

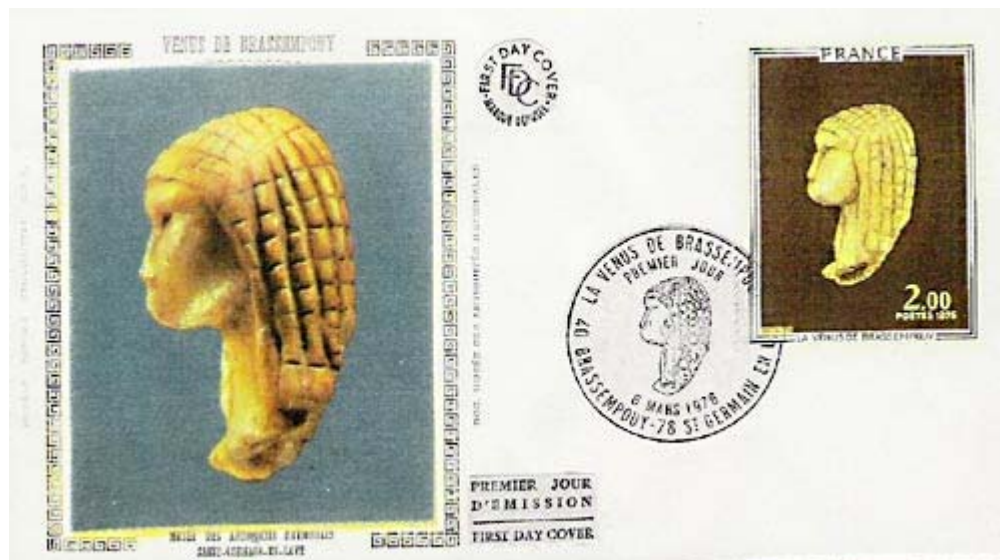
# Two Small Masterpieces

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by George Rohrer

We have heard much about the prehistoric art in the decorated caves of France and Northern Spain. Thousands of small pieces of paleolithic art have also been discovered in various prehistoric sites and shelters.

Outstanding among these bits of portable art is the Dame de Brassempouy, an ivory head 1-3/8th inches high, carved from a mammoth tusk.



The French post office honored this small masterpiece with a 2Fr stamp issued in March 1976. Georges Betemps, who designed the stamp, chose the colors yellow, brown and black.

The cancellation on the first day cover shows a profile of the statuette and uses the name “Venus de Brassempouy” that is also on the stamp.

This piece of sculpture was discovered by the prehistorians Edouard Piette and Joseph de Laporterie in the Grotte du Pape at Brassempouy in 1884. The small community is near Dax in southwestern France.

The numerous Venuses which have survived the millennia invariably represent entire bodies. Busts and hips are usually exaggerated, suggesting that they do not portray individuals, but symbolize fertility.

## Two Small Masterpieces

The Dame de Brassempouy has only a head and neck. No other fragments of this figure have been found. She has a triangular face with forehead, eyebrows, nose and chin strongly sculpted. The eyes and mouth are only suggested.

The neck is slender and long. Her hair is divided into braids by vertical cuts of the blade. Less deep horizontal cuts set the style of the hairdo. It should be remembered that this intricate carving was done with a stone blade.

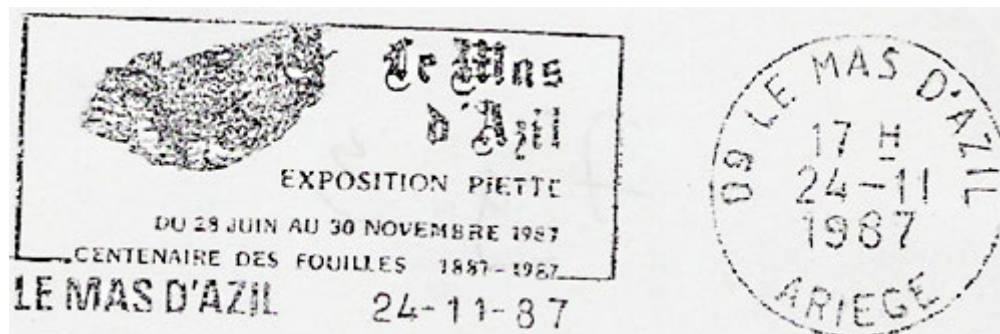
There is no positive evidence to estimate the age, but responsible opinion would place it at 20,000 years before the present (BP).

An article in the Washington Post of January 6th 2004 described ivory figures discovered in a cave in the Jura Mountains in Germany. The figurines are believed to be 30,000 years old. Judging from photographs, the bird carved from a mammoth tusk and 3 other pieces lack the refinement found in the Dame de Brassempouy. Authorities have collected 270 pieces of ivory carving debris. According to anthropologist Nicholas Conard, "Whoever made the figurines spent a lot of time there."

Our Venus is part of the collection in the Museum of National Antiquities in the Chateau de Saint-Germain-en-Laye at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near Paris. A large section is devoted to Stone Age culture.

The museum catalog observes (translated) "She is one of the most celebrated works of paleolithic art who gives us the most real image of paleolithic woman.

Another masterpiece of mobiliary art is a horse's head carved from a reindeer antler. The post office in Le Mas d'Azil in southern France issued a cancellation in 1987 picturing the head.



The year marked the 100th anniversary of the discovery of the local prehistoric site by the scholar Edouard Piette. Under Piette's direction many objects created by Stone Age artisans 12,000 years ago were found in the region.

## Two Small Masterpieces

The little head is now part of the distinguished collection in the Museum of National Antiquities in the Chateau de Saint-Germain-en-Laye (Scott 1187). Since the illustration in the cancellation is not very clear it is supplemented by a copy of the picture in the museum catalog - below.



The little piece, approximately two inches long, made from a reindeer antler, shows only the head without a neck. There is no hint as to the nature of the missing part. Only one side is sculpted, the reverse being spongy tissue inside the antler and not suitable for carving.

### Prehistoric Bison

We take the liberty of adding one more to this little group, although the French Post Office has not discovered this little treasure.

This representation of a bison licking its flank is from the paleolithic period, around 12,000 BC. It was found near Tursac in the Dordogne region, and is an example of “flattened sculpture in the round”. It’s thickness does not correspond to reality.



The bison was a staple in the prehistoric cuisine of the region.

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The original is made from reindeer antler and is in the Museum of National Antiquities.

Complete illustration of the Bison showing intricate detailing also in same museum. Though not on any stamp or cancel, here you can see the type of details in these items.

The artist gave astonishing attention to detail. The open mouth, distended nostrils, and bulging eye all give the impression of movement. The lines of the lower jaw, the skin, and the short mane are similarly well rendered by skillful strokes of the stone blade.

The little head is acknowledged to be one of the finest examples of mobiliary art. According to the catalog, “We are in the presence of the work of a master artist.”

## About the Museum

The Chateau de Saint-Germain-en-Laye was not the first building on the site. In the 12th Century a chateau fortress was built on that location by Louis VI as a defense against the English. In 1346 the Black Prince captured the fortress and damaged it badly. It was rebuilt with the gentler renaissance style replacing the chateau fort.

Under Francois I the chateau became a “little elegant jewel”. Louis XIV was born here in 1643 and made it his principal residence until he constructed the great Versailles complex. The chateau at Saint-Germain-en-Laye suffered a rapid decline.



During the French Revolution it became a prison. In the Restoration under Louis XVIII it was a barracks. Under the monarchy of July it was a military prison. Finally Napoleon III ordered a complete restoration of the chateau and created a museum. As already noted, in the Museum of National Antiquities a large section is devoted to Stone Age culture.

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The certified representation of the Dame de Brassempouy from the Louvre Workshop, like that of the bison, is made from resin and is mounted on a wooden block. The Louvre Workshop is world-famous for their high quality reproductions.

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