triumph of prostitution.”²³ Interestingly, both comments also paralleled Pottier’s impression of the Minoan fresco *la Parisienne*, which would hardly be pure coincidence.

Pottier was not the only person who made a connection between Minoan women and modern women. Many others, who saw Minoan frescoes of female figures first-handedly, expressed a similar view. Some comments included “beyond classical art... one rediscovered the modern world, with an elegance at once more familiar and more affected...” and “the women of Knossos in 1600 B.C.E. shared with the Parisiennes of our day the notion that a dress should cling around the hips and widen toward the hem.”²⁴ The aforementioned miniature fresco scenes, in which Evans detailed the “court ladies in elaborate toilette...engaged in animated conversation” were later presented as demonstrations of “the astonishingly modern character of Minoan life” where “men and

women [mingled] freely with one another” (figs. 2 and 3).²⁵ The connotation of a modern society carried by images of stylish women was beyond doubt.

Impression of Modern Based on Art

The image of *La Parisienne* of the 1900 Paris Exposition would come to mind again when the faience female figurines, which Evans named the Snake Goddess and her attendants, were unearthed in 1903 (fig. 6). The Snake Goddess had a high tiara, a necklace, a long skirt, an apron, and a tight jacket with a laced bodice that revealed her breasts. Three snakes coiled on her body and arms, which extended forward. The posture



Figure 5. Postcard of the 1900 Paris Exposition with an image of the statue of *La Parisienne* (Used under the Creative Commons Attribution 1.0 Generic. Courtesy of L'Exposition Universelle de Paris 1900 <http://exposition-universelle-paris-1900.com>).

of the Snake Goddess naturally evoked that of *La Parisienne* from the exposition. Her costume and that of her attendants were also comparable to that of *La Parisienne* in terms of the elaborate decoration. Evans, clearly fascinated by the meticulous execution of the costumes of the faience figurines, detailed the braids and patterns and pointed out that the jacket of the Snake Goddess was “richly embroidered.”²⁶ Although these were the only objects from Knossos that bore images of female figures handling snakes, Evans gave them major significance in his interpretation of the civilization and selected the Snake Goddess as the frontispiece for the first volume of his publication *Palace of Minos*. The Snake Goddess and her attendants, clothed in carefully decorated costumes, have since enjoyed the status as an iconic Minoan images, just as *La Parisienne*, which celebrated “the decorative art and the decorative women,” was the face of the 1900 Paris Exposition.²⁷

Thus, the perception that the Minoans were more modern than other ancient civilizations, even some after its time, was in fact a reflection of the ideas of the early 20th century. Explaining his new discovery by drawing parallels from other ancient civilizations, Evans certainly saw the Minoans as part of the greater ancient East Mediterranean world. The association between the Minoans and the modern, seemingly out of context, was in fact established upon the similar styles between Minoan art and Art Nouveau, the art movement that aimed to represent modern society. The decorative quality, the representation of nature, and the contrast to classical style placed Minoan art in alignment with Art Nouveau style as opposed to Neo-Classical style preferred by traditional institutions. The impression of a modern art style then led to that of a modern society. Since no written texts of a narrative nature were left of the



Figure 6. Snake Goddess from Knossos (After A. Evans 1921-1935, I, Frontispiece. Digitized image courtesy of the Bibliotheken der Universität Heidelberg <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/evans1921ga>).

Minoans, the images naturally dominated the idea and the interpretation of the civilization. Conceived by Evans and supported by some of his fellow scholars at the very beginning of this discipline, the perception of the Minoans being modern would later play a significant role in reconstructing the image of the Minoan civilization.

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Endnotes:

1. Evans 1900, 12, 40; Evans 1902, 77-78.
2. Evans 1901, 97; Evans 1902, 16.
3. Evans 1902, 18, 45.
4. Evans 1902, 18.
5. The view that Evans' interpretation of the Minoans was influenced by the artistic practice and ideology of the turn of the 20th century has been expressed by a number of scholars. See Niemeier 1995 and Farnoux 1996b in particular relation to this paper.
6. Evans 1900, 15, 48, 54.
7. Evans 1900, 40.
8. While Art Nouveau style might not conform entirely to some of the 20th-century theories of what constitutes the modern, its breakaway from academic style certainly gave it a modern image at the turn of the century.
9. Evans 1903, 5. Evans did not specify which of Morris' wallpaper designs he had in mind. The comment most likely referred to his general impression of the design of Morris.
10. Clark 1974, 107.
11. The stylistic similarities between Minoan art and Art Nouveau style have generated much discussions. Opinions vary as to whether one influenced the other. Recent scholarship includes Blakolmer 2006, De Craene 2008, Farnoux 1996b, and Ilaria 2011.
12. Immerwahr 1990, 40.
13. It has been pointed out that Evans' use of the word "naturalism" was a misnomer. "Naturalism" in art theory means the representation based on the accurate depiction of detail, yet Minoan paintings are more often a free expression of the spirit than a scientific depiction of an object (Immerwahr 1990, 41).
14. Evans 1903, 5.
15. Evans 1900, 47.
16. The Sharabha, a mythical animal with part lion, part bird, and part human features, in Hindu mythology is relatively comparable to the griffin or the sphinx in Western mythology. Yet whether there is a link between the Sharabha and the griffin or the sphinx remains to be explored.
17. Evans 1900, 34.
18. MacGillivray 2000, 205.
19. Farnoux 1996a, 105.
20. 76,000 exhibitors from both France and abroad were presented at the 1900 Paris Exposition. According to official figures, there were 39,027,177 admissions using 47,076,539 paid tickets at two locations over the span of the

- exposition, not to mention the enormous amount of free tickets that were given to political figures, media, and embassies (Jullian 1974, 203-205).
21. Silverman 1989, 288.
 22. Jullian 1974, 39; Silverman 1989, 290.
 23. Jullian 1974, 38; Silverman 1989, 293.
 24. The first comment was made by Father Lagrange, a French theologian, and the second by Salomon Reinach, a French archaeologist (Farnoux 1996, 105).
 25. Evans 1900, 47; Hall 1914, 158.
 26. Evans 1903, 76, 80.
 27. Silverman 1989, 291.

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