



Figure

Date

ca. 1500-400 BCE

Primary Maker

Olmec

Medium

jade

Description

This piece, an excellent example of the fine lapidary technique achieved by early artisans, displays the principal iconographic elements of the Olmec style. The figure is carved in the shape of an axe head, although it clearly was not intended for a utilitarian purpose. The nose is wide and the snarling mouth, perhaps the most distinctive trait, opens with a curled upper lip to show a pair of fangs at each corner. The contours of arms and legs have been incised into the figure, helping achieve a harmonious balance of two and three-dimensional elements. Several perforations in the corners of the mouth, the hands, and the ears probably were inlaid with shell or another contrasting material. It has long been proposed that these figures represent the combined features of a human baby and a feline, a mythological “were-jaguar,” with the cleft forehead indicating vegetation emerging from the earth or certain anatomical traits of jaguars. Other interpretations link the cleft with

the regenerative process by which a toad sheds its skin. The large repertoire of hybridized supernatural beings in Olmec art demonstrates a complex understanding of the visual representation of power in metaphors drawn from the surrounding natural environment.

Dimensions

Overall: 6 1/2 x 2 7/8 x 7/8 in. (16.5 x 7.3 x 2.2 cm)