

## 60 A CARVED STONE BEAR

*Ancient Bactria, 3000 BC, or earlier*

*Size: 12 × 20 cm*



This rare and unusually large animal figure is carved in hard limestone of a pinkish hue. It captures marvellously the form and spirit of the bear as he rests, apparently contemplating hibernation after a season of activity. He is reminiscent of the masterpieces of the European Ice Age, such as the Zaraysk bison. He is of the brown bear variety; the larger cave bear had died out by 12,000 BC.

Painted images of bears in caves are frequent from the Upper Palaeolithic period onwards, such as the remarkable images of both a cave bear and a brown bear in the Chauvet Caves in Ardèche, which date back to between 32,000 and 30,000 years BC. One of the earliest of all known sculptures is a bear moulded in clay found at Montespan in Haute-Garonne in 1881. This was probably made 15,000–20,000 years ago.

While there was clearly some symbolic significance attributed to bears – caves with skulls set on plinths or arranged in circles, quantities of bones indicating ritual slaughter – the meaning has been hotly disputed over the last century. Was there a bear cult? Was the bear, with its upright stance, seen as the intermediary between humans and dimensions beyond? Were there shamanic associations? The Ainu of Japan, the Ostyaks, Evenks, and Yakuts of Siberia, the Lapps in Scandinavia, and the Inuit in Canada and Greenland, all practised a bear cult, which has been substantiated in historic time. Whether it is legitimate to project what we know from more recent times, back through millennia, is the main bone of contention among those trying to decipher what people thought so long ago, based on the meagre clues that remain. It could be argued that, after all this time, the bear has entered the realm of conceptual art, where people project their own interpretations, usually onto arrangements of objects and assemblages of rubbish.