

Ancient and Medieval Art

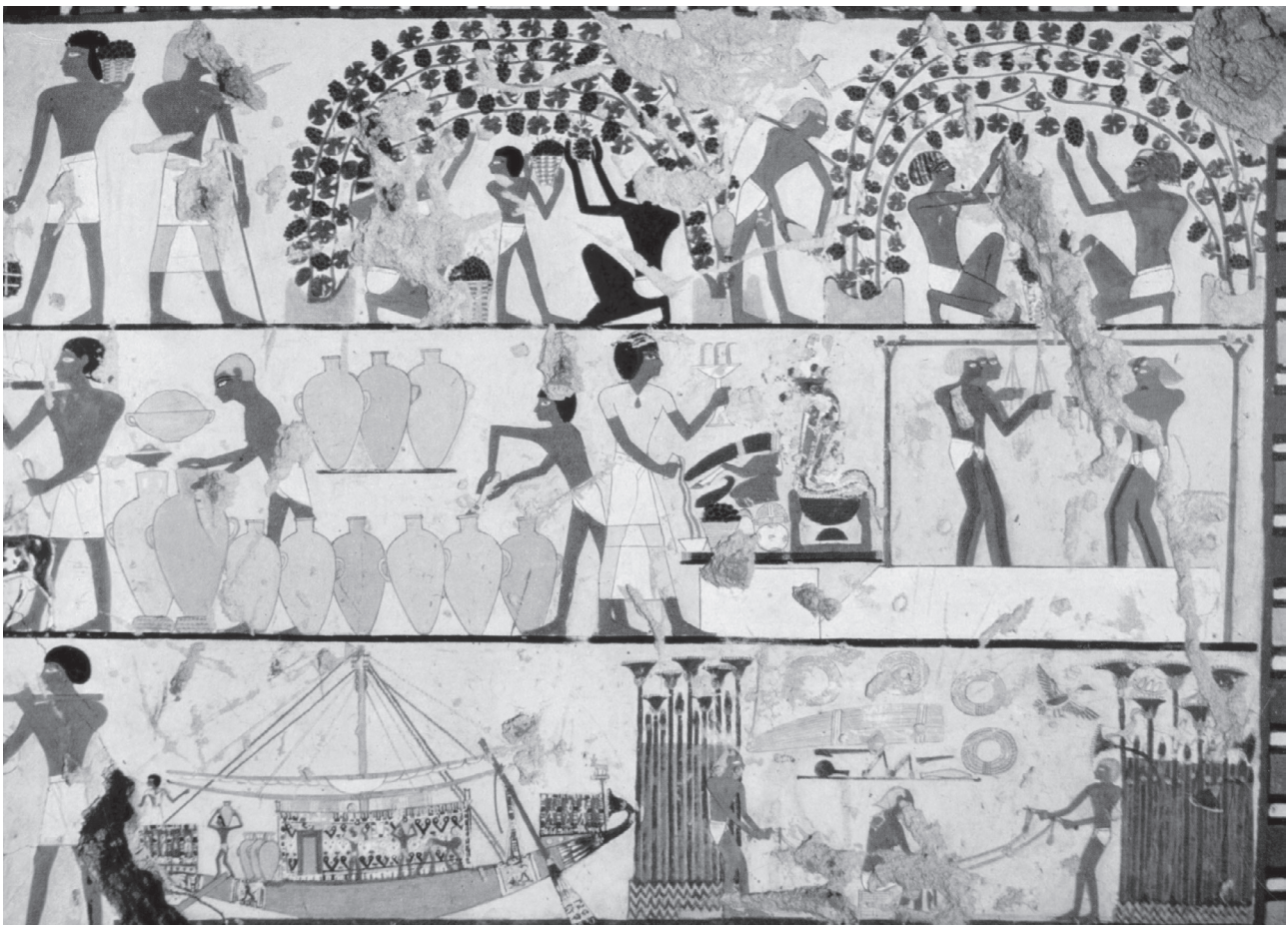
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Many beautiful works of art survive from Ancient times – from Egyptian tomb paintings to Minoan palace decorations. But the earliest artists would not have thought of their work as ‘art’ the way we do today. Most early art was actually made for ritual or magic purposes.

Walk like an Egyptian

Egypt was ruled by kings, called pharaohs, from about 3000 BCE to 30 BCE. Much of the art that survives from that period was made for tombs, including carved stone statues and elaborately detailed paintings.

The ancient Egyptians believed that art had magical powers. They decorated tombs with images of everyday life, because they really believed these would help the person live on in the next world. People thought it was more important to record details clearly than to create natural-looking scenes. For them, art was a way of preserving life. In fact, one Egyptian word for sculptor can be translated as “he-who-keeps-alive”.



A depiction of a painting in an Egyptian tomb.

Island art

From about 2000 BCE, art flourished on the Greek islands, particularly on Crete, where a people called the Minoans lived. The Minoans were great seafarers and traded with the Egyptians, and their art shows an Egyptian influence. But the Minoan style was less stiff and formal.

A lot of Minoan art was to do with religious rituals. For example, many statues show gods or worshippers. But some Minoan art – such as animal designs on storage jars – was probably just for decoration. So, for the first time, people were making art for its own sake, just because they liked the way it looked.

Artists and warriors

Then, from about 1600–1100 BCE, a people known as Mycenaeans dominated most of Greece. They were great warriors and fought many battles, including the Trojan War. You can see their preoccupation with war reflected in their art, which often shows warriors and fight scenes.

The Mycenaeans took over Crete from the Minoans, and were influenced by their art too. But compared with Minoan art, Mycenaean paintings seem much less fluid. The difference between the two styles shows how early Greek art developed and changed, unlike Egyptian art, which remained virtually the same for thousands of years.

The art of observation

The ancient Greeks were fascinated by the world around them and studied it closely – and they used their observations of real life in their art. Sculptors of the period tried to show the human body in a realistic, natural-looking way. The standards they set, for both beauty and technical skill, have been admired and imitated for centuries.

Unfortunately, very few Greek paintings have survived. Paintings made on wood rotted away, and wall paintings were lost when buildings were destroyed. But we know quite a lot about Greek painting from ancient writings. And the Greeks were famous for making painted vases and dishes, many of which did survive.



A Greek sculpture of an athlete preparing to throw a discus.