



Female figurine with folded arms

Not on display

Title/Description: Female figurine with folded arms

Born: 2700 c. BC - 2400 c. BC

Measurements: h. 159 x w. 50 x d. 30 mm

Accession Number: 344

Historic Period: Early Cycladic II (2700-2400 BC), 3rd millennium BC

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This is a small figurine neatly executed in very fine marble. On its left side there is some damage from weathering, probably as a result of differential exposure during the conditions of its burial over the past four and a half millennia. This damage has also resulted in the loss of the left foot. Otherwise, the surface condition is very fine, with details created through modelling and through incision.

The figure belongs to a group called 'folded-arm figurines', named after the characteristic position of the arms, usually (as in this case) the left folded above the right. The stiff pose and the expressionless face (only the nose is indicated, although eyes, hair and other features might have originally been indicated by the use of paint) combine with the stereotypical rendering to create an impression of an icon or symbol rather than an individual person – though the use of paint may have been the means by which individual features were indicated.

These aspects have led to much speculation as to the 'meaning' of such figures. Do they represent an ideal, a divinity or a spirit, or something else entirely? Almost all such figures are female, with sexual characteristics indicated in most cases, which has led some scholars to speculate about an association with fertility. In this regard this particular figurine is of some interest, as it is one of the minority that appears to depict a stage of pregnancy. In many Cycladic figures the belly is almost flat, but in this case it is clearly swollen. However, even if this were to indicate a link to fertility, pregnancy is rarely depicted on such figures.

Rather than trying to intuit 'meaning' from the innate characteristics of the object (in this case, the representation of pregnancy), archaeologists prefer to understand the complete material world in which past peoples lived. This is why unprovenanced objects such as this, not recovered during systematic archaeological research and so lacking a material context, become less useful than they might have been in approaching a holistic understanding of the Early Bronze Age Cyclades.

Michael Boyd, April 2022

Further Reading

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

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

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1961. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
