

Minoan Masterpieces

Dusting off the art of Bronze Age Crete

Athanasia Kanta is the associate director of the Iraklion Archaeological Museum on Crete, which houses the world's greatest collection of artifacts from the Minoan civilization (3100–1050 B.C.). Kanta, who has participated in some 100 digs on the island, also directs excavations at the Minoan site of Monastiraki, a palatial complex where wine and textiles were produced. She spoke with *ARCHAEOLOGY*'s Eti Bonn-Muller about the museum's ongoing renovation and how it provides the opportunity for a fresh look at some of its best-known artifacts.

What has been the most exciting part of the museum's renovation?

At one point, Byzantine archaeologists were called in to excavate the museum's garden before a new wing was added. They discovered the foundation of a Venetian monastery. We plan to restore the garden with plants that existed in Minoan times and are comparable to what you see in their wall paintings, such as olive, fig, and pomegranate trees; myrtle, papyrus, and poppies. We will make the ruins beneath it viewable.

What can visitors see today?

There are about 400 objects in a temporary gallery that was added to the back of the museum. On display are the most famous pieces; for instance, the Phaistos disk and the Agia Triada sarcophagus.

Will any new objects be on view when the museum reopens later this year?

There will be roughly 2,000 new artifacts from recent excavations, including gold leaves from the funerary complex at the palace of Mallia

and a clay "epiphany" group of five women from Phaistos.

Women were prominent in Minoan society. Did they rule Crete?

I think there was a male ruler, a "priest-king," but women had an exceptional place in society. In Minoan wall paintings and figurines, we can see they were attired in a rich way. And they are *shown*. They are not hidden away somewhere, covered. They have their breasts exposed. I'm sure they didn't go out like that every day. But in religious or state feasts, they had very sophisticated attire, which shows the position they had in society.

What period most interests you?

I have worked on material from the Neolithic to the eighth century B.C. But what I like best is the period from about 1380 to 1100 B.C. I find it mouthwatering, in a way. It is the time when the Mycenaeans from the Greek mainland come over to Crete and create a civilization that has elements of both Minoan and Mycenaean cultures.

How is that reflected in their art?

Crete is a strong partner, culturally, and the Mycenaeans come here and develop many new artistic elements. But things change. Linear B comes to Crete. It is the language of the ruler in the palace of Knossos. We have warrior tombs. And as time goes on, Knossos, the last existing palace, is abandoned. Then the political situation changes on the island. We have small principalities. It's great fun to see how Crete retains its, let's say, "high culture," compared to what happens to the rest of the Mediterranean in the difficult years of the late Bronze Age.



Do you have a favorite object in the museum's collection?

One of my favorites is a clay rhyton, or vase, in the shape of a head of a "Mycenaean." He has a beard, sideburns, and little curls on his forehead. The Minoans mostly were clean-shaven. His eyes are very lively and he sort of looks at you in a funny way. Another one is a well-known rhyton in the form of a man in a cart driven by oxen. The form has been abstracted to its bare essentials. It would have a place of honor in any museum of modern art.

What is one piece that visitors shouldn't miss?

There is a figurine of the poppy goddess. Few have noticed the dress details. The dress has a standing collar, which at her back forms a triangular opening that leaves the back bare to the waist. Most women have long hair, but hers is short, and it ends in a triangle to match the opening at the back. If you think of a modern woman wearing this dress, it would be absolutely fantastic, like something out of Dior. Minoan civilization was, indeed, the first European civilization, and it produced masterpieces of art. We shouldn't forget that.