

First Sculpture

Teaching Resource

First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone / January 27 – April 28, 2018

[First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone](#) is the first museum exhibition to present prehistoric handaxes and figure stones as evidence of the earliest forms of artistic intention among our ancient ancestors. Through these objects, we have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of human history and the origins of our ability to recognize beauty and meaning in objects.

Bolded terms can be found in the glossary at the end of this resource.

About the Curators

First Sculpture is the product of a unique curatorial collaboration between Los Angeles-based artist Tony Berlant and anthropologist Dr. Thomas Wynn, Distinguished Professor at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. The pair visited museums throughout Europe, the Middle East, Africa and North America to examine early human artifacts for evidence of aesthetic intent and conducted conversations with [anthropologists](#), [neuroscientists](#), artists and other experts to develop compelling insights into the mind of early man.



LEFT: Thomas Wynn. RIGHT: Tony Berlant.

- As you view the exhibition, consider how an artist and archaeologist working together might develop ideas that extend beyond the normal reach of their chosen fields.

Who Made the Artifacts?

Besides humans, only our ancestors and close relatives knapped stone tools. Paleontologists use the term Hominini ([hominins](#), for short) to refer to humans and our extinct, ancestral and related forms. Between seven and two million years ago there were at least eleven different species of hominins as identified by their fossils. Artifacts within this exhibition were created by a number of these species, including [Australopithecus africanus](#), [Homo erectus](#), [Homo heidelbergensis](#), [Homo neanderthalensis](#) and [Homo sapiens](#). Refer to the exhibition brochure for a timeline of selected hominins and artifacts.

Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Fine Arts: Historical and Cultural Relevance, Critical Evaluation and Response, Creative Expression | §117.52. Art, Level I (c) (1), (3) and (4)
Social Studies | World History: Early Civilizations, Interpreting Historical Events | §113.42. (c) (2) and (29)
Science | Biology: Common Ancestry Among Groups | §112.34. (c) (7) (A)

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Nasher Sculpture Center

What Is a Handaxe?

A handaxe is a prehistoric tool made using a stone flaking technique called **knapping**. Handaxes are generally considered to be the longest-used tool in human history and were likely used to dig for roots, to butcher animals, or to chop wood. They have been discovered over all of Africa, much of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Most were produced between 1.8 million and roughly 35,000 years ago.



Figure 1

While prehistoric handaxes are not rare objects, certain examples have characteristics that make them stand out. When selecting artifacts for this exhibition, the curators looked for handaxes that were “**overdetermined**,” meaning that their makers invested more time and effort in them than would have been necessary to produce a functional tool.

- Think of a creative project you “overdetermined.” What made you spend extra time and energy on this project? How did you feel about the end result?
- Make a list of the tools you use daily. How does the design of each object (its shape, size, materials) enhance or detract from its function?
- Sketch an object you use daily and make notes about how you would improve its appearance or function.

What Makes these Handaxes Special?

Shape: This handaxe (Figure 2) was knapped into a highly **symmetrical** teardrop shape. The teardrop is considered the typical shape for handaxes, although few achieve this level of refinement. The maker of this object appears to have made a conscious effort to accentuate the different colored layers of stone for aesthetic effect.



Figure 2: Shape



Figure 3: Pattern

Pattern: This handaxe (Figure 3) is made of an unusual stone, and the maker used its shape to draw attention to the center of the artifact and the large, colorful mineral crystals.

Framing: Some handaxes frame and highlight interesting features in the stone, such as a crystal, a fossil, or a hole. In the example to the right, the knapper highlighted a fossilized shell for visual impact (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Framing



Figure 5: Framing



Figure 6: Size

A number of handaxes work around naturally occurring openings in the stone (Figure 5).

Experts believe that these were not functional additions since the impact of using the tool with a finger or thumb inserted in the hole could cause injury or broken bones.

Size: This handaxe (Figure 6) is far too large and heavy to have been a hand tool, and there is no evidence that it was ever used.

Figure 1: Handaxe, Tabelbala, Algeria, ca. 300,000 years of age. Quartzite, 10 3/8 x 5 x 1 in. (26.6 x 12.7 x 2.5 cm). Musée de Préhistoire, Sauveboeuf, Aubas, France. Figure 2: Handaxe, Kathu Pan, South Africa, ca. 600,000 years of age. Iron Stone, 9 1/4 x 4 1/2 in. (23.5 x 10.8 cm). McGregor Museum, Kimberley, South Africa. Figure 3: Handaxe, Mauritania, ca. 800,000-300,000 years of age. Gneiss, 10 1/2 x 5 x 2 in. (26.6 x 12.7 x 5 cm). Tony Berlant Collection. Figure 4: Handaxe knapped around a fossil shell, West Tofts, Norfolk, England, ca. 500,000-300,000 years of age. Flint, 5 x 3 x 1 1/8 in. (13.2 x 7.9 x 3.5 cm). Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Figure 5: Handaxe, Niger, ca. 800,000-300,000 years of age. Hornfels, 4 3/4 x 3 1/2 x 1 in. (12 x 8.8 x 2.5 cm). Tony Berlant Collection. Figure 6: Handaxe, Algeria, ca. 800,000-300,000 years of age. Quartzite, 14 x 7 1/2 x 4 in. (35.5 x 19 x 10 cm). Tony Berlant Collection.

What Is a Figure Stone?

A figure stone is a naturally occurring stone that resembles a human, an animal, or another recognizable shape. Prehistoric people noticed these shapes and would sometimes collect them.

The human brain evolved to detect faces, a skill which helps us navigate complex social situations. In fact, there are groups of neurons in the brains of primates that are devoted solely to the task of recognizing faces. A side effect of this ability is the effect of *pareidolia*, or seeing patterns in natural objects, like seeing shapes in the clouds or the man in the moon.

This jasperite pebble (Figure 8) was found with other early human artifacts and fossilized remains at an *Australopithecus* site over 20 miles away from where this type of stone naturally occurs, suggesting that it was carried there. This is the earliest known example of a human ancestor recognizing and collecting an object that strongly resembles a face.

This figure stone (Figure 9), found at a *Neanderthal* site, was broken around its edges to frame a naturally occurring face.

- Spend some time looking thoughtfully at your surroundings. Where can you find shapes that suggest faces or other familiar forms?
- Figure stones were collected by prehistoric people. What do you collect?

Touching the Past

The curators of *First Sculpture* describe holding a handaxe as "touching, through the medium of stone, the hand of a very distant ancestor." Included in this exhibition are three handaxes that visitors are invited to hold (ask a Visitor Experiences staff member).

- As you hold the handaxe, consider the following: How do the shape and weight of the handaxe feel in your hand? Does it feel balanced?
- How would you grip this object to use it as a tool?
- How does the handaxe compare to present-day objects that are designed to fit a human hand? A cell phone? A hammer? A computer mouse? A knife?



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figure 7: Neanderthal figure stone, Fontmaure, France, ca. 150,000-50,000 years of age. Flint, 16 x 16 x 9 1/2 in. (40.6 x 40.6 x 24 cm). Tony Berlant Collection. **Figure 8:** Makapansgat Pebble, ca. 2.5 million years of age. Jasperite, 3 x 2 1/2 in. (7.6 x 6.3 cm). University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. **Figure 9:** Neanderthal figure stone, Fontmaure, France, ca. 150,000-50,000 years of age. Flint, 12 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 4 1/2 in. (31.7 x 19 x 11.4 cm). Tony Berlant Collection. **Figure 10:** Twisted ovate handaxe, Grindle Pit, England, ca. 300,000 years of age. Flint, 4 1/2 x 3 x 1 1/4 inches (11 x 8 x 3.3 cm). The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Presented by Sir Arthur Evans, from the collection of Sir John Evans.

The First Artisans

Near the village of Boxgrove in England, archaeologists uncovered a site where a group of *Homo heidelbergensis* lived for a single generation about 500,000 years ago.

Working with a team of six **archaeologists** and artists, the curators of *First Sculpture* conducted a close examination of the handaxes found at the Boxgrove site with the hope of identifying the work of individual makers. Each member of this group considered the objects separately and developed their own criteria for grouping the handaxes by maker. Remarkably, they were able to identify two groups of three and two pairs of handaxes that were each made by particular individuals. These four knappers would be by far the oldest individual artisans ever recognized.



Figure 11

and

Artist **Richard Deacon**, who was part of this team, describes the experience in the exhibition catalogue, marveling that “these objects are not just good enough for the job in hand but made with sufficient refinement and particularity to carry a message across the millennia to us.”

- Consider the handaxes in this exhibition. What criteria would you use to group them?
- Think about this process as you view modern and contemporary works in the Nasher Collection. What characteristics can be used to identify the handiwork of individual artists?

Connections to the Present

To coincide with *First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone*, the Nasher Sculpture Center’s curators have selected works that draw connections between the Paleolithic objects featured in *First Sculpture* and sculptures of the more recent past from the Nasher Collection.

- Why might artists today choose to use stone to create sculpture?
- Find an artwork in the Nasher Collection (on view in Gallery II) that shares characteristics with a handaxe or figure stone in *First Sculpture*. Do you think this present-day artwork will last as long as the objects created by our prehistoric ancestors? How might the artwork change over time?
- What will the tools of today say about our culture, how we lived and what we valued?

Additional Resources

- Tony Berlant: Close to Home <https://vimeo.com/109076229>
- Knapping diagram <https://kids.britannica.com/students/assembly/view/127645>
- Smithsonian Human Evolution Timeline <http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-evolution-timeline-interactive>
- Will Lord: Stone Knapping <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPlv7gCvEOs>

Glossary

Anthropologist – Someone who studies the various aspects of humans within past and present societies.

Archaeologist – Someone who studies human activity through the recovery and analysis of artifacts, architecture, cultural landscapes or organic material (biofact) that carries archaeological significance.

Australopithecus africanus – An early extinct hominid anatomically similar to *Australopithecus afarensis*, with a combination of human-like and ape-like features that lived primarily in Southern Africa about 3.3 to 2.1 million years ago.

Australopithecus afarensis – One of the longest-lived and best-known, now extinct early human species that lived primarily in Eastern Africa (modern day Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania) roughly 3.85 and 2.95 million years ago. This species survived for more than 900,000 years, which is over four times as long as our own species (*Homo sapiens*) has been around.

Hominins – Humans and our extinct, ancestral and related forms.

Homo heidelbergensis – An extinct early human species that lived primarily in Europe, possibly in Africa and Asia about 700,000 to 200,000 years ago. It was the first early human species to live in colder climates; their short, wide bodies were likely an adaptation to conserving heat. It lived at the time of the oldest definite control of fire and use of wooden spears, and it was the first early human species to routinely hunt large animals. This early human also broke new ground; it was the first species to build shelters, creating simple dwellings out of wood and rock.

***Homo neanderthalensis*, also known as Neanderthal** – Our closest extinct human relative that was not ancestral to modern humans, this species lived primarily in Europe and parts of Asia from around 200,000 to 40,000 years ago. Neanderthals made and used a diverse set of sophisticated tools, controlled fire, lived in shelters, made and wore clothing, were skilled hunters of large animals and also ate plant foods, and occasionally made symbolic or ornamental objects. There is evidence that Neanderthals deliberately buried their dead and occasionally even marked their graves with offerings, such as flowers. No other primates, and no earlier human species, had ever practiced this sophisticated and symbolic behavior.

Homo sapiens – The species that all living human beings currently belong to. During a time of dramatic climate change 200,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* evolved in Africa. Like other early humans that were living at this time, they gathered and hunted food, and evolved behaviors that helped them respond to the challenges of survival in unstable environments.

Knapping – Shaping a piece of stone by striking it so as to make stone tools or weapons. Some of the best stones for knapping include flint, chert, quartzite and obsidian.

Neuroscientist – Someone who studies the nervous system, which is composed of the brain, spinal cord and nerve cells.

Overdetermined – An object in which the maker has invested more time and effort than would have been necessary to produce a functional item.

Pareidolia – Seeing patterns in natural objects, like seeing shapes in the clouds or the man in the moon.

Symmetrical – Made up of exactly similar parts facing each other or around an axis.