The Moche, 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. The Moche built large settlements along the rivers that flowed through these valleys from the Andes Mountains to the Pacific Ocean.

They channeled these rivers into a complex network of irrigation canals that supported abundant agriculture. They grew corn, chili peppers, beans, avocados, squash, and peanuts. The Pacific Ocean and rivers, marshes and lagoons yielded large quantities of fish, mollusks, shrimp, crabs, and crayfish; domesticated guinea pigs, llamas and muscovy ducks.

They most certainly practiced the redistribution system characteristic of Andean peoples; local lords received food and commodities from their subjects, which they subsequently distributed to nobles of lesser rank. In this way, vast quantities of handmade goods and raw materials were systematically collected and redistributed by the state.

The surplus from redistribution supported a base core of artists who created objects for the elite. The lords to demonstrate their power and wealth used many of these objects; other objects were given by the lords to lesser nobility to maintain social and political allegiances.

With skilled artists and craftsmen supported in this way, an ideal climate was created to stimulate artistic excellence and innovative technology. (Alva, Donnan, Quick 1993)
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.

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

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

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

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 Water Lily Game
149 cm x 142 cm
Oil and acrylic on paper
Painting by Christiane Clados

Combat

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

Combat
Rollout of Moche Pottery
Christopher Donnan 1978

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.

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.

Offerings
100 cm x 73 cm
Oil and acrylic on paper
Painting by Christiane Clados

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.
The ceramics of ancient Peru were fashioned using simple procedures by potters who worked with readily available raw materials and rudimentary tools. The pottery was not characterized by high technology. The great achievement of ancient Peruvian potters was the degree to which they were able to master the full potential of available materials and simple techniques in order to produce objects of extraordinary beauty.

Discuss the following questions after reading the article, "The Spirit of Ancient Peru" Tribal Arts Magazine, summer 1997. The website is: http://www.tribalarts.com/feature/peru/

The ancient Peruvians lived over 1500 years ago. What do you think life might have been like for them? How did they get their food? Did they have grocery stores? What were their containers and pots made of? Do we still use objects, which are made of clay today?

Using literature, complete a variety of art, writing, and interpretative activities to understand how the Moche culture lived and how their culture was depicted in their art.

Art • Technology • Language Arts

Have students look at the techniques used by ancient Peruvians to create their pottery; especially look at their creation of molds. Create a virtual museum of images showing the various styles and decorative techniques used by the Moche culture.

Art • Language Arts

The Moche culture takes its name from a river of northern Peru. Moche cities, pyramids, and temples are poorly preserved, and there is no written Moche language. South America's western coast is marked by extremes of dramatic and inhospitable landscape: the world's driest coastal desert rises to the longest mountain chain and finally becomes the densest of tropical rainforests. In some places as many as thirty-four ecological zones can be experienced, none, however, offering the balance of water and land necessary for agriculture.

Despite the challenging environment, or perhaps because of it, ancient Peruvian civilization survived and prospered for nearly three millennia. The determined spirit of the people enabled them not only to conquer their rugged terrain but also to produce art and architecture of spectacular originality, beauty, and technical expertise. The amazing technical mastery that ancient Peruvian pottery reflect, as well as their stunning beauty and originality, have served to distinguish them as a national treasure. Regal portrait vessels epitomize the spirit of ancient Peru.
Stirrup-spout vessels capture the noble visage of a Moche ruler wearing a double-bird headdress. Portrait vessels depict specific individuals in Moche society, presumably those of high status and power.

Representation of the natural landscape was a common theme. The dramatic environment that stimulated social organization in Peru also strongly influenced artistic developments. Aspects of nature are also represented, in vessels depicting plants and vegetables.

Fortunately for ceramics like this Stirrup Spout Vessel with Deer Hunting scenes remain to give us an insight into the lives of the Moche people.

This vessel in the Dallas Museum of Art tells a story. Look at the top. Who are the main characters in this story? The man is holding a club in his left hand and a spear-thrower in his right. The story is about hunting. Look closely at the body of the jar. Use the detail of the rollout drawing for more information. What hunting details can you see? The hunter uses an atlatl, or spear-thrower, to hunt the deer. The glossary may give you a definition and picture of how this thrower was used.

Moche children are not depicted in their art; we know little of them and can only imagine the oral narratives parents might have related to children. Have students compose a narrative and create a rollout drawing on content from what they have learned about the Moche culture.


RESOURCES


INTERNET LINKS

The Spirit of Ancient Peru
http://www.tribalarts.com/feature/peru/  
Fineline Painting of the Moche
http://www.tribalarts.com/feature/moche/  
Clay and Cloth
http://www.textilemuseum.ca/clay_cloth/
GLOSSARY

Moche Pottery Detail of Iconography Influenced by the Coastal Environment and Fishing
Museo de Arqueologia, Anthropologia e Historia, Drawing Christopher Donnan

Iconography
Pictorial illustration of a subject. The collected representations illustrating a subject. A set of specified or traditional symbolic forms associated with the subject or theme of a stylized work of art.
Context-These images remain a record of the animals that were the Moche world; a narrative iconography.

Backflap
A piece of armor suspended from the belt of a warrior.
Context: Made of gold, the backflap weighs almost two pounds.

Earspools
An ear ornament.
Context-the Moche earspools were very large; many made of gold, turquoise and silver.

Stirrup Spout Vessel
A pre-Columbian ceramic vessel whose spout resembles the shape of a stirrup.
Context- Because the spout looks like a stirrup, these vessels are called stirrup spout bottles. Of course, there were no stirrups in Peru until the Spanish brought horses, but the shape makes a good handle.

Rollout Drawing
A rollout drawing presents an image of a cylindrical object as a continuous scene.
Context - A drawing from a bottle or ceramic vase. The Moche depicted such things as animals, ceremonies and rituals on their vases.

Gold Backflap
Museo Nacional Bruning, Lambayeque, Peru

Earspools
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Stirrup Spout Vessel with Deer Hunting Scenes
Dallas Museum of Art

Rollout Drawing from Moche Ceramics
Drawing Christopher Donnan