

The 'Gillet' Piravend

1st Millennium B.C.

22.8 x 14.3 cm (9 x 5 $^{5}/_{8}$ inches)

Bronze

This impressive bronze idol is one of the largest-known in the world of its kind. It comes from the excavations at Piravend in ancient Luristan in northwestern Iran, some 10 km north of Taq-e Bustan, which was extensively explored during the 1930s-1950s. It belongs to a group of artefacts known as the Luristan bronzes that consists of ornaments, tools, weapons and horse fittings cast from an alloy of copper and tin during the Early Iron Age (sometime between 1000-650 B.C.). Little is known of the people of Luristan – with no form of writing, their material culture and burial sites are all the evidence that remains of them. The bronzes first became widely known in the 1930s after a series of archaeological excavations in the northern Pish Kuh and southern Pusht Kuh valleys in Iran. They are known for their distinctive blue-green patina, like that of the present lot, which over time has developed a rich, luscious colour. The bronzes are normally flat and open work – much inspired by Scythian art. They have also been discovered as far away as Crete, suggesting that the people of Luristan had strong trade networks. Along with animal motifs, human depictions are particularly common. This figure stands on small, squat legs, mounted on a square base, and she has moulded genitals and angled hips. Her large flat chest has two small bronze attachments for nipples, her arms are outstretched bent 90 degrees at each elbow, and her fingers splayed. Around the figure's neck is a collar decorated with vertical incisions. The figure's head is elongated, rising through a prominent pinched chin, to a cone-shaped crown with moulded lips and punctured eyes. In each ear are two suspended rings, each containing a series of beads. Such figures are thought to represent important or sacred members of the nomadic community, while the accentuated genitals, hips and breasts suggest the process of child birthing and rearing. The arms, raised in supplication to the sky, further this idea that these idols operated in an other-worldly realm. The attachment loop on the idol's reverse suggests it was intended to be portable, and possibly fixed to a larger totemic object. Many Luristan bronzes can be found in important collections around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Louvre in Paris. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art contains a remarkably similar idol excavated from the same region, and of similar dimensions. Unlike ours, the Los Angeles example is tall and thin, with rounded facial features and less-accentuated hips. They both however, share the same pose with outstretched arms, suggesting this was a known type of votive that filled a specific cultural role. They also both have the same style looped earrings, highlighting the importance jewellery must have played to the alluring women of ancient Luristan.

Exhibitions

Trésors de L'ancien Iran, Musée Rath, Geneva, 8 June-25 September 1966.

Literature:

Trésors de L'ancien Iran, Musée Rath, Geneva, 8 June-25 September 1966, p.70, no. 124, pl. 26.

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