

# The New York Times

February 1, 2018

## Was Australopithecus an Artist?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/arts/design/nasher-sculpture-center-dallas-first-sculpture-review.html>

By: Jason Fargo



A hand ax from Niger, included in the Nasher Sculpture Center's new exhibition "First Sculpture." Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

DALLAS — The Nasher Sculpture Center here is devoted to the art of the modern era, and its elegant pavilion and garden, designed by Renzo Piano, have recently welcomed exhibitions by living masters like Roni Horn, Pierre Huyghe and Giuseppe Penone. Its new show, though, exhibits sculptures from far, far earlier: So far back in human history that the artists — and we'll come back to whether that term applies — are not even of our own species.

"First Sculpture," an alternately fascinating and flummoxing exhibition of Paleolithic stone artifacts, travels as far from the present day as possible to propose a new genealogy of art history. Stones carved and collected by Neanderthals 150,000 years ago appear in vitrines. Large hand axes, sitting in view of steel sculptures by Mark di Suvero and Richard Serra, date from 300,000 years ago or earlier. Think those are old? "First Sculpture" also includes tools from North Africa 800,000 years old, and a spheroid gewgaw, found in South Africa, that was collected by Australopithecus 2.5 million years before today.

Though you may have seen tools like this in natural history museums, the proposition of "First Sculpture," from its title onward, is that these are not merely instruments, but art; that they were crafted not just for functional reasons but for aesthetic ones. Moreover, the naturally occurring patterns in some stones — holes or circular depressions that resemble eyes, for example, or protuberances like noses — supposedly reveal a hard-wired hunger for representation: an aesthetic impulse in our evolutionary forebears.

Are these 80-odd tools, eons more ancient than the ancient world, indeed art works? Can we ever really know? With no artist statement forthcoming from our Stone Age ancestors, the show takes on a strange admixture of science and guesswork, paleoanthropology and wishful thinking. Still, the uncertainty of its thesis is part of its pleasure; a great work of art, after all, is always a thing we don't fully understand. Whatever their status, the objects are astonishing.

It convinces most in the section devoted to hand axes. Stone Age humans, principally the species *Homo erectus*, would use rocks, bones or antlers to fracture larger boulders, hewing sharp tools in a laborious process known as knapping. Though *Australopithecus* (four million to three million years ago) made blunt cutting tools, *Homo erectus* (1.9 million to 100,000 years ago) fashioned finer implements, tapering from the butt to the point and flaked on two sides, to form the familiar teardrop now paradigmatic of early man. There are dozens here, and at a display by the entrance of "First Sculpture," visitors can handle three specimens, each 7 or 8 inches long and weighing about five pounds, crafted by our fellow hominins between 200,000 and 700,000 years ago. Their satisfying heft and ergonomic shape offer an unnerving haptic trace of human life before contemporary humankind.



Hand axes from Mauritania (center), Niger (left) and Israel (right). Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

The hand axes do disclose evident aesthetic choices. Two examples here, crafted in England 300,000 years ago, have curving edges whose sinuousness offers no functional advantage — a Paleolithic echo of [Hogarth's line of beauty](#). Some are punctured with holes, usually placed near the center of the tool. (You couldn't use them as a grip; you'd break your finger.) One ax found in England has a shell embedded in it. Others have atypical colors or textures. An ax of iron stone from South Africa has alternating yellow and gray grooves, like the ridges of a topographic map; another, from Mauritania, was hewed from a block of striated gneiss that could well have been chosen for its beauty. Five oversized hand axes, more than a foot tall, would have been too heavy for a single hand to wield; they may also have been for show.



Cleaver, quartzite, from Mauritania. Credit Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times



An installation view of objects in the Nasher Sculpture Center's new exhibition. Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

Most of these artifacts come from the collection of [Tony Berlant](#), a Pop artist in Los Angeles and a lay authority on prehistoric art, who has co-curated "First Sculpture" with [Thomas Wynn](#), an anthropologist at the University of Colorado. (Collector-curator shows can raise hackles — the museum's prestige stands to increase the collection's value — but the catalog notes that Mr. Berlant and Mr. Wynn first sought loans from nearly two dozen museums worldwide. Though they borrowed objects from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, the British Museum in London, and institutions in France, Israel, Tanzania and South Africa, the pair found that Mr. Berlant's own objects were often of greater quality than those in public collections. The Nasher's director clarified to The Times that Mr. Berlant does not intend to disperse his collection in the future.)

The curators have surely put their fingers on the scale by staging the show at a modern art center, where the hand axes and stones appear in an immaculate light far from the dinosaur bones and dioramas of the universal museum. And they have overplayed their hand on the question of aesthetic intent. Can we really say that eight hand axes from the British Museum, as Mr. Berlant and Mr. Wynn claim, were made by four *individual* members of the species *Homo heidelbergensis*, "by far the oldest individual artisans ever recognized"?

Yet the axes themselves, finely tuned weapons whose ridged faces resemble oyster shells, certainly have a visual attraction that exceeds pure function. Even earlier hand tools, the largest here 1.5 million years old, were hewn into nearly ideal spheres whose shape did not increase their utility. If we define art as a form that exceeds use, then these are indeed some of the oldest aesthetic objects on earth. Someone a little like us invested extra time and effort to enact these shapes on hard stone.



Neanderthal figure stones from Fontmaure, France. Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

Did they also find meaning in the shapes those stones naturally displayed? The bolder, even foolhardy second half of “First Sculpture” suggests so through a collection of “figure stones,” or objects that early humans supposedly appreciated for their resemblance to animals or human faces. Some are functional objects, such as a quartzite cleaver from Mauritania with two circular bumps that produce, as the catalog has it, “a feline face.” Others have no clear function. Mr. Berlant has acquired a suite of stones from Fontmaure, France, which Neanderthals supposedly chipped and knapped to accentuate the faces they saw in them. One large rock has two holes above a jutting knob: a face, if you turn right side up. Another bears an almost comic resemblance to a Picasso profile.



One of the Neanderthal stone figures from Fontmaure, France, has two holes above a jutting knob: a face, if you turn right side up. Tony Berlant Collection

It falls to us, the overdressed apes in contemporary museums, to make sense of these incomprehensible rocks. On the one hand, imputing figures into these stones projects modern ideas of proportion and beauty onto “artists” of not just another culture, but another species. This is a primitivist impulse, and should be avoided, especially when these supposed art objects could merely be junk from the cave floor. We see faces here — but we see faces in clouds, too.

On the other hand, art itself no longer means what it did when the first paleoanthropologists ascribed artistic intent to our fossil kin. Before the 20th century, art was understood as a direct act of creation, whose earliest manifestation would be cave paintings from 30,000 or 40,000 years ago (quite recently, in the timeline of “First Sculpture.”) After Duchamp’s invention of the ready-made, the definition

changed. Art could be an encounter between an object that already existed — a urinal, a bicycle wheel, a stone in a grotto — and an idea about that object, fused into a new union beyond functionality.

By that definition, the 2.5 million-year-old Makapansgat pebble, lent to this show from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, could indeed be the world's first work of art. It's made of jasperite, a stone not present at the site where it was found, and it bears two shallow indentations like eyes, another beneath where a mouth should be, and a hatch mark like a brow above. A member of Australopithecus, whose brain was just a third the size of ours, must have found this stone and brought it some distance. And if he or she did see a face in its surface — not out of the question; other primates' brains have evolved for face recognition, one of the most important skills in social relationships — then this Australopithecus would have been thinking like an artist.



The 2.5 million-year-old Makapansgat pebble is made of jasperite, a stone not present at the site where it was found. It also bears two shallow indentations like eyes, another beneath where a mouth should be, and a hatch mark like a brow above. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

We can never be sure whether any individual stone or spheroid is an intentional creation, or just a leftover from prehistoric industry. What we can say, and what this intelligent, imprudent and thoroughly enjoyable exhibition does show, is that art has a far deeper tradition than usually acknowledged. Hegel famously argued that art was born from spirituality, and that modern painting and sculpture could never equal the old stuff. But if “First Sculpture” is correct, the impulse for art predates that of religions by uncountable millennia, and might even predate humanity itself. Right or wrong, that was a lot to

absorb in Dallas, as my eyes shuttled across the Pleistocene and my fingers swiped the touch-screen of the blunt hand ax I tote everywhere.

First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone

Through April 28 at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas; 214-242-5100, [nashersculpturecenter.org](http://nashersculpturecenter.org).