



Face plaque

On display

Title/Description: Face plaque

Born: 0900 BC - 0400 BC

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Serpentine

Measurements: h. 82 x w. 76 x d. 38 mm

Accession Number: 139

Historic Period: Formative (middle) period (900-400 BC), 9th century BC, 4th century BC

Production Place: Mesoamerica, Mexico, The Americas

School/Style: Olmec style

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This small solid face plaque displays features characteristic of Olmec imagery, such as the broad nose and down-turned mouth. The smooth patina and rather worn details suggest that the piece has been much handled. There are losses on the lower left cheek and on both ears. Two holes at the upper back of the piece were probably for suspension or attachment. Miniature 'masks' in fine stones may have been worn as elite regalia, as seen on numerous monuments. They may also have been an important component of burials. At Tikal, a small jade face plaque may have taken the place of the skull in the burial of a Preclassic ruler (W. Coe and McGinn, 1963:29, 31).

Gay and Pratt (1992) state that the Olmec lapidary tradition may have begun in Guerrero state, where small-scale Olmec stone sculpture has been found, in addition to Proto-Teotihuacan and classic Teotihuacan objects. It is not possible to say whether this plaque comes from Guerrero or Veracruz.

Joanne Pillsbury and Ted. J. J. Leyenaar, in Steven Hooper (ed.). 1997. Catalogue to the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection. University of East Anglia.)

Provenance

Formerly in the collections of P. C. Wilson and William Ohly.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1949.

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