



Engraved shell disc

On display

Title/Description: Engraved shell disc

Object Type: Ornament

Materials: Pigment, Shell

Measurements: h. 75 x w. 75 x d. 5 mm

Accession Number: 809b

Historic Period: Late Classic period (AD 600-900)

Production Place: Guatemala, Mesoamerica, The Americas

Cultural Group: Maya

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1982

Shell was one of the most favoured materials for ornaments in the Maya region. These discs probably once formed the central part of a pair of earflares; they would have been fixed with resin to wood mounts which were pinned through holes in the ear lobes. The imagery on each disc is in low relief and is accentuated by the use of red pigment on the ground and in the incisions. The discs are not flat, but retain the slight undulations of the natural shell. The backs are uncarved.

The disc on the right (809b) shows an elderly male carrying a zoomorphic staff in his right hand and an incense bag in his left. He has a long beaded necklace and a beaded belt and loincloth. An avian figure is shown at his back. His oddly-proportioned body has markings on the back, behind the knees and on the back of the upper arm. These markings are generally thought to be indicators of divine status (M. Coe, 1973:13; Scheie and Miller, 1986: 43). Nicolai Grube (personal communication, 1993) has identified these as 'tzuc' signs, indicating the four cardinal directions of the Mesoamerican world. Most probably he is God D, or Itzamna, one of the old Underworld gods, shown in his bird aspect.

The disc on the left is more eroded, but a seated figure with one leg drawn up can be discerned. He is sitting on an object in the shape of a profile head, leaning on his right hand. The left wrist is raised to the forehead, perhaps in a gesture of woe (Scheie and Miller, 1986: 215, 270, fig. vu.i). He wears a long necklace, a fringed hip-cloth and a bead belt. The body markings suggest that this figure is also a god. Avian forms are in front and behind the figure, and although erosion has obscured much of the detail, the bird behind the figure may be perched on a tree. In Maya iconography, trees are important elements in cosmological diagrams indicating divisions of space (Greene Robertson, 1983,1991a). Related pairs of engraved shell earflares are in the Denver Art Museum and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard (Gallenkamp and Johnson, 1985: no. 21; Scheie and Miller, 1986: pl. 83).

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

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Jonathan Holstein, New York, on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1982 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.
