



Seated figure

On display**Title/Description:** Seated figure**Object Type:** Figure**Materials:** Basalt, Pigment**Measurements:** h. 518 x w. 250 x d. 143 mm**Accession Number:** 692**Historic Period:** Formative (early) period (1200-900 BC)**Production Place:** Mesoamerica, Mexico, The Americas, Veracruz**School/Style:** Olmec style**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1977

Three-dimensional stone sculpture was particularly well-developed in the Olmec period, from small-scale works such as jade figurines (nos. 9-12) to the remarkable colossal heads from sites such as San Lorenzo and La Venta. This seated figure with its legs drawn up illustrates some of the characteristics of Olmec sculptural style: rounded forms, emphasis on the head and limited attention to the details of hands and feet. Most of the surface irregularities are due to the nature of the volcanic stone from which the piece was carved, although some holes were drilled to indicate facial features.

The sharply down-turned mouth and diagonally-set eyes are also characteristic of certain categories of Olmec sculpture. This type of imagery has been the topic of considerable debate in the art-historical and archaeological literature, and various theories have been proposed on the significance of these features. Michael Coe (1965,1989), David Joralemon (1971,1976), and others have suggested that this imagery represents a were-jaguar, and may be linked with the rain deity in the Olmec pantheon, with possible connections to later gods worshipped in the Aztec period. However, this interpretation has been challenged (Pohorilenko, 1977; Marcus, 1989), and other suggestions have been put forward identifying toad, crocodilian and other features in Olmec iconography (for example Furst, 1981; Stocker etui., 1980).

Stylistically this figure is related to Monument 52 from San Lorenzo, which was found near the main drain line of the complex drainage system at the site (Coe and Diehl, 1980:127, 361-3). Monument 52 is nearly twice the size and has a hollowed back, unlike the present piece which is flat, but they share overall formal characteristics such as the posture and proportions of the figure and the detailing of the face. This figure was reported by the vendor to have come from Tenenexpan, Veracruz.

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

Provenance

According to the vendor, John A. Stokes Jnr., it came from Tenenexpan, Veracruz.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from John A. Stokes Jnr., New York, in 1977 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
