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ANCIENT CRETE AND THE MODERN WORLD

Where the literature of an ancient people is scanty and largely unread, an appreciation of its culture must depend on the evidence from other remains. Archaeologists are fortunate in the wealth of pottery, frescoes, buildings, ivories, bronzes, sealings and seals which Crete supplies. It is almost as if in the paucity of written material or monumental record, a beneficent Providence has provided scholars with other sources of knowledge. Perhaps indeed this wealth is the reason for, or result of this poverty; since it may be that the genius of Ancient Crete lay rather in an aesthetic than a historical approach to life, with an acute appreciation of what was immediately given, rather than a record of the past in poetry or prose. This would not preclude music or the dance, nor a great tradition of justice or sailing lore. For each of these, if not codified, is an appropriate response: music and the dance to basic rhythm; justice to natural right; and seamanship to the conditions of adventure in the ancient Mediterranean sea.

The dancing floor which Daedalus made for fair Ariadne, the reputation of Minos as judge-enthroned perpetually, the beauty and speed of Cretan galleys for which the wide-spread commerce of the Ancient World, the records of Egypt and the seal stones of Ancient Crete bear witness, suggest a freedom and enthusiasm which could assess the present not as a slave to the past, not as pregnant of the future, but as something in itself, whose value lay ready for immediate grasp.

In all the wealth of material remains of Ancient Crete there is, as must be, one gap. There are so far, no remains of those superb textiles of which the frescoes preserve a fading memory. Egypt held the first place for excellence and fineness of linen; but Crete seems to have mastered quite early the art of weaving brocade whose character was based upon overall patterns of intricate invention. No doubt the later superb Byzantine and Persian Fabrics ultimately derive from this ancient skill. The patterns and colour of the brocades preserved in the frescoes of Crete and Egypt point not only to the ingenuity of the Cretan mind in the manipulation of forms

but to the place and value Cretan textiles enjoyed in antiquity.

This manipulation of forms is also seen on vase shapes and in their decoration; so that except for Persia of the third Millennium before Christ and of the later Islamic culture, no peoples have succeeded in mastering the art of vase decoration as did the Ancient Cretans. Two peoples devoted to vase making, have, in their particular solutions, emphasized the genius of Ancient Crete. Classical Greece cut the Gordian knot of the problem and created beautiful shapes upon which a pictorial tale was told. Chinese pottery of the T'ang and Sung dynasties found their solution in a succession of the most beautiful glazes.

The decoration of Ancient Cretan pottery is surely without peer. In this respect each visit to the Archaeological Museum at Heraklion is both a surprise and a revelation. But the genius of Ancient Crete, whose inspired expression in music and the dance and woven fabric is now lost to us, is still preserved in vase paintings, in bronze, gold and silver work. Best of all it is found in those antiquities whose material is hard enough to withstand the passage of time, whose shape and size eluded many tomb robbers—the seals. These and the sealings they produced, give a clear picture of an unbroken tradition and ceaseless ingenuity: and, except for one dynastic movement in the Middle Minoan Age, a continuous development of a thousand years.

From the portion of an ivory tusk of EM II date whose greater section was beautifully carved with a combination of S and C spirals, found in the Mochlos cemetery, to a beautiful little steatite lentoid of LM IIIb of a running deer wounded by an arrow, found in a geometric tomb at Knossos, every glyptic problem is posed and solved. The early seals from Mochlos and Sphungaras show a variety of motifs and some preoccupation with functional shape. Three-sided prism beads from North Crete of a calculated primitive character suggest an additional amuletic use; the ivory seals of the Messara Tholoi a preoccupation with pattern for its own sake. A gradual fusion of the two diverse styles heralds the Middle Minoan Age, in which the earlier separate uses now appear to be mingled. Rapid advances in technique however and the use of harder and more beautiful stones allowed the hieratic style of the Hieroglyphic Deposit to become beautiful in its own right, and to lay the foundations of a fine Minoan use which was to last until the end of the civilisation. The introduction from East Crete of a talismanic stone

and its gradual spread throughout Crete in the Late Minoan Age freed the seal proper from its amuletic burden and allowed artists free play in choice of motif and in the development of style and technique. So it is from the end of the Middle Minoan Age until the Late Minoan Age that far reaching experiments in seal engraving were attempted. While some of the work on the Near Eastern cylinders of the Sargonid and Akkadian periods show great stylistic and technical achievement; for range of subject, variety of motif, virtuosity in technique, there are few seal uses to compare with that of the Late Minoan Age in Crete.

This age first continued the naturalistic trend of its predecessor, reserving formal design to heraldic grouping: but the use of LM II, connected with the Palace of Knossos, resolved itself into four main classes of style, which if summarily stated bear striking resemblances to the trends of modern art. The inclination towards subjects of a naturalistic character treated in verisimilitude persisted from the earlier part of the age; but alongside of this were bold experiments in constraining the natural subjects into more formal patterns, in technical virtuosity, in the manipulation of forms to achieve formal integrity or discursive movement, and the partition of living entities in symbolic treatment and their reassembling in the guise of new shapes and mythological beings. In the hundreds of different motifs exquisitely treated in a technical and formal way on the seals, a record of the ebb and flow of Minoan culture is mirrored. Moreover the significance of the forms thereon engraved is always striking and gives the beholder an impression of completeness and individuality. Lest this should be thought an exaggeration, the work on the seals shows a preoccupation not only with the formal qualities of objects and their relationship, but with the problem of light, surface planes and movement. These are much the same problems with which modern art and aesthetics are concerned.

The engraver's preoccupation with form does not deprive religious and mythological scenes of a mystical character, nor does it prevent naive combinations of sacred symbols with natural forms. But while cult and religion seem never far away, there is little or nothing to suggest historical or literary subjects. So the treatment of forms tends to leave the particular and move towards a timeless and universal value behind them. Indeed, objects are portrayed in a manner as to imply an absence of religious or social connotation.

This suggests an ability to regard objects whether natural or invented as things in themselves—an aesthetic viewpoint which appears to be foreign to that of Egypt and of the Near East but related to later Greek thought. So in real sense, here in Crete is one of the first elements of Western culture.

This dispassionate view and fresh approach to nature, and with it the freedom to experiment and enjoy without being fettered to the past are aspects of a way of life which made more fruitful the great literary, historical and religious tradition which came to the West from the Near East. Here then is the beginning of our culture. To this perhaps we must return to refresh ourselves from the noise and confusion of an impatient technology.