

The Aesthetics of the Axe

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IT IS NOT UNCOMMON THAT the oldest works in a museum collection command the most attention. Who hasn't marveled at an Egyptian or Mesopotamian artifact at an encyclopedic museum like the Louvre or the Met? Who isn't impressed by the earliest abstract paintings in a modern art museum? But what happens when the objects in question are not only incredibly old, but the oldest manmade things that we know of?

It says much about our fascination for everything prehistoric that the stone tools and shaped rocks recently exhibited in *First Sculpture: From Handaxe to Figure Stone* at the Nasher Sculpture Center did not seem out of place there. Normally falling under the purview of the science or anthropological museum, these ancient implements easily stood toe-to-toe with the Nasher's usual fare. This should not surprise us. Modern sculpture, particularly that produced within the orbit of surrealism, took direct inspiration from prehistory. So we have long been conditioned to accept the presence of the objects of early humanity within the sphere of the most advanced art, even though said objects were never intended to be art. Or were they?

What makes *First Sculpture* more than just a mere transfer of specimens from the science museum to the art museum is its underlying premise: that things like handaxes, face-like rocks, and spherical stones are not just records of human activity but records of *artistic* activity. During the Paleolithic, hominids (a category including *Australopithecus*, *Homo erectus*, *Homo heidelbergensis*, and eventually Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*) learned how to create stone tools. By striking pieces of flint together to make variously-sized flakes, they made what we today would call axes and knives. For a long time, and even in pop culture today, the image of this early society was not that much different from an illustration from Louis Figuier's popular *The Earth Before the Deluge* (1867). There brutish cavepeople went about their daily tasks: men hunted and gathered while women stayed at home and took care of the children; they covered their private parts with impeccably tailored animal skins; the firepit was home; and the at the center of it all was the family. If this sounds familiar, it should. For as many have noted since, the artist simply projected turn-of-the-century middle-class values and customs back a couple million years.



Makapan pebble, Makapansgat, South Africa
ca. 2.5 million, Jasperite, 3 x 2 1/2 in. (7.6 x 6.3 cm)
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

This is not to say that our ancestors did not have social structure. On the contrary, in addition to stone tools, we have evidence of body decoration and the making of pigments as well as tools made of bone. They probably used animal skins and pieces of wood in interesting ways as well. But the handaxes are still our best guides, both for their durability over the millennia and the sheer quantity to be found all over the world. To put this into context, we are talking about the three-million-year period between the commencement of the most recent ice age and the beginning around 10,000 years ago of the warmer interglacial period that we still live in today. That is, a period starting 60

million years after the last dinosaurs and ending around the time of the first agricultural societies (but still 7,000 years before the invention of writing).

What is remarkable about this period is the stability of the handaxe form across millennia. At a time when the human brain was quickly evolving into its present state, the toolmaking process was passed on hardly altered. In comparison, the last three thousand years of human history (an infinitesimal amount of time, geologically speaking), has witnessed huge technological advances, from the invention of the wheel to spaceships, while our craniums in the same period have remained more or less the same size.

Did hominids during this period appreciate the aesthetics of the handaxe? Did they collect or produce rocks that looked like faces and figures? The curators of the exhibition believe so, and they construct certain arguments on its behalf, to various degrees of credibility, as we shall see. In the case of the handaxe, the organizers point to certain features that make no sense from the standpoint of utility. A giant-sized stone, for instance, would be too heavy to easily wield. The shape of certain choppers seems to follow the patterns of the rock from which they were carved. It was impossible to judge from the information given in the catalogue and the exhibition alone the hypothesis that the existence of unusual size and patterning is proof of aesthetic intent. Maybe large handaxes *could* be useful for doing certain things. And statistically speaking, amongst thousands of examples, isn't it conceivable that at least some of them might have an interesting pattern purely by coincidence?

More convincing for the argument than the most spectacular examples were the ones that were humbler but came with more information. At Boxgrove, in England, handaxes were found in the thousands. Apparently, some of them are so similar to each other that archeologists have speculated that they are evidence of a particularly distinct hand, group of hands, or some kind of systematic production. Whatever the case, this is too many examples from a single place, in a relatively short period of time, to be attributed to chance. If some of the more generic pieces had been shown next to the most extraordinary ones from the same place, this would have lent greater credence to the idea that they were made with something other than use-value in mind. It still would not prove it without a doubt. But at least one could make a better case for the argument

that they were intentionally exceptional.

The highly concentrated set of objects was the exception, not the rule. According to the catalogue, the curators scoured public collections around the world in search of the best objects for the show. It didn't matter where they came from, as long as they fit the criteria for being "exceptional," that is, gigantic, of unusual shape and pattern, highly symmetrical, etc. They looked spectacular in the vitrines, but it did make one wonder if the aesthetic perception belonged to early humankind or to the curators themselves.

An art historian by training, I am in no position to really judge the scientific arguments of *First Sculpture*. But what is interesting to me is that, whether talking about prehistoric humans or us moderns, the criteria for something to be called *artistic* had an eerily modern ring to it. This is because the idea that the aesthetic is constituted by what in the object exceeds absolute need dates to the eighteenth century. In the Enlightenment, when an urgent task for philosophy was to categorize and define all human thought, the concept of the beautiful received rigorous examination. It was then that the dichotomy between need and aesthetic pleasure, between utility and the beautiful, was given its first philosophical definition. In many ways, we still work under this general principle. If we today think of the artwork as part of larger web of socio-historical forces, we at the same time also believe that art somehow stands apart, however minutely, from those forces, even if only to comment upon the act of its own failed attempt at separation. In other words, while we no longer think of art as purely disinterested, art can only be critical on the condition that it is also not purely instrumental.

Would the curators say that they were projecting a modern view of what art is

back to prehistory? Probably not. But that is precisely what *First Sculpture* does, with a neuroscientific twist that will be addressed later below. This is most apparent in its presentation of the other class of objects, so-called figure stones. Unlike the knapped choppers, these stones have no ostensible use. If created by man, then they would truly be needless and therefore able to be classified as art. This would put the birth of art a couple of million years earlier than the cave paintings with which Art History 101 usually begins. But are they man-made, or did chance accidents of erosion leave rocks that to our eyes look like faces? Let's suppose that their excavation at a certain stratigraphic layer or that chemical dating proved that these artifacts were from the Paleolithic. The anthropological approach would be to determine what other kinds of objects remain from which to reconstruct

have been determined by chance. But barring sufficient evidence (which admittedly may exist outside this exhibition in the scholarly literature), how can we possibly know that a particular shape or form or material was the product of human manufacture? In order to procure consensus, the presenters draw upon neuroscience. Take the example of symmetry. We know that certain areas of the brain are stimulated by the perception of symmetry. This innate appreciation of bilateral symmetry helped early human beings to recognize each other and thus to survive. This was especially true of faces. It was quite amazing to see in the accompanying symposium that deformed photos of celebrities, when turned upside down, didn't register to the audience as aberrations.¹ Acknowledging the general overall image was enough for our brains to

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this hypothetical prehistoric society. Were there other kinds of figurative items? Were they found in particular places like caves? And if so, can connections be drawn or inferred among them? When the evidence is abundant, as it is in more recent times, one can infer a great deal, e.g. whether that community had funerary rites, or something resembling a cosmology or mythic thought. But when there is a paucity of comparanda, let alone questions of dating, this task remains speculative at best.

We are asked to believe that these things are the earliest sculptures, and not just tools or anthropomorphic objects, ultimately because first, they seem to have no use and second, they are too particular in design to

recognize them as faces, even though the eyes and mouths had been grossly altered. So far so good. But it is one thing to say that we are hard-wired to like symmetry; it is another to say that because of that we want to produce symmetrical things. I'm not saying it's not possible, just that one cannot logically use the existence of one as conclusive proof of the other.

At this point it might be helpful to put this neuroscientific turn in historical

¹ With presentations from co-curators Tony Berlant and Thomas Wynn, John Gowlett, Richard Deacon, Leanne Young, and Naama Goren-Inbar, the symposium was held at the Nasher on January 27th, 2018; video of the presentations and panel discussion is published on YouTube.



Cleaver, Gesher Benoit Ya'aqov, North Bridge Acheulian (NBA), ca. 780,000, Basalt
6 1/2 x 3 15/16 x 2 23/64 in. (16.5 x 10 x 6 cm)
Tel Hai University, Israel

perspective. A century and half ago, well before *Jurassic Park*, prehistory was an obsession of nineteenth-century scholars and antiquarians. One of the pieces in the show in fact comes from the collection of one of these proto-prehistorians, a customs-house officer of the French town of Abbeville, Jacques Boucher de Perthes.² What has earned him the name of thezfather of the study of prehistory in France was his unwavering commitment to the then extremely controversial idea that ancient man lived alongside extinct animals. Why would this have caused so

² A flint flake circa 500,000 to 30,000 years old, in the collection of the Musée d'Archéologie nationale et Domaine national de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France.

much concern? Even though natural historians and geologists were beginning to accept the idea that the earth was much older than biblically-derived dates had hitherto suggested, scientists were still very much reluctant to put the appearance of mankind so far back in the timeline. If human beings were special and made in God's image, and if the fossil record showed a slow progression of fauna from the most primitive species to the most advanced ones as one moved closer to the earth's surface, then surely men and women would have arrived at the very end of the chronology and not be mixed in with the earlier, less advanced species. For if the latter were actually true, it would only take a few steps to argue that—gasp!—humans evolved from lower life forms.

Boucher de Perthes presented his discoveries from nearby quarries in his 1845 book *Antiques celtiques et antédiluviennes*. The title alone is indicative about the state of the field at the time. Most French antiquarians were concerned with the people who lived in France before the Romans, the Celts. As a learned amateur, not an academician or professor, Boucher de Perthes had to wait a considerable time for the acceptance of his theories (the quasi-philosophical prose of his first texts did not help him in this regard). Yet what really held him back were claims of forgeries and fakes. Scholars assumed that local stonebreakers had forged ancient implements, in the knowledge that people like Boucher de Perthes would be willing to pay a lot for them. Then there was also the cursory nature of the excavations. Rocks were often hard to date because the excavators did not carefully note where they were found. This was essential, for how could one know whether or not animals existed at the same time, if one didn't know what time one was talking about. By the 1860s, the search for traces of "fossil man" became a *cause célèbre*. In 1863, no less than

Charles Lyell, the eloquent and influential British geologist, wrote in support of Boucher de Perthes after visiting Abbeville himself. Many who subsequently took the trip also began to change their minds. Eventually Boucher de Perthes's collection became the basis for the National Museum of Archeology at Saint Germain-en-Laye, the first of its kind in France.

What did its owner have to say about such early figurative representations? Quite a bit actually. Practically a quarter of the text of *Antiques celtiques et antédiluviennes* and half of its illustrations concerned things that were not handaxes but rather

symbols: steles, talismans, animal silhouettes, hieroglyphs, biomorphic pebbles, and of course rocks in the shape of human heads. Boucher de Perthes recognized the speculative nature of what he was doing: "Was it my imagination? You be the judge. I do not present my idea as a certitude but as a question to explore."

First Sculpture takes up Boucher de Perthes's question and tries to answer it with certainty. Its ally is the neuroscientific analysis of human brain function. If the early human brain was not too dissimilar to our own, then its core functions were probably similar to ours. That is to say, if we



Biddenham "Big Boy", England
Late handaxe
ca. 300,000
Flint
11 x 4 in. (27.9 x 10 cm)
The British Museum

are drawn to bilateral symmetry and tend to see faces where they are not, then so, too, did our ancestors, just as they shared involuntary processes like breathing and digestion, or coordinated locomotion. The problem is that liking and making are two entirely different operations. Just because I like the color blue, does not mean that I will make only blue sculptures or avoid black-and-white drawing altogether.

It is up to properly trained scientists to judge the conclusions about neural function presented in the catalogue and exhibition. From the view of the field of art history however, there are certain reasons to be wary about such grandiose claims. Not just a few times in the history of art has a set of norms been held as a universal aesthetic ideal. Laws of perspective, mathematical ratios, classical proportions, and—well before electronic brain scanning—symmetry itself were often held up as standards of perfection underwritten by divine and then later scientific authority. It is not that the creation of standards against which to test one's judgement was inherently wrong. After all, art criticism could not happen without evaluative criteria. It is rather that such norms, in claiming universal validity, became highly rigid and exclusionary. To define beauty became a way to repress aesthetics that did not match one's own. Thus, attempts to explain what causes a feeling of harmony, pleasure, and excitement in front of a work of art often went hand-in-hand with denunciations of what causes discomfort and displeasure, inevitably the production of barbarians, foreigners, and the unskilled.

To be fair, I don't think that *First Sculpture* was locating certain aspects of aesthetic experience in the brain in order to devalue others. Indeed, the discussion of gigantism and exaggerations ("peak shifts") in the making of handaxes suggest that the non-normal could be as interesting from an

artistic point of view as the normative. The reason I raise a red flag is that with every new scientific discovery it is all too tempting to attribute to nature what is in fact a product of culture. And culture by definition is manmade, decided by social convention, and historically contingent (i.e. not universal). This temptation is particularly strong when there is not much information. We know next to little about the daily lives, group organization, communication, and (if any) religious or cult practices of these early societies. Without these basic facts, there is no opportunity to make the counter-argument that the symmetry of the spheroids or the anthropomorphism of rocks has less to do with early humankind's neural processing capabilities and more to do with, let's say, a way of maintaining a social hierarchy or celebrating the hunt.

Prehistory is thus a minefield of methodological problems. On the one hand, we don't want to consign all human activity, in all its complexity, to biological mechanisms; on the other, we don't want to uncritically project our ways back to a period that probably had cultural dynamics different from our own. Only more research (including new fields like paleogenetics) will further elucidate the enigmas of prehistory. But as long as it remains enigmatic it will always be an arena in which to explore the most basic question of all: what does it mean to be human? A

First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone.

Exhibition curated by Tony Berlant and Thomas Wynn. Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, January 27th to April 28th, 2018. Catalog with essay by Berlant and Wynn, and contributions by Jared Diamond, V. S. Ramachandran, Richard Reacon, Naama Goren-Inbar, John Gowlett, and Evan Maurer, 188pp., 84 color and 19 black-and-white illustrations, \$70 cloth.