

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. Charming 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 headdresses, regalia, and postures as indicators of specific deities and human rank or position. Rank in both earthly and supernatural realms was denoted by the degree of costume elaboration with special attention devoted to headdresses and other ornaments such as large earspools. A seated posture also indicated high rank since lords would be seated to receive subordinates (fig. 2).



Figure 1. A feline attacking a bound human captive may represent a specific rite or the relationship between the conqueror and the conquered. PM 16-62-30/F727. Photo by Hillel Burger.



Figure 2. Headdress, earrings, fangs, and a seated posture identify this figure as a deity. PM 46-77-30/4960. Photo by J. David Bohl.



Figure 3. Portrait vessel. PM 46-77-30/5050. Photo by Hillel Burger.



Figure 6. Rare image of a woman with a young child. PM 09-3-30/75604.2.

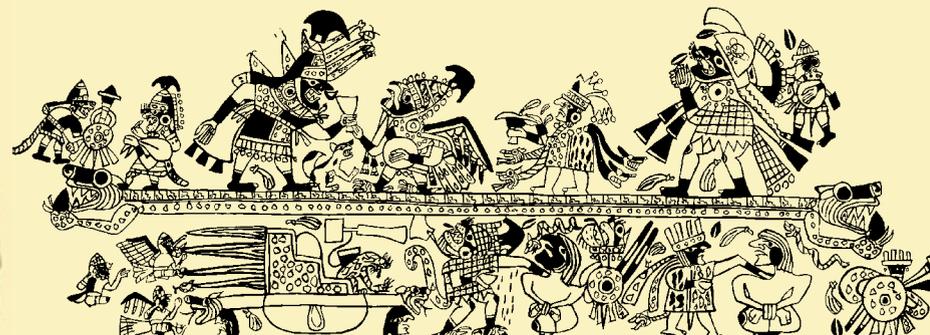


Figure 5. Priests and lords, such as those shown in this detail from a fine-line painted ceramic, performed rituals and were buried in the great Moche pyramids. Drawing by D. McClelland from photos by C. B. Donnan.

Deities are also identified by distinctive headdresses, postures, or physical attributes. The principal Moche deity is known as the Decapitator God. He is often shown standing with arms partly outstretched, a human head in one hand and a curved-blade knife in the other. Sometimes his fanged mouth and distinctive headdress are featured.

Moche lords were often depicted as warriors and, in late times, a warrior deity was prominent in art.

Moche art is most famous for its "portrait head" vessels (fig. 3). Many portrait heads are so distinctive in their facial features that it seems highly likely that they were modeled on real, living people. Some faces have straight, thin lips and straight noses, while others are round and chubby with wide noses and distinctive pursed lips; still others have wide, open eyes, and there are many other variations as well.

We know little of the lives of Moche commoners. Some Moche vessels appear to show men of low rank; that is, they lack the obvious signs of status such as fancy headdresses or are shown performing apparently mundane chores. So too, people with illnesses or with handicaps, such as a dwarf or a blind man, are sometimes portrayed. Again, these may have symbolic meanings that we cannot yet decipher.

Women contributed significantly to Moche culture yet were depicted infrequently. When shown, some appear engaged in everyday life such as a woman with her young child (fig. 4) or another with a tumpline around her head supporting a burden behind her. A frequent image is a seated woman shaman with a long shawl, staring straight ahead.

Scenes representing stories or myths were also depicted in ceramics and murals. Some have been identified, others remain a mystery. Smooth layers of adobe on temple walls were decorated in brilliantly colored murals and friezes (fig. 6a). Many of the designs repeated the face of the Decapitator god, others were

abstract, geometric designs. Moche depictions of battle show hand-to-hand combat or the taking of prisoners for sacrifice (fig. 5). Captured prisoners were stripped of their clothes and marched with ropes around their necks to temple complexes where they were killed by priests and priestesses dressed as deities. The priest ritually drank the victims' blood, probably in front of a large audience of onlookers. This ritual, known as the Sacrifice Ceremony, appears frequently in late Moche art when fine-line painting increased in popularity.

Metals were mostly employed for jewelry and other ornamentation, but also for small tools, such as tweezers. A masklike head of a man and a face of a deity may have been formed by hammering sheet metal on a die. Solid gold and silver as well as alloys were employed in jewelry for the elite. Items of shell, gourd, carved wood, and bone are examples of the wide range of material culture once made and used.

Moche temples were made of adobe bricks and were built over older temples, with layers of new adobes encasing the earlier structures in new construction. A common temple form was a series of platforms, smaller ones stacked on top of larger ones, echoing the pattern of agricultural terraces on the sides of valleys and mountains. In front, a large, walled plaza held crowds of pilgrims (fig. 6b).

Temples served both the living and the dead. The Moche performed human sacrifices of war prisoners at their temples and held similar rites in the mountains, where the blood of the sacrificial victim was symbolically tied to the descent of rainwater through mountain valleys. Moche lords, their retinues, sacrificial victims, and burial offerings were entombed in chambers beneath temple floors. Single-storied houses, streets, and compounds that held residences and artisan workshops often surrounded temple complexes. Moche commoners buried their dead below the floors of their residences and workshops, and graves and offerings were more or less elaborate, depending on an individual's rank.



Figure 6a. Frieze of a deity holding condors at Huaca Cao Viejo, El Brujo Archaeological Complex, Chicama Valley. Photo by J. Quilter.



Figure 6b. Aerial photo of Huaca Cao Viejo, El Brujo Archaeological Complex, Chicama Valley. Photo by Ira Block.

The Moche developed technologies for mass producing vessels using molds. Clay was pressed into molds for separate sections and the sections joined with wet clay. Variations were created by adding a stirrup spout in one case or leaving an area open to create a bowl.



PM 46-77-30/4943, PM 09-3-30/75620.

After seven centuries of growth, development, and expansion, the

Moche faltered. The troubles may have begun in the sixth century when a series of devastating El Niño floods destroyed agricultural fields, towns, and cities.

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 felt 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 Chimú—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 hold 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 pre-history. 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.

PEABODY MUSEUM
HARVARD UNIVERSITY
11 DIVINITY AVE.
CAMBRIDGE, MA 02138
617-496-1027
WWW.PEABODY.
HARVARD.EDU

THE MOCHE OF ANCIENT PERU

Media and Messages



PEABODY MUSEUM OF
ARCHAEOLOGY AND
ETHNOLOGY
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

THE MOCHE OF ANCIENT PERU

Media and Messages

textiles, rare stones, and shells for the ruling class. Goods, including fancy ceramics, were exchanged over great distances. Lords ruled over populations in desert valleys made fertile by extensive canals, warriors led armies into battle, and priests performed human sacrifice.

The prehistory of Peru can be traced to at least 10,000 B.C., the time of the first hunter-gatherers. The rich resources of the Pacific stimulated one of the earliest maritime traditions as early agriculture combined with intensive fishing by 4000 B.C. By 1500 B.C., ceramics and textiles were widely employed as media for religious, social, and artistic expression.

THE MOCHE OF ANCIENT PERU produced one of the most striking art styles of the ancient New World. Using a variety of media they spread their belief systems and social customs along Peru's north coast. They attained their greatest power between A.D. 100 and 800, extending their influence throughout the north coast desert. Their huge temples (*huacas*) were boldly decorated with spectacular and colorful designs on the adobe walls. The Moche drew upon ancient traditions in the Andes to create new styles and technologies. Skilled artisans made large gold ornaments, jewelry, and elaborate costumes of cotton

At about 900 B.C., a highland temple complex, Chavín de Huantar, synthesized diverse religious traditions found in regional ceremonial centers. The Chavín 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.

View of the lower Virú Valley of northern Peru.
Photo by J. Quilter.

