

## THESSALIAN "IDOL"

Thessalian, 6th millennium B.C.

Terracotta

Height: 15.2 cm (6 in)

Reference: 35053



Figurines of sitting, standing or reclining females with overexaggerated, voluminous shapes (especially of buttocks, breasts, and bellies) are characteristic for the Neolithic culture and found in many areas of the Near East, the greater Mediterranean area, and also in Eastern, Central and Western Europe. They vary greatly in style (with a more naturalistic or schematic approach in modeling the body, head and facial features) and material: commonly executed in baked clay, they can also be of white or grey marble, semi-translucent alabaster, or colored stones.

Both the sophistication and distinctive level of abstraction define this idol as exceptional. Its relatively large size, skillfully designed composition, harmonious proportions, and beauty of its rounded shapes are all a testament to the quality of the craftsmanship. The entire composition is built as a contrast of the upper and lower parts. The upper part has rather schematic and flattened volumes (head/neck, shoulders/arms, torso) which are positioned symmetrically and almost similar in size. The arms with spread rectangular shoulders are bent at a right angle so that the forearms create an exact parallel. The forearms are narrowing to a point that may suggest the hands of the idol which otherwise are not shaped individually. The unique shape of the forearms/hands was probably necessary for the accentuation of a gesture which points to the breasts, clearly positioned and seen as two small semi-spherical knobs (this gesture is in a great contrast to the so-called gesture of modesty in later Greek and Roman figures of the nude Aphrodite). The tapering narrow torso echoes the combined shape of the neck/head. The manner of the ancient sculptor is based on the minimalistic approach for the anatomical detailing. The eyes were shaped by two oblique cuts to pre-baked clay. The prominently sculptured nose dominates the face. The hair, ears, and mouth are not indicated at all. Interestingly, the same modeling is found in both soft clay and hard marble figurines, so the lack of details as a characteristic was not due to the difficulties and limitations of

sculptor's tools and materials, but was a deliberate choice.

The lower part of the "idol" is distinguished by corpulent forms of hips, buttocks, and thighs with significantly diminished lower legs and omitted feet. Again, the shape unifies the parts and creates exaggerated and purely abstract forms, to which are not lacking a sense of sexual beauty (noticeable is the line separating the left and right legs which starts at the top of the pubic area and continues to the buttocks).

The "idol" has considerable tactile appeal and was apparently designed to be handled. One does not exclude the opportunity that such figures were manipulated in some way during certain public or private rituals and ceremonies. Similar statuettes, both of stone and clay, were discovered in shrines and houses.

It is generally assumed that the steatopygous form relates such figures to the fertility goddess, the Great Mother, whose cult was primary in the religion of the early human civilization.

She was considered as Mistress of life and death for human, animal, and vegetation.

### CONDITION

Excellent state of preservation; complete except for the damaged tip of the proper left leg; surface weathered and worn; a few cracks, chips and dents, small hole in the back of the proper right leg.

### PROVENANCE

Ex- H.J.B. private collection, Chicago; Ex- Prominent US private collection, New York, collection assembled 1970s- 1990s.

### EXHIBITED

- TEFAF New York, Fall 2017, Spring 2018
- FRIEZE MASTERS London 2017
- PAD London 2018

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

BAILEY D., *Prehistoric Figurines Representation and Corporality in the Neolithic*, London, New York, 2005.

BAILEY D. W., *The Figurines of Old Europe*, in ANTHONY D. W., ed., *The Lost World of Old Europe: The Danube Valley, 5000-3500 BC*, New York, Princeton, Oxford, 2010, pp. 113-127, p. 229, nos. 18.

COHEN C., *La femme des origins: image de la femme dans la préhistoire occidentale*, Paris, 2003.

GETZ-GENTILE P., *Personal Styles in Early Cycladic Sculpture*, Madison, 2001, pp. 1-6, p. 173, pl. 1, fi gs. a1-3.

GIMBUTAS M. et al., *Achilleion, A Neolithic Settlement in Thessaly, Greece*, Los Angeles, 1989.

LESURE R. G., *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, Cambridge, 2011. LIGABUE G., ROSSI-OSMIDA G., eds., *Dea Madre*, Milan, 2007.

MINA M., *Anthropomorphic Figurines from the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Aegean: Gender Dynamics and Implications of Early Aegean Prehistory*, Oxford, 2008.

PAPATHANASSOPOULOS G., ed., *Neolithic Culture in Greece*, Athens, 1996, p. 293, no. 188; p.

WEINBERS S. S., *Anthropomorphic Stone Figurines from Neolithic Greece*, in THIMME J., ed., *Art and Culture in the Cyclades in the Third Millennium B.C.*, Chicago, London, 1977, pp. 52-58, 208-218, 415-424, nos. 1-21.