



ORGANIZACION DE LOS ESTADOS AMERICANOS  
ORGANIZAÇÃO DOS ESTADOS AMERICANOS  
ORGANISATION DES ETATS AMERICAINS  
ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Set No. 224

Ecuador: Shrunken Head

Tsantsa (Shrunken head)  
13x8.6x11 cm.  
No. 1-20-83R  
Shuar group

The Jivaros (or "Shuara," as they refer to themselves), live in the Amazon region of eastern Ecuador along the Rios Morona, Santiago and their tributaries. The practice of shrinking heads among these people persisted well into the mid-20th century. According to Mathew W. Stirling, there is archaeological evidence that the Jivaros were the last group to practice what was at one time a widespread custom in northwestern South America.<sup>1</sup> Depictions of shrunken heads can be found on pre-Columbian Peruvian textiles and Nasca ceramic vessels.

Among the Jivaros an enemy's head was taken as a trophy on behalf of the killer's departed relatives to fulfill obligations of blood revenge. The head was thought to possess a magical spirit which had to be captured so that it would not take revenge.

In order to prepare the severed head, an incision was made from the crown to the base of the neck. The skin, with the hair intact, was removed from the skull in one piece, and the skull discarded. Then, the incision was sewn together. The eyelids were also stitched closed, and the lips skewered with bamboo splinters and lashed with cotton cord. To remove loose flesh the head was immersed several times in almost-boiling water. During this procedure the head was reduced to about one-third of its original size. After the water bath, hot sand and heated pebbles were poured into the head to hasten the drying process. Warm stones rubbed over the exterior helped smooth the skin and remove fat. To complete the tanning process the head was rubbed with ashes and hung over a smouldering fire. The splinters & lashing were removed from the lips, and they were sewn together with decorative cotton strings. Important rituals and ceremonies accompanied the preparation and shrinking of the head.

<sup>1</sup>Mathew W. Stirling, Historical and Ethnographical Material on the Jivaro Indians (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), p. 61.



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- 224A Frontal view of shrunken head with feather headdress.
- 224B Side view of head. Notice the profuse facial hair.
- 224C Three-quarter view of head, showing the ornamented, woven lip cords.
- 224D Back view of head and headdress, clearly showing the neck incision.
- 224E Profile of head, showing details of the feather headdress. Notice the variety and colors of feathers used in it.
- 224F Close-up of face with detail of facial hair and braided lip cord.
- 224G Detail of ear. Notice the pores of the skin, which are clearly visible.
- 224H Detail of nose and eye area with stitched eyelid.
- 224I Back of neck with detail of sewn incision.
- 224J View of head in repose, showing interior of the neck.

Photographs by Angel Hurtado  
Research and text by Lynn Adkins

