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A Large Cycladic Female Figure

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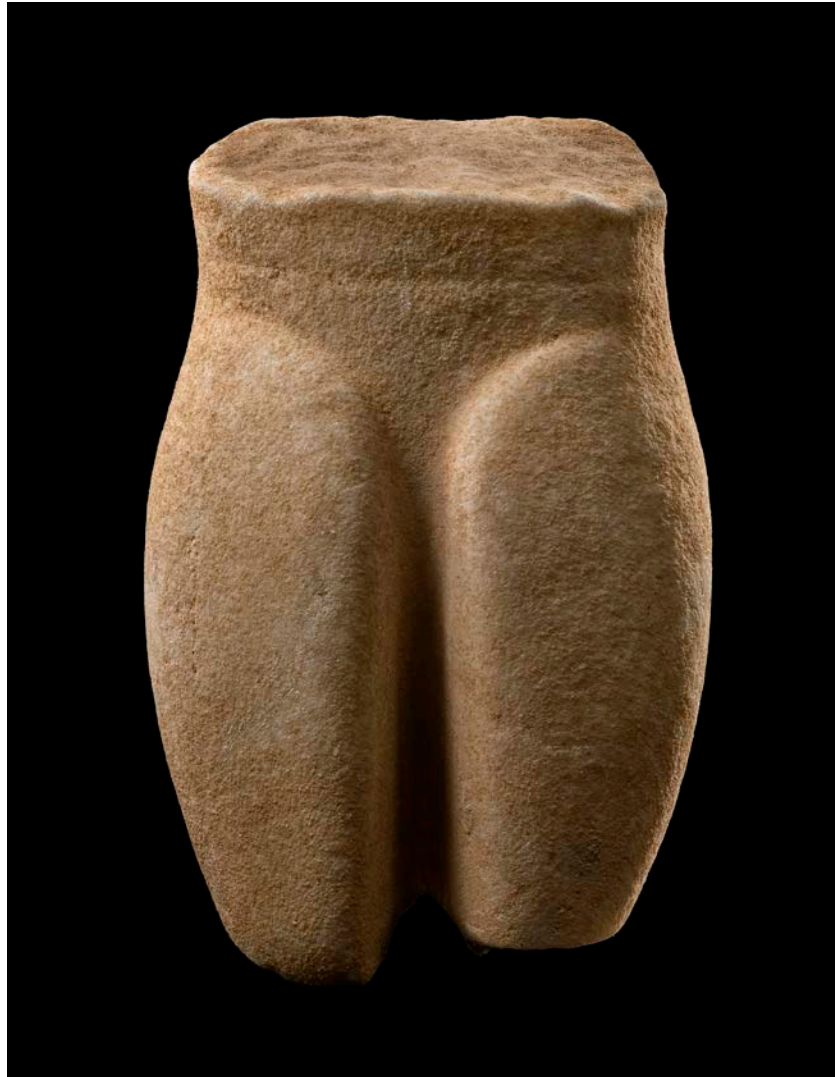
Greek, Cycladic, Early Spedos Variety
Early Cycladic II, ca. 2600-2500 B.C.

Large Female Figure

Marble
h: 21 cm; 8 ½ in.

Provenance

Formerly from a New England Private Collection.
Antiquities, Sotheby's, New York, 23 June 1989, lot 115.
Accompanied by Art Loss Register Certificate #S00241024



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The present Cycladic marble preserves the thighs and lower torso of what was originally a full figure of considerable size, some four times the height of what now remains. The tops of the thighs are curved, creating a sunken pubic area that merges with the top of the broad leg cleft, with a lightly incised horizontal line low on the abdomen. The backs of the thighs jut forward at a sharp angle from the bottom of the torso, indicating that the figure's knees were bent and projected forwards from the torso, as is typical of those of the Early Spedos variety.

Cycladic figures come from a prehistoric culture that flourished in the Greek islands in the middle of the Aegean Sea from around 5,300 to 2,000 B.C. Various purposes for these figures, which were most commonly female, have been supposed since their discovery by archaeologists nearly 200 years ago: from representations of a fertility goddess, to apotropaic figurines, children's toys, or representations of slaves or attendants who were meant to accompany their owners into the afterlife. More recently, however, archaeologists have complicated these understandings by focusing on the variety of representations among these figures (as there are male figures, figural groups, representations of musicians, and more) as well as the fact that some figures show signs of erosion, repair, and repainting, implying that they were owned or used for much longer than a simple burial deposit implies.

Controlled excavations of Early Cycladic cemeteries have shown that the marble figures belonged to a very small percentage of the population, some of whom possessed several examples, while the majority had none. The figures' ownership, and the fact that some were repaired several times, suggests that the few individuals who owned them kept them complete and repainted them during their lifetime and then, in some instances, were buried with them. Some graves also contained small jars and bowls with pigments that could have been used to paint or tattoo humans both in life and in the afterlife. It was common practice to dismember the marble figures methodically at the ankles, knees, waist or chest, and neck, perhaps to ensure that their light or essence was dispersed and could not re-enter them. Such a "killing" of the figure may have coincided with their owner's disincarnation, as often only fragments of the figure are entombed. But this was also the practice in the sanctuary at Kavos in Keros, so there may have been more complex reasons to render these figures powerless when they were deposited there, perhaps at the conclusion of a specific rite or festival.

References

For other similar examples, see pl. 28 in P. Getz-Gentle, *Personal Styles in Early Cycladic Sculpture* and no. 99 in C. Doumos, *Cycladic Art, Ancient Sculpture and Ceramics of the Aegean from the N.P. Goulandris Collection*.

For further reading on the purpose of Cycladic figures, see Hendrix, Elizabeth A. "Painted Early Cycladic figures: An exploration of context and meaning," *Hesperia* 72, 2003, pp. 405–46.

On ritual practice, see Renfrew C., O. Philaniotou, N. Brodie, G. Gavalas & M.J. Boyd (eds.) *The Sanctuary on Keros and the Origins of Aegean Ritual Practice: The Excavations of 2006–2008, vol.II: Kavos and the Special Deposits*. (McDonald Institute monographs) Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2015.

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