

31 Macaw's Head

XOCHICALCO CULTURE

Epiclassic (650–900 AD), Xochicalco, Valley of Morelos

Region: Central Highlands

Basalt, stucco, red and black pigments, 58 x 36 x 44 cm

Inventory: 10-225799

Given its swift, agile flight and brilliant red, yellow and blue plumage, Mesoamerican cultures found a symbolic link between the macaw and fire, the radiant sun and the daytime sky. This head, which is doubtless the best-known work of Xochicalco art, is surprising for its deft abstraction and accomplished geometrism. The sculptor has created an intriguing play of volumes, masterfully combining broad contours, deep negative spaces, and surfaces with well-designed line engravings. The characteristic ring of skin around the macaw's eyes is skillfully portrayed, and so are its angled beak, rounded tongue and plumage pattern.

This piece was incorporated into the collection of the National Museum in 1904 thanks to the archaeologist Leopoldo Batres. It was discovered by accident in May 1903, when the caretaker of Xochicalco, Herculano Verazaluce, was burning off vegetation at “the top of the hill west of the monument under my care”—i.e. in the area west of the famous Temple of the Feathered Serpents. This may indicate that the head formed part of the city's main ballcourt on Mount Xochicalco's western mesa.

All this helps to explain why the sculpture's form resembles that of a Veracruz ballgame *hacha*. It is also significant that several Mesoamerican ballcourts—including A-III in Copan—are decorated with representations of macaws, given that the ballgame was taken as a metaphor for the confrontation between the forces of day and night. The best example of this is Xochicalco's eastern ballcourt, where a ring-shaped stone marker bearing bas-relief images of macaws and bats was discovered in the 1990s.

LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN & MARCO ANTONIO SANTOS

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