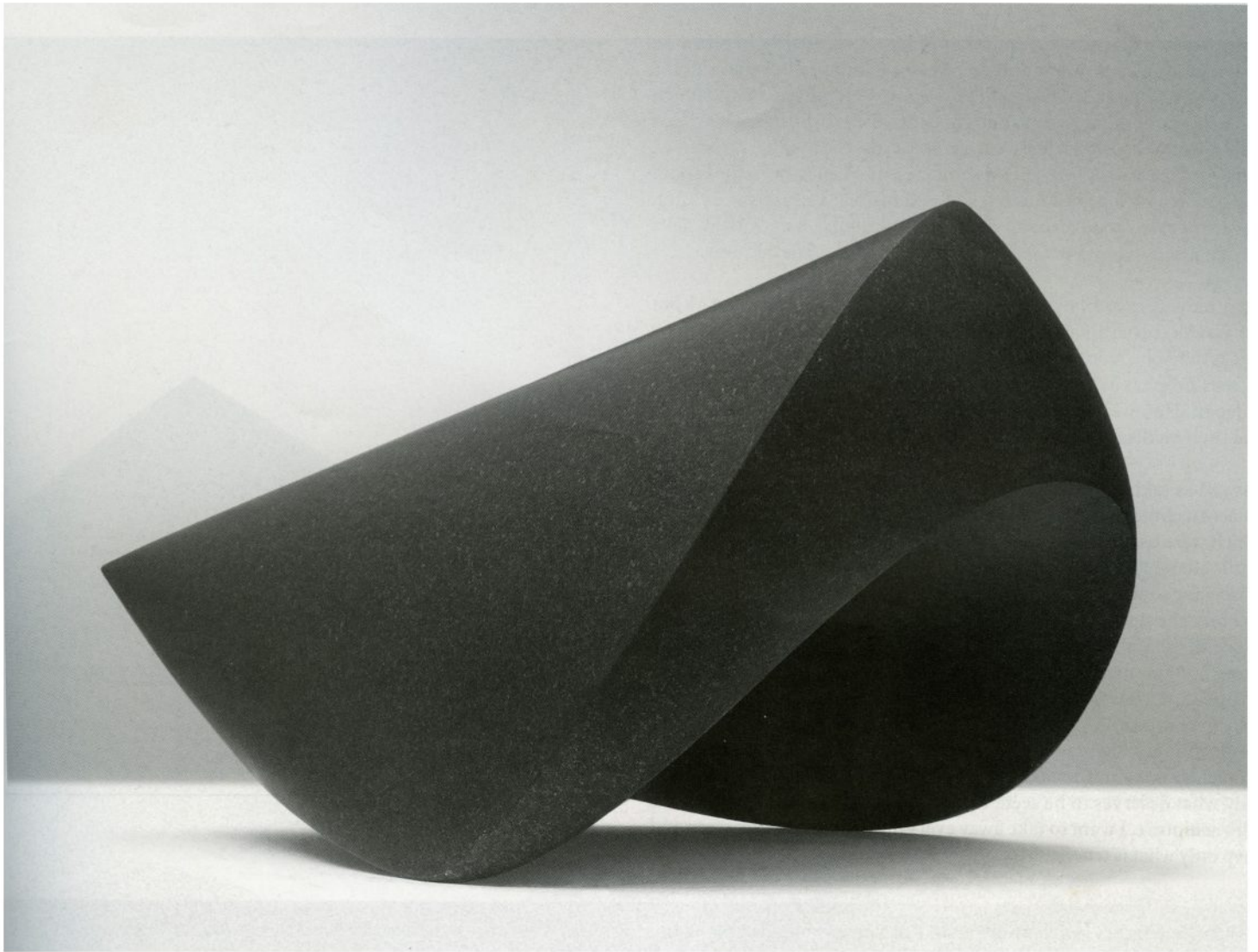




Standing The Test Of Time

Armenian-Egyptian artist Armen Agop creates contrasting sculptural pieces, their smooth, hard stone surfaces complemented by strong, angular lines and sharp points as he takes influence from his heritage as well as his working environment in Italy, thoughtfully constructing pieces which are striking yet apt for their surroundings. The Upper House features his unique designs.



Ancient Egyptian art and architecture were well ahead of their time. Still today no one can quite fathom how the Egyptians managed to build the enormous Pyramids at Giza which are still renowned across the globe, particularly as one of the monuments, the Great Pyramid of Giza, is the last of the seven ancient wonders of the world to be extant.

Within the ancient culture of Egypt, granite was a material prominently used in architectural construction and art. Some of the pyramids at Giza included elements of granite (as well as limestone and basalt) and various statues and large stone stele made use of the hard stone. Similarly, Armenian-Egyptian sculptor Armen Agop has adopted the material as one of the most prominent used in his oeuvre, taking many of his artistic influences from ancient Egyptian art. Black granite is one of his most favoured mediums to work in, while basalt also often features in his repertoire.

Agop was born in 1969 in Cairo, where he spent most of his early and formative years, before going on to apprentice for five years in the studio of painter Simon Shahrighian in Cairo at the age of just 13. Agop was clear from a young age about what he wanted to do. Constantly drawing and making models as a child, he never found a good reason to stop. "I never posed the question," he says, "I just followed what I wanted to do." After pursuing a fruitful apprenticeship with Shahrighian, he attended

Helwan University in Cairo, graduating in 1992 from the Sculpture Department in the Faculty of Fine Arts, and going on to be awarded an Assistant Research Scholarship in the same faculty. Having spent so much of his artistic life in Egypt, surrounded by the fascinating relics of this ancient civilisation at the centre of it all in its capital, it's no wonder that his work is so strongly influenced by the historic culture of what was then his world.

As well as all the wonders of Egypt surrounding him every day, Agop also had his Armenian heritage to draw from. Growing up as part of an Armenian minority within Egypt, the artist was keen to keep alive this part of himself through his work, drawing on these roots and incorporating them with the influences of Ancient Egypt in his creations. "Both are very ancient cultures and they managed to survive. I feel fortunate to have grown up with both of them," explains Agop. However, today the sculptor works out of Italy, having moved away from the country from which he derived so much inspiration. In 2000 Agop was sponsored to work in Italy for a year, after receiving the State Prize of Artistic Creativity "Prix de Rome". He participated in various shows, including one entitled "Young Egyptian Artists" at the Egyptian Academy in Rome, and began to show at the National Gallery of Modern Art. It was a turning point for the artist.

Agop reveals that the appreciation of his work during his time in Italy encouraged him not only to remain, but to really believe in his creations and further develop them. Perhaps surrounded by so much art in Egypt, of the ancient variety, his intrinsic artistic talent had been rather overlooked, but it just took a move across the Mediterranean Sea for him to realise his full potential and he is thrilled to be in the capital of a country which itself has its own rich history and artistic culture. "As Egypt was a good place for a sculptor to be born, Italy with all of its artistic heritage is a great place for a sculptor to live," he declares.

Since moving to Italy, Agop has not only further developed his work but has also increased his global presence, exhibiting in numerous locations across the globe, from Miami to Guilin to Bergen, as well as various cities across Europe as well as the Toyamura International Sculpture Biennale in Japan. However, in his work, he always returns to the ancient cities and their civilisations.

As well as taking influence from such cultures, Agop is interested in ancient techniques, adopting certain skills in his stone work and carving which were used all that time ago, but which have managed to survive until today. He is also fascinated by the ideology of the past, using it as a basis for some of his work and concluding that little has changed if you take the time to delve a little deeper. "Looking back is very helpful to see further ahead," philosophises the artist. "The ancient and the contemporary may seem very different, but I think the essential things are the same. If we look at our modern society, our real problems and values are the same: hate, love, fear, courage, greed, generosity. And yet we all still seek happiness. All this is ancient. It's important to see real problems and values, to take away what deludes this vision and to retain only what deserves to be seen. I think it's all about that. It's the same with sculpture. I want to take away everything that isn't necessary and keep only what is true."





Agop's sculptures, as a result of his scrutiny, are often seemingly fairly simple in their design, but more often than not there is a deeper complexity behind the creation and construction of his perfectly carved works. Contemporary in their aesthetic, they are also clearly influenced in their stylisation and technique by Egyptian art, as well as in their medium and concept.

Using durable stones such as granite and basalt in most of his work, the thoughts behind this choice of material are linked to its nature. "These (the chosen materials) are very encouraging for me, especially for their heritage in existence. It is very difficult for me to work with a material which I know will vanish soon," says Agop, who hopes that his pieces, like those of the ancient civilisations on which he is so enamoured, will stand the test of time.

Agop's piece at The Upper House has been carved from black granite and is made up of contrasting curves and angular lines, a sharp point on top at variance with the smooth, rounded surface on which the sculpture sits. It almost appears ready to rock at any moment, but conveys a certain solidness of form at the same time, one that is by no means unwieldy but

rather has a simple elegance to it. As Agop explains, the piece represents similarly contrasting ideas of both serenity and of presence. "They may seem like contradictions, but it is very interesting to look for them at the same time. That's what I thought would live well in the location. A hotel is a temporary home. You need to feel comfortable within the space," he says, explaining the notion of serenity behind his piece, reflected in the smooth curves and polished round base. "Yet, because it is not

your definite home, you will still be concerned about your appearances," says Agop, pinpointing the concept of presence conveyed by his piece and represented by the strong lines and the strict, upward point of the sculpture.

Agop's work has often been described as contrasting or contradictory art, perhaps partly a reflection of his mixed Egyptian-Armenian heritage as well as his current existence in a place removed from his origins, in Italy. His intriguing

works convey so much, with ideas taken from the past yet geared for the present. While often representing contrasting concepts there is always rhyme and reason behind his pieces as Agop strives to concentrate on what is truly of essence. As a result, his conceptually complex but often aesthetically accessible works respond to the past, sit easily in the present and despite their ancient influences will no doubt persevere and stand strong in the future.



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