THE STORY OF PAINTING

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SISTER WENDY BECKETT
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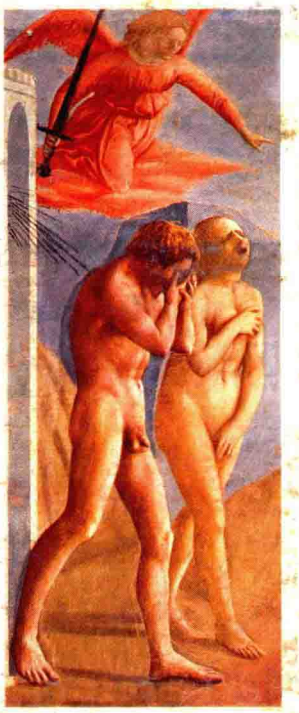

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I dedicate this book to Toby Eady. With him I would like to associate all at Dorling Kindersley who worked so hard on it, especially Sean Moore, who commissioned the book, and Patricia Wright, my gifted co-writer; and Gwen Edmonds, Janice Lacock, Susannah Steel, and Edward Bunting, who labored with such patience to get it right.

Note on painting titles

In *The Story of Painting* we have used authentic titles for paintings where they are known or, in their absence, one that will serve as well, e.g., *Still Life with Peaches.* Where paintings have a popular title that was obviously not given by the artist, the title appears in quotation marks, e.g., *"The Arnolfini Marriage."* For ancient works we use a simple description, not set in italics, e.g., Fresco with dolphins.

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Donatello, Florentine heraldic lion, 1418–20

Mantegna, ceiling fresco in the Gonzaga Palace, c. 1470

FOREWORD

Art has long been a passionate concern to me, and I have often been puzzled by media questions as to why this is so, and when my interest began. It seems to me that we are all born with the potential to respond to art. Unfortunately, not all of us have the good fortune to have this potential activated, as it were. This book is my faltering attempt to offer the security of a knowledgeable background, which will help to make whatever art we see more accessible. Some people are certainly held back from a fearless gaze at painting because they fear their own ignorance. Truly to look remains one's personal responsibility, and nobody else's response (and certainly not my own) can be a substitute. But knowledge must come to us from outside, from reading, listening, and viewing. If we know that we know, we can perhaps dare to look. Love and knowledge go hand in hand. When we love, we always want to know, and this book will succeed if it starts the reader on the track that leads to more reading, greater knowledge, greater love, and, of course, greater happiness.

Pisanello, *Duke of Rimini* (portrait medal), 1445

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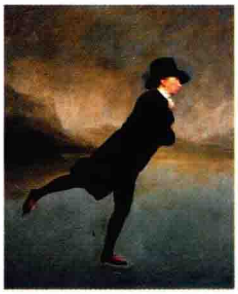

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INTRODUCTION

PAINTING BEFORE GIOTTO

Our word "history" comes, by way of Latin, from the Greek word *historien*, which means "to narrate", and that word comes from another Greek word, *histor*, "a judge". History not only tells a story, but it passes judgment on it, puts it in order, and gives it meaning. The story of painting is one that is immensely rich in meaning, yet its value is all too often hidden from us by the complexities of its historians. We must forget the densities of "history" and simply surrender to the wonder of the story.

The preface to our story opens with the earliest examples of Western painting, created by our first artistic ancestors: Paleolithic man. From here to Giotto – with whom the story really begins – we pass through the ancient worlds of Egypt and Greece, the great Roman Empire, and the early Christian and Byzantine worlds, and we close with the magnificent illuminated manuscripts created by European monks during the Middle Ages.

Revelers, ***from the Tomb of the Leopards, Tarquinia, Italy, c. 470*** **BC**

The First Paintings

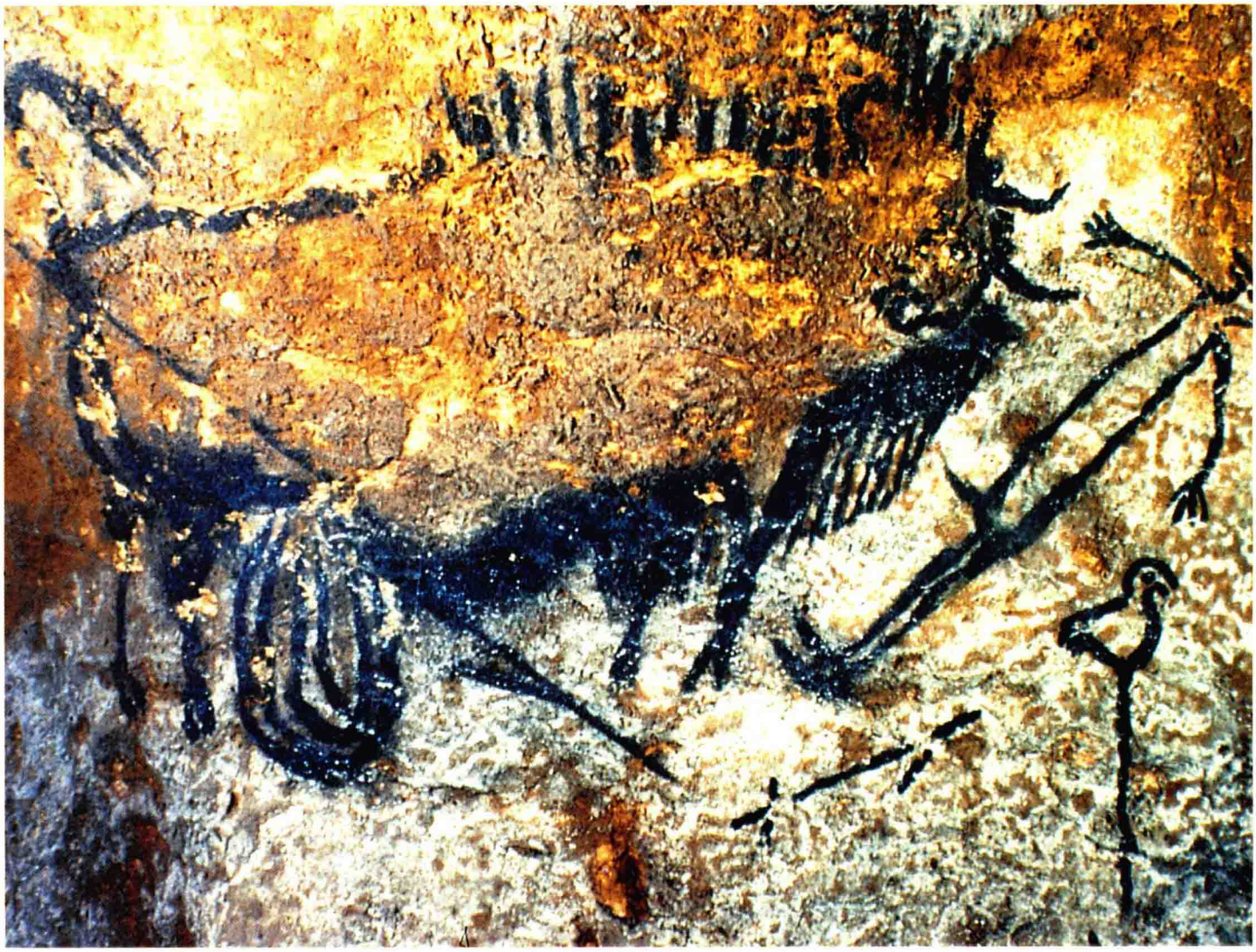
That art is truly our birthright can be seen from its ancient beginnings. It does not begin in history, but actually in prehistory, thousands of years ago. Our Paleolithic ancestors, living between 30,000 and 8,000 BC, were small, hairy, and unlettered, and even archaeology can say little about them with certainty. But one thing is radiantly clear, and that is that these Stone Age cave dwellers were artists, and not only artists in that they could describe in visual terms the animals with which they came into daily contact – such art may be no more than illustration. Cave painting is much more than this: it is art in the grand manner, great art, manifested in works of subtlety and power that have never been surpassed.

The paintings on the walls of the Altamira caves were the first to be discovered in modern times, in 1879. The caves are near Santander in northern Spain. The discovery had such fundamental implications for archaeology that it was at first dismissed as a forgery. This great bison *(1)* is painted on the ceiling of a long, narrow corridor leading from a subterranean cave in Altamira. It does not stand alone. A whole herd surges majestically across the roof, one animal overlapping another – horses, boars, mammoths, and other creatures, all the desired quarry of the Stone Age huntsman. They assert a powerful animal presence, despite the confusion.

Cave painting technique

The caves are fully underground, and therefore permanently in darkness. Archaeologists have discovered that the artists painted with the aid of small stone lamps, filled with animal fat or marrow. The initial designs were engraved into the soft rock, or thin lines of paint were blown onto the wall through a hollow reed. To make colored paint, the artists used ochre, a natural mineral that could be crushed to a powder that would yield red, brown, and yellow pigments, while black may have been made from powdered charcoal. Powdered pigments were either rubbed onto the wall with the hands,

1 Bison from Altamira cave, c. 15,000–12,000 BC, 77 in (195 cm) (bison length only)



2 Wounded bison attacking a man, detail from cave painting at Lascaux, France, c. 15,000–10,000 BC, 43 in (110 cm) (bison length only)

producing very delicate gradations of tone akin to soft pastel painting, or mixed with some form of binding fluid, such as animal fat, and applied with crude reed or bristle brushes. The means were simple, yet the effect, especially in the strange silence of the cave, is overwhelming.

Significance of the cave paintings

It is thought that these paintings had some deep importance to prehistoric society. The bison seems to be almost quivering with power as it displays its massive chest, dense hindquarters, and short, thin legs. It brandishes an aggressive pair of horns. Was this animal sacred to some ritual? We may never know the true significance of the cave paintings, but they almost certainly served a ritualistic, even magical function. How much the art was produced for its own sake – and this cannot be entirely ruled out – will remain a mystery.

The extraordinary naturalism and anatomical accuracy in the portrayal of animals in these paintings is believed to be connected with the purpose they served. The artists were also hunters, and their lives depended on the animals whose images they painted in the caves. Is it possible that these hunter-artists believed that by accurately depicting the animals' power, strength, and speed, they would acquire magical power? With this they might be able to take control of the animal's spirit and remove its strength before the hunt. Many of the paintings show the animals wounded or pierced with arrows, and some examples even show evidence of actual physical attacks on the painted image.

The naturalism with which animals are painted and drawn does not extend to the portrayal of humans – perhaps for this very reason. People are rarely represented, but when they are, it is by the crudest recognizably human shape, or more often by symbolic forms, as can be seen in the image of the prostrate man in this startling painting *(2)*, which dates from between 15,000 and 10,000 BC. It is in the most celebrated of all the sites of ancient cave paintings: the Lascaux caves in the Dordogne, France. The sticklike man is lying in front of a bristling, disemboweled bison. Below him is a figure that looks as if it could be a bird, or possibly a totem or banner displaying an image of a bird. The painting has an awesome power: we have to confess our ignorance of its meaning, yet this lack of knowledge does not affect our response – unless, indeed, it deepens it. In this alone, prehistoric art is representative of all art to follow.

THE ANCIENT WORLD

Strangely enough, it is a long time before painting rises again to the quality of the cave art of Stone Age society. The Egyptians were interested mainly in architecture and sculpture, and in many of their paintings, particularly those that decorated their tombs, they gave drawing precedence over color.

Some paintings, or fragments, have been preserved from a variety of other cultures of ancient Europe: Minoan, Mycenaean, and Etruscan. Then came the civilizations of Greece and Rome. From a modern point of view, a feature common to almost all ancient painting traditions is a shortage of examples surviving today.

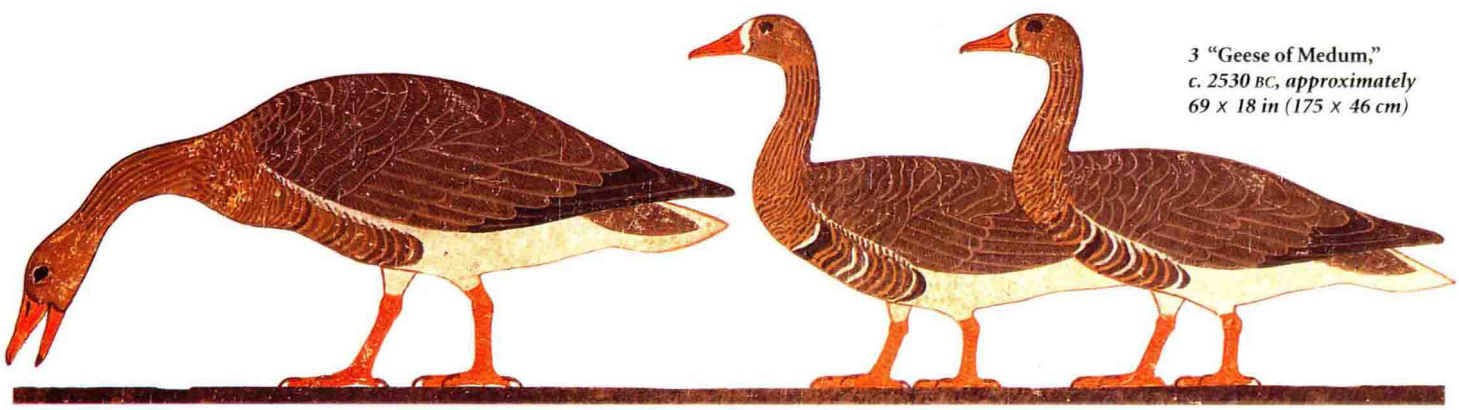
The Egyptians loved the terrestrial world too much to believe that its pleasures necessarily ended with death. Egyptians believed that the rich and the powerful, at least, could enjoy the pleasures of life in perpetuity, as long as the image of the deceased was reproduced on their tomb walls. Much Egyptian painting, therefore, was done for the sake of the dead. It is possible, however, that the Egyptians did not feel that great expense was required to ensure a good afterlife, and that they chose painting as a labor-saving and cost-cutting device. Instead of the expensive art of the sculptor or the stone carver, a cheaper art form – painting – was employed. It is certain, at any rate, that the ceremonial, formal painting style used for tomb walls was not the only one available. We now know that living (and wealthy) Egyptians had murals in their homes, and that these were done in richly textured, painterly styles. Unfortunately, only small fragments of these murals survive.

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN TOMB PAINTING

Perhaps one of the most impressive images from Egyptian tombs is that of the "*Geese of Medum*" *(3)*, three majestic birds from the tomb of Nefermaat (a son of Snofru, the first pharaoh of the 4th dynasty) and his wife Itet, dating from over 2,000 years before Christ. The geese form only a detail in a pictorial frieze in a tomb at the ancient town of Medum, but already they hint at the vitality and power of the sculptural triumphs to come in the years ahead. Another Egyptian tomb painting, from the tomb of Ramose, shows a funeral procession of *Lamenting Women (4)*. Ramose was a minister under two pharaohs of the 18th dynasty, Amenhotep III and Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten). The women in the painting are flat and schematic (look at their feet), but their anguished gestures vibrate with grief.

4 Lamenting Women, ***wall painting from the tomb of Ramose, Thebes (Egypt), c. 1370 BC***

To the ancient Egyptians it was the "eternal essence" that mattered: what constituted their view of constant, unchanging reality. Thus their art was not concerned with the changeable variation of externals for visual appeal, and even their keen observations of nature (evidently painted from memory) were subject to rigid standardization of forms, often becoming symbols. It is not from any kind of "primitivism" that their scenes appear decidedly unreal – their technical skill and evident understanding of natural forms makes this clear enough. It is, rather, the direct consequence of the essentially



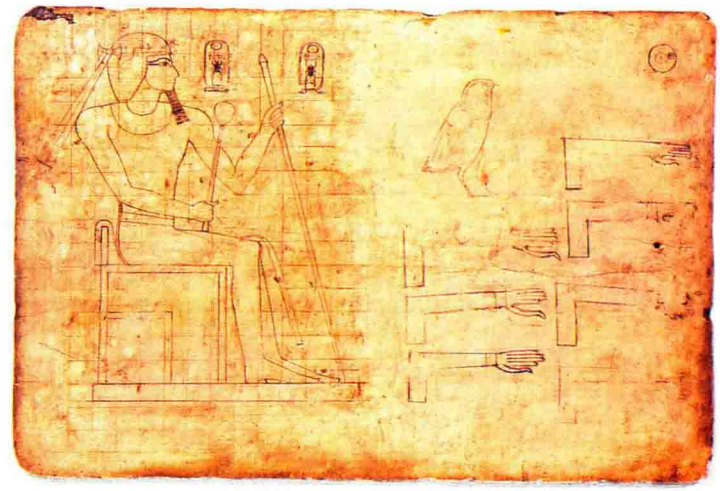
3 "Geese of Medum," ***c. 2530 BC, approximately 69 x 18 in (175 x 46 cm)***

intellectual function of their art. Each subject was shown from whatever angle would make it most clearly identifiable, and according to a rank-based scale, large or small dependent on social hierarchy. This resulted in a highly patterned, schematic, and almost diagrammatic appearance. This over-riding concern with clarity and "thorough" representation applied to all subject matter: hence, the human head is always shown in profile, yet the eyes are always drawn from the front. For this reason, there is no perspective in Egyptian paintings – everything appears two-dimensional.

Style and composition

Most Egyptian wall paintings, as in this example, a *Fowling Scene (5)* from a nobleman's tomb in Thebes, were created with the *fresco secco* technique. In this method, tempera (see glossary, p.390) is applied to plaster that has been allowed to dry first, unlike the true *buon fresco* technique in which the painting is made on wet plaster (see p.46). The wildlife of the papyrus marshes and Nebamun's retriever cat are shown in great detail, yet the scene is idealized. The nobleman stands in his boat, holding three birds he has just caught in his right hand, and his throwing-stick in his left. He is accompanied by his wife, who appears in an elaborate costume with a perfumed cone on her head, holding a bouquet. Between Nebamun's legs squats the small figure of his daughter, picking a lotus flower from the water (this is an example of how, as mentioned above, it was conventional for figures to be shown large or small according to their status). Originally this painting was only one part of a larger work, which also included a fishing scene.

5 Fowling Scene ***from the tomb of Nebamun, Thebes, Egypt, c. 1400 BC, 31 in (81 cm) high***

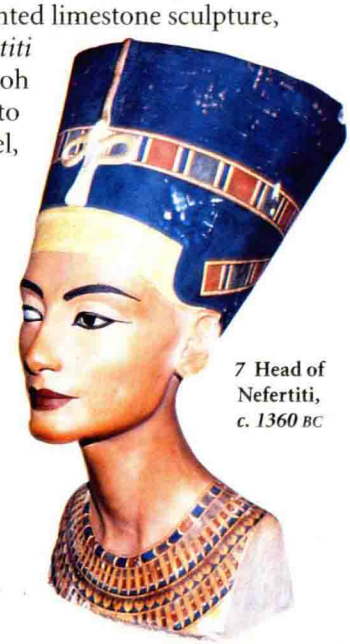


6 Pharaoh Tuthmosis III, ***Egyptian painting on a drawing board, c. 1450 BC, 14½ in (37 cm) high***

Egyptian rules of representation

In Egyptian art, representation of the full-length human figure was organized within the so-called "rule of proportion," a strict, geometric grid system that ensured the accurate repetition of the Egyptian ideal form on any scale and in any position. It was a foolproof system, regulating the exact distances between parts of the body, which was divided into 18 equal-sized units and placed in relation to fixed points on the grid. It even specified the exact width of the stride in walking figures, and the distance between the feet (which were both shown from the inside view) in standing figures. Before beginning a figure, artists would first draw a grid of the required size onto the surface, and then fit the figure within it. A surviving 18th-dynasty wooden drawing board shows the Pharaoh Tuthmosis III drawn within such a grid *(6)*.

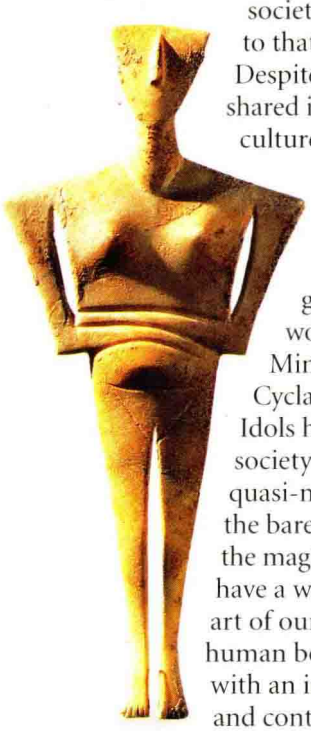
It was not only tombs that the Egyptians decorated: they also painted sculpture. This beautiful painted limestone sculpture, of the *Head of Nefertiti (7)*, wife of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, is thought to have been a workshop model, because it was found in the ruins of a sculptor's studio. It is as poignant as a Botticelli head (see p.94), with the same touching and exquisite wistfulness. It shows a loosening of the rigid conventions that governed earlier (and later) Egyptian art, for Akhenaten broke with the traditional style. During his reign, paintings, carvings, and sculptures were refreshingly graceful and original.



7 Head of Nefertiti, ***c. 1360 BC***

Aegean cultures of the Bronze Age

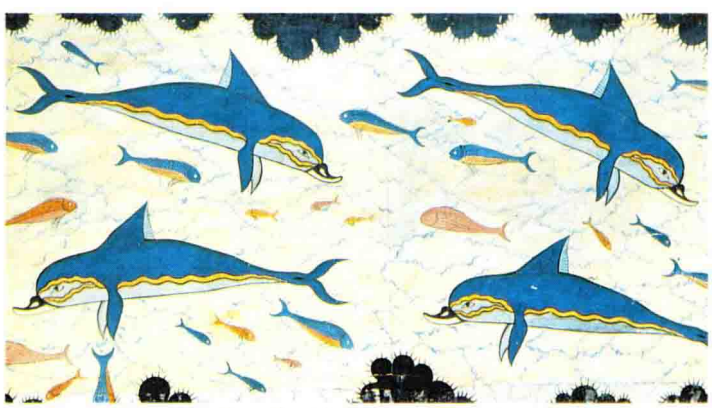
The Bronze Age Minoan civilization (3000–1100 BC), named after the mythical King Minos, was the earliest to develop in Europe. Its home was the small island of Crete, in the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey, and its society developed roughly in parallel to that of its African neighbor, Egypt. Despite their proximity and certain shared influences, Egyptian and Minoan cultures remained very separate, though the latter was to have enormous influence on the art of ancient Greece. Crete formed the center, both culturally and geographically, of the Aegean world. Also in parallel with Minoan civilization was that of the Cyclades, an Aegean island group. Idols have been recovered from this society *(8)*, objects whose ancient, quasi-neolithic forms are reduced to the barest abstraction, but still retain the magical power of the fetish. Here we have a weird forerunner of the abstract art of our own century, in which the human body is seen in geometrical terms with an immense raw power, contained and controlled by linear force. Originally the idols had painted eyes, mouths, and other features.



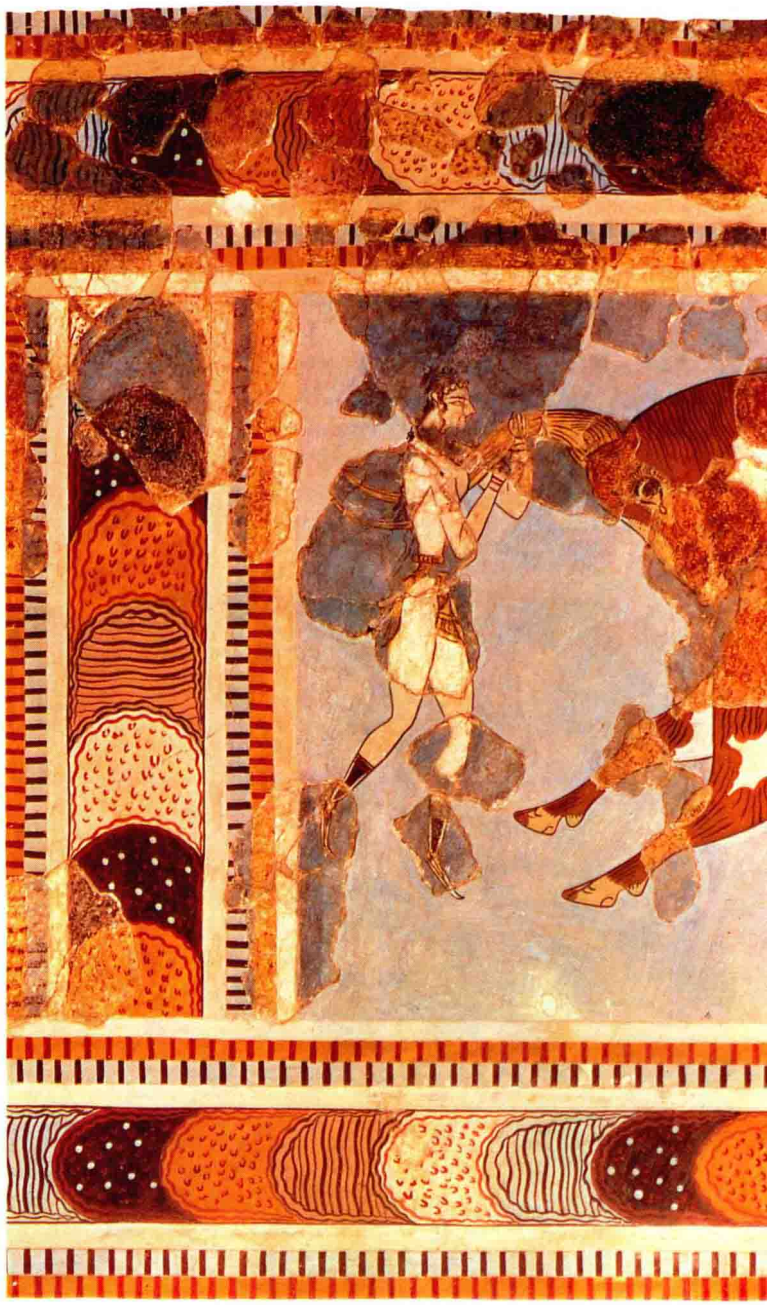
8 Female idol from Amorgos, an island in the Cyclades Archipelago (now part of Greece), c. 2000 BC

Minoan and Mycenaean art

Minoan art is largely represented by its carvings and painted pottery, and it is not until 1500 BC, during the great "Palace period," that we see paintings at all, and generally these have only survived in fragments. Although a certain degree of Egyptian stylization is apparent in the schematic repetition of human figures, for instance, Minoan representation reveals a naturalism and suppleness largely absent in Egyptian art. The Minoans took inspiration from nature and their art exhibits an astonishing degree of realism. They were a seafaring civilization and their paintings reflected their knowledge of the oceans and of sea creatures, such as dolphins.



9 Fresco with dolphins, from the Palace of Knossos, Crete, c. 1500–1450 BC



10 **"Toreador Fresco"** *from the royal palace at Knossos, Crete (restored detail), c. 1500 BC, 31½ in (80 cm) high including borders*

This lively example *(9)* is from the Palace of Knossos, which was excavated in the first two decades of the 20th century. Another recurrent Minoan theme is bull jumping, a ritual thought to be connected with Minoan religion. A second work from the royal palace of Knossos, the *"Toreador Fresco" (10)*, is one of the best-preserved Minoan paintings, although fragmentary. The fragments have been pieced together to reveal three acrobats, two girls (they are fair-skinned), and a darker-skinned man somersaulting over a magnificent bull. The usual interpretation of this picture is as a "time-lapse" sequence. The girl on the left is taking hold of the bull's horns in preparation to leap; the man is in mid-vault; the girl on the right has landed and steadies herself with arms outstretched, like a modern gymnast.

11 Funeral mask from the royal tombs at Mycenae, c. 1500 BC

The Mycenaean civilization was a Bronze Age culture of mainland Greece. It came to succeed the ancient Minoan culture in Crete, emerging around 1400 BC to became the dominant culture on the island. Its history and legends form the background to the writings of the Greek poet Homer (c. 750 BC), whose epic poems, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, reflect the "heroic age": the end of the Mycenaean period. One of the most enduring images from Mycenaean art is this funeral mask *(11)*, thought for a time to be of the Mycenaean King Agamemnon, who, in Homeric legend, was the leader of the Greeks in the Trojan Wars. All that is certain is that it is a death mask, and that it was taken from one of the royal tombs of the Mycenaean period, in the 16th century BC. Besides a certain love of gold, it reveals the immense dignity of the Mycenaean image of humankind. This highly expressive mask is a great iconic depiction of what it means to be a human being.

Fragments of Mycenaean paintings found at two sites (Tiryns and Pylos) in Greece represent what must have been impressive mural cycles. Many of the Mycenaean and Minoan murals were not frescoes in the usual sense of the word, but, like the Egyptian murals, were produced by applying tempera paint (see glossary, p.390) to plaster that had already dried. Subjects of Mycenaean murals included scenes from everyday

life, as well as depictions of the natural world. Mycenean art was rather solemn in nature in comparison with Minoan art. These two traditions formed the background from which the art of the Greeks later emerged.

The Mycenaean civilization collapsed around 1100 BC. Its ending marks the end of the Bronze Age in Greece. There followed a period of around 100–150 years, known as the "Dark Age," about which less is known in Aegean culture. After that, prehistory ended, and the period of written history began. Around 650 BC, archaic Greece emerged as Europe's most advanced civilization.

Greece's new vision

Like their Cretan predecessors, the Greeks were far less conscious of the tomb than the Egyptians. They have left us a number of bronze statuettes, which are highly esteemed. But their painting – an art on which their writers assure us they lavished great skill – is almost totally lost. One reason for this is that, unlike the Egyptians, Minoans, and Mycenaeans, who painted only murals, the Greeks painted mainly on wooden panels that have perished over time.

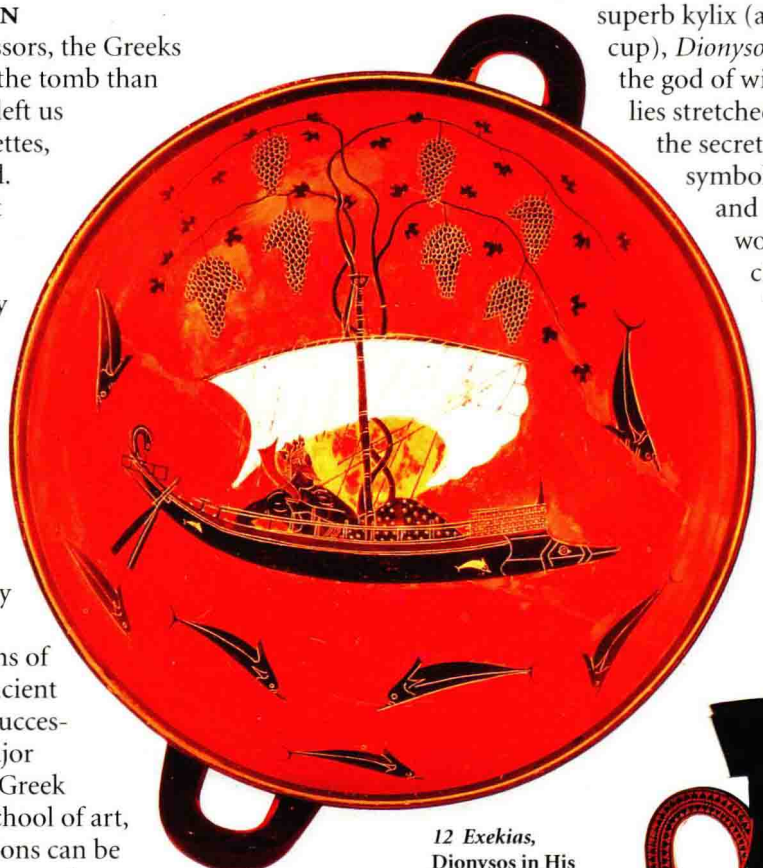
The Roman scholar Pliny the Elder (AD 23/4–79), whose detailed descriptions of Greek painting and the ancient world greatly influenced successive generations, is the major source of information on Greek painting. In every other school of art, the truth of such descriptions can be judged by the painting that survives. This is not true of Greek painting, and so the value of what Pliny said can never be assessed.

Almost our only hint of the beauty of Greek painting is in the relatively minor, especially utilitarian art of vase painting. The word *vase*, first used as a broad term for ancient Greek pottery in the 18th century, can be misleading. The Greeks never made vases purely for decorative purposes, as can happen today, but always had a specific purpose in mind. Greek potters made a range of products, in a variety of shapes, such as storage jars, drinking vessels, bottles for perfume and ointment, and containers for liquids used in ceremonies.

In the Greek vase paintings we can see a concern with anatomy, and a preoccupation with the human figure, which became the central motif of Greek art and philosophy. We see a departure from what the Egyptian tomb paintings showed, with their preconceived formulas for representing the world, and a whole new way of viewing art opens up with respect to what the eye can see, and what the mind dictates.

Styles in Greek vase painting

If vase painting is a minor art, then it has some major practitioners. The Athenian artist Exekias, who lived about 535 BC, signed at least two of his black-figure pots as their "painter," and his style, with its poetry and perfection of balance, is instantly recognizable. It is worth noting that he made the pottery as well as its decoration. Exekias's work is important because it reveals the direction representational art would take, signifying the leap from a "hieroglyphic" symbolic representation of objects in the world to one that attempted to show the world as it really appears. This is particularly evident in his treatment of the boat's sail in this superb kylix (a shallow, two-handled drinking cup), *Dionysos in His Boat (12)*. Dionysos, the god of wine, vegetation, and fruitfulness, lies stretched out in repose as he carries the secret of wine to humankind. His symbolic vines twirl around the mast and soar fruitfully into the sky, a wonderful adaption to the difficult circular composition of the kylix. The ship, with its gleaming sail, glides majestically over the pink and orange world of Heaven and Earth, where dolphins play around the sacred presence, and the scene is alive with an amazing sense of wholeness.



12 Exekias, **Dionysos in His Boat,** *on a kylix (a shallow, two-handled drinking cup), c. 540 BC*

13 Berlin Painter, **Pallas Athena,** *on an amphora (a two-handled storage pot), c. 480 BC*