Art of the Ancient Aegean

AP Art History
Where Is the Aegean Exactly?
3 Major Periods of Aegean Art:

- **Cycladic**: 2500 B.C.E - 1900 B.C.E
  - Located in Aegean Islands

- **Minoan**: 2000 B.C.E - 1400 B.C.E
  - Located on the island of Crete

- **Mycenaean**: 1600 B.C.E – 1100 B.C.E
  - Located in Greece

All 3 overlapped with the 3 Egyptian Kingdoms.

Evidence shows contact between Egypt and Aegean.
Digging Into the Aegean

Similar to Egypt, archaeology led to understanding of Aegean civilization through art

- 1800’s: Heinrich Schliemann (Germany) discovers Mycenaean culture by excavating ruins of Troy, Mycenae
- 1900: Sir Arthur Evans excavates Minoan palaces on Crete
- Both convinced Greek myths were based on history
  - Less is known of Aegean cultures than Egypt, Mesopotamia
The Aegean Sailors

- Unlike Egypt and Mesopotamia, Aegean cultures were not landlocked.
  - Access to sea allowed for expansion and exploring, adaptation of other cultures (Egypt)
- Much information about Aegean culture comes from items found on shipwrecks
  - Egyptian scarabs
  - African ivory, ebony
  - Metal ore imports
The Cycladic Culture

- **Cyclades:** Circle of Islands
- Left no written records, essentially prehistoric
- Artifacts are main info source
- Originally created with clay, later shifting to marble
- Most surviving objects found in grave sites like Egypt
  - Figures were placed near the dead
Cycladic Figures

- Varied in size (2” to 5 feet)
- Idols from Greek word *Eidolon*-image
- Primarily female (always nude), few males
  - Made of marble, abundant in area
- Feet too small to stand, meant to be placed on back near the deceased
Peculiar Painting

- Cycladic sculpture has been found with remnants of paint
  - Asymmetrical painting
  - Eyes appear in strange places (belly, back, etc)
  - Many hypothesis exist for meanings of these paintings
What does this art show about the people who made it?
Meet the Minoans

- Lived on island of Crete
  - First civilization to be completely surrounded by sea
- Relatively isolated
- Developed unique culture
- Traded with Egypt and Mesopotamia
- Art focused on life, beauty and fun
- Make peace, not war
  - Early hippies? 😊
The Legend of King Minos

- According to Legend...
  - King Minos ruled Crete from the capital in **Knossos**
    - Kept a **Minotaur** (half bull, half man) in a Labyrinth maze.
    - Minotaur was son of his wife and Poseidon’s bull
  - Ordered Athens to send 14 young men and women to feed the Minotaur each year
    - *(early “Hunger Games?”)*
    - Finally killed by Theseus in the maze
Now We Know about Knossos

- 1900 CE: Sir Arthur Evans uncovers remains of a palace at Knossos
  - Named the civilization after the Minotaur legend that inspired his search
  - Similar to discovery of Rosetta Stone/King Tut’s tomb
    - Revealed much about the nature culture through palace design
What does the design of this palace reveal about the culture? Good design? Bad?
The Minoan Maze

- Minoan architecture is very complex
  - Frequent earthquakes led to rebuilding, multiple stories, multiple rooms
  - Wood often used to frame and brace walls
  - Flat roofs
  - Columns utilized to bring in light and air
  - Courtyards were the biggest component
  - Not fortified: Strong navy and island base made invasion very rare
The Palace at Knossos: Not Very Practical
The Fantastic *Toreador* Fresco

- **Fresco:** Painting technique involving placing water-based paint on a freshly plastered wall. Paint forms a lasting bond with plaster

- What does this fresco show you about the Minoans?

- How is it different from previous cultures?
What do we find in the frescoes?

- Sexual Equality
- Life/motion/energy
- Man and nature are one
- Sequence of action
- Wavy S shapes (like the ocean)
  - **Buon (True) Fresco:** Applied to wet wall (Aegean)
    - Drying paint meant faster, more fluid strokes
      - Implies movement, life (unlike Egyptian)
  - **Fresco Secco:** Applied to dry wall (Egyptian)

VERY non-militaristic themes, unusual from previous cultures examined.
Not Exactly Egyptian...

- Minoans, like Egyptians, painted on their walls but....
  - Actually showed profile or face views
  - Created one of the first landscapes in existence:
  - *Spring Fresco*
    - Uses color and movement to represent nature.
    - No human in the scene
Merging with Mycenaen

- Minoans may have been too easy going
- 1500 B.C.E, aggressive tribes from Greek mainland invaded Crete, merging with the Minoans
  - Created the Greek myths
  - Launched the Trojan War
  - Not as laid back or “out of touch” as the Minoan’s were
  - Figures in art were depicted as more “fit” for battle
The Mycenaeans Move In

- Mycenae rose to power on the mainland and spread throughout the Aegean after the bronze age.
- War-like people, built and designed art differently from Minoans.
  - How does this palace show a difference?
No Mud for Mycenaens

- War was common for Mycenaean, not Minoans
  - Mud brick was replaced with thick stone for protection
  - Large, rough cut, irregular blocks were used to build walls
    - Called Cyclopean Walls (Masonry) because only a Cyclops could move such heavy bricks
The Lion Gate of Mycenae

- Entrance to the citadel (fortress) of Mycenae
- Post and Lintel structure
- Relieving triangle lessens pressure
  - This triangle has a relief of two lions with paws on an altar
  - Lions serve as guardians, obedient to their goddess
- Corbelled Arch: Arranging stones in layers (courses) until they meet at the top, creating an arch
Central column between lions....where did they get that idea?
Mortality in Mycenae

- Tombs were given more importance in Mycenae than in Minoan culture
- Honor = burial of warriors
  - Earliest burials were shaft graves
  - Important people had bigger tombs
    - Enclosed in a circle
    - Left with clothes, jewelry, weapons, wealth
    - Gold funerary masks- Egypt Influence?
Who was Agamemnon?

- Brother of **Menelaus** (of Sparta) whose wife, Helen, ran away with Paris of Troy
- **Agamemnon**, launched 1,000 troops to get his brother’s wife back AND attack Troy for himself
  - Legendary warriors **Achilles** and **Odysseus** went to fight for Agamemnon, whose warriors couldn’t breach the walls of Troy
  - Pretending to leave, Agamemnon’s men built a Trojan Horse and hid inside, which Troy took into the city
  - Greeks burnt the city to the ground and took Troy
The Mask of Agamemnon

- Not actually Agamemnon
- Definitely a death mask of someone
  - What does this remind you of?
Even Pottery Shows Power

- Mycenaeans excelled in ceramic pottery
  - Functional and decorative
  - Tradition continues in ancient Greece

- Kraters: Bowls for mixing water, wine
  - Used for grave markers or in feasts

- Highly stylized decorations
  - Less vibrant energy
  - Disciplined warriors instead
The Importance of Aegean Art

- Serves as an artistic and geographical bridge between Mediterranean Art:
  - Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek.
  - Seen through formal elements and content
- Influenced styles and traditions that will be adopted by the Greeks and later, Romans