

Half faced (Cut in Half)

by George J. Haas

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Pendants and Masks

The first example of a half face sculpture is of an Olmec portrait carved into a large jade pendant found in Bagaces, Guanacasta (Figure 1). This half image is perfectly split through the forehead, including the nose and mouth. The only way to complete the image is by mirroring. However, because of the recognizable subject matter, no mirroring is needed here. It should also be noted that because of the precise placement of the suspension hole just above the eye, the pendant hangs perfectly straight.¹



Figure 1

Olmec Half Faced Pendant (jade)

Note the face is not in profile, it's a frontal view that has been cut in half, right down the middle.

Drawing by George J. Haas

(Image source: *The Olmec & Their Neighbors*, Anatole Pohorilenko, 1981 p.319)

This remarkable Olmec pendant is comparable in design to a half-faced mask produced hundreds of years later by the Indians of North America (Figure 2). Just as we see in the Olmec mask, a Kwakiutl mask is half-faced and carved in a full frontal presentation that is split in half (Figure 2a). A second example of a half faced mask comes to us from the Yupik Indians (Figure 2b). Although the mask is cut in half, the frontal view of the face features a full mouth, on the right side. The presence of these two North American Indian masks further emphasizes the common iconographic motifs shared by the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

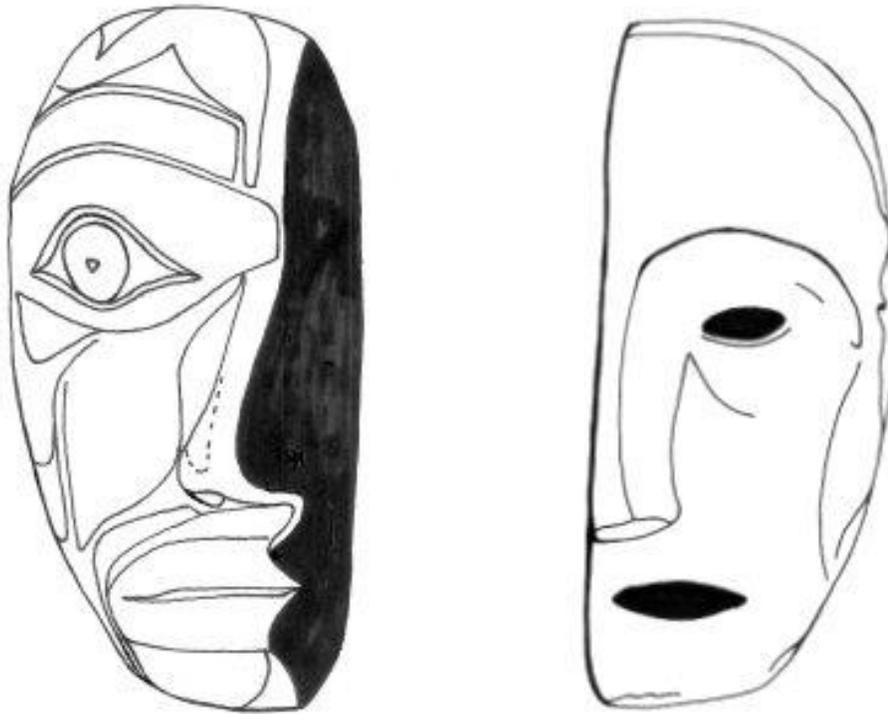


Figure 2

American Indian Half Faced Masks

Left: Kwakiutl Mask (wood)
Drawing by George J. Haas

(Image source: *The Cultures of Native North Americans*, Christian F. Feest, 2000, p.447)

Right: Yupik Mask (wood)
Drawing by George J. Haas
(Image source: Ann Fienup Riordan)

Half faced images were also produced throughout South America. Half faced portraits such as the one seen on a painted Chavin textile (Figure 3) is a prevalent motif found in the artworks of the Peruvian Indians. Notice the partial nose and grinning mouth with large saber tooth fangs



Figure 3

Chavin Half Face

(Detail of textile fragment)

Drawing by George J. Haas

(Image source: The Ancient Americans Art from Sacred Landscapes, by Richard F. Townsend)

Geoglyphs

Besides masks and textiles examples of half faced portraits were also executed in the form of gigantic earthworks. Just to the north of the city of Lima, in the Supe Valley of Peru are the expansive ruins of Caral. Just beyond this ancient complex of mounds and partially buried pyramids is an immense half-faced geoglyph formed into the surface of this once sacred ground (Figure 4).



Figure 4
Half Faced Geoglyph (Caral)
Drawing by George J. Haas
(Image source: Smithsonian Magazine, August 2002)

Notice the D-shaped head with its large gaping mouth and raked hair. It should be noted that this partial face is not carved in profile but is intentionally designed in a “cut in half” manner and like the two-faced geoglyphs found on Mars, the Caral halved face is also meant to be seen from high above the ground.

GLYPHS

Along with half faces, the cultures of Mesoamerica also produced half images of symbols and graphic glyphs. A rectangular bar pendant produced by the Olmec features a set of "half glyphs" carved vertically down the face of the bar (Figure 5). Because the half glyphs on this pendant are not complete they can only be correctly identified when they are "reconstructed" by mirroring them.

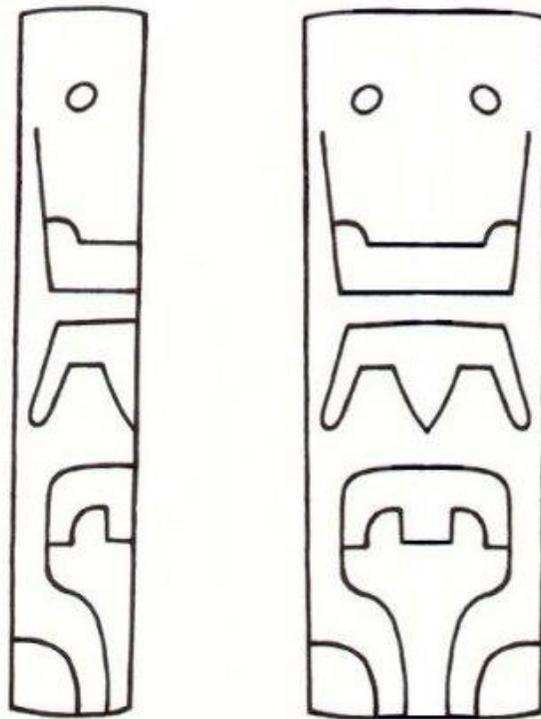


Figure 5

Bar pendant with half glyphs.

Note reconstructed (mirrored/duplicated) glyphs on the right.

Drawing by George J. Haas

(Image source; after Robert J. Twardzik, *The Olmec & Their Neighbors*, Anatole Pohorilenko, 1981 p.320)

According to archaeologists Anatole Pohorilenko, when the glyphs are duplicated along the right side of the pendant, they are "restored" and then appear quite familiar (Figure 5). The glyphs have been identified by Pohorilenko as follows; "the first glyph is a open-ended cartouche with a double line base. The second is a down turned E motif, while the last is seen as a common torch motif."²

Upper and Lower Worlds

These cut in half artifacts were originally complete objects, which were ceremonially cut in half and placed in graves as burial offerings. It is believed by archaeologists that after a member of the elite died some of his personal objects were cut in half and one half was placed with the deceased and the other half was given to a family member.³

Although separate these individual halves were considered complete representations of the whole figure. Like an individual element of a holograph that retains the entire image, this Mesoamerican concept known as *pars-pro-toto*, enables any part of an object to be used as a representation the whole.⁴ Therefore, this is act of cutting the object in half embraces the duality of life and death. It creates two equal parts of the whole that represents mirrored reflections of two opposing worlds – one side embodies the living force, while the other side descends to the realm of the underworld.

Archaeologists have utilized the technique of mirroring or as they like to call it "duplicating" half images of figurative and graphic forms to complete the image. Unfortunately many critics dismiss this technique and are unaware of the long tradition of composite art produced in Pre-Columbian cultures and have prematurely excluded the half, bifurcated and polymorphic model from their criteria for establishing artificiality.

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Footnotes

1. Michael D. Coe and David Grove, *The Olmec & Their Neighbors; Essays in Memory of Matthew W. Stirling*, (Washington, D. C. Dumbarton Oaks, 1981), 318.
2. Ibid., p.320.
3. Mark Miller Graham, *Jade In Ancient Costa Rica*,(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), p.53.
4. Marlin Calvo Mora, *Gold, Jade, Forests: Costa Rica*, (University of Washington Press, 1995), p.51.