

Torso of an Idol

Greek, possibly by the Copenhagen Master

2500-2000 B.C., Bronze Age

Marble

H:32cm

A large torso, broken off at the base of the neck and the midriff, carved from marble with a beige patina. The broad, slightly angular shoulders taper towards a slimmer waist. The true left arm is folded across the body above the true right arm. The fingers on each hand are delineated with simple carved lines. Two widely spaced breasts are modelled above the hands. A long, straight line representing the spine is carved vertically down the otherwise unadorned back. This probably falls into the Spedos group of Cycladic sculptures. This figure is very close to those grouped by Getz-Gentle as the works of the 'Copenhagen Master', due to its slender proportions, near-vertical silhouette, the low-placed breasts above the horizontal crossed arms, and the shallow groove used to delineate the spine. Getz-Gentle believes this artist came from the island of Naxos, and examples of works attributed to this master can be found in museums around the world.

The Cyclades are an archipelago of around 30 small islands, islets, and rocks formed from the exposed summits of two submerged mountain ridges in the Aegean Sea. In classical times the name Cyclades referred specifically to the islands thought to form a circle around the holy island of Delos, the birthplace of Artemis and Apollo (the modern name includes other islands that were previously grouped separately). The Cyclades took an important role in the culture of the Early Bronze Age civilisation of the Aegean Basin, as the islands form a natural stepping stone between Brete, mainland Greece, and Asia

Minor. Much of the evidence we have for the Early Cycladic period comes from goods and objects that were found in tombs on the islands. Tombs contain a range of objects in different materials: tools and weapons of Melian obsidian and bronze; shell, stone, bone, bronze and silver jewellery; elaborately carved soapstone boxes. However, marble was clearly the preferred material for sculpting. The marble came mainly from the islands of Naxos and Keros, and some from Paros and los.

Figures of the so-called ‘canonical’ type were exclusively produced in the period known as Early Cycladic ll, or Keros-Syros phase (c. 2700-2400/2300 B.C). Five different categories of folded-arm figures have been identified, though there is a great deal of overlap between them. The Spedos variety (named after a cemetery on the island of Naxos) is the type produced and disseminated most widely, which seems to have covered the longest period of time. Studies of the consistent proportions of these figures have suggested that they were planned out with a compass to ensure compliance with the canonical form. The meaning and use of such figures remains uncertain, and may have changed across the five centuries in which they were produced. Some archaeologists have suggested that they were produced solely for funerary use, and may have fulfilled the same role as ushabtis in Egyptian graves (to perform work for the owner in the afterlife), as substitutes for human sacrifice, or as guides for the soul of the deceased. Others have suggested they had apotropaic qualities. Another theory is that they represent figures from Cycladic mythology, and even could have been images of the ‘Great Mother’ goddess. There is little evidence for this deity in Cycladic culture, however, and androgynous figures such as this, and some with male genitalia have also been excavated. Some figures were found broken and repaired prior to their placement in the tomb – this suggests that they were used prior to their burial, perhaps within a domestic shrine.