Earring

Place of origin: Europe
Date: 600-700 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Gold, pierced
Museum number: M.6&A-1970
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 8, The William and Eileen Ruddock Gallery, case 13

Public access description

Earrings such as these were not just precious jewels. They also made a statement about the faith of their wearer. During the late Roman era the motif of two peacocks flanking a well or vase (a so-called kantharos) occurred in Christian contexts. The emblem remained popular as a Christian motif in the Byzantine era. The pierced-work technique used to create the design is called opus interrasile, a method of forming patterns by making openings in flat metal surfaces. This technique highlights the play of light and shadow, and was one of the more innovative jewelry-making methods used in Late Antique and Early Byzantine styles.

Descriptive line

A pair of crescent-shaped gold earrings, the pierced-work decoration depicting two stylised peacocks drinking from a well, Byzantine Empire, 7th century

Physical description

A pair of crescent-shaped gold earrings, the outer border formed by a thin strip soldered perpendicular to the thin sheet of metal in which are pierced the main decorative motifs of the earring - two birds facing each other, drinking from a vase set between them, above a scrolling border. The outer border is decorated with nine balls of gold (soldered); the large hoop is separately made.

Dimensions

Height: 5.5 cm, Width: 4 cm

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Historical context note

These crescent shaped earrings are executed in openwork technique, the background has been removed with a fine chisel to leave a silhouette of the desired bird and vase forms. Birds flanking vases are found on other earrings such as two cruder examples in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks (BZ.1953.12.96 and BZ.1965.15 a pair said to have come from Constantinople and dated late 6th / 7th century). Peacocks are the most frequently represented.

Earrings such as these were not just precious jewels. They also made a statement about the faith of their wearer. During the late Roman era the motif of two peacocks flanking a well or vase (a so-called kantharos) occurred in Christian contexts (Marzinzik 2003). The emblem remained popular as a Christian motif in the Byzantine era. Crescent-shaped earrings are also found with peacocks flanking a tree of life or decorated with crosses, geometric motifs or single birds. Such imagery was not limited to earrings of the period, but was also found on bracelets, necklaces, buckles and pendants. The variety of uses of the imagery suggest that it may have had apotropaic connotations for the wearer as a symbol of long life and protection from evil in this life and the next. These qualities would have been enhanced by the intrinsic value of the material value of the earrings. Because gold never lost its monetary value such jewelry was a form of portable wealth, emphasising status. It is suggested by Zwirn that earrings like the present example may have been suitable as dowry gifts, "for short term enjoyment and as a long term asset".

A pair of similar earrings in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection have been dated to the seventh century on the basis of a technical comparison with a necklace found on Lesbos with coins of Phocas and Heraclius. Other examples of earrings have been found throughout the Mediterranean region, some as far north as Germany.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O111110/earring-unknown/