



Pectoral Ornament

Date

ca. 1000-1550

Primary Maker

Gran Coclé

Medium

gold

Description

During the period when this pectoral ornament was created, the Gran Coclé culture flourished in the center of the country. Most ancient gold objects from Panamá have

been found within Gran Coclé sites, especially from burials that also included pottery vessels, tools, weapons, and fabric. According to Spanish records from the sixteenth century, elaborate burial in Panamá was reserved for the chiefs and nobility. Disks similar to this one, typically ranging in size from about four to eight inches in diameter, usually have two holes close to the edge, suggesting that they were worn as chest ornaments. Many of these pectoral ornaments, also known as patenas, are remarkable in their simplicity, with the designs typically restricted to the edges of the disk. Some disks, however, have intricate decoration across the entire surface. Rows of raised dots around the rim are a common motif, however, in this piece the edges have been hammered, creating a rough edge juxtaposed against the smooth center. The reflective quality of these gold disks is striking as well; in the early 1500s, when Christopher Columbus sailed along the Caribbean coast of present-day Costa Rica and Panamá, he reported, “Indians wearing mirrors around their necks.” It is possible that he was referring to gold pectoral ornaments similar to this one, which would have reflected sunlight like mirrors.

Dimensions

Overall: 4 3/8 × 4 1/2 × 1/8 in. (11.1 × 11.4 × 0.3 cm)