

61 A GLAZED LIMESTONE OWL

Ancient Bactria, 3rd millennium BC
Size: 23 cm high



The comparison between this Owl and the carved-stone Bear (previous pages) is very instructive, even though both remain shrouded in mystery. They come from the same general area, but it may be that millennia separated their manufacture. The contrast is striking, however, because while the Bear looks back to the most ancient tradition of sculpture, this Owl anticipates a new age.

It arrived as a group of fragments in an old shoe-box, where it had lain for half a century or more. Nothing is missing apart from the tip of an ear, Colin Bowles assured me when he returned it reassembled. As I looked at it for the first time, I had the distinct impression that what I was looking was at the perfect impersonation of an owl by a piece of stone. It seemed quite as likely that a piece of stone could render the quizzical expression of an owl by pulling a face, as that a stone-chipper in a remote Bactrian oasis some 5,000 years ago could do the same. I questioned Colin again later about the slight skew of the beak, which is part of what animates the face and allows one to imagine his hoot, and he was adamant that its position is original.

Holes at the back of the head suggest it was once part of an incense-burner. The technique of glazing limestone to look like marble is occasionally encountered among ancient Bactrian sculptures, and the shine that remains at the top of the head shows how attractive this can be. Faience beads were similarly treated to resemble semi-precious stones.