



## Shell Currency

**Date**

mid 20th Century

**Medium**

Kina shell (*Pinctada maxima*)

**Description**

This bride price shell was collected in Papua New Guinea and dates back to the mid-20th Century. The piece made

from a golden iridescent Kina shell with a carved fan-like shape protruding out of the right side. Along the edge of that protrusion there are eleven saw-toothed marks. On the reverse side, the natural layers of the shell are visible and there is a bit of black material towards near the top. A *Pinctada maximum*, commonly referred to as Kina, is a type of gold lip shell used in highly valued adornment pieces. These adornment pieces were used as bride prices— a type of currency in dowry practice. Papua New Guinea islanders primarily retrieved these shells from Manus Island or Thursday Island in the Torres Strait. A Kina’s value was based on its size, color, and condition of the shell. A ruddy colored Kina was priced the highest, because it was deemed the finest specimen. The process of creating such a bride price necklace was quite time consuming and involved various tools. A small drill tool would be used to create the holes on either end of piece for the threaded fiber. The possession of a Kina signified important qualities about the individual’s wealth and social influence. In the practice of dowries, all relatives of the bride would receive a bride price. In such cases, a number of Kina adorned necklaces may be used to purchase the bride along with other bride price tokens, such as small pigs or bailer shells. A marker—such as a knot, tooth, or bristled end of a pig tail—could be attached to the shell to record its use for debts, dowries, deaths, or exchanges.

**Dimensions**

6 3/8 × 7 1/2 × 3/4 in. (16.2 × 19.1 × 1.9 cm)