

# ORDOVAS

PRESS RELEASE  
27 SEPTEMBER 2018

25 Savile Row  
London  
W1S 2ER  
T. +44(0)20 7287 5013

Gallery Hours:  
Tue-Fri: 10:00-18:00  
Sat: 11:00-15:00



## Alabaster

28 SEPTEMBER—15 DECEMBER 2018

**Alabaster**, on display at Ordovas from 28 September until 15 December 2018, will explore the enduring fascination that artists have had with this translucent and transformative stone, from its uses in ancient Egypt to twentieth century and contemporary sculpture. In this exhibition, alabaster works from the ancient world presage the modernist abstractions and biomorphic forms of Eduardo Chillida, Anish Kapoor, Henry Moore and Isamu Noguchi. Whether figurative or abstract or made for sacred or secular purposes, alabaster carries inherent symbolism in both its delicacy, and its relationship with light. Light moves within and bounces off alabaster, and ultimately light becomes part of the material itself.

The ancient Egyptians prized alabaster, using it as part of the mummification process. Due to its colour and durability, they considered alabaster to be pure and the best material in which to preserve precious oils, ointments and perfumes as well as organs conserved for the afterlife. The exhibition includes “canopic jar of Henat”, dating from the late Dynastic Period, 26th Dynasty c. 664-525 BC. The object’s human head depicts Imsety, the only son of Horus, and the four columns of text identify that this jar was made to preserve the embalmed liver of a priest named Henat. The dark pigment used to enhance the inscription would often have been scrubbed away at a later date, to make the vessel as pure and “clean” as possible; however, this particular jar holds the original blue-grey pigment that was pushed into the engraving upon making. Also included is a canopic jar lid from an earlier ancient Egyptian kingdom, c. 1400 BC, carved from finely veined alabaster in the form of a man’s head wearing a full wig. The object’s rounded face, with its smooth and simple lines, is beguilingly tactile and almost seems to anticipate the modern, abstract stone carvings of the twentieth century.

Ancient South Arabia was centred on modern-day Yemen and parts of Saudi Arabia and southern Oman. Several kingdoms flourished over the vast period, which lasted from 1000 BC to the rise of Islam in the sixth century AD. The exhibition includes a South Arabian socle, in the form of a sturdy piece of alabaster that would have served as the base of a statue. With 26 lines of immaculately conserved Sabaen script (Saba being the most significant of these ancient kingdoms), this slab of stone tells a story of conflict between South Arabian kingdoms and the Abyssinians during King Lahay`athat Yarkham’s short but transitional reign, and is one of the few remaining artefacts to mention this ruler.

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Perhaps the ancient object most reminiscent of modern sculpture included in the exhibition is the South Arabian “head of a woman”, c. 1st century BC – 1st century AD. The head sits atop a long tapering neck; its shield-shaped face is framed by thin arching brows above almond-shaped eyes, inlaid with white stone around pupils that originally would have been decorated with glass or lapis. Her features are exaggerated and overly-refined with cushioned lips and a nose that comes without interruption down from her forehead, heralding Picasso’s plaster busts of Marie-Thérèse as well as Modigliani’s stylised models.

A statue of Saint Ambrose, dating from the early fifteenth century, is a rare surviving example of Nottingham alabaster, the medieval English output of relatively small religious carvings and relief panels for altarpieces, which flourished from the fourteenth century until the early sixteenth century. The majority of religious statuary in English churches that survived the Dissolution of the Monasteries Act in the 1530s, was destroyed in the reign of King Edward VI, following the Putting away of Books and Images Act in 1549. After this time, the English sculpture industry survived on a far smaller scale and had virtually ceased altogether by the late eighteenth century. Standing in a classical contrapposto, the drapery of Saint Ambrose’s cloak foretells the abstract forms carved by twentieth century artists who re-engaged with indigenous English stone in the 1920s and early 1930s - among them, Henry Moore.

At the time, stones mined from regions including Portland, in Dorset, and Ancaster, in Lincolnshire, were primarily used as building materials and were not considered to be conventional materials for carving. In 1978, Moore recalled that he was introduced to Cumberland alabaster by the sculptor John Skeaping, Barbara Hepworth’s first husband. Skeaping had been shown odd pieces of the stone by a Cumberland farmer, who had found them while ploughing his land. According to Tate curator Richard Morphet, “Moore bought eight or nine rough blocks from this farmer, who sent them to him in London in parcels”. Between 1930 and 1935 Moore carved at least eight sculptures in Cumberland alabaster. Moore and his contemporaries, including Skeaping and Hepworth, carved directly into their sculptures – working into the stone with a range of chisels, rifiers and hammers, without the aid of drawn plans or maquettes; the form or shape of the final sculpture evolved through the processes of its making, as the artist responded to the characteristics of the material.

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The idea of direct carving, or ‘truth to materials’ was first introduced in the work of Constantin Brâncuși at the turn of the twentieth century. Before this, carved sculpture was usually based on a pre-conceived model and then carved by craftsmen under the instruction of the artist. Brâncuși taught Isamu Noguchi how to use carving tools and honour his materials when Noguchi was his studio assistant in Paris in the 1920s. *The Kiss*, 1945, is one of only a handful of works that Noguchi executed in alabaster. The sculpture’s modernist lines and the delicate marking on its surface, demonstrate Noguchi’s carving skills and subtle exploration of the soft and yielding qualities of the material.

Eduardo Chillida’s approach to sculpture underwent a significant shift in the mid 1960s. He moved away from working predominantly in iron to producing works carved from marble and, later, from alabaster. This period coincided with Chillida’s first trips to Britain and the beginning of his engagement with art and museum culture in London. In 1962, he studied the *Parthenon frieze* sculptures at the British Museum and the following year travelled to Greece. After experiencing Mediterranean light for the first time, Chillida worked increasingly with alabaster as he craved a material that could contain and give off light. Executed in 1979, and reminiscent of the artist’s architectural training, Chillida has mined the interior of *Homenaje a la mar I*’s warm pearly-grey alabaster, leaving the stone’s raw exterior exposed and excavating spaces inside the block. Within the stone’s centre, he carved out the outline of his monumental *Peine del viento* from the cliffs of San Sebastián, his best known and most loved public work.

Anish Kapoor’s *Untitled*, executed in 2010, is part of his ongoing experiments with freestanding spatial voids carved from natural materials and stone, which he first began in 1987. With this work, the artist has used a massive slab of Italian alabaster, to address signature themes of duality—absence versus presence, spirit versus body, invisible versus visible, and illusory versus tangible—as well as the physical opposition between the convex and the concave. The dynamism of *Untitled* is heightened by Kapoor’s ability to create incredible physical geometry out of a sizeable stonework while still preserving the alabaster’s innate beauty, delicacy, and organic quality.

### Editor’s Notes:

1. To join the accredited list for press events please contact Clare Roberts +44 7899 065 088 [communications@ordovasart.com](mailto:communications@ordovasart.com)

Eduardo Chillida, *Homenaje a la mar I*, 1979 © courtesy of Chillida family, Zabalaga-leku San Sebastián

page 3 of 3