



Figure of a boy

On display

Title/Description: Figure of a boy

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Bronze

Measurements: h. 140 x w. 60 x d. 30 mm

Accession Number: 921

Historic Period: c. 14th century

Production Place: Eastern Java, Indonesia, Pacific, Southeast Asia

This nude figure has flexed knees, hair combed back around elongated ears and a flower-shaped bun or clasp on the head. It is sexually ambiguous, with male genitals, prominent breasts and a bulging stomach as if pregnant. A small projection on the forehead may represent an *uma*. It is reported to have come from East Java, but stylistically it fits neither with the iconography and style of Indianised Indonesian art, nor with the ethnographic bronze art of the outer islands as represented by the 'woman weaving from Flores' (Bintarti, 1985: fig. 2). It also does not compare closely with the small figurines from Sumatra and elsewhere as illustrated by van Heekeren (1958: pl. 9), the standing figure of a man from Cibarusah, Java (Fontein, 1990: pl. 1), nor the small bronze *tau tau* of Central Sulawesi (Taylor and Aragon, 1991: fig. vi, 36).

Some small standing male figures have been published by Bernet Kempers (1959: pls. 292-3), and although these are more elaborately decorated with necklaces and armbands, probably representing gold originals, they do have some of the naive aspects of the present example. However, the proportions and treatment of the hair are quite different and they have natural-length arms. These images are thought by some to be 'portrait' statues of royal children or, as Bernet Kempers suggests (1959: 95), for the magical fulfilment of a woman's desire for a child. They are attributed, with little evidence, to the post-Majapahit period of Java, i.e. after the fifteenth century. However, the dating, areas of manufacture and true function of these images of nude boys are still matters of speculation and research.

Outside Java some remarkable parallels for this sculpture can be found among the eight standing Jain (Jina or 'Conqueror') Tirthankara figurines in the Chausa hoard from Bihar, India and now in the Patna Museum (Deshpande, 1988: 24-8). These are attributed to the late Kushan/early Gupta Mathura School and are dated to the second to third century. Despite this anachronism, several images in the Chausa hoard show more similarities with this piece than the pieces from East Java

illustrated by Bernet Kempers referred to above. They stand stiffly in the Kayotsarga posture, with unnaturally long arms at the sides, prominent breasts, and some have the urna. The Rishbhanatha figure especially (Deshpande, 1988: figs. 5-6), with its naturalistic long wavy hair arranged around a bun, recalls the treatment of the hair here.

Technically this figure is an accomplished piece of lost-wax casting. X-ray photography shows that it has an iron armature still in place inside a clay casting core. The metal is thin with a dense, olive to dark green patina; limited corrosion has led to the development of some dendritic (moss-like) etch marks on the exposed metal. The slight corrosion suggests a rather high tin content in the metal, although no composition analysis has been made. The hollow casting technique is equally compatible with a Javanese or a northern Indian origin for this piece.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).
