

## **Visual Analysis of Incensario in the Form of a Bat God**

Standing among the many artifacts at the Baltimore Museum of Art is a small statue, not quite the length of a fully outstretched arm, roughly 16 inches in height. Despite its small size, Incensario in the Form of a Bat God draws both the eye and the mind with its detailed surface and its approach to its subject matter.

Incensario in the Form of a Bat God is a 9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century, Pre-Columbian statue from Vera Cruz, Venezuela. Made of terracotta, the statue was first formed by hand and then baked until hard. At first glance, one sees a statue with an overly large head and hands, and heavy ornamentation. The statue is detailed in these aspects, to the point of being crowded. The ornamentation appears primarily on the head, ears, and chest, and consists of a headdress, earrings, a chest plate hung from the neck, and possible bracelets around the upper and lower arms. The chest plates and bracelets feature geometric design. There is an unidentified square-shaped piece resting on the statue's left foot with a flower-shaped protrusion. There is also an unidentified object supporting the statue's head, running from one ear, across the neck, and ending at the other ear. Not quite reaching the statue's right foot is a staff held in its right hand. Although the statue's chest and nether regions appear exposed, there are no signs of sex or gender, including nipples or other sexual attributes.

The statue appears to be in good condition, with no apparent damages. Any paint that may have been applied is now gone, leaving only the terra cotta surface. Paint would have varying effects depending on where on the statue it was applied. If applied to the ornamentation, the paint would have primarily increased the dominance of the ornamentation, but also given some sense of the approach of the culture to materials; some cultures revere materials that are

easily found in their area, while others import precious metals for revered objects. If the paint was applied to the body of the statue, it may have lowered the dominance of the ornamentation and head, and given an increased supernatural appearance to the figure itself. If originally unpainted, it may imply a respect for natural materials.

The above comments clearly assume that this statue is meant to be a revered object. As noted earlier, the statue features heavy ornamentation. While heavy ornamentation does not appear in the art of all cultures, when it does appear, it is typically a sign of high status. Furthermore, the hands imply that this is the figure of a ruler; the open palm of the statue's left hand signals an invitation to approach for a ruling, or the holding of power in the statue's cupped palm, while the right hand holding a staff implies leadership. The significance of the hands' role in denoting the role of the statue is made especially clear by the disproportionate size of the hands.

The desexualization of the statue may also have implications for this aspect of the statue's meaning. Being ungendered may be a sign of being more than human, a being that somehow is beyond definition by a single gender or to whom gender and sexuality are insignificant.

The head is also disproportionately sized, most especially the ears, eyes, and mouth. The eyes are extremely enlarged, though not well-detailed. The ears are also extremely enlarged. The mouth is both enlarged and features large protruding fangs. These features are clearly emphasized, and imply a respect for certain physical abilities of the bat, features that translate into symbolic characteristics of the culture and its god portrayed in this statue. The eyes insinuate a respect for the night vision of the bat, and symbolically translate into an all-seeing god; the ears imply a respect for the bat's ability to find prey through sound, and symbolically translate into an

all-hearing god; and the mouth and fangs imply a respect for the bat's ability to consume its prey, and translate symbolically into a fierce god who conquers in battle. These features of Incensario in the Form of a Bat God give us a strong sense of why this culture chose the form of the bat for a god; the bat easily translates into an all-knowing and all-seeing god, capable of defeating and destroying its enemies. It is noteworthy that the Bat God is portrayed in an essentially human form. This allows us to relate through our similar, though lesser, characteristics, but also may imply an innate perception of humans as the highest level of evolution. This may be the reason that the bat's ability to fly is not portrayed in the statue. The portrayal of the Bat God without wings may also signify a contrast between this culture and modern popular conceptions of godlike figures; while both cultures prefer human portrayals of their supernatural figures, modern day mythology features beings that are constantly traveling between heaven and earth. Perhaps the culture that produced this statue had a differing conception of the supernatural world, where its gods remained in one place, with its people, or overlooking them from its home in the supernatural world.

Thus, Incensario in the Form of a Bat God gives us a clear message about the relationship of this culture to the bat. It clearly portrays a ruler, blessed with attributes that the culture revered in the bat; superhuman hearing, sight, and a fierce devouring of prey. However, the human portrayal of the Bat God allows its subjects to identify through their own, lesser, abilities of sight, hearing, and ferocity in war.