

Priest Wearing Flayed Skin/Xipe Totec Veracruz, Mexico
Purchase 1973 ca 250-550
#4157.1

God of Vegetation/Springtime or Xipe Totec (pronounced she pay To Tec) or his priest wearing a Flayed Skin:
Gallery Description: The rites associated with the cult of Xipe required a human sacrifice. A priest would wear the victims flayed skin, possibly as a symbol of the renewal of the earth that occurs in the Spring. In this figure, which represents the priest, the lips are visible through the mouth of the figure and the ridges on the arms and legs indicate the skin pulled over the priests body. feathers, human hair or sprigs of greenery or flowers would have been placed in the holes on the figures head.

Background and Subject :

The deity represented by the man Xipe-impersonator was common to the Zapotecs, Mixtec and may have originated in Oaxaca. It is also associated with Teotihuacan, Toltec and Aztec cosmology. Probably this deity has been around for a long time because he is a fertility god. Literally he is "Our Lord who is Flayed" in Nahuatl, signifying that he lacks most of his original skin. What is seen is a layer of dead skin from another body and it can clearly be identified by the extra hands or feet hanging free at the images' wrists and ankles. Xipe is basically an agricultural deity, especially because his skinless body acts as a metaphor for the necessity of a seed to emerge from its husk before it can grow. The 'costume' that we see in this image was typical for this god to whom the actual ritual and hymns and prayers were dedicated at the time of the planting of the corn. In those rituals, a priest donned the skin of a victim, representing in this sense the dead covering of the earth in the dry season of winter before the new vegetation bursts forth in spring. Xipe then is the divine embodiment of life emerging from the dead land, of the new plant sprouting from the 'dead' seed. Death is not an end, but always a beginning; the dead seed is the promise of the corn. Some Aztec images show the skin knotted across the back of the head of the priest.

From Mary Flinn's medical tour -we see that the priest might not wear the skin himself but give it to a person who is in need of healing from some malady. He would then wear the skin for several weeks. The actual wearing of the skin and then the surgical removal was a curing ritual for skin and eye disorders.

The idea of transformation could also be discussed here- moving from one plane of existence to another (physical/spiritual worlds). This has a long history in Mesoamerica and is behind ritual bloodletting as well as the offering of human sacrifice. However, 'renewal' and 'regeneration' and 'rebirth' were not concepts that the Conquistadors clearly understood and needless to say were horrified to see the sacrifice activities of 16th century Tenochtitlan.

Medium and Technique and style: The figure is a hand modeled and buffed red terra cotta image made in the early Classic period on the Gulf Coast of Mexico. The image is hollow with holes on the head. The artist used different colored clays to show the inner priest and the outer dead skin. It is seated with legs crossed and his hands on his knees. Areas such as the chest have been softly modeled. It is very realistic and you can clearly see the figure underneath this skin.

Resources:

Markman. *The Flayed God*. 1992

Miller and Taube. *The Gods and Symbols Of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*. 1993.

Information on this piece was written by James Jensen and is reproduced below:

Jensen, James F. "Honolulu Academy of Arts, Sculptures of the Americas, Africa and Oceania." IN *Apollo*, Vol.CIX, No 204, p. 54-55. February, 1979.

"The Gulf Coast area of Veracruz later became an important centre of production of ceramic sculpture. A seated figure from southern Veracruz later became an important centre of production of ceramic sculpture. A seated

figure from southern Veracruz, dated AD 250-550, represents a man impersonating Xipe, the god of goldsmiths and of spring. The classical poise and balance of this figure, with its smoothly modeled tubular limbs and beautifully detailed hands and feet, give it a simple elegance characteristic of the best Veracruz art. The seeming serenity of the figure provides almost no hint of the gruesomeness of the rites connected with the cult of Xipe, which required that a human victim be sacrificed and his flayed skin put on by a priest, perhaps as a symbol of the renewal and new covering of vegetation that Nature manifests in the spring. Later Xipe images, especially those of the Aztecs, are often startlingly graphic in their portrayals, showing the stitching together of the sacrificial victim's mutilated skin and his severed hands dangling at the priest's wrists. In the Veracruz sculpture, however, the only indications of this bizarre practice are the lips of the priest visible through the victim's open mouth and the slightly raised ridges on the lower arms representing the victim's skin pulled over that of the priest. The perforations in the upper part of the head, a feature which appears on other Veracruz figures including other (though by no means all) Xipe images, were perhaps for human hair or possibly for feathers, sprigs of greenery or flowers to ornament the sculptures."

