

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



## Portrait Head of a Female

Maya, Late Classic Period, 600-800 A.D.

Limestone and stucco

74 cm.; 29 in.

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### Provenance

Ex-André Emmerich Collection;  
(Zurich) William P. Palmer III (USA);  
European Private Collection, acquired in New York in 1988.

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The head is most likely that of a woman of high status, either human or divine. Her sex is identified by the step-cut hair and patterns on both cheeks.<sup>1</sup> The proper left cheek features a rare double-hooked version of the common “IL” motif denoting representations of women on the painted pottery and figurines as well as the hieroglyphic nominal prefix ix or ixik, meaning “woman” (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Rarely, the double-hooked version also marks the cheek of the young maize god. The proper right cheek displays five diagonal, parallel bands, an uncommon pattern known from only a few artworks, all of which illustrate women (Figure 2).

Cheek markings in Classic Maya art have been interpreted as face painting, tattoos, tattoo-like raised scars, or sacrificial disfigurement. Sixteenth-century Spanish descriptions of native peoples throughout Mesoamerica describe bodies patterned by all four techniques, and it is likely that the Classic Maya employed more than one of these methods.

The exceptional artistry and colossal scale of the head imply this majestic sculpture adorned the façade of a temple or royal residence. It is said to come from Bonampak, a Maya archaeological site in the Mexican state of Chiapas. The portraiture style resembles that seen on Bonampak’s carved stone stelae and stucco sculptures. It also recalls those of nearby Palenque, famous for lifelike portrayals emphasizing the principal characteristics of Classic Maya beauty and royal portraiture. These include the elongated forehead and cranium, the prominent nose with built-up bridge, slanted eyes, and full lips. The cranial elongation was visually continued by a headdress which was attached to the tenon at the top of the head. Regal headdresses featured long plumes and icons of identity such as the personal name or titles of the person portrayed.

It is rare for large-sized architectural stuccoes to survive. The most famous example, the portrait of Palenque’s renowned ruler K’inich Janaab’ Pakal (r. 615-683 A.D.), was preserved

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Stone and Marc Zender, *Reading Maya Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Maya Painting and Sculpture*. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Schele and Mary Miller, *The Blood of Kings. Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*. Ft. Worth, TX: The Kimbell Art Museum, 1986. Also see Tatiana Proskouriakoff, “Portraits of Women in Maya Art”, in Stephen Houston, Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos and David Stuart (eds.), *The Decipherment of Ancient Maya Writing*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press-Norman, 2001, p. 342-357.

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because the ancient Maya placed it in his tomb (Figure 3). Most architectural stucco sculptures exist solely as weathered fragments in the rubble of collapsed buildings (Figure 4).



**Fig. 1.** Double-hooked version of the common “IL” motif marking representations of women in Maya Art and examples of the “IL” motif in the hieroglyphic female nominal prefix ix or ixik, meaning “woman”.



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**Fig. 2.** Examples of the diagonal, parallel cheek bands found on only a few Classic Period artworks; details from a figurine and a painted ceramic vessel.



**Fig. 3.** Portrait head of Kinich Janaab' Pakal, ruler of Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico and stucco portrait head, Palenque.



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**Fig. 4.** The remains of the shattered stucco façade of an elite building at Lamanai, Belize, and a portrait head from the deposit.