

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

