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UCCS receives large donation of ancient stone tools

July 13, 2023 Abby Newell



Photo credit: Gabby Hensley

1 / 20

There's lending a hand, and then there's lending several hundred handaxes.

The latter is how UCCS, with the help of Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Emeritus **Thomas Wynn**, received an impressive collection of stone artifacts from the Palaeolithic and Neolithic ages ranging from about 6,000 to 600,000 years old. The Department of Anthropology has agreed to curate the collection, and the UCCS Center for Cognitive Archaeology paid the shipping costs.

Donated by Tony Berlant, a California-based American artist, the collection is comprised of nearly 1000 artifacts and is about 2/3 of Berlant's overall collection. Berlant started collecting them around 1998 and his primary motivation when adding to his reservoir was how a handaxe spoke to him as an art form, versus selecting specimens based on their archaeological history. As a result, many of the handaxes have a similar teardrop-type shape and design while the texture and size vary. There are also several artifacts that are "spheroids," some of which may have been used as hammerstones to chip flakes off of other stone tools.

While these types of tools often performed functions, many have "overdetermined" forms, meaning they were shaped beyond what was necessary for them to do the job they were made for, suggesting that those making them did so for not just functional but also visual appeal.

"Some of them are way too big to be effective hand tools, and we think that they were, in fact, used for display purposes or simply to demonstrate your skill at making the tools," explained Wynn.

The collection, most of which comes from regions of northwest Africa, southwest Asia and western Europe, is being used not only for display but for teaching purposes. This gives students the opportunity to study and learn from them in class and the potential to use them in research projects.

"For example, if somebody wanted to do a research project on the relationship between raw material and artifact form, we have a huge range of raw material in these," Wynn said. "Even if we don't know their age or exactly where they're from, we can figure out what the raw material is. And the student

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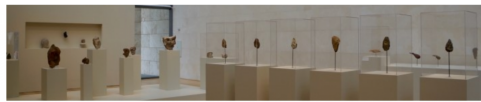
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could look at it from a technical point of view and do that, so there are certainly research projects that the collection would be amenable to.”

Berlant chose UCCS as the collection recipient in part because of his work with Wynn. The two connected around 2012 when Berlant was looking for an archaeologist to help him put together an art exhibition of the stone tools and a curator from the British Museum suggested Wynn.

“Jill Cook, the curator, gave him my name and he called me out of the blue,” Wynn said. “We talked about hand axes for an hour and he had me fly out to LA and he flew



Tony Berlant and The Impulse to Create

The Collection

This is not a typical archaeological collection. In assembling it, Tony was not very concerned with the provenance of the artifacts, or even with their age, region of origin, function, or identity of the hominin species responsible. He was not dismissive of these considerations; they just did not govern his choices. Instead, Tony responded to the visual impact of an artifact: its form, size, raw material patterns, and skill of execution. He saw the artifacts as products of individual creativity that continue to speak to us hundreds of thousands of years after they were made.

Tony’s personal tastes do emerge from the collection. He was fond of large handaxes with bold shapes made on variegated raw materials. Violations of symmetry were more interesting to him than well-executed, monochrome, symmetrical examples. He was not much impressed with cleavers, unless they were unusually large or were made of interesting raw material. He liked spheroids – enigmatic modified stone balls – some of which were hammerstones, but most of which were not.

He was attracted to whimsical forms and pareidolic forms that resembled animals or faces. This is most evident in his fondness for “figure stones,” modified and unmodified stones that were not tools, but which evoke animals or people. Modern archaeologists tend to be dismissive of figure stones because it is rarely possible to demonstrate that prehistoric people saw the stones this way. Tony was unmoved by this skepticism; if he could see the figure, prehistoric people could, too, and did.

Tony was drawn to attractive stone tools of any age, but his primary fascination was with handaxes. Most of the artifacts in the collection are handaxes that date to the final millennia of the Acheulean or Aka Age (1.8 million through 300,000 years ago), and several date to the Middle Palaeolithic/Middle Stone Age that followed it (300,000 – 40,000 BP). Even though it is impossible to provide a precise age for most of these artifacts, they are all very, very old, and long predate the emergence of the famous figurative cave paintings of the late Palaeolithic. There are also a few artifacts from the Neolithic (10,000-5,000 BP).

Tony’s collection makes the very important point that human aesthetic propensities – our impulse to create – evolved long ago in circumstances very different from the modern world. But through these stone tools, prehistoric people continue to speak to us.



The Artist

Tony Berlant (1941 -) is an American artist based in Santa Monica, California. He is best known for his mixed media sculptures, in particular collages assembled from cut metal and mounted onto wooden constructions such as boxes and wall-mounted frames. His initial training was in abstract expressionism, and in the 1960s he became one of the leading figures in the West Coast Pop Art movement. He earned a BA, MA, and MFA from UCLA. Examples of his work can be found at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Tony is also a collector and enthusiast for Southwestern Native American art and Palaeolithic stone tools. In the 1970s he helped significant archaeological sites and resources in the Montrose Valley of New Mexico. Later, in the 1990s, he developed an interest in early stone tools, which he sees as very early evidence for the human urge to create.



Handaxes

“Handaxe” is the somewhat misleading label that archaeologists have applied to a kind of stone tool that our ancestors made and used for over one-and-a-half million years. They were not axes, but they were almost certainly hand tools. They first appeared in archaeological sites that date back to almost 1.8 million years ago. These handaxes appear to have been a response to a need for a large, hand-held cutting tool that could do heavy work. Indeed, handaxes were the earliest known ergonomic design.



Between 1.8 million years ago and 300,000 years ago, handaxes were the mainstay of stone tool technologies throughout Africa, much of Europe and South and Southeast Asia. A period labeled Acheulean after the eponymous site of St. Acheul in France.

The tools did change a bit over time as hominins acquired techniques that gave them greater control over thickness and shape.



John Cowlett has identified six ergonomic design features that guided their production: 1) a mass of stone situated toward one end that placed the center of gravity close to or within the hand; 2) a length of stone extending away from the palm that provided leverage; 3) a sturdy cutting edge along all or most of this length; 4) expanded width, typically within the hand-held portion, to counteract the tendency for the tool to twist while in use; 5) thickness reduction to reduce weight; 6) a slight skewness in form to optimize the cutting edge opposite the palm.

When these design features work together to guide manufacture, the result is a rough handaxe-shaped stone tool with a cutting edge around much of its perimeter. Average size is about 30 cm/1 1/4 inches but there is a huge range in handaxe size, governed partly by the nature of available stone and partly by local custom. Artifacts that fit this definition can be found almost everywhere our ancestors made stone tools, though they are not always called handaxes. They were a kind of generic, hand-held, heavy duty cutting and chopping tool.

After the development of techniques for hafting smaller flake tools to handles, beginning about 500,000 years ago, handaxes slowly dropped out of favor as the center piece of lithic technology.

in the director of the Nasher Sculpture Center, and we sat around for several hours talking about hand axes and what we might do.”

Eventually Berlant and Wynn put together some of the collection for an exhibit at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas, titled “First Sculpture” that opened in 2018.

To see the UCCS collection, head to Centennial hall where the display resides.

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