



Upper part of a figurine

On display

Title/Description: Upper part of a figurine

Born: 1000 BC - 0400 BC

Object Type: Figure, Fragment

Materials: Earthenware

Measurements: h. 195 x w. 155 x d. 65 mm

Accession Number: 975

Historic Period: Jomon period (Final) (c. 1000-400 BC)

Production Place: Asia, East Asia, Japan

This hollow figure is a large example of the Kamegaoka (or Obora) type, named after the site in Aomori Prefecture, Tohoku region, northern Honshu, where a number of figures of this kind have been found, though few complete. The bulbous 'goggle-eyes' are the most striking feature of this type, and have occasioned much speculation since archaeologists discovered these figures in the nine-teenth century. Shogoro Tsuboi (1863-1913) proposed that they represented snow goggles of the kind worn by prehistoric and historic Eskimo and Inuit people (Kidder, 1965: 48; see also this catalogue, vol. 11, no. 190). This view is frequently repeated in the literature, although the assumption that this feature is a naturalistic representation seems to be at odds with the style of Jomon figures, and have no more validity than a suggestion that the Marquesas Islanders wore 'spectacles', which we know they did not (see this catalogue, vol. it, no. 16). The enlarged eyes are more likely to be a symbolic device to emphasise sight and the importance of the gaze.

The elaborate patterning on the body, with zones of jomon (cord-impressed) designs, is symmetrical on the front, but not on the back. It is not possible to say if this represents costume or tattoo, or has some other significance. The hands are diminutive and similar in form to the quatrefoil 'crown' on top of the head. The surface is burnished or polished, giving a dark sheen, and traces of pigment (haematite or cinnabar) remain, suggesting that at one time the figure may have been painted red. Comparison with object 974 and with published examples (e.g. Kidder, 1965: 57, fig. 34; Egami, 1973:16,159; Pearson, 1992: 115) suggests that when complete it would have been about 26-28 cm high with wide hips and short, circular-section legs tapering to small feet. It has been reassembled from several large fragments and measures c. 4 mm in thickness at the break around the waist.

Harada Masayuki (in Pearson, 1992: ns) states that most of these figures date to the first half of the Final Jomon period. The example he illustrates is missing the left leg, although, curiously, when the same piece was illustrated in an earlier work by Kidder (1965: 179), it was complete. The present example was reported by the vendor to have been excavated at Kamegaoka.

Yutaka Mino, 1997

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper

(Yale University Press, 1997).
