

ART

Differences between Minoan and Mycenaean Art

The Minoan civilization, famous for its luxurious palaces and works of art, heavily influenced the Mycenaean civilization, but their way of life, society and beliefs were quite different, and it shows in their art.

By Tea Fumić February 2, 2020



Minoan Bull-Leaping Fresco from the palace of Knossos, via Ancient Origins

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The Minoan and the Mycenaean civilizations flourished on Crete and the Greek mainland during the 3rd and the 2nd millennium BCE, and Homer immortalized them in his two epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey. There are certain similarities between

the two, due to the Mycenaeans appropriating a lot of Minoan cultures. However, their way of life, society and beliefs were quite different, and it shows in their art. This article will list these artistic differences and present their most important works of art.

Wall Paintings



Minoan Ladies in Blue Fresco from the palace of Knossos, via Ancient Origins

Both civilizations decorated their palaces and other structures with frescoes, using lime plaster and vibrant colors. The only differences are their iconographic elements.

Minoans relied heavily on religious iconography, depicting the images of their gods and especially goddesses. Common motifs are also processions and sacred rituals, such as bull-leaping. The Minoan iconography strongly reflects their social matriarchal structure – the images of women dominate their visual arts, and female symbolism is present at almost every depiction.

Experts on the Greek Bronze Age often state that the Mycenaean wall paintings, although seen as a continuation of Minoan, are of lesser quality. The influence of the Minoans is clearly visible in female imagery and general style. However, Mycenaeans were slightly more simplistic in their depictions. They preferred

symmetry and geometrical motifs, unlike Minoans who did not like to leave empty, undecorated spaces. The human figures are stylistic in Mycenaean wall paintings, and males are more common.

Another important difference is the hunt and war scenes that we find in Mycenaean art. Unlike Minoans, known for their peaceful thalassocracy, the Mycenaean society was oriented towards war and expansion, and it showed in their art.

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Mycenaean Shield Fresco, Mycenae, Mark Cartwright, 2017

Palaces Architecture

The maze-like layout of Minoan palace at Knossos (left) and a possible reconstruction (right), via Minoan Labyrinth

Both civilizations are famous for building complex palaces, and archaeological evidence confirms that they were administrative, residential and religious centers. Again, Mycenaeans borrowed many architectural features from Minoans but adapted them to fit their society's beliefs and demands.

The most famous and largest Minoan work of architecture is a palace at Knossos, a mythological dwelling of king Minos. The center place in the palace is a large courtyard, with rooms, halls and small chambers dispersing from it in every direction. Historians consider that the maze-like structural complexity of the palace is probably what inspired the myth about the Minotaur and the Labyrinth.

Minoans decorated their palaces with wall paintings and used vibrant colors to paint the columns, balustrades, and pediments, which held the multiple stories of the palace.

The North Entrance of the Knossos Palace, Theofanis Ampatzidis, 2018

The frescoes are mainly of religious thematic, although many depict natural scenes, such as marine life, mythological animals and flowers.

The Throne Room with a Griffin Fresco from the palace at Knossos, via Made in Crete

Mycenaean palaces, like their visual arts, reflect the militaristic character of their civilization that Homer so marvelously described in Iliad. The best-preserved palaces are those in Pylos and Tiryns. The difference from the Minoan style is very clear.

Mycenaean palaces are in fact citadels, built on a hill and fortified. Minoans, settled on an island and oriented towards trading, not expansion, had no need for defensive structures. Militant Mycenaean had to surround their palaces with massive walls, also known as Cyclopean.

They got their name after mythological Cyclops, one-eyed giants who were, according to myths, the only beings strong enough to build such colossal walls. The most recognizable example of Cyclopean construction is the Lion Gate at Mycenae.

The Lion Gate, the main entrance of the citadel in Mycenae, via Joy of Museums

The center of a Mycenaean palace was not a courtyard, like with Minoans, but a megaron, a large rectangular hall used for court functions and social or religious events. The additional rooms are mainly square and the layout very geometrical, indicating a planned construction. The layout of the Minoan palaces, in comparison, shows many building extensions, so it seems that they built additional rooms when the need for them presented itself.

A layout of the Mycenaean "Nestor Palace" at Pylos, J. Travalos, 2006

Mycenaeans also decorated their palaces, but their frescoes depict war and hunting scenes, strong warriors on chariots and battles. They were also fond of geometrical patterns and vivid colors.

A reconstruction of a Mycenaean megaron, by Piet de Jong, via Odyssey Adventures

Burial Tombs

Minoan tholos at Mesara, Crete, via Brewminate

Both Minoans and Mycenaean buried their dead in circular structures, known as tholoi. Historians still debate whether Mycenaean adopted the tholoi style from Minoans, but the similarities indicate that there was some sort of continuity. Nevertheless, there are many differences between the two.

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Minoans built their tholoi above ground, with small doors and round tomb chambers. Archaeological excavations confirmed that Minoans buried all members of their settlements in these tombs. The communal status of Minoan tholoi explains the simplicity in the architectural style and the lack of decorations.

Mycenaean tholoi, on the other hand, were much larger and subterranean. They were usually built into hills, with an entrance passage, called dromos, and monumental doorway. Some of their tholoi consisted of a couple of rooms, with a central burial chamber, which was round or rectangular.

The main difference between the two types of tholoi is its purpose. Mycenaean reserved monumental tombs for rulers and prominent individuals. That explains their monumentality, as opposed to the more simplistic style of Minoan tholoi, intended for all. Mycenaean decorated their tombs, mostly with colorful relief sculptures, which again reflects the "higher" status of their deceased.

The entrance to the Treasury of Atreus, Mycenae, via Elixir of Knowledge

The most famous Mycenaean tholos is the Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae, amply decorated with reliefs, columns and decorative rocks such as green alabaster. These rich decorations, along with precious burial gifts, lead Heinrich Schliemann, a chief archaeologist at Mycenae, to proclaim this tomb the Tomb of Agamemnon. However, modern research confirmed that the person buried in this tomb predated both Agamemnon and Atreus for a few hundred years.

The interior of the Treasury of Atreus, Mycenae, via The History Hub

Pottery and Metalwork

Minoan Octopus Jar, Knossos, via Arts and Science

Both civilizations richly decorated their pottery and metal vessels but the iconography is, again, quite distinctive.

Just like their wall paintings, Minoan vessels are slightly more decorative. They particularly liked pottery with a light background, on which they painted a life-like human or animal figures (often sea creatures) in some vibrant or contrastive color.

Mycenaean preferred dark colors in their pottery, and their motifs were much simpler, sometimes almost abstract. The affinity for

geometrical patterns shows again on their pottery, which they often decorated with triangles, circles, and meanders. However, despite their more simplistic approach to décor, Mycenaean pottery is of a much higher quality. They used purer clay and baked the vessels on higher temperatures.

Mycenaean Octopus Jar, via the Met Museum

The one area where the artisanship of Mycenaeans exceeded that of Minoans is metalwork. Nevertheless, Minoans were skilled metal manufacturers, especially when it comes to jewelry. Their highly developed trade enabled them to import gold and they perfected the faience technique of adding tiny beads of gold to the surface of the object.

Minoan Master of the Animals Pendant, Kotomi Yamamura, 2012

Mycenaeans are famous for producing golden death masks and mastering the niello technique in which they mixed two types of metal to create contrast on an object. The famous Mask of Agamemnon is a great example of using thin gold sheets and hammering or embossing the motif.

The Death Mask of Agamemnon, via The National Archaeological Museum, Athens

Clay Figurines

Minoan Snake Goddess Figurine, Knossos, Mark Cartwright, 2012

Minoans are famous for their figurines of female goddesses, of which the Snake Goddess is probably the most recognizable. Their goddesses' figurines have accentuated female attributes, and they usually rendered them in faience and painted them with vibrant colors.

Mycenaean Female Figurines, via Joy of Museums

Mycenaean clay figurines are again, highly stylized. It seems they inherited Minoan affinity for female figures, so depictions of fertility goddesses are the most frequent archaeological find when it comes to sculpture work. Regardless of their somewhat poor executions, these figurines played a significant role in the Mycenaean religion, since archaeologists excavated over five hundred figurines from various sites.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Tea Fumić holds an MA in History and worked as a field archaeologist, curator and museum educator. She specializes in researching and writing about ancient civilizations, religions and mythologies. Her areas of expertise are auxiliary historical sciences, mainly numismatics and epigraphy.
