1. Introduction
How do archaeologists and artists make it possible for long-silent civilizations to speak to us today? How do contemporary conditions influence the way the ancient past is understood? This exhibition unites two creative restorations of the Greek Bronze Age (ca. 3000–1700 BCE) that test the boundaries of interpretation and invention by bringing together the discovery of Minoan culture by the British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans (1851–1941) with a contemporary video installation by the Turner Prize–winning British artist Elizabeth Price (b. 1966). Combining archaeological practice with contemporary art, Restoring the Minoans explores the dynamics of restoration and creation.

Sir Arthur Evans

At the very beginning of his first season, almost immediately after starting his excavation at Knossos on the island of Crete in 1900, Arthur Evans announced that he had discovered the royal residence of the mythological king of Crete, the “Palace of Minos.” Although the legend of King Minos and his labyrinth—said to have been designed by Daidalos to contain the half-bull, half-man Minotaur—had long been a fixture of Western mythology, Evans thought he had discovered genuine archaeological proof of the myth. Over the next three decades at the site, Evans unearthed “the oldest throne in Europe,” goddess figurines, ornately painted pottery, luxurious hard-stone vessels, sealstones, and the fragments of stunning frescoes.

It was Evans’s pioneering work that fundamentally shaped how we see this culture, even though earlier scholars were already using the term “Minoan.” He celebrated the distinctiveness of this civilization from other Bronze Age Aegean cultures, and influenced how we understand the Minoans through his excavations, curatorial projects, lectures, and extensive publications, but above all through his restorations at the “palace” at Knossos.

Evans believed that in the world of the Minoans he had found an ancient island paradise of goddess-worshiping pacifism and bull-leaping vitality. It was a peaceful vision of a European prehistory that provided an optimistic alternative to the tumultuous political conditions of the first part of the twentieth century in Europe: unrest in the Balkans, World War I, and rising nationalism. In order to maintain his vision of an innocent and peaceful Minoan prehistory, Evans ignored the fortifications and watchtowers that he himself had discovered elsewhere on Crete. His bold restoration was also inflected by early twentieth-century design and architecture, leading to images of Art Nouveau–styled women and reinforced concrete structures (see figs. I-1, I-2).

Motivated by a pedagogical attempt to make Knossos, in the words of his biographer and half-sister, “intelligible to other men,” Evans often blurred the lines between archaeological restoration and artistic invention. His family fortune allowed him to realize his own vision of the Minoans: Evans financed the excavation himself using funds from his father’s paper mill. Working with a team that included an archaeological assistant, architects, masons, carpenters, artists, and illustrators, as well as an enormous crew of excavators, Evans oversaw a “reconstitution” (to use his own term) that was at times considered over-zealous even by the standards of his day.
Fig. I-1. Unidentified Artist, Reproduction of a Minoan Snake-Goddess Figurine. Plaster and pigment, after a find from Temple Repositories, Knossos, 20th century CE. HAM: 1977.216.3319. Checklist no. 27.

The chief fresco restorers at Knossos were a father-and-son pair, both named Émile Gilliéron. Swiss-born Émile Gilliéron père (1850–1924) studied art in Switzerland, Munich, and Paris, immigrated to Greece in 1876, and worked as a draftsman for archaeologists including another famous figure in the study of the pre-Hellenic Aegean world, Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890). Schliemann relied on Gilliéron’s illustrations of his excavations of Mycenae for his publications in an era before photography became the discipline’s standard. By the time Evans sent for Gilliéron in April 1900—upon unearthing the first fresco fragments of Knossos’s “Throne Room”—he had a reputation as one of Greece’s foremost artists. His son, Gilliéron fils (1885–1939), born in Athens of Swiss citizenship, and who trained in Athens and Paris, was just under fifteen years of age when he began working for Evans.

Perhaps second only to Evans himself, the Gilliérons helped to shape the image we have of Minoan culture today. Guided by the archaeologist, they filled in the pieces according to Evans’s vision as well as their own. Both father and son contributed to the restorations of individual frescoes and the reconstructions of entire palace rooms, and also created replicas of metal objects, watercolor copies of frescoes, three-dimensional plaster reconstructions, and illustrations for Evans’s massive four-volume publication *The Palace of Minos at Knossos* (1930).

One of the most iconic and complete images from Minoan Crete restored by Émile Gilliéron père, dubbed “The Tau-reader Fresco” by Evans, shows acrobats leaping over a bull (see fig. I-3). Like many of the watercolor reproductions on view in the exhibition, this copy was based on the original restoration (currently in the Heraklion Archaeological Museum), and representations of the ancient fresco fragments are visibly distinguished. The work was guided by Evans’s close study of bull-leaping scenes as depicted on sealstones and signet rings, in bronze figurines, and in other sources, in addition to other complementary pieces and the fresco fragments themselves (see figs. I-4, I-5). One of several bull-leaping panels, and perhaps part of a larger frieze, the general composition of the scene has been confirmed by recent analysis: a bull at center, with acrobats performing a leaping athletic feat. Yet the elaborate variegated rock and dentil pattern bands at top and bottom were extended to frame the left and right sides of the image in Gilliéron père’s restoration. Recent scholarship has questioned the accuracy of this framing, as the side borders likely represent a modern, decorative feature rather than an element of the original, ancient painting.

Fresco fragments were occasionally misinterpreted and restored in archaeologically inaccurate yet beautiful ways. In one well-known example, a series of fragments were restored by one of the Gilliérons in the form of a nude, blue-skinned boy collecting crocus flowers for their saffron in a rocky field and setting them into a bowl (figs. I-6, II-3). The work combines pieces from different frescoes into one, and Evans even notes that the flowers in the upper-right corner likely belonged to a companion painting rather than to this grouping. Despite his meticulousness in documenting certain details of the restoration, Evans and Gilliéron failed to identify a fragment of a tail near the crocuses, hinting at a simian’s body. Subsequent scholarship has revealed that
Fig. I-3. Émile Gilliéron père or fils, Acrobats Leaping over a Bull. Watercolor on paper, after a fresco from Court of the Stone Spout, Knossos, early 20th century, before 1914. HAM: 1926.32.50. Checklist no. 2.
Fig. I-4. Lentoid Sealstone Depicting Bulls with a Human Figure. Banded agate, Peleponnese, Late Minoan Period, ca. 1700–1090 BCE. AM: AN1938.1076. Checklist no. 8. Evans’s collection of sealstones inspired his interest in Aegean archaeology.

Fig. I-5. Restored by A. J. Lambert, Fresco Fragment Depicting a Bull Leaper. Plaster and pigment, H. 60 cm; W. 30 cm, Court of the Stone Spout, Knossos, Late Minoan II Period, 1450–1400 BCE. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford: AN1896.1908.AE1708.
Fig. I-6. Unidentified Artist, Unrestored Fragments of the Saffron Gatherer (or Blue Monkey). Watercolor on paper, after a fresco from Area of Early Keep, Knossos, ca. 1921. AM: Evans Fresco Drawing L/3 b. Checklist no. 30.
Fig. 1-7. Piet de Jong, Blue Monkey (formerly Saffron Gatherer) Restoration. Watercolor on paper, H. 40 cm; W. 58.5 cm, after a fresco from House of the Frescoes, Knossos, 20th century, before 1938. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, gift of Margaret C. Laidlaw: 938.66.3.
Fig. I-9. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Sybil Sanderson, from the portfolio Portraits of Actors and Actresses. Crayon lithograph on china paper, Image: H. 29.5 cm; W. 23.5 cm, Sheet: H. 39 cm; W. 31.6 cm, France, 1898. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949: 49.55.161. Compare this Art Nouveau drawing with Émile Gilliéron père’s Fragment from the Lady in Red (fig. II-11).

Fig. I-10. Émile Gilliéron père, Notes from the Restoration of the Lady in Red. Ink and pencil on paper, after a fresco fragment from Northwest Fresco Heap, Knossos, ca. 1914. AM: Evans Fresco Drawing O/2 a. Checklist no. 19.
the figure was likely a flower-picking blue monkey, similar to those later discovered in the House of Frescoes, rather than a boy (see figs. I-7, I-8).

Often working with sparse fragments, their creations were ingenious, if sometimes tendentious, and fresco restorations from Knossos often resemble late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artistic styles. Evans’s restorations reflect the tastes of his own era even as they try to revive an ancient past. Working with a single fragment of a female figure, Gilliéron père was able to extrapolate an image that to a contemporary eye is evocative of modern European art as witnessed with “Lady in Red” (see figs. II-11 and I-9). Nevertheless, “Lady in Red” was not a completely imaginative invention but a real attempt at a studied restoration: the figure’s headband and her hairstyle with bangs and side curls reflect a kind of composite of several paintings including some showing complete heads of women (see figs. I-10, III-9). However, subsequent scholarly attention and more precise dating of Minoan frescoes suggest that anatomical features such as a high-bridged nose, a prominent chin, and angular lips are historical inaccuracies, while lines drawn to indicate nostrils and coquettish smiles, a feature of Gilliéron’s restorations, are always absent in Minoan wall paintings (fig. I-11).

Elizabeth Price’s A RESTORATION

When the artist Elizabeth Price was commissioned by the Contemporary Arts Society to create a work based on the collection of the Ashmolean and Pitt Rivers Museums at the University of Oxford, she was invited to work in any area
Fig. I-12. Unidentified Artist, Plan of the Area of the Central Tri-Columnar Hall, Ground Floor. Pencil and ink wash on tracing paper, West Wing, Knossos, early 20th century. AM: Evans Architectural Plans WW/34. Checklist no. 45.
Checklist no. 1. Archival photograph of the Central Tri-Columnar Hall,
Knossos (after restoration).
Fig. I-14. Kamares Ware Tumbler. Terracotta, Knossos, Middle Minoan IB Period, ca. 1950–1900 BCE. AM: AN1896-1908 AE.944. Checklist no. 56.
that attracted her attention. The familiarly modernist style of watercolors in the Sir Arthur Evans Archive—ostensibly reflecting an ancient culture—elicited her curiosity. A RESTORATION (2016) is an immersive, eighteen-minute, two-channel video installation that reinterprets the archives and digital photobank of the two museums, transforming ancient artifacts into a work of art for the digital age. This rich and sophisticated piece takes creative license with the museums' collections in response to Evans's own blurry boundaries between artifact, restoration, and invention.

In A RESTORATION, Price layers images from Evans's archaeological excavation, museum artifacts, written words, loud, rhythmic electronic music, and synthetically voiced narration to create a new story that is as much about the present as about the past. The video begins with a sort of prelude: a virtual Eden-like garden is cultivated using images of the Cretan watercolors in a computer's server. A robotic chorus of female-voiced museum "Administrators" then figuratively reconstructs the Knossos labyrinth within the museum's computer using the digitized files from the collection. Like some of her previous video works, including USER GROUP DISCO (2009) and THE WOOLWORTHS CHOIR OF 1979 (2012), archival images and artifacts are reassembled to create an emblematic architectural space. Through this virtual maze, museum objects from areas of the collection beyond the Evans Archive digitally flow and clatter. In the process, the grandiosity of Evans's project is playfully satirized, and Knossos—which he praised as Europe's first and oldest city—reveals the achievements and fragility of human civilization as a whole (fig. I-13).

Price began her artistic career in the late 1980s as a sculpt-
tor, and was also a member of the indie-pop bands Talulah Gosh and The Carousel. She later developed projects that explored the histories and dynamics of institutions. Price’s work with the moving image began in 2005 and frequently involves adaptations of rarely accessible archives and collections. Her videos, including A RESTORATION, are a kind of bricolage, bringing together seemingly disparate elements through associative points of contact. The texts for her videos often employ language that echoes, in a way, the variety of archival sources at hand, but the authority of the narrator within the video is not always wholly reliable. Sound, too, is an evocative dimension in her installations, and A RESTORATION is presented at a cinematic volume that makes watching the video an aural as well as a visual physical experience for the viewer.

Restoring the Minoans

Restoring the Minoans presents material from Oxford University’s Sir Arthur Evans Archive together with Elizabeth Price’s digital interpretation. The first gallery is devoted to approximately 60 objects comprising original artifacts from Minoan Crete, along with watercolors, photographs, and other materials from the archive, many of which are displayed for the first time. By examining archaeological artifacts together with archival documents, the presentation illuminates Evans’s working methods. Rather than trying to unravel truth from error in Evans’s visions, Restoring the Minoans instead aims to present a portrait of archaeological practice in a specific time and place, and the larger questions that emerge about how pieces from the past are reimagined (see figs. I-14 and I-15).

The second gallery presents Price’s video installation. Evans’s own permissive restorations become a point of departure for the artist’s electronic chorus of Administrators who boldly extrapolate their own inventive understandings, imagining the sounds of museum artifacts as a way to recover something otherwise lost. Sir Arthur Evans represented his restorations as scientific hypotheses, while Elizabeth Price explicitly presents A RESTORATION as a work of art, and both offer different perspectives on the significance of an ancient Aegean civilization. This exhibition provides viewers with the opportunity to move between the actual and the virtual, the visual and the sonic, the real and the imaginary, to derive their own understanding of the Minoan world and its restoration from the diverging interpretive settings.
Cathy Gere, *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). This book describes the role of Knossos in the twentieth century and how a paradisiacal vision of Minoan culture served as the antithesis to modern crises.

The similarity between Minoan restorations and Art Nouveau was recognized during Evans's own day: the novelist Evelyn Waugh commented that the Gilliérons, who restored the frescoes at Knossos, "... tempered their zeal for accurate reconstructions with a somewhat inappropriate predilection for the covers of Vogue." Waugh, *Labels: A Mediterranean Journal* (London: Duckworth, 1930), 136–37.


Evans, *Palace of Minos*, vol. 1, 265n2.


M. A. S. Cameron, "The Lady in Red: A Complementary Figure to the Ladies in Blue," *Archaeology* 42, no. 1 (1971): 39–43.