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Statuette of a Seated Old Woman

400-200 BC

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Object Details

Catalogue Number	28
Inventory Number	78.AD.295 
Typology	Statuette
Location	Taranto region
Dimensions	H: 11.5 cm; W: 5 cm

Fabric

Pinkish beige in color (Munsell 7.5 yr 8/4) with a friable consistency and small calcareous inclusions. Head and body were made with a mold; a number of details, such as the drapery, were retouched after molding. The back was merely sketched out; the interior is hollow.

Condition

The statuette is missing both arms and the base that supported the feet.

Provenance

– 1978, Bruce McNall (Encino, California), donated to the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1978.

Bibliography

Unpublished.

Description

This figure, hunched slightly forward, is seated upon a stool; originally the arms were extended forward. She wears a chiton beneath which it is easy to make out the sagging breasts and the belly. The very large head has pronounced, roughly modeled facial features that caricature the elderly female character. The hair is brushed in an arch over the forehead and raised in the middle, pulled back into a sort of *sakkos* that culminates in a broad bow. The mouth is large with half-open swollen lips twisted into a mocking smile; the eyes are elongated with upper eyelids exaggerated in order to convey the idea of swelling. The nose is broad, the eyebrows are furrowed, and the forehead is marked by two deep creases. She wears sandals on her feet, and there are small holes on either the side of the head.

Statuettes depicting seated old women can fit into the repertory of comic-theater types, in which the comic force sprang precisely from an emphasis on physical decay. Figures are often accompanied by wineskins or skyphoi, evident allusions to the motif of the drunken old woman, which is one of the best known iconographies in the category of genre subjects.¹ In some cases, statuettes of old women are depicted holding babies or children, and in such cases they can more readily be identified as elderly nurses; in this kourotrophic context, the figures act as symbolic objects intended to protect the life of a young child.² The type features no characterizing attributes, save perhaps for the accentuation of physical decay and the mocking expression, which are found also in the types of elderly *hetairai*;³ it therefore seems more likely that this is a genre figure assignable to the context of the rich production of Magna Graecia and Sicily, dating from the fourth and third centuries BC, and oriented toward comic themes.⁴

At Lipari, statuettes depicting elderly female slaves or housekeepers have been identified by Bernabò Brea as Middle Comedy characters, while various mask typologies have been found in funerary deposits of the late fourth century and the first half of the third century BC. Some of these are characterized by mouths with only two surviving teeth.⁵ Figures of elderly seated women are also present in Sicily in funerary deposits from the second century BC in Centuripe. The type has significant correspondences in Taranto where, among the five seated women found in funerary deposits that can be dated to the period from the first quarter of the fourth century BC to the first quarter of the second century BC, none of them is holding a child, while some have folded arms. Here, too, the custom of placing statuettes of theatrical subjects in tombs must have had a link to the cult of Dionysos, which is intimately related with the funerary world and with an eschatological vision of the afterlife.⁶

Notes

1. On the theme of the drunken old woman, see P. Zanker, *Die Trunkene Alte: Das Lachen der Verhöhnnten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989); see also the relationship between the coroplastic art and “fine art” in connection with a statuette from Montagna di Marzo, see C. Greco, “Una terracotta da Montagna di Marzo e il tema della ‘vecchia ubriaca’,” in *Alessandria e il mondo ellenistico-romano: Studi in onore di Achille Adriani* (Rome, 1983–84), pp. 686–94.
2. A figure of an elderly nurse sitting with a child in her arms, possibly from Attica, dates from after the middle of the fourth century BC and is thought to depict one of the first types created in Athens; see UHLENBROCK 1990, no. 15, p. 122. For examples from Tanagra, see HIGGINS 1967, pl. 44b (statuette of an elderly nurse, datable between 350 and 325 BC); and BIEBER 1961a, figs. 251–52. For the mask of the elderly nurse in comic theater, see WEBSTER 1995, vol. 1, pp. 37–38.
3. For the depiction of old women, see S. Pfisterer-Haas, *Darstellungen alter Frauen in der griechischen Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), pp. 36–43, 55–64, figs. 103, 107, 109, 110, 113; in particular, for another statuette in the Getty collection (inv. 73.AD.53, said to be from Sicily), identified by Pfisterer-Haas as a *hetaira* and dated to the fourth century BC, see fig. 100, no. III.35, pp. 59 and 134.
4. Figures of elderly seated women are also present in Sicily in funerary deposits of various contexts, as for example Centuripe; see LIBERTINI 1926, pl. XXXIII, and LIBERTINI 1947, pp. 271–72, fig. 6c. See also the small head of an old woman from Lentini, datable between the end of the fourth century and the middle of the third century BC, in M. Frasca, “Lentini: Piccola coroplastica ellenistica da un’abitazione rupestre di Contrada Crocefisso,” *BdA* 91 (1995) pp. 1–21, pl. IIId. For the elderly slave in the votive deposit of Fontana Calda at Butera, see PORTALE 2008, pp. 35–36.
5. BERNABÒ BREA 1981, pp. 72–73, fig. 129 and pp. 212–13 (statuette of an elderly slave woman, assignable to the sphere of Middle Comedy, an immediate precedent of the *oikouron gradion* that is found in the masks of New Comedy); also BERNABÒ BREA 1971–74, p. 176, figs. 11–12.
6. For the statuettes from Taranto and for the significance of the seated elderly women in the Tarentine funerary deposits, see GRAEPLER 1997, pp. 228–31, fig. 35, p. 105 (an example datable to 375–325 BC) and figs. 264, 266–68 (examples datable from between the second quarter of the fourth century BC and the first quarter of the third century BC); also GRAEPLER 1996, p. 233. See also the unpublished Tarentine statuette in the collection of the Musei Civici di Trieste, inv. 3994.