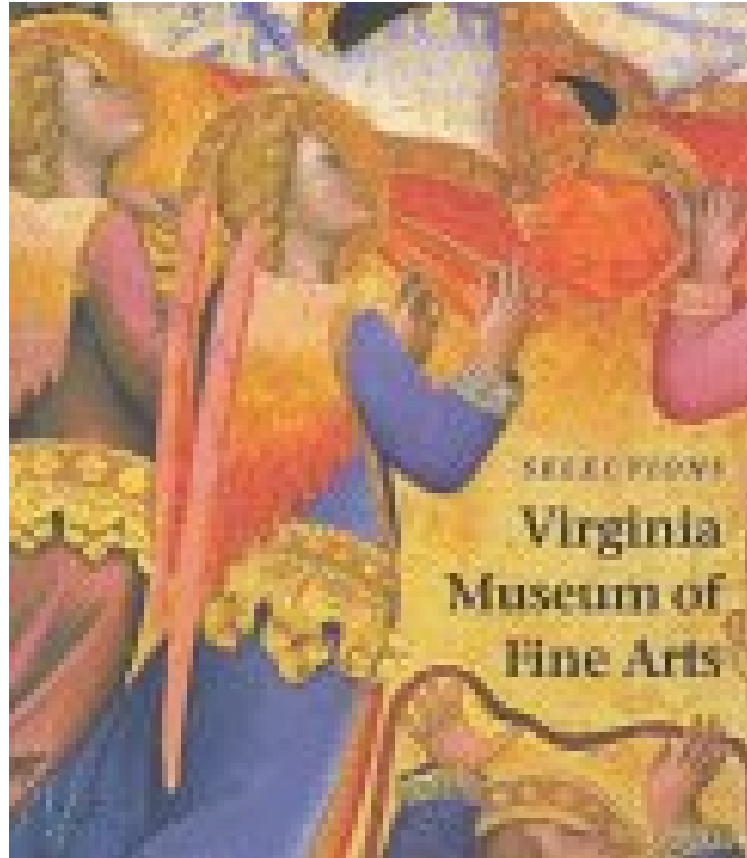


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About the AuthorDr. Anne Barriault is a writer and editor for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Foundation. She is the author of Selections: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany (1994) and has edited various publications including Early Cycladic Art in North American Collections (1987), George Catlin's "Indian Gallery" (1993), and the Art of Late Rome and Byzantium (1994) to name a few. Barriault co-Authored an article on Italian elegiac painting with Paul Barolsky for the Gazette des Beaux Arts (1996). She holds a PhD. in

Italian Renaissance art from the University of Virginia.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Ancient Mediterranean Art: Cycladic, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Roman Egyptian Figure of A Woman Cycladic Islands, circa 2400 B.C. Marble: 14 3/4 inches high "Self-contained" is one phrase that comes to mind to describe this figure. She has a face without features, and she folds her arms tightly across her body. Though she was carved more than 4000 years ago, her simple contours--lyre-shaped head; long, cylindrical neck; broad, sloping shoulders; and hips that narrow to slightly bent legs--might at first remind us of the clean geometry of contemporary sculpture. Contemplate her, however, and her symmetry softens as her sculptor's distinctive hand is revealed. She displays a slight unevenness of nose, breasts, arms, and knees; a foot was shortened and toes reworked when the marble cracked under the pressure of the carving tool. She could be held in the hand but, with angled feet, she was never intended to stand. The figure was meant to recline. The longer we look at her, the more she discloses about her nature, hand-made from marble washed by the sea or broken from the hillsides of her island home. The figure comes from the Cyclades, a group of small islands in the Aegean Sea east of Greece and north of Crete. Known to the ancient Greeks as "the Circling Ones," this chain of mountainous islands supported pre-Greek, non-literate people who framed, fished, and traded with fellow seafarers between 3200 and 1100 B.C. Clusters of families lived together on these islands, in tiny communities scattered where fresh water could be found. They built homes of unmortared stone, buried their dead in cemeteries of shallow stone graves, and carved stone figures and vessels of timeless, mysterious beauty. The precise meaning of Cycladic sculpture is unknown. Looted from the earth before archaeologists could study their exact placement, many figures laid to rest with the dead may once have offered information now lost to us. Perhaps they were created for religious purposes, blessings of fertility in this life, or companionship in the hereafter. We know that the figures were originally less abstract in appearance than they are today. Traces of paint, such as the faded lines on this figure's chest, tell us that artists added eyes, hair, and adornments in reds and blues. The complex meaning of these figures is as elusive as the ancient Cycladic Communities themselves, whose own golden age vanished when trade with the Minoans in Crete and the Myceneans on the Greek mainland increased, and new golden ages were born. Tradition in Cycladic Art Most Cycladic figures take the form of reclining females with folded arms. For a thousand years, generation after generation, figures such as this one were carved, usually with U-or lyre-shaped heads, prominent noses, and left arms folded above right. Faces were sometimes painted, and fingers, toes, and...were incised. Artisans of the Cyclades also fashioned seated and standing figures, sometimes male, as well as marble bowls, beakers, and boxes. Between 3200 and 2200 B.C., the tradition of Cycladic marble carving continued unbroken, altered only by an artist's personal nuances and refinements.