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### **MINOAN ART AND THE ROLE OF GREEK AND ROMAN CULTURE IN THE FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN ART**

Originated in Judaism, Christianity spread in many parts of the world in the very first centuries. The apostles fulfilled the words of Christ, which continue to be fulfilled nowadays too: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (*Mt.*, 28, 19-20; *Luke.*, 24, 46-48; *Mark.*, 16, 15-16). As Christianity is the religion of all nations, each of them contributed its unique features to the creation of the Christian culture while preserving the fundamental, unifying force – the Christian creed and the Christian spirit manifesting it.

Israel, the birthplace of Christianity, was part of the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, together with Greece. Therefore, the Greeks and Romans, being the first Christians along with the Jews, were directly involved in the propagation of Christianity and shed the blood of martyrdom. They played a significant role in molding the Christian culture, which embodied the new *weltanschauung*. Judaism prohibited the representation of the image of God and applied symbols. Therefore, Greece and Rome served as the source of rich artistic traditions. Early Christian painting is based on Judaic symbols and the antique manner of painting. Apart from the Jews, Greeks and Romans, Christian art was created by numerous people inhabiting a vast area from Africa to Asia, including the heirs to the Mesopotamian culture (modern Iraq, Turkey and Syria). Therefore, the traces of the Mesopotamian culture in the Christian art are quite natural. This first of all concerns relief images and some iconographic schools of

the East (e. g. the images of Christ and Mary executed in the iconographic school of Syria and Palestine resembled the images of the Holy Face in terms of portraiture and vestment. The catacomb images of beardless Christ with a short Roman haircut and of Virgin Mary, with her head uncovered, did not quite match the reality. Therefore, the iconographic tradition adopted the image of bearded Jesus with dark complexion and of Virgin Mary with a veil in a Palestinian manner, which appeared more verisimilar and closely resembled the images of the Holy Face. As mentioned, the Christian culture was mainly developed by the Romans and Greeks, who constituted the greater part of the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries and had rich antique culture – painting, relief painting, sculpture and architecture. Antique art, the art of ancient Greece and Rome, was the successor to the Pre-Greek and Etruscan cultures, adopting all the best from their predecessors whose territories they settled.

In this article, I will dwell on the Minoan art, and specifically, the Minoan painting, and its indirect but highly significant role in the development of Christian painting. Despite the lack of immediate chronological succession, a nation or a unity of peoples may become an indirect partaker in the development of a later culture, provided it creates a value of foundational significance. To this extent, Minoan art can be considered at least an indirect partaker in the development of Christian painting and architecture. Though very often the preceding culture does not closely resemble the subsequent one but shows greater affinity with the next but one, I believe, in this case, the likeness can also be seen in terms of chronology. If we look through the history of painting from the period of Minoan art – the frescos of the Palace of Knossos and the paintings of the Island of Thera – and compare them with Etruscan painting, then have a look at classical Roman frescos (I BC – I AD) and afterwards the painting of early Christian catacombs and church mosaic, we will see that all of them are interrelated. They make up a wonderful panorama of successiveness on the one hand and unique individuality on the other.

My decision to write this article was motivated by the fact that the finesse and colour combinations of floral ornaments and the well-known blue bird of Knossos have always stirred in me associations with early Christian mural painting. In this respect especially remarkable is the mosaic in Tabgha and Ravenna, which abound in floral decoration and symbolic biomorphic images, while in terms of fine shapes and colour combination, the Christian mosaic or mural paintings are quite similar to the frescos of Knossos even nowadays. Though mosaic requires a different technique, it is anyway based on a painting, and then small pebbles are set in clay mortar.

My immediate interest is the role of Mycenaean painting in the formation of the Greek and Roman painting on the one hand, and the impact of the latter on the development of Christian art on the other – or, in other words, what Christian art inherited from Pre-Greek art, and what these three great arts may have in common.

Looking at Minoan frescoes, one may be under an impression that they represent modern painting and not the art created millenniums ago. A proof to this is the fact that our contemporary researchers called one of the frescoes *La Parisienne*. According to Prof. Rismag Gordeziani, “the first impression that Minoan art leaves is its surprisingly youthful spirit. In fact, as if intentionally, all human images depict a young person, and the scenes of nature feature the blooming period; elderly age, dormition and fading did not apparently attract Cretan painters.”<sup>1</sup>

This theme – the youthful spirit, blooming nature in spring and the earth in all its diversity – is exactly what is perpetuated in all times and what unites Minoan Crete, the island of Thera and the Etruscan painting. Besides, the manner of expression is alike, which has been pointed out by researchers and has been universally admitted. This theme has been discussed at conferences and in important monographs. One of such monographs says that despite the affinities, it is difficult to compare painting of Thera and Knossos in terms of their architectural background as the first consists of palace frescoes and the latter are the paintings of the prosperous Cycladic city, subject to a remarkable influence of Minoan art ...<sup>2</sup> However, it has been admitted that the painting of Akrotiri is the direct successor of Minoan painting and that their styles are similar. The same idea is shared by R. Gordeziani in his above-mentioned work, which is both profoundly fundamental and accessible. He writes: “In this case, an important point evidently is the historical moment when in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, Greeks found themselves to be the heirs to the great Pre-Greek culture, whose nucleus was Minoan Crete ...”<sup>3</sup> In another place he argues: “Despite the highly important local characteristics, the style is the same.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, the Theran painting resembles Minoan art, and on the other hand, it is affinitive with Etruscan art. One may even think

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<sup>1</sup> Gordeziani R., *Greek Civilization*, I, 32, Tbilisi 1988.

<sup>2</sup> The Thera Foundation, *Thera and Knossos: Relation of the Paintings to Their Architectural Space*,  
<http://www.therafoundation.org/articles/art/theraandknossosrelationofthepaintingstotheirarchitecturalspace>

<sup>3</sup> Gordeziani R., *Greek Civilization*, I, 17, Tbilisi 1988.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

that the plant on the Tarquinian fresco is the same as the lilies from Akrotiri, and that the mountains and the birds flying above them are identical in both places, which, naturally, is wrong, though the semblance is marvelous in terms of artistic style, bright colors and refinement. Alberti's Window published an article *The Minoans as Hippies (and an Etruscan Thought)*, where the author speaks of the parallels between the Minoans and the hippies of the 1960s. I will quote an extract: "When I was an undergrad, one of my professors liked to compare the Minoans to the hippies of the 1960s. My teacher isn't the only one who has made this comparison. In fact, recently Minoan lilies were cleverly dubbed "the ancient equivalent of flower power."<sup>1</sup>

My teacher pointed out that the Minoans were very interested in nature (as evident in their art, which often depicts animals and plants) and used opium. And I think one could even (jokingly) say that the bright colors in some of the frescoes (like the hills in the *Spring Fresco* from Akrotiri, Thera, before 1630 BC, shown above left) are "psychedelic."<sup>2</sup> I don't mind the hippie comparison, especially if it can help students to differentiate between the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations. I do think it's important, though, for students to know that the comparison isn't perfect. For example, the fact that the Minoans had fortifications (despite what Sir Arthur Evans argued) and were possibly involved in human sacrifices suggest, that these people weren't all about love and peace.

Speaking of Minoans and the *Spring Fresco*, I was struck today about how there some similarities between this painting and a tomb are painting from the Etruscan period (*Boys Climbing Ricks and Diving*, from Tomb of Hunting and Fishing in Tarquinia, late 6<sup>th</sup> century BC). Both paintings depict brightly colored hills (with the mounds divided into multiple colors). In both cases, the hills are adorned with spindly vegetation (the *Spring Fresco* depicts stylized lilies, but I don't think there is enough detail to identify the Etruscan plant). Additionally, the two paintings have birds darting about in the air. I know that over 1,000 years separate these frescoes (not to mention that they are from different geographic areas - the Minoans were on islands in the Aegean Sea and the Etruscans were on mainland Italy), but I think the similarities are interesting."<sup>5</sup>

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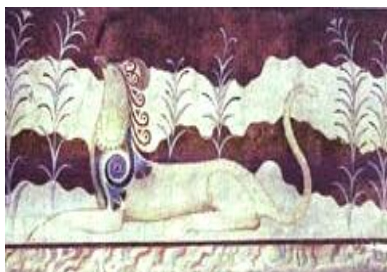
<sup>5</sup> Alberti's Window, *The Minoans as Hippies (and an Etruscan Thought)*, <http://albertis-window.blogspot.com/2010/11/minoans-as-hippies-and-etruscan-thought.html>



I cannot say whether the Minoan frescoes were truly created under the effect of opium, and whether the bright, emotionally charged colors on both frescoes (the *Spring Fresco* from Akrotiri and the above-mentioned fresco from Tarquinia) are psychoactive, but it is truly a great art, exerting an unforgettable impression on the visitor. One may have a feeling of being part of the process - whether it is the scene of boys' jumping from

the hill into water or blooming lilies on spring mountains, with swallows flying above them, or the fascinating colors of the blue bird and the dolphins of the Palace of Knossos. All this is 'contagious' and delivers a strong impression, which may even be considered as imitating the impact of intoxication. However, the assumption might even be true. Anyway, the frescoes of Knossos, Thera painting and Etruscan art are aligned to the same style of painting and, probably, are among the most impressive human creations.

The refined style and the bright colours, which sometimes become tender but remain cheerful and combine in perfect harmony, were inherited from antique art by Christian painting, as Christianity is the religion of life, immortality, and the victory of life over death. As commonly known, black colour is not at all used in Orthodox iconography to indicate that the divine light shines even in the hell. Therefore, the bright colors conveying the life-giving spirit of spring are acceptable in Christianity. According to R. Gordeziani, "The spread of the Greek civilization was motivated by its unparalleled sublimity."<sup>6</sup> I believe it was among the characteristics of antique art that proved acceptable for Christian art. If we look at frescoes, we will notice a gradual transition from Minoan to Etruscan art and the development of Roman painting under the influence of Etruscan and Greek art. Later, the antique tradition of painting played its role in the development of an art on Christian themes, which on its part fostered the purely Christian art, conveying in it Christian spirit and featuring saints.



The Frescoes of the Palace of Knossos  
(Museum of Iraklion, 16<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> BC)



Dolphins, The Frescoes from the Palace  
of Knossos

<sup>6</sup> Gordeziani R., *Greek Civilization*, I, 15, Tbilisi 1988.



The Blue Bird, A Fresco from Knossos, 1550 BC

The plant and animal images in early Christian painting are mainly symbolic though plants may often appear as decorations. After the legalization of Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, symbol lost its function in Christian painting and was banned. Plant and animal images were only supposed to have an allusive function or to take part in rendering a plot. For instance, rooster used to be depicted on an icon to allude to the Apostle Peter's disowning of Christ, as had been prophesied by the Lord (*John* 13: 38). Canonical Christian icon painting, started from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, preserved the shapes and colours of antique painting and at the same time introduced an altogether new trend, which had a special import (see below the comparisons) and served as a window connecting man with the Lord, as Father Paul Florensky put it.

Early Christian painting, Mosaic Floor in Tabgha (4<sup>th</sup> century AD)







Church Mosaic Plan

Each epoch contributed to Christian painting in a special way. Greeks donated to it, and to art in general, an especially high intellectual spirit, while Christianity added to it the grace of the Holy Spirit, which distinguishes icon from picture and elevates human heritage, manifested in art, to the Heaven and to God.

Minoan and Etruscan art embodies life, the earth and is beautiful; antique art is humane and at the same time is sublime, fascinating and intellectual, while in Christian art this beauty is connected to God, to the Kingdom of Heavens and conveys its Divine call and supreme nature.



*Primavera* A Fresco in Stabiae, Pompeii, 1<sup>st</sup> century BC



Rublev's *Trinity*, on the right is the Archangel



*Europa and the Bull*  
A fresco in Pompeii, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD



*The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem*, 15<sup>th</sup>  
a Russian Orthodox icon