Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

GREEK FIGURINE AH56/B

This seated figure of a man is made from terracotta, brownish red baked clay. Figures like him were mass-produced in the Greek world in the fourth and third centuries BC. It is thought they were first made in and around Athens and then copied across the Mediterranean. They have been found in Cyprus, Sicily and Turkey, as well as in Greece.

They are commonly known as Tanagra figures. Tanagra is a place in Boeotia, the central area of ancient Greece where thousands of these statuettes were found in one necropolis (cemetery). It is thought they may have been placed there as offerings to the gods or to accompany the dead person in the Underworld. They have also been found placed at religious sanctuaries, perhaps to act as worshippers in place of people. Others have been found in the remains of private houses where they may simply have been used to decorate rooms.

The large majority of these figurines are of women and the sculptors who produced them were known as *koreplasts*, from the Greek *Kore*, meaning girl and *Plastein*, to sculpt. Some figures of men, children and comic actors were also produced.



A feature they all have in common is their design. They are always in relaxed, informal poses and have small heads and long bodies. The sculptors were particularly interested in arranging the clothes of the figures into patterns and folds that emphasised the shape of the body underneath.

The man in this figure is naked, except for the cloth which hangs over his left arm and his wide brimmed hat, called a petasos in Greek and Roman times. Male nudity is common in Greek and Roman art as an athletic body was highly admired. In his right hand he is probably holding a water flask.

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Statues like this were commonly made in two-part moulds, one for the front half of the body and one for the back. These two halves were then joined together and mounted on a rectangular base. The head was usually moulded separately and attached by inserting a long spike into the shoulders. In this example both the front and back halves of the figure are decorated, but in some instances the back is left plain. The hole in the back of this figure is a common feature. The purpose is thought to have been to allow the sculptor to get his fingers inside to press the separate pieces together. It would also allow moisture to escape from the clay when it was being baked. Details such as the hat and the water flask would probably have been made separately and then attached. A solution of clay and water was then applied to the statue and it was baked until it became hard. Afterwards it would be painted with bright colours.



Two other Tanagra figures in Reading Museum's School Loans Collection (left AH56/B and right AH56/A)