



Small head of a female figurine

Not on display

Title/Description: Small head of a female figurine

Born: 2700 c. BC - 2400 c. BC

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Marble

Technique: Carving, Incising

Measurements: h. 48 x w. 30 x d. 22 mm

Accession Number: 354

Historic Period: Early Cycladic II (c. 2700-2400 BC), 3rd millennium BC

Production Place: Cyclades, Europe, Greece

Cultural Group: Keros-Syros culture

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This small head once belonged to a sculpture made on a Cycladic island in the middle of the third millennium BCE. The head is both largely featureless (only the nose is shown in relief) and highly stylised, being shaped in a way that is far from anatomical. Part of the neck has been preserved, which shows that the head is thrown back, perhaps looking upward. The head is broad, long and narrow, with a flat area at the top (the 'cranial plane') which flares out slightly, creating what has been called the 'lyre shape', named after the shape of an ancient musical instrument.

The head belonged to a figurine depicting a naked female with folded arms and toes pointing downward, so that the object could not stand on its own. Perhaps the representation is of someone reclining or sleeping, or alternatively in the act of jumping. These objects may have been intended to be carried, to be seen in the hands, though some were much larger than this example (which, when complete, would have been approximately 220mm in length).

Sometimes these rather austere-looking figures were painted, adding an additional layer of meaning beyond the sculptural. Here the forehead is slightly darker than the rest of the face, perhaps just a trace of preserved paint. The strange shape of the cranial plane can perhaps be taken to be an indicator of hairstyle, and in examples with preserved decoration this area and the back of the head can be painted black.

Michael Boyd, April 2022

Further Reading

Broodbank, C., *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Marthari, M., C. Renfrew & M.J. Boyd, *Early Cycladic Sculpture in Context* (Oxbow Books, 2017).

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1958. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
