



Vessel in the form of a seated hunchback

dwarf

Not on display

Title/Description: Vessel in the form of a seated hunchback dwarf

Measurements: h. 270 x w. 200 x d. 170 mm

Accession Number: 866

Historic Period: Proto-Classic period (200 BC-AD 300)

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1983

Various seated hunchback dwarf figures are known in Colima-style pottery but the significance of these sculptures is unknown. As discussed in the entry for UEA 691, dwarfs were a feature of the Maya and Aztec courts, but they may also have played a role in shamanic practices. In the Aztec period, hunchbacks and dwarfs were seen as confidants to the rulers in religious matters, and assisted in communication with the gods (Linne, 1943: 169); they may have had a similar intermediary role in ancient West Mexico.

The shamanic aspects of West Mexican figures and the broader problems of the interpretation of these works have been addressed by Furst (1973). Arguing against a common interpretation of these works as 'anecdotal' and 'secular', due to the apparent absence of complex iconography as found in Central Mexico, Furst has suggested that deeper meanings may be illuminated through the observation of ritual practices of contemporary groups in West Mexico such as the Huichol and the Cora, who are thought to be descendants of the creators of the shaft tomb complex. Although limitations to this approach are noted by Gallagher (1983), Meighan and Nicholson (1989), Taylor (1970), Weigand (1985) and others, the findings are potentially fruitful.

The seated figure here is shown leaning forward over his very short, outstretched legs. The head, which is nearly as large as the entire body, has a spout at the top. The surface finish of the vessel is uneven; the craquelure appears to be a result of root damage.

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

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from John Stokes, New York, on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1983 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.
