



Conch shell

On display

Title/Description: Conch shell

Object Type: Musical instrument

Materials: Terracotta

Measurements: h. 220 x w. 450 x d. 270 mm

Accession Number: 673

Historic Period: Classic period (c. AD 300-900)

Production Place: Guatemala, Mesoamerica, The Americas

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1977

Conch shells and ceramic effigies of conch shells were used as musical instruments, paint pots and offerings in ancient Mesoamerica. Scheie and Miller (1986: 83 4,308-9, pls. 27,121) have suggested that in the Maya region conch trumpets may have been used during rituals to recall ancestors or supernaturals. Conches were modified into trumpets by removing the *columellae*, and at Teotihuacan and elsewhere ceramic effigies were also used as trumpets and whistles (Kolb, 1987: 43, fig. 18; Clancy, 1985: no. 103). This large finely modelled effigy was probably used as a votive offering, since it is unpierced and cannot be blown.

Conch shells and effigies of shells have been recovered from a variety of contexts throughout Mesoamerica. Incised, perforated and plain conch shells are known from burials and offerings (Andrews, 1969; Caso, 1969: lam. m; Kidder *et al.*, 1946: fig. 162, a-b). In some instances, the use of conch shells can be linked with specific deities. Large stone effigies of conches and conch shells themselves were excavated at Templo Mayor, where they were closely associated with the Central Mexican rain god, Tlaloc (Matos Moctezuma, 1990:138-9.148-9; Broda, 1987a, 1987b). In the Maya region, conch shells were associated with the Underworld; God N, one of the old gods of Xibalba, is often portrayed emerging from a shell.

White-slipped ceramics are known from many parts of Meso-america, but it is difficult to give a precise attribution for this sculpture. Although it was reported by the vendor to be from the island of Jaina. Virginia Fields (personal communication, 1994) has noted a very similar white-slipped ceramic shell in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (no. ACi993.217.14). It is reportedly from Colima in West Mexico, raising the possibility that the present example is from western, rather than southern Mesoamerica, and of slightly earlier date.

Ted J. Leyenaar, 1997 & Joanne Pillsbury, 1997

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

Provenance

According to the vendor, it came from the island of Jaina in southern Mesoamerica, however this is unconfirmed and it has been suggested that it could come from Colima in west Mexico.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Edward H. Merrin, New York in 1977 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
