

## • Around the world .... •

### Damien Hirst's Diamond Encrusted Skull & Jeweled Skulls in Archaeology

\* An article from [www.anthropology.net](http://www.anthropology.net)

I think most people would agree that their skulls are a priceless asset. But what artist Damien Hirst has done to the following skull has actually made a nondescript skull into one of the most expensive pieces of art ever. It is believed to come from the skeleton of a man who lived between 1720 and 1810.



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British artist Damien Hirst revealed his latest work of art at the White Cube Gallery in London, June 1, 2007. "For the Love of God" is a life-size cast of a human skull in platinum and covered by 8,601 pave-set diamonds weighing 1,106.18 carats. The single large diamond in the middle of the forehead is reportedly worth \$4.2 million alone. Hirst financed the project himself, and estimates it cost between 10 and 15 million. Of course, it will cost someone a pretty penny to own the work: It's priced at \$99 million. But given the cultlike following for Hirst's previous works — and corresponding financial takings — some hedge fund manager, and closet Hirst fan, may shell out the cash for the diamond-crusted skull.



Hirst's Diamond skulls represents a curious intersection for me. One where archaeology is inspiring modern art. There are quite a lot of examples of bejeweled skulls in the archaeological record. Now, I don't know for sure if Hirst's inspiration for this work stemmed from the prevalence of jeweled skulls in the archaeological record. And I understand his skull is just a cast. But, I think it is notable that Hirst has taken something that has been done in many cultures throughout many different times and reproduced it into popular and profitable art.

One example of jeweled skulls in the fossil record is the one of a woman from Ur that unfortunately got looted from Iraq's National Museum several years ago. It has not yet been recovered nor can I find an image of it. I do, however, have a photograph of a jade encrusted skull from Oaxaca, Mexico — specifically from the Monte Alban Tomb 7 Museum. This skull was formerly at the convent in Iglesias Santo Domingo.

And from the blog, Mosaic Art Source, I found an image of the Mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca, originally uploaded by Nolan Willis. Here's a description of the skull:

### **The Skull of the Smoking Mirror**

This mask is believed to represent the god Tezcatlipoca, one of the Aztec creator gods. He was also the god of rulers, warriors and sorcerers. His name can be translated as 'Smoking Mirror'. In fact, in many depictions during the Postclassic period (A.D. 900/1000-1521) his foot is replaced by a mirror.

The base for this mask is a human skull. Alternate bands of turquoise and lignite mosaic work cover the front of the skull. The eyes are made of two discs of iron pyrites set in rings made of shell. The back of the skull has been cut away and lined with leather. The jaw is movable and hinged on the leather.

Turquoise was sent as tribute to the Aztec capital from several provinces of the empire.



Lastly, I have a very tiny image of inlaid jade and turquoise stones inside the teeth of a Mayan skull from the ninth century. Unlike the skulls above, inlaying jewels inside teeth was practiced on living Mayans at the time. This was not done after death.

Although I have only shown you mostly examples of jeweled skulls from Mesoamerican cultures, I hope you do trust that examples of jewel encrusted skulls also have been found from archaeological digs from ancient China and Mesopotamia. I just can't find images of them on the internet. I would even argue that the golden masks that covered the mummies of Egyptian pharaohs fall under the jeweled skulls.

So what's it with skulls and adorning them with precious metals and stones? Is the skull considered the center of being in many cultures? No, not necessarily. Many cultures consider other parts of the human body central to existence, such as the gut in many Asian cultures. My best guess is that across cultures and times, people subconsciously consider the skull the home of humanity. It is where our words come from and our emotions are shown. And what would be a better way to embrace that for eternity than to inlay precious jewels and metals? ■