Left to right: front, side, and back views of Kelsey Museum 1983.4.1.
An Unprovenanced Cycladic Folded-Arm Figurine in the Kelsey Museum

Anonymous

Unprovenanced, but probably from one of the Cycladic islands of Greece
Early Cycladic folded-arm female figurine, ca. 2600–2200 BCE
Marble, H. 7.85 cm; Th. 1.1 cm; W. at shoulders 4.35 cm; W. at toes 1.9 cm;
weight 34.6 gm
Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, by transfer from UMMA, 1983; 1983.4.1

In 1978, the Museum of Art received a bequest of thirty-three artworks from the estate of Maxine W. Kundstadter, in memory of Sigmund Kundstadter, Class of 1922. Among them was a small, incomplete marble figurine, of a type characteristic in the Cyclades during the later stages of the Early Bronze Age. The piece was transferred on 14 September 1983 to the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.¹

The sculpted white marble figures made in the Cycladic islands of Greece during most of the Early Bronze Age (ca. late fourth–third millennium BCE) are among the most distinctive and instantly recognizable of archaeological objects. Many are less than 10 cm tall, but almost life-sized examples have also been found. Nude females, especially those with arms folded across the belly, are commonest, but there exist many other types: male “hunter-warriors,” flute players, seated harpists, two or three figures conjoined as a group, and purely schematic or other noncanonical examples.

The Kelsey figurine is of white marble, almost certainly from the central Cyclades. It has suffered minor damage in modern times, especially to the back (a deep gouge, running from waist to shoulder); it is also heavily encrusted, especially on the rear (shoulders, back, and rear of the arms, right leg, and foot). The head is missing, and the break at neck-level appears to be ancient. Below the head is a shallow V-shaped incision, perhaps to suggest the neck or collarbone. Widely spaced breasts are indicated by slight protuberances. The shoulders are quite broad and angular; the arms are folded, left above right, with no indication of hands or fingers. The pubis, or perhaps the lower abdomen, is indicated by an incised triangle, the upper line of which also serves as the lower edge of the right arm. Legs are divided by a pronounced groove, about 2 or 3 mm deep, and all ten toes are represented by tiny shallow incisions (more distinct on the right than the left foot). A notch 0.5 cm deep divides the feet, which point steeply downward and outward at an angle; this figurine, thus, cannot stand upright and must have
been either held in the hand or laid on a flat surface (quite unlike the standard manner of museum display for such pieces).

The stylistic development of Aegean “folded-arm” figurines of this general type, from Neolithic prototypes of the later fifth and fourth millennia BCE to the wide range of types, styles, and sizes encountered during the third millennium, is well understood in broad terms, notwithstanding disagreements concerning details of nomenclature, sequence, regional variation, and absolute dates (see, e.g., Getz-Preziosi 1987a, fig. 3; 1987b, fig. 21; Renfrew 1991, fig. 5). The Kelsey example exhibits a number of the features of the so-called Spedos variety, although its broad, sharply angled shoulders are more characteristic of the slightly later Dokathismata variety (Renfrew 1991, 74–94); there is no question, nevertheless, that it falls within the range of figurines in use during the later part of the third millennium BCE. What it may have been used for, however, and what it meant to its maker or users remains enigmatic since regrettably it lacks any archaeological provenance. Examples have been excavated in domestic settlements, though most of those with known contexts have come from graves—thus, perhaps, serving the needs of the deceased beyond the grave or representing him/her or some divinity (perhaps even a “mother goddess”?).

The general cultural context of these objects is that of small-scale village farming communities; replication experiments, moreover, have demonstrated that they could have been produced (albeit laboriously) with very simple tools. Yet modern scholars have, for the most part, written about them as objets d’art, employing terminology more appropriate to Renaissance and later art. It is their brilliant whiteness (although traces of painted decoration occasionally survive), their simple elegance, and their severity of form that have made them so appealing to modern collectors (resulting in illicit excavation and looting on a massive scale, especially in the decades after World War II, and in the production of fakes and forgeries for which archaeology has, as yet, no reliable diagnostic tests).²

Nothing is known of this figurine’s history of ownership prior to becoming a part of the Kundstadter collection, nor even when that took place. Yet in some respects the composition of this collection is symptomatic: the Michigan bequest was comprised almost entirely of earlier twentieth-century works, the first an oil painting of Jean Metzinger (1917), the latest a set of screen prints by Ilya Bolotowsky (1969). Among its items were not only half a dozen ancient bronzes from Luristan (a category infamous for its forgeries) and a couple of Tibetan prayer wheels but also a 1930 polished bronze by Jean Arp, one of the artists (along with Brancusi, Modigliani, Picasso, and others) who was most influenced by “primitive” art, including the Cycladic figurines that were beginning to become better known at about that very time (Renfrew 1991,
In other words, the inclusion of this figurine, five millennia old, in a collection of twentieth-century artworks is neither unexpected nor atypical.

Nonetheless, a recent study (Gill and Chippindale 1993) has explored the devastating material and intellectual consequences of the fact that so few of these figures have a known find-context or a well-documented history of ownership (largely as a consequence of pressures exerted by the art market). The corpus as a whole, moreover, is corrupted—to an unknown degree—with modern fakes, making its reliable archaeological study perhaps no longer possible. The question then arises as to whether archaeologists should study and publish these sorts of unprovenanced finds at all since doing so may actually help to validate an illicit trade in looted material; this is a significant, and still largely unresolved, ethical dilemma that faces archaeologists worldwide but one that Early Cycladic sculptures raise in an unusually stark form. Meanwhile, KM 1983.4.1 will remain, for all time, deracinated from her original context and dissociated from comparable figurines, so many of which have likewise been rudely severed from their archaeological settings.

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**Notes**

1. I thank Robin Meador-Woodruff and Sebastián Encina for facilitating my access to this figurine, inventory records, correspondence, and photographs in the Kelsey Museum; and Carole McNamara and Lori Mott for assistance in consulting accession records and searching (unsuccessfully) for donor files in the Museum of Art.

2. The Kelsey’s figurine was examined some years ago by Dr. Pat Getz-Preziosi (now Getz-Gentle), the leading expert in North America, and not deemed by her as raising suspicions of forgery; I concur with that evaluation.

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**Works Cited**


