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'First Sculpture' views prehistoric tools as early examples of art

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This artifact from Egypt is part of an exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. (Kevin Todora/Kevin Todora)

When is an ancient tool a sculpture? It depends on how it's presented.

If you display stone handaxes with information about how they were used tens and even hundreds of thousands of years ago — to hunt, dig, hammer and cut — you might think of them as tools.

If you focus on their beauty, you might think of them as art.

Displaying beauty is what's happening in "First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone" at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. A collaboration between anthropologist Thomas Wynn and artist Tony Berlant, the exhibition is the first to present ancient handaxes as artistic objects.

They were used by our prehistoric ancestors and unearthed in places such as France, Egypt and South Africa — and, the exhibition contends, they can be considered the first sculptures ever made. By presenting the tools, which were hewed throughout the Paleolithic era, in an artistic context, the museum challenges visitors to discover an aesthetic dimension that goes far back in time.

The tools are presented alongside “figure stones,” rocks collected by Neanderthals, *Homo erectus* and even *Australopithecus africanus*, a pre-human ancestor that existed 2 million years ago. They aren’t usually thought of as artsy, but they did save rocks that appealed to them.

Why? What meaning did they see in the stones? What did they think of as beautiful? “First Sculpture” provokes those kinds of questions and more.

If you can’t make it to Dallas before the show closes on April 28, you can view the objects, along with a series of lectures and a teaching guide, on Nasher’s [website](#).