



Female figure

On display

Title/Description: Female figure

Born: 1800 - 1900

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Walrus ivory

Measurements: h. 98 x w. 40 x d. 20 mm

Accession Number: 107

Historic Period: c. 19th century

Production Place: Greenland, North America, The Americas

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This distinctive T-shape hairstyle is characteristic of women from the coastal regions of Greenland, notably Ammassalik in the east; their long hair is tied up with a band so as to project above and behind the head (see Holm, 1888: pl. m). Numerous wooden and, more rarely, walrus ivory figures have been collected from Greenland, most of them recognisably female because of the hairstyle. Those from Ammassalik have the topknot directly above the head (Holm, 1888: pls. xxvii-xxviii; Thalbitzer, 1914: fig. 366) but an ivory figure from north-western Greenland, dated to the prehistoric period, has it placed further back (Fitzhugh, 1984: 534). The present figure may also come from that area.

The Greenlanders are the easternmost Inuit group, descendants of the Thule Inuit who moved eastwards from northern Alaska early in the second millennium AD. In this pale ivory sculpture the artist has achieved a beautiful rendering of female fecundity by the use of flowing, rounded forms. The three-quarter view shows that the arms are present, but are stylised into a curve on the abdomen.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 259.

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of Worsae, a Swedish explorer and navigator, who collected the object on his travels in the mid-nineteenth century.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1957.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
