



Seated figure

Not on display**Title/Description:** Seated figure**Born:** 1500 - 1699**Object Type:** Figure**Materials:** Steatite**Measurements:** h. 208 x w. 75 x d. 90 mm**Accession Number:** 204**Historic Period:** 16th century**Production Place:** Africa, Sierra Leone**Cultural Group:** Sherbro**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Some of the finest African carvings in stone and ivory come from the area inhabited by the ancestors of the present-day Sherbro of Sierra Leone. Their work in ivory was praised by early Portuguese travellers; indeed, many of the 'Afro-Portuguese' ivories (Fagg, 1959), such as salt-cellars, spoons, forks and oliphants, were made by Sherbro artists. These can be dated to between AD 1462, when the Portuguese reached Sierra Leone, and some hundred years later, when invaders from the south-east broke up the old Sapi confederacy of the Sherbro and the Temne, who had occupied the greater part of southern Sierra Leone (see Ajayi and Crowder, 1971 : chapter 4). Taking into account the differences in material, the stone carvings (*nomoli*) dug up over most of southern Sierra Leone are often sufficiently similar in style to certain Afro-Portuguese ivories to allow them to be attributed to the Sherbro.

About two thirds of *nomoli* are carved in steatite (soapstone, a form of talc); the rest are in other stones, even hard ones. Steatite is no harder than ivory or hardwood (Moh's hardness 1), but it chips easily as the blade changes direction, and carving it requires skill. Steatite has been used in Sierra Leone, Esie in Nigeria, around the mouth of the Zaire and in parts of Kenya.

Nomoli generally represent human figures, mostly male, and are dug up on riverbanks, in fields or on the sites of former villages. Most have forward thrust heads, prominent eyes and broad noses with flaring nostrils. The main axes are horizontal, unlike the steatite *pomdo* figures of the neighbouring Kissi of eastern Sierra Leone, which are rather more like pole figures, with a vertical axis.

Tagliaferri and Hammacher (1974: 15-28) divide *nomoli* into four groups, beginning with those akin to the large heads (see no. 76, UEA 205) and finishing with the more crudely made and numerous *nomoli* which exist by the thousand. This example belongs to their third group, which they date hypothetically to the 16th and 17th centuries, perhaps when the Sherbro had begun to use an alternative material to ivory, which was then in short supply after the indiscriminate slaughter of elephant herds.

This figure is one of the finest of all known *nomoli*. The balance of form and precision of carving combine with a relatively unexaggerated '*nomoli* face' to make what could well be a portrait by a master carver. The cross-legged pose, with 'plasticine' treatment of the legs, recalls the famous recumbent *nomoli* in the British Museum (see Fagg, 1965: 5-6). though this is not to suggest that both pieces are the same hand, or even from the same workshop. The bent arms are supported at the elbows by what are probably heavy cast metal (perhaps gold) armlets with integral ball rattles, comparable to the massive anklets worn among the Kru of Liberia. The British Museum *nomoli* has a similar armlet on the left arm. This figure, probably male, is sitting on a stool six bent legs and is holding to its chin an unidentifiable curved object. A faint ridge from the V of the hairline down the forehead to the nose represents scarification. The stone is unusually dark in colour, and close examination, especially of the base, suggests that it was originally grey (the normal colour for steatite) and that it has been artificially patinated, probably with a mixture of and oil, though apparently it was already black when brought to Europe in the 1940s.

The original purpose of *nomoli* is not known, but they possibly represented clan or ancestors and were used in divination or propitiatory rituals. However, since the recent Sherbro were quite unaware of their origin, and they were often dug up when preparing ground for agriculture, they often became used as 'rice gods'. Accounts of this use vary: they might be hidden in a corner of the field; or they might receive offerings of rice flour or ritual flagellations to make them cause a good harvest.

Margret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 100-102.

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Berkeley Galleries in 1945.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
