



Seated figure

On display**Title/Description:** Seated figure**Object Type:** Figure**Materials:** Earthenware**Measurements:** h. 349 x w. 150 x d. 205 mm**Accession Number:** 774**Historic Period:** 300 BC-AD 400**Production Place:** Ecuador, South America, The Americas**Cultural Group:** La Tolita-Tumaco culture**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1980

The province of Esmeraldas, on the far north coast of Ecuador, is famous for its clay figurines and for the wealth of tiny gold and platinum ornaments from La Tolita and from other destroyed or looted sites (Meggers, 1966:102-7). Identical material is found across the frontier, in Colombia, where it is assigned to the Tumaco culture or 'Tumaco style' (Bray, 1978: 61-2). The figurines have been studied by several authors (d'Harcourt, 1942; Raddatz, 1975; Sánchez Montañés, 1981), but most of the old collections lacked archaeological documentation, so that the precise age and cultural affiliation of these items remained uncertain. Excavations in Colombia (Bouchard, 1984:139-43) and at La Tolita (Bouchard, 1989; Valdez, 1987 and 1992) indicate that the typical 'Tolita' figures were made during the centuries between 300 bc and ad 400.

The present piece is made of the characteristic grey sandy clay, and has a mould-made face attached to a hollow, hand-made body. Vent holes in the feet, at the base of the head, and inside the upper arms and thighs allowed steam to escape, and prevented explosion during firing. The figure has an artificially flattened skull (produced by binding in childhood), and the nose, ears and nipples are pierced, perhaps for the insertion of wire jewellery. Most of these figures were originally painted in fugitive, post-fired colours.

All kinds of subjects are depicted in Tolita art; animals and birds, figures wearing elaborate costumes, mythical creatures, and ordinary people playing musical instruments, paddling canoes or making love. Men and women are represented in roughly equal proportions, but always as stereotypes, with no attempt at portraiture or individualisation. Figurines, usually broken and discarded, have been found by the hundreds in household rubbish, which suggests that they were not made exclusively as burial offerings or for temple use. In the absence of documentary evidence, their precise function remains unclear.

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

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

This charming figure seated on a broad stool has an engaging, woeful attitude, hand to head as if in pain or misery. Now monochrome, the figure would have been decorated, like many of the ancient objects in the collection, with coloured pigments and might have been adorned with jewellery, hung through the holes in the ears and nose.

His original purpose is unknown, but a great number of figures of this type are found in the Andes on both sides of the Ecuador-Columbia frontier. Male and female figures, whole or broken and discarded, have been excavated, including animals and birds, mythical creatures and ordinary people. Described as Capulí figures, they are handmade and hollow. Holes in the arms and legs are still visible: these would have acted as vents, preventing an explosion during firing. The features of his face are simply delineated, and the elongated form of his head indicates the purposefully flattened skull achieved by binding in childhood.

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Amanda Geitner, Director, East Anglia Art Fund

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from John Stokes, New York, on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1980 out of income from the Sainsbury Purchasing Fund.
