



Tufts University Art Galleries Collection Guide

Adorning the Body

Introduction

Adorning one's body is a mode of expression that transcends time, place, and culture. Therefore, the objects used to embellish or enhance one's appearance can offer insights about the maker, the wearer, and the cultural context in which these adornments were worn. The artworks presented in this collection guide provide a variety of perspectives regarding the role of clothes, jewelry, and other wearable objects as they relate to identity, ritual, and power. Exploring body adornments through material, form, and cultural knowledge makes clear their importance beyond their wearability.

Using Art Across Disciplines

This collection guide draws from selections from Tufts University Art Galleries' Permanent Collection. The content presented here is meant to suggest curricular connections, prompt further discussion, and promote interdisciplinary learning. Click on each image to open its record in TUAG's collection database.

Art and visual images can supplement any curriculum across academic disciplines. Engaging with art can help to fine-tune cross-disciplinary skills that complement a variety of research practices and critical-thinking methods. The images and questions offered in this collection guide can prompt educators and learners to:

- Consider how artists visually represent data, tell a more complete story about presented data, or connect emotionally with an audience by presenting data pictorially.
 - Consider the aesthetics of color, shape, line, texture, etc. by looking formally at art. Apply those sensibilities to images in your own work or field:
 - What do I notice first?
 - Where does my eye travel? In what directions?
 - Am I looking at individual parts of an image or at the whole?
 - What do particular colors connote?
 - What has been omitted?
 - What story or message is most prominent?
 - Examine an artwork or group of works as primary source material. How does it relate to or challenge other texts, objects, or archival sources you are reading?
 - Practice perspective or compare ideas cross-culturally. Use an image or work of art to consider others' values and ways of looking.
- Use art to practice asking and honing questions. Consider all of the questions you might have about a given work of art. Think about which types of questions yield more substantive discussions or additional lines of thinking.
 - Look at art as a way to get out of a rut or think creatively about your own work. Consider:
 - How would an artist have presented content related to your field?
 - What information was known about a topic in your discipline at the time this artist was working? How has it evolved?
 - What could be different in this work of art? This situation?
 - Sketch or draw as a way of coming to understand or know the material differently.



Key Questions

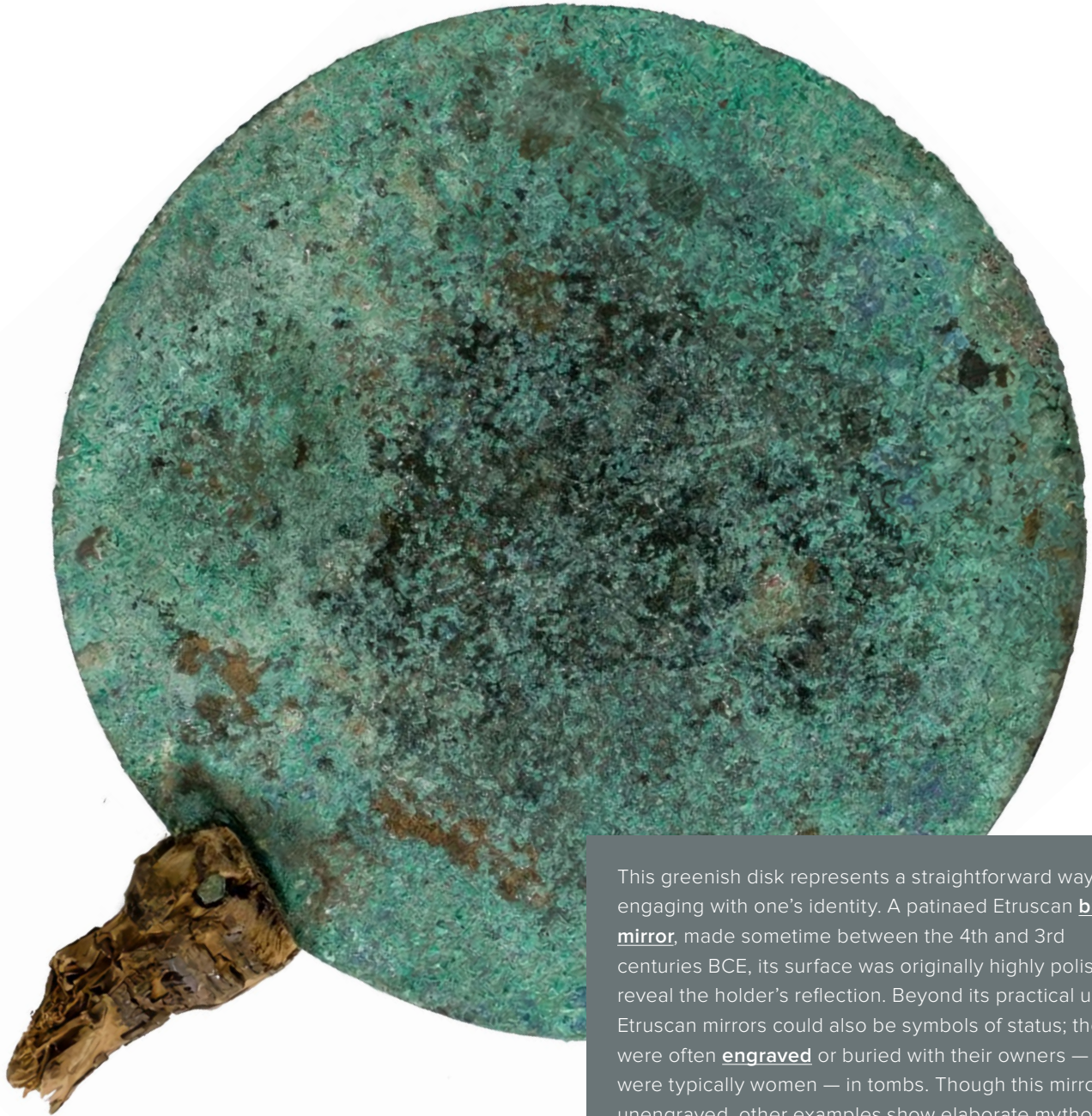
How is personal and cultural identity constructed and communicated through wearable objects?

What can personal adornments tell us about their maker, wearer, and relevant cultural context?

How do wearable objects signal personal or collective power?

Displaying Identity

Central to any discussion of body adornments is their contribution to one's identity formation. What one chooses—or doesn't choose—to wear can signal to others key attributes related to personality, nationality, gender, and status, for example.



This greenish disk represents a straightforward way of engaging with one's identity. A patinated Etruscan **bronze mirror**, made sometime between the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, its surface was originally highly polished to reveal the holder's reflection. Beyond its practical use, Etruscan mirrors could also be symbols of status; they were often **engraved** or buried with their owners — who were typically women — in tombs. Though this mirror is unengraved, other examples show elaborate mythological scenes that might relate to marriages or symbolic gifts between family members. Though mirrors allow for an obvious engagement with one's identity through their reflective surfaces, this Etruscan example presents another way of considering how such objects might operate on a more conceptual level.

Etruscan mirror, 4th-3rd century BCE, bronze, 6.75x5.25 in.
Property of Tufts University School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering,
gift of the Merrin Gallery, TU2002.03.

F. Luis Mora's *Rosemary in Costume (The Doll Nurse)* (c. 1926) features the artist's eight-year-old daughter tending to her doll wearing an elaborate Spanish-style silk shawl and richly decorated dress. Mora was born in Uruguay in 1874 to a Catalanian-Spanish father and French mother but grew up in the United States and attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Instrumental to his artistic development were his trips to Spain with his mother, where he encountered works by Spanish old masters like Diego Velázquez. Mora's decision to paint his daughter wearing a Spanish-style garment exhibits the artist's commitment to passing on his own cultural heritage through wearable signifiers. The High Museum of Art in Atlanta has a **sketch** made by Mora in preparation for the final painting in Tufts' collection.



Rosemary in Costume (The Doll Nurse), Luis Francis Mora, ca. 1926, oil on linen, 67x43 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of The Estate of Frederick Crosby Hodgdon A1894, AI 70117.



Created by the **Zenú** (also known as Sinu) peoples, who lived in present-day Colombia, the set of gold earrings dates from as early as the 2nd century BCE. These earrings are relics of a robust metalworking tradition that, in addition to the geometric style seen here, also took shape as stylized animals and elaborate, weblike filigree designs. Filigreed ornaments, perhaps the best-known extant Zenú objects, symbolically link to the highly sophisticated web of drainage canals the Zenú built to combat flooding from the Caribbean Sea. While the earrings in Tufts' collections feature a different technique, they represent one aspect of a metalworking tradition closely linked with the expression of Zenú community identity through wearable signifiers.

Sinu earrings, 2nd century BCE-16th century CE, gold, 4.5x3in. Property of Tufts University School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, gift of Bernard Sperling, TU1994.42.A-B.

Beverly Semmes's *House Dress* (1990), a technically unwearable garment, provokes judgment about the absent wearer and suggests the dehumanizing nature of stereotypes. Both the title of this work and the object itself call to mind ideas about women, self-image, and body adornment as a signpost of personal and class identity. The artist herself has taken up a politicized role through her choice to work in fiber media, which are often derided as "feminine" crafts rather than fine art.



House Dress, Beverly Semmes, 1990, printed rayon fabric on wooden hanger, 50x72 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of Gerald and Joan Kimmelman, 2006.001.A-B.

The pyxis, another functional object, is a 5th-century BCE Persian example of type of a **typically Greek vessel** meant to hold jewelry or cosmetics. There are innumerable types of pyxis, decorated in different ways and made from a variety of materials, which speaks to their ubiquity in ancient Greece and beyond. Used in daily self-presentation tasks like putting on jewelry and makeup—as well as their occasional use in funeral rites—the pyxis is a key functional object in understanding ancient Greek identity formation.

Persian pyxis with lid, 5th century BCE, bronze, 2.3x5.5 in. Property of Tufts University School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, gift of Charles Merrin, TU1999.13.



Further Discussion

What identity-related signifiers can be communicated through clothes, jewelry, or other body adornments?

Are there limits to what one's dress or appearance can communicate? Where might one draw the line?

Ritual and Ceremony



Symbolic or otherwise significant wearable items are also frequently featured in ritualistic or ceremonial contexts as part of religious or other faith-based practices. Each of the masks shown here are Andean ceremonial masks, possibly used in funeral rites. The mask at left dates from the 11th–14th centuries and was produced by the **Chimú**, a prosperous empire from the northern coast of present-day Peru. Based on records kept by the Inca—the Chimú’s successors—and excavations at Chan Chan, the Chimú capital, we know that they had a pantheon of deities and elaborate burial structures that acted as staging grounds for funerary processions.

Chimú funerary mask, 11th-14th century, wood, clay and pigment, 8x7 in. Property of Tufts University School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, gift of Seth I. Merrin A82 and Anne Heyman, TU1999.11.



This green and red mask, created between the 8th and 12th centuries, originates from the **Sicán** culture, another north-Peruvian Andean populace whose empire overlapped with the Chimú. This mask, among others, would have been used for the funeral rites of a Sicán leader, who were often buried with large caches of offerings. The mask’s “winged” eyes are associated with a Sicán deity, possibly linking the leader with the deity when the mask was placed upon the deceased’s face. These two masks—both used in ceremonial contexts in northern Peru within concurrent empires—show the variety in aesthetic, cosmological, and funerary traditions among the different cultures of the period.

Sicán ceremonial mask, 8th-12th century, copper and pigment, 17.25x25.75 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of Samuel Merrin A85, 2001.03.



The Moche headdress ornament, from the 1st–5th centuries BCE, likely would have been affixed to a cloth head covering (much like the rendering on **this nose ornament**) and **worn by a significant figure**. The Moche culture, located in the Andean region, was not unified by political authority but did shape a common identity through shared religious practices.

Moche headdress decoration, 1st-5th century, copper alloy, 6x17.25 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of Samuel Merrin A85, 1985.6.11.

The stone sculptural form is an *hacha*, a type of wearable sculpture unique to Mexican Gulf Coast culture from the 4th–10th centuries CE. This hacha would be fastened to a yoke tied around a ballplayer's waist. The ballgame was a fixture of Mesoamerican culture, and its rules and customs varied across place and time; however, many versions of the ballgame generated rich visual traditions. *Hachas* took many forms depending on their place of origin, date of creation, and symbolic significance to the ballplayer. The *hacha* at Tufts represents a stylized figure, but other versions represent human and animal heads. Wearing a stone *hacha* along with a stone yoke would have made gameplay difficult, so it is possible that the stone sportswear was used for ceremonial purposes and would be swapped out with lightweight versions once the game began. It is important to note that the term *hacha* originates from the Spanish conquistadors who arrived on Mexico's Gulf Coast in the early 17th century. *Hacha* means axe in Spanish, so the term is also used to describe Mesoamerican stonecutting tools.



The Ethiopian cross pendant (c. 1900), though far more recent than the other objects in this section and originating on a different continent, is no less effective in demonstrating how ritual beliefs are displayed via wearable objects. Portable and wearable crosses are key objects in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, whose adherents created countless variations on the motif with immense decorative and stylistic variation.



Gulf Coast hacha in the form of an old god, 5th-9th century, stone, 6x5 in. Property of Tufts University School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, gift of Bernard Sperling, TU1994.23.

Pendant cross, unidentified Ethiopian artist, ca. 1900, silver, 4.75x2.5 in. Property of Tufts University School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, gift of Dr. B.J. in den Bosch, TU1993.4.H.

Advertising Power



Considering the material, degree of craftsmanship, and symbolic elements of some body adornments can indicate the power and status they would have advertised for the wearer. The pair of earrings at top left originate from **Nabataea**, an ancient Arab kingdom composed of parts of present-day upper Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine. By the time these earrings were created, Nabataea had likely been annexed by the Roman Empire. There are other extant **examples** of Nabataean jewelry that are no less intricate than Tufts' pair, which are made from gold and silver and detailed with tiny spheres of varying sizes covering their surface. These spheres were painstakingly created and attached to the earrings using the **granulation** technique, an ancient method of jewelry making. The owner of such intricate and labor-intensive earrings no doubt would have displayed significant status by wearing them. Two other types of ear ornaments are included in this section, though they differ significantly in cultural context and appearance.



The Chimú ear spool (11th–14th centuries) is made from wood and vibrantly colored feathers. Many prominent people wore ear spools of **various materials** in Andean cultures, and they required that the wearer's lobes be elongated to fit the jewelry.

Nabataean earrings, 1st-2nd century, gold and silver, 2.5x1.75 in. Property of Tufts University School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, gift of Esther Merrin Bronstein, TU1994.55.A-B.

Chimú ear spool, 11th-14th century, wood and feathers, dia. 3 in. Property of Tufts University School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, gift of Bernard Sperling, TU1994.43.

The set of beige earplugs (11th–14th centuries), also Chimú, would have required similarly elongated lobes. These earplugs are intricately carved bones, inlaid with tiny green stones of varying shapes. Textiles, in addition to jewelry, signaled power in Chimú culture. Chimú textile production was highly advanced and allowed for elaborate designs such as the one at the bottom of the loincloth. Likely worn underneath an equally elaborate tunic, this loincloth features a **typical design** at the bottom—a figure wearing a crescent-shaped headdress. Such headdresses have been found in the tombs of important figures in Peru, and the motif possibly imbued the wearer of this loincloth with the spiritual power such headdresses represent.



An even more intricate textile, a multicolored **Nazca** feathered tunic (3rd–7th century), would have been a highly prized object for its wearer. Merchants across the Andean region traded **feathers** from a wide variety of birds through complex networks, making them rare and expensive materials. Therefore, this feather-covered tunic would have been an eye-catching status symbol for its owner.



Chan Chan (Chimú) earplugs, 11th-14th century, bone with stone inlay, 3.5x1.75 in. Property of Tufts University School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, gift of Bernard Sperling, TU1994.49.A-B.

Chimú loincloth, 9th-12th century, cotton and camelid wool, 51.5x15 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of Esther Merrin, 1985.6.15.

Nazca feathered tunic, 3rd-7th century, cotton and feathers, 39x72 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of Samuel Merrin A85, 2001.04.

Further Discussion

What kinds of power are communicated through one's dress?

How is power articulated through wearable objects (material, form, symbolism)?

How do you advertise your personal power via what you put on your body, and how does that compare with the kinds of objects you see here?

Additional Relevant Collection Works

- [Moche necklace bead](#)
- [Mesoamerican skull mask](#)
- [Chimú breastplate](#)
- [Chimú ear spools](#)
- [Olmec pendant](#)

Tufts University Art Galleries