

Last Word: A Favorite Object by Wilbur Norman

"Of all lies, art is the least untrue." -- Flaubert

One of my favorite 'art' objects lives in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When I go to the museum I always stop and freshen my familiarity with it. If pressed to describe these visits I would say that I am indulging my eyes and mind, but it is really a pilgrimage of the heart.

The piece I visit is modern in conception and might have been made today - or tomorrow, but in fact is 6000 thousand years old. It affirms the adage 'there is nothing new under the sun' and demonstrates the necessity of continuously re-evaluating our thinking vis à vis the development of consciousness and the psyche of early humans. Brain and mind are, after all, not the same thing; our ancestor's brains made the objects but their minds informed the action. This context is expressed best by Robert McGhee (*Ancient People of the Arctic, 1996*): "the apparent simplicity of Stone Age technologies is largely a reflection of an inadequate archaeological record rather than of the simplicity of Stone Age peoples."

It is only in the last hundred years that we have begun to grasp this idea in the West. A priceless, perhaps apocryphal, anecdote is the tale of the Victorian woman who, upon hearing that perhaps our ancestors were not as mentally primitive as commonly believed, is supposed to have uttered, "Let us hope that it is not true, but if it is, let us pray that it will not become generally known." (J.E. Pfeiffer, *The Creative Explosion, 1982*.)

What, then, is this object in question? The Metropolitan Museum label reads:

Marble female figure

Cycladic, Final Neolithic, ca. 4500-4000 B.C.

On the museum's website it tells us that the height is 8 5/16 inches (21.5 cm.) and further:

"This figure, now missing its head, is a masterful example of a rare type known as steatopygous, characterized by a fleshy abdomen and massive thighs and buttocks, all undoubtedly indicative of nourishment and fertility. In contrast, the figure's upper torso is flat in profile with the arms typically framing V-shaped, pendant breasts. The corpulent, markedly stylized, thighs, taper to diminutive, stumplike feet. Incised lines articulate folds of flesh in the groin and at the knee joints in the front and back."

The label's reference to Cycladic simply means the figure's origin is the Cyclades Islands in the Aegean. The name derives from the ancient Greek *kyklades*, a scattered ring, a circle (*kyklos*) of islands that include the famous tourist ones of Santorini and Mykonos as well as Paros (ancient quarries for marble), Naxos (marble quarries and abrasive emery powder) and Melos (source of obsidian, a carving material.) Many stylized marble figures, usually long and slim, have been found as associated grave goods over most of these islands. This particular figure, in the large buttocks style (or, *steatopygous*, to use an anthropological word) is quite rare in the oeuvre - the Met's description does not overstate, and a line in the literature that we see repeatedly is that these sculptures are "restrained in expression and refined in execution." The eminent archaeologist and antiquary Lord Colin Renfrew describes Cycladic figures as "handsome standing figure[s], with quiet, unassertive rhythms and balanced proportions, achiev[ing] one of the most compelling early statements of the human form." (Bradshaw Foundation)

While the aesthetic detailing is restrained, minimal, its impact is maximal. The sculptor, a genius of observation and abstraction, was a master of the possibilities of form and line



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

and the physical master of his craft; this figure, surely, was not his first. What, then, was the pride of ownership in this object? What was thought of its 'artfulness'? It is often said that most of the tribal artifacts sold as "art" were not actually made with a non-utilitarian art-sense as part of the item's genesis; its artfulness was not a factor in its construction. But aesthetic concerns seem always to have been a consideration for master craftsmen. We may not know the specific answers to the above questions, but I believe aesthetics were of great, if not primary, importance.

Much has been made, recently, of David Hockney's recitation of a Chinese proverb that says to be a painter "you need the eye, the hand and the heart - two won't do." This, like the best folk wisdom, is a distillation of a home truth about the creation of superior art in any medium. Though we may not be able to adequately define genius, many know it when it is seen, read, heard, tasted or smelled. We know the real thing OK, you may say, but what makes this Hottentot so hot? For me, this Cycladic masterpiece is a solid manifestation of a physical presence manifestly articulating the world of ideas -- ideas that had percolated for millennia throughout a much greater geographic region. The world of its creation was not just a parochial backwater accidentally giving birth to a localized genius of expression. The figure succeeds on the level of the eye, the hand and the heart, as well as in the realm of the intellect. Its initial allure mutates, as one's gaze lingers, into a dialectical moment: the thesis of its allure followed by an antithesis - its startling oddity. And then -- wait for it! -- the synthesis of its impact, its volumetric resonance and power, its perfection, flowing over one like a shower of transcendence. It is the vital force of the invisible made visible.

With its geometric quality this figure could have been brought into being by Brancusi, its arms and stance emanating stoicism and patience with a natural directness, and yet it bears a visual relationship to the Paleolithic obese Venus figures found in Central and Eastern Europe. Is it a natural, genetic descendant of these much earlier Venus figures whose images recall fecundity and sexuality, abundance and fertility?

While there are many hypotheses as to the meaning and intent of the corpus of Cycladic figurines, we really do not



Rear, side view of the figure
Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

know much about their place in the lives of the peoples of the greater Aegean Sea. Most were excavated long ago, under uncontrolled, or illegal, conditions with the subsequent loss of any archaeological context that might have shed light on their purpose. Because those figures that have retained their heads have faces that look upward in a manner suggesting supplication, many believe they are idols. Labeling them idols may be a misstep, however, as some figures were apparently tossed instead of being repaired, a fate surely not in keeping with an idol's importance. There are others, as luck would have it, that were repaired meaning they might not have been only grave goods. At least one scholar has hedged her bets and written that the figures were "more than dolls and probably less than sacrosanct idols." (Emily Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age*, 1974.) But all explanations are good, and necessary, as a myriad of theories are required in any questing debate. "Without the making of theories I am convinced there would be no observation." (Darwin to Lyell, 1860)

What we do know is that the figures were surface-painted, and some are not figurines in the classic sense as there are a number of nearly life-size specimens. And, like the so-called Venuses, these figures depict women; 95% of the known examples are female with many of those few figures that are male depicting sitting musicians. (Were we guys simply playing second fiddle to Neolithic matriarchal societies?)

This genre or basic style of female figure has been found from France to Eastern Europe and thence across the vast landmass of Asia all the way to Siberia. Clearly something was going on and the light of that something was not being hidden under a bushel. It shone on a semi-global Paleolithic stage of unparalleled continuity, not only through geography but through time as well - more than 30,000 years of it (or up to half a million years if one goes back to the Venus of Tan Tan in Morocco!) There is a certain unity to these figures, spread as they are throughout a diversity of empires, that suggests to me, to borrow a phrase from the late British archaeologist Stuart Piggott, "the unchanging traditions of the temple" rather than "the secular instability of the court." Though, to be honest, the whole sacred vs. profane issue is a relatively modern distinction in art.

New computer research on the Venus images, however, has posited a very interesting idea: these figures reflect a self-view, that is, the view an individual woman would see if she were looking down at her own body. Seen in this context, this new idea regards the images as self-portraits probably created by women, perhaps in a gynecocracy, a culture ruled by women. Heady stuff, indeed! And, the latest thinking also removes the word Venus from the names of these little objects as it implies a cult, or goddess status, an idea that may be misplaced if we are to believe the self-portrait theory. This new idea also enlists a bit of political correctness in arguing that,

"while sex is biological, the product of nature, gender is to be understood as social, the product of nurture or culture... [The] paradigm that has been defining the feminine in the west since the Greeks is a patriarchal one. The feminine, in terms of gender identification...in western culture, is arguably partially, or even wholly, a male construction." (Christopher L.C.E. Witcombe, *The Venus of Willendorf*, the Internet)

Perhaps it is the male in me that does not care about the lack of a head on this figure. It is not, for me, a detriment, but is, instead, a nice touch as I cannot imagine the head that would actually enhance this figure. Rather, I think it would detract, since humans, like other animals, are disproportionately attracted to the face to the initial exclusion of all other parts of the body.

A final kicker in my aesthetic response to these figures is that it is based on how they look now, not how they appeared to a contemporary, Cycladic viewer. For, according to the Getty Museum, much of the modernist reverence for Cycladic figures is

"based on a misconceived aesthetic premise that they are abstract works of art pared down to minimal representational forms: flat, pure, and white. The original appearance of the figures was much more complex. Details like eyes, eyebrows, hair, even garments, were brightly painted onto the figurines and have been worn away by time. For instance, the figures were originally decorated with red, black, and blue designs to indicate facial features, jewelry, body paint, or tattoos... Instead of abstraction, the original intent was colorful realism." (Suzanne Hill, *Art of the Cyclades*, the Internet)

We now know that many, perhaps most three-dimensional artworks in the ancient world, from small sculpture to the friezes on the Parthenon, were heavily gilded and bedaubed. Truly, as Duchamp once observed, artworks are completed by viewers.

Still, despite the refractory nature of our interpretations, the arts of the Paleolithic have cast a long shadow over the uncertain terrain of the human mind. But, as I have tried to show, we need not be stopped by ideas and uncertainties for which we have no proper analysis or explanation, or for which we possess no rational knowledge. For me, "the world must be measured by eye." (Wallace Stevens) This may well fall into the category of useless but precious knowledge, yet it is a touchstone by which to measure the endless march of visual delights and debris that accost us every day. When I look at this work of art I am transported, if only for moment, from the world of politics, the Great Decline of the Great American Experiment, and other frustrations, to the world of unalloyed pleasure.

The immutable beauty of my full-figured friend embraces the perfect balance between abstraction and realism and is deeply human. As I stand before this masterpiece I like to believe I can feel the artist's breath upon the back of my neck, her eye over my shoulder. This stirs in me an incandescent joy that even now surprises me in its intensity. When I look at Miss Cyclades 6000 BCE, I feel all the better for the experience. And that is good enough for me.