The Moche: Life and Death on the Peruvian North Coast

The Moche culture which flourished on the north coast of Peru between 100 BC and AD 700, produced one of the most remarkable art styles of Pre-Columbian America. Although the Moche people had no writing system, they left a vivid artistic record of their activities and their environment. Their art illustrates their clothing, architecture, implements, supernatural beings, and a multitude of activities such as warfare, ceremony, and hunting. Although Moche art gives the impression of having an almost infinite variety of subject matter, analysis of a large sample of it has suggested that it is limited to the representation of a small number of specific events, or activities, which are referred to as themes. (Donnan 2004)

In the centers and cities build of unbaked bricks lived ten thousands of people: Artisans, warriors, priests, nobles and the sovereigns. As living gods the Moche sovereigns resided in palaces on high platforms, out of the crowd’s view. In richly decorated courts and temples were stages for feasts and ceremonies including human sacrifice. The people killed were mostly warriors captured in battle. On other occasions, Moche worshipers honored their gods with dancing, waterlily games, and the presentation of valuable offerings. One of the most important rituals was the Sacrifice Ceremony, which the Moche often depicted in their vase paintings (Donnan 1978).

The Sacrifice Ceremony

After a successful battle the sovereign, priests, warriors and a priestess meet at a ritual court on the top of a platform. All the participants are wearing the dress of important Moche gods. The lord representing the god of light and the sun has just stepped off his litter of gold. A spotted dog accompanies the figure in the middle of the picture with a blue-painted face. He receives a goblet filled with human blood from a priest displayed in a humbling posture. Goblets used in the Sacrifice Ceremony have been found in archaeological excavations.

A priestess representing the moon wears a long skirt covered with black feathers. Her legs are painted yellow. She offers a second goblet. She is wearing a tall crown of gold. In contrast to the Inca culture where gold was exclusively
the symbol of the sun god; the Moche society revered gold and silver also symbol of the moon and sea gods. Two undressed and captured warriors sit on the ground. A priest wearing a long skirt and a tall crown of gold cuts the prisoner's throat with one hand using a ceremonial knife. With the other he holds a gourd bowl in which the prisoner's blood is carefully captured and poured into goblets to be drunk by the lord.

Ceremonial Knife or Tumi used in the Sacrifice Ceremony
Museo Arqueológico Rafael Larco Herrera

Ceremonial knives like this have been discovered through archaeological research and many show evidence of use on their blades.

Ritual Dance

Many vase paintings depict dance rituals, which played an important role in Moche society. To the rhythmic sound of panpipes, flutes, rattles and drums, warriors and members of the Moche elite are dancing. The richly dressed sovereign stands over them atop a two stepped platform. He has just come from the small throne house and presents a war captive with a rope around his neck. The dancers form two rows. Their performance is choreographed to suggest the winding movement of a snake. Two dance formations approach the sovereign. One starts at the bottom of the platform, finding its way up the ramp and onto the top of the platform, finally stopping in front of the lord. A second, smaller dance group, in the left upper corner of the picture, has already ascended the platform and simultaneously approaches the lord. In the foreground, large vessels decorated with algarroba branches hold corn beer. (Algarroba is the tree that produces carob.) The beer pots stand ready for the dancers, along with fruits and fish gathered by servants. Musicians wearing elaborate dress can be seen behind the small dance group at the top of the platform. Two other musicians with hand drums form part of the large dance group.

Ritual Dance
152 cm x 142 cm
Oil and acrylic on paper
Painting by Christiane Clados

Some dancers wear leggings covered with gold bells as well as belt-attached backflaps with rattles to produce a metallic sound. Backflaps like this have been discovered in numerous Moche burials.

Gold Backflap
Museo Tumbas Reales, Lambayeque, Peru
Photograph Walter Alva and Christopher Donnan

The lord wears the ornate regalia of the god of the night sky. This includes a helmet decorated
with feathers and an ornamental shirt; both are covered with gold plaques. His pectoral consists of hundreds of gold and shell beads. Leggings with bells are visible under a short woven kilt. The other participants wear the insignia of lower-ranking deities. The shirts and kilts of many dancers are covered with gold discs to reflect the sun’s brilliance. In the background of the picture another platform rises, crowned by the palace complex of the lord.

**The Waterlily Game**

The Water Lily Game of the Moche was one of the most spectacular pre-Hispanic rituals. The ceremony, associated with both the abundance of water and fertility, is often depicted in paintings on vases. Artifacts used in the ritual have been found in burials excavated in Moche centers.

The reconstruction shows participants dressed as gods associated with the night and the sea standing around the sovereign on a two-stepped platform. Wearing large earplugs depicting a muscovy duck—the symbol of water abundance—he receives a goblet filled with corn beer from a man in a feline headdress. Meanwhile, other participants throw spears covered with tiny pieces of gold sheet and feathers that represent water lilies. The wind carries the gold objects for a moment before they fall to the ground like small propellers, sparkling in the sunlight. While some servants collect the precious fallen objects, others distribute more spears and cups of corn beer. In the foreground, three men with amputations—a common audience at such ceremonies—watch with fascination.

**Combat**

Combat, a common theme in Moche vase paintings has been described in detail on hundreds of ceramic vessels.

This reconstruction shows the climax of a battle. After the conch shell sounds the call to arms, warriors of both factions collide in the middle of a battlefield situated outside the city. Each warrior attacks his opponent with a mace, the main weapon of the Moche culture. Many of the wooden maces found in excavations were originally covered with copper or gold sheets.
While one warrior pulls his vanquished enemy to the ground by his hair, another lies defeated nearby, naked and stripped of his armor. The warrior in the left corner leaves the battlefield with his opponent’s armor as a trophy. The main objective of combat appears to have been the capture of high-ranking prisoners for sacrifice on ceremonial occasions. Some ceremonies took place atop the high temple platforms in the cities, while others took place on the Guano Islands, from which the Moche harvested bird excrement or guano to use as fertilizer. The captives were decapitated to ensure a rich guano harvest.

The Moche offered elaborate gifts to their gods and lords. Paintings on ceramic vessels show that jewelry; richly adorned costumes, food, and shells were some of the most important offerings. This reconstruction shows a sovereign and a priestess. The sovereign wears the costume of the god of the night sky and holds a gold mace as he sits on a bench in his palace. His gold earplugs, inlaid with turquoise, lapis lazuli, and shell, depict a running hawk god who carries a bag filled with beans. One half of the lord’s garment is covered with yellow parrot feathers that symbolize the day, while the other half is decorated with round motifs that represent the stars in the night sky. The tall “Snake Crown” worn by the priestess makes her recognizable as the personification of the moon goddess. She holds a Strombus shell in her left hand and offers the sovereign a beaker filled with corn beer. Her braids are wrapped with long, colorful bands. In the foreground, offerings of two elaborate headdresses of gold, a jaguar pelt, and parrot feathers rest beside pepper pods (aji) in a vase at the lord’s left side. Headdresses such as these were worn in combat, as well as during deer and foxhunts.