

A Tale of Three Museums

by P.Y. Forsyth

Museum 1: Let's go back in time to the 1950s – a young student (whom I'll call "P") is making yet another visit to her favourite place: The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. As usual, her first stop is the crowded Mummy Room, where she gazes upon the remains of a people who lived long ago and very far away. Her years-old fascination with the ancient Egyptians, however, has this time led her to another set of rooms, also dedicated to a "long ago" culture, that of the ancient Greeks. But, just as she enters the area, she catches sight of a small glass case containing a single, very unusual object. This strange artefact is only a few centimetres tall, and is made of ivory skilfully accented with gold strips to indicate that the obviously female figure is holding snakes. It's called, she soon discovers, a "Minoan Snake Goddess" (see figure 1). But she has never heard the word "Minoan" before and wonders what it means; little does she know at that time that much of her adult life would be devoted to the study of the Bronze Age civilization of Minoan Crete (ca. 3000-1200 BC). It

would appear that the "Boston Snake Goddess" had left an indelible impression.

Now, let's jump ahead to 2001: A growing number of art historians have become increasingly suspicious of the "Boston Snake Goddess" and claim that it is probably a modern forgery. It certainly came to light under mysterious circumstances: the Museum had obtained it in 1914, allegedly from a Cretan peasant who had worked at the excavation of the great Palace of Minos at Knossos (discovered by Sir Arthur Evans in 1900). We now know that at least some of Evans' workers were indeed forging artefacts on the side to take advantage of the growing desire of art collectors for exotic Minoan objects. Was the Boston Snake Goddess such a fake? Was its cracked and weathered appearance really due to the pouring of acid over the ivory to make it look very old? The Museum of Fine Arts must be contemplating this matter very seriously, as this figurine is indeed its prize Minoan artefact,

and removing it from public display would be a cruel blow to the institution. It would also be a cruel blow to P – the very object that first alerted her to the existence of the prehistoric culture of the Minoans could turn out to be a fraud.

Museum 2: Jump back in time to 1966 and the Royal Ontario Museum. P has just moved to Toronto and can't wait to visit the internationally famous R.O.M. Among its treasures, she knows, is "Our Lady of the Sports," another ivory and gold Minoan figurine worthy of its own special display case (see figure 2). She knows the piece has been much restored, but it still appears authentic: it clearly represents a female "bull leaper" (an acrobat who would vault over the back of a running bull) of the type well documented in Minoan wall paintings. In fact, the figurine strikes her as one of the most beautiful Minoan objects she has yet seen: the gold costume the bull leaper wears is very finely made, and the pose of the figure is very graceful. While a graduate student in Toronto, she will visit this tiny figure many times, especially when in need of a break from exams!

Jump forward now to 2001: Can lightning strike twice, P wonders? Respected art historians are vehemently questioning the authenticity of “Our Lady of the Sports”! For example, one scholar finds fault with the figure’s large breasts that seem to be supported by what she calls a “Victorian-like corset.” The situation is not improved, she states, by the fact that Our Lady is wearing a man’s codpiece! And, as was the case in Boston, the history of the figurine is murky at best: a French art dealer who provided no data on its find site or circumstances sold it to the R.O.M. in 1931. Since this figurine is the R.O.M.’s most prized (and most famous) Minoan object, museum officials must be pondering what to do: keep it on display, or take it away to lie in ignominy in some back room? For the moment Museum officials have promised an investigation into the authenticity of the figure. P awaits the verdict with some degree of trepidation!

Museum 3: This time let’s just jump back just a bit, to September, 2000: On a visit to the British Museum, P is wandering through a room lined with Bronze Age material from the Cycladic islands of the Aegean Sea. The Early Cycladic civilization is even older than that of Minoan Crete, and she has long been intrigued by the so-called “Folded Arm Figurines” produced on these small islands about 2000 BC. Looking about at these sculptures, she suddenly sees a case that she had not noticed before in previous visits to the Museum: alone in this case stands a larger than normal (almost 1 meter tall) Cycladic Folded-Arm Figurine (see figure 3). What makes this figurine so special, however, is not its size (she has seen even larger ones in Athens) but its material: instead of being made of the usual marble found in the Cycladic islands, this figurine is made of tephra, a compacted volcanic material. The label in the case says that the

figurine may come from the volcanic island of Thera – an island that P has been studying for many years. In fact, she once speculated that the early inhabitants of Thera had used tephra for many purposes and had even exported objects made of it to other islands. Could this be the “hard” evidence she was looking for? But, given her previous experiences in Boston and Toronto, she wonders whether this, too, is “too good to be true” – i.e., is it a modern forgery?

Move just slightly ahead to February, 2001: Still intrigued by what she has come to call “Tephra Woman,” P reaches for the Internet and connects with a highly respected curator in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities in the British Museum. She learns that the figurine was apparently found on the island of Syros in 1912; the curator believes it to be an authentic Cycladic figurine, and notes that a similar statue can also be found in a German museum. However, she adds that no tests have been carried out to identify the origin of the tephra by analysis of its chemical composition.

And that is the rub, so to speak: two ways of determining the authenticity of an ancient object are (1) to subject it to modern scientific methods of dating, and (2) to analyse it chemically to find out exactly where it came from. All three of the objects dealt with in this article need this kind of analysis, but there is a price to pay: usually fragments must be removed for scientific examination, and thus each piece would be damaged even more. No wonder archaeologists and art historians sometimes feel as though they’re caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place!

Given how much we now know about the Bronze Age civilizations of the Aegean, one might ask whether it is really so important to pass judgement on these controversial artefacts. Yes, it is, because such objects may well lead us to misinterpret important aspects of these cultures. As Kenneth Lapatin, an art historian at Boston University, has stated, such forgeries “continue to appear in textbooks and encyclopedias, scholarly journals and monographs, art historical and archaeological surveys, and more popular books... as genuine ancient artefacts... [and thus play] a crucial role in fashioning modern conceptions of Aegean prehistory.” Whether P likes it or not, her Minoan and Cycladic “icons” need to be what they claim to be. Well, P already seems to have two strikes against her – will she strike out on “Tephra Woman”? She certainly hopes not – she’s beginning to think she’s jinxed!