"Although absolute proof for or against the authenticity of the [Boston Snake] Goddess is elusive (and illusive), the combined evidence of history, style, imagery, technique, and science suggests that she . . . is a modern work." — Kenneth Lapatin

Introduction

In 1914, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts acquired a remarkable six-inch-tall gold and ivory statuette, reputedly from Knossos, on Crete, that has been described as the most refined and precious relic of Minoan civilization. But what is this statuette really? In Mysteries of the Snake Goddess, a compelling real-life archaeological detective story, Kenneth Lapatin contends that this and other famous artifacts in museum collections around the world are very likely fakes. He examines several suspicious elements that suggest that the figures are almost certainly forgeries; their ivory and gold are of the wrong period, for one thing, and the stories of their origins are inconsistent and problematic.

The exact source of the Boston Snake Goddess is unknown; like her companions, she has no verified archaeological provenience, meaning "precise origin, or archaeological findspot." As a museum curator wrote in 1915, in the most comprehensive account of the Goddess to date, "No details
as to the time, place, and circumstances of its discovery have been ascertained."

What makes this tale truly intriguing, however, is not the forgery but the motivations behind it. Sir Arthur Evans, the legendary excavator of Knossos, romanticized a sophisticated prehistoric society, one that provided Europeans with a legitimate rival to the cultures of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. And restorers working for Evans obligingly supplied the artifacts of that society, producing fakes that conformed to modern notions of Minoan culture. Their creations formed the basis for further theories, which led to further deceptions.

Evans hailed Minoan culture as "at once the starting point and the earliest stage in the highway of European civilization," yet many of its icons were fashioned by modern rather than ancient Cretans to suit the needs of many people, from forgers to collectors to scholars. The Goddess "has provided a canvas on which archaeologists and curators, looters and smugglers, dealers and forgers, art patrons and museum-goers, feminists and spiritualists, have painted their preconceptions, desires, and preoccupations for an idealized past," Lapatin explains.

This does not mean that the Goddess is not important, Lapatin points out. Rather, it means that we must regard the statuette as a projection of contemporary cultural ideals rather than a depiction of an actual ancient civilization. But this projection has value in and of itself. "Neither she nor her unprovenienced counterparts can any longer be employed as evidence for Aegean Bronze Age art, religion, or culture, but they can nonetheless serve as important historiographical documents. For they reflect the mentalities of early investigators of Minoan Crete and those who have followed in their footsteps, and thus provide valuable lessons in the subjectivity of historical reconstruction."

Mysteries of the Snake Goddess is both a real-life mystery story and a significant work of intellectual and cultural investigation, revealing how the past can be redesigned to accommodate the present.

About the Author

Kenneth Lapatin studied Greek art and archaeology at Berkeley and Oxford, and in Athens as a Fulbright scholar. He is the president of the Boston society
of the Archaeological Institute of America. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his wife, Marina Belozerskaya, a writer of historical nonfiction.

A conversation with Kenneth Lapatin, author of *Mysteries of the Snake Goddess: Art, Desire, and the Forging of History*

Q) When did you first suspect that the Boston Snake Goddess and other such statuettes in museums in Europe and North America are not masterpieces of ancient Cretan art but modern forgeries?

A) About ten years ago, when I first began to look at them closely. But I am by no means the first to question their age. In fact, within a few months of the appearance of the Boston statuette in 1914, some people noticed problems with her, especially the details of her face. But she and the other figures that came to light shortly thereafter were so spectacular, and so many people wanted to believe they were priceless relics of a lost civilization, that the doubters were far outnumbered. These statuettes were embraced as icons of Minoan culture and shaped modern ideas about the distant past. They have been featured in textbooks, encyclopedias, scholarly journals, and popular books—especially New Age books espousing the power of "The Goddess"—and have been widely accepted as genuine ancient artifacts.

Q) So how did you pursue this question further? What new evidence have you found?

A) Quite a lot, actually, though I did not set out to debunk these statuettes. My research began not by focusing on any of them as individual artifacts, but rather by looking at the entire class of ancient gold and ivory statues. These include some of the most celebrated works of ancient art, such as the lost statue of Athena that once stood inside the Parthenon on the Acropolis and the statue of Zeus at Olympia, which was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Very few of these survive, and those only in fragments, because their precious materials have been plundered over the centuries. Initially I thought that the Boston Goddess was a rare survival, and because there are no other pieces in such good shape, I really wanted to believe in her. But because I had examined a lot of fragments and other evidence on Crete and elsewhere—material that had all been excavated by archaeologists and thus was unquestionably ancient—I had a lot more to
compare the Goddess to than did earlier investigators. Then, digging deeper, so to speak, I also found a whole group of other unprovenienced statues (that is to say, pieces not recovered through controlled excavation but acquired on the art market) now in museums in Baltimore, Toronto, Oxford, Seattle, and elsewhere—many of them clearly forgeries—and the Boston statue has a number of similarities with these.

Q) And that clinched the case?

A) No, but it was highly suggestive. Style and technique strongly suggest that the statue is not 3,500 years old but do not prove it. All great works of art have distinctive individual features. Many of the features of these statuettes that just don't seem right can be explained away, and have been over the years. We want certainty, 100 percent proof, but even science, which we expect to solve such problems, is often inconclusive. Tests can help date organic materials, but the results need to be interpreted. In this case, carbon-14 tests can date the ivory but not the carving. And the date they provide is reliable only if the ivory has not been contaminated by modern restorations, which are sometimes extensive. Thus an "ancient" result might mean that someone had reused some ancient material, something forgers do quite often, while a "modern" result might mean only that a genuine ancient figure had been treated with wax or animal glue in more recent times.

Q) So where does that leave you?

A) Well, I not only examined numerous artifacts, both ancient and modern, but carefully traced the time and place of their recovery, both actual and alleged. By searching out and discovering previously unknown archival material, sale records, personal letters, and early reports of forgers' activities, I have been able to present a larger picture of the cultural climate in which these statues were made and sold. The more I searched for evidence (and over the past ten years I sometimes found myself wanting to prove these statues ancient and sometimes wanting to prove them modern), I came to realize that even more interesting than the question "genuine or fake?" were the questions of who and why. Who was making the forgeries and why? What was the market for them? What were the various motivations? And what were the results?

Q) For the price of the Snake Goddess, the museum could have bought a number of Old Masters, couldn't it?
A) Yes, it could have bought a number of Old Master paintings, but what was really at stake when all of these statues surfaced at the beginning of the twentieth century (and there are more than a dozen of them) was the history of Western civilization. Archaeologists uncovered this amazing new ancient culture on Crete—the Minoans—who were presented as an early European alternative to the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians. Minoan artifacts were, and still are, considered to be physical evidence of the truth behind ancient myths of Theseus and the Minotaur, the Labyrinth, Daidalos and Ikaros, and so forth. Museum curators and collectors clamored for Minoan relics, and forgers and smugglers stepped up to the challenge of fulfilling their desires.

Q) Who were the forgers?

A) What is particularly interesting in this case is that the fakes seem to have been produced by the same men who worked legitimately as restorers of excavated artifacts. Sir Arthur Evans's finds at Knossos were heavily reconstructed, and because his workmen had access to authentic antiquities and were familiar with the ideas of Evans and other archaeologists, they were able to produce convincing fakes, and—even more significantly—to make their creations conform to modern theories about Minoan civilization. What they did, in effect, was to manufacture proof for unconfirmed ideas about prehistoric art, religion, and culture. Thus everyone was happy. The forgers got paid good money, collectors got magnificent artifacts, and scholars got more material with which to explain the nature of an enigmatic ancient civilization—one that was widely praised, ironically, as being surprisingly "modern."

Q) What have been the reactions of the museums that own these statues? They can't be pleased when you tell them that their priceless 3,500-year-old masterpieces were actually made in the early twentieth century.

A) No, as you might imagine, the museum people were not terribly happy at first, and there was some resistance. But they have long known that there were potential problems with these pieces, even if they did not fully acknowledge this until quite recently. Most of the museums have, in the end, been very cooperative. After all, they are in the business of presenting the past to the public. Most of them have also come to recognize that these statues are not evidence of the ancient past, but rather evidence for the modern reconstruction of that past, which took place upon its discovery at
the turn of the last century.

Q) What will be done with these statues? What do you think should be done with them?

A) Although some of them have been removed from display, I am pleased to report that others are still exhibited prominently, but with additions to their labels. After all, they are important historical artifacts, just not as old as was once thought. They have played key roles in shaping modern conceptions of ancient civilizations, and now, recognized as what they truly are, they can illustrate the fact that interpreting the past—writing history—is far from neutral. Rather, it is quite a precarious process. Examining how and why this group of modern artifacts has been privileged as ancient, and how they have even engendered new interpretations of a lost civilization, reveals a lot about how the past continues to be shaped to suit the needs and desires of the present.