

This is the author accepted manuscript.

Published as: Wickstead, Helen (2025) The false dawn of art. *The Antiquary*, 2024-25, p. 4.

<https://www.sal.org.uk/2025/04/antiquary2025/>

# The False Dawn of Art

Dr Helen Wickstead MCIfA FSA [h.wickstead@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:h.wickstead@kingston.ac.uk)

On the day after April Fool's Day 1914, William Malcolm Newton (1846-1930) displayed part of his famous stone collection to the Society of Antiquaries at Burlington House.

Excitement about prehistoric art was at fever-pitch. It had become undeniable that the paintings found alongside prehistoric artefacts in French and Spanish caves were Palaeolithic. The race was on to discover even older 'pre-Cave art'. Figure Stones had been collected since the mid-nineteenth century, (notably by pioneer prehistorian Boucher de Perthes), but they were dismissed by most archaeologists. As more and more items were authenticated, interest revived.

William M. Newton was Britain's foremost expert on what he believed were the world's oldest artworks: 'Figure Stones'. Figure Stones – as Newton and others defined them - were lumps of flint naturally resembling birds, beasts and human body parts. Such accidents of nature were, he suggested, already seen as magical by early humans. Their primitive finders, the theory went, 'animated' them by applying simple scrapes and chips to turn them into sculptures.

Newton took his strange bird and animal-shaped flints to Benjamin Harrison, who had achieved scientific fame with stones – called 'eoliths' – which were then believed to be evidence of the earliest known technology. Harrison confirmed that – in his opinion – Newton's Figure Stones were humanly produced. For the next six years, Newton employed a team of quarrymen to sift five thousand tons of gravel in search of prehistoric art. Sir Arthur Keith – champion of the (now notoriously fake) early human 'Piltown Man' - was delighted when Newton discovered a 'Cro-Magnon Type' cranium in his Figure Stone Pit. Was this the skull of Britain's first artist? The evidence was tantalizing, but somewhat inconclusive.

The Figure Stone theory of art complemented Robert Ranulph Marett's idea of pre-Animistic religion and Newton's discoveries came to Marett's attention. Marett

visited Newton, subsequently bringing him to Oxford so his stones could be examined by a sceptical Anthropological Society. The stage was set for Newton to display his findings to learned audiences. As well as Oxford, the Figure Stones were exhibited at the Paris Hall of Learned Societies and widely publicised: they were displayed at The Langham Hotel, Piccadilly, and published in splendid colour in the British Archaeological Association's Journal.

The Figure Stones, however, provoked ridicule, producing shrieks of laughter wherever Newton took them. (He took this well, interpreting this reaction as evidence of the joy they had originally inspired in early humans.) Perhaps wisely, the Society of Antiquaries admitted only Newton's genuine handaxes to their meeting in 1914. His Figure Stone menagerie was stopped forever at the threshold of legitimate archaeology.

Where it remains.



For more about the history of Figure Stones see Helen Wickstead, (2024). *Palaeoliths and Pareidolia: Photography and Archaeological Stone Collecting from the Discovery of Deep Time to the Eolith Controversies*. *Photography and Culture*, 17(1), 5–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17514517.2024.2336361>

Figure 1: One of William Malcolm Newton's Figure Stones, Class F ("Grotesques") No.50. An "extraordinary flint image" with "two eyes well hit in" from gravels on the East shoulder of the Darenth Valley (about 100 O.D.)" (Author's photograph of original chromolithograph).

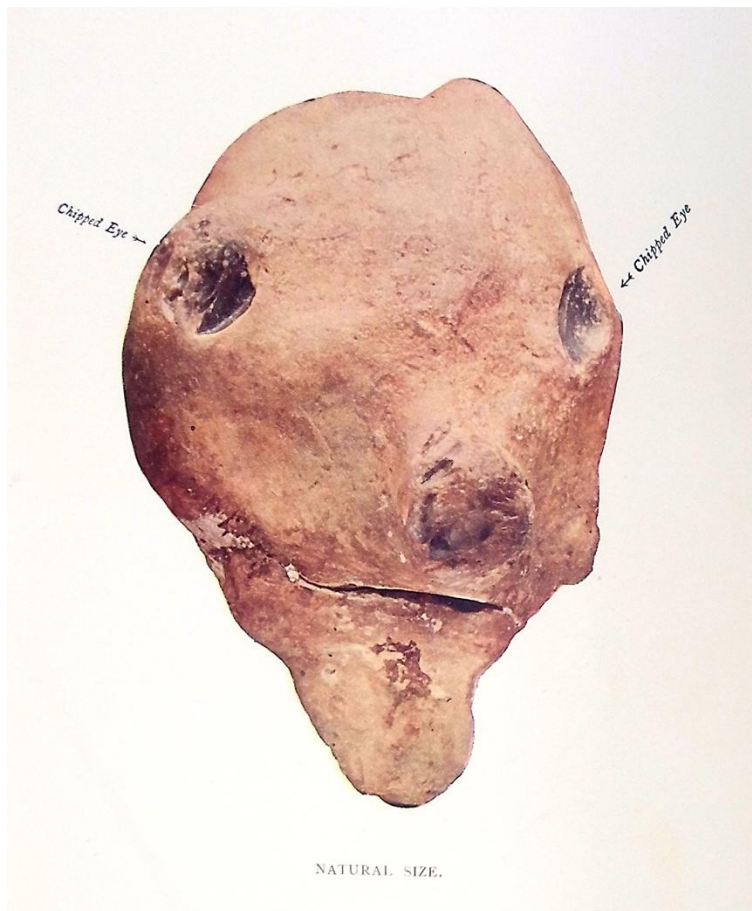


Figure 2: "A Mask" from Newton's article "On Palaeolithic Figures of Flint", Journal of the British Archaeological Association vol.19, 1913 (Author's photograph of original chromolithograph).