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Paul Vanstone: Modelling the Present from the Past

Mark Merrony talks to the award winning sculptor about marbles, and the technique, styles, and influences that inform his splendid artistic works

Paul Vanstone with an over-life-size head in Bolivian blue marble. © Paul Vanstone.



When did you start training and what inspired you to become a sculptor?

British art schools decided the mind was the tool to work on rather than skill sets. I come from the countryside in Berkshire to Saint Martins in 1986. They had thrown out a lot of technical training by the time I got there. There were some people there like Chris Haysom, who had a stone carving area, and I wandered in one day. I then studied at the Royal College of Art from 1990.

In my childhood I loved drawing and making things, and I really struggled with language. That's where everything I do comes from really. If somebody gives me a block of stone and says make sense of that, that's the material that I really try to make sense of in my work.

Is there any technique that you use which culminates in a particular style?

The material of Afghanistan green onyx has beautiful veining. To overlay that with decoration is very difficult because you are almost using the veins as the detail. I react to each block. There are characters I want to portray. It's not like a doodle where you are following

the pencil. It's fitting it into that block. I'm interested in portraying, or emotions, maybe, or states of being a human. And I think the material you can use in quite a poetic way to bring something out. But I think most artists will tell you that they want to do something new and fresh. And in that way, I think the material can help me do that, make me make things I've never made before.

Do you think that happens a lot in your work where you start off when you are sculpting something and then you end up following the material? The material dictates the style?

Yes, you do have to adapt. I've worked next to sculptors who will have a model, and they will then copy that model into a material, and it will be exactly like the



Paul Vanstone. *Rising Orator*.
2020? Italian Statuario marble.
Height: 181cm; width: 87cm.
© Paul Vanstone.

Paul Vanstone. *Red Onyx Crystal Head*.

2025. Pakistan onyx.

Height: 175cm; width: 39cm.

© Paul Vanstone.



model. I am what you would call a direct carver. I will draw on to the block and do drawings, but I am reacting to the material; almost a bit more like a painting in a way. When you paint something, the marks you put on to the painting, one mark will affect you making another mark. And I think when you're carving, there will be traits within the stone which you react to.

How do you plan a sculptural work from the beginning through its end product? Do you draw it first or work from a drawing?

I'll do drawings towards it and then draw onto the block itself. So, if you walk around the studio, you'll often see them marked in a red crayon or a pencil. Because with carving there is no way backwards. It forces you to make a decision, and then you have to stand by that decision. It's a reductive process. You're not adding, but always taking away, the opposite of modelling. Being forced to make a decision, for my character, is important, because you could play around forever if you wanted to, keeping it wet. So, sometimes you get stuck and you think to yourself, I can't think of a way forward. I bought a block of Thasos pure white and made a cloth piece and got stuck, and I started it something like twenty-three years ago, and then eventually about three or four years ago, finished it.

Sometimes you just need time with something to work out how to resolve it. That's a bit extreme, but I quite like materials being around for a few years before I complete something and it goes out. The lovely thing about stone is that nothing is going to happen to it. In the meantime, it sits there winking at you going come on, finish me. And I quite like that; I've been carving for thirty-six years, and my skills and responses accumulate and hopefully I'll bring that to what's here.

Aside from working on faces, do you carve marble portraits?

I have done a few portraits, I love looking at heads, but I wouldn't say I'm portraying individual people for what I do, but I have done.

How would you describe your artistic style? Do you focus on realism, abstraction, or somewhere between the two?

I generally need to feel a figurative element in my work. And I've made abstract sculptures; I love abstract



Paul Vanstone. *Pale Portuguese Cloth Senator*.

2019. Portuguese marble.

Height: 170cm; width: 67cm.

© Paul Vanstone.

sculptures. For me, there is something of the human being, whatever it is, my career has been matching that to a material, finding some sort of poetry with a subject, the material, and the scale, those combinations of things – that’s what I have worked on all my life.

I work in stone, of course, and there are a vast number of different types of stone, and I feel that the combination of what to find to put into something which is millions of years old, do it justice, is important, and not charge through something. And that has been my career, making things that I love making but making sense of it: from a beautiful green onyx from Afghanistan to alabaster from Spain to classic Carrara marble, and you get the sense of what people have made with those things before you.

You worked at the famous Carrara quarries in northern Tuscany. Could you say something about that experience?

Yes, I had finished at the Royal College of Art, and at my degree show, then the wife of Ted Turner, who owned CBS at the time, turned up, and they had a big collection of British figurative artists’ work. They bought a marble head from me, and she was with Paula Roffa, who owned the Roffa Studios in Pietrasanta, a big marble-carving town near Carrara, about 40 minutes from Pisa. They invited me to come and work there with the provision that I would give them some pieces. And I had a year working predominantly just in Carrara marble. Carrara sucks in beautiful materials from all over the world and that then sparked all these different journeys I have been on.

There is a perception of Carrara marble that it is beautifully white. Is that strictly true or are there other subtypes?

For years, the basic Carrara marbles, the Statuario, of Michelangelo has been the cream on the cake, but there are all these different variations. In fact, when you go, there could be fifty or sixty different quarries around the Carrara area. And they all produce their own individual material. There are the Gioia quarries, a vast, beautiful quarry, with this sort of dappled grey Carrara, which you see a lot of, and I have worked in a lot; a good friend of mine runs that quarry. But the Statuario quarry has a much whiter-based colour to it. There is also one called Zebrino, as in zebra, which has become very popular.

Strangely, my world has been affected by the enormous surge of interest in stones for bathrooms and kitchens. I know it sounds petty, but that is what the

vast amount of material goes for. But, in a way, I have profited from the fact that it has driven the mining and quarrying of these materials.

What type of Carrara do you prefer to use and is there any specific favourite that you have?

Well, the *Carrara Marble Triceratops* in Berkeley Square is a classic, what is called a Carrara Ordinario, that I used. It is almost bone like and has a slightly flat colour to it. Whereas a Statuario has almost a luminousness to it. If you think of Canova’s carvings, they are incredibly white, and he worked mostly in Statuario, as in *The Three Graces*; they have this glow to them – wonderful, wonderful colouring. I generally love materials with lots of colour, lots of veining, but I dampened that to make the skull. I have some wings here which I made for a client, which have a dapple grey in them, which is more of a common colour.

You mentioned how tensile Carrara marble is, are there any other types of marble that are not so tensile?

Yes, it’s to do with the minerals and the way they are bound together. When you go to Carrara and look up at the mountains, there is a band or a seam. Anything above that seam hasn’t had enough pressure to bind it together. It is originally formed of calcium carbonate from shells and, as a metamorphic stone, then it has pressure and sometimes heat. Anything below the seam has had too much pressure and it’s full of cracks and brittle. So, there is this sort of sweet spot in the quarries, and that quirk of geology creates these beautiful materials, which allow you to work with them.

Alabaster in Spain is different. They are almost like meteorites in the ground. But the core of the ‘meteorite’ is generally this pure alabaster. The Egyptians made extraordinary things in alabaster, very delicate vases and things like that. So, it just allows you, largely with hand tools, with time and skill, to make these extraordinary things, but there are lots of machines now.

Is it true that when marble is first quarried it is softer and more easy to Carve?

They say it dries out, which is an odd one, because marble is basically not a porous material. But it is true, it does, and you can ‘fry it’ a bit, but generally, if you take it down an inch or so, it is good, and as it has always been. If you ever go to Hampton Court Palace, there are some Carrara sculptures there which date back to when

Elizabeth I lived there and they haven't got their polish but have all their detail. It is a very robust material, and you can do lots of things in it.

What inspired the Carrara Triceratops that you mentioned above, recently installed in Berkeley Square?

I approached Jonathan Aaron probably about seven or eight years ago. I used to stand outside David Aaron's gallery, particularly at nighttime, and be in awe of some of their pieces, the Roman and Greek heads and torsos and Egyptian; just extraordinary quality, and I approached him with a view to maybe showing my work with some of these ancient pieces. He then said how about you respond to some of these pieces, and we have a dialogue with the ancient work and your pieces? I loved that idea. Then I think COVID hit that year and there was quite a shadow after it, as we all know, and it died down.

Then they started to buy and sell dinosaur fossils, and there has been an enormous interest in them. They had one cast into bronze which had been there for two years. They run an educational programme with Westminster City Council, and there is an educational location at the top of Berkeley Square. That ran its course

over two years and then they looked to what could be next. Jonathan approached me about eighteen months ago and said that he had an incredible triceratops skull. I must admit I was never a dinosaur lover as a kid. I liked the Jurassic Park films, but I would not say I would have gone out of my way to watch them. But then he said just come and see this fossil. They mounted it at an angle like it was charging and I would have challenged anybody not to have felt the presence of this thing, which was here sixty-eight million years ago, and it still had this sort of force in it.

I love a challenge. It is a very complicated set of volumes. And I just thought, well let's have a go at this, and it took me in a different direction. I think it's an extraordinary creature, and I wanted to try and portray some of that power. They were herbivores, so not the carnivores of the tyrannosaurus rex, and the horns were for protection. I hope I have got something of that in there. It is life-sized but a bit of a junior. They grew to around twelve tonnes in weight, and this sculpture represents a sub-adult, around halfway to full maturity. They had the biggest skull of all the dinosaurs, and there was this big crest at the back to protect the neck from being bitten. But an extraordinary piece of evolution; there's a bit of a beak, the sort of lizard-like eye, the rhinoceros 'bulb', the horns. It's a great mix in evolutionary moment.



Paul Vanstone. *Carrara Marble Triceratops*. 2025. White Carrara Marble. Height: 320cm; width: 150cm. © Paul Vanstone.

Did the inspiration of the Senator and Orator Series of sculptures hark back to the Roman Republic and Empire when you were working in Carrara?

Very much so. I think that when you start working in stone there is a perception that it is a traditional material, whatever that means, although I am making things now; but when you start making things in Carrara, you realise there are certain things you can produce in it. And it has this sort of tensile strength that you can do limbs and fingers. If you look at Bernini's pieces in the Borghese Gardens, they are incredibly intricate, whereas you could not do that in granite because it just does not have those qualities. I love the idea that when you approach working in a stone, you look at it, and what has been made in it before, as well as what you want to make in it. And I think that, not only are you getting to know a material and its strengths and weaknesses, and how to work it at the angle of the chisel, but you are also looking at its history.

I think life is a bit about contrast. And there is this incredibly heavy, hard material, and you're trying to play something soft and delicate and flowing. And I think you can see in history that combination, there is something about it, which is very successful. I remember reading once that marble can both reflect light as well as absorb light. Skin does that as well, and there's something very human about those characteristics

because of that, I think. And, in a way, I think cloth is quite human because it does that, it has a sort of fluidness about it and softness. When you are looking at Roman carving of cloth it does something to you. It could have been carved all those years ago, but today it still has this human effect on you.

It's strange going to Rome for the first time, having experienced neoclassical responses to sculpture, they sort of cleaned it up and made it a bit more sterile. I love Canova, yet they are very sterile, but extraordinary carvings. But if you go to Rome, you sense that brutality of that society and the hierarchy within that society in the sculptures. And I personally find that quite exciting in a way. Well, there's a truth in it. I remember spending a month in Rome and the effect it had. Rome is packed full of stuff, isn't it. Going to see *Moses* by Michelangelo, that's just extraordinary, with the arm and beard. It's an incredible, strong sculpture, and there are Bernini works everywhere, and he's much more baroque and flowing. It was fantastic. I love seeing, almost the source of later sculptures. And then I spent time in Greece.

Are you essentially following the Hellenistic and Roman style of drapery?

Yes, absolutely. Also, I have various friends who have studied Greek and Rome much more than I have done, and commentators talk about the bronzes being so highly treasured that they were copied in stone. That

Paul Vanstone. *Senator*.
2022. Portuguese marble.
Height: 220cm;
width: 190cm.
© Paul Vanstone.



relationship between what the Romans had seen the Greeks doing, I find fascinating and then moving it and pushing it on and doing different things with it technically, there are some real peaks.

I think the Greeks did some extraordinary things with the human, particularly in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. I could go on talking about Canova pieces. We were talking about them being quite clean and anaemic. But there are some extraordinary things in his work and the pieces I really loathe. You go to the museums in Athens and there are some incredible pieces within different periods which really have had a big effect on me.

What are your thoughts on the sculptures produced by ancient civilisations outside the Mediterranean world, and to what extent do they inspire your work?

The Greeks learned from the Egyptians, and the figures came out of the block and became these extraordinary moments of sculpture; I like the incredible dexterity the Greeks had in the Hellenistic period. But I love the strength within Egyptian work that you feel the block still. And I guess my interest in materials, it's almost that cusp, like a fossil in the block, and retaining that strength in the block, which may make it a bit more abstract in that sense.

It's interesting when, like the very big ones here; there is a six- or seven-tonne piece. When you start making things on that scale people always immediately think of Easter Island, but there are very few references in a way, or the Central American Olmec heads. I love the idea that there is a human being all those years ago trying to make sense of things or a society. So, portraying a head, in a way, I've loved joining that history, and doing the same thing. And I like those set of references and then pushing it with my own quirky style. I have seen them as characters that I've found within the blocks, rather than forcing a character I know that I'm trying to portray in the stone generally. I have made specific portraits, but generally it's not my main interest.

Definitely Egyptian sculptures inspire me. I spent quite a lot of time in India. Indian art is a whole different layer altogether. I went to buy some material about eight years ago but haven't been since then. I would love to go back and travel more in India. I haven't been to southern India, mostly in the north and the west – Rajasthan and Maharashtra – and I've been down to Calcutta (Kolkata), which I loved. I went to this fantastic place where they make these beautiful, incredible mud figures, which they paint, and the mud

is taken out of the Ganges. Then it's all dropped back in to the Ganges in these boats. It's incredible, and worth going to Calcutta just for that. It's an extraordinary sort of ceremony.

Henry Moore loved the Mexican pieces and he was extraordinary. When I was at the Royal College the Foundation paid for my last year there, and I love his pieces.

You can see that Picasso liked the inventiveness of African art very much, and the effect of classical work on Picasso as well. It's to do with what I've been talking about really, looking back at how people have used materials and subjects and, you're almost evolving something.

I had this wonderful trip to Lima, and I went to these fantastic Inca museums. It's a little bit like in India; I loved the everyday nature of the works. There are a lot of ceramics which have survived from the Incas, but they often had a practical base to them as water carriers or wine carriers. But then in the stone pieces, they kept the block. It was probably due to selecting the right bit of stone to make a character in, but I just love the strength of the figures.

I love the everyday nature of sculpture. The classical pieces almost become more museum based. They were probably for wealthy individuals, whereas I am quite enjoying these everyday objects, which you wouldn't necessarily have been a wealthy person to have owned. You may even have made them yourself.

It is interesting that you are visiting places like Lima and you're coming away in your mind with concepts based on Incan civilisation and fusing them with your own.

Yes, in that way that someone has approached material, and I just find it fascinating. It's not my culture. Do I need to be portraying my culture? I don't know. As a human being, I don't feel the need to portray my political views but just trying to portray being a human being in these materials. And it's interesting how other cultures have done that.

Could you just take us through some of the different types of marbles illustrated above and below, and their colours, and where they come from? In your workshop, for instance, you have a blue sculpture.

I found myself in a stockyard full of Bolivian marble. It comes from above La Paz up in the mountains and it had been discovered by an Italian after the end of the Second

World War. He had left Italy for whatever reasons and found himself in South America. He had seen this blue marble; there are very few blues – lapis lazuli being the famous example from Afghanistan. But it has been dynamited and is still very difficult to get out of the mountains, so it does not come in very big dimensions. So, this was much more accessible. It is not as pure as Afghan marble, but I think it is a beautiful blue.

Onyx has incredible colours. I bought a lot of onyxes from Iran and Afghanistan. There is a beautiful red I work in from Pakistan, and they have some wonderful colour. Rajasthan in north-western India has some beautiful rainforest greens, and out towards the Pakistan border there is a stunning orange stone from Jaisalmer.

***The Stone Tape*, broadcast by the BBC back in 1972, was scary, and based on the concept of a stone room where audio and visual energy is stored and perpetually re-released. Is there any sense you get that stone figures absorb and release some kind of energy?**

Well, I think you know it, don't you? My mother's family are from Dartmoor. It's one big, huge granite pile. And where my grandfather worked was on the edge of that pile. It's a stone which releases energy and I think that there is an energy within it, and you can feel it in the stone without being too crystally about it. I think it's a connection and it is deep within us.

We talked earlier about stone collections as kids. Why are kids interested in stone? I understand why they're interested in dinosaurs, but why stones? You



Paul Vanstone. *Turquoise Veins Run Through Me*. 2008. Iranian onyx. Height: 170cm; width: 65cm. © Paul Vanstone.

Paul Vanstone. *Bolivian Blue Head*. 2023. Bolivian Blue marble. Height: 195cm; width: 45cm. © Paul Vanstone.



pick up a pebble, and you put it in your hand, and I often think of those votive figures; it's a physical thing sitting in your hand. It goes right back into our history, doesn't it, and making sense of things is interesting. I quite like the mystery of it rather. There is no answer, is there, really.

But I agree with you and I find it fascinating. There was that book, wasn't there, *The Mystery of the Crystal Skulls*, in the Americas, and linking them to aliens and other parts of the world. But often I think people don't quite believe that previous societies could make such sophisticated things. So, they try and explain it by saying there must have been an intervention. Whereas actually, you see these extraordinary peaks in technical ability and what people are portraying. You see it within Greek and Roman carving and bronzes, and then it collapses and maybe those get lost. It's obviously workshops and around palaces and temples which knock off each other and push on to make these extraordinary things. I think it is collective rather than individual, and it is fascinating because it doesn't last.

Paul Vanstone was a former assistant to Sir Anish Kapoor RA and has exhibited at major galleries and sculpture gardens in Britain, including the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Chelsea Flower Show – LAPADA.

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