

The Palace Style

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The Palace Style refers to the decoration on a group of ceramic vessels created at or near palace workshops during the LM II period. After an earthquake destroyed the Cretan royal palaces at the end of MM III, they were finally reconstructed by LM II. This period marks the last dynasty of Cretan kings, and the pottery style reflects this high point in royal patronage. Conventional motifs seem to reflect a stately and orderly manner, and the animated images and decoration from the previous periods were suspended in favor of this rigid Palace Style. The earlier floral and marine Minoan motifs were frozen into formal, stylized images. As a result, the emphasis on the imitation of nature slowly dissolved as conventionalism triumphed. For example, the octopus and nautilus were transformed into formal designs rather than living creatures. Lilies and palm leaves stiffened instead of freely flowing over the surface of a work. Scholars debate the influence for these stylized images. One theory claims that the style imitated the popular interior decoration found on Cretan wall paintings from the LM II period. Another argues that Mycenaean interaction with Minoan society influenced the shift towards more stylized motifs.



Palace style vases from Prosymna, National Archaeological Museum, Athens, 15th century B.C. (Photo: Sailko, Wikimedia Commons)]

The vessels created during this period are usually larger in size than earlier Minoan pottery. The new favorite shape was the pithoid jar, of which there are examples in the *Ancient World Gallery*. These vessels are characterized by the inclusion of three vertical handles and high shoulders which gradually contract downwards to a narrow foot. The word *piriform*, which means “pear-shaped,” has been used to describe these ceramic works. While some pieces do resemble this pear form, many do not. Therefore these vessels are usually referred to as pithoid jars, a term coined by Sir Arthur Evans for vessels with more than one row of handles. The extra handle allowed the jar to be held and moved either by hand or rope.

The Palace Style is not only valued for its aesthetic beauty. More importantly, it provides critical information concerning Minoan society during the LM II period. Primarily, the existence of this style on works created after the mid 15th century BCE gives evidence of Bronze Age peoples living in palaces originally damaged in the earthquakes from the MM III period. Secondly, the Palace Style was not only popular in Crete but was exported throughout the Aegean world. Archaeological excavations in mainland Greece have uncovered Cretan Palace Style pottery,

indicating that the princes of Mycenae and other mainland settlements desired these ceramic vessels for use in their palaces or even their graves. The existence of Palace Style pottery outside of Crete also proves trade existed between Mycenaean and Minoan societies, though the extent of this contact is debated by scholars. The Palace Style continued to flourish in the Aegean world until the Cretan palaces of Knossos, Phaestos, and Mallia were suddenly destroyed around 1400 BCE. When these royal palaces collapsed for a second time, the decorative style which expressed their grandeur fell out of use as well.

For Further Reading

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