

Blade (V16.97.3)
China, southeast coast
Neolithic period, Liangzhu culture (ca. 3000-2500 BC)

The jade blade offered as 75th anniversary gift to the Freer by Elizabeth Meyer Lorentz is an extremely handsome object, its shape marred only by the chip off one edge of the blade. The large hole, drilled from both sides, is typical of such axes. The glossy, mirror-like polish on the unaltered surface is exceptionally beautiful, enhanced by the deep variegated tones of the stone.

Axes of this shape, some in similar variegated material have been recovered from Liangzhu contexts along the southeast coast of China.¹ An example in the Nanjing Museum, recovered from the outskirts of Nanjing in 1956, appears even to have the same high polish.² It is conceivable, given the similarities of shape and material, that this ax may have come from similar contexts. The Freer collection has only one other example of this type. In its high polish and near-pristine condition, this is clearly superior to the existing example in the collection.

Particularly interesting is the ax's material (see technical report), which suggests a non-nephritic stone that is harder than any example we know to date (7-7.5 compared to nephrite's 6.6.5). It is an important example of this new material in ancient China's Neolithic context, and one that will be useful as a benchmark for comparison with similar materials from excavated contexts (e.g. the blades from Nanjing and Jiangsu cited above). Confirmation of the use of this considerably harder material in Liangzhu jade-working contexts will have important implications on the culture's nephrite working methods and implements.

For its aesthetic appeal, and intriguing mineralogical properties, I would support the acquisition of this ax into the Freer's permanent collection.

PROVENENCE

According to Tom Lawton, the ax has been in the Meyer family collection for some time. It is unclear whether the ax has ever been published. If further documentation is required, this should be obtained from Mrs. Lorentz, or from Tom Lawton.

Prepared by Jenny F. So, July 1997

¹ See *Liangzhu wenhua yuqi* (Hong Kong: 1989), nos. 223-24, examples from the Shanghai and Jiangsu Wu Xian areas.

² See *Art Treasures from the Nanjing Museum Collection* (Tokyo: 1981), no. 5 where it is simply described as a "polished stone" ax.