

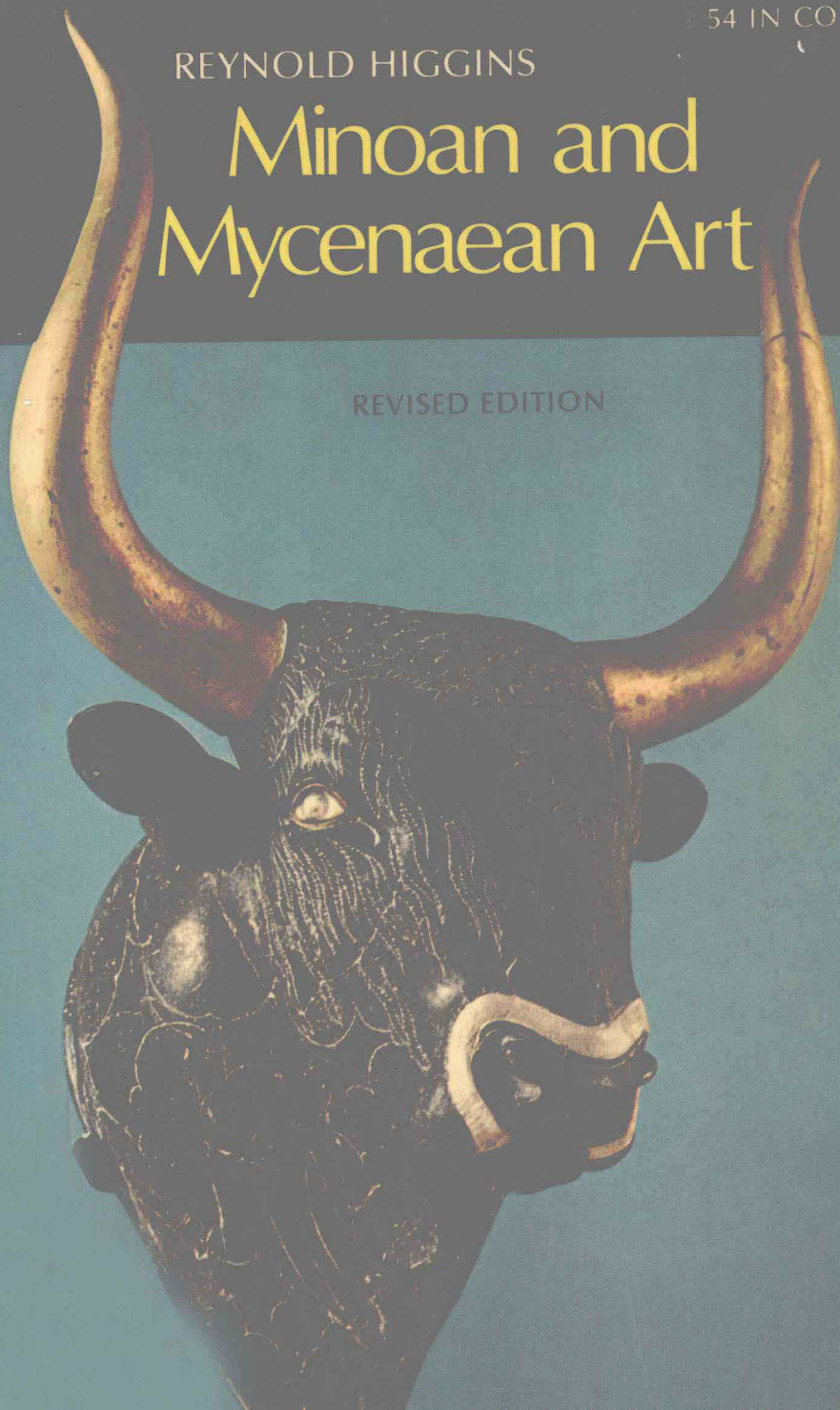
241 ILLUSTRATIONS

54 IN COLOUR

REYNOLD HIGGINS

# Minoan and Mycenaeae Art

REVISED EDITION



# **Minoan and Mycenaean Art**



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**Reynold Higgins**

*Revised Edition*

**New York and Toronto  
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*Author's Note on the Second Edition*

In this edition the text has been brought up to date in the light of research and discoveries since 1967, and a few changes have been made to the illustrations. In particular space has been created for two colour photographs of the newly discovered frescoes from Thera (*Ills. 110 and 111*).

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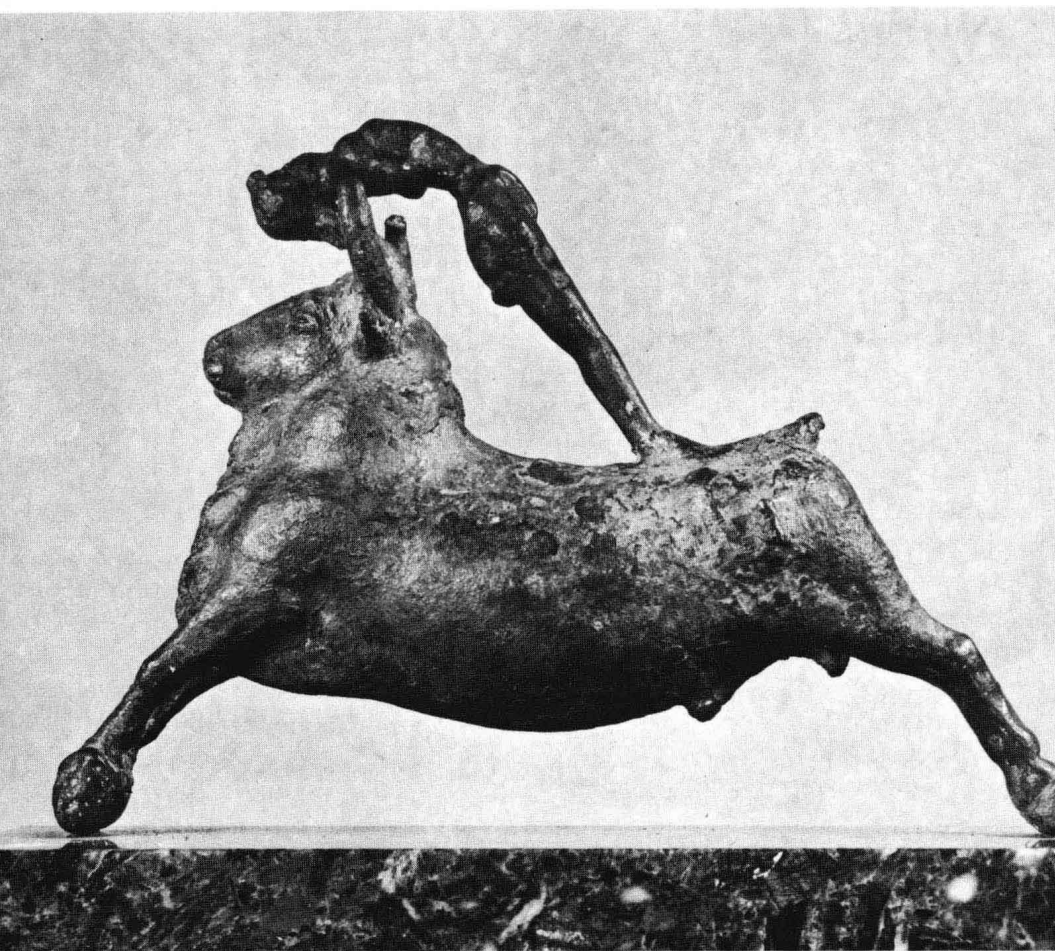
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*Frontispiece.* The finest extant Cretan bronze represents an incident in the ceremonial bull-sports. Made about the sixteenth century BC, it is believed to have been found at Rethymnon. It is of solid bronze cast by the *cire perdue* method, and has the rough surface typical of Cretan bronzes. The representation of violent movement, both of the animal and the acrobat, is unequalled in ancient art. The technical feat of showing an acrobat virtually in mid-air has been achieved by making his long hair actually touch the bull's forehead. The legs from mid-thigh to the ankles are modern restorations

## Introduction

When Heinrich Schliemann claimed in 1876 to have discovered a new world for archaeology, he was stating no less than the truth. The occasion for this claim was his historic discovery of the Royal Shaft-Graves at Mycenae, which opened the door to the study of Bronze Age Greece.

It is a surprising fact that although Classical Greece has been familiar to us, after a fashion, since the Renaissance, the rich Bronze Age culture of the Aegean area was completely unknown as recently as a century ago. Indeed, so unfamiliar were the treasures from the Shaft-Graves that they were variously interpreted by experts (who should have known better) as Celtic, Carian, Scythian, Byzantine, Gothic, and even Indian. The principal reason for this amazing ignorance is that whereas the Classical period has bequeathed us a wealth of literary sources, the Bronze Age has left us precious little on which to build but the evidence which archaeology can supply.

The lack of contemporary documentation has not, however, been all loss, for the student of prehistoric art in the Aegean area is forced to assess the surviving material on its merits alone, unhampered by the often confusing judgments of ancient art-critics.

This book is concerned with the three principal civilizations of the Aegean in the Bronze Age: those of Crete, the Cycladic islands, and Mainland Greece. The title is therefore convenient rather than strictly accurate, for our scope is somewhat wider than it would suggest. Yet the fact remains that of the cultures to be considered, the Minoan and Mycenaean are by far the most important.

The tale begins shortly after 3000 BC, with the gradual replacement of stone for tools and weapons by copper, and later by bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. It ends round about 1100 BC with the destruction of the Bronze Age sites, the arrival of the Dorian branch



of the Greek family, and the replacement, for many purposes, of bronze by iron.

It may be objected that the starting-point of this survey is too arbitrary, since art of a kind existed in the Neolithic period, which preceded the Bronze Age; but it seems on balance sensible to start at the point where European civilization as we know it may reasonably be said to begin.

#### HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP

The Greeks of the Classical period had hazy memories of what they regarded as an age of heroes. They possessed the Homeric poems and other legends set in Mycenae and Thebes, and they knew that a great king called Minos once lived in a palace called the Labyrinth at Knossos in Crete and ruled over most of the Aegean with his fleet.

In addition, certain monuments from the Bronze Age had never been lost to sight, as for example the Cyclopean Walls and the Lion Gate at Mycenae (*Ill. 1*), and the Treasury of Atreus near by; and there is a growing body of evidence that many Mycenaean tombs were venerated from the eighth century BC onwards as the resting-places of heroes.

These reminders of former greatness retained their significance for the Romans, but after the official adoption of Christianity in the fourth century of our era, interest in the Heroic Age was almost extinguished, to be altered out of all recognition in the Middle Ages, when the tale of Troy was reshaped to fit the feudal mould. With the Renaissance and the rediscovery of ancient literature, the stories regained their Classical form, but until the mid-nineteenth century there were few indeed who regarded them as better than fairy tales. It remained for Heinrich Schliemann to reveal something very near the truth. Convinced that the Homeric poems were basically historical documents, he set out to excavate those sites with which they were principally concerned, and was triumphantly successful.

In 1870 he identified the site of Troy, in spite of the consensus of scholarly opinion that the city (if it existed at all) was elsewhere. Here he dug intermittently for some twenty years, his most dramatic



1 One of the most impressive monuments of Mycenaean Greece is the Lion Gate at Mycenae, built c. 1250 B.C. For the main part of the circuit wall, rough 'Cyclopean' masonry (visible through the gate) was used, but to give a more imposing appearance to the main entrance, smooth squared ashlar work was used (cf. *Ill. 100*)

discovery being the gold treasure from the Second City, which (mistakenly, but pardonably) he identified with Homeric Troy.

In 1876 he turned his attention to Mycenae. Taking his cue from Pausanias (a traveller of the second century A.D.), he searched inside the walls for the royal burials, and found the richest tombs ever to be excavated in Greek lands. He later dug at Tiryns, Orchomenos, Ithaca and other sites, and would have excavated at Knossos in Crete, but was prevented by circumstances beyond his control.

In all strictness, Schliemann was not the first to discover antiquities belonging to the Greek Bronze Age. In the early nineteenth century Lord Elgin had visited the Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae and had brought to London reliefs and sculptures found in that

tomb. Either he or a contemporary also brought back Mycenaean vases, and several European collections acquired similar vases about the same time, all of which were consigned to store-rooms and forgotten.

In 1866 Late Minoan vases were found on the island of Thera beneath volcanic material, and two years later the first consignment of Mycenaean antiquities from Ialysus in Rhodes reached the British Museum.

Then came Schliemann's discoveries, which have already been mentioned. He was in a fair way to understanding the significance of his discoveries, but it was left to C. T. Newton of the British Museum as early as 1877 to gather together all these separate threads and to make of them a coherent story.<sup>1</sup>

By identifying a scarab of Pharaoh Amenophis III (c. 1417-1379 BC) among the finds from Ialysus, and by spotting parallels to Schliemann's discoveries in Egyptian tomb-paintings of the Eighteenth Dynasty, he was able to reach a very good estimate of the correct age of this civilization, to which the generic name Mycenaean inevitably attached itself.

Meanwhile, work continued in the study and in the field. In 1886 Adolf Furtwängler published a masterly study of Mycenaean pottery, and in 1890-1 Flinders Petrie improved somewhat on Newton's chronology by further correlating Mycenaean finds in Egypt and Egyptian imports at Mycenae. He also correctly identified as coming from the Aegean area some hitherto unknown varieties of pottery from Twelfth Dynasty tombs: we know it today as Middle Minoan.

It was now the turn of the Cycladic islands. In the 1890s the Greek archaeologist Christos Tsountas turned from excavating Mycenaean sites in Greece to the Cyclades, where he excavated some hundreds of tombs on Amorgos, Paros, Syros and Siphnos. This culture, which proved to be different from the Mycenaean, he called Cycladic. He was followed by a British venture on Melos in 1896-9, at the prehistoric settlement known by its modern name of Phylakopi.

The next major step forward was taken by (Sir) Arthur Evans, who succeeded in 1899, where Schliemann had failed, in initiating an excavation at Knossos in Crete. The greater part of the palace was

laid bare in the first few years; but the excavation continued, with the exception of the war years, till 1932, and Knossos was to occupy Evans continuously until his death in 1941. His great work, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, was completed in 1935.

His greatest achievements, apart from the excavation of the palace, were first, to establish the principal origins of the Mycenaean culture as lying in the far older civilization of Crete; second, to work out a relative chronology for the Bronze Age in Crete. This civilization he called Minoan, after Minos the legendary King of Knossos. It is a matter for regret that this fanciful name has become established (it has been observed that it is about as logical as calling the entire post-Conquest history of England the Victorian period), but it is too late now to change.

It remained to trace the Mainland Greek antecedents of the great Mycenaean age. This was first achieved by Blegen in the 1920s at sites near Corinth. He was able to work out a complete chronology for Bronze Age Greece, parallel to the Minoan chronology of Crete, which he called Helladic, after Hellas, the name by which the Greeks, ancient and modern, have always known their country.

It would be tedious to enumerate all the good work which has been done since, and is still in progress, but some recent achievements are worthy of special mention.

In 1941, the Swedish scholar Arne Furumark produced a monumental study, in two volumes, of Mycenaean pottery. This attempt to bring order out of a rapidly growing chaos was in many ways successful. He has been criticized, as are all systematists, for a too rigid approach, but he has not been upset in his essential conclusions, and there are few excavations and fewer Mycenaean scholars who could dispense with these two books.

After the last war, work was resumed at Mycenae. Wace uncovered three large houses outside the Citadel, and Papademetriou and Mylonas excavated a second grave-circle. More recently, Caskey has dug at Lerna in the Argolid and has worked out an improved historical sequence for the Early Helladic period based on this, and on a reassessment of earlier excavations. The same scholar later excavated a settlement on the Cycladic island of Keos.

Blegen and Marinatos have excavated at Pylos; exciting finds have been made by Greek archaeologists at Thebes; Marinatos has excavated at Marathon and with Doumas on Thera; and the British have returned to Melos and Sparta.

In Crete, a fourth royal palace has been discovered and excavated at Zakro by Platon, and two intact royal burials have been excavated at Archanes near Knossos.

Finally, in one of the greatest intellectual achievements of our generation, in 1952 the late Michael Ventris deciphered the so-called Linear B script of Knossos and Mycenaean Greece, and found it to be Greek.

### CHRONOLOGY

The relative chronology of the Aegean area is as follows: The Early Bronze Age comprises Early Minoan (EM), Early Cycladic (EC), and Early Helladic (EH), all roughly contemporary. The Middle Bronze Age comprises Middle Minoan (MM), Middle Cycladic (MC), and Middle Helladic (MH), all roughly contemporary. The Late Bronze Age comprises Late Minoan (LM), Late Cycladic (LC) and Late Helladic (LH) or Mycenaean (the terms are synonymous), also roughly contemporary. Each period is generally subdivided into three phases, and each phase has been further subdivided where necessary. Thus we get such references as EH II, MM IA, etc. which tend to mystify and exasperate the layman. This system, although it has stood the test of time fairly well, is becoming increasingly cumbersome even to scholars, and where an absolute dating is assured, it is always preferable to use it. Another disadvantage of this kind of dating is that it is based ultimately on pottery styles, some of which have proved to be not consecutive but concurrent, with the consequent telescoping of dates. Therefore, when used at all, this system should be applied only to a period of time, never to a particular pottery style. It is advisable, too, to bear in mind Pendlebury's remark: 'It is not reported that Minos declared, "I'm tired of Middle Minoan III, let Late Minoan I begin!"' <sup>2</sup>

Absolute chronology (that is to say, dates in years BC) is clearly the ultimate answer to this problem, and there are two methods of

BC	CRETE	CYCLADES	GREECE	EGYPT		
					DYNASTY	
3000	E M I	E C I	E H I	ARCHAIC	II	
2800					III	
2600				OLD KINGDOM	IV	
2500	E M II	E C II	E H II		V	
2400					VI	
2300						
2200	E M III	E C III	E H III	1st INTER	VII-X	
2100					XI	
2000	M M I	M C I	M H	MIDDLE KINGDOM	XII	
1900						
1800	MMII	M C II		2nd INTER	XIII-XVII	
1700	M M III	M C III				
1600		NEW KINGDOM		XVIII		
1500	L M I A				L H I	
	L M I B				L H II	
1400	L M II					
	L M IIIA			L H IIIA	XIX-XX	
1300	L M IIIB			L H IIIB		
1200	L M IIIC			L H IIIC		
1100	DARK AGES			LATE PERIOD	XXI	
1000						
900						

2 Chronological table of the Aegean Bronze Age. *N.B.* In Crete MMII is found only at Knossos and Phaestos, LMII is found only at Knossos. In the Cyclades the subdivisions of the Late Cycladic period are seldom used; the LM and LH systems are used instead. In Greece MH is not yet susceptible of division into phases. The terms LH and 'Mycenaean' are synonymous. In Egypt, Inter=Intermediate

obtaining it. The first is that inaugurated by Newton: correlations with the better-established chronologies of Egypt and the Near East. These chronologies rest ultimately upon Egyptian astronomical fixes, which, coupled with king-lists, give certainty as far back as 2000 B C, and a high degree of probability to 3000 B C.

A second system, not yet perfected, is well on the way to providing an absolute date for any organic object (wood, bone, etc) which may be recovered from an excavation. It is based on the fact that in certain substances containing carbon there is a predictable proportion of radioactive carbon, or Carbon 14, as it is called. In life, animal and vegetable forms maintain a constant proportion of Carbon 14, but after death it gradually decays at a known rate. It is thus in theory possible, by measuring the amount of Carbon 14 in a bone or in a piece of wood, to date the death of the creature or the tree. There are difficulties, but some eminently reasonable dates are being obtained, and are proving particularly useful for fixing the chronology of the Early Bronze Age, where good results have been obtained at Lerna and Eutresis.

The diagram (*Ill. 2*) attempts to set out the chronology, relative and absolute, of the Bronze Age in the Aegean. It should, however, be noted that here, and in this book generally, all dates are approximate; in the Early Bronze Age the margin of error may extend to several centuries.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The historical background is, very briefly, as follows. Bronze Age civilization came to Greece from the more advanced East about 3000 B C, and for a thousand years ran an approximately parallel course in Crete, the Cyclades, and Mainland Greece. About 2000 B C the continuity was broken. In Crete civilization rose to new heights; the Cyclades came under Cretan influence; and Mainland Greece suffered a severe setback.

Then, about 1550 B C the Greek Mainland adopted Cretan culture, which continued to flourish in its homeland. About 1450 B C the hegemony passed from Crete to Mainland Greece under the leadership of Mycenae. The fourteenth and thirteenth centuries are

known as the Mycenaean Empire. Political power was henceforth vested in the Mainland, but the art of the Empire was essentially Cretan.

About 1200 B C mass destructions brought the Empire to its knees. A brief artistic renaissance followed in some areas, but the Bronze Age finally came to an end about 1100 B C, to be followed by some two centuries of poverty and near-barbarism.

For the sake of convenience, the arts of Crete, the Cyclades and Greece will be considered separately down to 1550 B C. Thereafter, the whole Aegean area will be taken together.



