

Basic Detail Report



Shell Currency

Date

mid 20th Century

Medium

Shell

Description

This small shell ornament was collected in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea and dates back to the mid-20th century. In many Melanesian communities, shells

were utilized as a form of currency and simultaneously as supplies for high-priced ornamentation. As a form of currency, shells were used in trades along the coast and nearby islands. The further distance a shell traveled, the higher their value would increase. Therefore, the price and social value of an adornment increased depending on the inclusion of a well-traveled shell. As a form of adornment, a shell will signify important qualities about the wearer their wealth, initiation level within a clan membership, and ideas of ritual practice. In the practice of dowries, the distinction of shell as an ornament or “money” overlaps. In the Sepik region, young brides adorn headdress covered in shells upon their initial entrance of their husband’s home. The bride’s use of a particular shell may indicate her new family’s financial and social influence in the community. In the incident of a husband’s death, the widower is given shell ornaments during the morning period that signify her to be isolated status from society. The use of shells as adornments also developed into a reflection of wearer’s individual notions of beauty and attractiveness. In war ornamentation, men utilize shell necklaces as an indicator of societal recognition for their achievements and to convey their view of strength as beauty. Ornamentation satisfies the individual’s personal desire for beautification and at the same time allows for the appearance of personality according to social norms.

Dimensions

3 7/16 × 3 1/8 × 1/2 in. (8.7 × 7.9 × 1.3 cm)