



Seated figure with splayed legs

On display**Title/Description:** Seated figure with splayed legs**Object Type:** Figure**Materials:** Pigment, Terracotta**Measurements:** h. 355 x w. 270 x d. 220 mm**Accession Number:** 697**Historic Period:** Formative (early) period (1200-900 BC)**Production Place:** Mesoamerica, Mexico, Puebla, The Americas**Cultural Group:** Olmec style**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1978

Among the more enigmatic works found in both the Gulf Coast and Central Mexico are large hollow figures, often referred to as 'babies' because of their facial features and chubby bodies. Although some scholars have suggested that the elongated head shape may represent natural or intentional cranial deformation of infants, the shape may also be a result of formal or metaphorical choices by the makers.

This figure is seated in a splayed position with hands on legs. The open mouth with downturned corners is characteristic of Olmec work. There is no clear indication of the sex, but at one time these figures may have worn costumes or ornaments of perishable materials which may have suggested gender. The back of the head is incised with a linear 'paw/wing' motif (Joralemon, 1971: to), and several holes were pierced in the figure for venting during the firing process. Traces of red pigment are evident on the body, particularly on the hands and feet as well as around the neck. Red haematite or cinnabar was often used on ceramic and jade figures; it was also sprinkled over the bodies of the deceased élite. The significance of red pigment is unclear, but it may have been conceptually related to the use of blood to anoint objects, a practice known among the Postclassic (and presumably Classic) period Maya (Garza-Valdés, 1993:123; Kurbjuhn, 1993: 240).

The original contexts of figures of this type are unknown. Fragments have been found in household middens at San Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl, 1980: 259 ff.), while in Central Mexico similar figures have been found in burials at Gualupita, Tlatilco and Las Bocas (Vaillant and Vaillant, 1934: fig. 14, 2-3; Covarrubias, 1950: facing p. 153). This figure is complete but has been restored from numerous fragments by the vendor, who reported that it came from Las Bocas in the state of Puebla.

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 Stokes, it came from Las Bocas in the state of Puebla.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from John Stokes, New York in 1978 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
