

BINCHE INTERNATIONAL
CARNIVAL AND MASK MUSEUM



THE PIECE OF THE MONTH

Teotihuacan Mask



OBJECT DETAILS

Designation : mask

Provenance : Teotihuacan, State of Mexico, Mexico

Inventory n° : ICMM 92/2484 ; French community APC 803

Era : classical period, Tlamimilolpa to Metepec phases, approximately between 250 to 650 AD

Material : stone (listwanite?)

Techniques : cutting, drilling, polishing

Dimensions : H 17 x W 20 X D 9,5 cm

Date of acquisition : 17 April 1991

The site of Teotihuacan, meaning « the place where the gods are made » in the Nahuatl language, is located at more than 2000 metres height in the semi-arid highlands in the centre of Mexico. The city started to develop around 100 or 150 BC. It was organized around a main North-South axis, the Avenue of the Dead. The latter was 5 kilometers long and flanked by the impressive pyramids of the Sun and of the Moon – the biggest ever built – and with the temple of Quetzalcoatl. An East-West axis created later on subdivided the city into 4 quarters situated around a central core, the seat of political and religious activities. At its zenith, Teotihuacan probably spread over about thirty square kilometers and had up to 100 000 inhabitants. No other Mesoamerican city had such a high population density before Mexico-Tenochtlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire in the 15th century. Teotihuacan was a model of large-scale urbanization and planning for a lot of contemporary and future societies. From 550 AD, economic and political problems, followed by the destruction by fire and the profanation of the main buildings, heralded the decline and later the abandonment of the city (NICHOLS 2015).

Shapes, materials and mask making techniques

These stone masks, hundreds of which are kept in museums or private collections all over the world, are, just like the gigantic pyramids and temples along the Avenue of the Dead, symbols of the city and the culture of Teotihuacan. They are all different, but all represent a stylized impassive face with a severe expression. The general shape of the face is an inverted triangle with a truncated and rounded basis, a straight and wide nose and forehead, prominent cheekbones and full lips. The ears are represented by two rectangular more or less massive excrescences on both sides of the face. Some present ornamental incisions on the front and on the back. Others have incisions on the cheeks. All feature an open mouth, sometimes, just like the eyes, inlaid with shell, obsidian or other materials. On the back, they show either a « U »-shape with a wide edge forming the « U » or a « V »-shape which is open on the basis. Some have a flat back without any rim, others feature a concave back. The majority have lateral perforations on the temples or under the ears as well as on the

earlobes. Some also show a central perforation next to the upper and/or lower rim.

These holes were made with a solid or hollow drill with varying diameters. When the artisan used a solid drill, he had to perforate the mask from both sides until the two holes merged. The holes made with this type of tool are recognizable by their shape resembling an hourglass forming two opposite cones with a central narrowing. With a hollow drill, it was possible to drill through the stone from one side to the other extracting a « carrot » and leaving a distinctly cylindrical hole (ROSE & WALSH 2016 : 10). The eyes as well as the mouth were also hollowed by means of a drill, starting from the corners and leaving a characteristic circular mark. The surface of these masks often exhibits an exceptional brilliance resulting from the usage of different abrasives together with tools made from bone, bamboo, wood or stone. Numerous quartz and feldspar particles as well as particles from other minerals were found on these objects. As they were not part of the stones used for the making of

these masks and because they are much harder, they were probably used to polish their surfaces (ROSE & WALSH 2016 : 10). Remnants of red, green and brown colour as well as coatings from white or pigmented limestone, polished until obtaining a high degree of brilliance, were found which leads to the assumption that certain masks were painted.

Analyses using scanning electron microscopy and energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy carried out some years ago by the Smithsonian Department of Mineral Sciences at Washington showed that all these masks were mainly made from four types of stone : limestone, serpentinite, travertine and listwanite. None of these materials come from the region of Teotihuacan. Differences in the used material, in the style of the face and the technique suggest the existence of stone carving workshops rela-

tively far from the City of the Gods. Most probably made close to the sources of raw materials chosen for their aesthetic features (colour, veining and particular inclusions), but also because they could be easily fashioned (soft and easy to carve), the masks were then transported to Teotihuacan in the form of finished products (ROSE & WALSH 2016 : 12). Today's region of Puebla, located about 150 kilometres south-east of Teotihuacan and rich in limestone, travertine and serpentinite deposits, was most probably one of the places. The origin of the listwanite is not clearly mentioned in the sources, but as it is an altered form of serpentinite (carbonated serpentinite), it could also come from this region. This does not exclude the fact that workshops could also have existed in Teotihuacan, but there is no supporting evidence.

The mask of the ICMM

It has the typical shape of an inverted triangle with a truncated and rounded basis as well as a broad and straight forehead. The nose is broad, the mouth is open and has quite thin lips in comparison with a lot of other masks. The ears are rather thin, with a straight lower rim and a rounded and inclined upper rim. They are decorated with an incision in the shape of an inverted « U » suggesting the cartilage of the ear flap. Above the eyes, there is a thin line representing the fold of the eyelids. We can also note a distinct horizontal incision under the nose. The mask features eight holes in total : two central holes (one in the upper rim and the other in the basis), two holes in the earlobes and four lateral holes (two in the temples, two under the ears). The central and lateral holes were made with a solid drill, whereas the earlobes were pierced with a cone-shaped hollow drill from the front to the back, as the diameter of the holes on the front of the ears is bigger than on the backside (8 mm vs 5 mm) The eyes and the mouth were also made

with a hollow drill, beginning at the corners where we can still see the characteristic residual core left by the tool, which indicates that there was no intention to finish this zone, maybe because there were originally inlays hiding the tool marks. The back of the mask features the shape of a « U » with a broad rim.

The stone is orange-brown and has greyish-brown and pale green inlays. It could be listwanite whose typical colour is marbled greyish brown or clear brown with darker orange-brown and light green spots. This material also often features numerous holes, « stings » or « depressions » due to the preferential alteration of the carbonates it contains (decomposition linked to physical, chemical or biological factors such as climate variations, erosion, action of micro-organismes etc.). Notches of this type are clearly visible on the mask of the ICMM. There are other arguments in favour of listwanite. The group of masks made from listwanite are indeed very standardized as to

their style and techniques : the great majority present a back in the shape of a « U », eight perforations, a subtle incision above the eyes suggesting the eyelids, a deep incision under the nose as well as a hollowing out of the eyes and the mouth with a hollow drill from the corners without trying to finish the worked zone. The only divergent feature : almost all perfora-

tions on the listwanite masks were made with a hollow drill, in contrast to the limestone, serpentinite and travertine masks. However, this is not the case here. Therefore an in-depth study with chemical analyses based on a simple visual observation of the material and the production techniques would be necessary to confirm or disprove this hypothesis.

Interpretation

There is very few data on the context in which these masks were found (BERRIN & PASZTORY 1993 : 184). Hence their interpretation is particularly difficult. What we can say for certain, however, is that these masks didn't cover the faces of living people (BERRIN 1993 : 77, BERRIN & PASZTORY 1993, PASZTORY 1992 : 307, ROSE & WALSH 2016 : 1). They lack perforations allowing to see, speak or breathe. Moreover, they are far too heavy (between 3 and 6 kg) to be worn.

In a lot of publications they are described as funerary masks attached to corpse bundles (funerary packages consisting of an envelope-made of cloth- and containing the remains of the dead as well as a number of precious objects), meant to constitute a more permanent version of the deceased's face enabling the latter to appear in the world of the living (LINNE 2003). The eyes and the mouth with inlays were supposed to give them a certain expressiveness. There are several discoveries which could corroborate this hypothesis. In a codex of 1540 (*Relación de Michacán* 1989 : 237-238), a funerary ceremony of a Tarascan king (neighbour state of the State of Mexico) and the preparation of the funerary bundle to which a mask made of turquoise was attached is described. In Tres Cerritos in the State of Michoacán, a small alabaster mask was found inside a tomb (MACIAS GOYTIA & VACKIMES SERRET 1989). In Teotihuacan, in the corridor of a palace of the Avenue of the Dead, a stone

mask was found next to tombs (DELGADILLO 1991). Finally, a terracotta bust featuring a removable mask made of clay was discovered inside a tomb in a potter's workshop located next to the Ciudadela (large complex at the intersection of the Avenue of the Dead and the East-West axis). Small holes on the sides, reminiscent of the perforations on the stone masks, made it possible to attach it to the bust. The latter could represent a funerary bundle with the mask which was put on it (MUÑERA BERMUDEZ 1991). These examples indeed suggest the existence of a link between stone masks and funerary customs or the world of the dead, but they are not by themselves sufficient to confirm this hypothesis. In Teotihuacan, no stone masks was really found in a funerary context, inside a tomb (PASZTORY 1992 : 295, 1997).

As the few masks for which the context in which they were discovered is documented were found on the floor of temples or patios (BATRES 1906 : 17, DELGADILLO 1991 : 206), other hypotheses were put forward. According to Headrick (1999 : 82), these masks were not attached to corpse bundles hidden inside the tombs, but rather to bundles placed in locations accessible and visible to everyone in order to make the presence of the dead or the ancestors more « tangible ». Corpse bundles of ancestors or important personalities originally kept in tombs or, corresponding to Mixtec tradition, in caves (for example the cave under

the Pyramid of the Sun) were presumably moved to make them more visible and to allow the elites to handle them in public.

According to Martínez (2013), Walsh and Rose (2014), the masks were rather used within the framework of daily rituals and presented in the centre of constructions installed in these palaces and patios. They compare these constructions with the famous « theatre incense burners », terracotta structures composed of multiple symbolic molded elements framing a central figure, usually a mask (stylistically very similar to the stone masks), giving the impression of a stage with curtains on both sides.

The perforations observed on the stone masks may indeed indicate that they were mounted on an amature, a construction. They could also have been used to attach adornments such as ear jewellery, nagueras, elaborate necklaces or headdresses, in the same manner as the faces presented in the centre of the « theatre incense burners ».

Both kinds of support, the constructions and the corpse bundles, composed of perishable materials, have disappeared. Only the stone masks left on the floor of the temples and patios remain.

Article by Aline HUYBRECHTS

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