



Small marble female figurine with folded arms

Not on display

Title/Description: Small marble female figurine with folded arms

Born: 2700 c. BC - 2400 c. BC

Object Type: Figure, Sculpture

Materials: Marble

Measurements: h. 216 x w. 62 x d. 33 mm

Accession Number: 340

Historic Period: Early Bronze Age (c. 3000-2700 BC), 3rd millennium BC

Production Place: Cyclades, Greece

Cultural Group: Keros-Syros

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This small sculpture is typical of a group of such figures usually referred to as 'folded-arm figurines', based on their shared characteristic of one arm (the left) folded above the other. They originate in the Cyclades in Greece, and were made in the third millennium BCE. Apart from the folded arms, their common features also include the use of marble, a head thrown backward, toes that point downward (so that they cannot stand), and the use of paint to show features not shown on the stone itself.

Such sculptures can range in size from the very small (less than 100 mm height) to the very large (more than 1000 mm height). This one, at 216 mm, is of a very standard size. It is carved from a single piece of marble, which studies have suggested would usually (but not invariably) have come from the island of Naxos [1]. Naxos is also the Cycladic island where emery originates. Emery is an extremely hard stone ideally suited to working marble. It is possible that some details may have been added using obsidian (a sharp volcanic glass originating on Melos or occasionally found imported from further afield) or even metal tools, but experimental work has shown that emery alone can suffice to produce such figurines [2].

The figure is depicted with a sinuous profile when viewed from the front. Shoulders, waist, pelvis and legs have a rounded form at the sides. The legs are separated by a sawn groove, which is present on both sides. The head the nose (which is slightly damaged) is shown in relief, but there are no other facial features. The top and bottom of the neck are indicated by slight grooves, and deeper grooves are used to delineate the arms. The hands have no indications of fingers (nor do the feet indicate toes). At the rear the back has a spine, again shown by incision, and at the top of the head is a flat area, the 'cranial plane', common on such figurines, and perhaps an indication of hairstyle.

At the top of the legs there is a 'pubic triangle' formed by three incisions. This is usually taken as an indication of pubic hair, though in this case it extends all the way across the body. This is a very interesting example, as there appear to be traces of dark-coloured or black paint here, particularly notable in the upper groove. If these really are traces of paint, which could in future be tested by elemental analysis, then this little figure gives us an unusual insight into how colour might have been used on such figurines. Other possible traces of dark colouring are seen as a faint band across the forehead, on the cranial plane, on the rear of the head, and on the right side of the head. Taken together, although very faintly preserved, these seem convincing traces of the representation of hair.

There are other traces of pigment, this time more secure. Both the upper and the lower neck groove have traces of reddish-brown pigment, perhaps cinnabar (which could again be confirmed by elemental analysis). This colour is also seen just below the nose. Cinnabar is a bright red pigment based on Mercury for which no convincing source has yet been found in the Cyclades: rather, the main pigments in use at the time are thought mainly to have been imports from distant sources, perhaps sometimes associated with metal prospection [3].

Michael Boyd, March 2022

[1] Dimitris Tambakopoulos & Yannis Maniatis, 'The marble of the Cyclades and its use in the Early Bronze Age', in *Early Cycladic Sculpture in Context*, eds. M. Marthari, C. Renfrew & M.J. Boyd (Oxbow Books, 2017), 468-82.

[2] Yiannis Papadatos & Epaminondas Venieris, 'An experimental approach to the manufacture of Cycladic-type figurines with folded arms: preliminary observations', in *Early Cycladic Sculpture in Context*, eds. M. Marthari, C. Renfrew & M.J. Boyd (Oxbow Books, 2017), 483-90.

[3] Tristan Carter, 'Cinnabar and the Cyclades: Body Modification and Political Structure in the Late EB I Southern Aegean', in *The Aegean in the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age*, eds. H. Erkanal, H. Hauptmann, V. Şahoğlu & R. Tuncel (Ankara University Press, 2008), 119-124.

Further Reading

C. Broodbank, *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

M. Marthari, C. Renfrew & M.J. Boyd, *Early Cycladic Sculpture in Context* (Oxbow Books, 2017).

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1969. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
