



Votive figure

Not on display

Title/Description: Votive figure

Born: 2700 c. BC

Measurements: h. 311 x w. 140 x d. 95 mm

Accession Number: 330

Historic Period: Early Dynastic II (c. 2700 BC), 3rd millennium BC

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

In 1934 a hoard of statues was found in the Square Temple at Tell Asmar, ancient Eshnunna, in the Diyala region of Iraq. Mary Chubb described the discovery:

'Seton [Lloyd] and Hans [Frankfort] were alone in the Abu Temple when I reached it. They were crouching in front of the niche beside the altar, and a fresh pile of rubble lay round them on the clean floor. The niche was so narrow that they completely blocked it.... Down in the floor of the niche was a long, oblong cavity - and in it I could see a gleaming, tightly packed mass of white and cream and grey and yellow stone statues; here a strange eye stared up, there a hand, long fingers curled round a cup, seemed to tremble with life.... Most were over a foot in length. Many of them were broken, though all the pieces were in place;... it looked as though they had been complete when buried, but that the weight of the numerous re-buildings of the Temple above must have cracked and crushed them. More statues came up, men and women, the men in fringed and tasselled kilts, the women with long cloaks thrown over one shoulder, leaving the other bare. All had their hands clasped before them, some holding cups. "They are worshippers, of course", Hans said.'

These statues form a homogeneous group belonging to the Early Dynastic II period and were probably buried when the temple in which they had originally been dedicated was rebuilt. Other, similar figures have been found in Nintu Temple V and Sin Temple VIII at Khafajeh, also in the Diyala (see Braun-Holzinger, 1977: pls. 1-5, 8). The type was thought to be restricted to this area, but later discoveries at Nippur in southern Mesopotamia, and at Tell Chuera in northern Syria, have shown that it was widespread (Braun-Holzinger, 1977: pls. 4f 8c-d).

The present figure, said by the vendor to have been found at Umma (now Jokha) in Iraq, belongs to this well-known type and therefore probably also represents a male worshipper who stands with hands clasped, and who was dedicated in a temple. It has the same long hair and beard, the same wedge-shaped torso, angular arms, belt and tasselled skirt as these statues, most of which also have a dorsal pillar, as here. The unusual features are the way the ends of the belt are tucked in on either side under the arms (cf. Frankfort, 1939: no. 7), and hang down in long tassels over the kilt at the back, thus producing a panelled effect. There is also a broad panel in front, with longer tassels.

The sculpture is relatively undamaged, except the arms, which have been repaired by a former owner. The figure is made of limestone with eyes inlaid with bone or possibly shell. The irises, which may have been made of lapis lazuli, are lost, though fragments of this material survive set into the eyebrows. The chevron patterning of the beard and of the heavy masses of hair which fall forward

over each shoulder is particularly close to two of the Tell Asmar figures (Frankfort, 1939: nos. 7, 9).

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

What is it that makes these votive works so gripping? Their symmetry, their stare, what they are doing or not doing?

From the available evidence it seems that these small statues were body-surrogates to be presented in the place of the worshipper in the shrine of a god (whether this was Anu, God of the firmament; Enlil, God of the air; or Enki, God of the waters). They carry the sense of rapt absorption that envelops one when in the presence of numinous power: a materialisation of the feeling of being in the presence of the unexplainable, the ineffable, the unknowable.

You might say this is the wide-eyed look of someone dumbfounded; someone made mute and tremulous in the face of power. This is what art can do with us, but in a postmodern age we are not supposed to fall prey to awe. A contemporary reading might be that this is the viewer struck dumb by spectacle. This is an idol that conveys the power of idolatry redolent of what can happen when Moses' third commandment, 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image', is disobeyed.

I love its fearful but rough-hewn symmetry. More of these votives were made than any other form of Mesopotamian sculpture. There is a crudeness that comes from repetition, but also a clarity that comes from a form that has been essentialised. Its eyes were originally inlaid with lapis lazuli, but without it they still stare. The fingers may be ciphers, but they still hold. And what do they hold? An empty vessel or the offering of blood, sweat and tears?

There is a vulnerability as well as strength in the work. There is power but also supplication, but perhaps even more, of the very nature of sculpture. The stillness of someone who waits is also the stillness of a sculpture that waits for you, to project your feelings, thoughts and empathy on to its silence. This was made as a surrogate for the presence of the man who could not, like it, wait forever.

Henry Moore made an early work, *Girl with Clasped Hands* (1930), that was inspired by this example. It speaks of the power of objects, of the power of he who can wield objects. Alberto Giacometti made a sculpture of a being holding something: *Hands Holding the Void (Invisible Object)* (1934). Gabriel Orozco made a photo of himself holding a small, red, fired terracotta lump moulded in the space between his hands: *My Hands Are My Heart* (1991). All these pieces hark back to the mystery of what this worshipper is holding and what he is seeing that cannot be pictured: it is his life that he holds in his hands and that he offers to the unseeable.

—

Antony Gormley, artist

Provenance

Purchased in Baghdad, and acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1953. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
