

COLNAGHI



Olmec Face Mask
Mexico, 900 - 400 B.C.

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Carved and polished green serpentine

10.5cm tall (unmounted)

Provenance

Ex Samuel Dubiner Collection, Canada, 1960s;

With Barry Kernerman, Toronto;

Ortiz Collection, Miami;

Private Collection, United Kingdom.

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The Olmec civilization, which thrived in the Gulf Coast region of Mexico from approximately 1400 - 400 B.C., is renowned for its remarkable artistic achievements, among which serpentine masks such as the present example are particularly noteworthy. Crafted from the distinctive deep green stone, they were characterised by intricate carvings that depicted human visages with exaggerated features, such as downturned mouths, almond-shaped eyes, and broad noses. The masks also sometimes incorporated serpentine imagery in the form of coiled snakes or serpent-like figures that surrounded the faces or extended from the top of the masks. It is believed that serpentine masks were utilised in ceremonial and ritual contexts, likely in conjunction with funerary practices or religious festivals, and were probably worn by priests or other elite members of society during these events. The masks also held symbolic value as status symbols, owing to their valuable materials and the skilled craftsmanship required to create them.

The Olmec civilization has had a profound impact on the development of modern art, particularly during the early 20th century, when Western artists rediscovered the art of ancient cultures, including that of the Olmec. This renewed interest in Olmec art influenced the emergence of modernist art movements such as Cubism and Surrealism. Olmec sculptures' stylised, geometric forms, such as the iconic "colossal heads" served as sources of inspiration for artists such as Pablo Picasso and Henry Moore, while the Olmec's use of negative space and abstraction was influential in the development of modernist sculpture. In addition, the Olmec's fascination with the natural world, particularly the serpent, inspired Surrealist artists such as Salvador Dali and Max Ernst, who integrated serpent imagery into their works. The Olmec's use of jade and other precious materials also influenced modernist jewellery and decorative arts. Today, the Olmec's legacy remains a significant source of inspiration for contemporary artists who continue to draw on its bold forms and use of negative space.

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