

THE FIGURINE KNOWN AS THE VOTARY (MUSEUM NUMBER: HM 65)

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTEFACT IN THE HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The Votary stands 28.5 cm tall, just under the height of an average wine bottle. She stares straight ahead, chin tucked in. Her protruding headwear, with large, circular adornments set around the edge, casts a shadow over her face. On top of her elaborate headwear sits a feline animal, body facing to the woman's right but with head turned forward towards the viewer.

Her bright white arms, bent at the elbows, are held up and out to her sides, flexed slightly forwards. Bracelets encircle her wrists. Her palms face forwards, each forming a fist over a wriggling, diagonally set snake. Tails pointed up, heads down, they are light brown with a dark stripe spiralling around their bodies.

Her prominent white breasts contrast with her laced, corseted jacket, which is dark orange with purple-brown thick bands. This covers her shoulders and upper arms, framing her breasts and pinching into her impossibly narrow waist. Her black hair falls in long locks to her hips, straight down and leaving a gap where the small of her back curves in. Her floor-length, A-lined skirt has seven flounces rippling downwards, with each layer divided into square blocks, alternating patterns of solid colour or vertical lines. Over this skirt sits a U-shaped apron with raised cord-like border, filled with a diamond-shaped lattice, the top of each diamond marked with two horizontal lines. This arrangement is mirrored at her back, and she wears a thick, stiff, curved belt decorated with vertical stripes.

The figure was made of faience, cool to the touch, and smooth like a polished stone. Faience is a crushed quartz paste fired to produce a brightly coloured vitreous sheen, although today, the colours are dulled to an autumnal wash. There are clearly visible joins around her neck and at the cat's shoulders. There seem to be signs of damage and notable changes in surface quality and colour, such as at the top of her apron. At the bottom of her skirt, to her right, the number '65' has been inked in black.

Her hourglass shape is set in a dominant, assertive stance. Try the pose yourself if you can: very upright and frontal, bearing quite a lot of weight on your head, chest slightly pushed out, and arms bent and raised to the sides.

She stands next to her companion, the so-called Goddess, in a display in the Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Crete. The couple form the centrepiece at the rear of Room 8, in an area dedicated to the 'Temple Repositories' from the West Wing of the Palace at Knossos. They are placed in the well-lit, de-cluttered central area that juts out, evoking the form of the Minoan tripartite shrine. They are enclosed in an altar-like focal position in a glass case, with their backs to the wall so we cannot see them in-the-round.

Arthur Evans chose the label 'Votary', but the bilingual label underneath this object describes them both as 'figurines of the "Snake Goddess"'; most people will think of them as such. We are told that the snakes 'symbolise the chthonic character of the cult of the goddess', the feline on her head represents her domination over wildlife, and that her breasts 'symbolise the fertility of women, the goddess and, by implication, nature itself'.

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2. THE DISCOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION

Arthur Evans investigated the cavities he termed the 'Temple Repositories' in the West Wing of the Palace at Knossos in 1903. His team uncovered two deep storage pits under the stone-flagged floor, the East Temple Repository being 2m by 1.5m and over 1.5m deep, well-constructed, stone-lined, and fitted with dowel holes for attachments or shelves. The assemblage appeared to be ritual; the finds were deliberately entombed there, arranged by material, after being damaged.

Over 200 faience objects come from this context, the highest concentration from Minoan Crete found so far. These were mostly found at the bottom of the East Temple Repository, which was covered by over a meter of fill, vases, and red earth. They were broken, probably before being sealed in their place of rest. There is evidence for 5 to 6 faience figurines altogether, including 3 additional left arms (one with snakes) and a further left hand. Numerous other riches were in this assemblage: hundreds of shells, clay and stone vessels, clay seal impressions, Linear A inscriptions, and animal bones.

No head was found for this figure. The hat was very fragmentary, with Evans describing the decoration as rose-like, although the evidence for this or any flower is minimal. The feline is original and may have been attached to something like the hat. The top of the surviving hat fragment had a small rivet hole, and Evans mentions a matching stud on the bottom of the spotted cat-like creature.¹ It is believed that the feline animal came from this deposit, but it is not referred to in the initial field notes or publication.

Excavation simultaneously destroys context as it reveals it, and, because of incomplete records, we cannot now reconstruct the full course of discovery to explain the inconsistencies between the field notebooks and various stages of publication.

Evans illustrated her without her head and left arm in his earliest publications.² The Danish artist Halvor Bagge restored her skirt to support her, about a third of which, including 6 of the 7 flounces, survived. Her breasts are original. Following the second stage of reconstruction (1903-1905), she was furnished with a new head and arm. Radiography has revealed the metal wires used to attach the new and old fragments, such as her head to chest.

Her surviving right hand holds a thin, striped object, interpreted as a broken snake and restored in the first stage of the reconstruction. This is the only possible snake fragment associated with this figurine, and other interpretations have been suggested – perhaps it is a rope? As her left forearm and hand are modern, this snake is also a reconstruction. Her physical reconstructions have been extensive, including elements that are key to the iconic silhouette of the figurine, namely her head, arm and the snakes. Her status is unclear. Evans labels her the *Votary*, a supplicant figure, but she is now imagined as a snake goddess.

¹ In the *Palace of Minos* Volume 1 (1921), page 504.

² For example, the *Annual of the British School at Athens* of 1903, page 77.

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3. REPRODUCTION AND REIMAGINING

My confident pose hides any sense of an identity crisis that might stem from how extensively I have been patched up. Disjointed, desperate, damaged goods – mended, but at the mercy of men's guesswork. A cat on my hat? Really? So much is new, including my wide-eyed face. You don't seem to realise that my head isn't much older than you.

My first reinvention was both physical and interpretive. The men pivoted between scientific restraint and the desire to discover new worlds and stories. My fragments are cleaned, scrutinized, measured and drawn, and I am renovated in an orderly fashion. But then their imagination steps up, and I am cast in a swirling vortex of 'what ifs'? A goddess! Specifically, a snake goddess, or a mother goddess. I'll take that – although the label *Votary* is logged in the drier archaeological books.

Since *The Rebirth*, it's all eyes on me, and my one solace is how much power my new personality carries. I am just *everywhere*. They churn me out, cheap and cheerful, Walmart stocking a 12-inch me online, categorised as 'knick-knacks' and 'culture spot'. I'm reproduced on facemasks, which were all the rage for a while before going out of fashion. Here, my breasts supplant the wearer's nostrils – I wonder if I should take offence but find it funny. New me has been tattooed on human skin, such as a forearm which, when raised, reveals me standing. I'm portrayed in a 1960s tourist advert for Crete – a poster girl for the decade of free love. I'm used again in 2022 – this time for a goddess pilgrimage tour. My image can make people money, and that seems to make them happy. The currency of power and status was very different in my first world.

I'm conjured up in non-visual imaginations, stories, books, and poems. My body is so favoured that I might appear on the cover of the book. These may – or may not – make the artist money. Sometimes, I'm larger than life, painted on external walls, graffiti for all to behold. This often happens in Heraklion; I can be depicted as a one-eyed Cyclops, holding red roses in place of snakes, or near the Museum alongside a sign pointing the way. A cruder version has appeared, cheering up an old water tower in the Asterousia Mountains with a cheeky flash of my leg. These artists don't seem to be paid for their time; they paint my altered form as a gift for those passing. 'I was here' marked by a bare-breasted, cat-hatted, snake-bearing woman. I don't think it matters what I was holding originally. Who cares? You see what you want to see.

But people – especially men – have always been fascinated by women playing with snakes. Gustav Klimt painted many such works *before* my sisters and I were found. It's sex-related, of course, but people seem hesitant to see us relics in that light. In fact, I am a proud influencer of feminist art, allocated a place in Judy Chicago's 'The Dinner Party' as 'snake goddess' alongside 38 mythological and historical sisters.

My favourites are the performances, where a person becomes me and sings, acts, or celebrates, such as the woman portraying me as street art in Heraklion. I become alive when so embodied. Fragmented, created, smashed, reborn, and fashioned into a muse for an entire island – my original self was never meant to move. Incorporated into a body, I experience a joy and vitality that more than compensates for any possible identity crisis.