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Amlash Female Figure

Circa early 1st millennium B.C.,

Ancient Iran

Terracotta

H: 31.75 cm

A terracotta idol in the form of a standing female figure with her arms folded over her midriff. The figure is simplified and stylised, and the features connoting fertility are emphasised, in the form of exaggerated buttocks and hips. The circular face is abstracted, defined by a large nose and two eyes composed of incised concentric circles. There are also concentric circles on each shoulder and one representing the navel. The toes are also marked out with a row of small incised lines on each foot. The figure wears a tall three-tiered hat, with a long trailing plait that falls down the centre of the back.

The Amlash ceramics of Iron-Age Iran are named after a small modern town in the northern province of Gilan, just south of the Caspian Sea. Although the town is in close vicinity to Mesopotamia, the objects found there have a distinct local style, perhaps due to the natural boundaries of the Elburz and Zagaros mountain ranges. Amlash finds have been passing through the small market town and entering the antiquities market in Iran, Europe, and the US since the 1930s. Subsequently, the Iranian government organised excavations in nearby areas, including the 1961 excavation of the Marlik tomb site on the Sefid Rud with renowned Iranian archaeologist Ezat Negahban.

The ceramic vessels and statuettes of both humans and animals from this region are by far the most important source we have on the Amlash culture of this period. Much of what has survived seems to have held spiritual or ritual functions, for example, votive idols and libation vessels. Human representations are generally found in burial sites, and may therefore represent deities or specific individuals. The exaggerated hips and buttocks of this figurine suggests it was associated with fertility and may have possessed a religious or apotropaic purpose in line with this.

This piece bears many of the hallmarks of Amlash style, and there a number of similar surviving pieces. One, published in 1977, possesses clearly similar rotund thighs and carefully positioned arms.[1] Also of terracotta, the circular incisions which mark the present piece are also seen here. Further comparison is offered by a steatopygous idol published in 1967.[2] This idol features the tiered hat, arms held above the chest, and round face. The present idol is a well-preserved example of the distinctive Amlash style, and identifiably fits within an established type of that civilisation's sculpture.

[1] Pierre Amiet, *L'art antique du proche-orient* (Paris, 1977), pp. 220-221, fig. 94

[2] R. Ghirshman, *The Arts of Ancient Iran* (New York, 1967), pp. 30-31, fig. 32.