

Statuette of a Comic Actor, unknown artist

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Greek, Apulia, South Italy, 325–275 B.C.

Terracotta

4 1/2 x 1 3/4 x 2 1/2 in.

96.AD.164

Gift of Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman

Background Information

Made in a mold, this terracotta statuette depicts a comic actor from the Greek theater. Sitting cross-legged on an altar, the actor holds his right arm close to his body and raises his left hand to his chin in a “plotting” gesture. He wears a short, belted costume, over leggings and a long-sleeved undergarment, and sandals. His **theater mask** has a short shovel-shaped beard accentuating the broad, grinning mouth. And the thick hair of his wig is brushed back from the forehead in a hairstyle called a *speira*.

The costume and mask characterize the figure as a slave. (For more information about slavery in ancient times, see the section “Slaves” on the BBC website *Ancient Greeks: Athens* at http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/ancient_greeks/athens/ and “Slaves & Freeman” on the PBS website *The Roman Empire in the First Century* at http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves_freemen.html.) The runaway slave taking sanctuary at an altar was a **stock character** in Greek comedy of this time.

Reminders of pleasant diversions, statuettes of actors were favorite knickknacks in ancient households. A wealthy family might have bronze statuettes, whereas a less wealthy one could always afford terracotta. Among these statuettes, the slave figures were most popular. Some scholars believe that figures like this may have belonged to sets that could be assembled to enact a famous scene from a comedy.



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Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at the work of art.

What do you see here? (*a little man sitting on a block, a sculpture, etc.*)

What details do you notice? (*big smile, big hair, beard, clothing, etc.*)

In ancient times, people would make statuettes of comic actors or decorate a common household object with a comic actor or other images from the theater. What objects in your house display a comic actor or cartoon character? (*i.e., Jim Carrey doll, SpongeBob SquarePants pencil holder, Shrek drinking glass, Toy Story figurine*)

What do you notice about the pose of the figure? What does it look like he is doing? (*thinking, planning, plotting*)

Silently imitate the pose. What does your body language communicate?