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SHRUNKEN HEADS – TSANTSAS

Shrunken heads of the Upper Amazon

In many cultures, including our own, the taking of heads from enemies has been a socially approved form of violence with deep religious and cultural meanings. Not seen simply as murder, it has been a way of maintaining social order. Elaborate rituals surrounded the killing of the victim and the display of the head.

The tsantsas or shrunken heads on display in the Pitt Rivers Museum are from the Upper Amazon region of South America between Peru and Ecuador. They were made by Shuar and Achuar peoples, distinct tribes with similar cultures. These people live in densely forested jungle; the women grow manioc, maize, beans, squash, and tobacco and the men hunt and fish. The Shuar and Achuar no longer take or shrink the heads of enemies. The practice ended by the 1960s. These peoples still live in their homelands, and their battles today are to retain control over land and resources.



Historically, men from these tribes took enemy heads to capture souls and harness their power for their own people. After European contact, shrunken heads also became valuable trade items, being exchanged for guns and metal goods.

Shrunken heads were made by skinning the head and discarding the skull and brain. The skin was immersed in hot water and then hot sand was poured in. The hot sand treatment was repeated several times over a period of months. Facial features were moulded by hand after each treatment. The eyes and mouth were closed with cotton string and the face was blackened with vegetable dye to prevent the soul from escaping and seeking revenge on the killer.

The head was then strung on a cord and worn at three ritual feasts, held over the course of a year or more, by the man who had taken it. During these rituals, the captured soul was adopted into the killer's group and its power transferred to

members of that group. The head was addressed by kinship terms during these rituals. After they were completed, the soul was thought to have been completely absorbed into the new group and the head itself was thought to be unimportant. Some shrunken heads were kept; most often, however, they were traded away.

English explorers collected shrunken heads because they saw them as exotic curiosities. The *tsantsas* in the Pitt Rivers Museum were collected between 1871 and 1936. Due to the demand for shrunken heads by museums and private collectors many counterfeits were made. These were most often produced from animals such as monkey or goat heads, but some were made from unclaimed bodies in morgues and hospitals.

It is sometimes difficult to tell apart real and counterfeit *tsantsas*. Counterfeit heads tend to be less elaborately prepared and decorated. Facial hair was not singed off as it was on real *tsantsas*, the skins of which have a polished appearance. The lips show no signs of perforation by the wooden pins used during authentic shrinking processes and are sewn together with light threads instead of heavy cotton cords. Also the top of the head was not pierced for the suspending string.

Museums today are developing new relationships with the communities from which collections were acquired historically, and are working with members of those communities to consider the meanings that objects have today. Much thought has also been given by museums to the ethics of displaying human remains. The Pitt Rivers Museum periodically reviews sensitive displays such as that of the *tsantsas* to consider whether the way in which the objects are displayed is respectful and to ensure that the information about the objects is appropriate and clearly communicated. We learn many things from the *tsantsas*, including the rich variety of ways of being human.

Further reading

Descola, Phillipe, *The Spears of Twilight: Life and Death in the Amazon jungle*. Translated from the French by Janet Lloyd. London: HarperCollins (1996).

Rubenstein, Steven L., 'Shuar Migrants and Shrunken Heads Face to Face in a New York Museum.' *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 20, no. 3 (June 2004), pp. 15-19.

Available from the Museum shop:

Peers, Laura, *Shrunken Heads*. Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum (2011).

The *tsantsas* can be found at the following location:

Court (ground floor)

Case 131A - Treatment of Dead Enemies

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