

## ANTHROPOLOGY

# Centuries of skulls

**Alison Abbott** enjoys a German exhibition charting how the human head is revered by cultures worldwide.

Skulls hold an abiding fascination for the living. From goth rings and Mexican Day of the Dead paraphernalia to artist Damien

Hirst's diamond-studded platinum cast, skulls are stark and emptied reminders of mortality — and repositories for meaning.

A German exhibition now reveals that skull cults have existed in nearly every culture since prehistoric times. *Schädelkult (Skull Cult)*, at the Museum of World Cultures in Mannheim, one of the Reiss Engelhorn Museums (REM), shocks and delights with its tales of how tribes around the world and across time prepared and used the skulls and heads of honoured ancestors or feared enemies.

The exhibition hints at why the skull so grips our imagination. It is the scaffolding for faces of those once loved, feared or respected — and a casing for their psyche, memories and social power. It is the starkest proof that an individual is no longer here. Every culture tries to rationalize death; many have tried to beat it. The skull has had different symbolic roles in these endeavours.

## Schädelkult (Skull Cult)

REM Museum of World Cultures, Mannheim, Germany.  
Until 29 April 2012.

The oldest object, found in 1997 near Koblenz in northern Germany, is a Neanderthal skullcap — apparently used as a bowl — with an estimated age of 170,000 years. But even stranger exhibits abound. Skulls of respected tribe members might be made into jewellery to be worn by their descendants; decorated with carving, feathers or shells and brought out in rain-making rituals; or modelled in clay to create a true or idealized portrait.

Some African tribes, believing that the power of their slain enemies lived on in their skulls, made musical instruments from them for use in battle or to weaken hostile neighbours. They detached the lower jaws to make trumpets and used the craniums as drums.

Some of the most famous trophy heads were not skulls at all. The Jivaro people of the Andes developed a unique way of processing the decapitated heads of their enemies: after carefully skinning them, they would fill the skins with hot sand to shrink them, closing the eyes and mouth with bamboo needles to stop the soul from escaping. Wearing a shrunken head was thought to bring all-round success — in health, fertility and hunting. The Maori of New Zealand mummified their ancestors' heads — the ornately tattooed head of a chieftain, brought to Europe by James Cook in 1770, is among the finest exhibits.

The practice of artificially deforming skulls was surprisingly widespread, from central Asia to central Europe. Startling examples include those created by binding the heads of young children in bandages or bonnets to force them to grow into a spherical shape, or by squashing

the heads between planks to force them into more flattened 'table' or 'tower' forms.

Europe had its own skull cult. During the Middle Ages, ancestral skulls in parts of Alpine Europe were sometimes painted with floral patterns — a token of respect for bodies that had been disinterred to make

room in cemeteries for the newly dead. Skulls appear constantly in post-Renaissance Christian art and architecture as

a reminder that death can pounce unexpectedly, so it was wise not to jeopardize a place in heaven by deviating from the path of righteousness. A carved bust of the Virgin Mary, for example, doubles up as a skull reliquary.

*Schädelkult* acts as a reminder that Western anthropologists have been collecting, measuring and interpreting skulls for some 200 years. The extensive ethnological collection of German artist and Darwinist Gabriel von Max (1840–1915)

spawned this exhibition when several hundred of its skulls, thought to have been destroyed in the Second World War, were rediscovered in 2008 and returned to the REM.

Von Max had intended his collection to celebrate the diversity of humanity. But many collections were exploited in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for dubious phrenological and anthropometric studies. These fed erroneous theories claiming, for example, that particular races were inferior. The exhibition confronts this unscientific research, along with the sensitive question of whether present-day requests for skull repatriation should be heeded. The curators argue that this should only happen when living relatives request skulls, or if they are proved to have been acquired through murder.

The REM Museum of World Cultures is well equipped for forensic analysis and, together with collaborators, has carried out tests on some of the exhibited skulls to date and characterize them. Some of the results, including facial reconstructions, are displayed on screens around the exhibition.

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A Peruvian trophy head from AD 100–600.



A shell-decorated ancestral skull of the Asmat people of New Guinea.