

An Overview of Abstract Stone Sculpture

300,000 B.C. TO TODAY

Definition of Abstract Art

- 'Abstract art', "non-objective art", "non-figurative", "non-representational", or "concrete art" - art that does not attempt to represent external, recognizable reality but seeks to achieve its effect using shapes, forms, colors, and textures
- But is any art truly 'abstract'?...Picasso believed that no such thing existed, while others believe that all art is a poor 'abstraction' of what exists in the real world
- Most art critics would agree that within the world of abstract art degrees of 'abstraction' from reality exist; from direct references to 'pure essences' i.e. Plato's Forms
- This overview attempts to briefly outline the history of abstract stone sculpture with a focus on the past 120 years

The world's oldest art

- The Acheulean Hand Axe up to 1.5 million years old, often in flint or chert
- Modeled after earlier, more primitive stone tools, they are often found unused and in giant form therefore implying a purpose beyond merely utility
- Artistic/competency demonstration of the set of skills required to create these pieces may have man's first attempt to create an object of 'beauty' or Art
- Anthropologists believe this work was created 50-100,000 years before man developed complex language skills
- Because they were 'abstracted' from other tool forms, Acheulean Hand Axes might be considered the first abstract stone art



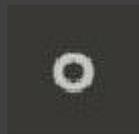
Bas relief



- The next oldest known Art was stone Bas Relief
- A cupule and sinuous line at the Auditorium Cave at Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh, India, dating from (290,000-700,000 BCE)
- A cupule is a hemispherical petroglyph, created by percussion, existing on a horizontal or vertical surface
- Cross-hatched lines on found on stones at South Africa's Blombos Cave Rock Art (70,000 BCE)
- These forms are of unknown cultural significance, however they represent the first abstract stone art on a surface
- Going from abstract to representation may have been concurrent with the development of figurative thinking in the human brain

Prehistoric abstract signs and symbols

- The oldest known cave painting is an abstract sign (a red-ochre disk or dot) discovered at the El Castillo Cave in Cantabria, Spain, which dates back to at least 39,000 BCE
- It wasn't until four thousand years after this abstract art that Stone Age artists began to paint pictures of animals
- Even then, for every figurative image of a bison, a reindeer or a bull, two abstract images were produced
- Common abstract symbols include:



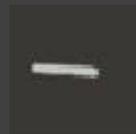
Circle



Claviform



Dot



Line



Open
Angle



Oval



Penniform



Quadrangle



Triangle

- Most of these symbols found as surface marks, with little relief

Prehistoric abstract figures



- Venus figures (e.g. Venus of Berekhat Ram, (basalt), Venus of Tan-Tan, (quartzite) Venus of Willendorf, (oolitic limestone), Venus of Savignano (serpentine) are as possibly old as 700,000 B.C. and were the first 'mobile' art
- Abstracted from (pregnant?) female forms
- Some of the earliest forms are controversial in their origin while later similar objects in ivory and made in porcelain are clearly created by man
- By the beginning of the Neolithic Era (about 8000) B.C. clay-based material becomes the dominant sculptural medium

Transition to historic sculpture



- As early as 9500 B.C. people at Gobekli Tepe (located in southern Turkey) had begun to carve Bas Relief of both slightly abstract and quite figurative humans and animals
- By 4200 B.C. Chinese 'cong' jade carving begins with abstract ritual representations of square and circular tubes with later periods increasing incorporating figurative embellishments
- By about 3000 B.C Egyptian and Mesopotamian art begins to flourish with most stone art becoming increasing figurative and realistic, albeit with standardized models predominating
- By the end of the Bronze Age (about 2000 B.C.), through-out the Mediterranean, abstract Cycladic styles rapidly evolved into the glory that was Greco-Roman figurative sculpture

The dominance of the figurative



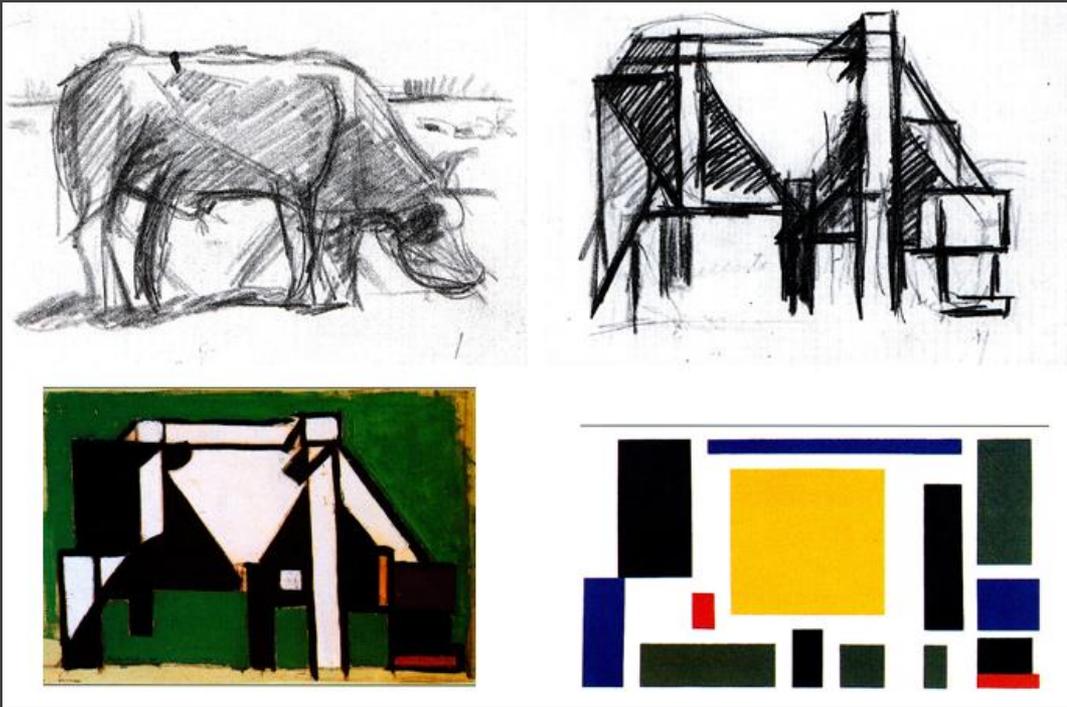
- For the next 4000 years figurative stone works dominated all West and East sculpture
- Only the more primitive cultures, surrounding developed areas, continued to create abstract stone sculpture, and even here strongly human and nature representational elements can be seen
- Human figurative themes dominated 3D sculpture for millennia and hard stone, especially marble, continued to be the carving material of choice

The break with visual reality



- By the late 19th century the western art world began to tire of exacting portrayals of man and the natural world; personalized visual impressions became the increasing viewed as the new direction
- Most art critics credit Auguste Rodin for breaking the hold 'absolute reproduction' had on sculpture, in particular through his representation of distorted human fragments
- By 1907 Picasso and Braque furthered the break with visual reality with the creation of Cubism in 1907, rejecting linear perspective and depicting flat planes with multiple viewpoints
- Finally, in the early 20th century, architecture, long the partner/consumer of sculpture, became increasingly clean-lined, no longer needing external or internal decoration; abstraction's time had come!

Theo van Doesberg on Abstraction



Theo van Doesburg, "Abstraction of a Cow, Four Stages", (1917)

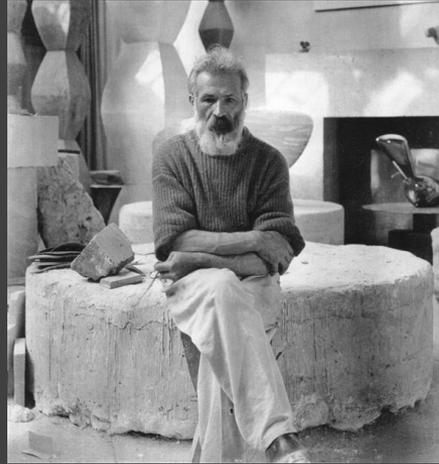
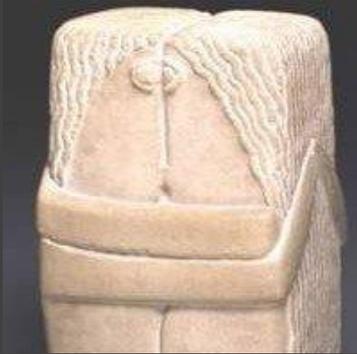
- Once Picasso and Braque had knocked over the facade of visual reality many other artists were quick to move toward complete abstraction
- Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian were all early pioneers with Vladimir Tatlin creating the first true 3D abstraction relief, albeit out of metal and wood
- Perhaps the top prophet and salesman of the abstract was the multi-faceted Theo van Doesburg

Cubism moves to 3D



- Following Picasso and Braque's lead, several sculptors sought to find a sculptural cubist style
- These included:
 - Alexander Archipenko
 - Jacob Epstein
 - Gaudier Brzeska
 - Jacques Lipschitz
- Although many of these works still contained recognizable figurative influences, the move to pure abstraction had begun
- The material of choice had begun to move away from Old School/Beaux arts - hard stone towards bronze, especially when commercial success allowed the artist to use this material

Brancusi the pioneer



- Beginning with 'The Kiss' in 1907, Constantin Brancusi was the true originator of 20th century abstract stone sculpture
- This Romanian pioneer studied briefly under Rodin, leaving because 'Nothing ever grows well under the shade of big trees'
- Often beginning with a simplified version of a figurative form, Brancusi reduced the subject to its essence, leaving behind only the title to suggest its original inspiration
- Brancusi, amongst others, reintroduced the concept of 'direct carving' of stone using no pointing devices or detailed maquettes, just hand tools

Constantin Brancusi

‘What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things.. it is impossible for anyone to express anything essentially real by imitating its exterior surface.’

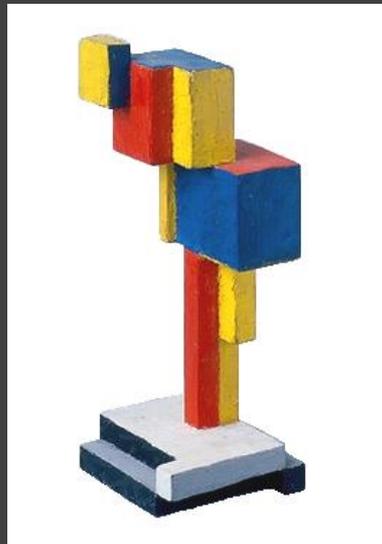
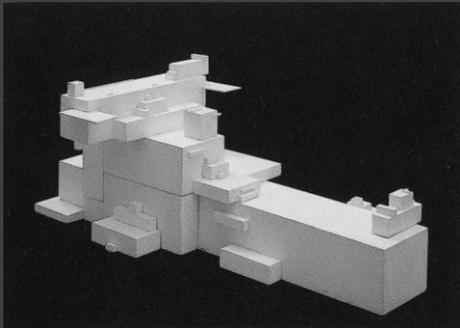
‘The people who call my work 'abstract' are imbeciles.. what they call 'abstract' is in fact the purest realism, the reality of which is not represented by external form but by the idea behind it, the essence of the work.’

‘It is while carving stone that you discover the spirit of your material and the properties particular to it. Your hand thinks and follows the thoughts of the material’

‘Simplicity is complexity resolved’

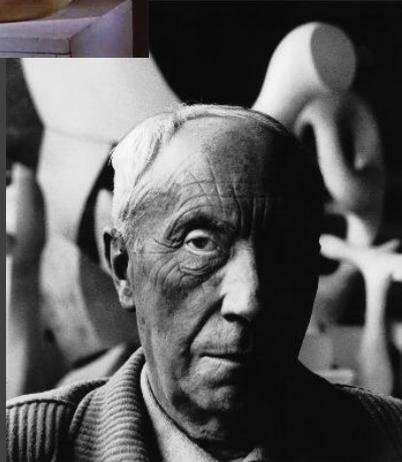
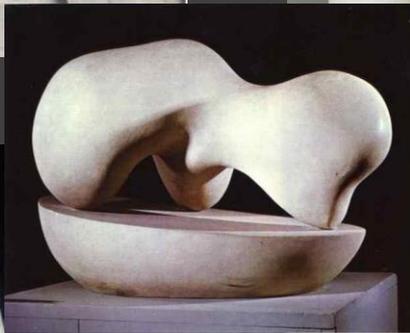
As told by Herbert Read in: Herbert Read Modern Sculpture A Concise History, World of Art Series, 1964

The flood of abstract styles



- Following closely on the heels of Cubism, a flood of new, diverse and mostly 'abstract' styles followed in quick session with much parallel development
 - Futurism
 - Dadaism
 - Constructivism
 - De Stijl
- However all of these 'movements' used materials other than stone to create their sculptural works
- Many factors account for this change
 - Clean break with the 'stony' past
 - New materials to explore (e.g. plastics and metals)
 - Ease/speed of working material
 - Cost/accessibility of material

Jean Arp



- The French abstract sculptor, engraver, collagist and poet, Jean (Hans) Arp was an early partner of Kandinsky and one of the founders of the Dada movement
- His mature phase sculptures (1931 onwards) pioneered highly distinctive, biomorphic shapes
- Working in many media, Arp often choose white marble for his sculptures giving a modeled depth and a tie to the classic sculptural past
- Arp's work directly influenced both Moore and Hepworth

Jean Arp

'We do not wish to copy nature. We do not want to reproduce, we want to produce. We want to produce as a plant produces a fruit and does not itself reproduce. We want to produce directly and without meditation. As there is not the least trace of abstraction in this art, we will call it concrete art.'

Hans Arp's statement on Dada art: "Jours effeuillés: Poèmes, essais, souvenirs", Gallimard, Paris 1966, p. 183

Barbara Hepworth



- Barbara Hepworth, second only to Brancusi, initiated, developed and matured pure abstract stone sculpture
- Her celebrated 1931 work *Pierced Form* (which was inspirational to Henry Moore) was the first of many sculptures she created where the 'hole' was as key to the 'whole'
- For many of her works, unlike others including Brancusi, no 'abstraction' from nature was required for much of her inspiration
- Her level of simple 'Forms' was a key influence in late 20th century minimalism

Barbara Hepworth

‘Working in the abstract way seems to release one’s personality and sharpen the perceptions so that in the observation of humanity or landscape it is the wholeness of inner intention which moves one so profoundly. The components fall into place and one is no longer aware of the detail except as the necessary significance of wholeness and unity...’

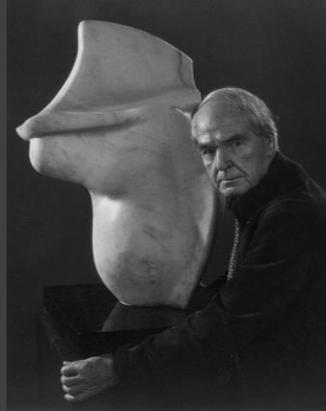
‘My left hand is my thinking hand. The right is only a motor hand. This holds the hammer. The left hand must be relaxed, sensitive. The rhythms of thought pass through the fingers and grip of this hand into the stone. It is also the listening hand. It listens for the basic weakness of flaws in the stone; for the possibility or imminence of fractures’

‘I love my blocks of marble, always piling up in the yard like a flock of sheep’

Woman sculptor, source of her artist quotes on sculpture art, works and life

“Barbara Hepworth, A Pictorial autobiography”, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1970.

Henry Moore



- Initially influenced by Cubism and then later by Biomorphism, Henry Moore developed his own style of the abstracted human form often focusing on the reclining pose
- The strongest proponent of direct carving in stone, he utilized a wide variety of local, textured stone giving his pieces distinct character
- Many of his works exploited the negative space of the holes he created in the stone
- By the early 1940s he became revered as the greatest sculptor of his time



Henry Moore

‘Since the Gothic, European sculpture had become overgrown with moss, weeds – all sorts of surface excrescences which completely concealed shape. It has been Brancusi’s special mission to get rid of this overgrowth, and make us once more shape-conscious. To do this he has had to concentrate on very simple direct shapes, to keep his sculpture, as it were, one-cylindrical, to refine and polish a single shape to a degree almost too precious... ..it may now be no longer necessary to close down and restrict sculpture to the single (static) form unit. We can now begin to open out. To relate and combine together several forms of varied sizes, sections, and directions into one organic whole. ‘

Source, famous English people life quotes: "The sculptor speaks" (1937), as quoted in "Letters of the great artists – from Ghiberti to Gainsborough –", Richard Friedenthal, Thames and Hudson , London, 1963, p. 250.

Abstract sculpture searches for a path

- The new forms of abstract art, including sculpture, had a difficult time in finding an supportive audience
- In the late 1920s to early 1930s groups of like-minded abstract artists began to form to new, albeit short-lived organizations (with associated journals) for exhibitions and the overall promotion of the abstract; these included:
 - **Cercle et Carre** (circle and square, 1929-31) formed in Paris in 1929, held only one exhibition, in April 1930. It was the first ever art show devoted exclusively to abstract art. Over forty artists participated, including Kandinsky, Mondrian, Vantongerloo and Schwitters and although many sculptures were included, none of them were in stone
 - **Art Concret** (1930) a journal created by Theo Van Doesburg, a break away effort focused only on geometric abstract art

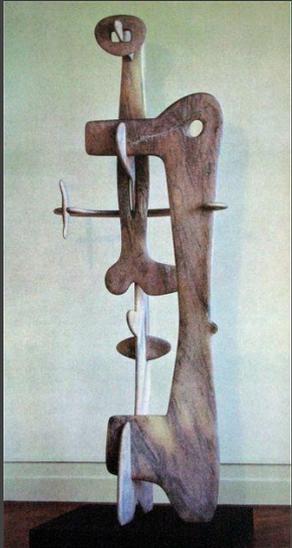
Abstract sculpture searches for a path

- **Abstraction-Creation** (1931-36) followed *Cercle et Carre*. Abstract sculptors Vantongerloo, Arp, Pevsner, Gabo, El Lissitzky, Calder, Hepworth and Nicholson were all members. *Abstraction-Creation* held a number of group exhibitions, and published an illustrated journal once a year (1932-6) called *Abstraction-Creation: Non-Figurative Art*. Although supposedly restricted to geometric abstraction, many of *Abstraction-Creation's* members moved on to non-geometric art forms, such as organic abstraction and kinetic art
- **Unit One** (1933-5) formed in Britain in 1933, including leading English sculptors Moore and Hepworth. In April 1934 the association published a book called *Unit One: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture*, timed to coincide with their only group exhibition at the Mayor Gallery, London. Conflicts between abstract and surrealist members of this group, like previous groups, caused it to struggle to maintain a focused identity, and *Unit One* duly dissolved in 1935
- Through these efforts and others, by the late 1930s abstract (sometimes stone) sculpture began to finally be seen as a serious development in the art world

Stone begins to fade

- If WWI provided an dramatic evolutionary kick-start to abstract art then World War II exploded what remained of the old art world
 - The global violence and destruction of the war left few old world artistic images relevant or meaningful
 - Photography and film became the chief medium to convey reality, not painting or sculpture
- In 2D art abstract expressionism took off, however in 3D sculpture it was new materials; metal, wood, found objects (almost anything but stone!) that led the way
- Assemblage Art, Neo-Dada, and Junk Art became the new movements in sculpture
- By the 1960s metal sculpture dominated and an artist's skills with a blow torch were far more important than those with a hammer and chisel
- Stone sculpting was slow, messy and very old-school; the emerging contemporary art world was beginning to move too fast for stone

Isamu Noguchi



- Noguchi born into both East and West traditions served as bridge between the old and the new world of abstract sculpture
- Apprenticing with Brancusi at a very young age, he became a globe trotting student absorbing many different artistic styles and traditions
- Working with available granite and slate slabs in the mid-1940s Noguchi created his famous interlocking stone works and evolved with abstraction/surrealism into 1950s and 1960s
- His later stone sculptures increasing favored more simple themes, often with a preserved sense of the natural stone
- The multi-talented Noguchi is widely considered the greatest stone sculptor of the late 20th century

Isamu Noguchi

‘Each sculpture is a miracle of chance. The shape, the size, the color, the blemish, its correction. And time, which completes all things, brings the sun into its alignment, when stone becomes mirror’

‘I have carried the concept of void like a weight on my shoulders. I could not seem to avoid its humanoid grip. It is like some inevitable question that I cannot answer’

‘The carving of stone is a search. One goes in from the surface giving depth and the suggestion of depth. There is something behind the carving. A thought.’

Source: as quoted in "The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum", Isamu Noguchi, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1987

Contemporary Abstract Stone Sculpture



- The Minimal, Monumental and Environmental has dominated much of contemporary art, this has also been true with stone sculpture
- Although stone structure is a small subset of the contemporary art scene a few individuals has become well-known:
 - **Carl Andre** (e.g. 'Field Stone Structure')
 - **Robert Smithson** ('Land Art')
 - **Andy Goldsworthy** (Outdoor site-specific, often ephemeral stone constructions)
 - **Lee Ufan** (natural stone and steel)
 - **Anish Kapoor** (large stone blocks)
- In all cases these artists included stone as only part of their material repertoire

Anish Kapoor

‘Abstract art has consistently been misunderstood as an “abstraction” of the so-called real world. The idea that abstract art relates to abstract ideas is hard to get. Mondrian did not start out as a realist and turn into an abstract artist. Mondrian was always a realist. He first turned his gaze to the outer world and then to the inner world. It is just the language of the inner world is abstract ’

Source: as hand written by Anish Kapoor in “Anish Kapoor: Past, Present, Future”, edited by Nicholas Baume, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2008

Does Stone Sculpture Have a Role in Today's Art World?



- The contemporary art world is 'Fast and Furious'
- Is there truly an audience for finely sculpted abstract stone art?...or is it as the historian Paul Johnson says (read quote) that we are now trapped in vicious, very short cycles of: Brand New-Discovered-Bought-Promoted-Sold-Too Old?
- Can abstract stone sculptors compete with sculptures of other mediums?
- Is stone sculpture just too too passé?



Brancusi's reconstructed studio at the
Atelier Brancusi - Centre Georges
Pompidou Centre Paris

Photo by Michael E. Yeaman 9/26/2011