

Ceramic Object Description

Sheba Karim: Writer-in-Residence, Department of English, Vanderbilt University

Revive 2022

The object is round and was once used as decoration, or possibly to serve fruit. It has a very wide, slightly sloped rim and a sunken middle. In the center of the sunken middle is another circle, except this circle rises up, like a small, round hill. Looking down at the work, there are three circles, the outer rim, the inner rim, and the circular base of the hill in the center.

The circumference of the entire work is roughly 16 inches. The rim is about as wide as large pear, 6 inches or so, and has a delicate slope. The circumference of the sunken middle is close to two pears, or about 10 inches, and the round hill in the very center is the width of an apple lying on its side, maybe 4-5 inches. The vertical height of the work from the edge of the outer rim to the ground is about 4 inches. The peak of the center hill is about 1 inch high.

There are three colors in this work, tan, bronze, and blue. The entire work is painted in a fleshy, light tan. Almost all of the decorative elements are painted in bronze. The bronze still has a slight shine, and when it was first made it must have had quite a lovely shimmer.

The work is decorated in nine bands, some solid, some patterned.

The first band, along the outer rim, is a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch solid band of the bronze. Some of it is wearing off, exposing bits of tan “flesh” beneath.

Next comes the second band, the work's largest. It takes up almost the entire rim. It's a patterned band of repeating flowers and stems, painted in bronze. The flower is composed of two separate flowers. The bottom flower is tubular, like a tulip. The bottom of the tulip is narrower than the top, which is unevenly scalloped. The bottom is about 1/3 inch wide, the top almost an inch. Sticking up from the center of the tulip is a narrow stem, drawn in two lines. The stem is short, about 3 inch long and 1/8 inch wide. From this stem grows the top flower. This flower is more fanciful, and unlike any real flower. It's drawn as a 1/2 inch wide circle that comes to a point at the top. Three 1/2 inch thick lines, shaped like a Y, divide the flower into three parts. The flower resembles an upside down pretzel. The flowers are roughly the same size, but each one is different, the three parts in the top flower are not symmetrical; the Y is a little more to the left in one, or to the right in another, or a little narrower in one, or a little fatter in another, in one the top two legs of the Y curve out more, in another they curve less, etc.

These flowers are not painted straight up and down, they all lean to the right, as if being blown by a wind.

A two-lined stem (the same style as the stem of the upside down pretzel flower) grows out from the bottom of the tulip, on the right side. This stem sweeps up alongside each flower all the way to the band at the outer rim. Just below the first outer band, the stem splits into two. There's a 1/2 inch flower shaped like a ball halfway up the stem, and another 1/2 inch ball flower right where it splits.

The third band is along the inner edge of the rim, a narrow strip of solid bronze, about 1/3 inch wide.

The fourth band is right below the inner rim, where the sunken middle begins to slope. It is a band of solid blue, about 1/3 inch wide. Up until now, the colors have been light tan and bronze, so this blue band really pops, delighting the eye. The blue has lost most of its brilliance, but it must have once made a striking contrast against the light tan and shimmery bronze.

As we follow the shallow slope down, the band of blue is followed by the fifth band, a 1/2 inch band of solid bronze.

The sixth band is tan, decorated with a repeating bronze pattern. The pattern is two pairs of parallel diagonal lines that cross each other somewhat haphazardly...imagine little bronze tic tac toe boards, except instead of intersecting at 90 degree angles the two sets of parallel lines intersect at random diagonals. The spaces formed by the intersecting parallel line are asymmetrical, many too small to write a little X or O. The “tic tac toe” boards are about 1/2 inch long, with a 1/4 inch between each one, and they are about 45 within the band. No two are exactly the same. The tic tac toe boards are sandwiched between two circular bronze lines, except that at some point both the outer line and inner line disappear into the fifth and seventh band, respectively.

Next is the seventh band, solid bronze, about an inch thick.

This brings us to the base of the hill, which is edged in a 1/3 inch band of solid tan. This is the eighth band. This band slopes upward slightly.

The ninth band is band of solid bronze, a little less than 1/3 inch. Five pairs of small Shapes dangle from this band. If the orientation is towards the very center, then these Shapes hang upside down from the band, like bats. The Shapes have indistinct figures, one is a lumpy circle, one a kind of trapezoid. One is shaped like a slice of sandwich bread. Though these five pairs of Shapes are all placed around the band, the pairs are not evenly spaced from one other. The Shapes are less than 1/2 inch long, like a baby's thumbnail.

From here, the tan hill, about 4 inches wide, rises to its round peak. At the very center is a leaping bronze bunny. The bunny is about 3 inches wide and slightly off-center, as if it's leaping forward, its front legs starting to come down to the left, its back legs a little higher. It is in mid-leap, its front legs almost touching the ninth band. If the bunny were to kick out its furthest back leg, it would knock one of the Shapes off the band. The bunny's leaping legs are long, with a hint of gazelle. The bunny has very long ears, the tops of which smack against the brown band that encircles it.

The lovely band of blue draws your eye of the center, and the bunny keeps it there. Where is this bunny going? Is it chasing? Being chased? On a merry adventure?

The bunny is in motion, and so is rest of the work; the flowers and stems have a wave to them, are swaying to a breeze. There is motion in the way the stem splits off at the top, each aide disappearing inside the very first band, and in the haphazardly slashed "tic tac toe" boards. One pair of Shapes hanging from the brown band look like they're about to be blown off by a strong wind. Though most art from this period and culture emphasizes symmetry and mathematical

accuracy as a way in invoking the beauty of the Divine, this artist has instead chosen a different path of playful whimsy.

Over the centuries, the colors have lost some of their brilliance and intensity. There's some yellow discoloration on the bronze flowers. The bronze paint is wearing off in bits and pieces, and the bunny's middle is riddled with holes, revealing the tan-like flesh beneath. There's a hole in one of the pretzel flowers, like a worm burrowed its way inside. In the exact center, the peak of the hill, there's a round smudge, like someone pressed their thumb against the bunny's middle. There's at least one crack through the rim. There's a random, tiny bronze spot on the tan hill, an inch or so underneath the bunny's chest. Is it intentional?

We will never know. We can only look and admire this work, which feels beautiful, whimsical, imperfect and free.