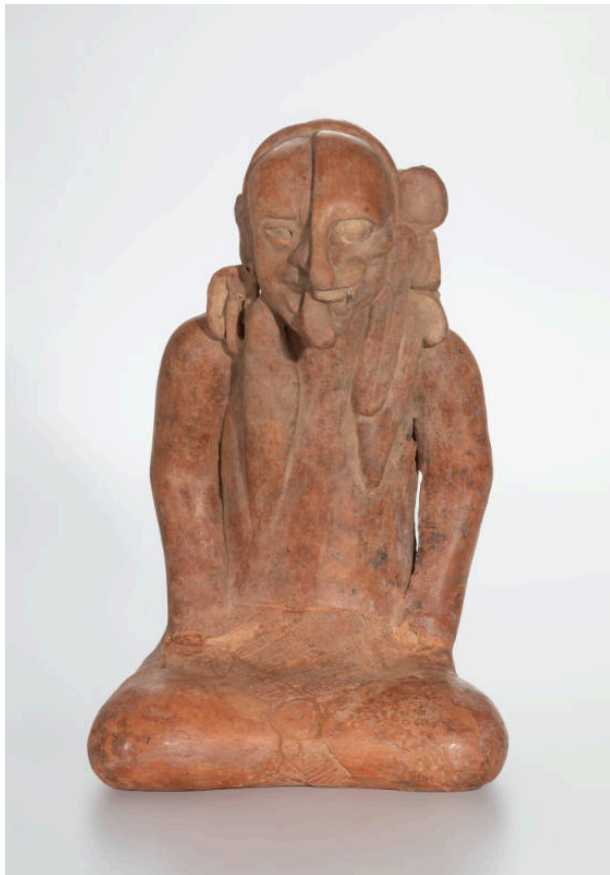




## Human-jaguar figure

### Date

150 BCE–250 CE

### Primary Maker

Unidentified artist

### Medium

Ceramic

### Description

Veracruz effigy jar in the form of a "were-jaguar" or Jaguar Man wearing half mask of feline; Fired clay, burnished.

\_\_\_\_\_ One hypothesis to explain the were-jaguar motif is based on the similarity of many of these individuals in appearance to those with Down Syndrome (trisomy 21). Because many of the Olmec "were-jaguar babies" are held in the arms of a larger person, it is speculated that these children may be Down Syndrome children who were venerated within this culture as living connections to the

jaguar spirits. Since many chiefly lineages traced their ancestry to mythical human-jaguar matings, it is proposed that the "were-jaguar baby" may have been based on a real child, perhaps one born into a noble family. However plausible this explanation may be for the so-called "were-jaguars" with the typical slanted or almond-shaped eyes and downturned mouths such as that found on the Kunz Axe, this hypothesis appears to be an unlikely interpretation for this figure, whose facial features bear little resemblance to the classic were-jaguar face found on the "baby" figures, which also typically have a cleft head. This cleft head bears some similarity to human children born with ecephaloceles, a consequence of the birth defect spina bifida. It is also similar to the appearance of the head of a toad or male jaguar, both of which animals had ritual significance to the Olmec. The only real point of similarity between this figure and more typical were-jaguar figures is that it does appear to be wearing the headdress with long side flaps characteristic of were-jaguar figures. Additional reading about were-jaguars: Murdy, Carson N. (1981): "Congenital deformities and the Olmec were-jaguar motif," in *American Antiquity* 46(4):861-871. Zoomorphic (animal) motifs were commonly employed on a wide range of Pre-Columbian artifacts, including pottery, textiles, and metalwork. Pre-Colombian works of art depict both wild and domesticated animals, creatures commonly encountered in everyday life, and creatures found rarely--or not at all--in the natural world. Aspects of many different animals can be found in Pre-Colombian art, often mixed with human attributes in what may appear to us to be startling and fantastic combinations. Many works of art feature animals such as the great cats (jaguars or pumas), which possessed great spiritual power and were key elements of Pre-Colombian religious traditions. In Central America and in northern South America, the animal triad of harpy

eagle, jaguar, and cayman (similar to an alligator or crocodile) was cosmologically important. Birds are creatures of the air, while caymans are creatures of the water; jaguars can move between the trees, water, and ground and thus serve to mediate the supernatural forces found on land, air and water. Birds and felines are among the most common shamanic helper spirits. Feline (or cat) imagery was commonly employed on a wide range of Pre-Columbian artifacts, including pottery, textiles, metalwork, and even in site planning (the archaeological ruins on the slopes of Mount Sangay, Ecuador, consist of tolas mounds arranged in the shape of a jaguar, and the Inca capital city of Cuzco, Peru, was laid out in the form of a puma). Recognizable by a typically snarling face with prominent fangs, cat-like elements are often blended with human characteristics as well as features from other animals such as snakes and birds to form a variety of fantasy creatures, including "monsters" and "dragons". Jaguars are the largest and strongest spotted cats in the Americas, and have had a profound influence on prehistoric art. Because jaguars are equally at home in trees and on land, they are seen as mediators between ground-dwelling humans and the divine; deities communicate to the world of mortal men through the jaguar. Both studies of modern people from lowland South America and writings from shortly after the Spanish Conquest emphasize the close association of shamans with jaguar spirits and the recurrent themes of jaguars as procreators, sexual unions with jaguars, jaguar-men and jaguar clans. Jaguars are usually depicted with curly tails in Pre-Columbian art. For more information, please see *The Cult of the Feline* (1972), edited by Elizabeth P. Benson, Dumbarton Oaks: Washington, DC. Hallucinogenic drugs were commonly used by religious specialists (shamans) to commune with the supernatural world. Visions of the supernatural beings seen in such spirit journeys played an important role in the cosmology or spiritual life of these peoples; the fantastic creatures, part-human, part-beast, depicted on some ceramic figurines and vessels are a physical record of such iconography. Shamanic healing practices were often mediated by hallucinogenic drugs, as found today among many contemporary lowland Amazonian cultures. Sources of such drugs are common in Latin America, and include plants as well animals (such as hallucinogenic skin of some Mesoamerican toads). Drugs were ingested in a variety of ways, including snuffing or snorting by nose, chewing (leaving a quid of leaves in the mouth), eating, drinking as a tea or infusion, smoking, or by anal infusion (enema). Drug-related paraphernalia included snuffing tubes, specialized vessels to hold drugs or drug accessories (such as lime-pots used for chewing coca), pipes, and clyster tubes used to administer enemas. Olmec The Olmec were the earliest Mesoamerican high civilization of interest to most art historians. Many of the characteristics which dominate the later art and archaeology of Mesoamerica--such as ball courts, pyramids, and greenstone carvings--are already found in Olmec material culture. Beginning during the early Formative period, about 1500 BC, the Olmec began constructing major sites along the Gulf Coast area of Mexico, with their core occupation in the region now part of the modern states of Veracruz and Tabasco. The networks of Olmec trade and influence were widespread, however, ranging well-beyond the so-called Olmec "heartland" and extending to Guerrero in the west and Honduras in the southeast. Although Olmec culture lasted until about 400 BC in the heartland, it persisted for several centuries longer in outlying areas, notably the highlands.

### **Dimensions**

12 x 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches (30.5 x 19.1 x 24.1 cm)