

# Foreword

## Jennifer Y. Chi

Associate Director for Exhibitions and Public Programs, Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University

For many visitors to *The Lost World of Old Europe: The Danube Valley 5,000–3,500 B.C.*—the second international loan exhibition organized by the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University—the region and its historical context, as well as its material culture, may be largely unfamiliar. Discussions of Western civilization often move from the Venus of Willendorf to the Lascaux cave paintings and then on to Egypt and Mesopotamia, without ever mentioning the art and culture of what is known as Old Europe, an area corresponding geographically to modern-day southeastern Europe and defined by a series of distinct cultural groups that attained an astonishing level of sophistication in the fifth and fourth millennia B.C. *The Lost World of Old Europe* attempts to redefine commonly held notions of the development of Western civilization by presenting the astonishing and little-known artistic and technological achievements made by these still enigmatic peoples—from their extraordinary figurines, to their vast variety of copper and gold objects, to their stunning pottery types.

Perhaps the most widely known category of objects from Old Europe is the “mother-goddess” figurine. Fashioned by virtually every Old European cultural group, these striking miniaturized representations of females are frequently characterized by abstraction, with truncated, elongated, or emphasized body parts, and a surface decorated with incised or painted geometric and abstract patterns. The figurines’ heightened sense of female corporeality has led some scholars to identify them as representations of a powerful mother goddess, whose relationship to earthly and human fertility is demonstrated in her remarkable, almost sexualized forms. The great variety of contexts in which the figurines are found, however, has led more recently to individualized readings rather than to a single, overarching interpretation. The set of twenty-one female figurines and their little chairs from Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru that is central to the exhibition’s installation of this category of objects, for example, was found near a hearth in an edifice that has been interpreted as a sanctuary. One widely accepted interpretation based upon its

context, then, is that the figures represent the Council of Goddesses, with the more-senior divinities seated on thrones. Others take a more conservative approach suggesting that the figurines formed part of a ritualistic activity—the specific type of ritual, however, remains open to interpretation.

As *The Lost World of Old Europe* illustrates, the refinement of the visual and material language of these organized communities went far beyond their spectacular terracotta figurines. The technological advances made during this 1,500-year period are manifest in the copper and gold objects that comprise a significant component of this exhibition. The earliest major assemblage of gold artifacts to be unearthed anywhere in the world comes from the Varna cemetery, located in what is now Bulgaria, and dates to the first half of the fifth millennium B.C. Interred in the graves are the bodies of individuals who may have been chieftains, adorned with as much as five kilograms of gold objects, including exquisitely crafted headdresses, necklaces, appliqués, and ceremonial axes. Indeed, it is in Old Europe that one sees the first large-scale mining of precious metals, the development of advanced metallurgical practices such as smelting, and the trade of objects made from these materials.

It is also important to note that these cultures did not live in isolation from one another, but instead formed direct contacts, most clearly through networks of trade. Gold and copper objects were circulated among these cultural groups, for example. The most striking material traded throughout much of southeastern Europe, however, is the *Spondylus* shell. Found in the Aegean Sea, *Spondylus* was carved into objects of personal adornment in Greece from at least the early Neolithic period forward. The creamy-white colored shell is known to have been traded as far as the modern United Kingdom by the fifth millennium B.C. Many of the most-common forms are on display in this exhibition and include elaborate beaded necklaces, tubular bracelets, and pendants or amulets. The shells can perhaps be read as markers of a common origin or as indicators of the owner’s elite position within society.

Another thought-provoking group of objects included in *The Lost World* are the “architectural” models. Made of terracotta, with the surface enlivened by both incision and paint, these models reveal an amazing variety of form, ranging from realistically rendered models depicting multiple houses to strongly stylized structures that include equally abstract figurines, sometimes interpreted as representations of a temple and its worshipers. While the precise meaning of these objects is still a matter of debate, their very existence clearly indicates a complex relationship between Old European cultures and both the built and unbuilt spaces that surrounded them.

Within their homes Old Europeans stored an impressive array of pottery that has been methodically studied over the last hundred years by many southeast-European archaeologists. The diverse typologies and complex styles suggest that this pottery was used in household and dining rituals. Bold geometric designs—including concentric circles, diagonal lines, and checkerboard patterns—distinguish the pottery made by the Cucuteni culture, examples of which are featured in this exhibition. Part of the

pottery's allure is the resonance of its composition and design to a modern aesthetic. Indeed, one could easily envision a Cucuteni vessel displayed in a contemporary home.

Exhibitions at the Institute are not only meant to illustrate the connections among ancient cultures, but also to question preexisting and sometimes static notions of the ancient world. With *The Lost World of Old Europe*, it is our desire to show that a rich and complex world can be found when looking beyond traditional and narrow definitions of the antiquity, and indeed beyond standard depictions of the development of Western civilization.