Back to the stone age

- Tom Allan

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*In the last year of the millennium, conceptual artists have taken over the spotlight, and stone carving has gone out of fashion. Sculptor **Tom Allan** goes back 4,000 years to find new inspiration at the source of modern sculpture in the Cyclades.*

Why Naxos, rather than somewhere much easier to get to from Glasgow? It's where Zeus was brought up, where Dionysus invented wine and Theseus abandoned Ariadne. It still reeks of myth. And for several years, I have been fascinated by Cycladic sculpture from the third millennium BC.

These stylised figures are usually female, geometric, graceful and mysterious, with the sharp corners and flowing lines that appeal to me in carved stone. They have a youthful look, slim and on tiptoe.

Older sculptures are of the 'earth goddess' type - voluptuous, but flabby and ungainly. They are like 'found' art - a stone with a shape that suggests a human form, the way a lump of driftwood or a strangely misshapen root might. For me, Cycladic figures are the first real sculptures, ancient yet living and vibrant. I wanted to see where they had been made.

At the end of the second millennium AD, stone carving is often neglected in art schools and fashionable fine-art circles. But why should a tradition that took 10,000 years to develop have reached a dead end? I wanted to see if going back to the source could help me find a way forward for my own work.

What's more, I had heard that in the ancient marble quarries on Naxos there were figures still lying unfinished. The idea of seeing the chisel marks, with the statue still beside the quarry face, was exciting. Naxos it had to be.

In the Goulandris Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens, a caption-card reads: 'We don't really know what these fig ures were for.' There is a huge number of the same images, repeated with little variation for centuries - a thousand years, in fact. It puts the current millennium fuss into perspective: these figures were made an equal stretch of time before Christ as we are after, and they are clearly still powerful. What difference is another year, or a thousand years, going to make to that?

In the Plaka district, souvenir shops sell a huge number of copies and cheap modern variations on Greek sculpture, including Cycladic. Some are not unlike things I've done in stone myself, but much of the imitation stuff is merely sentimentalised or soft porn. You are

surrounded by a cheap version of the genuine eroticism in ancient Greek art: 'Loves of the ancient Greeks', or postcards of horny satyrs.

The Acropolis. Polished bedrock, no concessions to age or slippy footwear. How vast a stretch of time since people began to build on this rock. An olive tree marks the site of Athena's victory over Poseidon - feminine wisdom over male earth-shaking violence and unpredictability.

National Museum of Archaeology. Early female figures, replaced later by male 'kouroi'. There are rooms full of kouroi, some massive, usually with left foot purposefully forward. They are impressive, majestic, calm, but they are not what I came to Greece for. They're too posed, static, conscious of their own dignity. Public expressions of the dominant culture and religion.

But even the largest Cycladic figures - less than six feet tall - are unintimidating. Most are small, just figurines. They don't necessarily impress even with their workmanship, though they are subtle and deceptively skilfully done. But they still emanate a poise, a luminous quality, even in the fragmentary figures.

At Melanes, in the green centre of Naxos, the unfinished kouros sleeps peacefully, surrounded by vineyards, peopled by lizards. You enter through an old lady's property, where she has set up a cafe called 'Paradise Garden'. It almost rings true.

There is no security. Just a sign saying, 'Do not touch.' A man tends his goats in the field above, and the 80-year-old custodian of the cafe dozes in the shade. The kouros is massive, yet graceful, and has gentle lines not so obvious in the finished works in the museum. The incomplete carving has something of the older Cycladic style about it, not obliterated by the rhetorical surfaces that the finished work would be given.

There is a flaw in the head of the sculpture, which may have been why it was abandoned. Sleeping for 2,600 years. Seeing a half-finished ancient sculpture, I felt a step nearer the secret of what carving is about.

According to the Naxos museum, the Cycladic figures were grave-gifts, to accompany and perhaps to protect the dead. Are they female because the deity of the period was female? Were the male figures later? There are certainly fewer of them. The carvings suggest a prehistoric Andy Warhol, endlessly repeating the same image. The souvenir shops do this by machine.

The shape of the earliest figures - the 'violin' figures - could have come straight from the pebbles found on Aliki beach. Flattish, oval or almost rectangular, some of them are already narrower at the top, and could suggest a head and body. Others would just need a few cuts to make the stylised shape of the very first art-works. Carving is intrusive, intervening in the natural world, but maybe it should be a continuation of this process - revealing what is almost already there. I certainly prefer to work with broken stones, or boulders, rather than blocks cut on all faces. It lends life and movement to the carving, and shows what the stone itself will probably take.

The unfinished carving at Apollonas is much bigger than the one at Melanes, and has not moved an inch, apparently, since it was roughed out. You can clearly see the marks of the

tools used to cut it, leaving regular parallel lines in the quarry-face. The statue is carved lying on its back, to be turned over and finished on the other side later. Nothing seems to be wrong with this stone, but its massive size must have needed a large team of workers, and plenty of time. Perhaps a war caused an interruption that proved permanent.

This one is a grander figure, more mature, bearded like a Pharaoh, stiff and hieratic. Like the statues in the Athens National Museum, it's public and powerful.

Sculpture can be a co-operative thing, but when it ceases to serve a real community, or that community disintegrates, it will die too, in that form. The more private and personal work may survive.

The summit of Kinidaros has been sliced off in stages, and the spoil material thrown down the mountainside. Each of these rejected lumps could provide a carving, and there's acres of them.

Bill M, the first stone-carver I knew in Glasgow, died last year, partly of cancer, partly alcohol. He only wanted to work in marble, but his supply was limited. He lifted - or liberated - bits of Carrara marble from a dump of broken gravestones at the Balmore cemetery. If only he'd been able to come here. It might have kept him alive longer. How much can I get home in my suitcase?

'How on earth did they have the energy to do all the quarrying, carving, and moving the things,' says Liz, as we collapse with heat-exhaustion.

Nearing the top, it becomes clear that at least two mountain peaks are being quarried, or rather decapitated. The valley drops away below us, and the track comes to a hairpin bend, which seems to float off the top corner of the mountain.

Only two or three men at a time work in this remote eyrie. Using a clapped-out engine to run a rope-saw, they cut chunks off the mountain, slicing off the marble like cut ting cheese with a wire. They don't wear safety-helmets or gloves. One squats on top of the block to be cut, marking his line, while another uses the bulldozer to bump the block into position, with his workmate still on it.

One worker can speak English. Yes, he says, some people still do use Naxian marble for sculpture, though it is mainly for buildings and furniture. 'Do I want to take some to Scotland?'

'Too heavy,' I say. But the main disincentive is the price: about #163;1,300 for a cubic metre. Maybe smaller pieces, broken bits, would be cheaper? 'Small, no problem!' he said.

As we shake hands in farewell I ask his name. 'Mehmet. I am from Egypt. I work here for 17 years.' His square, bearded face belongs to a tradition of stone-working going back five millennia.

And after visiting Naxos, has a bolt come out of the blue, a hand pointing the way towards the new sculpture? I didn't really expect that. A 'new' sculpture is not my way of thinking.

Not that I want to imitate the sculptors of 4,000 years ago. I feel a continuity with them, closer than to contemporary artists who search constantly for new ways to shock, new words to explore what art is.

The sensitive interpretation of stone and other materials, which can be related to on a private and personal level, is what I see as being the lasting quality of early Cycladic sculptures.

Two approaches are possible: you can concentrate on what makes us different from the people of the past - of the 19th century, or of the 1980s, or of last year. You can put pressure on yourself as an artist to create novelty. Or you can try to see what we have in common with our predecessors, with different ages and cultures. You can define yourself in relation to them, and find another kind of individuality, which may be more durable. A citizen of the 21st century? I'd rather see myself as a new stone age man.

• Tom Allan's work is currently (1999) on show at Art Exposure Gallery, Glasgow, and the Kingfisher Gallery, Edinburgh.