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## The wall paintings of Akrotiri, Greece.



## Introduction

For modern archaeologists who are constantly learning more about the intriguing lives of its dwellers, Akrotiri, the 3,600-year-old city on the island of Santorini that was covered by ash from a massive volcanic eruption in 1650 BC, serves as an exquisite time capsule. The ancient city was a component of the Minoan civilisation, which ruled over the Greek island of Thira at the time and the neighbouring island of Crete. The name Thera was derived from the island's mythological monarch, Theras. Archaeologists have shown that the island's eruption completely destroyed a city-state that was once a part of the Minoan civilisation and obliterated all of the island's life. This raises the question of whether Santorini was actually Atlantis, the fabled city of great beauty that perished beneath the waves, given its elegant three and four-story buildings edged with coloured stones and resplendent public art, including frescoes, which bear witness to a highly-developed, elegant culture.

Some of the most well-known representations of the ancient Greek world may be found in the Bronze Age frescoes from Akrotiri on the Aegean island of Thera (today's Santorini). Between 1650 and 1550 BCE. The bright paintings that were painted on the walls of practically every structure in the town as a result have been kept amazingly well even after the volcanic eruption. The mysteries and marvels of this long-lost ancient metropolis were ultimately rediscovered and once again enjoyed by the human eye when the first systematic excavations started in 1967 CE. In this research paper, I will be focussing on the frescoes that are painted and preserved at Akrotiri. [1]

## History

The fact that most paintings were found on second storeys of buildings and that they could be found in all different kinds of structures demonstrates that frescoes were not only a luxury for the wealthy but were also favoured by all social strata. Smooth lime plaster was applied to the inside walls, and either the fresh or dried plaster was painted over it (secco or tempera).

Spirals in particular exhibit indications of mechanical devices used to attain more precision in certain of the geometric forms. Similar to this, figures used a grid system that was proportionally changed based on the age or size of the figure in order to appropriately depict humans. Minerals were used to make paints, which produced vibrant hues including red, orange, black, blue, purple, and white and organic materials were used as a fixative.

A panoramic panorama was frequently created by decorating all four walls, which occasionally took the eye outside the boundaries of the space. Thera had established itself as a thriving Mediterranean trading hub with connections to the peoples of Crete, the Cyclades, mainland Greece, and Egypt from 2000 BCE until the tragic earthquake and eruption, and this is reflected in the subject of some of the frescoes and in their style, which shares many similarities with frescoes in Minoan Crete and in Egypt. The seascapes, creatures, fish, and plants that are frequently shown in the paintings show an obvious appreciation of the ocean and the natural world. Historical researchers may learn a lot from these later scenes, including the architecture, landscapes, hairstyles, jewellery, weaponry, armour, and trades like shipbuilding from the Bronze Age. The aim of the paintings at Akrotiri is much more than simply being works of art; the frescoes had a special relationship to the purpose of the space in which they were painted. A painting expressed an element of a Minoan or Thera tradition that was understandable and even predictable. One may argue that art served as a representation of the shared ideals of the society the spectator was a part of. Thus, there was a close bond between artist and audience, and the purpose of the painting was crucial. The topics were centered on religious experiences, albeit they might be both direct and indirect. There doesn't appear to be any political depiction at all. [2]

## I] The Spring Fresco



The first painting depicting a natural scene in European art history is said to be the Spring Fresco, which was discovered at the Late Bronze Age site of Akrotiri in Santorini. The Spring Fresco, also known as the Fresco of the Room of the Lilies and located in the site's Delta Complex, has generated a lot of debate among archaeologists and art historians. The painting, which adorns three of the room's walls, casts doubt on the room's intended use. The Spring Fresco in Akrotiri, which was recently discovered, provides a wealth of information on Greek culture throughout the Middle and Early Late Bronze Age (20th–17th century BC).

Like other Minoan wall paintings, the Spring Fresco features vivid hues that span from reds and oranges through black, blue, and purple, as well as white. The paints were prepared from crushed mineral powder and applied to a wall using either wet or dry lime plaster. When the plaster dries, the lime interacts with the carbon dioxide in the air to cement the pigment to the plaster through a chemical reaction called carbonation. The topic and style of this picture may be analysed without raising any difficult restoration-related issues, and its precise placement and archaeological context are known and recorded. [3]

The paintings seem to be in a good condition and is the most intact fresco that was excavated in Thera. According to me, the conservation of this fresco fits best with the critical approach that Brandi has written about. The fresco is displayed in one of the rooms of the Collection of Prehistoric Antiquities of Thera, which protects its historical, aesthetic as well as their physical aspect as they are displayed in the heart of the excavated settlement of Akrotiri in a room which was one of the few decorated rooms of the complex and has been interpreted as a space intended for worship. The museum has performed in-fillings in the lost areas with the help of modern conservation techniques to stabilize and give us a sense of what the image would have looked like without trying to restore the object to its original state. [4]

## II] The Boxers Fresco



This fresco shows two young people engaging in ceremonial boxing rather than a competition. The antelopes are shown in a considerably bigger fresco on the room's other three walls. The red colouring, which is customary when depicting men, suggests that the boxers are male. Only a belt and loincloth are worn by them, along with a boxing glove on the right hand. As a show of youth, their hair features long tresses with shaved sections. Contrary to his opponent, the youngster on the left is accessorized with a necklace, earrings, bracelets, and anklets. According to Marinatos, the contrasting antelopes appear to be facing each other off in a playful test of strength. [5]

It is said that some of the elements of this painting were saved in the debris and later put back together by archaeologists. This fresco is now housed in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens in a protective environment under climate control. Very little remained

from the ancient fresco but enough to give the sense of what is going on in this fresco which was used as a guide to recreate the fresco, saving its aesthetic nature. According to Brandi's theory, recreation of these frescoes might have hampered the physical aspect of the artwork but protected its aesthetic nature which, according to him, was acceptable. These frescoes give contemporary civilization a priceless window into the way of life of the Cycladic people.

### III] The Ship Fresco



This six-meter-long painting, which depicts a tiny parade or escort of ships, is in the Athens' National Archaeological Museum. The fleet's flagship takes centre stage as eight huge ships and three smaller ones, all propelled by rowers, move from port to port. Marinatos recognized the town on the right as Akrotiri because of its more affluent architecture and fashionable residents, while the town on the left is Aegean, likely another, more rural village on the island, based on its vegetation and wildlife. Additionally, the fact that the ships were propelled by oars shows that the two towns were not far away. The image might depict a scene from a forgotten epic poetry or possibly a seasonal marine event. The decorations on the ships, which include flowers, butterflies, swallows, and other natural motifs, point to a religious event as being more plausible. The flora and fauna in each port are depicted in great detail, as are the long robes worn by the ship passengers, which suggest they are of high

social status and, once again, taking part in an important religious festival. Dolphins that resemble those from Knossos leap between the ships and the buildings. [6]

The fragments were collected, reconstructed and displayed in the National Archaeological museum of Athens for the public to see. According to Brandi, losing the physical nature of the painting was necessary to preserve its historic and nature. The "West House," the location of the renowned flotilla of ships, as well as individual residences in the town were decorated with these intricate murals. They give incredibly valuable information about Bronze Age Cycladic culture, customs, and beliefs, as well as minute details about the islanders and their daily lives.

#### IV] The Monkey Frescoes



Among the various creatures depicted in the paintings of this 3,600-year-old city are the blue monkeys painted on the walls of Akrotiri on the Greek island of Santorini. Since the paintings were discovered on the island, once known as Thera, in the 1960s and 1970s, historians have examined them for decades. However, recent examination of the paintings by a team of primatologists revealed that the monkeys might offer a hint that the Bronze Age world was much more globally connected than previously believed. They set out to determine potential

species attributions for the monkeys shown in Aegean artwork. In order to do this, the researchers looked at the physical traits of monkey and ape imagery found in plaques, glyptic art, wall murals, decorative pinheads, and figurines from Egypt, the Near East, Mesopotamia, and the Aegean. Even though most depictions (especially most wall paintings) were too unclear or badly maintained for accurate attribution, some early identifications were confirmed, and one wall painting revealed important new information.

There are a few different theories as to what influenced the artists to paint these monkeys. One of the theories states that the monkeys that are painted on these walls depict Hanuman langur's (genus *Semnopithecus*), a type of monkey from the Indian subcontinent. This can also be linked to the Hindu God Hanuman, who appears as a monkey in Hindu mythological stories. Stories of Hanuman and his 'vaanar sena' (monkey army) have been displayed through art and artworks in temples and other religious places. The Aegean people, who originated in Crete and the Cycladic islands in the Aegean Sea, may have had trade networks that extended over 2,500 kilometres, according to this evidence. The Aegean peoples had access to minerals like tin, lapis lazuli, and carnelian that originated beyond the Zagros mountains on the western border of contemporary Iran, according to archaeological evidence. But compared to other monkey artwork of the time, the Akrotiri paintings' creative intricacy implies that the creators had actually seen real creatures, probably while traveling overseas. Given that the connections between the Aegean and Egypt were already widely known and corroborated by archaeological data, it makes sense that older researchers believed the monkeys to be African. They only look at African animals for answers if you expect to discover an African monkey. But as primatologists, we were able to approach the data with a fresh perspective and without having any preconceived beliefs about the ancestors of the present. [7]

Ancient and medieval artwork frequently featured non-native and even made-up animals and other creatures. And it's laughably obvious when the artist, as with those in medieval manuscripts, never actually saw the animal they're depicting. The images are so exact that experts can recognize the monkeys, however, it is obvious that the painters actually saw these animals in Grecian frescoes or at least spoke to someone who were alive back then, in great detail. The wall paintings of Akrotiri, which provide an unparalleled picture of an early civilization in Europe, were preserved by volcanic ash that caused the city to be destroyed somewhere in the 16th or 15th century BC. This wall painting was found on the ground in fragments with stone slabs from the second floor of the building it was painted in.

According to me, Egypt was the only source of inspiration for the depiction of monkeys in art because it is the closest location where both imagery and physical remains of the native animals are plentiful and well preserved. These wall paintings are now located in the National Archaeological museum of Thera, placed next to other wall paintings that were excavated. The fragments of the wall painting were collected and transferred to a conservation laboratory where they were put back into place and the displayed at the museum. According to Cesare Brandi's theory, this loses the physical nature of the artwork but it is necessary to save the historical and aesthetic nature of the painting. The first thing that struck me as an artist was the area that the paintings are contained in. The painter could have made up for the fact that the oil lights that were in use at the time gave the walls a more yellowish tint by painting them blue so they would seem grey. Just an idea.

### Reassembling the Thera Frescoes - Automated Digitization and Matching of Fragments

Wall paintings, which have been preserved in the volcanic ash since the seventeenth century BC, are among Akrotiri's most priceless antiques. The frescoes, however, are often found in fragments that range in size from a few millimetres to a few tens of centimetres, and in Akrotiri, reconstructing entire wall portions takes up a lot of manual labour. An effort to aid conservators and archaeologists by scanning shards found during excavations and utilizing computer algorithms to automatically suggest matches based on 3D edge profile, colour, and other clues was performed. Conservators were able to see and assess matches with the aid of an easy-to-use user interface.

A big group of Princeton scholars visited Akrotiri many times in 2007—first to study and learn from the site's expert conservators, then to test their method. They used their automated technology to measure 150 pieces during a three-day trip to the island in September 2007. Even while the system is still being refined, it has already produced encouraging outcomes in real-world situations. For instance, it discovered 10 out of 12 known matches when tested on a subset of fragments from a sizable Akrotiri wall mural. It also discovered two more, previously undiscovered matches. They also created a test fresco using the fragments that were collected.

It merely takes a few seconds to analyse a common pair of fragments to check if they match. The algorithm must look at all potential pairs of pieces, which might add significantly to the time required to rebuild a big fresco. The researchers want to include a number of other indications that archaeologists generally employ to streamline their search for matching shards in order to speed up the algorithm. These details cover things like the location of the shards, the texture of the pigment, and the degree of preservation. Given the state of the pieces and the sheer volume of fragments, reconstructing these paintings is exceedingly complicated. The computer handles the tedious aspects of the process while leaving the crucial, intuitive judgments to the people. [8]

### Theory Comparisons

I think Viollet-le-Duc would genuinely disapprove of the way the Akrotiri frescoes have been preserved thus far. Viollet-le-Duc practiced "stylistic" restoration and held a belief in "Zeitgeist," which translates from German as "the spirit of time." He thought that artworks should maintain the aesthetics and style that were present at the time of its creation and as intended by the original artists and in order to properly maintain the originality and location of the frescoes production, I believe Violet-le-Duc would have suggested that the paintings be repainted or left and displayed on site along with other stylistic creations.

On the other hand, Viollet-le-restorational Duc's principles would be completely rejected by John Ruskin. Ruskin was well known for his theory of "anti-restoration," even though he mostly spoke for the preservation and restoration of architectural structures. In the case of the frescoes of Akrotiri, I think Ruskin would choose not to intervene as according to him , the spirit (of an artwork) is only provided by a worker's hand and eyes can never be remembered. Furthermore, it is clearly impossible to reproduce something directly and simply. Contrary to Viollet-le-Duc's theories, Ruskin believed that relocating, reconstructing, and conserving these frescoes would have been a falsehood that could never restore the original essence of the work.

Alois Riegel frequently debated the opposition between an artwork's "memorial value" and "present-day value," and he believed that both should be taken into account when evaluating

conservation procedures. He also believed that an artwork's "artistic value" as well as its "age value" should be considered. Riegel was making systematic analysis of the concepts of conservation, considering the value which then defined the approach while rejecting the theories of restoration and anti-restoration. He was a follower of Morris and Boito and he claimed that even cleaning of a painting was a modern intervention and he believed that stylistic conservation endangered the authenticity. Considering the age value first, minimum to no level of intervention should be taken and different values need to be prioritised. His theory is applicable to contemporary conservation but not to the restoration of the frescoes of Akrotiri. He would have been against this theory and left the frescoes as they are on site, in order to save the authenticity, but actually destroying the fresco in the longer run.

### Conclusion

You may expect to see the Akrotiri frescoes on site, but that is not the case. In Athens, at the National Archaeological Museum, the majority of them are on exhibit. A handful are also on display in Santorini's Museum of Prehistoric Thera. There are no frescoes to be seen at the Akrotiri Archaeological Site, where you may view the excavations of Akrotiri. There are other works of art nevertheless, including ceramics, sculptures, and other unfinished items. I think that relocating the frescoes was the right thing to do. Since their discovery, a number of individual frescoes have been displayed as independent works of art at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, where they have been viewed by countless tourists. However, the 1999 earthquake that devastated the Greek capital severely damaged the Minoan gallery where they were on display. The Central Archaeological Council made the decision to store the bulk of them for a considerable amount of time with the intention of moving them to a permanent display in their original Santorini location.

The Museum of Prehistoric Thera exhibition is divided into four sections that cover the history of Thera research, Thera's geology, the island's history from the Late Neolithic to the Early Cycladic I period (early 17th century B.C.), and the height of Akrotiri's city (mature Late Cycladic I period, 17th century BC). As the museum restores the frescoes and artifacts from the site during its immense success, it may be seen as an extension of the Akrotiri

archaeological site. [9] The frescoes are not at the site anymore as most of the site has not been excavated and explored yet due to low government funds and the conservation laboratory shut down. The frescoes cannot be left on site, exposed to unprotected architectural structure that may risk destroying the frescoes.

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