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THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL PLASTIC SCULPTURE IN SCULPTURE ART

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Abstract: This article examines the historical origins and evolutionary development of small plastic sculpture (minor sculpture) as a distinct branch of sculptural art. Based on archaeological, historical, and art-historical sources, the study explores the emergence of small-scale sculptural forms from prehistoric times to modern periods. The paper analyzes materials, functions, symbolic meanings, and stylistic transformations of small plastic works across different civilizations. The research highlights the continuity and transformation of this artistic form, emphasizing its cultural, religious, and aesthetic significance.

Keywords: Small plastic sculpture, minor sculpture, ancient art, figurines, sculpture history, material culture, decorative arts, miniature sculpture, archaeological artifacts

Introduction

Small plastic sculpture, often referred to as minor sculpture, represents a significant yet sometimes overlooked branch of sculptural art. Unlike monumental sculpture, small plastic works are characterized by their modest size, portability, and often intimate function. Archaeological findings confirm that such sculptures date back to prehistoric times, making them among the earliest forms of artistic expression [1].

The earliest examples of small plastic sculpture are associated with ritualistic, symbolic, and utilitarian purposes. These artifacts provide insight into early human beliefs, social structures, and aesthetic sensibilities. From Paleolithic figurines to Renaissance decorative bronzes, the development of small plastic sculpture reflects broader cultural and artistic transformations [2].

Methodology

The research employs a historical-comparative and analytical approach. Primary data are derived from archaeological findings, museum collections, and documented art historical studies. Comparative analysis of different cultural periods—Paleolithic, Neolithic, Ancient Civilizations, Classical Antiquity, Medieval, and Renaissance—allows for identifying patterns in the evolution of small plastic sculpture. Secondary sources, including scholarly publications and catalogues, are used to validate factual data and interpretations [3].

Results

The study reveals that small plastic sculpture emerged as early as the Upper Paleolithic period (approximately 40,000–10,000 BCE). One of the most well-known examples is the “Venus figurines,” such as the Venus of Willendorf, which are believed to have had fertility-related symbolic meanings [4].

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During the Neolithic period, small sculptures became more diverse in form and function. Clay, stone, and bone were commonly used materials. These figurines often represented humans, animals, and deities, indicating the development of religious and social symbolism [5].

In Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, small plastic sculptures were widely used in religious rituals and burial practices. For instance, Mesopotamian votive statues and Egyptian ushabti figures were placed in temples and tombs, reflecting beliefs in the afterlife [6].

Classical Greek and Roman periods marked a refinement in technique and aesthetics. Small bronze sculptures and terracotta figurines were produced both as decorative objects and as replicas of larger works. The Tanagra figurines of ancient Greece are notable examples, showcasing realism and everyday life themes [7].

During the Middle Ages, small plastic sculpture was primarily associated with religious art. Ivory carvings and small devotional objects were widely produced in Europe. These works often depicted biblical scenes and were used for private worship [8].

The Renaissance period witnessed a revival of classical traditions and a renewed interest in humanism. Artists such as Donatello created small bronze sculptures that demonstrated technical mastery and expressive depth. These works were often commissioned for private collections [9]

Analysis and Discussion

The historical trajectory of small plastic sculpture reveals a complex and continuous interaction between material possibilities, cultural functions, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic developments. Across different epochs—from prehistoric societies to the Renaissance and beyond—small-scale sculptural forms have maintained a remarkable consistency in their core purposes while simultaneously adapting to shifting social, religious, and technological contexts. This dual nature—continuity and transformation—forms the central analytical framework for understanding the evolution of small plastic sculpture as a distinct artistic phenomenon.

In prehistoric contexts, particularly during the Upper Paleolithic period, small plastic sculpture emerges as one of the earliest forms of human artistic production. Archaeological discoveries of figurines, especially the so-called “Venus” types, demonstrate a consistent emphasis on the human body, particularly female forms, often rendered with exaggerated anatomical features. These exaggerations—such as enlarged breasts, hips, and abdomen—have been widely interpreted as symbolic representations of fertility, reproduction, and survival [4]. Such interpretations are supported by the broader environmental and socio-economic conditions of Paleolithic communities, where survival was closely tied to reproductive success and the continuity of the group.

Importantly, the portability of these small sculptures suggests that they were not fixed ritual objects but rather personal or communal items that could be carried, handled, and possibly used in repeated ritualistic practices. This tactile and intimate dimension distinguishes small plastic sculpture from monumental forms and underscores its role in everyday or cyclical ritual life. Furthermore, the use of readily available materials—such as stone, bone, ivory, and later clay—indicates a direct relationship between artistic production and the natural environment. This material dependency also influenced stylistic choices, as the properties of each medium constrained and enabled specific forms of expression.

Transitioning into the Neolithic period, the function and diversity of small plastic sculpture expanded significantly. With the advent of sedentary lifestyles and the development of agricultural societies, symbolic systems became more structured and complex. Figurines from sites such as

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Çatalhöyük demonstrate a broader range of subjects, including seated female figures, animals, and hybrid forms, often associated with domestic or cultic spaces [5]. This shift suggests that small plastic sculpture was increasingly integrated into the spatial organization of human settlements, serving both decorative and symbolic functions within households.

The emergence of ceramics as a dominant material during this period also had profound implications for production techniques and dissemination. Clay allowed for more rapid and varied production, facilitating the creation of multiple similar objects. This reproducibility marks an early stage in the standardization of artistic forms, which becomes more pronounced in later civilizations. At the same time, the presence of hand-modeled details indicates that individuality and craftsmanship remained important, reflecting a balance between mass production and artistic expression.

In ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia and Egypt, small plastic sculpture acquired more clearly defined institutional roles. In Mesopotamia, votive statues—often small in scale—were placed in temples as perpetual representations of worshippers, serving as intermediaries between humans and deities. These figures, typically characterized by clasped hands and wide, attentive eyes, embody a codified visual language that reflects religious devotion and social hierarchy [6]. The standardized features of these sculptures indicate a shift toward formalization and symbolic consistency, aligning artistic production with religious doctrine.

Similarly, in ancient Egypt, small plastic sculptures such as ushabti figures played a crucial role in funerary practices. These figures, placed in tombs, were intended to serve the deceased in the afterlife, performing labor on their behalf. The mass production of ushabti, often inscribed with spells from funerary texts, illustrates the integration of art, religion, and text into a unified cultural system [6]. The uniformity of these objects suggests not only technological advancement but also the institutionalization of artistic production, where workshops operated under strict conventions.

The classical period of Greek and Roman antiquity represents a significant turning point in the development of small plastic sculpture. During this era, there is a noticeable shift from primarily symbolic and functional roles toward aesthetic appreciation and artistic experimentation. Small-scale sculptures, particularly those made of bronze and terracotta, were produced both as independent artworks and as replicas of larger monumental pieces. This practice reflects the growing importance of art as a collectible and displayable object within private and public spaces.

The Tanagra figurines of Hellenistic Greece provide a compelling example of this transformation. These terracotta figures, often depicting elegantly dressed women, children, and scenes of daily life, demonstrate a high degree of naturalism and attention to detail [7]. Unlike earlier figurines, which were often stylized or symbolic, Tanagra figures emphasize individuality, movement, and emotional expression. This shift aligns with broader Hellenistic artistic trends, which prioritized realism, dynamism, and the exploration of human experience.

The production and distribution of such figurines also indicate the emergence of a market for small plastic sculpture. Workshops produced these objects in large quantities, often using molds, which allowed for widespread dissemination across different regions. This commercialization of small sculpture marks an important development in the history of art, as it reflects changing patterns of consumption and the democratization of artistic objects.

Technological advancements, particularly in metalworking, played a crucial role in enhancing the expressive potential of small plastic sculpture. The lost-wax casting technique, known since antiquity, allowed for the creation of highly detailed bronze sculptures with complex forms and fine surface

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textures. This method, which involves creating a wax model that is later replaced by molten metal, enabled artists to achieve a level of precision and refinement that was not possible with earlier techniques [9]. The continued use and refinement of this method during the Renaissance further expanded the possibilities of small-scale sculpture.

During the medieval period, the function and meaning of small plastic sculpture were largely shaped by the dominance of religious institutions. In Europe, small sculptures were primarily produced as devotional objects, often made from precious materials such as ivory, gold, and enamel. These objects, including reliquaries, diptychs, and statuettes of saints, were used in both public and private religious practices [8]. The emphasis on craftsmanship and material value reflects the spiritual significance attributed to these objects, as well as their role in expressing piety and devotion.

The stylistic characteristics of medieval small sculpture differ significantly from those of classical antiquity. Rather than striving for naturalism, medieval artists often employed stylized forms and symbolic representations, prioritizing spiritual meaning over physical realism. This shift underscores the broader transformation in artistic priorities during the medieval period, where art served primarily as a vehicle for religious instruction and contemplation.

The Renaissance marks a renewed interest in classical antiquity and a corresponding revival of naturalism, proportion, and human-centered themes. Small plastic sculpture during this period reflects these changes, as artists began to explore new forms of expression and experimentation. Figures such as Donatello and other Renaissance sculptors produced small bronze works that combined technical mastery with expressive depth [9]. These sculptures were often commissioned by wealthy patrons and collected as objects of intellectual and aesthetic value.

The Renaissance also saw the emergence of the studiolo culture, where collectors displayed small artworks, including sculptures, as part of curated spaces dedicated to learning and contemplation. This context elevated the status of small plastic sculpture from functional or devotional objects to works of art appreciated for their formal qualities and conceptual significance.

Across all these historical periods, one of the most striking aspects of small plastic sculpture is its adaptability. Despite changes in materials, techniques, and cultural contexts, the fundamental characteristics of small-scale sculpture—its portability, intimacy, and versatility—have remained constant. These qualities have allowed small plastic sculpture to fulfill a wide range of functions, from ritualistic and religious to decorative and aesthetic.

Moreover, the study of small plastic sculpture provides valuable insights into broader cultural and social dynamics. As artifacts that are often closely tied to daily life, these objects offer a unique perspective on the beliefs, practices, and values of different societies. Their relatively small size and widespread distribution make them particularly useful for archaeological and anthropological research, as they can be found in a variety of contexts, from domestic spaces to burial sites.

Conclusion

Small plastic sculpture represents one of the oldest and most enduring forms of artistic expression. Its origins in prehistoric times and continuous development through various historical periods highlight its cultural, religious, and aesthetic significance. From ritual objects to decorative art pieces, small sculptures have played diverse roles in human society.

The study confirms that small plastic sculpture is not merely a minor branch of sculpture but a fundamental component of art history. Its evolution reflects broader cultural transformations and

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technological advancements. Understanding its history provides valuable insights into human creativity and the development of artistic traditions.

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