

Chapter 3 Innovation in Minoan Artistic Design

The Minoans created an art that was significantly different from the grand Mesopotamian and Egyptian traditions to the east and their derivatives. Just how different is only now being revealed as interest in the seal images increases.

Beautiful Geometry and Natural Shapes (Plates 3.1 to 3.18)

We turn first to study the designs of the Early Seal Period to chart their innovation in coalescing geometry and nature. We have already glimpsed the knowledge of geometric principles revealed in designs of the early seals as we noted the circle with its radiation divisions in 2.55 and the spiralfirm designs of 1.53, 1.54, 2.51, 2.51 and 2.57. Yet the acute observation of geometric shapes begins with the shape of the seal itself. Leaving aside the early figural seals, the seal shape itself takes a three-dimensional geometric form in the cylinders and prisms, the discoids, lentoids and amygdaloids. In the two dimensions of the seal face, the shape is again geometric – circle, oval and rectangle – and it is the first designation listed in the Syntax field. For the components of the seal design, the inspiration of geometric shapes is profound. It includes the spiral, ellipse, interlocking patterns and angular designs. Elements based on the spiral are the coil, J spiral, C spiral, S spiral, whirl, zweipass, dreipass, vierpass and running spiral band. The precise halving of the ellipse gives us the petaloid, and it works with the various looping and fill ornaments, the twoloop, threeloop, threecorner and fourcorner. Interlocking patterns and border designs using a geometric base are the guilloche, meander, rope band and dentate band. Then there are the angular designs of the cross, chevron, zigzag and swastika, and the geometric forms of the lozenge, ring, ellipse, pentagram and hexagram¹. Knowledge of geometry and the ability to play with the geometric forms have produced beautiful radiating and spiralfirm designs that have been admired since Aegean art first came to the attention of archaeologists and art lovers. Yet, there is another level to the Minoan understanding of geometry, and that is their ability to see the deep underlying structure in natural forms and to incorporate it into their depiction of flora and fauna.

The seminal floral/foliate shapes are the rosette, quatrefoil, papyrus, lily, palm, palmette, leaf and petaloid², all terms being used as art designations³. The daisy-like flower seen in plan becomes the rosette, its usual six or eight petals reflecting the many flowers that share this number of petals. Seen in 3.1, this eight-petalled rosette has its circular shape accentuated by the ring border with double leaf band surround and by its petals forming the radiation division 8 design created when the circle is dissected along 8 radii spaced at 45° angles. Dots in the interstices indicate the position of dissecting radii. For the six-petalled rosette the design is created when the circle is dissected along 6 radii spaced at 60° angles.

1 Search the IconAegean Database in the Element field on coil spiral, J spiral, C spiral, S spiral, whirl spiral, zweipass spiral, dreipass spiral, vierpass spiral, running spiral band, petaloid, twoloop, threeloop, threecorner, fourcorner, guilloche, meander, rope band, dentate band, cross, chevron, zigzag, swastika, lozenge, ring, ellipse, pentagram and hexagram.

2 Search the IconAegean Database in the Element field on rosette, quatrefoil, papyrus, lily, palm, palmette, leaf and petaloid.

3 The actual identity of the flowers represented by these terms, including whether the papyrus and the palm are Egyptian or eastern plants, is treated in Chapter 5 below.

This is perhaps the easiest rosette to construct as the radius can simply be used to mark arcs around the circle circumference, and the 60° angle is immediately made. The quatrefoil as in 3.2 encapsulates in plan all the four-petalled flowers, often among the tiniest of the floral kingdom. It is a special case of the rosette in that its petals form the radiation division 4 design created when the circle is dissected along 4 radii spaced at 90° angles. This angular spacing also suggests a square, and its effect is often exploited in designs as with the square borders of 3.2 and 1.2, the latter also doubling the effect of the 4 division by entering the stamens as a cross. Other flowers are seen in elevation, but their underlying geometric shape is still clear. The papyrus in 3.3 is a segment of a circle, its triangular shape finished by the curve of the circumference arc which represents the edge of the floret. Smaller papyrus shapes are seen in 3.8, and a later more naturalistic form is seen in 2.50 where five papyrus plants spring up from a rocky base. The palm as in 3.5 and the palmette as in 3.2 also exhibit the triangle/segment of a circle shape. They are always shown with a central rib from which the leaf sections spring out. This contrasts with the papyrus which has its flower divisions shown as vertical striations coming from the base. The lily shape mimics the opening flower with a centre piece still in bud and two petals already opening out in volute arcs as in 3.4. In this lily, and in 1.25, the stamens are also shown sprouting up each side of the centre bud. When the shape is reduced to its essentials the curve of the volutes may also be minimised, and then we have the triple bud as seen in 3.11, 1.34 and 1.53. Leaf shapes may be lanceolate in form, carefully showing their pointed tips as in 3.8 and 1.34. They may be rounded, especially when paired as in the double leaf seen around the perimeters of 3.1 and 1.14 and in 1.72. When worked as small details, rounded leaves resemble petaloids. Leaves may be shown blank or may have veins marked. Now, while these individual leaves may not be a specific geometric shape, their use with S spirals suggests leaves shooting from vine tendrils as in 1.34 and 2.2, as also with the quadrilateral spiral shapes in 3.9 and 2.57. Moreover, their multiple use reflects the structure of leaves sprouting from a branch as in the leaf band of 3.10 and the assemblage of bush foliage or a tree canopy in the all-over pattern of 1.72. By the end of the Early Seal Period these floral/geometric elements are worked in amazingly complicated patterns as in 3.11 with the papyrus, C spiral and triple bud and in 3.12 with the palmette, petaloid and J spiral.

The final design in this grouping is the petaloid as in 3.6, and its inspiration is not a leaf or a petal at all but a pure geometric shape, half an ellipse. An ellipse is drawn when a point moves so as to be always equidistant from two foci. Its area may be halved by finding the midpoint between the two foci and using the measurement of a focus to this midpoint as the radius to draw circles centred on each focus. Tracing one circle's perimeter from the ellipse perimeter through the midpoint and joining on to the other circle's perimeter to reach the ellipse perimeter divides the ellipse into two equal areas, each one being a petaloid. The design in 3.7 shows just such a division of an ellipse into two petaloids. The curving nature of this geometric shape echoes that of a petal or leaf and allows myriad design possibilities when joined with spiraliform Elements. When a J spiral is attached to the point of the petaloid it becomes a leaf sprouting out of a vine tendril as in 3.8, or the core of the fluid design of 1.68 with many leaves and spirals curling round. The genius creation of the pure geometric shape of the petaloid to evoke the floral/foliolate world is the clearest statement we have of the Minoans' ability to peer into the natural world and see its deep patterning.

When it comes to the animal kingdom, the Minoans also have interesting insights into structure. It is not simply a noting of the inherent reflectional symmetry of faunal bodies. Rather, it is an attempt to search out the particular characteristic of each insect or animal and reveal its structure. In the Early Seal Period the scorpion is a frequent subject, and its stinging tail is seen as a J spiral. With two scorpions, as in 3.13, the tails can swing into an S spiral in the manner of favouring patterns at this time. The spider, also an early favourite, has its eight legs paired so as to form four arcs as in 3.14. Later, with larger animals the body mass is seen as changing in shape through action, and that shape parallels geometric shapes. The great bull in a flying gallop is seen as an elongated rectangle with the upraised tail balancing the head as in 3.15, 3.22, 3.47 and 1.86. The body of a wounded lion is seen as a circle when it is contorted in agony as in 3.16 and 3.34. Sea creatures are seen in leaping arcs like the flying fish of 3.17 and the dolphins of 2.20 and 2.48. When dolphins chase their prey they form a whirl spiral attacking

the bait ball as in 3.18, this image only beginning to be appreciated as we modern viewers are able to see such action close-up on television nature programs.

So, depicting the shape of flora and fauna examples is not wholly dependent on fitting it into the geometric shape of the seal face. Rather, as revealed in the explanation of composing the *Icon*, the depiction starts with the artist's eye recognising the underlying structure of the living entity. If floral, then the geometric substrata of circle division, triangle, arc, ellipse and spiral allow the creation of amazing patterns which fill the early seals. They may then disappear from seal design but not from Aegean art. They stay with the pottery and re-emerge in the later periods where they are wrought in ivory and jewellery and come to border grand frescoes. If faunal, then the images continue since the artist's interest lies particularly in the ability of the active body to take different shapes as it moves. Shape shows the deep patterning of abundant flora. Shape shows the mobility of living fauna. The Minoan artist has grasped this truth and, in seeking to portray the essence of life, has become the impressionist of shape⁴.

The Animal Body and Distinctive Aegean Animal Poses (Plates 3.19 to 3.42)

Animals are the single largest source of subject matter in seal images across all periods. We have already seen how animals placed in heraldic poses comprise a large component of Aegean symbolic images, particularly in the antithetical group design, but here we are concerned with the naturalistic representation of animals, and these give rise to some of the most distinctive and recognisable Aegean creations. Of all animals it is the land mammals that hold the artist's interest most, and they create twenty-four *Icons* to express the mammal life cycle and activities: animal standing, resting, rearing, flying gallop, flying leap, reverse twist, mating, suckling, caring for young, playing, scratching, tethered, penned, netted, sacrificed, distressed, contorted, stalking, holding at bay, chasing, seizing, crunching, carrying the catch and feeding on the catch⁵. Indigenous animals, both domesticated and wild, like the agrimi, hound, stag, boar, cat, ram and bull, are carefully depicted in a variety of situations. However, these indigenous animal poses are extended to have exotic beasts like the lion and fantastic creatures like the griffin also become the *Icon* protagonists. These animal-based *Icons* regularly subsume the whole seal face and this, together with their multiple uses, testifies to the importance of this subject matter to owners and artists alike. All are perceptive renderings of animal behaviour and together represent an innovative artistic experiment in sensitivity to the animal condition.

The first six *Icons* listed show the animal in its most natural poses at rest and in action: animal standing, animal resting, animal rearing, animal flying gallop, animal flying leap and animal reverse twist. All the favourite large quadrupeds – agrimi, hound, stag, boar, ram and bull as well as the lion and griffin – are depicted as the main subjects of the seal designs and are shown in a variety of these poses. The examples in 3.19 and 3.20 of standing and of resting are recorded through all Periods, as in 3.57, 1.3, 1.8, 1.31, 1.40, 1.48, 1.50, 1.55, 1.57, 1.71, 1.72, 1.101, 2.5, 2.17, 2.19, 2.25 and 2.44. The animal rearing is rather less used but is known from the early seals as in 3.21. In Minoan High Art it is used to great effect with the bull rearing up to confront the genius hunter in 3.64 and the lion rearing up in combat with the human hunter in 2.34. These natural poses of standing, resting and rearing are codified into the heraldic poses of statant, couchant and rampant in formal and symbolic compositions. The extreme action poses of running and leaping are crystallised in the flying gallop, flying leap and reverse twist *Icons* seen in 3.22 to 3.24. The flying gallop shows the animal in profile, at full stretch, with forelegs and hindlegs flung clear of the ground, as with the bull in 3.22. It is first seen in the Phaistos

4 I choose this description as a deliberate parallel to those other inspired artists, the French Impressionists, who were impressionists of colour.

5 Search the IconAegean Database in the *Icon* field on animal standing, resting, rearing, flying gallop, flying leap, reverse twist, mating, suckling, caring for young, playing, scratching, tethered, penned, netted, sacrificed, distressed, contorted, stalking, holding at bay, chasing, seizing, crunching, carrying the catch and feeding on the catch.

sealings as in 1.61 and 1.64 and continues in later Periods as in 1.44, 1.46, 1.86, 2.61, 3.15 and 3.47. In these examples the bulls in the flying gallop are masterpieces of animal art. The variation of the flying gallop, the flying leap, where the animal at full stretch leaps on the diagonal down to the ground, as with the agrimi in 3.23, is less used but is no less striking in effect. Consider the agrimia in 1.27 and the agrimi and hound in 2.29. The reverse twist does not refer to a pose where only the animal's head is turned backwards, a pose which is termed *regardant*. The reverse twist has the whole forepart of the animal, its head and shoulders and forelegs, turned 180° to face its hindparts, as with the hound in 3.24 and the bull in 3.29. This twist quite changes the shape of the animal from the expected stretch to full extent in the five *Icons* we have just been examining into a swinging semicircular curve which inherently suggests the potent life force of the animal.

The next four *Icons* form a set to take the mammal through its life cycle: animals mating, animal suckling, animal caring for young and animal playing. Mating is seen in two examples, both of agrimia, in the early prism in 3.25 and in the great gold signet of 2.26. The animal suckling is much more used. Beginning in the Early Seal Period with cows suckling their calves as in 6.67, the *Icon* continues, often in delicate detail, as in 3.26, 1.91 and 2.27, depicting agrimia, cows, does, bitches and sows. Close in sentiment to the animal suckling is the caring for young *Icon* as in 3.27. Here the juvenile animal is not actually suckling at the udder but may be playing with, or nestling close beside, the mother as in 3.61. The animals depicted are mostly cows, bitches, agrimia and ewes and sometimes griffins and lions. Young animals are shown in the animal playing *Icon*, as in 3.28 which appears to be restricted to puppies, and the examples are Minoan High Art or later. To show their pets in this playful way is another mark of the affection Minoans had for their hounds.

Then there is the set of seven *Icons* which record the dark side of animal life in constraint, suffering and death: animal scratching, animal tethered, animal penned, animal netted, animal contorted, animal distressed and animal sacrificed. Animal scratching is where the animal raises a back leg to scratch the offending part as with the bull in 3.29. Hounds, bulls and lions are the usual subjects scratching in Minoan High Art. The back leg seems to be able to reach almost any part of the body – head, neck, belly, side or leg. The affliction may be simply an itch which the animal scratches, as with the bull and the hound in 2.46 and, as such, is more of an observation on animal life belonging to the natural animal poses discussed above. However, it could also be that the cause of the trouble is a wound inflicted by an arrow, as with the lion in 3.16, in which case the animal is truly suffering and will probably die. These images cross over into the animal contorted and animal distressed *Icons* discussed below. The images of constraint are the animal tethered in 3.30, penned in 3.31 and netted in 3.32. The image of tethering belongs to Minoan High Art but even more to the Legacy Period and involves the hound, bull and ram. It can be the simple tying of the hound's collar to some fixed point as in 3.27 or the linking of the animal to a symbolic pillar as in 3.30 and 2.47. The animal penned as in 3.31 begins somewhat earlier with the constraining fence handled as wickerwork, as in 2.19, and continues later with the barrier usually rendered in crosshatching. The bull is the animal most often shown penned although the ram is shown with a wickerwork barrier in 8.58. The animal netted as in 3.32 and 2.36 is a bull and the image belongs to Minoan High Art. The net can also ensnare a bird as in 6.156 or a fish as in 7.14. The suffering of animals is explored in the animal distressed and animal contorted *Icons* as in 3.33 and 3.34. Both are presaged in the early seal examples of animals wounded with arrows, as in 6.5 and 9.105, but both see most activity in the later periods. The animals most often depicted as suffering in this way are the agrimi, bull, lion and stag. The animal distressed as in 3.33 is one of the most used images, particularly within the animal attack Theme where the terrified prey is overwhelmed, as in 3.40 and 2.28. The animal distressed *Icon* links to the animal contorted and animal scratching *Icons* when specific aspects of the distress are emphasised, as with the wounding by spear or by arrow as in 3.16, 3.59 and 2.58. The distress is shown in the body of the animal which may sink down as in 3.33, but it is particularly evident in the limbs, some or all of which may be bent awkwardly as in 1.79. Very often the suffering is expressed by the open mouth as in 3.33 and in 3.40, 3.42, 3.59, 2.28 and 2.58. In some of these examples the tongue is seen protruding. Is this an attempt to depict an agonised cry or bellow? The contorted pose is

the most extreme where the animal coils into a circle in agony as in 3.34 and 3.16. While death may be foreshadowed in the distressed images where the animal is wounded, there is no doubt of it in the animal sacrificed *Icon* as in 3.35. It begins in the early seals and continues through all periods. Bull, agrimi and boar are the sacrificial animals, mostly shown as juveniles. In the early seal examples the sacrifice is indicated by the crossed legs of the animal as in 6.181 to 6.190, while in later images the animal is placed on the sacrifice altar as in 3.35 and 6.192.

The next seven *Icons* portray the animal attack theme: animal stalking, animal holding at bay, animal chasing, animal crunching, animal seizing, animal carrying the catch and animal feeding on the catch. These seven *Icons* comprise the animal attack set and sequence already discussed above in Chapter 2 as compositional devices which also help to layer meaning. However, we should look again at the detail of these images to see how the variety of animal poses we have been discussing contributes to the vitality of these scenes. Among the indigenous fauna, the predators are the cat and the hound, while among the exotic and fantastic creatures they are the lion and the griffin. The prey are indigenous fauna such as the bird, agrimi, stag, bull or an unknown quadruped, except for those images where the griffin and the lion fight and the lion is the expected prey. Extensive use is made of the flying gallop, flying leap and reverse twist since these poses can depict either the predator or the prey. They can emphasise the ravaging ferocity of the predator or the terrified collapse of the prey, as in 3.38 to 3.40, 3.42, 1.92 and 1.93. Yet, the seal artists have many other poses at their finger tips to maximise the depiction of these violent destructive attacks. The predator may be leaping up as with the rearing hounds holding the agrimi at bay as in 3.37 and 1.60, or the lion rearing up over the stag only then to come crunching down on the backbone of its prey as in 2.28. For the prey, the animal distressed or contorted poses, often with open mouth and protruding tongue, convey the animal's agony, as with the bull and stag in 3.40 and 2.28. Such sensitivity to the animal's plight and accuracy in depicting its tortured anatomy come centuries before we see the dying lions of Assyrian art⁶.

Now, as we look over these twenty-four *Icons* created to show the full range of mammal behaviour we are struck by how brilliantly economical the seal artists are in using their skill. Certainly, the flying gallop, flying leap and reverse twist are the most recognisable of all Aegean animal poses, and they form the core of what has become known as the Aegean Animal Style so carefully described by Helene Kantor⁷. They constitute an artistic initiative that sets Aegean designs apart and makes them a desired inclusion in Egyptian and eastern contemporary art traditions⁸. The reverse twist deserves special mention. In capturing this twisting pose, the seal artist has brilliantly found another way to fit the whole animal into the seal face shape while still asserting its vigour. It allows the lion predator to turn and crunch its prey as in 3.40, or the great bull to trample the hunter as in 2.36 when its headlong rush is abruptly stopped as it is caught in the net. Moreover, the reverse twist can also be the core of some other interesting *Icons* like the suckling scenes, as in 3.26 and 1.91, the scratching scenes as in 3.29 and the contorted poses as in 3.34. The artist's eye has seen the shape of the animal change from its full extent to a swinging curve turning back on itself and has encapsulated this new shape in a memorable *Icon*. Perhaps the initial eidetic image was the hound racing along and then abruptly changing course as its prey moved in a different direction, or perhaps it was the mother cow turning to gently muzzle its calf to the udder. The artist saw the changing shape in the body movement and registered it in that happy winnowing of the eidetic image and its core characteristics into the essence of the finished *Icon*. In meeting the constraints of the seal face shape in this particular case, the artist has created an arresting composition and one that might not have emerged in any other art medium. The reverse twist is the most distinctively Minoan

6 Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, 180-181, Plate LXXX.

7 Kantor 1947, 1-103 and 1960, 14-25.

8 See AE, 113-119 and 197, Crowley 2021, 199-213 and Chapter 15 below.

of all the animal action poses, and it is rarely copied successfully elsewhere⁹. No other ancient art has produced such an image of animal muscular energy.

This close examination of animal poses in the seal designs widens our appreciation of the creativity of the seal artist well beyond simply cataloguing the poses. Each of the *Icons* showing animals at rest or in action is a memorable image and can, by itself, provide a complete seal design. Yet, each can be a building block in creating other distinctive Aegean compositions of great vitality but also sensitivity. Reflect on the tenderness of the suckling and caring scenes and the playfulness of puppies. Note the life of animals recorded as penned or tethered or netted or sacrificed. Consider the hunting predators bursting with power and aggression, and their poor prey, terrified, wounded, contorted and dying in agony. Appreciation of the animal body and sensitivity to the vicissitudes of animal life have taken the Aegean seal artist into new artistic territory and have created some stunningly beautiful images of the animal world.

The Human Body in Muscle, Movement and Drapery (Plates 3.43 to 3.54)

Human figures are known from the earliest seals, and interest subsequently grows in depicting their form, clothing and actions. In the Early Seal Period the figures are stylised and most are male, shown without clothing as in 1.14, 1.32, 1.74 and 1.75. These stylised humans become a favourite subject in MM II where they are shown holding their tools, products or weapons as in 1.32, 1.37, 1.74, 1.75 and 2.39. At this time some figures are shown with a cloak as in 8.9 and 8.99 and some, as female, wearing a skirt/dress as in 1.15, 1.39 and 1.59 or with long pants marked with a hemline at the calf as in 8.96 and 12.25. In the Experimentation and Minoan High Art Periods the human form is shown in detail with shape and clothing appropriate to females and males, as in 3.43 to 3.56, 3.63, 3.65, 3.66, 3.73 to 3.78, 3.88 to 3.90, 3.94 to 3.99, 2.31 to 2.38, 2.59, 2.60, 2.63, 2.64, 2.67 to 2.72, 1.10 to 1.12, 1.21, 1.24, 1.41, 1.82, 1.85 to 1.90 and 8.100 to 8.129. In the Legacy Period the effect of these creative experiments gradually lessens and so there is not as much variation in detail as in 1.94 to 1.97 and 8.130 to 8.135. By the Late Period we see the complete attenuation and schematisation of the human figure, presumably male, as in 1.51 and 1.102.

In the Experimentation Period and Minoan High Art, significant innovations in naturalistic detail produce depictions of the human figure that are among the most sensitive of all images. With the seal designs we are speaking of relief compositions and there are two Minoan conventions for rendering the standing and the seated human figure: the combination pose, which is the one most frequently used, and the full profile¹⁰. The combination pose classically shows the head and lower body in profile while the upper body is frontal, the swivels to accommodate this twist being at the waist and neck. It is shown in the standing male figures in 3.43 and 3.89 and in the standing female figures in 3.45 and 3.66. The waist swivel can cause problems with the alignment of clothing. For the males the problem is the placement of the codpiece, sometimes resulting in a rather disjointed effect as in 3.43. For the females the problem is the joining of the centre of the bodice on the frontal upper torso and the centre of the flounced skirt on the profile lower torso. When the standing male wears the long kilt as in 3.89 or the long diagonal robe as in 12.148 this problem does not arise. The combination pose is also used for seated female figures as in 3.50 and 1.11 and kneeling figures as in 3.51. With the combination pose the head and lower body regularly face in the same direction although occasionally they are placed opposite as in 3.52 and 12.148. There appear to be no seated males depicted at this time. The profile pose has the complete body in profile, as assumed by the standing female figures in 3.44 and 3.52 and the half-kneeling figure in 3.49, as well as the male figures in 3.60 and 1.82 and the small male figure

9 Some Dynasty 18 wall paintings closely copy this Aegean vitality, AE 113-119, Plates 309-326.

10 Search the IconAegean Database in the Syntax field on combination, profile, frontal, standing, sitting, kneeling, half kneeling, striding, running, somersaulting, falling, lying, processing.

in 3.63. This is also the favoured pose for males wearing the long diagonal robe as in 2.37. With both female and male figures the shoulders are correctly shown while the legs are usually posed slightly parted and, when covered by clothing, are indicated by the division of the long pants or the feet below the long skirts or long robes. The Minoan combination and profile poses parallel the use of the combination and profile poses already seen in the artistic traditions to the east, but they are not direct copies. The Minoan combination pose is closer in effect to the Mesopotamian tradition than the Egyptian canon for the human figure with its precise placement of nipple and navel to accommodate the armpit swivel¹¹. So, does the Minoan innovation consist only of variations of long-used combinations and profile formulas from the east? Not necessarily so. While there may well have been foreign influence there is, no doubt, a strong component of that Minoan eidetic artistic vision operating in the body presentation as well. This enables the seal artists to portray human figures more naturalistically and to imbue them with such volume and movement that they surpass conventions and come to life, convincing the viewer that they can turn, twist, gesture and leap out of the seal face.

Movement is explored by considerable experiment in the actual modelling of the male and female bodies. In all his poses the Minoan male has a distinctive cast. His body appears almost naked since the usual dress of codpiece and kilt provides minimal coverage¹². This allows the artist to show the body articulated and all the muscling needed for each pose. The subtle detail is best appreciated by looking at the sealings 3.43, 3.45 to 3.48 and 2.31 as well as the seals 2.32 to 2.36 and the special poses of the male boulder kneeler as in 4.111 to 4.113 and the tree puller in 5.121 to 5.124 and 5.127. Particular interest is shown in the way extreme active poses are depicted. The archer in 3.46 has his back and shoulders convincingly turned as he draws his bow. The wrestler/boxer in 3.48 has all his muscles rippling as he strides forward¹³. There is even an experimental back view used for the male in 3.45. The sealing depicts his body as glimpsed beneath a diaphanous full-length mantle¹⁴. Then there are all the poses of the leapers in the bull sports *Icons* providing somersaulting and landing bodies as in 3.47, 3.15, 3.22, 1.86, 2.67 and 2.68, and also falling and fallen bodies as in 3.65 and 2.69. The exertions required by war and the hunt also demand vigorous poses. Warriors and hunters stand and stride with great energy as they duel with man or beast and are victorious, as in 2.31 to 2.35 and 2.70. Yet, those same war and hunt images show the vanquished as fallen warriors and hunters, as their bodies buckle and they sink to the ground, their limbs bent up with wounds or stretched out in death as in 2.31, 2.33, 2.36 and 2.70. No other Bronze Age art provides such graphic depictions of male athletic bodies. We must now ask whether the stress on muscling and active poses is simply the turn towards naturalism evidenced in Minoan High Art. It would seem that there is a little more to the images than that. We see here an idealistic portrayal of the male body – young, extremely fit and extremely muscled for extreme action. We will have to wait until well into Classical Greek art to find them again.

For the depiction of the female body there is no corresponding interest in action poses. Overwhelmingly, female figures simply either stand or are seated as in 3.44, 3.45, 3.50, 3.52 to 3.56, 3.63, 3.66, 3.99, 1.11, 1.88 to 1.90, 2.38, 2.59, 2.63, 2.64 and 2.72. The only exceptions are the half kneeling archer pose of 3.49 and the ceremonies of kneeling the boulder as in 4.109, 4.110 and 4.114 to 4.116 and pulling the tree as in 5.121, 5.123 and 5.126. However, each of these is really handled as a slight variation of the combination or the profile pose. The interest in the female form is in its inherent shape, and here we find a certain voluptuousness. The bare breasts and curvaceous buttocks are fully modelled. The bosom is not covered but the lower body is always clothed. This is quite clear when the figure wears one of the

11 AE, 152-159. The Egyptian canon avoids the problems of alignment caused by the waist swivel by placing the swivel below the frontal shoulders at the armpits and depicting the body as profile in a stepping pose below that.

12 Search the IconAegean Database in the Element field on belt and kilt, diagonal robe, tunic, cloak and mantle.

13 This athlete was erroneously first described as showing his back, PM I 689, Fig. 509 and PM III 504, Fig. 349. Some comparisons are suggested under the entry for CMS II.8 280 but not all are back views.

14 Observation of the enlarged photographs of the sealing helped the identification of the pose and the fine overlay of material across the body.

styles of skirt but less so when the figure wears long pants, and so there have sometimes been claims of naked females. However, the female body is not naked, as close inspection always shows the hem line of the pants leg across the calf¹⁵. In some cases, the pants material simply clings to the female shape while nevertheless revealing it as in 3.49, 3.51 and 3.52. In other cases the pants material is diaphanous and reveals the body shape beneath the fabric, all the time providing the outline of the pants and the calf hemline as in 3.53 and 1.21/1.88. So, with the female body always needing to be clothed except for the breasts, the artist turns to an exploration of female dress and how the particular material type fits to the body¹⁶. With standing females the heavier fabrics of the flounced, frilled and fringed skirts mould over the curvaceous buttocks and hang to the ground, just allowing the feet to be shown standing flat as in 3.44, 3.55 and 2.38. Sometimes the flounced skirt finishes at the calf, and the ankles and feet are then shown as in 1.88. With the seated figures, as in 3.50 and 1.11, the interest is in the detail of the heavy flounces and the way they fold across the knees. Finer, softer materials fit closer to the body revealing its shape and, when these lighter materials are also diaphanous, care is taken to show their semi-transparency. We have already noted this above in discussing the wearing of pants, but there are also cases where the full body-covering mantle is woven of diaphanous fabric. In 3.54 the female wears such a mantle knotted at the shoulder, and the whole of her fleecy skirt beneath is revealed. A more subtle handling of this fine fabric is seen in 3.45, noted above, where the male stands with his mantle enveloping, but not obscuring, his body. Indeed, the best seals reveal how the artists have acutely observed the nature of woven materials and how they have been able to record the behaviour of fabric as it drapes over the human body. Even today for the sculptor, seal artist and cameo specialist, to reveal the body through drapery is judged one of the highest skills.

In seeing virtually no interest in depicting the female form in action, have we missed something? Are all upright female figures simply standing still, maybe walking, or, as has often been suggested, are some dancing? Those who see dancing figures in 3.44 and 3.55 point to the curving buttocks shape and see hips swaying to music, and point to the arms raised and see rhythmical movements. Yet, there are other explanations for these features that more closely accord with the full range of renditions of the female form. The curving buttocks shape is always seen in seated female figures and in many upright figures who are clearly not dancing, as in 3.49, 3.52 and 3.53. The arm gestures in 3.44 and 3.55 are the standard forehead, hands high and arms high gestures used by many figures who are also clearly not dancing. Gestures are used in group compositions to link the *dramatis personae* together as seen in 3.63, 3.66 and 1.21/1.88. If the hands and arms do not necessarily indicate dancing, then do the feet? In 3.44 and 3.55 the women's feet are placed flat on the ground, not a particularly convincing dancing pose, especially when one considers that feet orientation is used in other images to suggest movement. The heels are raised to indicate walking in 3.52 and 2.59, and the toes are pointed down to indicate certain small figures are hovering in the air¹⁷ as in 3.55 and 3.56. In addition, there is no suggestion of knee movements moving the drapery in dancing steps. The half-kneeling pose of the female in 3.49 shows how such movements could be managed. Minoan women might well have danced, but one can only conclude that Minoan artists did not choose to portray them doing so. Returning then to the curvaceous outline that the female form assumes in Minoan art, are we to see here the naturalistic rendering of the generous bosom and buttocks shape typical of the Minoan woman, or is there another artistic agenda? Some enhancement of these two essential womanly characteristics would seem in order for an art that searches for the essence of each entity, a parallel to the exaggerated muscling of the Minoan male.

15 Note the careful CMS descriptions of the *saumwinkel*, the angle of the hemline.

16 Search the IconAegean Database in the Element field on skirt, flounced, frilled, fringed, fleecy, side-pleated, lappet, long pants, flounced pants, diaphanous pants, diaphanous, scarf, gown, cape and mantle. On the identification of the fabrics used as silk, linen or wool see Chapter 8 below.

17 See the discussion of epiphany figures in Chapter 12 below.

Perspective, Emotion and Dramatic Impact (Plates 3.55 to 3.66)

There was an interest in **perspective** from the beginning in the sense that the eidetic impulse which is the basis of Minoan art always provided for a foreground and a background in the depiction of scenes. Animals are seen against the trees or the rocky mountainside in the earliest seals. The removal of their immediate background in the interests of clarity and the attaching of the rocks to the upper seal perimeter as well as the lower creates the glen motif which lasts throughout the art. Yet, the possibilities of developing this into perspective compositions was not immediately exploited, and the stage convention became the most used method of organising scenes through into Minoan High Art. This is where the use of a groundline orients all figures who either stand on a line marking the lower perimeter of the seal or have some groundline marked as rocky ground or paving, as for example in 3.63, 3.66 and 2.38. When the stage convention is refined to the extent of having a single subject with no background and only a groundline, then the composition convention is the focus with all its concentration on that single subject, as for example in 3.59 and 3.64, and for the bull sports scenes, as for example in 3.15, 3.22 and 3.47. This gives the impression of the focussed subject existing outside time or place. Yet, the artist often provides an additional element in order to identify a human figure. This is widely used in MM II when the worker figure is identified by the tool he holds, as in 9.1 to 9.9. It is of particular identifying significance when the element is placed at the back of a human figure as with the grand pillar in 3.98, the crocus in 12.62 and the dolphin in 12.173.

However, in Minoan High Art, experiments in perspective begin anew, termed here the mountain view¹⁸. In 3.55 a group of four women gather, but they do not stand on a groundline in the stage convention. Each is placed at a different level against the background, and the flowering plant clumps are likewise placed freely in the intervening space. Accommodating the small epiphany figure above causes some difficulties, especially with the artificial construct of the skyline beneath her feet. The scene in 3.56 is a less successful attempt at handling perspective, partly because so many *Icons* are included¹⁹. There is a foreground where the dolphins leap down. There is a middle ground with the ship coming to the shore where the woman and man are standing. There is a far ground where the tree grows on the shore on the other side of the ship (the rocky ground that is usually the tree's base is obscured by the ship's hull). The epiphany figure is placed on high in the same plane as the ship, the woman and the man. The complex compositions in 3.55 and 3.56 both have to do duty as cultscapes, and the need to convey that extra level of meaning complicates the experiment at perspective. The landscape of 3.57 is a much clearer example, with the young agrimi resting in the foreground, the stream flowing in the middle ground and the rocky hillside rising in the far ground. Now the confined space of the seal face was never going to be a convenient canvas for the perspective experiment. It is likely that the space provided by wall painting was the catalyst for artists to try large-scale compositions initiating attempts at perspective. Nevertheless, the eidetic concept of the seal artists is still the point of view taken by these fresco artists, as will be further discussed in Chapter 13.

Experiments to show **emotion** in humans and animals are also seen in Minoan High Art. The attempt to register voice is among the most interesting, particularly with animals. There are many mammals where the open mouth may well be emitting bleats, moos, roars or other sounds appropriate to the animal's situation. The young wounded animal in 3.59 raises its head and opens its mouth to cry out in pain, as does the wounded bull in 3.33. This is a regular detail in the animal distressed *Icon*, sometimes forming part of the depiction of the prey in animal attack scenes as in 3.40, 3.42, 2.28 and 2.58. The open mouth may be emitting a softer sound as the mother animal gently muzzles her young in 3.26, 1.91 and 2.27. Then who could forget the cry of the male agrimi mating in 2.26! The relationship with humans may also

18 Search the IconAegean Database in the Syntax field on mountain view.

19 See the entry for this seal in the IconAegean Database which lists eight *Icons* and the discussion on complex compositions, Crowley CMS B8, 131-147, which suggests that having five icons or fewer preserves clarity. The gold signet in 3.55 uses four and manages to present much information clearly.

cause the animal to use its voice, somewhat gently towards the man in 3.60, but in considerable distress as the herders take away their young in 3.62. Emotion, with or without voice, is built into the creation of the animal suckling and animal caring for young *Icons* which explicitly target nurturing bonds as in 3.61, 3.26, 3.27, 1.91 and 2.27. With humans the depiction of emotion is much more circumspect. Two human male heads, 3.58 and 3.70, have open mouths which may indicate speaking or singing. The other heads have closed mouths and none exhibits emotional states. There are no female heads featured. With the full-size human figures the heads are necessarily very small, and although some features are shaped, their tiny size prevents their revealing emotion. So, we are left with the pose of the figures. Already in the discussion of fallen warriors and hunters we have commented on the anguish of their stricken bodies as in 2.31 to 2.34 and 2.36, but for happier emotions the poses are composed and formal, mostly finding expression in gesture. A series of 15 gestures codify human interactions and the emotion associated with each. The gestures are named descriptively for the part of the body touched or the position of the hands or arms or for what is held in the hands, as in forehead, shoulder, heart, chest, hips, greeting, reaching, beckoning, pointing, arms high, hands high, holding hands, power, brandishing and toasting²⁰. A full discussion of these gestures awaits in Chapter 9, but we should note here the gestures that particularly display emotion on the part of the gesturer: greeting, forehead, shoulder, heart and holding hands. In 3.63 the woman welcomes the epiphany figure with a greeting gesture, although it is not clear whether the men and women are greeting or farewelling each other in 2.60. The forehead gesture is given by the woman in 2.63 and the man in 2.72 in the presence of the epiphany figures appearing before them. This gesture is a recognition of the majesty of those epiphany figures, and so has often been called the prayer gesture. The shoulder gesture appears to signify attending or listening, as with the woman in 3.66 watching the others in the group. This is also the gesture when the woman is waiting/listening before a shrine as in 9.69. The heart gesture denotes a relationship between the man and the woman as in 3.66. An even stronger connection is intimated by the holding hands gesture made by the woman and man in 3.45 and 3.56. In the complex scenes on gold signet rings, the use of combination and profile poses and gesture are used together to animate the figures and to enliven communications between them. Consider the groups in 3.55, 3.56, 3.63, 3.66 and 3.73 where gestures link the individuals and the conversation can almost be heard. Perhaps it is not surprising that in a traditional society the display of emotion is constrained within accepted gestures. The artists have registered this formality but have also shown in these particular images, not only in the gesture but also in the stance of the people and the inclination of their heads, that powerful emotions are being expressed.

Finally, we come to the question of **dramatic impact** and the relationship between the artist and the viewer. We have already commented in the explanation of the *Icon* composition that the eidetic underlay places the viewer's eye in the position of the artist's eye and that this allows the viewer directly to apprehend the image. The point of view of artist and viewer being identical creates an immediate bond, and thus the subject matter can make a direct appeal to the senses of the viewer. We have just been discussing how the emotional state of humans and animals is a significant topic and one that is treated in graphic detail. These poses and moments of interaction have a profound effect on the viewer. The artist is entreating the viewer to appreciate the mother animal's tenderness and to empathise with the stricken animal's suffering, to see in all the gestures the social interactions that makes us most human. The artist-viewer bond is most clearly on view in the extended scenes where the artist chooses the moment of greatest intensity in action or feeling and emphasises its most telling aspects in order to affect the viewer. In war and hunt scenes the climactic point of the fatal thrust makes maximum dramatic impact, as with the hero and the great beasts in 3.64, 2.34 and 2.35 and the warrior victors and the warriors vanquished in 2.31 to 2.33. The climactic point on the animal attack scenes is the violent crunching/seizing of the prey by the predator as in 3.39, 3.40, 1.80 and 2.28. In the bull sports the moments of

²⁰ Search the IconAegean Database in the *Icon* field on gesture and in the *Element* field on forehead, shoulder, heart, chest, hips, greeting, reaching, beckoning, pointing, arms high, hands high, holding hands, power, brandishing and toasting and see the discussion on each gesture in Chapters 9 and 12 below.

maximum danger are depicted: the successful somersault as in 3.15 and 3.47, the landing as in 3.22 and 2.68 and the desperation of the fall as in 3.65 and 2.69. All these danger moments are depicted in such a way as to evoke the most intense reactions in the viewer: elation and wonder at a leaper's success, and horror and desolation when the leaper fails. In the series of cultscapes, human figures are depicted enacting ceremonies. In each case the viewer is treated as the audience present at the ceremony, as in 3.66, 3.45, 3.51, 3.55, 3.56, 3.63, 3.73, 2.38, 2.60 and 2.72. Indeed, it is extremely likely that the viewer has been present at just such ceremonies and that the seal image is deliberately crafted to remind the viewer of those moments and the emotions felt at those times. In all, this direct appeal by the artist to the viewer is not seen fully again in Greek art until the Hellenistic period. In other ancient societies of the Bronze Age the subject matter of art is distanced from the viewer because it is created to worship the all-powerful gods, to celebrate the exploits of great rulers or to record in the tomb the daily needs to be supplied for the afterlife. Art is created for the eyes of those omnipotent gods, great rulers and tomb owners. To directly involve the human viewer in the art, to stir emotion and memory, is the genius of the Minoan seal artist.

Brief Experiments (Plates 3.67 to 3.84)

Now, there are several images in Minoan High Art that do not seem to fit easily within the iconographic repertoire, and we should note these experiments even as we cannot be sure of the meaning of their novelty. Of course, if we had the complete output of the Minoan seal artists before us, we might find that these images are not so singular. However, with only a fraction of that output remaining to us, we are restricted to seeing these images as brief experiments without lasting effect. Nevertheless, it is important to register their creation as part of the Minoan artistic innovation.

Do the seal images experiment with **portraiture**? The heads of the human figures in the Early Seal Period are handled generically with the nose accentuated and all figures stylised. Later, in Minoan High Art, human figures appear in complex scenes, and the heads are necessarily very small, providing little chance to register individual traits. Yet even in these scenes, it might be expected that some special effort could be made to depict the facial features of an important individual when that individual is the human protagonist performing an important ceremony. Yet even here the head is often a blob, and the facial details are barely noted at all, as in 3.55, 4.109 to 4.115 and 5.121 to 5.127. When the VIPs are shown full figure the heads are shown in more detail, but even here the facial features are generic as in 3.49, 3.54, 3.88 and 3.89. Then there are the detailed male heads which appear for a short time as sole subjects in the Experimentation Period and early Minoan High Art Period and have been called portraits. The 14 extant illustrations of human heads as sole subjects are all rendered profile and all are of males²¹, as with the seven illustrated in 3.67 to 3.72 and 3.58. There is no similar treatment for female heads. The male heads seem rather to be in a natural progression of featuring human heads following all the earlier animal heads. There is differentiation in these male heads with respect to hairstyles and beards. Some heads have straight hair and some have curly hair which at times seems to be carefully coiffured. When there are beards they are all straight. The lines at the chin in 3.58 are like beards in other examples. All heads have defined straight noses and prominent chins when shown clean-shaven. The nose and lips are carefully delineated, and two have the lips open as if speaking or singing. The example in 3.72 appears to be that of child with a shaved head. Do these heads comprise an experiment in portraiture, and if so, why is it restricted to males? The small number of examples across a short period of time, as well as the absence of clearly idiosyncratic features, would incline argument away from any real interest in portraiture on the part of the Minoans²². Perhaps the Minoan heads are simply a general statement of the three stages

21 Search the IconAegean Database in the *Icon* field on human head profile. For the human head frontal, which appears to carry different connotations, see the discussion in Chapter 11 below.

22 See Foster 1997, 127-140 and VIV-LV, for proposals in favour of portraiture, and Pini 1999, 661-669, rather doubting portraiture.

of man's life – child, clean-shaven youth and bearded age. This age range should be kept in mind when looking for comparisons across the seal images. There are some children and younger adults as in 2.60 and 12.88 and some older men with corpulent bodies as in 3.76. However, the overwhelming number of the depictions of human figures, female and male, show them in full maturity in the prime of life. The group of male profile heads certainly fits within this human figure survey since most are young, fit men with some outliers of youth and age. So, perhaps it is not portraiture that the artists are attempting here briefly, but something revealing of the life stages of a man.

Are there any examples of **narrative** or **history**? The six images 3.73 to 3.78 all involve the activities of humans, and each shows iconographic details that have no parallel. Accordingly, they are all listed as one only images²³. Is there a story behind these actions or does the detail record a singular event? The first three scenes may each be the visualisation of a story, myth or legend, familiar to all Minoans. In 3.73 the central image is of female and male human figures facing each other and standing close. She holds a bow, aiming an arrow at him. He has his arm crooked through the bow so the arrow cannot be fired and, in that hand, he holds a piriform rhyton. What is the story that lies behind this bow contest? In 3.74, a female figure is seen against a tricurved arch pattern. The pose of her legs and feet indicate that she is not standing but rather reclining. In standard Minoan iconography, the tricurved arch pattern registers a watery expanse and the surface of the sea. If this meaning holds for this image, then the female figure is floating on the surface of the sea. CMS has presented another view. It has rotated the image 90° to the left to place the figure upright, suggesting that the pose of the legs might indicate a dancer and that the tricurved arch pattern should not be read as water²⁴. Yet, if the standard iconography is followed, then this enigmatic image may also be the visualisation of a myth or legend that all Minoans would immediately recognise. In 3.75 a male figure rows/poles a skiff-like vessel, the muscles of his upper body magnified to stress his prowess. Comparable examples show similar vessels, here termed boats, that are light-weight craft meant to be used in sheltered waters, in contrast to the many substantial sailing ships suitable for the high seas. These boats are rowed or poled by female figures. Why is a male being featured on this particular seal? Is there a story behind this exceptional image that we cannot now trace? The last three scenes may represent the recording of actual events. In 3.76, there is an all-male scene where the central figure bows to the ground before a standing male figure with a staff while two older males stand watching and gesturing. It is the only image clearly showing such obeisance. Is this a worshipper bowing to the statue of a male god, or a subject bowing to his king, or the performance of some other ceremony? There are some indications that life-size sculptures were known in Crete but we have no comparable images that could be read as depicting kingly power and authority. In 3.77, another all-male scene, the two figures on the left are engaged in dialogue while two young men stand watching and gesturing. It is a pity that damage obscures the detail of the central figure but he does appear to be kneeling on a cushioned stool. What is clear is that he is holding an item of unusual flowing shape. Is this item a diaphanous mantle like the one worn in 3.45? If so, then we may be seeing the recording of the presentation of a prestige garment as a singular honour to a celebrated man/warrior/citizen. In 3.78 enough of the composition remains for us to see a great sailing ship with crew ready at their oars. Superimposed on ship and crew is a huge horse. Does this image record the momentous event of the arrival of the horse in Crete? The exceptional nature of these six images causes us to ask whether we have here a glimpse of the telling of stories or of historical recording, but we cannot provide a sure answer. Lack of comparable images and the absence of a deciphered literature defeat us again.

The seal artist attempts to present **ephemeral shapes** to the viewer in 3.79 to 3.82. Movement in humans and animals is of consuming interest to the Minoan artist, as is the ever-changing surface of water. Yet there are other moving shapes, even more fleeting, that also capture the attention of the

23 On the authenticity of the gold signet in 3.73 see Sourvinou-Inwood 1971, 60-69; Pini CMS B1, 145-149; Krzyszkowzka AS, 333.

24 CMS II.8 264, description, 407.

innovative Minoan artist: droplets of liquid, billowing smoke and the brief life of insects. In 3.79 a section of the composition in the gold signet of 3.55 is shown. The piriform shape hovering symbol behaves as a piriform rhyton releasing the liquid it contains. This shower of droplets is shown as tiny upraised dots in the gold surface. In 3.80 and 3.81 the bee smoker is already warmed, sending out the billowing smoke which will soon daze the bees. The smoke is depicted as linked semicircles surrounding the smoker and its handle in 3.80 while in 3.81 the smoke is presented as zigzags. In 3.82 the ephemeral life of the butterfly is recorded in four stages linked by the tails curled into a whirl spiral. Moving clockwise from the base, the swelling chrysalis is about to burst, then it becomes the emerging butterfly drying its new wings, then the adult enjoys life with wings fully spread, and then finally the end comes in the dismembered body pieces. The butterfly has considerable presence in mainstream Minoan iconography, giving added significance to the graphic portrayal of its ephemeral life in 3.80.

As the Minoan artists are acutely conscious of shape it is not surprising that they see **similar shapes** in different items. Take the example of the squid from the sea and the vase with its double curved handles. In 3.83 we see the classic shape of the squid. Being placed within seaweed fronds gives it striking similarity to the vase with its double handles centred in its usual surround of branches as in 1.42 and 1.84. The depiction of the sunburst as in 4.85 to 4.90 and the sea urchin as in 7.24, 7.28 and 7.70 to 7.72 show similar shapes, but the context glosses the identification. Then there is the case where a familiar motif is linearised and the resultant image, although similar, evokes different responses. The palm and palmette feature in the iconography from the Early Seal Period, but there is a development in Minoan High Art which sees the creation of a palmette tree, as in 3.84 and 5.100 to 5.102. The basic design is the palmette standing up from a curved mound of earth with additional fronds springing up from the base. It is clearly the linearised form of the tree growing from rocky ground when it is a palm tree with base fronds as in 3.5 and 5.97. When flowers or fruits are added as circles each side of the trunk, variations of the design appear. However, with this transition, something strange has occurred, and the images now look more like a face with staring eyes and a moustache. Indeed, these palmette trees are often described as masks or lion masks²⁵. We do not know whether the resultant designs did look like a face or a mask to the Minoans. We also do not know whether the playfulness with design that appears to us in all these similar shapes also appeared to them, although this is not impossible.

Minoan Art Styles and the *Icon* Essence (Plates 3.85 to 3.99)

So, after examination of the innovations of mainstream Minoan art and a brief look at some transient experiments, we come to define Minoan artistic style. The search for individual style as it pertains to a seal artist is virtually impossible. As we noted in Chapter 1, like the rest of the people of Bronze Age Crete, the seal artists have left no names for identification and the small number of seals extant in any discrete age makes it difficult to discern a “hand” or “school”²⁶. When excavation permits, it is possible to recognise the output of a palace workshop, as in the MM II seals of the Mallia Workshop, thus allowing a summation of style for this seal group. Similar difficulties assail the researcher who tries to address the concepts of palatial art and provincial art. Yet, without doubt the Minoan seal artists have ventured into many areas of artistic creativity during the long floruit of the seals and, at each turn, have granted us an original point of view of this world and the other. How then to define Minoan artistic style?

Certainly, from the discovery of the Aegean civilisations in the 19th century CE, art historians have tried to define Minoan art and Mycenaean art or, more generally, Aegean art. Working largely from frescoes, wall paintings and pottery, they have used the usual terminology for art discussions to arrive at

25 Artemis Onassoglou, in her analysis of the talismanic seal designs, lists various floral and foliate motifs, among them the *Papyrus-Motiv* (*Löwenmaske*), and discusses the “lion mask” design, CMS B2, 48-54, Tafel XX.

26 John Younger’s work on the “Lion Master”, the “Spectacle-Eyes Group” and other Stylistic Groups attempts this differentiation, Younger 1978, 1979b, 1981a, 1981b, 1983, 1984a, 1985a, 1986, 1987, 1989a and 2000.

a description, if perhaps not yet a definition, of the art²⁷. It is helpful to turn to the style characterisations usually applied to the wider art media to see if the Minoan seal corpus falls into any of them. Then, further, we should examine the relationship of the seal images to images in the other Minoan media and to later Mycenaean art. This latter exercise must await a fuller exposition in Chapters 13, 14 and 15 after we have explored in detail the seal images, but we can begin with the terms of art style that art historians have regularly employed.

Is Minoan art decorative or descriptive? It certainly is decorative, as the many seal images of the Early Seal Period attest as in 3.85 to 3.87. A whole range of designs incorporate geometric and floral motifs into delightful patterns, as discussed in 3.1 to 3.12. The neat precision of reflectional symmetry organises flower and leaf units into balanced patterns. The swirling vigour of rotational symmetry unites spiraliform and floral into moving kaleidoscopes. This reliance on decorative forms disappears from the seal repertoire with the move into the Experimentation Period, but it has already seeded the decorative designs of pottery in MM II and subsequently into the other media where they live on as principal motifs or as border pattern. However, in using the term decorative there is no suggestion of superficiality or of lack of meaning since in all of them the deep structure of natural forms is intimated. Yet, the seal images are also descriptive of this physical world and its living inhabitants. In so many of the images across Chapters 1 to 3 we have seen patterns in Cretan rocks, water and trees, as well as humans and animals. The animals are of particular interest since, from the earliest seals, so much effort goes into portraying the different characteristics of each species and their actions. This interest is fully exploited in the Minoan High Art Period, as we see in 3.19 to 3.42. Then there are the images of human figures as in 3.43 to 3.66, which are generally descriptive, but the term descriptive may need to be refined by using more subtle distinctions like impressionism and naturalism, as discussed below. So, Minoan art contains strands of both the decorative and the descriptive.

Is Minoan art formulaic and/or symbolic? Compositional devices like the antithetical group and heraldic poses organise humans and animals into striking images. The Mistress/Master of Animals as in 3.88, 1.24, 2.24 and 2.64, and animals at the grand pillar as in 1.26 and 2.65 are among the most memorable. The ultimate source of their identity may lie to the east, but their incarnation in Aegean seal designs brings new clarity and economy, as with the animals one head pair in 8.79. Then, the Minoans create their own formulas, as with the roles of VIPs seen in the VIP with familiar as in 3.89, the VIP granting audience as in 3.98 and the VIP appearing on high as in 3.99²⁸. Other formulas involve animals like the bull head with double axe as in 3.91, the double axe in 1.83 and 2.41, and items important to warriors like the boar tusk helmet in 3.93 and the cloak knot and eight shield in 2.42²⁹. Closely allied with the formulaic strand in Minoan art is the symbolic³⁰. Indeed, the formulaic regularly incorporates the symbolic. Here we see fantastic creations like the hybrid humans as in 3.90, 1.90, 1.99 and 2.43, geniuses as in 3.64, dragons as in 1.89 and griffins as in 3.92, 2.44, 1.57 and 1.98, as well as living exotic animals as with the lions in 3.89, 1.26, 1.58, 2.24, 2.64 and 2.65 and the monkeys in 3.98 and 2.14. Again, the use of heraldic poses promotes precision in the formulaic depiction of both living animals and fantastic creatures. With the creation of scripts, the signs themselves are another example. For seal artists, the hieroglyphic script signs are not simply the representation of certain items but are subjects worthy of

27 See Crowley 1991, 226-228, "Reviewing Aegean art history discussions" for an outline of these earlier attempts. See also Rodenwaldt 1921, Matz 1928, Snijder 1936, Furumark 1941a, Kantor 1947, Gronwegen-Frankfort 1951, Vermeule 1964 and 1975, Stevenson Smith 1965, Lang PN II, Boardman 1970a, Walberg 1976 and 1986, Laffineur 1985, Younger 1988, Morris 1989 and 2000, Rehak and Younger 1998, Niemeier CMS B3, Immerwahr AP, Schiering CMS B1 and 1992, Shaw 1993, Wedde 1992, 1995a and CMS B5, Morgan 1988 and 2020, N. Marinatos 2000, Warren 2000b, Poursat 2008, Krzyszkowska 2010, Anastasiadou 2011, Chapin 2004 and 2016, Vlachopoulos 2016a and Paintbrushes, Panagiotopoulos 2020, and Blakolmer 2010d and CANP.

28 For discussion of these *Icons* see Chapter 12 below.

29 For discussion of these items see Chapter 8 below.

30 Search the IconAegean Database in the Theme field on symbolic.

great effort to carve exquisitely and to position on the seal face, as in 1.17, 2.3, 2.8, 2.9 to 2.12 and 2.53. There are very strong formulaic and symbolic strands in seal design from beginning to end.

Is Minoan art abstract or surrealist? These are not designations expected in the list of possible art types for Minoan images. Yet, some images suggest the abstract. Semicircles are a favourite inclusion in LM I images, handled by holding the circular bit at an angle to the seal face, especially as seen in talismanic seals. This technical expertise helps present details like the octopus tentacles. In 7.46 to 7.48 the octopus is depicted with its tentacles curling around. Yet, there are many examples where an array of interlinked semicircles suggests the octopus shape as in 7.49. to 7.51. Gradually, the compositions have become more and more about the shape of circles and semicircles until the octopus is lost and we have designs verging on the abstract. Then there is a discrete group of seals emanating from the site of Zakros³¹ and gathered in the IconAegean Classification under the heading of Zakros fantasy as in 2.45. The human, animal and inanimate units of the Zakros corpus can be found as motifs in other seal designs, and in that way the Zakros images find a place in the wider Minoan repertoire. However, it is how these units are combined in the Zakros images that takes us into surreal territory. The Zakros fantasy images thus remain a separate, if distinct, strand in seal art deserving of their own analysis, and they do not initiate a continuing art style.

Is Minoan art realistic? Realism does not seem to be an appropriate designation since at every turn the depiction of realistic detail of the natural world does not seem to be the primary concern of the artist. Yes, for the fauna there is any amount of fur, feather, horn and claw, while for humans there is careful revealing of body shape, muscling, hairstyles and clothing. Yet, the true subject of the image is rather the significance of mortal activity or the vitality of mammalian life, as we have been discussing. Even with the brief interest in male profile heads as in 3.67 to 3.72, the detail seems more attuned to showing age group differentiation than true individual likenesses. Certainly, there is nothing to compare with the preoccupation with individual identity in Egyptian and Mesopotamian art. Realistic portraiture ensured that the Pharaoh and the tomb owner would be recognisable for eternity. The Mesopotamian tradition too, in some eras, found it necessary to identify their rulers with arresting detail. When we look on the face of Men-kau-re or the head of Sargon we have no doubt that we are in the presence of a particular mortal. We may allow that these royal portraits carry elements of the ideal as we note the perfect symmetry of Men-kau-re's face and as we register that every curl of Sargon's hair and beard sits in its appointed place, but we know the individual man. We look in vain for such parallels in the Aegean.

Is Minoan art idealistic? There is certainly idealism in the representation of female and male figures in the Minoan High Art Period as in 3.43 to 3.54. There are almost no children and very few older bearded and/or corpulent men. Virtually all figures are in their youthful prime. The females have a distinctive silhouette emphasising bosom and derriere. The males are granted a muscular active form. The faces, when shown in detail, are unblemished and composed. We will not see such calm beauty in the human form again until we arrive at Classical Greek art.

Is Minoan art naturalistic? This is the term most often used to describe Minoan art and especially Minoan High Art. Naturalistic is applied with its usual meaning as an art style which portrays the natural world with surrounding landscape rendered in recognisable form and with living creatures obeying all the rules of structure and movement of bone and muscle. The examples of a hunt scene in 3.94, the chariot scene in 3.95 and the woman server gesturing before a shrine in 3.96 remind us of that strand of naturalism that pervades the seal images. There was always an incipient naturalism in the early seals with their animals and associated landscape details as in 1.31 and 1.55. Then, following the Phaistos Sealings revolution as in 1.59 to 1.66, the trend increased to its full expression in Minoan High Art as in 1.76, 1.79 and 2.15. Yet even at that peak of artistic expression the art is not fully naturalistic. The Minoan artist is ever constrained by other demands. Accordingly, the description of art should be Minoan naturalism to reflect these Minoan modifications to pure naturalism.

31 See Weingarten 1983 and 2009, 139-149 and Anastasiadou *Forthcoming*.

Is Minoan art impressionistic? Now, as we have seen, any naturalistic tendencies in the seal images are tempered by the desire to present the essence of the subject. This is the importance of understanding the power of the *Icon* composition. As addressed in Chapter 2, and argued through examples 2.25 to 2.36, the *Icon* is the core of Minoan design. Humans, animals, action scenes and community ceremonies are not shown simply as one sees them but in a certain mode of presentation which alters details to involve the viewer. This certainly is impressionism although, in the seals, it cannot be handled by colour as with the original Impressionist painters. In the seals it is handled by shape. Gathering all our evidence of how landscape and living creatures are depicted, we are struck by the importance of their shape. The rocks become rounded outcrops or looping borders as in 3.88, 1.27, 1.60 and 2.58. Vegetation declares its identity but also its relationship to the living participants through its shape as in 3.94, 3.96 and 3.99. The animal conveys its happiness or distress predominantly through its shape, as seen in the distinctive Aegean animal poses 3.19 to 3.42. The bull sports give perhaps the most telling use of shape to create the bull sports *Icons*, and thus they assail the viewer with maximum intensity as in 3.15, 3.47, 3.65, 3.97, 1.86, 2.68 and 2.69. If we had to characterise all the above impressionist effects then we would have to say that Minoan seal artists are the impressionists of shape.

Thus, to some extent and in particular cases, the regularly-employed style terminology is able to describe the art of the seals. Which style epithets we can apply to the art of the seal images somewhat depends on which era is being discussed. Remembering that we are talking about an art tradition that spans fifteen centuries, we can see that different styles are in favour in different eras. For the Early Seals the decorative and the formulaic apply with geometric and floral designs and heraldic animals. Still, there is also an incipient impressionism in the way some landscape and animals are portrayed. We lose the decorative for seal design at the beginning of the Experimentation Period, but the formulaic continues through to the end of Minoan High Art (and beyond) while the naturalistic and impressionistic strands become stronger.

Yet, art historians may have missed much in trying to explain Minoan art in these currently used terms. Minoan innovations were pioneered in the 2nd millennium BCE, and terminology used for later European artistic styles may not provide the most appropriate descriptions or be the best to recognise the early date of these Minoan creations. Minoan art is full of innovations that distinguish it from contemporary arts to the east and which place it at the beginning of European art. Should we not try to find new terms that can express this originality? Scholars of Minoan and Mycenaean art have, in the past, made use of the generally accepted art terminology, but they have also formulated their own epithets. Five idiosyncratic terms, coined to describe the particular nature of Aegean art, spring to mind. Henriette Gronweger-Frankfort, in an early assessment, directed our attention to the inherent movement in much Minoan art with her term “absolute mobility”, a term which does recognise the attempt to portray the essence of life in the natural form³². When Michael Wedde analysed the composition of scenes in seal images he used the term “pictorial architecture” to explain their formality and inherent structure³³. In his essay on floral subjects in fresco, Peter Warren coined the term “essentialism” in presenting the idea generally of flowers in contrast to the depiction of an individual blossom³⁴. Fritz Blakolmer has discussed Aegean iconography widely and deeply, always revealing the variety and originality of Aegean art, particularly in the frescoes. In his introduction to the recent overview of Aegean iconographic studies, he has described Minoan Art as the “Brilliant Child Prodigy” of the Eastern Mediterranean³⁵ in order to encapsulate its very early success in creating so many new features. With the term, “Minoan idiom”, Lyvia Morgan attempted to gather the disparate features of Minoan art under one heading, and she has recently expanded its meaning to be a general term for the way Minoan art handles its subject

32 Gronweger-Frankfort 1951, 185-216.

33 Wedde 1992, 181-203.

34 Warren 2000b, 364-380.

35 Blakolmer CANP, 9-17.

matter³⁶. It is a most useful term, and one I shall use in this book. Each of these scholars has seen the very special nature of Minoan creativity which holds across all the art media, and each has helped towards a definition of Minoan style that can encompass the variety and yet see the commonality.

In our efforts to find new terms to recognise Minoan artistic creativity and the early time period of its floruit, we must also acknowledge that previous assessments have largely depended on which particular art media provided most examples. As has been noted earlier, much of the discussion of art in the Aegean sphere has to date been particularly reliant on pottery and fresco studies. This was especially the case for the early researchers. In recent years, study of the Theran frescoes, with so many of their compositions largely intact, has been foremost in these art history investigations, and it has provided enlightenment on so many issues. However, as was also noted earlier, pottery is limited in its range of subject matter, and fresco begins late in the artistic tradition.

Have we been looking in the wrong place for answers all this time? It is the seals that have the answers to our many questions of source, style and nomenclature. Taking the viewpoint of the seal artist provides the connection for all the disparate strands and gives us a definition for Minoan art that holds for the fifteen centuries and across all media. At the end of these three Chapters addressing the art of the Aegean seal, I come back to the analysis of the designs which shows that the essence of the subject rather than its surface form is the true subject of Minoan art. This, I have argued, underlies the creation of the *Icon* to control design. With its eidetic point of view and its coalescing of the original-essential-elaborate images, the *Icon* is the compositional imperative of Minoan art. I believe that the style of Minoan art can be named the Icon Essence.

36 Morgan 1985, 5-19 and AWP, 21-44.

Plates 3.1 to 3.99

Beautiful Geometry and Natural Shapes

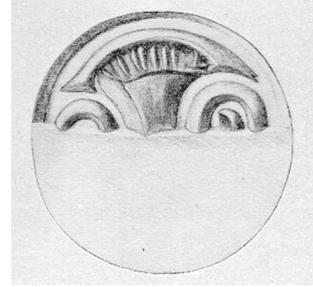
flower and leaf forms



3.1 – rosette, leaf band
(II.1 228/EM III-MM IA)



3.2 – palmette, quatrefoil
(II.1 450/EM III/MM IA)



3.3 – papyrus
(II.2 142/MM II)



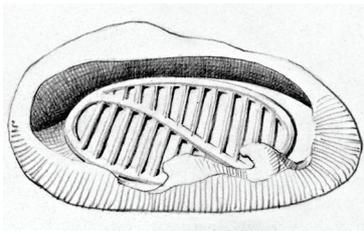
3.4 – lily flower triple bud
(II.2 316a/MM II)



3.5 – palm tree
(VI 157/MM II-MM III)



3.6 – petaloid
(II.1 260a/EM III-MM IA)



3.7 – ellipse halved, two petaloids
(II.1 347b/MM II)



3.8 – petaloid, papyrus, leaf
(II.5 209/MM II)



3.9 – vierpass spiral, quatrefoil, leaf
(II.6 199/MM II)



3.10 – leaf band
(II.1 222a/EM III-MM IA)



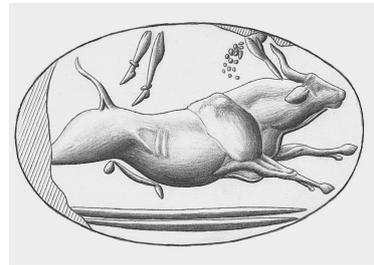
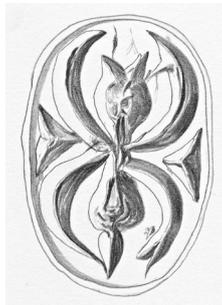
3.11 – papyrus, C spiral, triple bud
(II.2 6/MM II)



3.12 – palmette, petaloid, J spiral
(II.8 20/MM II)

Beautiful Geometry and Natural Shapes

insects and animals

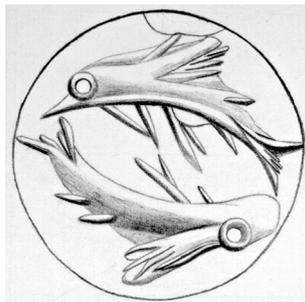
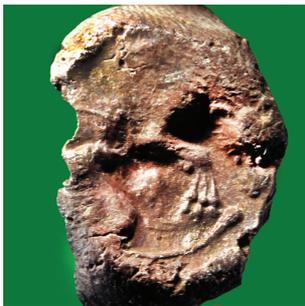


3.13 – scorpions, S spiral
(II.1 250b/EM III-MM IA)

3.14 – spider
(VII 15b/MM II)

3.15 – bull, flying gallop
(II.7 38/LM I)

sea creatures

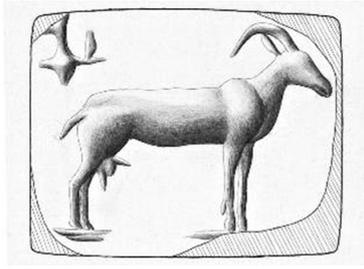


3.16 – lion distressed, contorted, scratching
(II.6 91/LM I)

3.17 – flying fish skimming
(IS 121/LM I)

3.18 – dolphins, whirl spiral
(II.6 155/MM I-MM II)

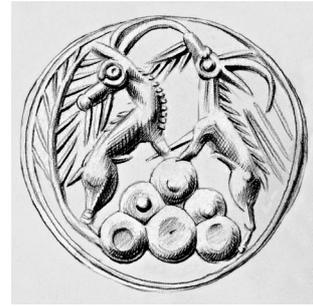
The Animal Body and Distinctive Aegean Animal Poses



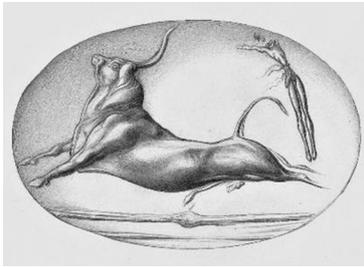
3.19 – animal standing
(II.8 378/MM III-LM I)



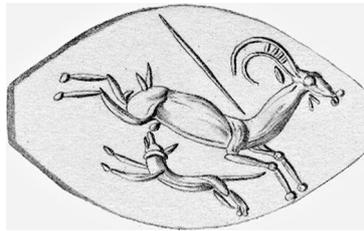
3.20 – animal resting
(II.6 72/LM I)



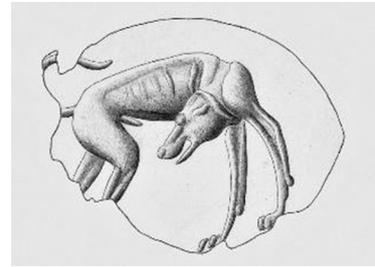
3.21 – animal rearing
(VI 129/MM II)



3.22 – animal flying gallop
(II.6 161/LM I)



3.23 – animal flying leap
(XII D15/LM I)



3.24 – animal reverse twist
(II.6 75/LM I)



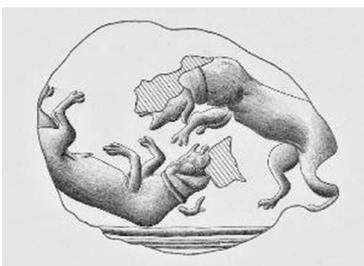
3.25 – animals mating
(II.2 306a/MM II)



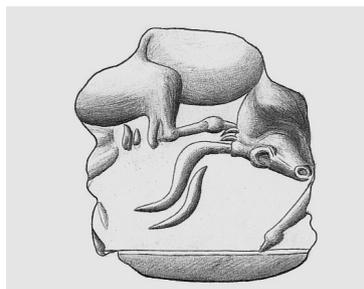
3.26 – animal suckling
(VS 1A 156/LM I)



3.27 – animal caring for young
(II.7 65/LM I)



3.28 – animals playing
(II.6 79/LM I)

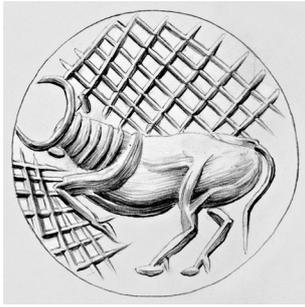


3.29 – animal scratching
(II.7 53/LM I)

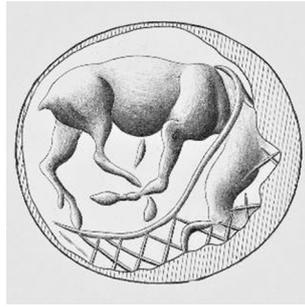


3.30 – animal tethered
(II.3 40/LB II-LB IIIA1)

The Animal Body and Distinctive Aegean Animal Poses



3.31 – animal penned
(VI 408/LM I)



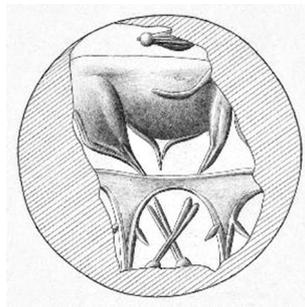
3.32 – animal netted
(II.6 49/LM I)



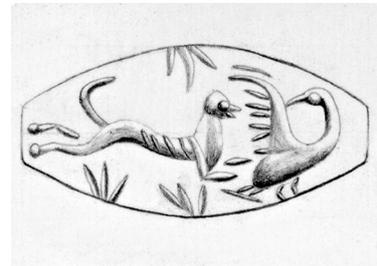
3.33 – animal distressed
(II.2 60/MM II-MM III)



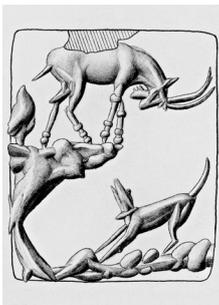
3.34 – animal contorted
(VS 1A 132/LM I)



3.35 – animal sacrificed
(II.8 481/LM I-LM II?)



3.36 – animal stalking
(IS 75/LM I)



3.37 – animal holding at bay
(VI 180/MM III-LM I)



3.38 – animal chasing
(II.8 354/LM I)



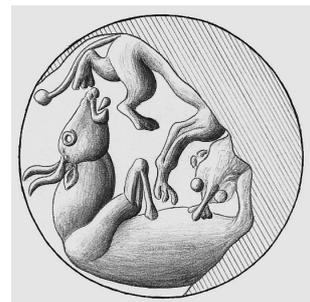
3.39 – animal seizing
(II.8 356/LM I)



3.40 – animal crunching
(II.1 419/LM I-LM II)



3.41 – animal carrying the catch
(IV 285/LM I)



3.42 – animal feeding on the catch
(II.7 102/LM I)

The Human Body in Muscle, Movement and Drapery

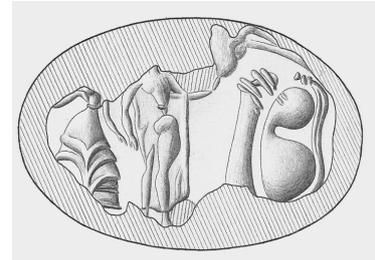
body conventions



3.43 – combination
(II.6 36/LM I)



3.44 – profile
(II.6 13/LM I)

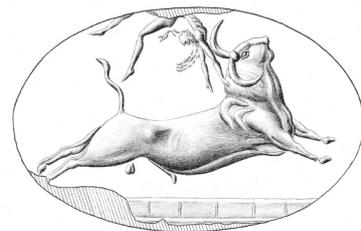


3.45 – back view
(II.7 5/LM I)

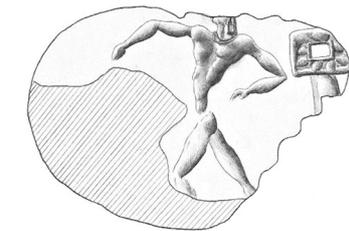
the male body



3.46 – archer half kneeling
(II.6 21/LM I)



3.47 – leaper somersaulting
(VS 3 392/LM I)



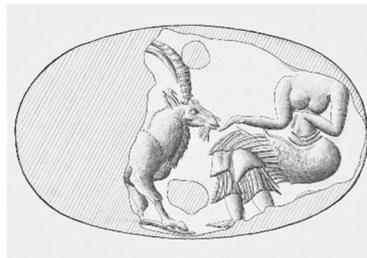
3.48 – wrestler striding
(II.8 280/LM I)

The Human Body in Muscle, Movement and Drapery

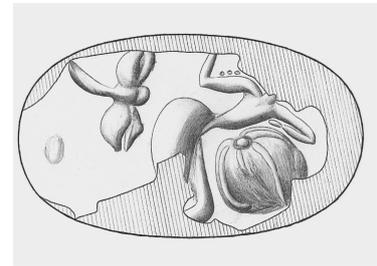
the female body and drapery



3.49 – half kneeling
(XI 26/LB I-LB II)



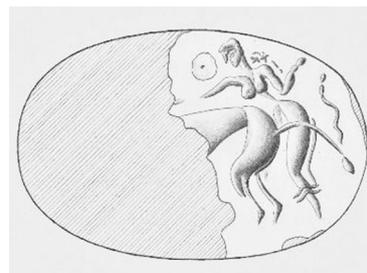
3.50 – seated
(II.6 30/LM I)



3.51 – kneeling
(II.7 6/LM I)



3.52 – pants with calf hemline
(II.6 26/LM I)



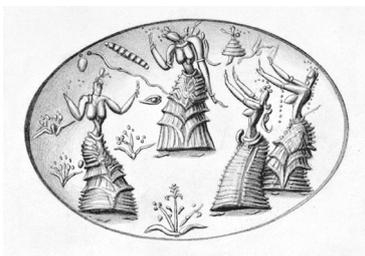
3.53 – diaphanous pants
(II.6 35/LM I)



3.54 – diaphanous mantle
(II.3 16/LB I)

Perspective, Emotion and Dramatic Impact

perspective

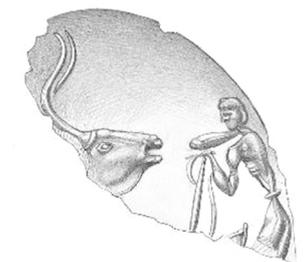


3.55 – mountain view
(II.3 51/LM I)

3.56 – mountain view
(VI 280/LM I)

3.57 – mountain view
(II.8 376/LM I)

emotion



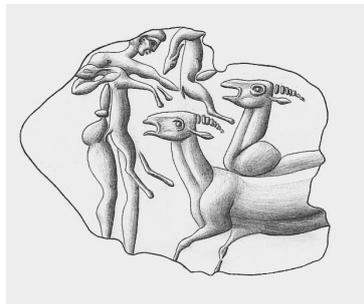
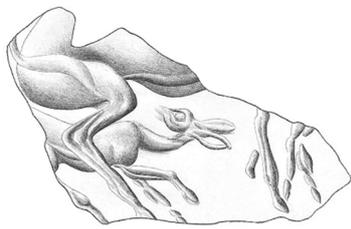
3.58 – human head profile
(VI 293/LM I)

3.59 – animal distressed
(VS 1A 154/LM I)

3.60 – man and animal
(II.8 233/fragment)

Perspective, Emotion and Dramatic Impact

emotion



3.61 – animal caring for young
(II.8 508/LM I)

3.62 – herder with animals
(II.7 30/LM I)

3.63 – gesturing
(VS 2 106/LM I)

dramatic impact



3.64 – climactic point
(II.7 31/LM I)

3.65 – leper falling
(II.6 40/LM I)

3.66 – human couple, gesturing
(VS 3 68/LM I)

Brief Experiments

portraiture?



3.67 – man, head
(II.8 40/MM II-MM III)



3.68 – man, head
(II.8 42/MM II-MM III)



3.69 – man, head
(XI 18/MM III-LM I)



3.70 – man, head
(I 5/LB I)



3.71 – man, head
(II.3 13a/MM III-LM I)

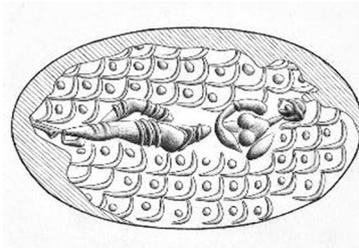


3.72 – man, head
(II.8 41/MM II-MM III)

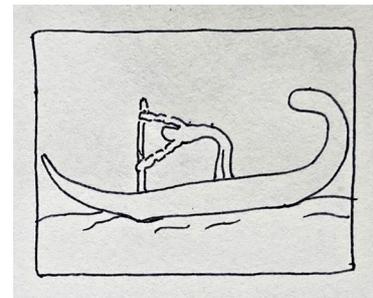
narrative? history?



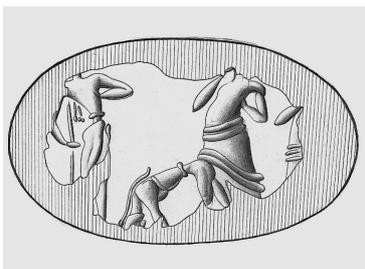
3.73 – one only image
(XI 29/LM I)



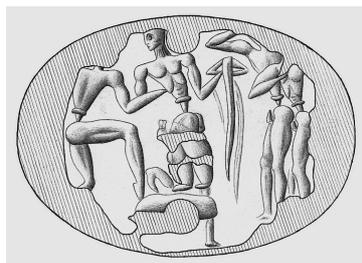
3.74 – one only image
(II.8 264/LM I)



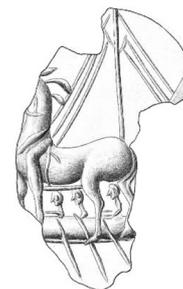
3.75 – one only image
(Rower Cushion/LM I)



3.76 – one only image
(II.7 3/LM I)



3.77 – one only image
(II.7.2/LM I)



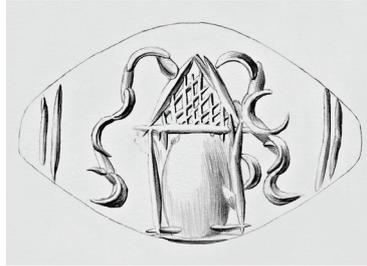
3.78 – one only image
(II.8 133/LM I)

Brief Experiments

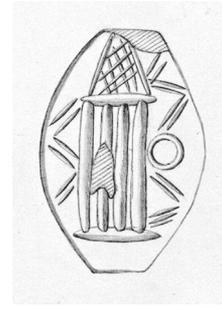
ephemeral shapes



3.79 – droplets of liquid, detail of 3.55



3.80 – bee smoker, smoke
(VI 201/LM I)

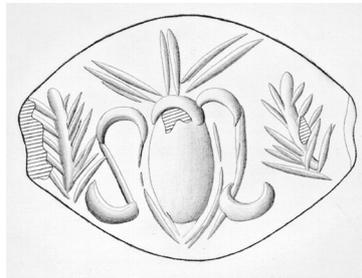


3.81 – bee smoker, smoke
(II.3 203c/LM I)

similar shapes



3.82 – butterfly
(II.3 22/LM I 80)



3.83 – squid, seaweed
(VS 1A 204/LM I)



3.84 – palmette tree
(VS 1A 181/LM I)

Minoan Art Styles and the *Icon* Essence

decorative



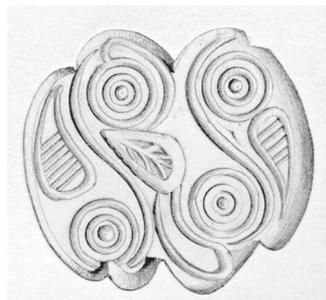
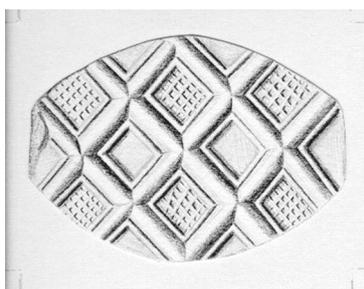
3.85 – lozenge grid
(II.2 11/MM II-MM III)



3.86 – ring, petaloid, leaf
(II.2 30/EM III-MM IA)

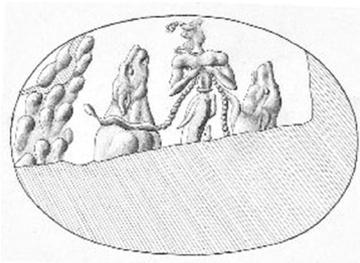


3.87 – rosette, rope band, palmette band
(II.8 9/EM III-MM IA)



Minoan Art Styles and the *Icon* Essence

formulaic and symbolic: human figures and hybrid human



3.88 – Master of Animals
(II.8 248/LM I?)



3.89 – VIP with familiar
(II.8 237/LM I)



3.90 – birdwoman
(II.7 129b/LM I)

formulaic and symbolic: animals, fantastic creatures and artefacts



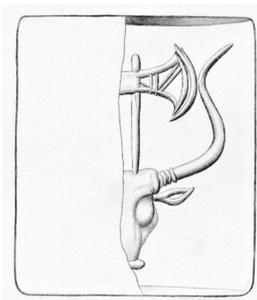
3.91 – bull head, double axe
(II.3 11/LB I-LB II)



3.92 – griffin, heraldic pose
(I 271/LB I-LB II)



3.93 – tusk helmet
(I 260/LB I-LB II)

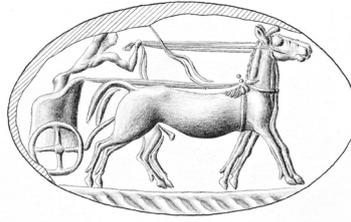


Minoan Art Styles and the *Icon* Essence

idealistic, naturalistic, impressionistic



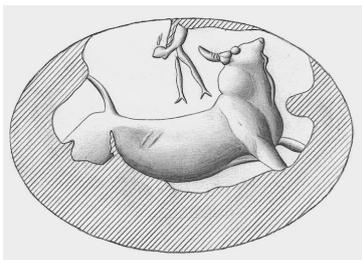
3.94 – hunt scene, landscape
(VS 3 400/LM I)



3.95 – chariot scene
(VS 3 391/LM I)



3.96 – server gesturing
(VS 1A 176/LM I)



3.97 – bull, flying gallop
(II.7 36/LM I)



3.98 – VIP granting audience
II.3 103/LM I-LM II)



3.99 – VIP appearing on high
(VI 281/LM I)