



Head

On display

Title/Description: Head

Born: 0600 c. - 0900 c.

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Earthenware

Measurements: h. 158 x w. 183 x d. 96 mm

Accession Number: 507

Historic Period: Late Classic period (AD 600-900), 7th Century, 10th century

Production Place: Los Cerros, Mesoamerica, Mexico, The Americas, Veracruz

School/Style: Remojadas style

This 'Smiling Head' exemplifies the creativity and craftsmanship of Veracruz artisans during the Classic Period (AD 600–900). Most likely broken from a complete figure, this terracotta piece is part of a larger group of 'Smiling Figures' or *sonrientes* (in Spanish). It stands out for its expressive smile—something rare in Mesoamerican art, where emotional expressions are uncommon. These figures have been found primarily in temple offerings and burial sites across Veracruz, often intentionally broken or decapitated, suggesting they played a role in rituals.

The head features a trapezoidal headdress adorned with intricate low-relief designs, including scrollwork, circular forms, and possibly profile depictions of human and serpent heads. Comparable examples, with nearly identical headdresses, have been documented by scholars such as Miguel Covarrubias, Alfonso Medellín Zenil, and Samuel Lothrop, linking this piece to the rich artistic traditions of the Remojadas culture in Veracruz. These sculptures were typically created using moulds to form the basic shape, with ornaments or costume details added by hand. This combination of standardisation and individual craftsmanship highlights the skill and ingenuity of Veracruz artisans.

As María José Reyes Parroquín points out, the production techniques of these figures reflect their cultural importance. She also notes the rarity of emotional expressions in Mesoamerican art, making these *sonrientes* especially unique. Their joyful smiles may connect them to ceremonies that celebrated music, dance, and communal joy, underscoring their role in bringing people together. Mary Ellen Miller and Karl Taube propose that many of these figures represent performers, highlighting the importance of music, dance, and theatrical expressions in Veracruz culture. Richard Diehl suggests that these figures likely played a role in group ceremonies, fostering social cohesion and communal joy, while Sandra Ladrón de Guevara expands on this idea, suggesting that their exaggerated smiles may represent transcendent states experienced during rituals.

Despite these insights, the exact purpose of the 'Smiling Figures' is still debated. Medellín Zenil's 1952 excavations uncovered fragments in ceremonial centres, but it is unclear whether they were discarded due to damage or as part of rituals. Other theories link them to altered states induced by hallucinogens or pulque, suggesting their importance in ceremonial life.

Dr Sanja Savkic Sebek

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Further Reading

Covarrubias, Miguel. 1957. *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Diehl, Richard. 1981. *Death Gods, Smiling Faces, and Colossal Heads: Archaeology of the Mexican Gulf Lowlands*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Publications in Anthropology.

Ladrón de Guevara, Sara. 1999. 'Sonrisas de piedra y barro: Iconografías prehispánicas de la Costa del Golfo de México.' *Revista Xalapa* 75: 25-34.

Lothrop, Samuel K. 1964. *Treasures of Ancient America: The Arts of the Pre-Columbian Civilizations from Mexico to Peru*. Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira.

Medellín Zenil, Alfonso. 1960. *Cerámicas del Totonacapan*. Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, Instituto de Antropología.

Miller, Mary Ellen, and Karl Taube. 1993. *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Reyes Parroquín, María José. 2013. 'Las figurillas sonrientes: un estudio diacrónico de su función.' Master's thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Exhibitions

London Art Fair, Business Design Centre, London - 22/01/25 - 26/01/25

Provenance

According to the vendor, it was excavated at Las Remojadas, Veracruz.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Furman Gallery, New York in 1973.

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 1993.
