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POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND LANDSCAPE IN MINOAN ART

by *Anne P. Chapin*

Since its discovery a century ago, in the excavations at Knossos led by Sir Arthur Evans on Crete, Aegean landscape art has come to characterize the extraordinary cultural achievements of Minoan prehistoric society.¹ Widely credited with the invention of pure landscape, Minoan artists created exuberant paintings teeming with plants and animals seemingly wild and free from a discernible human presence. Vivacious, colorful, curvilinear, seemingly spontaneous, and always full of life, the landscapes still invite modern imaginings of an idealized era in the distant past.² The romantic appeal of Aegean landscape art, however, masks important questions of purpose and meaning for which satisfactory answers have yet to be found. What functions did these landscapes serve in Minoan society? What was their symbolic meaning? For whom were they painted, and how were they used and consumed? And perhaps most importantly, why paint landscape at all, especially landscape devoid of human presence or activity? Why did the Minoans not select some other subject matter, drawn perhaps from their mythology or history? This study attempts to address these questions, albeit briefly and rather speculatively.

PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

Since their initial discovery a century ago, each generation of scholars has presented a slowly evolving understanding of purpose and meaning in Aegean landscape painting, conveniently illustrated by tracing the modern history of the Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco from the House of the Frescoes at Knossos, dated to MM IIIB/LM IA (Fig. 3.1).³ Excavated by Sir Arthur Evans in 1923, two panels were reconstructed by Émile Gilliéron fils from a large deposit of fresco fragments found in Room E on the ground floor of the building. One depicts a blue monkey in a rocky landscape of crocuses, dwarf irises, ivy, and papyrus-reed hybrid plants, and the second features a blue bird in a rocky landscape with wild pea or vetch, dwarf iris, and perhaps roses.⁴ Gilliéron reconstructed a third panel of a monkey foraging through papyrus, along with illustrations of numerous individual fragments of flowering plants and a jet d'eau, a fountain of water.⁵

1. As is evidenced by the discussion of Minoan art in two recent surveys of art history: Kleiner, Mamiya, and Tansey 2001, pp. 85–86; Stokstad 2002, I, p. 141.

2. For commentary on such fantasies, see Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, p. 185.

3. Immerwahr 1990, pp. 42–46, 170 (Kn 2); *PM* II, pp. 431–467; Cameron 1967, 1968.

4. *PM* II, pls. X, XI.

5. *PM* II, figs. 264, 266, 268, 272, 275.

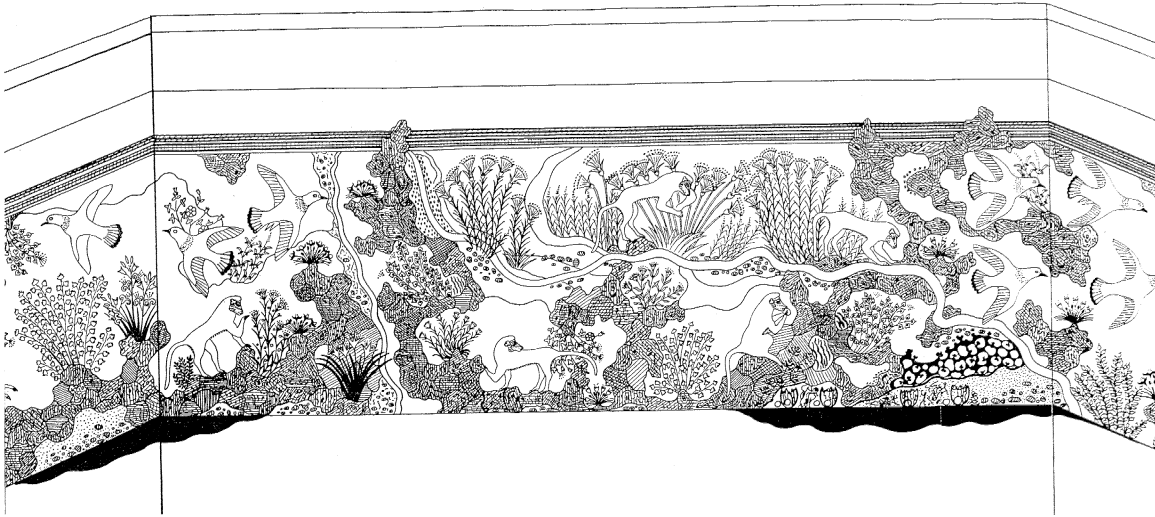


Figure 3.1. Reconstruction by Mark Cameron of the Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco from the House of the Frescoes, Knossos. Cameron 1968, fig. 13

Evans, like other scholars of his generation, understood landscape painting primarily in secular terms, as room decoration that celebrates the beauty of the natural world. He wrote that the Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco characterized the “cultured home of a small burgher” and represented “not only the high standard of civilized life in the great days of Minoan Crete, but the wide diffusion of culture among all classes.”⁶ Evans thus asked the modern viewer to see this fresco as evidence of the cultural superiority of the ancient Minoan civilization (which he understood as the first European civilization), where even so-called small burghers elected to decorate their homes with landscape art worthy of the finest residences. Evans’s understanding of Minoan landscape painting therefore seems strongly influenced by his own upper-class Victorian upbringing, where noblemen throughout Europe sought to decorate their great houses with ideal landscapes by artists such as Claude Lorraine and Nicholas Poussin.⁷

Interest in composition was renewed in the 1960s. In 1966, additional fragments were incorporated into the panel depicting a monkey in a papyrus thicket, on view in the Herakleion Archaeological Museum. In 1967 and 1968, Mark Cameron published additional fragments and identified the subject of the fresco—monkeys foraging for food and raiding the nests of rock doves for their eggs. He also presented an impressive reconstruction of the composition as a continuous frieze about 5 1/2 meters in length.⁸

More recent interpretation of the fresco stresses its iconographic and archaeological contexts in order to assign a religious meaning to the composition. As Cameron makes clear in his reconstruction, the fresco overflows with flowering plants and animals, many of which, as Nannó Marinatos observes, bear Minoan religious significance. The crocuses and lilies that are found in the fresco also appear consistently in Aegean art as offerings and as decoration for altars and offering tables, while elsewhere monkeys and doves appear in connection with a goddess of nature. In addition to this religious symbolism, Marinatos also points to a compaction of season and environment apparent in the fresco: spring flowering lilies bloom simultaneously with fall crocuses, and marshy landscapes are depicted adjacent to dry, rocky terrain. For Marinatos, the Monkeys and

6. *PM II*, p. 406.

7. For a recent account of the social climate in which Evans worked, see MacGillivray 2000.

8. Cameron 1967, 1968. For the colored version of Cameron’s reconstruction, see Evelyn 1999, p. 247.

Blue Birds Fresco is not simple wall decoration. Rather, the frieze represents a deliberate compression of nature brimming with religious meaning suggestive of the renewal of nature and symbolic of the ideal spring. She further points to a stone offering table and a votive ladle inscribed in Linear A that were also found in the House of the Frescoes, and suggests that the room once decorated by the fresco must have been a shrine.⁹

The Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco, then, conveniently encapsulates a continuing debate about the meaning of landscape art in the Aegean Bronze Age. Is a landscape secular or religious in meaning? Is it just fancy wall decoration, or does it signal the presence of a religious shrine? These are the principal questions that are still being brought to the material, and the debate on the religious significance of landscape art underlies most recent studies of individual landscape compositions derived from Aegean contexts.

The LM I fresco cycle from Room 14 of the Royal Villa at Ayia Triada in southern Crete presents a second instance that stirs the same debate (Fig. 3.2). Excavated in 1903 but only published in 1998, this composition extended across three walls.¹⁰ On the north wall, situated on the viewer's left upon entering the room, was painted the image of a kneeling female figure in a lush landscape of lilies, crocuses, and violets. On the east wall at the rear of the chamber, a central panel showed a second female figure, usually identified as a goddess or a priestess, positioned beside a platform set in a landscape with myrtle plants. Finally, on the south wall, to the viewer's right, was an elaborate depiction of untamed nature where goat-like animals (probably *agrimia*) bound across a rocky landscape and wild cats stalk pheasantlike birds amid a profusion of crocuses, ivy, and additional varieties of flowering plants. Though understood by its earlier interpreters in secular terms as luxurious bedroom decoration, it has more recently been suggested that the room, which is equipped with a low platform, should be identified instead as a religious shrine.¹¹

On Thera, where frescoes and archaeological contexts were well preserved by an enormous volcanic eruption, the academic debate has become even more intense, with strikingly different interpretations of the Spring Fresco from Delta 2 in Akrotiri appearing in recent years. In one camp is Mary Hollinshead, who argued in 1989 that Room 2 was used as a bedroom.¹² After all, excavation of the room did reveal the ghostly remains of a bed, preserved as a negative impression in the volcanic ash. For Hollinshead, the Spring Fresco, with its lovely depiction of swaying lilies and darting swallows, is essentially secular in meaning, endowed only with dormant symbolism derived from the religious role of lilies in other contexts.¹³ The other camp is led by Nannó Marinatos, who identified Delta 2 as a shrine and suggested that the fresco served as a backdrop to religious action.¹⁴ Supporting this position is Karen Foster, who in 1995 questioned the bedroom identification and interpreted the swallows as evidence for an avian epiphany.¹⁵ For Foster, the room was clearly designed for cultic use. Yet the basic problem remains that Delta 2, which contained an assortment of everyday artifacts in a secondary context, would not be identified as a shrine without the existence of the Spring Fresco. Is the presence of this beguiling composition enough to demand a revision of traditional

9. Marinatos 1984, p. 92; 1993, pp. 194–195.

10. Immerwahr 1990, pp. 49–50, 180 (A.T. 1), pls. 17, 18; Militello 1998.

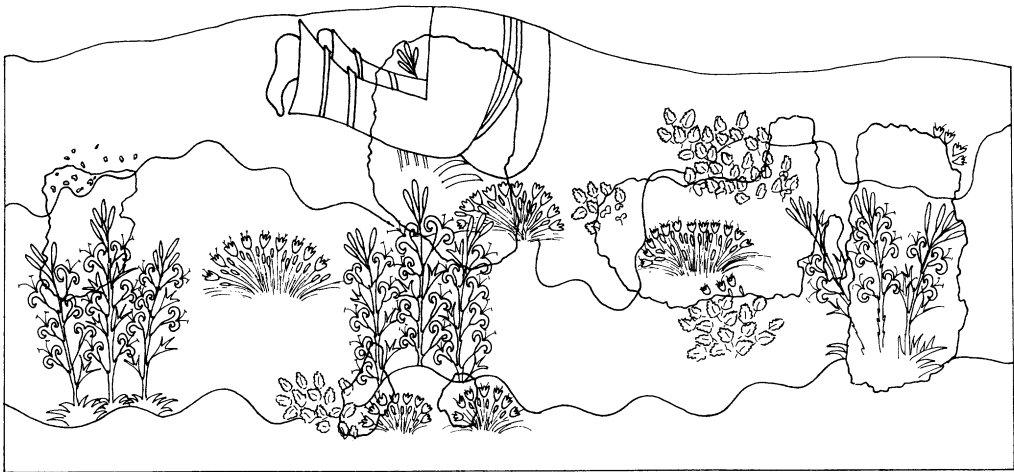
11. For identification as a bedroom, see Kopaka 1990; Halbherr, Stefani, and Banti 1980, p. 92. For identification as a shrine, see Militello 1998, pp. 250–282; 1992; Rehak 1997, p. 174.

12. Hollinshead 1989.

13. Hollinshead 1989, p. 351.

14. Marinatos 1984, pp. 93–94.

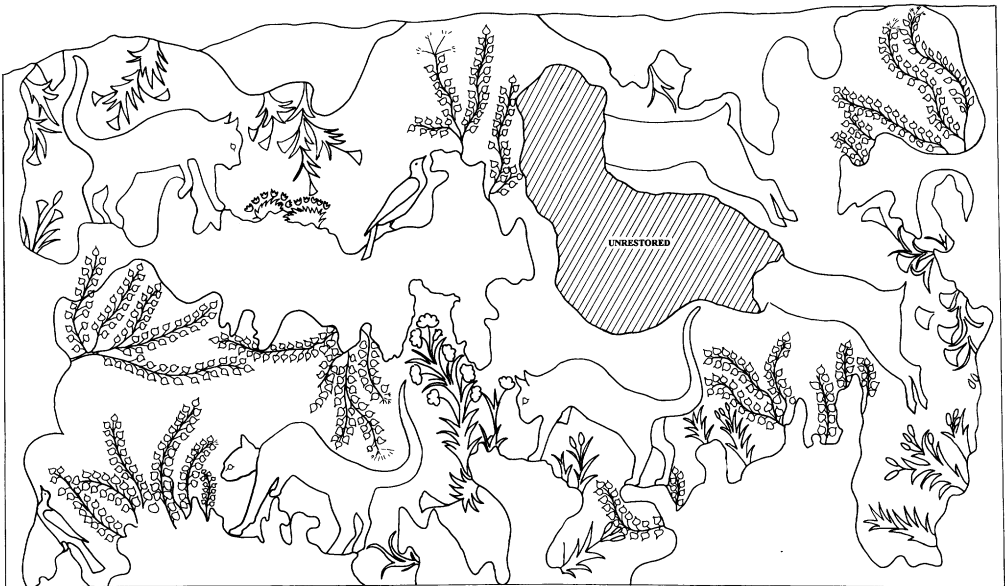
15. Foster 1995.



a



b



c

Figure 3.2 (*opposite*). Sketches of the Herakleion Archaeological Museum's reconstructions of the frescoes from Room 14 of the Royal Villa at Ayia Triada: (a) north wall, (b) east wall, (c) south wall. A. P. Chapin

16. Doulas 1992, p. 100.

17. Immerwahr 1990, pp. 78–79 (Kn 20), pl. 30; *PM* II, pp. 109–116, figs. 49, 51–54, and frontispiece.

18. The fragmentary and worn condition of the composition makes species identification difficult. Evans (*PM* II, p. 110) identified the birds as chukars (*Caccabis chukar*) whereas Cameron (1975, pp. 94–95) saw them as rock partridges (*Alectoris graeca*). A plant believed by Evans to be dittany (*PM* II, pp. 111, 113) is identified as caper (*Capparis spinosa* L.) by Martin Möbius (1933, p. 20), and as an acacia tree (*Acacia nilotica*) by Maria Shaw (forthcoming). The “briars” are too abstract to be identifiable as a particular plant.

19. *PM* II, p. 114.

20. Palyvou 2000.

21. Schofield 1996.

22. The prestige function of painting is also emphasized by Christos Boulotis (1992, p. 89), who points out in his discussion of Thera wall painting that frescoes are expensive to commission yet create no economic gain for their owners. The value of mural decoration must then have resided at least partly in the display of wealth alone.

23. For an overview of the problem, see Rehak and Younger 1998, pp. 104–106; for detailed investigation into the definition and functions of Minoan villas, see Hägg 1997. For investigations into the functions of Minoan palaces, see Hägg and Marinatos 1987.

categories of sacred and secular architecture? As Christos Doulas observes, so little is known about what constitutes sacred, domestic, and public space in Aegean prehistory that it is difficult to establish objective criteria for characterizing Delta 2 as a cult room.¹⁶ Indeed, the same problems of interpretation seem to confront the identification of the proposed shrines in the House of the Frescoes at Knossos and the Royal Villa at Ayia Triada. With no foreseeable resolution of this problem, the debates no doubt will continue.

The question is further complicated by compositions that appear to present secular characters and contexts, such as the LM IA Partridge and Hoopoe Fresco from the Stepped Pavilion of the Caravanserai at Knossos (Fig. 3.3).¹⁷ As restored by Evans, the frieze depicts at least eight partridges and two hoopoes in an abstractly rendered rocky landscape dotted with myrtle, chicory, “briars,” and perhaps dittany, caper, or acacia.¹⁸ None of these pictorial elements is believed to embody religious symbolism, though Evans observes that both partridges and hoopoes are good to eat.¹⁹ The architectural setting of the frieze, too, is unusual, but does not seem to indicate that religious ritual was its primary function. The Stepped Pavilion opened onto a courtyard located along what Evans believed was the probable route of the Minoan road leading to the Knossos palace from the south. To the east of the Pavilion were storerooms and stables; to the west, also open to the courtyard, were remarkable waterworks consisting of a sunken stone bath for cold-water bathing, a room of clay bathtubs for hot baths, and an elaborate Spring Chamber that supplied fresh drinking water. Considering these features together with evidence for fine upper story rooms with tarazza flooring and painted plaster walls, Evans imagined that the complex served as a resting place and inn for travelers arriving at Knossos.

More recent investigations emphasize the building's connection with the prestige architecture of the Neopalatial elite. Clair Palyvou observes that the architectonic framework of painted yellow bands in the Stepped Pavilion seems to imitate the grid of the pier-and-door partitions that constitute the Minoan polythyron system,²⁰ and Elizabeth Schofield further notes that the bathing facilities, combined with the pleasant atmosphere of the Stepped Pavilion, suggest that the Caravanserai may have functioned as a sort of prehistoric club or health spa. The intimate scale of the facility additionally suggests that “membership” would have been limited to a select group of people.²¹ Renewed interest in the Caravanserai thus serves only to highlight the prestige elements associated with this unusual building while failing to make a solid connection with Minoan cult practice as it is currently understood. The proposed link between nature painting and Aegean religious ritual therefore does not seem to be supported by either the Stepped Pavilion or the Partridge and Hoopoe Fresco. Instead, the fresco seems to be one element among many in a carefully calculated design intended to impress a visitor to this “public” building.²²

The issue of archaeological context is complicated by the growing awareness that houses, villas, and even palaces and towns throughout the Aegean may have specialized to serve a variety of functions.²³ At Akrotiri



Figure 3.3. Reconstruction of the Stepped Pavilion of the Caravanserai at Knossos, decorated with the Partridge and Hoopoe Fresco.

A. P. Chapin, after *PM II*, i, p. 117, fig. 55

on Thera, the West House perhaps housed a textile workshop,²⁴ and Xeste 3 may have served a ceremonial function.²⁵ Both structures were painted with landscape frescoes.²⁶ Likewise, in the area of Knossos, the Royal Villa seems designed specifically for ceremony, perhaps of a public or official character,²⁷ but the Caravanserai looks like a bath house and inn.²⁸ The Unexplored Mansion may have served as a workshop and storage annex to the Little Palace, which probably had a ceremonial function.²⁹ Each of these urban villas was decorated with landscape frescoes, though in the cases of the Royal Villa and the Little Palace, these frescoes remain undated and unpublished, and their fragments are now unidentified.³⁰ Even entire settlements may have been differentiated. The palace and town of Zakros, for example, probably specialized in overseas trade, whereas Psira and Mochlos may have served primarily as port towns, and Ayia Irini on Keos (modern Kea), located near the mainland mines at Laurion, may have been involved in metallurgy.³¹

Within this diversity of building type and settlement, close study of Aegean painting reveals regional trends in technique and subject matter.³² The flora and fauna that are the subject of Aegean nature painting are also

24. Tzachili 1990; Wiener 1990, p. 134.

25. Marinatos 1974, p. 23.

26. For the Nilotic Frieze from the West House, see Dumas 1992, pls. 30–34, and for the landscapes of Xeste 3, pls. 95–99.

27. Betancourt and Marinatos 1997,

pp. 94–95; Fotou 1997, pp. 38–41.

28. *PM II*, pp. 103–125, and note 21 above.

29. Hitchcock and Preziosi 1997.

30. For the frescoes from the Royal Villa and the Little Palace, see Cameron 1975, pp. 714–715, 722–723, 730. For the frescoes from the Unexplored

Mansion, see Cameron 1984, Chapin 1997.

31. Wiener 1990, pp. 133–134; Schofield 1990.

32. Morgan 1990, Davis 1990. For the problems associated with identifying regional schools of painting, see Chapin 1997, pp. 10–11.

diverse and are represented in a variety of situations that do not all seem to have overt cultic meaning. Maria Shaw raises the question that some seemingly wild Aegean landscapes might actually represent gardens,³³ while Natasha Angelopoulou observes that in Theran frescoes, the red lilies that seem infused with religious symbolism in the Spring Fresco reappear in the two ordinary-looking flower vases painted on the window jambs of Room 4 of the West House.³⁴ Angelopoulou argues that the variety of landscape elements, the variation with which they are presented, and the differing functions of the rooms and buildings they decorated all suggest that the Theran landscape paintings do not have a unified meaning. Instead, each composition must be analyzed separately.³⁵

These debates and problems, then, illustrate the state of scholarship on Aegean landscape painting. Most early- and mid-20th-century scholars understood Aegean landscape art primarily in secular terms as room decoration that rejoiced in the beauty of the natural world,³⁶ whereas late-20th-century scholars have reconstructed a religious function for some Aegean landscapes³⁷ but not for all.³⁸ This later generation of scholars has recognized the importance of variability and uncertainty: iconography and style vary,³⁹ many frescoes have been overrestored or restored incorrectly,⁴⁰ and the functions of the buildings in which frescoes were found are imperfectly understood.⁴¹ This situation is compounded by incomplete records of excavation and publication. Interpretations now seem to rely so heavily on individual contexts—both archaeological and iconographic—that a scholarly consensus on a broader meaning of the artform within prehistoric Aegean society sometimes seems unattainable.⁴²

It is for this very reason, then, that Sara Immerwahr's survey of Aegean landscape art contained within the pages of *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age* remains important. Her work provides the first and only comprehensive attempt to place Aegean nature painting within the larger context of the major artistic developments in contemporary Minoan and later Mycenaean fresco traditions.⁴³ It is therefore a great honor to dedicate this essay on landscape painting to Professor Immerwahr, who generously guided my studies long after she was officially freed from the demands of

33. Shaw 1993.

34. Angelopoulou 2000.

35. Angelopoulou 2000.

36. Rodenwaldt 1921, p. 10; Swindler 1929, pp. 75–77; *PM II*, p. 466; Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, pp. 195–205; Hutchinson 1962, pp. 178–181, 275–278; Matz 1962, p. 121; Graham 1969, pp. 199–205.

37. Marinatos 1984, pp. 84–96; 1993, pp. 193–200; Foster 1995. See Niemeier 1992 for a careful review of the religious content of Theran painting.

38. See, e.g., Hollinshead 1989, Chapin 1997, Angelopoulou 2000, and Shaw forthcoming.

39. Hägg 1985, Morgan 1988 and 1990, Davis 1990, Walberg 1992, Angelopoulou 2000.

40. Perhaps the most famous mistake remains Evans's restoration of the monkey in the Saffron Gatherer Fresco from Knossos as a blue boy. For overviews of the restorations, see Immerwahr 1990, pp. 41–42, 170 (Kn 1); Evelyn 1999, pp. 119–123. See also Shaw (this volume) on the continuing

debate surrounding the restoration of the Priest-King Fresco from Knossos.

41. For a recent overview, see Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999, pp. 89–122.

42. A number of recent investigations into Minoan fresco painting thus expand their methodologies. Fritz Blackolmer and Stefan Hiller (forthcoming) are developing a diachronic study of all painted plasters from Crete, whether figural or not. Charles Gates (this volume) and Judith Weingarten (1999) explore cross-cultural approaches.

43. Immerwahr 1990.

teaching,⁴⁴ and to begin with her conclusion that, despite variations of archaeological context and iconographic theme, Aegean landscape consistently reflects a reverence for nature that implies the overarching presence of a Minoan goddess of nature.⁴⁵

From this starting point, this investigation will take another look at the varied iconography of Minoan landscape art with the intent of demonstrating that its underlying religious symbolism may perhaps be even more potent than previously recognized. However, the goal of this inquiry is not to support the contention that Aegean landscape painting was simply religious in meaning. Rather, a review of the restrictions placed on viewing landscape painting suggests that the religious content of Aegean landscape may have been used by an elite class to reinforce its own dominant social standing within a theocratic society.

FLORAL ICONOGRAPHY IN MINOAN LANDSCAPE

The underlying iconographic meanings of many favorite Neopalatial floral motifs have been carefully studied by other scholars, and this investigation accepts the findings that crocuses, lilies, and other plants probably served cultic, medicinal, and economic functions in prehistoric Aegean society.⁴⁶ Not all Minoan landscapes, however, depict these plants. In fact, the surprising variety of floral motifs identified in Neopalatial landscapes from the town of Knossos—wild pea or vetch, rockrose, convolvulus, honeysuckle, flowering rush, butcher's broom, and dittany or acacia, to name a few—suggests something of a Minoan "renaissance," during which artists may have been intentionally inventing new floral compositions to attract patronage, just as artistic competition in the Italian Renaissance centuries later drove artists to new levels of achievement.⁴⁷

But do these varied landscapes also carry embedded religious meaning? Certainly only a few Aegean landscapes, such as the fresco cycle from Xeste 3 in Akrotiri on Thera,⁴⁸ preserve identifiable images of deities or deitylike figures, and many landscape frescoes do not include human or divine figures at all. These pure landscapes, which have come to characterize the cultural achievements of the Minoans and their Aegean contacts, also lack painted representations of Minoan religious symbols, such as horns of consecration and double axes.⁴⁹ The frescoes themselves are usually in fragmentary condition, their archaeological contexts are often unclear, and their architectural settings are not always well understood.⁵⁰ The evidence in support of a more comprehensive religious iconography embedded in Aegean landscape painting would, at first glance, seem to be weak.

The LM IA Floral Fresco from the Unexplored Mansion at Knossos is one composition that is intriguing for its creativity and its lack of overt religious symbolism (Fig. 3.4). In 1997, when I published a new reconstruction of the composition, I did not see anything more than latent religious meaning embedded in the floral motifs, but further study of this fresco has led me to reevaluate the iconographic evidence. The crucial feature is the representation of unusual varieties of plants and plant hybrids

44. This essay has benefited greatly from the insightful comments of Dawn Cain, Paul Rehak, Louise Hitchcock, Robert Bauslaugh, Sabine (formerly Ivanovas) Beckmann, and the anonymous readers who refereed the manuscript. I wish to thank each of these people for his or her help. All remaining mistakes are my own.

45. Immerwahr 1990, p. 50.

46. The earliest comprehensive study of floral identification is Möbius 1933; more recently, see Warren 1979, 1985, 2000, Marinatos 1984, 1993, Amigues 1988, Morgan 1988, Walberg 1992, Porter 2000, Negbi and Negbi 2000, Beckmann 2001, Rehak (this volume).

47. Chapin 1997, pp. 19–24.

48. Doulas 1992, p. 122.

49. Interestingly, in Room LVIII at Kato Zakros, identified as a lustral basin or bath, floral fresco fragments were found near painted horns of consecration and imitation stonework surviving in situ. See Cameron 1975, p. 764, with reference to *BCH* 91, 1967, p. 777, fig. 7, lower; Platon 1971, p. 182 (without mention of the floral frescoes).

50. For a catalogue of figural fresco evidence summarizing excavation contexts up to the mid-1970s, see Cameron 1975, pp. 671–781. Blakolmer and Hiller (forthcoming) are working on an updated catalogue of all painted plasters.



Figure 3.4. Reconstruction of the Floral Fresco in the Unexplored Mansion, Knossos. Chapin 1997, fig. 2

that defy identification. The osier-lily hybrids, the anemone-reed hybrids, and the “frilled flowers” are exotic artistic inventions otherwise unknown in Aegean art.⁵¹ The technique and artistic mastery exhibited in the fresco further reflect an enormously talented and innovative artist who possessed such confidence and imagination that he (or she) ventured away from the traditional Aegean repertoire of floral elements. The new creations, however, do not pretend to represent a real landscape of native plants, but instead depict unreal combinations of floral motifs.⁵²

The Floral Fresco from the Unexplored Mansion is only one of many Aegean landscapes to employ floral hybrids, but it distinguishes itself by the rarity of the floral motifs that it hybridizes. Common hybrids in Minoan art include the papyrus-lily and papyrus-reed hybrids, which appear in the Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco from the House of the Frescoes at Knossos (Fig. 3.1).⁵³ The appearance of these floral hybrids, along with an imaginative choice of flower colors that expand upon the natural range, could be explained as illustrating Aegean artistic inventiveness within the confines of a rather limited repertoire of motifs.⁵⁴ But a century of excavation reveals that while crocuses and lilies are among the most commonly encountered floral motifs in Neopalatial landscape, there is also an unexpected diversity of floral types that represents an expanding pictorial vocabulary in early Neopalatial painting.⁵⁵ In light of this development, it seems difficult to sustain the argument that floral hybrids were used only to compensate for the limits of the Minoan artistic idiom.

It has often been observed that Minoan artists were not as careful as their Egyptian counterparts when describing species, and that they frequently chose to hybridize one species with another or to generalize the forms of their art.⁵⁶ But why? Aegean artists could be brilliant observers of

51. Cameron 1984.

52. Chapin 1997, pp. 20–23.

53. *PM II*, pp. 463–465. For an overview of papyrus and its artistic hybrids, see Morgan 1988, pp. 21–24.

54. See Walberg 1986 for an exploration of how the abstract designs underlying Kamares pottery decoration were combined to create pictorialized fresco motifs in Neopalatial painting.

55. The well-preserved frescoes from Akrotiri on Thera, especially the complex pictorial program of the West House, demonstrate the wide variety of floral motifs available to Aegean artists in the Neopalatial period. See Doulas 1992 and Morgan 1988.

56. See, e.g., *PM II*, pp. 463–465; Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, p. 196; Hood 1978, p. 56; Immerwahr 1990, p. 41; Dickinson 1994, p. 165.

their natural world. In the realm of statuary, the Palaikastro kouros continues to amaze viewers with its extraordinarily detailed anatomical rendering.⁵⁷ The naturalistic bulls and athletes carved in relief on the Boxer Rhyton from Ayia Triada,⁵⁸ the foreshortened views of swallows twisting in flight frescoed on the walls of Delta 2 at Akrotiri,⁵⁹ and even the gnarled trunks and tiny leaves of the olive trees decorating the gold Vapheio cups,⁶⁰ all present just a few examples of the high degree of naturalism that Aegean artists could apply to their art in the Neopalatial period. So it would seem that on some occasions, Minoan artists were highly motivated to create very naturalistic depictions of people, plants, and animals, but on other occasions they were free to depart from realism, to generalize, and to invent new artistic forms through hybridization.

The question remains, then, why would a Minoan artist intentionally create distortions of nature? The answer may be that these obviously fictional representations served an important but unrecognized purpose. When animals are combined to create hybrids, such as griffins or sphinxes, they are universally identified as mythological and are understood to be divine.⁶¹ Thus the attendant griffin in the Mistress of Animals Fresco from Xeste 3 in Akrotiri identifies the enthroned female figure as a goddess,⁶² whereas on Crete, the frescoed griffins flanking the stone throne of the Throne Room at Knossos suggest a cultic role for the enthroned individual.⁶³ But what about plants? When artists created fantastic plant hybrids, could they not have been intentionally signifying something more meaningful than an active imagination expanding the limits of a developing artistic idiom? Could not Minoan painters have used floral hybridization along with animal hybridization to signal the presence of divinity? If so, then the Floral Fresco from the Unexplored Mansion at Knossos would offer more than an unusual experiment in Aegean landscape painting. It would appear to visualize an underlying belief in the power of divinity to act upon the natural world and to transform its appearance. The exotic hybrids of the Floral Fresco, then, may preserve an artistic illustration of the power of divinity to create and reshape nature.

Does this imply that the Floral Fresco marks the presence of a shrine in the Unexplored Mansion? Probably not. To use an oft-quoted parallel, a crucifix hanging on a wall today does not by itself make that space a place of religious devotion, and likewise, a landscape fresco alone should not signify the presence of a prehistoric shrine. In this case, the archaeological and architectural contexts of the Floral Fresco do not support a religious interpretation.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, a crucifix would suggest that the resident of that room is Christian, and likewise, the presence of a landscape fresco, as a medium of social communication, may imply that the occupant participated to some degree in a Minoan religious or theocratic community.

Support for the hypothesis that landscapes with floral hybrids were infused with supernatural symbolism can be found in the Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco from the House of the Frescoes at Knossos (Fig. 3.1).⁶⁵ This expansive and complex landscape combines a taste for innovative floral motifs with imaginative floral hybrids and, as observed above,

57. Dickinson 1994, p. 173, pl. 5:19; Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999, p. 144, fig. 90.

58. Hood 1978, fig. 145.

59. Doulas 1992, pls. 66–76.

60. Hood 1978, figs. 160–163.

61. On the griffin, see Morgan 1988, pp. 49–53.

62. Doulas 1992, pl. 122.

63. Immerwahr 1990, pp. 96–98, 176 (Kn 28), pls. 47, 48.

64. Chapin 1997, pp. 12–15.

65. See note 3.

represents an explosion of plant growth and a compression of different environments—rocky, riverine, and marshy—within a single painting. Focusing on these elements, Nannó Marinatos has interpreted the fresco as a religious landscape symbolic of an ideal spring and its fertility.⁶⁶ There may, however, be a more universal meaning, that the composition alludes to the greater totality of nature. To begin with, the list of plant species that are identified (some very tentatively) is impressive and exceeds the number included in any other Minoan landscape studied to date. The plants include the crocus, Madonna lily, sea lily (*Pancratium* lily), rose, dwarf iris, ivy, wild pea or vetch, cistus, convolvulus, honeysuckle, tulip, flowering rush, reed, mallow, and papyrus.⁶⁷ There are also unidentified plants and varieties that were created through hybridization, such as the “papyrus-reed” motif and a fanciful plant that combines papyruslike flowers with reedlike stems and additional radiating flowers that recall marguerites.⁶⁸ Although some of the identifiable plants, such as the crocuses and lilies, have known cultic connections, others seem to have been selected for representation or invented by the artist in order to emphasize the enormous variety of nature.⁶⁹

The seasonal range of flowering represented by the different plant species shown in the fresco, moreover, does not suggest a springtime landscape. A quick survey of the identifiable plants reveals the following: the dwarf iris (*Iris inguicularis*) flowers in Greece from January through April,⁷⁰ but the Madonna lily (*Lilium candidum* L.) blooms from May into July.⁷¹ The sea lily (*Pancratium maritimum* L.), which grows on seaside sand dunes, blossoms in late summer, from August to September,⁷² but the crocus (*Crocus cartwrightianus*) does not bloom until late October, with flowers emerging through November and into December.⁷³ The flowering plants in the composition thereby encompass the *entire* year’s growing cycle. It is as if the artist wished to compress all of nature’s annual beauty into a single painting, and so the composition does not depict a native Cretan landscape that could be encountered at any single moment in time.

Nannó Marinatos explains this apparent contradiction with nature as a representation of an ideal spring, but her use of the word “spring” refers to all periods of growth, including the Greek autumn, rather than to the season commonly identified as spring—that following winter and ending with summer. Nor does her expanded concept of “spring” recognize the significance of the blooming sea lilies, whose late summer flowering occurs in the dry season, a time of little growth in Greece.⁷⁴ It may therefore be more precise to understand the “ideal spring” described by Marinatos as an eternal, timeless landscape idealized to suggest a supernatural fertility of the earth. In this light, the Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco seems to

66. See note 9.

67. *PM* II, pp. 454–466, pls. X, XI, figs. 264, 266, 268, 275; Cameron 1968. For a reidentification of the “rose” as cistus, see Warren 2000; for the identification of the sea lily rather than

papyrus, see Porter 2000. New identifications for some of the plants are introduced by Beckmann (2001).

68. *PM* II, pp. 464–466, fig. 275:c.

69. Walberg 1992, p. 245.

70. Sfikas 1987, p. 280.

71. Polunin 1969, p. 497.

72. Sfikas 1987, p. 276; Porter 2000.

73. Porter 2000.

74. On the flowering of sea lilies, see Porter 2000.

portray a timeless idea of nature in *all* its seasons.⁷⁵ The presence of floral hybrids thereby reinforces the unearthly, magical quality of the composition already suggested by the simultaneously flowering native species. Together, both types of floral motifs—reflective of nature and invented—seem to reinforce a sense of divine abundance.

Additionally, the fresco cycle of Room 14 in the Royal Villa at Ayia Triada combines the landscape features discussed above—floral hybridization, innovative depictions of native plants, and simultaneous blossoming—with a prominent female figure (Fig. 3.2:a, b).⁷⁶ Here, subtle clues in the representation of the flora of the flower-gathering landscape also seem to reveal a divine power at work. The lilies are artistic inventions created by hybridizing the form of the white Madonna lily, *Lilium candidum* L., with the color of the red lily, *Lilium chalcedonicum* L.⁷⁷ The supernatural quality of this hybrid is reinforced by its flowering simultaneously with violets⁷⁸ and crocuses (*Crocus cartwrightianus*),⁷⁹ in apparent contradiction to botanical reality. In nature, violets flower in March and April, Madonna lilies bloom from May into July, and crocuses blossom from late October to December. The simultaneity of flowering in the Ayia Triada fresco, like that in the Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco, thereby suggests the growth of an entire year.

Though Moshe and Ora Negbi dismiss the concurrent blooming as mere “decorative pattern,”⁸⁰ it seems unlikely that such a pronounced departure from reality should be excused as a meaningless artistic device.

75. While this idea, expressed by the coined phrase “eternal springtimes,” is only now appearing formally in print, it was much discussed on the e-mail discussion group AegeaNet in 1999 and 2000. Louise Hitchcock, after reading an earlier version of this manuscript, introduced a summary account of these ideas to AegeaNet just as Sabine Beckmann was posting similar observations. In addition, Beckmann generously shared with AegeaNet many of her photographs of Cretan flowers, details of her new plant identifications, and contributed extensive AegeaNet discussion of their significance for recognizing a year-long symbolism of plant fertility. Beckmann and I arrived at these ideas independently, and from different avenues of investigation, but we are in basic agreement that no single season is depicted in the Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco. I want to thank Sabine Beckmann for sending me the text of her 2001 paper delivered at the 9th Cretological Congress (Beckmann 2001).

76. She is crouching or dancing

beside a stepped platform and the focal point of the small room, and Paul Rehak (1997) and Pietro Militello (1998) both identify this central figure as the Minoan goddess of nature, though in truth her divine identity remains uncertain. As Dawn Cain (2001) clearly demonstrates, distinguishing mortal from divine figures in Minoan art is greatly complicated by our limited understanding of gesture, spatial relationships, and temporal sequences, even in scenes generally identified as epiphanic. In this case, even though there are good reasons for recognizing the central female figure of the Ayia Triada fresco as a goddess, and even though accepting her divine identity would bolster the thesis presented here, the evidence supporting her divinity is not wholly conclusive and must be treated with caution. The figure, though central, is neither enthroned nor accompanied by supernatural attendants, as is the unambiguously divine Goddess of the Xeste 3 frescoes on Thera (Doumas 1992, pl. 122). Additionally, the open

angle of the crouching figure's throat, which is partially preserved in newly published fresco fragment V9 (Militello 1998, p. 120, pls. 1:B, F.a; note also the curve of a large hoop earring on this fragment), suggests to this author that the figure's head should be tilted higher than is suggested by Militello's reconstruction of the panel (Militello 1998, pl. 4). An upward glance, as if gazing toward the heavens, seems an unusual pose for a goddess in epiphany. While the fresco cycle clearly seems suffused with religious content, distinguishing a human, divine, or mythological identity for the central female figure still seems to lie beyond the existing evidence.

77. Rackham 1978, p. 756; Negbi and Negbi 2000.

78. A rare motif in Minoan art identified tentatively by Cameron (1975, p. 101) as *Viola oderata* L.

79. The identification of the Ayia Triada crocuses with *Crocus cartwrightianus* is made independently by both Warren (2000) and Porter (2000).

80. Negbi and Negbi 2000.

Nor is this the idealization of a single season. Rather, landscape art again seems to depict an eternal, timeless landscape expressive of the mythic fertility of the earth. Though naturalistically painted, the frescoes from Ayia Triada are thus revealed to be highly selective and manipulative works of art.⁸¹ The composition appears to show a coherent environment, yet a closer examination reveals that the landscape setting is a deliberately deceptive fiction intent on displaying the power of a Minoan divinity in the natural world.

Since the best-preserved landscapes discussed above seem to feature a religious symbolism that, while poorly understood today, could have been recognizable to a Neopalatial viewer, can it be argued that *all* landscape paintings were laden with religious iconography? Probably not. Iconographic analysis of the most common floral motifs, such as crocuses and lilies, suggests that medicinal and even economic values were attached to some of the plants,⁸² thereby pointing to a plurality of symbolic meanings within the context of Aegean society. Moreover, the abundance of new motifs in Neopalatial painting—many of them representing unidentified or unidentifiable plants—defies any attempt to fit them all into a system of religious iconography. Further complicating matters, most of the frescoes are too poorly preserved to reconstruct their original appearance with any degree of confidence, and the lack of documentary evidence surviving from the Neopalatial Aegean makes it very difficult to place the artistic evidence within a historical context. Therefore even though it may now be possible to argue that many of the better preserved landscapes are instilled with more potent religious symbolism than previously recognized, it cannot yet be demonstrated that all landscape art was religious in meaning and associated with cultic space. Why then would anyone on prehistoric Crete go to the expense of painting a room with a landscape if it did not necessarily announce the location of a shrine? What other functions might landscape art have served in Minoan society?

NATURE PAINTINGS AND POWER: THE POLITICS OF LANDSCAPE

Although access to divinity in nature seems to have been available to any Bronze Age Aegean person who could walk to a peak sanctuary, a hilltop shrine, or a sacred enclosure, landscape paintings were usually private and not open to general view. All known landscape paintings decorate the interiors of buildings, and were often located in rooms on upper floors. So, to view a fresco, one first had to be admitted to the building and then go upstairs. Additional barriers further regulated passage through the buildings: interior doors separated spaces, and rooms were laid out in sequences that directed circulation throughout the structure. A chamber painted with a nature fresco thus formed only one element within the greater plan of building use and communication.⁸³ Even without considering the function of the buildings and rooms involved, it seems clear that access to nature paintings was restricted and probably carefully controlled.

81. For a summary of the deceit of landscape and its many functions in Western art, see Mitchell 1994, p. 2.

82. See, e.g., Amigues 1988, Porter 2000, Negbi and Negbi 2000, Rehak (this volume).

83. Hitchcock 1994; Michailidou 1990, p. 299; Palyvou 2000.

Moreover, landscape painting is by no means found in every Aegean house.⁸⁴ In fact, figural frescoes in general and nature frescoes in particular are quite rare and are limited to the more elaborate structures of an Aegean settlement. On Crete, the towns of Gournia and Kommos reveal the comparative rarity of this art form, as no identifiable fragments of figural painting were found in Neopalatial Gournia, despite the excavation of over 1.5 hectares of habitation,⁸⁵ and only one house from Kommos, House X, yielded fragments of a landscape fresco.⁸⁶ Altogether, the decoration of a building with a landscape fresco must have been a mark of distinction, and the fact that most of the known nature frescoes from the Aegean come from villas or large houses reinforces the connection between painting and the Neopalatial elite.⁸⁷

It probably would not be taking the evidence too far to suggest that the elite both owned and consumed landscape painting, and, in their own residences, probably had a hand in deciding when the paintings would be available, if ever, to non-elite members of the community. Since the elite demonstrated their wealth and position by building large structures, whatever their specific uses and functions, and commissioned artists to decorate these buildings,⁸⁸ the resulting frescoes were available on an everyday basis only to those who habitually worked or resided in the rooms bearing the frescoes. These few people, then, were the principal consumers of that art. Moreover, they probably controlled access to the images, since everybody else presumably needed permission to be allowed into the rooms. This likely situation applies equally to private residences, such as the House of the Frescoes at Knossos or Complexes Beta and Delta at Akrotiri, as to buildings with probable public use, such as Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, and to villas with a likely mix of public and private functions, such as at Ayia Triada. In each instance, the archaeological record suggests that somebody outside the building only viewed landscape art if he or she was permitted access to the decorated interior room. Landscape art, then, was not only an element in the display of prestige and wealth—it was also an art of exclusion.

The only exception to this rule appears to be the Partridge and Hoopoe Fresco from the Caravanserai at Knossos (Fig. 3.3), but this fresco embellished a building that appears to have been a traveler's rest area where people visiting Knossos would have stopped, rested, and bathed.⁸⁹ In this sole example, landscape painting seems to have been put on public display, just as the high quality of the building's construction emphasized to any visitor the wealth of palatial Minoan society.

The average non-elite person living in Neopalatial Minoan Crete, then, probably rarely, if ever, saw landscape art. This individual presumably lived comfortably but not extravagantly in a modest house (such as in the common residences at Gournia or Kommos) that lacked palatial features, including figural painting, and resided in a town led by members of an elite class who participated in a theocratic system of government. This non-elite Minoan was also probably illiterate and was likely to have been a rather unsophisticated viewer of art, since mural painting was probably not a part of his or her daily experience. But if this average Minoan received an invitation to appear at the residence or seat of government of his

84. See note 50.

85. Hawes 1908.

86. Shaw and Shaw 1993, pp. 131, 155–160, pl. 28:b, c.

87. Broader connections between fresco painting and elite ritual are being revealed by Fritz Blakolmer (1995, 1997, 2000).

88. As Boulotis (1992, p. 89) observes, this was probably a significant expense.

89. See notes 17 and 21.

or her local civic and religious leader, then landscape art could have been used to make a powerful psychological impact on the non-elite visitor.

Upon arrival, this non-elite person could have been received in a room decorated with landscape art, and if so, he or she would have experienced an amazing sight, for the ordinary world of nature would have appeared transformed to the unsophisticated eye. Beautiful and delicate plants would flower with lush elegance, and different species would all blossom simultaneously in a magnificent and supernatural profusion of life. Quite unexpectedly, the powerful presence of divinity in nature would have been made visible to the non-elite guest. More importantly, it was a member of the elite class who had made this divinity manifest. This ability of the Minoan patron to provide a formal expression of divine power, then, could have had a profound psychological effect upon the non-elite Minoan population that would reinforce existing social and class distinctions.

In a theocratic culture, the elite who built the palaces, ran the government, and managed the economy also directed the spiritual life of society.⁹⁰ Religious ceremonies and cult activities were probably undertaken with the intent of pleasing the deities and ensuring harmony with them and prosperity for the people.⁹¹ From the Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco at Knossos, it seems clear that the Minoan population was divided into participants and spectators, in which a priestly class directed the ceremonies while others watched.⁹² The members of the elite would have used ritual to demonstrate their special relationships with the gods, especially the Minoan nature goddess. Landscape painting would have supported this stratification of society by providing visual evidence of the elite class's communication with divinity. Even more, the ability of the elite to produce, own, and control images of landscapes may have further suggested to the populace that divine power fully supported the Minoan elite.

CONCLUSION

This ongoing investigation into the iconography, patrons, consumers, and audience for Minoan landscape art suggests a new interpretation for the art form—one that does not require landscape art to be either secular or religious in meaning, because in a theocracy, religion pervades *all* aspects of life. Instead, this line of reasoning suggests that even though the underlying symbolism of landscape seems religious in intent, perhaps even more so than previously recognized, the paintings were used by an elite class to reinforce their privileged position in society. Landscape art, as expensive room decoration, contributed to an elaborate display of wealth and luxury, while, simultaneously, its symbolic messages demonstrated that the elite class was entitled to its intimate connection with divine power. An important function of landscape art within its architectural setting, then, was to sustain and to justify the elite's claim to power and high status within the broader context of Minoan society.

In conclusion, though Minoan painting remains beautiful to look at, it was more than expensive and elegant wall decoration. And though endowed with potentially potent religious meaning, these frescoes cannot be

90. For a recent summary, see Rehak and Younger 1998, pp. 147–148.

91. Marinatos 1984, pp. 119–120. Dickinson (1994, p. 266), however, cautions against idealizing Minoan society in terms that reflect modern values.

92. Immerwahr 1990, pp. 65–66, 173 (Kn 16), pl. 23; *PM* III, pp. 66–80, pl. XVIII.

understood simply in religious terms, as only devotional paintings or as backgrounds to religious rituals. Rather, Minoan landscape remains complex and multifaceted in meaning, just like the society that produced it. So perhaps it is not all that surprising that the conclusion of this investigation is that one of the most important functions of landscape painting was to support a basic human ambition—to achieve success and status in society, and to maintain power within it.

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