CHROMATIC EXPERIMENTATIONS IN THE ARCHITECTURAL RESTORATION OF THE «PALACE OF MINOS» AT KNOSOS

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ABSTRACT
In the distant March of 1900 the extensive finds of the archaeological site of Knossos came to light. Within the framework of a complex and sui generis approach to the conservation and restoration, the ruins will be identified by Sir A. Evans as those of ‘Minos’s Palace’. As a consequence the term ‘Minoan’ was introduced and it would since be associated with the precious antiquities which correspond to the same place and chronology. Among these, numerous fragments of frescoes were unearthed, copies of which would later become famous such as the ‘King-Priest’, the ‘Griffins’, the ‘bull with the olive tree’ and the ‘Grand Stand’. In a wider sense colour will play its first role in this archaeological excavation as an interpretational agent for the discovered data. We are concerned with the architectural representations shown on the frescoes, which will become the model for future reconstructions. The basic use of colour would be made clear after the realisation that the ruins either of dark grey stones or the scintillant white of gypsum were deteriorating due to exposure to the light, as intense as in Africa. Thus the colour will be utilised as a balancing medium between the ruins and their reconstruction, an instrument for the reading of the architectural forms, as well as being proof of the existence of the novel Minoan aesthetic. This was a fundamental process for Evans who was in need of discovering a unicum in the fields of history and archaeology. This Cretan civilization ought to have been in a position of supremacy even over the classical period of Greece from which Evans wished to distance himself since his university days to account for a light sense of orientalism. Minoan architecture owes its exotic and singular character, separate from the classical world, to its extensive use of colour. Its not by chance that the chosen palette of basic tones for the restoration of the ‘palace’ display a common affinity with that of exotic Egypt. On one hand the basic chromatic experimentations dictated by the restorators ensured and declared their artistic autonomy, while on the other, exactly on account of this same artistic originality, they fervently endeavoured to salvage the excavation. Validation of the importance assigned to the role of colour in the restoration and reconstruction of the Minoan archaeological site, will be the presence of architects trained in the use of colour as well as painters. Crucial for this choice of professionals will be the formidable passion nurtured by Evans for painting; himself was a collector of renaissance canvases and deemed imperative that the walls of his villa, within the archaeological site, were fitted with a hanging system for them. Either way his passion for paintings will continue throughout his life. The personalities to be analyzed, who were involved in this operation will be the Swiss painters Émile Gilliéron father and son, and those of architects Christian Doll and Piet de Jong, who also was the last important painter who witnessed the greater part of the Knossos endeavour.

The ruins of Knosós ‘Palace’ in Crete have clearly been interpreted on the basis of archaeological evidence; a totality which consists of few architectural members, clay vessels, and fragments of frescoes. Based on the latter, the original sum of artifacts was reconstituted, currently exhibited in the Archaeological museum of Iraklion. Cases in point are
the remains of the paw of a mythical animal with plants on the wall of the ‘Throne room’, the hoofs and head of a bull found at the ‘Northern Entrance Passage’, the fragments of male figures at the ‘South Propylon’ and South Corridor and lastly the fragmented representation of partridges at ‘Caravan Sarai’. (Fig. 1)

The story of discovering these antiquities, is hardly commonplace. In March of 1900 they were officially unearthed, on the site acquired by the archaeologist and by 1931 had undergone a gradual archaeological and architectural processing. With this term it is meant that following the initial protective measures-simple timber shelters or supports-sir Arthur Evans braved restorations which essentially approached, increasingly a complete copy, without him being certain regarding their ancient form. Nevertheless the restorations were never executed thoughtlessly or without prior study, though for some this fact did not guarantee their correctness.

To the activities of the complex gradual archaeological and architectural treatment of minoan fragments/relics, being necessary to deal with their rapid deterioration was added the issue of presenting them. The main salvaging strategy followed by Evans and his engineers, concluded in a three-dimensional building renaissance - seemingly desolate. It was the archaeologist’s justified mindset, also shared by the engineers, to discover the missing piece between myth and history in the mosaic of western civilization, which initially lead them to initiate restoration activities. At the same time the ruins' much discussed modern creative restoration, was brought into relief; closely interwoven with, yet beyond the personal projections of British orientalism and the private visions of the excavator.

The means by which the lack of grandeur-in contrast to Egyptian or Roman ruins-was dealt with were exclusively architectural in conjunction with the placement of the frescoes' restored copies. This particular decision, following the architectural interventions, aimed at restoring the missing sense of color among the grey ruins; something which, considering Evans’ mythical essence, could be articulated metaphorically as a minoan phoenix risen from the ashen ruins by

Fig.1:
The Knosos Plan, indicating discussed fresco locations, image by the author.

Fig.2
The “Grand Stand” fresco AMH pg. 182.
means of an ardent British will. The team of architects, restorators, painters and archaeologists had at their disposal the following practical tools for ‘re-organizing’ the space: conservation, restoration and reconstruction, but also the composition of compete ‘canvases’ either inspired by or derived from their ancient fragments. Naturally, at the same time, there were other theoretical arguments such as mythical, historical and archaeological, which would presume a different study matter.

Thus the minoan aesthetic was reborn, with unavoidable subjective elements yet researched in detail: in 1902, in the RIBA hall in London, Theodor Fyfe, Knosós’ first restoration architect, presented his thoughts and impressions concerning certain knosian fresco relayerings. Assuredly the ‘colored’ material at the disposal of Fyfe and other researchers was greater than the current list of frescoes selected for commenting by the present author. The 1902 report included the comments concerning the decorative bands, certain ceiling patterns of painted stucco relief and demonstrably the form and color of minoan columns. Crucial to this was the “Grand Stand” micro-fresco, which was

Fig.3
Grand Staircase Loggia with “Shield Fresco” Replica - Red Columns T.D.P.E.A.E. pg. 32

Fig.4
The “Cup - Bearer Fresco” AMH, pg. 85

Fig.5
“South Propylon” - White Column T.D.P.E.A.E. pg.34
(Fig. 2) precisely the main source for obtaining a number of architectural and morphological fundamentals. This particular find was found just a few months following the discovery. It is a figurative representation of a scene, with a plethora of viewers, taking place in an unidentified space which could be a grand balcony. This would provide Evans and his associates, the original vocabulary for their future graphic representations and subsequent reconstructions. On the fragments of the “Grand Stand” fresco are shown black and red columns among other architectural members. The columns depicted represent the Minoan order that will introduce to architectural history, the column that «is growing smaller towards its base». In other words, this predominant characteristic is described as a narrowing of the column’s base in relation to the base of the capital; characterized by the pronounced curvature over the first ring and colored as terracotta red and black with white circular bands.

The first application of a ‘new minoan’ column/pillar manifested in the restoration of the “Grand Staircase”. It place concerns the iconic point by antonomasia, in the Minoan ‘palace’, erroneously nominated so after the ‘Throne Room’. Not only owing to the history of its discovery and the constant measures taken to salvage it, via tunnels, burrowed to help support its stairs. It was as though a lighting study was taking place tracing back – from the time of the restoration - approximately three millennia. Initially, in fact archaeologically, the space concerned here lent itself to two morphological versions. The first could be termed as ‘closed’ having only small openings on the staircase’s eastern elevation; an architectural attitude oriented towards protection from the intense local sunlight, rather towards the users’ comfort and grandeur. The second, put forth by Ch. Doll (Fig.3) and ultimately realized, resulted from numerous graphic attempts, reversals and archaeological validations. It comprises a series of stairs with parapet, upon which the neo-minoan red columns were reconstructed in the ancient niches. Thus the staircase’s inner load-bearing wall formed a dark background against which the bright colored columns are outlined.

In contrast to the first ‘closed’ architectural solution, here is seen an open and ethereal magnificence also expressed in the architect’s exceptional watercolor drawings. The presence of color in the technical drawings functions as a vital element in visualizing the space in its completion. The deep red tone/coloration that became known as ‘minoan’, is composed of the basic pigment with mixed «terra d’ ombra». The same typical color was used in the background for the ‘Room of the Throne’ fresco, the ‘Priest – King’, the bull and olive tree, also as the basic tone of the “Cup Bearers” skin. (Fig. 4) A further observation on deep red (or “deep venetian red”) is that it is often accompanied by white surfaces; [1] such as in the instances of the ‘Throne Room’ and the ‘King Priest’. In the first fresco it is rendered by curved surfaces usually interpreted with the curvature of the ground; much like the background with the partridges at ‘Caravan Serai’. [2] These though are important to the whole ‘weight’ of either image which, in the end, resulted from E. Gilleron’s extensive treatment. The same combination- in reverse to the “Cup Bearers” - for achieving chromatic balance - was accomplished by selecting the white tincture for the “Priest’s” skin in the self-titled fresco. Such a revolving correlation between these two colors was transferred to the architectural members. Reference is made to the great white column at the ‘South Propylon’. The column’s appearance in fact (Fig. 5) added, to the restorations, an added possible coloration to the two already known from the original source: the red and the black. No white column survives in ancient pictorial form; yet we have seen the white pigment to be strongly present in the panorama of minoan frescoes, presented here, mainly as a background. We haven’t though yet introduced another prevalent and –following the discovery of the frescoes on Santorini - reinforced interpretation which broadly identifies, based on the two
use of this pigment indicates the exotic influence in minoan art, since the particular white pigment is indeed found in Egyptian pictures. Then as a skin tincture we find it on many depictions of women, as in the ‘Parisienne’ (Fig.6), the ‘Palace Ladies’ or outside Knosós in the ‘Grove’ picture from Hagia Triada. [3] Thus, with relative ease, from the fragments of frescoes the following characteristic pigments have been isolated: deep red, black and white. The same pigments would become the symbolic guides for the ‘restoration’s’ lime-cast process. Following the existence of the other two columns, the hypothesis of there being white ones as well, was the anticipated syllogistic outcome concerning pigments on the minoan palette. Such a decision belongs with the need to approach a contemporary ‘Icon’.

In relation to the aforesaid exotic influence, from Egyptian to Minoan art, emerged an intriguing interpretation which would affect the timbre of the restoration throughout the archaeological site. According to Evans’ view, the minoan civilization was an historical unicum; an equal alternative to the academic prevalence of authorities in the classical period. Within such a framework, color became the point of differentiation between the two cultures. Although Evans surely was aware that the ancient Greeks colored their architectural works, what rather seemed to matter to him was the widespread all-white image of the remains of classical architecture. Also it mustn’t be overlooked that in the corresponding forms of Neoclassicism moderate use of color was made. The coloration of the architectural members which directly conveys an Eastern exotic background holds great importance to Evans, as it is placed beyond the influence of classicism. As indeed the use of color on the columns led Evans’ thought toward the even more distant Egypt, so did the form of Minoan columns lead it away from the white classical orders. Within a more particular interpretation of the term exoticism, we could include the choice of phrase ‘deep Venetian red’ [1] in reference to the Minoan red, due to the fact that the notional presence of Venice signified for many the ‘second Constantinople’ or the city-symbol for the diverse.

The third chromatic type that remains in this description is the black. Chronologically, circa 1905, the red columns at
the «Hall of Colonnades» (Fig. 7) were the first to be constructed; these were followed in 1908, based on the designs by Doll, by the black columns at the courtyard of the «Queen’s Megaron»; only at the close of the second excavation period—from 1928 until 1930—would they be constructed in accordance with the design made twenty years prior, in the “Hall of the Double Axes” and the ‘Room of the Throne’. An important aspect of the restoration endeavors, for the aforesaid spaces, lies in the fact that several of the technical drawings displayed a vivid painterly character. In the ‘Throne Room’ the philologically correct second type of column, in chromatic contrast to the dominant deep red of the walls and frescoes, is oddly enough lost in the dark space attributed to initiatory rituals. Recent cleaning and conservation works undertaken on the column capitals, revealed their original blue rendering as proposed in Gilleron’s watercolor drawings. Memories then, of Homeric texts which describe cyan capitals and were subsequently applied to the restoration of archaeological finds at “Caravan Serai”. Specifically in the figurative representation of painted column capitals comprising a decorative whole with the copy of the “Partridges” fresco. In the sui generis—as much as in the ad hoc—restoration of the monumental complex of Knossos, the use of color on the new architectural members is indicative of the importance that art held in Evans’ life; it is known that in Oxford he even possessed a Bronzino. At his villa in Crete, special railings were designed for hanging his paintings, as the design of its garden was conceived on the basis of recognizable references to landscape painting. The correlation of Evans’ passion for art to the perception of chromatic restoration, in the end, projects his habit to interweave his real life with the requirements of the archaeological sites.

A further observation relative to the use of color under the Mediterranean sun derives from the ‘coincidence’ where each type of column is answered in an authentic—albeit fractured—fresco. For example, the ‘procession’ fresco depicts the ‘deep Venetian red’ pigment of the red columns. For the abstract white there is no evidence available for the columns. Backgrounds however exist, such as in the representation of griffins at the throne or the skin tone of the ladies in the ‘Grand Stand’. For the black, that is either architecturally identified with the attributed esoteric darkness of the ‘Throne Room’ or contrasted to the white light in the «Loggia of the King Megaron», there is the fresco of the «Captain of the Blacks». (Fig. 8)

By inference, at Knossos, as for any work of art, the semiotic character of chromatic restorative interventions, compromises with a symbolic but also functional variable. The same column may obtain a supportive role, a chromatic importance when associated—or not—with the intense Cretan sun, but also an artistic reference to an ancient sample of the tincture.

References:

References for the figures: