The Peabody Museum holds one of the largest collections of Moche artifacts in North America. This exhibition draws upon this collection to introduce the public to this little-known but fascinating culture.

The ceramic arts of the Moche are appealing to modern viewers because they utilize imagery with which we can identify. Charmingly and finely rendered animals, men, women, and children create a sense of comfortable familiarity. But do we understand these images and figures in the same way that the Moche did? The Moche saw their gods in human terms and found the sacred in the world around them. Study of the material expressions of these concepts in the art and artifacts opens a window onto their world-view.

Some depictions appear straightforward, a deer or a portrait head, while others are clearly mythical, such as a fierce, fanged deity battling a sea monster. Still others combine natural and supernatural features into a single creature.

An analysis of Moche art reveals that many apparently ordinary images conveyed specific cultural meanings. Animals, especially birds, foxes, or dogs, are often depicted as warriors and may represent warrior societies, social groups, or mythical armies. Other animals associated with warfare were owls and felines (fig. 1).

Human or humanlike faces commonly appear in Moche art, and it is often difficult to distinguish among gods, mythological heroes, and humans. Scholars have identified distinctive headgear and it is often difficult to distinguish among gods, mythological heroes, and humans. Scholars have identified distinctive headdresses and other ornaments such as large earspools. A seated posture also indicated high rank because they utilize imagery with which we can identify. Charmingly and finely rendered animals, men, women, and children create a sense of comfortable familiarity. But do we understand these images and figures in the same way that the Moche did? The Moche saw their gods in human terms and found the sacred in the world around them. Study of the material expressions of these concepts in the art and artifacts opens a window onto their world-view.

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The Moche of Ancient Peru

Media and Messages

Coastal uplift, caused by the earth’s tectonic movement, decreased arable land and rendered canals useless over the centuries. These factors, combined with overpopulation and warfare, undermined the power of the elite and the social order. The sacrifice cult appears to have intensified as leaders attempted to placate the gods and demonstrate their powers to their followers. In the southern highlands a new cult and culture emerged at the vast city of Huari. While the north coast was never conquered, it left the power of the Huari empire indirectly, and the Moche culture was radically transformed between a.d. 800 and 900.

From their vast city and ceremonial center at Chan Chan, the Chimu—the Moche’s successors—conquered the old Moche territory and may have even stretched beyond it for a time only to be conquered by the Inca. The Inca held over the north coast, however, was brief before the Spanish conquered them in turn.

North coast peoples have always maintained an independence from the rest of Peru, preferring their local traditions and styles, and these tendencies continue to the present day. Some ways of life and tales told at twilight today have ancient roots, perhaps extending into prehistory. Those continuing traditions aid scholars in the search to understand the media and messages of the Moche.

The Moche of Ancient Peru was curated by Jeffrey Quilter, Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs, the Peabody Museum.

At about 900 a.c., a highland temple complex, Chavin de Huantar, synthesized diverse religious traditions found in regional ceremonial centers. The Chavin cult spread far and wide during a period of relative peace and prosperity. Following its collapse and several centuries of social and political instability, new cultural forms emerged. One was the Moche of northern Peru. By the first century a.d., Moche began to take its distinct form in the Moche and Chicama Valleys, the heartland of Moche culture. At its height, Moche influence extended from the edge of the Sechura Desert in the north to the Nepeña Valley in the south.