

**THE CITY OF** Hania, in western Crete, rises from the sea in a semicircular band that surrounds its perfectly rounded harbor. Hania is called the Venice of the East because of the splendid Italianate buildings constructed after the Venetians arrived, in the 15th century. The narrow passageways and the outdoor seafood restaurants also remind the visitor of Venice.

Hania (it's also called Chania, Khaniá, and Xania in the guidebooks) offers two of the finest small museums anywhere. You wander into them as casually as you stroll into the shops that sell mountain honey and olive oil, and you marvel at objects that seem to be closely related to their surroundings. Many of these things, dating as far back as the second millennium B.C., were used daily here and bear images that depict the surrounding world. The oil lamps and some of the vessels once contained the same sort of olive oil that is produced today, which was used for lighting and for cooking.

The conditions are idyllic. You may be the only visitor to the Archeological

# FROM IDOLS TO ICONS

Archeological Museum  
Byzantine and  
Post-Byzantine Collection  
Hania, Crete

Museum, a stunningly simple stone-and-plaster building that was formerly a church. The Minoan masterpieces are well lit and clearly displayed. Their quality is marvelous. One, a sublime clay pitcher, is shaped like a bird and painted in stripes, its neck extended and its three legs looping gracefully underneath its bulging stomach.

This region has been home to a succession of civilizations—Minoan, classical Greek, Roman, and Byzantine as well as Venetian. In the museum, sur-

rounded by objects like the bird pitcher, you become convinced that the earliest inhabitants were so talented artistically, so steeped in life's pleasures—and yet so sensible and practical—that we have only declined since. No wonder Picasso loved this civilization and its way of seeing. In Hania the myth of the Minotaur trapped in the Labyrinth in the palace at Knossos (its famous ruins are on the other side of the mountains) seems real.

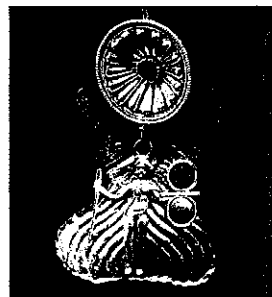
The Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Collection occupies an equally graceful former church. Here you can feast your eyes on Roman mosaics, 11th-century frescoes, and golden icons. The jolt of the passionate artistry and impeccable quality of the artworks is immediate. Coming upon these beautiful objects so casually, seeing them in this setting, in the place where they were made and used, the visitor feels the connection of esthetics and everyday life that is the special gift offered by such small museums. ■

*Nicholas Fox Weber's most recent book is Balthus: A Biography (Knopf, 1999).*

Fragment of an 11th-century wall painting with two saints.



One of a pair of earrings found in a grave near Hania, 3rd century B.C.

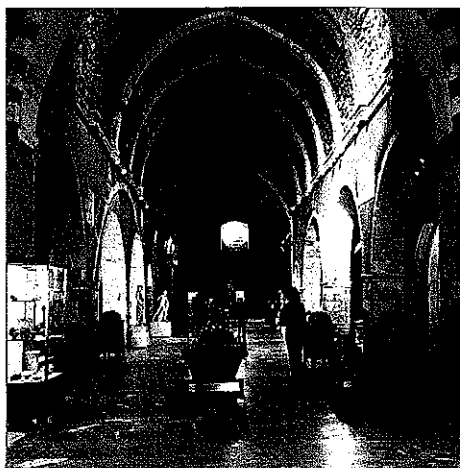


Icon depicting St. George and the dragon, 1660-80.



Minoan clay pitcher in the shape of a three-legged bird.

Fragment of a mosaic floor found in Hania, 3rd century A.D., depicting Neptune and the nymph Amymone.



Interior of the Archeological Museum, a former church.

Magical. Stunning. Spectacular. These were the words we were looking for when we asked curators, critics, and frequent contributors to recommend the best "unknown" museums. It wasn't hard to find perfect candidates, even in our own neighborhood—like the Dan Flavin Art Institute in Bridgehampton, Long Island, which Arthur C. Danto celebrates in these pages for its "aura of polychrome glory." And it took

**T H T P E**

**M S U S O**

**N V R E R O**

Alexander Stille to inform us about the "crown jewel" of a new group of museums in Rome, the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, which houses an extraordinary collection of previously unexhibited Roman wall paintings. Francine Prose's favorite haunts include the Museo Franz Mayer, in Mexico City, an "enchanted" oasis with an exquisite collection of Mexican and European decorative arts.

We're betting that few readers will have even heard of all ten museums on this list. If you have been to more than a few, please let us know—we're always looking for well-traveled correspondents.

—Robin Cembalest

**Palazzo Massimo alle Terme**  
Rome

**Museo Franz Mayer**  
Mexico City

**The Hispanic Society of America**  
New York City

**Gustave Moreau Museum**  
Paris

**Archeological Museum  
Byzantine and Post-Byzantine  
Collection**  
Heraklion, Crete

**The Dan Flavin Art Institute**  
Bridgehampton, New York

**Insel Hombroich**  
Neuss-Holzheim, Germany

**Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán**  
Lambayeque, Peru

**Percival David Foundation  
of Chinese Art**  
London

**Museu Frederic Marès**  
Barcelona

