



Head-dress ornament in the form of a fox

On display

Title/Description: Head-dress ornament in the form of a fox

Object Type: Animal, Figure, Head

Materials: Bronze, Greenstone, Shell

Measurements: h. 160 x w. 95 x l. 127 mm

Accession Number: 599

Historic Period: AD 100-800

Production Place: Peru, Piura valley, South America, The Americas, Vicus

Cultural Group: Moche style

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1975

Moche metalwork has been found in abundance at Loma Negra and at other sites in the Vicus region. This naturalistic fox head is made from several sheets of copper or copper alloy. The face and the lower jaw are separate pieces of metal, and the ears are attached by means of tabs. Each ear consists of a double sheet. The staples which hold the gilt copper dangles are slotted through the front sheet of the ear, and the joins are concealed by a backing sheet fixed by folding or crimping over the edges. The whiskers are made of copper wire. The piece is covered with green corrosion products derived from the copper, and on the forehead and nose this crust still bears the impression of a plainweave textile in which either the warps or the wefts are paired (in the absence of a selvage the direction of the threads is unclear).

Examination by Dr David Scott of the Institute of Archaeology; University College London, shows that the copper contains abundant inclusions of sulphur and iron, indicating that the metal was probably smelted from sulphide ores. Electron microscope examination of a fragment from one of the dangles suggests that the very thin layer of gilding was produced by the electrochemical replacement technique which is common in Moche-Vicus metalwork (see Lechtman *et al.*, 1982). A former owner has re-fixed the back of the left side of the jaw to the head with a plate of green coloured material.

Jones (1979: 72-8) shows three similar fox heads. One, accompanied by a set of four paws made of sheet copper, is in the Didrichsen Art Museum in Helsinki, and is said to be from Vicus. Another was found beneath the Huaca de la Luna, in the Moche valley, and is now in the Linden Museum, Stuttgart (Schulz, 1982; Lapiner, 1986: pl. 293). A third example came from the 'Warrior Priest's Grave', an unusually rich tomb of the Moche IV period excavated at the Huaca de la Cruz in the Viru valley (Strong and Evans, 1952:150-67). Here, the metal face was modelled over the actual jaw bone of a fox and appears to have been attached to a body made of grass fibre and cotton wadding. Like the Helsinki specimen, the one from Viru had a set of four paws made of gilt copper sheet. A similar fox head was also recently excavated at the Moche site of Sipàn (Alva and Donnan, 1993:184, fig. 199)-

The present example has holes around the neck and, like the other heads, was once part of a

composite ornament. This may have been a face mask, as depicted on Moche pottery, or, more probably, a headdress. Representations in carved wood or on modelled and painted pottery show that animal heads were worn as forehead ornaments, and in some cases the head-dress took the form of an entire animal complete with limbs and tail (Lapiner, 1976: pl. 291; Lumbreras, 1979: 43). Whether those wearing these head-dresses are mythological figures or members of the Moche élite is not clear (see Donnan, 1976:117-36).

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 Mathias Komor, New York in 1975 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
