

## STEATOPYGOUS FEMALE "IDOL"

Cycladic, Aegean, Late Neolithic, circa 5000-4000 B.C.

Marble

H: 12.7 cm

Reference: 19364



This statuette is carved from a beautiful gray marble. Contrary to other stone Neolithic figurines, this example is well balanced and can even stand on its own: suggesting that this "idol" was probably sculpted for the express purpose of being positioned and seen vertically. It is an excellent and carefully executed example of a rare but recurring type in Aegean Neolithic marble art; the standing female with arms symmetrically opposed. These types of "idols" with over-exaggerated female forms are usually referred to as steatopygic (Greek, literally of large buttocks).

The structure of the figurine is a surprising study in contrasts: the generous contours and the relatively large dimensions of the legs are balanced by the upper part of the body, which, despite a certain amount of stylization, is modeled more naturally and in a less exaggerated manner. The impression of abundance given off by this sculpture is expressed not only by its volumes but also by the groupings of rounded lines that characterize the silhouette and the anatomical details (oval face, shape of the biceps, stomach, line above the thighs, buttocks, etc.).

The cylindrical neck supports an oval face with a soft, but still pointed, chin. The rectilinear nose is plastically indicated, while the mouth (a slight groove under the nose) and the horizontal eyes are incised. The ears are simply indicated by a line that follows the curve of the jaw. Above the face, a rectangular protection might be interpreted as a headdress, a small polos of sorts. The shoulders and the folded arms form a large, slightly raised rectangle with rounded edges, precursors to the design of the crossed arms on the Cycladic figurines of the Bronze Age. At the ends of the arms, a flat area marks the placement of

the hands, which are clearly separated from one another; two very schematic horizontal incisions mark the presence of fingers. The chest is covered by the bulging arm muscles – especially the biceps; the back of the torso is flat, but an incised line outlines the precise contours of the arms

Below the waist, the female silhouette abruptly thickens to form many folds of fat around the abdomen, the buttocks and the tops of the knees. The public area is delicately outlined by two triangular incisions and bordered by the prominent, rounded stomach; the navel is not shown. The structure of the legs differentiates between the buttocks and the thighs with a horizontal incision that also indicates the placement of the knees. The line separating the left and right legs starts at the top of the public area and continues to the buttocks; at the tops of the knees, this line transforms into a deep groove that separated the figure's calves and ankles. The feet are simply two flat stumps, without any indication of toes.

Although stylistically completely Neolithic in its design, this figurine exhibits a certain formal evolution compared to other statuettes from the same period: the many details of the face, the small polos and the well-modeled torso – even though it still retains the basic shape of an elongated rectangle- are elements that allow us to base the dating of this example to the final phase of the Neolithic Period, probably around the 5<sup>th</sup> Millennium. Seen straight on or from the back, the silhouette already seems to resemble the so-called Plastiras statuettes, a precursor to the famous Cycladic figurines with crossed arms from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium.

These types of statuettes, in both terracotta and stone, have been found in all the principal regions of the Greek world, both continental Greece and the islands (Macedonia, Thessaly, the Peloponnese, Attica, the Cyclades, and Crete). Stylistically, the more elaborate treatment of the head (anatomical details, polos) may hint at a more specific place of origin for this "idol": it is particularly in Thessaly in central Greece, that such details are a typical feature of Neolithic sculpture.

Anthropomorphic figurines are among the best known and most appreciated creations of Neolithic Greece: they were most often made in terracotta, while the stone (marble) or shell examples were much rarer and probably came a bit later. Their size ranges between 10 and 15 cm, although they can sometimes reach very large dimensions. Although statuettes of men and animals exist, the female figurines are clearly the most well-known. They can have widely varied poses (standing, seated on the ground, on a chair, holding an infant in their arms), but they are largely dominated by two positions: standing or seated with the arms crossed. The representations reflect two artistic tendencies that coexisted throughout the Neolithic: a more naturalistic style (cf. this statuette) and a more schematic one with cursory limbs and without anatomical details (cf. for example the figurines shaped like violins).

Their significance is a subject that is still debated today; archaeologically, the Neolithic figurines come almost exclusively from inhabited sites and not from cemeteries: therefore, one can exclude a funerary use. The places where they have been found are most often related to the production of different types of objects ("workshops" of jewelers, potters, toolmakers, weavers) or to the preservation and preparation of foodstuffs (storage lofts, ovens). Based on these clues, the tendency today is to place these figurines in relation to ritual and magic (e.g. protection for the food) or to the transmission of scientific knowledge and skill from one workshop to another. It is also possible that these statuettes and models were meant as toys for infants, serving an educational purpose but possibly also one of initiation.

One of the most popular theories suggests a religious significance: they are thought to represent the Great Mother Goddess, who, during the Prehistoric Period, was a pivotal mythological figure. She was the protector of human fertility and the fecundity of the herds and fields; this figure was worshipped over a vast and widely varied geographic area, from the Near East to Central and Western Europe. The exaggeration of the figurine's sexual characteristics and their voluptuousness of form are the best argument in favor of this hypothesis.

#### CONDITION

The figure is intact, except for minor losses to the front of the feet and the left forearm. Superficial bruises on the side of the left thigh and calf and some weathering of the face are visible on the otherwise excellently preserved piece. Some rust-colored deposits and stains are present here and there on the front and also on the back of the head, whereas the rear is almost completely covered with a thin coating of

earthy material, except for small areas on the back of the head and buttocks. There is also clear demarcation on both sides of the piece where this coating begins. This suggests that the figure was buried lying on its back in a seasonally damp environment which encouraged the formation not only of the thin coating (which judicious washing might reduce or remove) but also of the much heavier concretions now present in places. The marble is mostly a lighter shade of gray on the front, a darker shade on the sides and presumably on the rear as well.

#### PROVENANCE

Ex- American private collection, New York, acquired on 3 May 1995

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