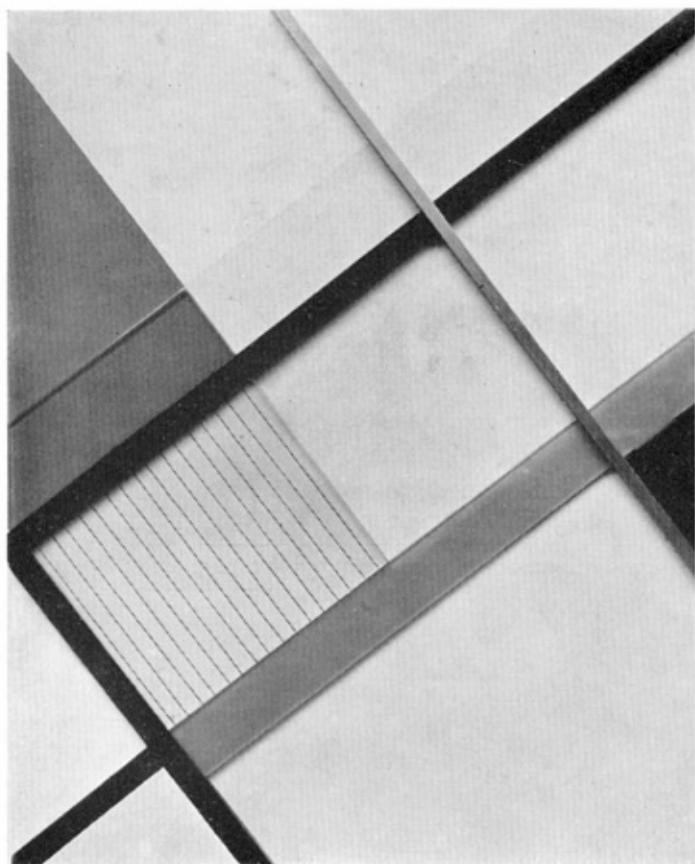


BULLETIN OF
SMITH COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART



NORTHAMPTON

MASSACHUSETTS

JUNE 1936

NUMBER 17

A DEATH GOD IN STONE

This sculpture is not a fragment from a full length figure but is complete in itself. The part left unworked at the back remains from the tenon that once secured it to the surface of a vertical wall. In decorative



FIG. 8. DEATH GOD, FRONT

use, if not in function, such a piece took the place of the medieval gargoyle. The jutting position of these pieces made them come into play mainly as silhouettes in a side view of the temple, which explains the prominence of the profiles and the minimizing of the front view.

When new this piece must have presented a different appearance as it surely was carefully stuccoed and polychromed. Judging from extant remains, its scheme of color must have been a spattering of red ochre (blood) on a yellowish-white background (bone). The National Museum of Mexico has an example, the orbits of which were once incrustated with some foreign material, perhaps turquoise. Traces of the bitumen that held it in place are still there.

That the skull is not realistically treated is obvious to the modern onlooker, but even for its maker, bred in the conventions of Indian sculpture, it was not meant to represent a mere human skull. The crest that tops it—or series of protuberances—points to a representation of the Lord of Death. It is the sculptured version of the penache of hair or feathers with which he is adorned in ancient picture writing, or perhaps stands as a shorthand for the row of spherical stars with which some deities are adorned.

Such Mexican "gargoyles" were in use both in Mexico and in

Yucatan, but they are usually linked with the Totonac civilization. Evidence of style does not disprove this source, however this sculpture could equally be of Aztec workmanship. Its unusually high craft makes improbable a provincial origin, and suggests it as



FIG. 9. DEATH GOD, SIDE VIEW

a fragment from the Acropolis, The Templo Mayor of Mexico City. We know from documents that one of its two main pyramids was thus adorned with skulls.

For people unfamiliar with Mexican art, this piece is an excellent introduction to the craft of the Indian sculptor. It shows clearly his intelligent feeling for the material used, his peculiarly mathematical emotion, and the tragic core that underlies its "abstract" veneer.

JEAN CHARLOT