

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Pendant in the form of a mask



Northeast China, Hongshan culture
(ca. 3800–ca. 2700 BCE)

Object dated to Late Neolithic period,
ca. 3500–ca. 3000 BCE

Jade

2 1/4 x 6 3/4 x 3/16 in

Gift of Therese and Erwin Harris. Freer Gallery of Art, F1991.52

Describe

This jade object is rectangular in shape. It's very thin and the color is an almost clear grayish green. Tiny black dots are scattered on the surface. Find a pair of eyes in the middle. Their "pupils" are two symmetrically positioned holes drilled from front to back. Above the eyes are two semicircular slits. Seven pairs of teeth-like points line up along the bottom edge, flanked on each side by a pair of large curls. These elements seem to suggest a face with eyes, brows, teeth, and curly hair or ears at the sides. Subtle relief carving, designs that slightly rise above the surrounding surface, highlight the curves and contours of the piece. A single hole sits between the eyes. It is neatly drilled from both sides of the plaque. Can you guess why it's there? It would have allowed the jade piece to be worn similar to a modern pendant, suspended on a cord and worn around the neck. It would have felt cool against the skin. All details are worked from the front, and the back is flat and polished smooth.

Analyze

Ancient Chinese poetically described jade as "the fairest of stones." As early as the Neolithic period (ca. 7000–1700 BCE), several early Chinese societies appear to have simultaneously discovered this special and precious stone. A substantial number of jade objects were made during this period. This stunning pendant is a typical jade work of the Hongshan culture. Existing more than six thousand years ago, Hongshan people were active in northeast China. They are known for making distinctively shaped jades like this one.



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Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

Interpret

The motif and meaning of toothed pendants have not yet been deciphered. Many scholars suspect that they are similar to other jade pendants that depict fantastic creatures. For example, the object below from the Cleveland Museum of Art depicts the head of a cow on a human-like body and is also pierced for wearing as a pendant. These pendants appear to be more than mere decorations. They were all excavated from burial sites and found on prominent locations of the body. This pendant was most likely a power and status symbol for an elite member of the Hongshan community.



Amulet in the Form of a Seated Figure with Bovine Head

Northeast China, probably Hongshan culture

Neolithic period

Jade

5 3/16 in

Gift of Severance A. Millikin. The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1953.628

Inquire

- What is a pendant? How does a pendant compare to other types of jewelry?
- What do you think the significance of the face is? What could this represent?
- Who do you think wore this? When and for what types of occasions do you think it was worn? What about the piece leads you to think that?

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1991.52/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

