



Shrine effigy with seated figures

Date

ca. 100 B.C. - 250 A.D.

Primary Maker

Unidentified artist

Medium

Ceramic

Description

Nayarit shrine with three seated figures and lizard atop roof. This Nayarit scene may depict a shrine or a house; three human figures are seated on the inside of the structure, while a lizard sits on the rounded roof. Lizards are phallic (fertility) symbols. Group figural scenes showing a variety of subjects are well-known Nayarit art

forms. _____ Figurine Function The original function of archaeological figurines found in museum collections is uncertain. When objects are excavated by archaeologists, then information about the associations between artifacts and the circumstances of their burial are carefully recorded, and we can draw many conclusions about object function. Very few of the archaeological objects found in museums today were excavated in a careful, scientific manner, so we have fewer clues about their past associations and function. A wide range of people and objects are shown in pre-Columbian pottery vessels. From burials, we know that the variety of head shapes, jewelry, and clothing styles reflect the actual appearance of many of these prehistoric people. Variations in human head shapes may be produced as the result of intentional cranial deformation; head shapes were an obvious (and permanent) way to mark one's group affiliation. In a time and place where television and newspapers were unknown, highly decorated pottery was used as one vehicle of information exchange, simultaneously conveying what was socially acceptable by documenting different aspects of real life (models OF society), and what people were expected to do (models FOR behaviors, actions, or appearance). Because figurines represent many life stages and ordinary human activities, they probably served to exemplify the usual norms of behavior, to serve as guidelines or rules to help socialize people and integrate them into society. Although obviously decorative, figurines could also have been used to make offerings to supernatural powers, to serve as good luck charms, or to accompany the dead as grave goods. West Mexico (Colima, Nayarit, and Jalisco) (200BC-200AD) Unfortunately there is little information about the provenience of most pre-Columbian objects from this area, except that they were found in shaft tombs. Ranging up to 6 meters in depth, these tombs consist of a chamber leading from a narrow vertical hole or shaft. Because these chambers were used to bury many people over long periods of time, it is likely that they were maintained and used by family groups. West Mexican shaft tombs range in date from the Early Formative to the Early Classic periods, but

most date to the Late Formative. Tombs may contain hundreds of figures; among them, paired sets of matching male and female figures, perhaps representing married couples, are common. Nayarit figures are noted for the unusual proportions of their limbs, which are typically foreshortened and stubby, making the figure's heads appear disproportionately large. Further Reading: Gill, George W. (1977): "Manifestations of a conceptual artistic ideal within a prehistoric culture," in *American Antiquity* 42 (1): 101-110. Discussion of Nayarit figurines. Grosscup, Gordon L. (1961): "A sequence of figurines from west Mexico," in *American Antiquity* 26(3): 390-406. Sund, Judy (2000): "Beyond the grave: the twentieth-century afterlife of west Mexican burial effigies," in *The Art Bulletin* 82(4): 734-767. Discusses the role of ancient art in modern advertising, particularly for liquors such as Kahlua.

Dimensions

Height: 14 inches (35.6 cm)