



Head

On display

Title/Description: Head

Born: 0900 BC - 0600 BC

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Jade

Measurements: h. 42 x w. 27 x d. 25 mm

Accession Number: 137

Historic Period: Formative (middle) period (900-600 BC), 9th century BC, 6th Century BC

Production Place: Mesoamerica, Mexico, Tabasco, The Americas

Cultural Group: Olmec

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Jade had become an important material for élite objects in Mesoamerica by the Middle Formative period. Jade or 'social jade' as it is sometimes called, is a non-mineralogical term used for a series of materials (jadeite, jadeitite, pyroxenite, albitite and other assemblages of minerals) that may have been considered more or less functionally equivalent by the original users (Lange, 1993:1-2). It was perhaps the most highly valued material in ancient Mesoamerica, prized for its hardness, colour and translucent qualities. It was also a scarce material; to date only one source, the Motagua Valley in central Guatemala, has been positively identified in Mesoamerica (Lange, 1993: *passim*). Blue-green jade and the more rare translucent light blue jade (from which this head is made) were particularly favoured by the Olmec, but the geological source for this latter type has not yet been conclusively identified. Both types may come from the Motagua region (Curtiss, 1993; Harlow, 1993), or possibly from an as yet unidentified source such as Guerrero, a region long thought to be associated with Olmec origins (Covarrubias, 1957: 76; Griffin, 1993). In either case, it is clear that jade was greatly valued and transported over long distances throughout Mesoamerica. In the sixteenth century, Sahagun (1963 [c. 1585]: 221-6) noted that it was the property of the *pipiltin*, or hereditary nobles, and was closely associated with concepts of moisture and fertility.

The Olmec used jade to create figurines, celts and ornaments; this exquisitely carved head was probably once part of a complete figure. Jade figurines have been found in burials and caches in the Gulf Coast region and Central Mexico (Drucker, 1952; Drucker *et al.*, 1959; Grove, 1987). This fragment shows stylistic affinities with figures from the site of La Venta on the Gulf Coast. La Venta Offering no. 4, found under a court floor, contained sixteen figurines of jade and other materials arranged upright with six jade celts, as if to indicate a specific scene. The arrangement was covered in white sand and buried, although its existence was known and even monitored in antiquity: evidence indicates that some time after the initial placement the offering was carefully checked and again reburied (Drucker *et al.*, 1959:152-61; pls. 30-36).

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of Alphonse Kahn.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1957.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
