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## First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone at the Nasher

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Most chronicles of art history trace this human impulse back to objects like the Ice Age [Lion-man](#), an ivory sculpture recognized as the first animal-shaped sculpture, or the [Chauvet Cave](#) paintings in France, with their 30,000-year-old depictions of horses, cattle, bears, and woolly rhinos. [First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone](#), on view through April 28 at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, argues for a much longer timeline of artistic intent. The oldest object among the exhibition's 70-plus artifacts is the 2.5 million-year-old Makapansgat Pebble. Found in Makapansgat, South Africa, the chunk of craggy jasperite resembles a human face.



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



Handaxe, France, ca. 500,000-300,000, Flint, 6 x 4 1/2 x 1 1/2 in.,  
Tony Berlant Collection

Did our pre-Homo human ancestor — an *Australopithecus* — who collected the Pebble recognize in its three stone pocks a reflection of his or her own eyes and mouth? Or are we applying a modern view to the past, morphing it to our present perceptions? There are bold claims in *First Sculpture*, some shakier than others. Yet by bringing together some of the finest examples of figure stones and handaxes — objects not exceptionally rare in archaeology — it clearly demonstrates how prehistoric human ancestors found and brought out beauty in the geological world around them. Traditionally, these handaxes are studied only as utilitarian tools. A 500,000-300,000-year-old flint handaxe from West Tofts, England, has a fossilized shell carefully framed by the knapping, a technique of stone flaking, and another from the same span in France has an eroded hole in the stone which the knapper carved around — a seemingly ornamental hole as it would have broken a user's thumb if used as a handle.



Handaxe knapped around a fossil shell, West Tofts, Norfolk, England, Ca. 500,000-300,000, Flint, Approx. 5 1/4 x 3 in., Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge



*First Sculpture* features loans from the British Museum in the UK, Field Museum in Chicago, Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory in Israel, McGregor Museum in South Africa, Musée de Préhistoire in France, and other institutions, joined by numerous specimens from the collection of artist Tony Berlant. Berlant co-curated the exhibition with anthropologist Dr. Thomas Wynn. It's luminously lit in the Nasher, with light radiating in from its sculpture garden, where biomorphic bronzes by Joan Miró and Henry Moore resonate with the gestural expression of the carved stones. Almost all of the handaxes are displayed upright like totems, so you can see each detail in the round. *First Sculpture* is billed as the "first museum exhibition to present ancient handaxes and figure stones as works of art," and indeed, the display of these stones is different from how they are usually presented in natural history or anthropology museums. A few days after visiting the Dallas show, I witnessed a case of handaxes at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, part of the exhibition [All the World Is Here: Harvard's Peabody Museum and the Invention of American Anthropology](#) on the development of anthropology in the 19th and 20th centuries. Just as this 21st-century reconsideration places the handaxe on an understandable timeline that leads to contemporary artistic creation, so, too, did Victorian archaeologists use the tools to guide ideas about human evolution and the making of tools as a sign of advancement to present industry.



Visitors to *First Sculpture* first encounter a group of four objects that act as touchstones (so to speak) for the themes of the exhibition. This gathering includes the Makapansgat Pebble, as well as a pebble tool from Portugal whose quartzite material seems chosen for visual impact, a basalt handaxe from Mauritania, and a cleaver from Mauritania, which either a *Homo erectus* or *Homo heidelbergensis* crafted to, as the exhibition states, “highlight its resemblance to a feline face.” The handaxe sections feel the most solid, demonstrating how certain early humans took care to select interesting stone, like the crystalline gneiss of a handaxe from Mauritania, and the purple, red, and yellow jasper quarried and modified by Neanderthals in central France. A “gigantism” display has colossal versions of handaxes that have no practical purpose, and show no damage from use, such as one hewn from quartzite 800,000 to 300,000 years ago in Algeria. A selection of spheroids — artifacts painstakingly fashioned into orbs — similarly have no evidence of use as tools. Shape variants ranging from teardrops to ovates suggest some design decision. However, the exhibition’s argument that the “twisted ovate was the most used vehicle for displaying knapping skill” seems to push confirmable intent a little far, even if its example of a dramatically-chipped handaxe from England is striking, with carved orange and blueish gray flint rippling like ocean waves.



Neanderthal figure stone, Fontmaure, France, ca. 150,000- 50,000, Flint, 12 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 4 1/2 in., Tony Berlant Collection

Less convincing is the theorizing on the figure stones: naturally-occurring rocks which for prehistoric humans supposedly represented faces, or crocodiles, horses, elephants, and lions (which would presumably kick the Lion-man off his first-animal-sculpture throne). Here the show is not about artistic intent, but rather early humans projecting meaning onto found objects, which were often augmented and enhanced through additional carving. The exhibition text notes that the same [pareidolia](#) of our moderns minds, which causes us to perceive such patterns as Jesus' face in our toast, or a man in the Moon, is shared with monkeys, apes, and our early human ancestors. A flint figure stone from Fontmaure, France, for instance, was detached from a larger outcropping by a Neanderthal who maybe saw in its smooth nodule the shape of a cranium. Even if it's a bit romantic, there is something uncanny

that here in 2018, you can discover the crooked line of a nose or the uneven spacing of two eyes in these figure stones, and perhaps follow in the mental path of some distant ancestor.

Right outside the *First Sculpture* gallery, visitors can touch and hold three handaxes that were made around 200,000 to 700,000 years ago, discovering how their teardrop forms were an ergonomic design. Whether or not you are sold on these as works of sculpture, it's powerful to have this tactile experience with our prehistoric past. Our idea of art has changed so much in just the previous century, in how it's as much about arranging a new perspective on the world as the act of creation; measuring its evolution in hundreds of thousands of years involves much conjecture. What's most moving about *First Sculpture* is this shared lineage of finding something compelling in the natural world, and shaping it to our desires.

Through April 28, 2018 [at the Nasher Sculpture Center](#) in Dallas.