



Seated male figure

Date

600-900 CE

Medium

Ceramic with traces of pigment

Description

This Maya seated male hollow figurine wears a broad round collar-like necklace, belt with loincloth, large round ear spools, and elaborate coiffure. The figure's hair is pulled back into a high topknot, with long rounded locks hanging free down the figure's back. There is a band of spiky objects, either a headpiece or styled bangs, above the figure's brow. The figure holds a round object with dotted indentations in his right hand, holds his left hand to his right shoulder, and sits with his right leg bent outwards with the right foot resting lightly against the lower left calf. Fugitive traces of pigment remain,

especially on the ear spools. The facial features are delicately formed, with a nose ring and possible moustache. _____ The Ball Game The thick, horseshoe-shaped belts known as waist yokes are the most characteristic athletic gear worn by players of the Mesoamerican ball game, which also included kneepads. All known ballplayer figures are male, and it appears that this sport was only played by men. The ball game was extremely important throughout Mesoamerica for many centuries. Successful ball players won great acclaim, while the defeated faced severe punishment and even death. 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.

Maya (AD 250-850) The Maya civilization was one of the premier civilizations in the New World, achieving great masterpieces of art and architecture, a sophisticated calendrical system, and a formal system of writing which has only been deciphered in the past several decades. The decipherment of Maya writing enables us to have a much more detailed view of the political machinations of this series of city-states located in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, Belize, and adjacent areas of Guatemala and Honduras than had hitherto been possible. Although the exact details of the Maya collapse in the 800's are still controversial, it appears that excessive warfare and violence, coupled with environmental degradation and the stress of a large population, led to demise of this once-vibrant culture. Populations crashed, with survivors of the urban centers dispersing to more rural areas.

Suggestions for further reading about the Maya:

Henderson, John S. (1997): *The World of the Ancient Maya*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca.

Schele, Linda and David A. Freidel (1990): *A Forest of Kings: the Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*. William Morrow: New York

Sharer, Robert J. with Loa P. Traxler (2006): *The Ancient Maya*, sixth edition. Stanford University: Stanford.

Dimensions

4 1/2 × 4 3/4 × 3 7/8 inches (11.4 × 12 × 9.8 cm)