



Small 'precanonical' female figurine

Not on display

Title/Description: Small 'precanonical' female figurine

Born: 3200 c. BC - 2800 c. BC

Measurements: h. 94 x w. 38 x d. 70 mm

Accession Number: 347

Historic Period: Early Cycladic I (c. 3200-2800 BC), 4th Millennium BC, 3rd millennium BC

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This is a very small marble figurine made in the Cyclades (in the Aegean) some time after 3000 BCE. While most of the figurines in the collection are of a very standardised form (the 'folded-arm type'), this example is by convention called 'precanonical', meaning that it was made before it became common to follow certain rules (or 'canons') in making such sculptures. Although this object is very small, it is full of interest.

Apart from its small size, it is much more rounded in form than the flatter figurines that came later. The arms are shown across the torso, a diagonal incision separating them. The head, although different in shape from later examples, is also shown looking upwards as is usually the case. The legs are very schematic, and the soles of the feet are almost flat, unlike many other examples where the feet point downward. The breasts are shown in relief, but the characteristic pubic triangle is absent.

The most interesting thing about this small figurine is the trace of painted decoration on the head. Painted decoration sometimes survives as traces of pigment on the surface of the figurine. In other cases, like this one, it survives as paint 'ghosts': the paint protected the surface of the figurine under the painted part for a period of time from the weathering affecting the rest of the surface, meaning that the painted parts are slightly less weathered than the rest of the surface [1]. These less weathered parts trace the outlines of, in this particular case, eyes, eyebrows and hair.

It is difficult to see these traces in direct light, but if you look closely you should be able to pick out some of them. The left eyebrow is the most prominent feature, while the right eye is large, oval and clearer than the left. The hairline is clear above the eyes. The right ear may be indicated but this is very unclear, and there may even be a trace on the nose, which is the only feature of the face which is modelled rather than painted. Although most traces of paint on Cycladic figurines have disappeared over the years, it does seem likely that many of them were originally painted, meaning that what seems to us to be their somewhat austere appearance is more than a little misleading [2].

Michael Boyd, April 2022

[1] Elizabeth A. Hendrix, 'Painted Early Cycladic Figures. An Exploration of Context and Meaning'. *Hesperia* 72 (2003), 405-46.

[2] Kiki Birtacha, 'Examining the paint on Cycladic figurines', in *Early Cycladic Sculpture in Context*, eds. M. Marthari, C. Renfrew and M.J. Boyd (Oxbow, 2017), 491-502.

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.

