

CRETAN ART: A CHAPTER IN EUROPEAN HISTORY*

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THERE is a hill in Crete which consists entirely of the ruins of masonry, the shards of pottery, the litter of every sort of human effort, and finally the dust of human bones. A sort of human ant-heap. Archaeologists say that the record of human effort on this spot of the earth's surface goes back 12,000 years. Certainly the development which began there about 5300 years ago, and which went on for more than 2000 years, is to be traced very plainly. In 1898 A. D. one human being, Sir Arthur Evans, bought this ant-heap, or man-heap, from the Turks, thinking that archaeologists might find it interesting. Since that time such an addition to the whole human story has been made there as, I think, has been made nowhere else in any similar period of time. The discoveries of Evans and his associates about the inhabitants of Crete from 3400 to 1200 B. C. have also made startling contributions to the former studies of Schliemann, to the work of Egyptologists, to our knowledge of Phoenicia, Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece and the western Mediterranean. In fact, these Cretan discoveries have changed men's ideas amazingly about history in general.

Now, it may be asked, how could a great civilization continue for thousands of years on so narrow a basis as the small, mountainous island of Crete? Let us look at the map. We English are fond of saying that civilization is maritime, but in saying this we are merely generalizing on the strength of our own history. The earliest civilizations of which we know anything,—the Sumerian, and the Egyptian—were based on land-empires, in fact on river valleys. The Hittite civilization, which has now been traced back as far as 2750 B. C., had for its base the central plateau of Anatolia. Both in China and in India civilization is based on rivers and plains. So far as we know, the Cretans had the first maritime culture. For a very long time they controlled the Mediterranean, from Egypt to the north shore of the Aegean, and from Phoenicia to Spain. Nay more, directly or indirectly through Tartessos, which lay north of the present Cadiz, on the Atlantic, they traded

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across the Bay of Biscay with Cornwall. That was their source of supply for tin, and in Britain ingots of copper of a Cretan mould have been found. Racially we cannot say much about them. But their culture was originally composite. Their artists at first learned much from the Nile. It used to be said that their religion derived from Anatolia, but the debt seems now to have been the other way. But whatever their beginnings, they went on to develop a highly individual civilization of their own. Later they carried the seeds of it far from Crete, and even influenced Egypt itself.

Let us pause for a moment to remark that the maritime character of Cretan civilization is in a line with most European development since. In the historic period there has generally been some European race which has taken to the sea: Greek, Norse, Venetian, Genoese, Portugese, Basque, Dutch, English. We shall notice, as we go on, other features in Cretan civilization which strike us as strangely European, in contrast with African and Asiatic cultures.

Remembering the frame-work of things, then, between about 4000 and about 1500 B. C.—great civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and all the areas to the west and north comparatively uncivilized—we see that Crete has an exceptionally fortunate situation for a people that has mastered the navigation of the sea. It is isolated from attack, and it is a very central base. It is still the Bronze Age, remember, and the richest supplies of copper perhaps during this period were to be found on three Mediterranean islands, Cyprus (the word means copper), Euboea, whose chief city was Chalcis, or the Bronze City, and Elba, and in Spain. From Spain, too, might be had that all-important metal, British tin. Here were cargoes for a carrying nation! Besides, the island of Crete has three geographical advantages of great importance. (1) Even now, after millenniums of forest destruction, the island is well-watered. Its highest mountain range, Ida, and three other mountains almost as high, wear snow through much of the summer, and the first sound one hears almost on landing in Crete from waterless Greece is the sound of running water. (2) Again, the soil of Crete, despite all that Baedeker says to the contrary, is extraordinarily fertile. True, there is not much plain-land for growing corn. But the hill-sides, famous in Homer's time for timber, carry magnificent timber to this day, including fine oak and cypress. At Candia one is struck by the quantity of wine exported, at Canea by the ship loads of green fruit, plums, peaches lemons, etc. (3) A third natural advantage is the temperate

climate. Crete lies right athwart the steady north-wind which blows from the cool mountains of Thrace, from early in July for the rest of the summer. Sail south from Athens in July, and you leave a temperature running up to 110° F. in the shade for an average of 80° in Candia.

As against these geographical advantages, the island of Crete—and especially the middle part of it where Minoan civilization was chiefly based,—is subject to terrible earthquakes, which have recurred through the modern historical period at pretty regular intervals. Sir Arthur Evans has described the last of these, which occurred in 1926. He was at Cnossus, or Candia, at that time. I visited the city a few weeks later, and saw everywhere the traces of destruction. Unfortunately the remaining Venetian architecture had suffered badly. In some of the chapters of his great work, *The Palace of Minos* (another volume of which has just appeared), Evans speaks as though the recurring earthquakes may be taken as a chief cause of the downfall of the civilization of Crete. In one place in particular he mentions the political convulsion that took place after an earthquake in the Venetian period, and hints that a similar but more formidable event in pre-historic times may have ended civilization. But I am sure that, if he were interrogated, he would not call this more than a contributing cause. In what follows I shall mention a cause of decline much more cogent. Meantime the general situation in the Levant must not be forgotten. The fact is that from about 1750 B. C. onwards there began all over the Levant and on its outer fringes a period of great commotion. From their mountain plateau in Asia Minor the Hittites had moved south to attack Babylon about 1900, perhaps because they themselves were under pressure in the north. But this was a flying raid. About the date already mentioned, 1750, other invaders pushed into Babylonia and they stayed there for nearly 600 years. Just about the same period alien invaders were established in Egypt. The Hittites reached the height of their power about 1500 B. C., and then steadily declined. But for a long time they continued to control the coasts of Asia Minor. The Cretan power began to wane about 1600, though its civilization continued for centuries later.

But before we trace the decline of Cretan power, let us first look to see how far it extended and how it had made its influence felt. It was thoroughly well established in most parts of the Peloponnesus, in the Aegean Islands, in Cyprus, in Attica, and less well in Thessaly and Thrace. It was settled in the Ionian Islands, and Sicily, and Sardinia; it got stone from Lipari for many

of its vases. It was closely connected with Tartessos (Tarshish) on the Atlantic coast of Spain, and through this connection got its tin from Britain, which was so indispensable for hardening bronze. It had long had intercourse with Babylon, though this finally was shut off by the Hittites. It was well established in Syria, where the Semitic stock had not yet taken root, nor yet learned the ways of the sea. But its most continuous intercourse from at least 3500 on had been with Egypt, and archaeologists seem now to take the view that from an early age it contributed to Egyptian art more than it borrowed.

Far flung as this civilization is, Crete is for so long its main basis that I venture to call it Cretan. Sir Arthur Evans, following Thucydides and Herodotus, calls it Minoan. French scholars, recognizing its absolute control in these islands, call it Aegean. There is an important difference between Cretan settlements and those existing in the islands and in Greece. The cities in Crete (there were scores of them) were unwallled,—which points clearly to a political federation; whereas the northern cities of Cretan culture are surrounded by gigantic fortifications; and at Mycenae a stupendous water reservoir, connected underground with a neighboring mountain, points to precautions being taken against a prolonged siege. Still the likenesses are more important than the differences. And the most striking likeness is the arrangement of towns. In all parts of the world at this time, except only in these Aegean or Minoan cities, there can have been no politics. Society was divided into kings, priests and slaves. Consequently in Egypt, in Mesopotamia, and further east in Persia, the kings have enormous palaces, and the priests enormous temples, built by millions of slave-subjects. But the slaves themselves have no domiciles that amount to anything. Now in the Cretan and Aegean cities it is quite otherwise. The rulers, whether they were king-priests or priest-kings, have a comparatively simple abode in the midst of the houses of the citizens, and the most striking feature of the town-plan is the market-place. That, and not a palace, is the city's centre.

Now, we spoke before of the Cretan civilization being in a straight line with European development in its maritime quality. We have arrived at a second and very striking similarity. This civilization was political, in the Greek or English sense of that word.

Let us now return to the place from which we digressed a few moments ago. We had come to the point in chronology where the Cretan art had begun to be decadent, and to the break-up in

Minoan civilization about 1600 B. C. I am not going to trouble you with all the various theories about the relationship of Greek culture with Minoan. The main movements of the next six or eight centuries we know pretty well, from the archaeological evidence, and from the careful reinterpretation of Greek literature in the light of that evidence. I have sometimes thought that it might be of some importance for men living now, on this continent, to understand just what did happen in the centuries in question.

How is a civilization destroyed? Under what propitious circumstances does a new civilization begin? Is civilization ever destroyed visibly, at one fell swoop? That has happened, so far as I know, only when the civilized people have been exterminated by fire and sword, in a short space of time. The Phrygians were thus destroyed about as quickly as any people I know of. But even in that case the process lasted about 60 years, and in two respects, in music and religion, the Phrygians still managed to leave their mark upon the world. But generally the process is slower, and the civilization is an unconscionable time in dying. An artist does not cease to be an artist, nor a scientist a scientist, because some of his fellow citizens have lost a battle, or even many battles. An artistic knack, a political conception, or a piece of scientific lore may survive from father to son, and from one generation to another. But no civilization can subsist intact over a long period of disorder, change, or migration of peoples. By civilization we mean, do we not, a continuous and individual development of ideas?

Let me stop over these words, because, in my opinion, one cannot understand either history or art who is not seized of the truth that lies behind them. I say *a civilization is a continuous and individual development of ideas*. All four words are important, nor do I think we need to add another word to them in describing civilization. *Continuous, individual, development, ideas*. They are easier to understand, perhaps, if we take them in the reverse order.

So let us begin with *ideas*. We cannot imagine a civilization, can we, that is merely material? Brick, asphalt, machinery, wheat, timber, minerals, geographical position—these things which Canadians call “natural resources”, and which Aristotle called *hyle*, are indispensable to civilization, to be sure. Aristotle argued it out philosophically, whereas a Canadian might content himself with pointing to the Eskimos, as a negative proof. But though indispensable to civilization, natural resources are not civilization. And preoccupation with them excludes civilization. Civilization means that a certain influential part of the community concerns itself with ideas, with things of the mind.

So much for that point. As to *development*, few of us would question that. Some Orientals, of course, might do so, though at present Asia seems to be changing and developing very fast. Yet certainly in the past Orientals have argued that civilization is static. To the European a thing which is not moving towards a goal is dead.

But further, civilization is *individual*. I will not go so far as to say that it is racial in any exact or narrow way. We English people know how diverse the strands of civilization may be. So do the French, with their Italian, Celtic, and Norse stocks. But these different stocks have to settle down and live with one another a long time before they begin to produce anything new and distinctive. Not until they coalesce into a new unity, a new individuality—and this has always required centuries upon centuries—is anything produced that is worth while, anything that can be called a civilization. Now this point is a little harder to see than the two points previously mentioned, but I am afraid that no other conclusion can be drawn from history. By history, of course, I do not mean all the foolish things that historians have said. For example, you have read the words "Greco-Roman civilization". But was there ever such a two-headed monster? What would one think of the term "Spanish-Dutch civilization", or "Italo-French civilization"? Yet Spaniards and Dutch, and sixteenth century Italians and French were much liker one another than Greeks and Romans. In the same loose, unthinking way men have written about the "spread of civilization from people to people". But when has civilization ever spread, or been spread! Alexander III of Macedon, generally called Alexander the Great, *tried to* spread Greek civilization in Asia and Egypt. But he only hastened its decay. What he changed was not Asia, not Egypt, but Greek civilization.

Finally, and this is perhaps the most difficult point of all: civilization is *continuous*. It can stand rude shocks. For example, French civilization stood the Revolution, and became more French than ever. Our English development stood two political Revolutions, and the industrial Revolution as well, and remained English. Still, there are shocks which no civilization can stand. The introduction of an Eastern religion, Stoicism, in a war-weary world, was the death-knell of European science. The invention of printing destroyed the mediaeval Church—not quickly, because for a long time the Church controlled printing. The invention of gunpowder destroyed feudalism—again not quickly, because the feudal barons had most of the gunpowder. But the destruction was not less fatal nor certain, because it ran over several centuries. I do not

mean to make a thin abstraction merely. To say that one thing destroyed another is a stenographic rather than a logical way of speaking. What really happens in these cases is that, two courses of human conduct being incompatible, men by electing to follow one of these turn their backs on the other. There are shocks then, which no institution and no civilization can withstand.

The invention which was the solvent of Aegean or Minoan civilization was the smelting of iron and the chemistry of steel. That story is writ large in Homeric literature, as well as in the archaeological evidence. The ensuing convulsion lasted about 800 years, and during six hundred of these the Aegean world may be said to have passed through the Dark Ages. It begins to be a civilized world again about 800 B. C.

What happened in the interval, you may ask? Did the tribes who came into the Aegean world from the north—the Achaeans of Homer, and the Dorians of historical record—learn the Aegean language, or did they impose their language on the conquered? Did the two stocks intermarry? Were the Ionians of later date the relic of the Cretans? Fascinating questions, but hardly relevant to our present purpose. We are concerned with Cretan art, and with asking how much of it has continued in any fertile way in subsequent European development.

I have already pointed to two features of Cretan civilization which are in a line with all subsequent European history. In the first place the Cretans, like ourselves, looked upon salt water as a connecting link, not as a barrier. Again, their society is political, which is the chief thing that divides Europe off from Asia and Africa. A further feature brings us at once to Cretan art. Their society is not priest-ridden, it is not obsessed with and preoccupied by religion. This may seem a strange statement. For art is generally intimately connected with religion; indeed I cannot think of a great art which has not its roots in religious emotion. Think of Renaissance Italy, think of Greece, think of English drama, or German music. And Cretan art too is intimately connected with religion; religious symbols, religious exercises, ritual, worship, occur in all their remains. But religion never tempts them, not for one moment, from the observation of Nature, nor from a deep-seated interest in Man. They too have their interest in miracles, such as the Virgin-mother-goddess, and in subterranean influences, seen in earthquakes, and symbolized by the snake. But a strangely modern European humanism pervades it all. Miracles and the Powers of Darkness sit lightly upon Cretan worshippers. They do not grow morbid, sadistic or even gloomy, in contemplating

superhuman potencies. Their artists shun the winged-lions and monsters of which certain Mesopotamian peoples are so fond. Persian art is largely taken up with bloody and cruel hunting scenes. But Cretan shows a quiet, serene observation of plants and animals, even if the animal is something of a monster, like the octopus. In Egypt the bull is a god, in Crete he is an animal that acrobats play with. In other words, the temper of Cretan art is humanistic. And here once more Crete is in a straight line with European development. Europe has several times been overlaid with the Oriental and African bloody, dark, morbid influence. The Stoics poisoned our intelligence. We acquired a bloody taint through ancient Rome. (Rome by the way got her gladiatorial games and her taste for blood through the Etruscans, who came from Asia. And this was reinforced in Imperial times from Oriental stocks in Africa and Spain.) Centuries later, the gloomy Calvin went near to triumphing over Erasmus, but finally, I think we may say, Erasmus and humanism have succeeded. Much as we have learned from them, I doubt whether any twentieth century European would admit Babylon, Assyria, Persia, or Phoenicia as an ancestor. But it is amazing how twentieth century Europe has hailed the civilization and art of Crete as belonging to itself. For twenty-five years its great discoverer, Sir Arthur Evans, has exclaimed over each new find, "How modern, how like ourselves!"

In comparison with Mesopotamia indeed, Egypt seems much more of our spiritual kindred. In Egyptian art there is plainly seen a love of Nature, and a certain freedom from religious obsession. Egypt, too, has a secular as well as a religious literature. In Egyptian art, again, there is a quiet humour which appeals to the European of modern times. Nothing like that in any Eastern art! At one time and another I have examined thousands upon thousands of examples of Hittite, Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian art, and never once have I been led to believe that any of these peoples ever smiled. In Egypt they could smile. But this may have been the Cretan influence, of which we have spoken before.

On the other hand, there is a very distinctive feature of Egyptian sculpture which cannot be Cretan, and yet which has won enthusiastic praise from Europeans of our day—its skill in portraiture. Not merely is Egyptian sculpture life-like; it is highly individualized. Look at the statue of an Egyptian king, or that of his wife, his baby, his man-servant or his maid-servant, and you feel that this is the likeness of a man, woman, baby or slave that had an historical existence. But there is nothing of this kind

in Cretan art. May the reason for this lie in the political character of Cretan civilization? Kings, queens and flunkys (as such) did not interest Cretans. They were interested in man as man; consequently their art represents human types, as it represents the bull, and the species of birds, and fishes. The species they represent with a marvellous fidelity, such as the flying-fish, and the partridge. But human portraiture you will not find. I am the more inclined to think this may be the explanation from my study of Greek sculpture. Throughout the great political period of the Greeks you do not find portraiture in their sculpture. That begins only in the fourth century B. C., when politics in the Greek world is a thing of the past. In the previous centuries they represent man generically, or at most, typically.

By all this I do not mean to say that Europe has owed everything to the Cretans. Far from it. Modern Europe, at its best, has very largely discovered things for itself. At its second best it has learned from its predecessors. Now, even if you accept my theory of the Cretan-European tradition, you cannot fail to be struck by the great breach in it occasioned by the development which lies nearest to the Cretans,—I mean the civilization which eventually developed from the mixture of Achaeans, Dorians, and Aegean peoples. The Greeks, as we call them, introduced mathematics and science into the world. It is this which makes twentieth century Europeans closer to them than to the Cretans on the one hand, or mediaeval Europeans on the other. True, the Cretans achieved things which no European again achieved until the 19th century A. D. But, so far as we can see, they did not possess what the Greek and the modern European mean by science. The best description of science I know was given by Liebig, the German chemist. He said: "We first observe, we then try to generalize, finally we measure exactly." This explains what the Greek meant, and what the modern European means, by the mathematical basis of science. Many antique civilizations observed, the Persian and Egyptian as well as the Cretan. The Babylonian and Chaldaean civilization also tried to generalize, as the Greeks knew. But they did not go on to express *quantitatively* as the Greeks did, and as we modern Europeans do, what was observed, and what was generalized. This attitude, then, is an important break between the Cretans and ourselves. Otherwise, I believe we may call them kin.

Up till the last few years anyone would have said that the Greeks were absolutely peerless as artists. Perhaps we must still say that, on the whole. But the Greeks represented themselves as being entirely ignorant of art during long centuries, during which

time, they said, all the "cunning workmen" came from Crete. Truth wears well historically, and even better archaeologically. You never can tell who will dig up your "fire-proof buildings", and your "wear-ever pots", and your "eternal coffins",—I am quoting present-day advertisers in these terms—you never can tell who will dig these things up in the next five or six thousand years. Up till 1900 A. D. what we knew of the Cretans we knew through the Greeks, and what we now know of the Cretans has not upset the Greek statements. On the contrary, the Greek poets and historians have helped us, in an extraordinary way, to understand the archaeological evidence.

I have observed a very extraordinary thing about all the criticism of Cretan art. Sir Arthur Evans is very much struck by its *modernity*, as he is by the modernity of Cretan plumbing, architecture and feminine dress. (Women's fashions have changed so completely in the last few years that something of the point has gone out of the last comparison.) The French writers again compare the art of Crete to that of eighteenth century France. By others it has been compared with the Japanese. Now what interests me in these comparisons is not their exactness—indeed I think some of them quite mistaken—but the desire of the critics to compare Cretan art with other art which they like. In other words, they are convinced that it is great art.

What is great art? Can we define it? Is it "fine execution applied to a local convention", as someone has said? Execution of course—the triumph over material obstacles—has much to do with it. Hegel had this in mind (as well as other things) when he defined art as "matter utterly permeated by mind". But the relief work done by Persian artists on glazed tiles, which may be seen in the Louvre, answers this description, and yet is not what a European at least would call great art.

I shall attempt no definition: I am no great believer in definitions. But I suggest for your consideration a condition which the European artist always seems to have considered as of paramount importance—that his work be human, humane. In science it is not so. The European scientist, following the Greek, rules out all that is anthropomorphic, or anthropocentric. Of science the European says: "Though it slay me, yet will I trust in it." But as Aristotle remarked, only Man, of all creatures, and for his own amusement, indulges in art. It is his self-expression. Art therefore should be humane.

This saying cannot be taken in any narrow way. Much of the art of the Cretans does not reveal either human nature or

Nature in general, in a direct way. Much of it has to do with symmetry of line; and its floral and animalistic decoration, striking as that is, is less noteworthy than its conventionalized decoration. Convention in art is not so much misunderstood now as it formerly was, but misunderstandings still remain, which tempt one to repeat a few commonplaces. The artist must always work through some convention. The painter, no matter how "realistic" he may be, is conditioned by the two-dimensional. The novelist boldly assumes, as his convention, that he can know the workings of more than one mind. And so on. But in particular it should be remembered that the weaver and the potter (the oldest of artists, Plato called them) are especially confined by convention. Yet the conventional is not necessarily the negation nor the contradiction of the natural, and it becomes so only if it is incongruous with the world of nature as men see it, if it is impossible or absurd to the human mind. At its most conventional, convention may depict human effort for perfection, human striving for beauty and truth; and hence it is essentially human in its appeal and charm. Perhaps it is his manner of dealing with conventions that most surely reveals the great artist.

And so, I think, this art of Crete is great art. And it is European, beautiful according to the highest European standard. The National Museum in Athens is one of the great museums of the world, not because of its size, though it is large, but because everything in it is Greek, and beautiful. You could drop at least one whole gallery of the Louvre into the Seine without much loss of beauty; you could drop into the sea all the pictures in Naples, save one, with no loss of beauty at all. But you could not move much from the Athenian Museum without great loss of beauty. So it is with the smaller museum in Candia. And the European goes there, as he goes to Athens, and bows his head, and says "These are verily my ancestors, these are my own kin."