

## Material Girls Living in the First Material World

Intro panel:

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

L.P. Hartley

How we interpret the past has as much to do with the present as anything that actually happened in the past itself. Historians view archives, objects, and original source material through the biases, perceptions, and assumptions of their contemporary world.

The examination of the past is even more difficult in ancient cultures, especially prehistoric ones (before the invention of writing). Prehistoric people didn't write things down. But they did leave us material culture: cave paintings; tools; pottery; and carved bones, rocks, shells, and ivory. Our understanding of prehistoric objects, therefore, must be based on additional materials found in the ground, the object's appearance, and educated guess work.

Mia's collection contains ancient female figures from three different cultures found in Japan, central Europe, and Greece. These three unique objects are separated by large distances of time and geography. They are, however, all part of a larger group of carved or molded naked female figures, found globally in diverse prehistoric cultures.

Text panel:

### A Venus by another Name

Since the 1800s, archaeologists have commonly referred to Paleolithic (about 750,000- 8,500 BCE) naked female sculptures as “Venus Figures.” With their exaggerated breasts and genitalia, scholars—all or mostly men—assumed that these figures were depicted naked for prehistoric titillation, like “pin up girls,” or as symbols of fertility. The name was also a kind of mean joke since these obese figures with sagging breasts and swollen thighs didn't conform to the slender, small-waisted, and idealized “Venus” figures of the classical Greek and Roman world.

The truth is, we really don't know how these objects functioned or what they meant to the prehistoric people who created them. They may have had nothing to do with sexuality or fertility. Perhaps they were buried in graves as companions in the afterlife. They may have been used as dolls, or symbolized deceased ancestors. Some scholars have argued that the sculptures indicate the belief in a great earth-mother goddess figure.

Label:

Japan, Asia

Figurine of a Female, 1000–800 BCE, Earthenware with traces of color

The John R. Van Derlip Fund 2016.46

Archaeologists have excavated a number of clay figures (*dogu*) of humans and animals made during Japan's Jomon period (14,000-300 BCE). The sculptures vary in size and complexity. There are several "types"; some are seated, others standing, some have heart-shaped heads, some have little or no decoration, and others, like the one here, have eyes similar to coffee beans.

The figures are almost always female and often have extended bellies, suggesting pregnancy. Curiously, *dogu* are usually found broken, missing arms and legs. Their broken state has led scholars to suggest that the figures had some kind of significance in birth and death and may have been deliberately destroyed after they were used in a ceremonial ritual.

Label:

Cycladic Islands

Female Figure, c.2500-2400 BC

Marble

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 65.52

The meaning of sculptures like these, part of an ancient culture from the Cyclades Islands in Greece, is elusive. Always carved from marble, the figures are usually female. These highly stylized sculptures feature minimal detail, reducing the human body to its simplest form. The deliberate emphasis on carved breasts and genitalia, in the absence of other details, such as eyes, is therefore significant -- but of what?

All of the figures have been found in graves of both men and women. Some of them were broken and repaired prior to burial, suggesting that they were used in daily life and not just created for a funeral ritual. Theories about the role of Cycladic figures in their contemporary society include: children's dolls; images of death; symbolic fertility figures; and goddess images or "idols."

Label:

Paleolithic, Found: France, Europe

Female figure, 20,000 BCE, Sandstone

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 72.10

This small female figure is the oldest object in Mia's collection. The person who carved it probably lived in a hunter-gatherer community in Europe. Around the same time that it was made, people made stone tools and began painting on cave walls. The sculptures of this period often depict plump women with extremely exaggerated breasts, thighs, and buttocks. The people who made these objects likely faced a harsh existence of great scarcity in a cold climate. It is therefore surprising that artists chose to carve plump and unclothed figures. In the absence of written sources, we simply don't know what they were used for or how they were understood by their contemporary society.