



Crown

Date

20th Century

Primary Maker

Yao

Medium

Silver and cloth

Description

Among the Yao, silver is used as the primary currency, ceremonial adornment, and symbolically as a means of keeping the soul in the body. Historically these silver

crowns would have been worn every day, though living around other cultures has meant that women are more likely to either wear aluminum pieces instead or forgo them altogether. They were attached to a woman's hair a clip and might be worn with the pins pulled out slightly. Among Yao subcultures in northern Vietnam, the crown is covered by a red cloth adorned in silver on a woman's wedding day. The basic headpieces are called celestial crowns, because of their 10-point stars and because the crowns are worn as a sign of religious devotion to the Three Pure Ones, the highest gods in the Taoist pantheon. The Mien and Mun Yao occupy large regions of northern Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, and southern China. The group has farmed and migrated through mountainous regions for at least 2,000 years which have made them a rare combination of adaptable and slow to adopt new customs. They have a strong cultural identity which they have managed to retain despite being forced to change regularly. Yao communities only rarely get involved in county or national politics and their own organizational structure is based on villages where decisions are made by elders, priests, and head men. The religion of the Yao is Taoism, which emphasizes adherence to a harmonious lifestyle and emphasizes compassion, frugality, and humility. Yao clothing, particularly festival wear, is incredibly colorful and often supplemented by silver. The history of silver within the Yao culture predates the earliest records, with modern silversmiths not necessarily knowing the origin of many of the symbols on their silver pieces. Indeed, one of the most interesting facets of the crowns is the uniformity of their aesthetic. Certainly, some do feature openwork designs while other do not, but all of them have a 10-point silver star at their center and are surrounded by pins. Silversmiths rely on a great many techniques to create these crowns, many of which are similar to what are used by Miao silversmiths: casting, hammering, repoussé, champlevé, chasing and etching. Once a young woman begins to go through puberty, her family commissions the crowns from a silversmith. It is delivered in its individual components. That may not make it seem like too much of a puzzle from these images, but the 200 or more individual pins in each of these pieces take approximately two days to fit into the human hair substructure.

Dimensions

1 × 6 1/4 in. (2.5 × 15.9 cm)