



Necklace Currency

Date

late 20th Century

Medium

Shells and beads

Description

This shell necklace was collected in Madang Province of Papua New Guinea. In many Melanesian communities, shells were used 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 can signify the wearer's wealth,

initiation level within a clan membership, and ideas of ritual practice. In the practice of dowry exchange, the use of shell as ornamentation or currency overlaps. Brides don headdresses covered in shells for the initial entrance into 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 case of a husband's death, the widower is given shell ornaments during the mourning period that signify her newly isolated status. The use of shells as adornment also reflects the wearer's individual notions of beauty and attractiveness. In war ornamentation, men use shell necklaces as an indicator of societal recognition for their achievements and to connect the attributes of strength and beauty. Ornamentation satisfies the individual's personal desire for beautification and at the same time allows for the expression of personality according to social norms.

Dimensions

17 1/2 × 2 5/8 × 3 3/4 in. (44.5 × 6.7 × 9.5 cm)