

Moche Portraits from Ancient Peru

Christopher B. Donnan

Introduction

About thirteen centuries ago in the northern coastal region of what is now Peru, a ten-year-old boy was selected by the leaders of his community to become, eventually, a great leader himself. As he grew older, he took on more and more responsibility, and finally he achieved his destiny as a man of high status and regard. During his adult life, he occasionally participated in a form of one-on-one ritual combat that was common among his people. While he was still young and strong, he won all of his encounters, but when he reached middle age, he lost a battle and joined the ranks of the defeated. According to the custom of his people, he and the others who had been defeated were stripped of their clothing, ornaments, and weapons. Their hands were then bound behind their backs, and they were led with ropes around their necks to a ceremonial location, where their blood was drained into goblets, to be consumed by priests as part of a traditional ritual. The ritual concluded with the prisoners' death and dismemberment.

Although the details of this story are speculative, we have grounds for believing that the essence of it is accurate. This leader's people, whom we now call the Moche, showed us through their painted ceramics a complete narrative of their ritual combat and the subsequent capture, sacrifice, and dismemberment of the defeated. The stories in Moche paintings are supported by archaeological excavations of elaborate tombs containing the remains of the ceremony's participants and of the mutilated and dismembered bodies of sacrificed prisoners. But most important for the purposes of this book, the Moche people commemorated this man's existence with a series of lifelike ceramic portraits of him from childhood through his final role as a prisoner about to be sacrificed. Although we can never know his name, the Moche captured his facial features so accurately that we would recognize him immediately if we saw him walking down the street of a Peruvian city today.

Nearly all ancient civilizations developed some means of portraying specific individuals. Often a portrayal involved a generic depiction of a person of the same age and sex as the subject, along with symbolic elements that enabled the viewer to identify the individual. Some ancient societies created caricatures of the individual's face or emphasized an unusual anatomical feature to facilitate identification. Others provided accompanying text that named the individual and described his or her role and importance.

Only a few ancient civilizations actually developed true portraiture, showing the anatomical features of a person with such accuracy that the individual could be recognized without reliance on accompanying symbols or texts. Of all the civilizations that developed in the Americas prior to European contact, only one perfected true portraiture and produced it in quantity. That civilization, the Moche, flourished on the north coast of Peru between approximately A.D. 100 and 800 (figure 1.1).

Moche portraits are among the most varied, objective, and confident portraits produced by any civilization of the ancient world. They were made as three-dimensional ceramic vessels that could have contained liquid. Most are in the form of human heads (figure 1.2); however, the Moche also made full-figure vessels with realistic portrait faces (figure 1.3). This study includes both types, but most of the discussion centers on the head vessels.

Although Moche portraits are frequently exhibited in museums and illustrated in publications, there has been little investigation of their essential characteristics or how they developed through time. Moreover, there has been little knowledge of how they were produced and distributed, whom they portrayed, why they were made, or how they were used in Moche society. This study, which deals with these questions, is based on a systematic analysis of a large sample of Moche portraits that today reside in museums and private collections throughout the world.

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The Moche

The Moche inhabited an arid coastal plain, bordered on the east by the Andean cordillera and on the west by the Pacific Ocean. Most of their settlements were located in a series of valleys whose rivers cut across the coastal plain, carrying water from the mountains to the sea. Archaeologists have traced the human occupation of this area from the end of the Pleistocene, around ten thousand years ago, through the development of settled village farming communities and the subsequent rise and fall of civilizations that took place prior to the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century.

Centuries before Moche civilization began, the area was occupied by highly stratified societies that constructed monumental architecture and developed sophisticated weaving, ceramics, and metallurgy. The Moche took the arts, technology, and social organization they inherited from previous civilizations and developed them to form their own distinctive culture.

By channeling the rivers into a complex network of irrigation canals, the Moche greatly extended the land under cultivation, which supported abundant agriculture. They grew a wide variety of crops, including corn, beans, guava, avocados, squash, chili peppers, and peanuts. From the Pacific Ocean, as well as from rivers, marshes, and lagoons, they harvested a rich catch of fish, shrimp, crabs, crayfish, and mollusks. Domesticated llamas, guinea pigs, and ducks were additional sources of food, along with other animals, birds, snails, and wild plants, which were occasionally hunted or gathered. With an abundant and nutritious diet, the Moche sustained a dense, highly stratified population and were able to allocate large numbers of workers to the construction and maintenance of irrigation canal systems, pyramids, palaces, and temples.

The area inhabited by the Moche was not large. At its maximum it included only the valleys from Piura to Huarmey, a distance of approximately 550 kilometers from north to south (figure 1.1). Its east-west extent was considerably smaller. Moche settlements are found only between the ocean and the point where the valley floodplains narrow as they

enter the canyons leading up to the Andean mountain range--usually a distance of 50 to 80 kilometers. Yet the Moche maintained trade relationships with people living far beyond the borders of their territory. They obtained lapis lazuli from hundreds of kilometers to the south, in what is now Chile, and Spondylus shells from hundreds of kilometers to the north, in what is now Ecuador.

The Moche probably did not have markets or money, but they almost certainly practiced the system of redistribution characteristic of Andean people at the time of European contact. Local lords received from their subjects' food and commodities, which they redistributed to nobles of lesser rank. In this way, vast quantities of food, raw materials, and handmade goods were systematically collected and redistributed in an efficient manner. The surplus from redistribution supported a corps of full-time artisans who created objects for the elite. The lords used many of these items to demonstrate their power and wealth; others they gave to lesser nobility to maintain social and political allegiances. Supporting skilled craft specialists in this way created an ideal climate for stimulating artistic excellence and encouraging the innovation of sophisticated technology.

Although the Moche had no writing system, they left a vivid artistic record of their beliefs and activities. Moche metalworkers produced remarkable objects of gold, silver, and copper, skillfully creating objects in sheet metal and lost-wax castings. Weavers created sumptuous fabrics from cotton and wool, often elaborated with colorful woven or embroidered designs. Other artists pyroengraved gourds, painted colorful wall murals, and carved and inlaid bone, wood, and stone.

Yet the Moche are most well known and widely appreciated today for their beautifully modeled and painted ceramic vessels. Like Greek vase painters of ancient Athens, the Moche excelled at painting complex scenes on ceramic vessels (figures 1.4, 1.5). Moche potters also produced low-relief ceramic depictions of figures and activities (figure 1.6). They were consummate masters of three-dimensional sculpture (figures 1.7, 1.8). In clay, they created lifelike animals, plants, and anthropomorphic deities.

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They portrayed hunting and fishing activities, mountain tableaux, and rituals of combat, and elaborate ceremonies. Representations ranged from the pomp and power of enthroned rulers to the travails of the maimed and the blind.

True portraiture was among the greatest achievements of Moche potters. They skillfully captured the facial features of specific individuals and instilled a lifelike quality in each portrait.

Nearly all of the Moche portrait head vessels depict adult males, although some children are also shown. No truly lifelike portrait of an adult female has been identified.² Some portrait head vessels show individuals with illnesses, or with abnormalities such as a missing eye (figure 1.9) or a harelip (figure 1.10).

As a group, the portraits represent an astonishing range of physical types (figures 1.11-1.15). They allow us to meet Moche people who lived more than fifteen hundred years ago and to sense the nuances of their individual personalities.

The Portrait Sample

This study is based on a photographic archive, created to facilitate the study of Moche civilization through a systematic analysis of Moche art. The archive, which is located on the campus of the University of California, Los Angeles, consists of more than 160,000 photographs of Moche objects from museums and private collections throughout the world. It includes documentation of more than 900 portrait head vessels.

The archive also contains the field notes from excavations that we have conducted at Moche sites in Peru during the past four decades, including documentation of the archaeological context of portrait vessels in tombs and midden deposits, as well as information that is useful for identifying the headdresses and ornaments worn in the portraits.

Unfortunately, grave robbers today looted more than 95 percent of Moche portrait vessels in museums and private collections, and their provenience is unknown. Although we can be confident that nearly all of them came from graves, they were not made for funerary purposes. They were made to be used by the Moche, and most show signs of wear--abrasion, chipping, or mended breaks--that

occurred prior to their placement in graves. It is likely that only a small percentage of the ceramic portraits produced by the Moche were ultimately put in graves. Most were probably broken while in use, and their sherds simply discarded along with other trash. These sherds are sometimes found in Moche refuse deposits, usually at important centers that have associated pyramid and palace complexes.

Ceramic portrait heads have been found in only a few of the Moche graves that have been excavated archaeologically. They occur in graves of both males and females--almost exclusively those of high-status individuals. When portrait heads are found in a grave, usually only one or two examples are present. This implies that they were not produced in great number and were seldom available to the common people.

There is no evidence that portrait head vessels were ever buried with the individuals they depicted. Although nearly all are portraits of adult males, they are sometimes found in female burials. Moreover, many portraits were often made of the same individual, and these were ultimately placed in the graves of various people.

The portrait head vessels were made exclusively as containers, all of which are portable. They range between six and forty-five centimeters in height, but most are between fifteen and thirty centimeters. They were made as bottles, jars, or bowls--all of which could have been used to contain liquid, possibly chicha, a mildly fermented beverage generally made from maize.

There are a few fineline paintings of portrait head vessels in use (figures 1.16, 1.17), but these provide little information about how they functioned in Moche society. They were used in ceremonial settings but may have been used in elite households as well.

In surveying a large sample of portrait head vessels, we see an amazing array of individuals, each with his own unique characteristics. So superbly crafted and so lifelike, these portraits provide us with a wonderful sense of connection to the Moche and to the remarkable civilization that they created.