

THE FIGURINE KNOWN AS THE GODDESS (MUSEUM NUMBER: HM 63)

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTEFACT IN THE HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

This female figure stands 34cm tall (just over the height of a standard wine bottle), and 12cm across at the flat, oval base that firmly grounds her. Her stiff, long conical skirt resembles a slender cowbell. A looping U-shaped apron falls down her front and back, supported around her waist by a twisted, girdle-like belt made of snakes. This, with her pinched-in waist and voluptuous bosom, gives her an hourglass shape. Her exposed breasts are framed by a short-sleeved, open jacket.

Her snake-entwined arms are held out at around 45 degrees, palms up and set approximately in line with her navel. She stares straight ahead, chin tucked in, with her dark hair falling behind her neck in well-defined, straight locks. Features such as eyes and breasts are enhanced, and her ears are particularly large. Her head balances a tall, conical hat, which is shaped like a chimney in broad spirals, upright, yet very slightly tilted to her left.

Try the pose yourself if you can: upright to balance the hat, strictly frontal, straight arms stiffly set forward, a symmetrical gesture offering up the arms' soft flesh.

Joins are visible on both arms where they meet the sleeves, and where her hat sits on her head. Slighter cracks are visible around her neck. Some parts of the figurine are glossier than others: her arms, shoulders, and belt reflect the museum's light, but her skirt is a duller matt.

Undulating snakes can be traced all over her upper half, their coffee-washed bodies marked with dark brown splodges. She loosely holds the head of a snake in her right hand, its body rippling up her arm, before tumbling into a figure-of-8 behind her back, up over her left shoulder, then dropping down again, with her left hand tightly grasping its tail. Other snakes form the tangle of her girdle. A snake hangs below her pelvis above the U of her apron, and snakes frame the sides of her breasts before moving up her neck. A tail loops over her large left ear, and a snake's head reaches up to peep over the top of her hat, mouth gaping.

The base layer for her exposed skin is a creamy brown stained with darker tints. Details like her facial features or corset laces are marked in a deep, dark brown, with faded greens in places, such as the dotted line to indicate a beaded necklace. Sharply curved lines decorate the boundary of her apron, while cross hatches border the bottom of her skirt. At the front of her skirt, on her left near the bottom, a small '63' is written in black ink.

Composition and decoration comprise a combination of straight lines, such as the horizontal details running across her skirt and her rigid arms set straight ahead, and curves, like the rippling snakes, the spirals on her jacket, or her rounded breasts.

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2. THE DISCOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION.

My sisters and I enjoyed good lives at the start. We were crafted mainly from ground-down quartz, with metallic elements added for colour and life. Then water was splashed on, gradually forming a paste. Each part of our bodies was manipulated separately, preciously, and our fragments partially dried before being assembled into a distinctive, individual pose. Pallid shadows of our future selves, our vibrant, transparent, glossy magnificence was only revealed after transformation in a burning inferno.

We thrived on the attention we received in one of the numerous ceremonial hubs. We were exhilarated by the animated commotion, the drumming, chants and cries, then lulled by the still, dusky downtimes. The smell of sweat, herbs, incense, and occasionally roasting meat wafted through the rooms. I can't recall the details of the end of this utopia, so stunned I was by the shock of the chaos and brutality that left us again in pieces.

What remained of us was buried in an underground coffin, which was so large we couldn't tell how far it went in any direction. It was filled in, rubble covering a layer of smashed riches, hastily snatched up but carefully hidden away. Then: nothing. A free-fall to nowhere, suspended in suffocating dirt. Silence, darkness, anosmia – an existence so stripped of stimulation there was nothing to think or feel. Not all of me made it to this sensory void: my left arm, much of my skirt and the top of my hat were lost, my serene face damaged and chipped, and my neck broken. My remaining snakes clung to me more tightly than ever.

And this was the new reality for a period I had no way of measuring. But it changed. The vibrations came initially: steady thuds, which switched to scraping. Then our fragments heard the voices, muffled at first, becoming clearer. Finally, the light burst in, and an overwhelming rush of fresh air hit my right arm, then the rest, reborn in turn.

I was exposed in more ways than one, disclosed and defrocked. I felt more vulnerable in this shattered nakedness than I ever did when proudly displaying my conspicuous breasts alongside my sisters. I'm frozen as the men scramble around, pawing at the dirt to find my skirt, pressing fragments against me in a futile attempt to make me complete and decent. Some men trace their thick sausage fingers over my breasts and waist, smutty bravado veiling their awkwardness. Others are more cautious, their respect driven by their curiosity or even awe, an anxious hunt to restore 'their' treasure. It seems I now belong to them.

Later, our fragments are methodologically laid out. They never found my skirt, but another one survived without my sister's upper body. It's too large to be mine but fires their imagination. Far from the craft rooms of my old world, these modern men create a new plaster garment for me, fitting in my remains where they can, fixing it all together with metal pins. This prosthetic allows me to stand again, and – a new sensation – I am branded with my unique mark of '63' on my front for all to behold. They also fashion me a new left arm, taking my right one as a guide. But while my right hand loosely cradles the head of my snake

with trusting intimacy, they have me grip his new tail with incomprehensible control. He tells me it hurts. They struggle with the snakes – some of the remodelling is guesswork. The reconstructed snake's head on my hat gets an almost comical grin. It feels odd to me, but pleases them.

I don't recognise myself. I used to be a brightly coloured vitreous sheen, but now I'm dulled to an autumnal wash. The lead man realises this; I hear him surmising that the tiara fragment he holds to my head, now turned brownish, would have originally been purple. He decides to call me 'Goddess' – I like the promotion.

We are shifted about, settled for periods, then the humans seem to change their minds. I'm set in another tomb, see-through this time, with one of my sisters, who has also been patched up. Two objects are attached behind us on the wall, and painted shells are scattered far from our feet, like cowering supplicants. I stare out into a room of the reconstructed remains of my first world – gazing at least from my own head; my poor sister has a replacement. Humans pause to scrutinise me to a degree they never did before. The room alternates, very bright and echoey for periods, then fading to a dulled, gloomy hush – never the drama and joy and raucous energy of the initial ceremonies. I am still revered, but I miss the human touch.

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3. REPRODUCTION AND REIMAGINING

The Goddess's stately form has exemplified an association of women with snakes, nurturing a theme that has long characterised Minoan Crete.¹ But she possesses a much less theatrical pose and silhouette than that of the Votary, and her visual legacy is cast in her sister's shadow.

The Danish artist Halvor Bagge both reconstructed and reproduced these figurines in the early twentieth century. His historic replicas are displayed in the Ashmolean Museum among original Minoan antiquities – different planes of historical reality and authenticity merging to create a narrative for modern times.

Today, three-dimensional copies are mass-produced, from cheap tourist souvenirs to more highbrow museum models, life-sized or miniature. This commercial enterprise has developed a life of its own as an integral part of the tourist economy and support for cultural institutions. The Goddess has also inspired a Barbie doll, a glassy-eyed figure with nipples painted scarlet red and cute knitted snakes gently draped over her.² The hourglass figure of the original suits the Barbie brand well.

Sometimes, women replicate and perform these figurines as embodied moving sculptures. It was the Votary who took pride of place in the 2004 Olympic Games opening ceremony in Athens, leading the historic procession. Still, our Goddess appeared in the 2015 European Athletics Team Championship opening ceremony, held in Heraklion. She grasped the heads of snakes in both hands, and they posed, jaws gaping to reveal a bright red mouth, shark's teeth, and a huge comedy-forked tongue.³

While Evans gave this figurine the 'Goddess' label, 'Snake Goddess' is a generalised concept that embraces many other manifestations. Hybrid forms and nuanced references to the Snake Goddess concept occur in the performative arts, including opera,⁴ dance,⁵ and music.⁶ There are pagan movements centred around the Minoan culture and its undefined Goddess.⁷ Our Goddess does seem to have inspired Dorothy Porter in her poem *Snake Envy*, where the snakes 'boil over the breasts, arms/and throat/of the Minoan priestess'.⁸

¹ Examples of novel covers include Clyde Clason (1939) *Clue to the Labyrinth*, Mary Renault (1959) *The King Must Die*, and Judith Hand (2001) *Voice of the Goddess*.

² Maria Teresa Satta: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=mariateresa.satta&set=a.4926285464058643>.

³ <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-heraklion-greece-20th-june-2015-a-woman-dressed-like-the-snake-goddess-84422189.html>

⁴ For example, the Snake Priestess in the 2008 Royal Opera House production of Harrison Birtwistle's *The Minotaur*.

⁵ For example, in Ted Shawn's *Gnossienne*, first performed in 1919, the Snake Goddess is so much a concept that she is off stage, to be imagined – all eyes are on the single male performer.

⁶ For example, in Celestogramme 'Bos Taurus' or Bob Dylan's 'Jokerman' – here, a fleeting reference to holding snakes in both fists.

⁷ For example, Laura Perry's group, 'Ariadne's Tribe'.

⁸ Part of Dorothy Porter's 1996 collection, *Crete*.

References to a 'Snake Goddess' may in fact refer to the Votary figurine – such as Paul Klee's painting 'The Snake Goddess and Her Enemy' (1940). This is so abstract that the title is needed to establish the link, but the two eyes (or breasts) seem to be set within raised arms, denoting the Votary. In Denise Levetov's 1968 poem, 'The postcards: a triptych', her ekphrastic style vividly brings to life the postcards of three artworks she had above her desk.⁹ Taking central place is 'the Minoan Snake Goddess', and the description is so meticulous that we realise this image is not actually our Goddess, but a modern fake – the ivory Boston Goddess, which had fooled even Arthur Evans.

This figurine's form is less reproduced than the Votary and other figurines encroach on the 'Goddess' label. But this is the figurine that most firmly links woman and snake, fuelling one of the most powerful and iconic traits of Minoan Crete.

⁹ Denise Levetov (1996) 'The Postcards: A Triptych'. In *Chicago Review* 42: 78-80.