54. Painted Shell Artifacts from California

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Few areas of native North America have produced the quantity of cut shell ornaments of high artistic quality that has been recovered from archaeological sites in California. However, characteristically rare here as elsewhere, have been any artifacts in the form of painted shells.

Traditionally, in California, shells have served multiple purposes. Not the least of these of course is the decorative purpose, and it is easily understandable therefore why the natural coloring or shape of the shell may have been a strong factor in its original selection. For example abalone, because of its lustrous mother-of-pearl interior and species range of red to black exterior, was appreciated primarily for its showy color. On the other hand, some shells, if they were not already white, were often turned white by boiling or by partially calcining them by exposure to heat from a fire. This was especially true of the shell of the Olivella, which in the growing state is an olive green; when the empty shell is heat-treated it turns to a lustrous ivory-white.

Gifford (1947) has discussed and illustrated the wide range of uses of shell in California. The purpose of the present paper is to amplify the record concerning the occurrence of painted shells, since at the time of the latter publication only seven specimens of painted shells were known: two from San Miguel Island and five from Santa Cruz Island. All of these specimens were, as indicated, from the Santa Barbara region; they are all essentially of the same type, are manufactured from the shell of the keyhole limpet (Megathura crenulata), and all show some slight marginal grinding. The shell is painted on the back with a dull red to orange hematite on which a pattern of white spots (pigment not identified) is superimposed. The spots extend to the outer margin of the shell.

Heye (1921, frontispiece) has illustrated in full color a shell of this type. Concerning its occurrence the following is reported (Ibid., p. 156): "Crossing a skeleton were seventeen of the larger keyhole limpet shells . . . no hematite paint was found in the grave but two of the accompanying limpet shells were centrally painted red and were further ornamented with spots of white paint arranged in lines radiating from the orifice of the shell, again suggesting the rays of the sun . . . other shells in the grave bear no trace of paint."

The five specimens of the above type recovered from site C.100 on Santa Cruz Island have been described and designated as type H2d by Gifford (1947, pp. 12, 70). Gifford notes that the white spots on the orange-red background are suggestive of the spotted-fawn painted design of the Miwok water moiety. Although Harrington (1942, Element 1242) lists moieties as present among Chumash groups, not enough specific information is available properly to develop this possible lead.

Recently, a painted M. crenulata shell was recovered for the first time from a mainland coastal shell midden by Dr. C. W. Meighan of the University of California, Los Angeles. The specimen is described (personal communication, 1956) as follows: "The shell is Megathura crenulata; the ends have been broken off and roughly ground but otherwise the shell is not altered. The pattern was applied with some sort of mineral pigment which has disappeared, leaving light spots on the dirtier and more weathered unpainted portions. I think the paint was probably red ochre—if they had had asphalt or almost anything else some of it would probably still be present. However, that's a frank guess. The specimen came from Arroyo Sequit (site 4-LAn-52) and was recovered from a disturbed cemetery area which yielded a number of historic burials (late 18th century glass beads). The whole site appears to be late in time, and I think it certain that the present specimen can't be more than 500 years old."

Meighan's specimen, illustrated here in Fig. 2c, differs from the Channel Island specimens in that it has, in addition to the spots, narrow lines extending from the central opening of the shell to the outer edges. The fact that the design appears in the form of a negative painting is no doubt the result of the unusual nature of the preservation of the shell and the design rather than of a direct, conscious attempt by the aboriginal artist to produce such an effect.

Of the painted Megathura shells from Southern California, it can be said that (1) they are a consistent type showing little variation; (2) they are both Channel Island and mainland in occurrence; (3) they are at least historic in time and probably late prehistoric as well; (4) they probably functioned as a neck ornament; this is suggested by the Heye specimens.

In 1953, L. L. Valdivia recovered two new types of painted shells from site Mrn-17 in the San Francisco Bay area. The village site has never been excavated by archaeologists on a large scale, but other artifacts recovered during several small salvage collections in the area of the site where the painted shells were found suggest a Late Horizon date within the Bay Area archaeological sequence (Beardsley, 1954). Seven shells were found. One type, represented by a single valve of the common food shell Macoma nasuta, shows a coating of hematite over its entire surface (UCMA 1/201998). The second type (e.g. UCMA 1/201997) is also of M. nasuta, and is painted, like the first, on the back; however it is decorated on the inside, not with a coating of hematite, but with a series of parallel wavy lines, connected at one end by a single band at the center of the shell (Fig. 2b). This design is also executed in hematite. Though some of the shells were broken, they occurred as a single cache in a typical refuse lens of Macoma species and gave no indication of any burial or special feature association.

Few comparable items are known which might suggest a possible function for the painted shells from Mrn-17. A slight similarity can be noted between the striped design on the shells and the incised designs on two ceramic figurines from Shasta County, California (see Heizer and Beardsley, 1943, Pl. XXVI a, b). The red parallel bands on the shells may represent the strands of a tule or grass skirt, as is suggested by

the incised lines on the figurines. However, any comparison between painted shells and ceramic figurines must be considered with great care. The only observation which might be significant here is that the two different shell types may represent male and female, and this in Marin County, an area where definite female and probably male type baked clay figurines occur.

Painted stone tablets from the Napa region (Heizer, 1953, fig. 3) show even less visual similarity to the shell specimens, though the suggested use for the stone tablets as ceremonial objects, gaming dice, or gambling counters might apply to the shells as well. Certainly the rarity of painted shells from both ethnological and archaeological sources suggests a decorative or ceremonial use rather than a simple utilitarian (e.g. monetary) function, such as is known for the clam shell disk bead or for dentalia.

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