The Discovery of Minoan Wall Painting

The Royal Academy Winter Exhibition of 1903 is a significant moment in the history of Minoan art. That year, alongside the traditional display of works by 'The Old Masters and Deceased Masters of the British School', a room was set aside for the works of painters who had lived 3,500 years ago on the island of Crete.[1] These works had started to come to light in 1900 when Sir Arthur Evans began to excavate at Knossos. Unlike Old Master paintings, however, they had emerged from the ground in fragments and could not be exported from Crete according to the laws of the time. Instead Evans commissioned replicas from the artist who had restored them, Émile Gilliéron. It was these replicas which hung on the walls of Burlington House alongside photographs and architectural drawings which helped explain the finds from Knossos to a London audience. Many of these exhibits survive in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, where Sir Arthur Evans was Keeper at the time of his excavations. By re-examining some of these exhibits over a century later it becomes possible to trace how interpretations have changed since Evans's day.

An article in *The Times* helps to put the exhibition in context. It was an appeal for public donations to help Evans continue the excavations which 'in three years have laid bare the living outlines of what was before to us a merely legendary world'.[2] Evans had uncovered a Bronze Age building which stood from around 2000 BCE until its final destruction in 1350 BCE. He called it the Palace of Minos, and the associated civilisation 'Minoan'. According to Greek myth the palace at Knossos was also the location of the Labyrinth and its resident Minotaur. These associations helped to attract public attention to the site, but the finds were also spectacular. The article went on to describe some of the replica paintings: 'More interesting still are the painted reliefs in *gesso duro*—the astonishing bull's head and the forceful human torso—which can leave no one who has seen them in doubt as to the capacity of these early Aegean artists to model with freshness and expression. Equally striking is the vividness of colour which pervades the frescoes, and, in some cases the curiously modern suggestions in inspiration and treatment'.[3] Critics have noted that the modernity of the frescoes was in part due to their extensive restoration by Gilliéron but there is no doubt that the wall paintings have a distinct aesthetic which seemed at home in the early twentieth century.[4]

One of the most remarkable pieces of painted plaster, found in the North Entrance Passage of the Palace, is the life size bull's head in relief which *The Times* highlighted (Fig. 1). It provided the inspiration for the bastion bearing a charging bull built in 1930 as part of Evans's controversial 'restitution' of the site in reinforced concrete (Fig. 2). For Evans this was one of the pieces of evidence that the Palace had inspired the myth of the Minotaur, since he believed that such images of bulls were still visible among the ruins in later times. The relief plaster head also gives the bull physical presence, bringing the animal out of the surface of the wall. Evans later called it 'one of the noblest revelations of Minoan Art. It is simple and large in style, but instinct with fiery life'.[5]

Another painting on display in 1903 was described in the catalogue as 'Fresco of the Female Toreadors' (Fig. 32). Émile Gilliéron's restoration clearly indicates the outlines of the surviving fragments, showing that his paintings were closely based on the available evidence but both the terms 'fresco' and 'female' are now debated. There has long been a consensus that the true fresco technique, applying pigment when the plaster was wet, was used for wall painting on Minoan Crete. Scientific analysis has complicated this picture, however, and it is now recognised that a mix of techniques was used, including painting *a secco*, once the plaster was dry.[6] Nevertheless it remains the case that Minoan Crete was one of the first places where true fresco painting was practised.

Evans argued that there were close links between Crete and Egypt in this period, so that the Egyptian convention of depicting women with white skin and men in red was adopted in Crete. This has been widely accepted too but, as this fresco shows, the evidence for this is ambiguous. All three figures in this fresco wear male attire, the codpiece and kilt, and so are

almost certainly young men; Evans instead explained this as ritual transvestism since he regarded bull-leaping as a religious performance. The Taureador Fresco, as it is now known, was one of a series of similar panels found in the East Wing of the Palace in 1901. The panels show different outcomes of the performance of bull-leaping which was depicted in a variety of media on Minoan Crete. The closest modern analogy seems to be the American rodeo, a demonstration of the skills used in rounding up cattle.[7] Both the pose of the leaper and the bull give a sense of movement. The posture of the bull has become known as a 'flying gallop', a distinctively Minoan innovation which brought animal depictions to life.

Conversely, one of the first frescoes to be discovered in 1900 was at first regarded as a female figure, before Evans decided that the red colour made it male. Now known more prosaically as the 'Cupbearer Fresco', Evans referred to this figure as 'Ariadne' in his notebook (Fig. 43). The feet of a number of other near life-size figures were found still *in situ* on the neighbouring walls, showing that this figure was part of a much larger procession. This helps to challenge our notion of wall paintings as simply decoration since many scholars now think that this painted procession was also an instruction for how to behave when entering the Palace – one should bring gifts – and also a permanent manifestation of a transient event. The object carried by the figure is known as a rhyton, most probably silver, and other similar objects were found at Knossos. It was probably used for filling cups in the course of the drinking ceremonies that happened at the Palace.

Another final fresco, described in 1903 as a 'Miniature Fresco', shows a gathering of red and white figures: red is used for the sea of heads around the white figures, who are clearly women in colourfully-dyed dresses which open to show their breasts (Fig. 54). This replica was made in plaster, and again shows the surviving fragments. It appears to show an area just outside the Palace known as the Theatral Area. Here there are raised walkways and banks of seating around an open area which, as this fresco shows, was used for performances of dancing among other things. It also shows that some women held high status, judging by their individual delineation and costly clothing. Dyed cloth was one of the main export products of Crete in this period, and these women might have been significant figures in the textile industry. Rather than gender, this painting shows that the red and white convention could map equally well onto status.

Some of the most famous Minoan frescoes only came into existence after the Royal Academy exhibition and first appeared in Evans's later publications. The fragments of the 'Ladies in Blue' were only put together a decade after they were excavated and were first published in 1921 (Fig. 6). Although the reconstruction appears to be accurate, all of the women's heads were reimagined by Émile Gilliéron. More problematic is the now famous 'Priest-King' or 'Prince of the Lilies', which was reconstructed from several fragments by the restorer's son, Émile Gilliéron *fils* (Fig. 7). Few archaeologists now believe that this restoration is correct: the crown probably comes from a sphinx and the torso from a male boxer (whose pale skin is another argument against the link between skin colour and gender).[8] Nevertheless, versions of these same restorations, containing the original fragments, are on display in Heraklion Archaeological Museum and have become emblematic of Minoan Crete.

Before the originals were put on permanent display in Heraklion The presentation of some of these reproductionspaintings at the Royal Academy in 1903 helped to establish them as part of the canon something that Arthur Evans referred to as of 'Minoan Art', and they are often seen in these terms. Yet despite their removal from the walls of the Palace, through Gilliéron's skilful replicas, they can also be used as important documents of the society that produced them. Indeed, in the absence of textual records for much of this period, they are often the best evidence we have for the society of Bronze Age Crete. One way of looking at the frescoes is that they show how the Palace was an economic centre where cattle were valuable animals, drinking equipment was paraded in processions, and women in colourfully dyed textiles held high status. In the Bronze Age these paintings presented a model of

society, with its important people, animals and activities. Maybe this was not so different from the paintings hanging on the walls of the other galleries in the 1903 Winter Exhibition after all.

Figure Captions

Fig.1: Replica of bull's head fresco from North Entrance, *c.1900-03. Painted plaster, 88 x 136 cm. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.*

Fig. 2: Restoration of charging bull painting on the North Entrance bastion at Knossos. Author photo.

Fig. 32: Émile Gilliéron, Taureador Fresco, *c.1900-03, watercolour, 86 x 153 cm. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.*

Fig. 43: Arthur Evans's 1900 Knossos excavation daybook, p. 19. © *Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.*

[or *Fig. 43:* Arthur Evans's 1900 Knossos excavation daybook, p. 19; Restoration of the Cupbearer Fresco, *watercolour, 56 x 25 cm. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.*]

Fig. 45: Émile Gilliéron, Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco, *c.1900-03. Painted plaster,* 64 x 84 cm. © *Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.*

Fig. 6: Émile Gilliéron, Ladies in Blue Fresco, *c.1914-21, watercolour, 95 x 161 cm. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.*

Fig. 7: Restoration of the Priest-King. A.J. Evans, *Palace of Minos,* vol. II (1928), pl.xiv

Biography

Andrew Shapland is the Sir Arthur Evans Curator of Bronze Age and Classical Greece at the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. He was curator of the recent exhibition *Labyrinth: Knossos, Myth and Reality.*

[1] *Winter Exhibition Thirty-Fourth Year*, ex. cat., (London: Royal Academy of Arts)
[2] *The Times,* 16 February 1903, p. 9
[3] Ibid.
[4] See Nicoletta Momigliano, *In Search of the Labyrinth: The Cultural Legacy of Minoan Crete* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 74-86
[5] Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos,* vol. III (London: Macmillan, 1930), p. 172
[6] Richard Jones, 'Technical studies of Aegean Bronze Age wall painting: methods, results and future prospects' in *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*, ed. by Lyvia Morgan (London: British School at Athens, 2005), pp. 199-228
[7] Andrew Shapland, *Human-Animal Relations in Bronze Age Crete: A History through Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 89-95
[8] Susan Sherratt, *Arthur Evans, Knossos and the Priest-King* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2000)