

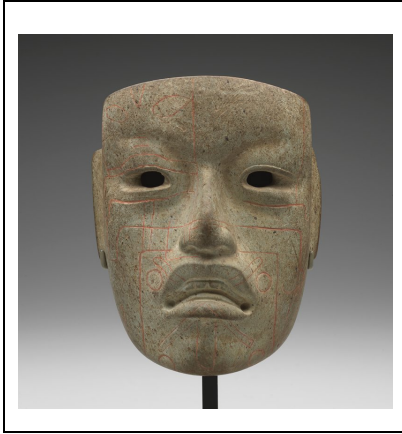
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## Title of Object

Mask

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** unknown

**Country:** Mexico (Mesoamerica)

**Date of Object:** 900-300 BCE

**File Created:** 1/5/2017

**Accession Number:** 2002.127

**Author of File:** Mary McMahan

**Material/Medium:** jadeite with cinnabar

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Art of the Americas

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 9/5/2017

**Culture:** Olmec

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## Tour Topics

Ancient Culture, Animals/Birds, Beauty, Celebration, Mythology, Ritual/Ceremony, Spirituality/Sacred, Symbolism

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Looking closely at this mask, both from the front and the back, what do you see that intrigues you? The Olmec deities were often represented by natural phenomena and things found in nature; do you see anything in the mask that might represent a deity?
2. We know very little about the Olmec and their use of these masks. What do you think they might have been used for? Do you think they represent humans or gods?
3. The lines carved into the mask may replicate face painting or tattooing. If you were to get a tattoo on your face, what would it represent? Why?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

This mask was created about 3000 years ago, perhaps as a portrait of a leader among the Olmecs. It has features common to Olmec sculptures, like the downturned lips and almond-shaped eyes (Khan Academy).

The artist sculpted the mask from jadeite, then carved lines and highlighted them with a red mineral powder of mercury sulfide (cinnabar). These lines may replicate face paint or tattooing.

Jadeite was quarried in the Sierra de las Minas in Guatemala, and was imported to the Gulf Coast of Mexico. (Khan Academy) Each jade object made by the artists of the Olmec culture is a masterpiece of craftsmanship. Jade was hard to find, even harder to carve, and it was valued above all other materials by the Olmec. (artsmia.org)

Look closely at the surface incised designs. "Olmec glyphs are the earliest known writing in America. These fine-line motifs symbolically define the four quarters of the human world with the king as ruler at the center. The Olmec art style is found on objects as far afield as the Valley of Mexico to the north and the Pacific coast of Chiapas to the south. This suggests a widely-shared set of beliefs that was to have a profound influence on many later Mesoamerican stylistic traditions." (Khan Academy)

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Little is known about the Olmec peoples who are considered the forerunner of all subsequent Mesoamerican cultures such as the Maya and Aztecs. In fact the word Olmec is their Aztec name, we don't even know what they called themselves. We do know that the Olmecs seem to have had a particular reverence for natural places that connected with the important junctions of sky, earth and the underworld.

"The Olmecs lived in the low-lying Gulf Coast area of what is now Mexico in about 1200-400 B.C.E. at sites such as San Lorenzo, Tres Zapotes, Laguna de los Cerros and La Venta. These and the other Olmec centers were well planned and included many of the features that would be associated with later civilization in Central America including the Mexica (Aztecs) and Maya. Alongside impressive public spaces and large platform-mounds made of earth, there is evidence of a ceremonial ball game and complex astrological calendars. Olmec art is very distinctive and clearly reflects their religion." (Khan Academy)

The Olmecs worked mainly in stone and particularly favored jade, or greenstone, which they believed had distinctive properties linked with fertility and procreation. These sought-after materials were brought into the region through long distance trade networks. The majority of jade was mined in the area of modern-day Guatemala. (Khan Academy and New York Times)

Red cinnabar or hematite powder was often applied to highlight symbolic details or features incised on ... figures. The incised lines of the were-jaguar are located above the right eye of the mask. These pigments were also used in human burials and probably had a significant role in Olmec rituals. (Khan Academy)

The names of the gods of the Olmec are not known other than that they often represented phenomena such as rain, the earth and especially maize. They also gave special significance to the animals present in their environment, especially those at the top of the food chain such as jaguars, eagles, caimans, snakes and even sharks, identifying them with divine beings and perhaps also believing that powerful rulers could transform themselves at will into such fearsome creatures. (Wikipedia)

The Olmecs also liked to mix animals and humans to create composite creatures such as the were-jaguar, a cross between a human and a jaguar. Jaguars feature prominently because the Olmecs believed that, in the distant past, a union between a woman and a jaguar produced an earlier race of were-jaguars. (Khan Academy) The were-jaguar was a powerful spirit who controlled rain and storms, as well as the growth of maize, the staple crop of the Olmec. This design might reflect the ruler's religious and political power. These pervasive references to the spiritual union of a jaguar and a human allude to an Olmec conception of the supernatural status of rulers. (artsmia.org)

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This mask was created about 3000 years ago, perhaps as a portrait of a leader among the Olmec people of Mesoamerica (present-day southern Mexico). It was likely reserved for ceremonial use. An artist sculpted it from jadeite, then carved lines and highlighted them with a red mineral powder of mercury sulfide (cinnabar). These lines may replicate face paint or tattooing. The rare materials and symbolic designs, like the supernatural human-jaguar whose face hovers above the right eye, reflect the ruler's religious and political power.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Tour Office study files.

Artsmia.org: Labels for the Mask, Figure (jade), Figure (ceramic)

Wikipedia: Olmec religion

Olmec, Khan Academy (including all subsequent object essays):

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-americas/early-cultures/olmec/v/olmec-mask>

William J. Broad, *In Guatemala, a Rhode Island-Size Jade Lode*, New York Times:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/22/world/in-guatemala-a-rhode-island-size-jade-lode.html?mcubz=0>