



'Fork-eyed' mask

Not on display

Title/Description: 'Fork-eyed' mask

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Shell

Measurements: h. 143 x w. 120 x d. 35 mm

Accession Number: 842

Historic Period: Mississippian (c. 1400-1600)

Production Place: Alabama, North America, Southeast USA, The Americas

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

The Mississippian period (c. ad 1000-1600) designates an era when the southeast was inhabited by peoples practising agriculture who lived in numerous settlements around major political/ritual centres such as Spiro, Moundville and Etowah. Information about these chiefdoms is available from archaeological excavations and from the reports of early European visitors, notably De Soto, who travelled in the region in 1539. It is clear that these peoples had extensive long-range trade networks, especially in high-value ritual materials, such as marine shells from the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and copper from sources near Lake Superior (Brown, 1975: 26). Marine shells, notably *Busycon perversum*, the left-handed whelk (so called because the direction of the whorl is sinistral and opposite to that of other whelks and related shells), were associated with the elites of Mississippian societies. Large numbers of shell cups, gorgets, beads and, later in the period, masks, have been found in elite burials at the major sites. Masks are usually found with males or infants (Kneberg, 1959: 7).

This well-preserved mask is cut from the outer whorl of the *Busycon* and, in common with others, is plain on the back and shows no signs of having been worn. It is distinguished by an engraved 'forked-eye', a design associated with the eye markings of the peregrine falcon, a raptor famous for its speed and spectacular aerial attacks. Brown (1975: 22) considers 'the essential element of the falcon is represented by the forked-eye motif, which is one of the more distinctive and widespread motifs in late Prehistoric North America... The falcon emerges as a major symbol of aggressive warfare, and is indeed appropriate to employ as a symbol of fierceness and boldness.' The forked-eye design seems to have been connected with an elite warrior status, termed by Brown (1985:114-23) the 'falcon-impersonator', members of which are often depicted with weapons and a feathered cape.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 296-297.

Provenance

Note in the Sainsbury Centre archives suggesting the object was found on a farm at Bridgeport, northeast Alabama.

Formerly in the collections of John Griffin and Ralph Olson, Deerfield, Illinois.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from John Arieta on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1982 from the income of the Sainsbury Purchasing Fund.
