

Two-Faced

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Life and Death

The following set of artifacts reveals just a portion of a vast cache of split-faced sculptures that were produced throughout the cultures of Mesoamerica. The first example is a fragmented head of a Zapotec child that was associated with Pitao Bezelao, the god of death (Figure 1). This split face is classified as a funerary head chronicling the eternal process of human destiny from the vitality of youth to the disintegration of death in one startling image.¹ When the image is split and each side mirrored, the left side features a sullen-faced child wearing a frown. The right side has a skull-like face displaying a distinct grin.



Figure 1

Zapotec funerary head (fragment)
Left: Split faced life and death mask
Center: Life - left side duplicated
Right: Death - right side duplicated
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(Image source: National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

A second example of the Mesoamerican perception of duality is found in a striking pottery mask from a grave at Tlatilco, Mexico (Figure 2). One half of this bifurcated mask is a human face with a protruding tongue. The companion side features the halved skull of a feline, possibly a jaguar. The feline skull has a prominent set of teeth and displays a “knob” feature on the side of the head that looks like the remnants of an ear.



Figure 2

Human and jaguar skull mask

Left: Conjoined human face with jaguar skull

Center: Human face - left side duplicated

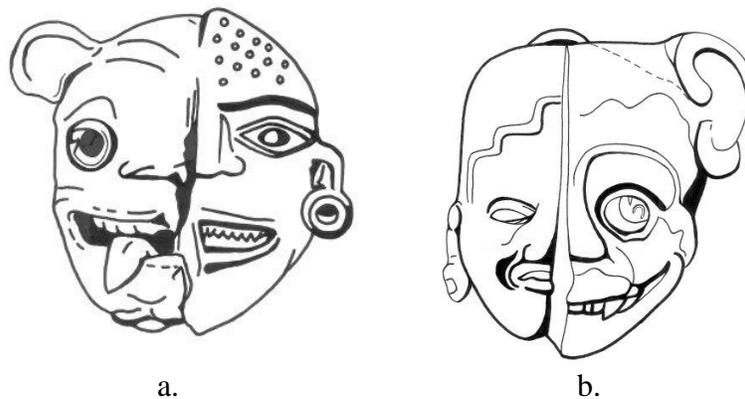
Right: Jaguar skull - right side duplicated

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(Image source: *The Flayed God: The Mythology of Mesoamerica* by Markman)

Human and Feline

Here are two more examples of pre-Columbian two-faced artworks that exhibit the split faces of a human and jaguar head (Figure 3).



a.

b.

Figure 3

Human and Jaguar Faced Artwork.

a. Jaguar and Male Human Face

Image source: *The International Museum of the Ceramics in Faenza, Italy*

b. Female Human and Jaguar Face

Image source: *Ceremonial Sculpture of Ancient Veracruz, 1987.*

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The third example is a bifurcated mask of a jaguar and human male face (Figure 3). On the left, we find a jaguar face with a broad muzzle and a rounded ear. Notice the protruding tongue and what appear to be human teeth. The human male face on the right side has a broad nose, an almond-shaped eye, an upper row of filed jagged teeth (a common practice among the Maya) and he wears a small ear spool.

The last example is a small mold-made pendant that features a split face of a human female and jaguar head (Figure 3). The human visage on the left has been identified as a female because of the stepped hairdo, which is normally worn by Mayan women.² The right side features a jaguar with a large eye and shape fangs. There is also a serpent-like ornament attached to the ear.

Notice that all of these examples of split, half-faces are frontal views that are split right down the middle.

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Footnote

1. Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti and Licia Ragghianti Collobi, **Great Museums of the World: National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City** (New York: Newsweek Inc. and Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1970), 85. The Maya and Aztec produced a variety of bifurcated sculptures and masks depicting similar life and death motifs.

2. Dr. Marilyn M. Goldstein, *Ceremonial Sculpture of Ancient Veracruz*, (Long Island University/New York, 1987), p.66.