The Paracas culture is named after a desert peninsula on the southern coast of Peru. In translation, the word Paracas means, "sand falling like rain". During the 1920s, ancient desert cemeteries were discovered in the Paracas area.

The people of the Paracas peninsula on Peru’s south coast are known for producing the beautiful and artistic textiles that influenced ensuing cultures through the time of the Inca in the 16th century.

Since this coastal region of Peru is so extremely dry, the climate has preserved the bodies of the dead and their burial goods. Each of the bodies was wrapped for burial in layer upon layer of clothing and other textiles, forming what archaeologists call a "mummy bundle."

Many bodies, particularly those in Paracas burial sites, were wrapped in magnificent embroidered textiles that fueled the greed of the robbers. In the ancient Andean world, textiles played a profound symbolic role in sacred and secular life. Andean textiles are among the most complex ever made (some of their techniques have never been replicated), and the prestige of cloth was directly related to the extraordinary energy that spinners, dyers, weavers, and embroiderers expended to produce it.
ART AND ARTIFACTS

Paracas Embroidered Mantle Detail
Paracas 500/200 BC

Chavín de Huántar 900-200BC

The first great art style of the geographical area that is now Peru was that of the civilization that flourished at Chavín de Huántar in the northern highlands. A more or less contemporaneous culture of the north coast produced a style of pottery known as Cupisnique.

The Culture of Paracas: The Power of Garments

The culture of Paracas flourished for several centuries in one of the driest areas of the Andes. During its apogee, from 300 BCE to 200 CE, its influence extended throughout southern Peru’s coastal valleys. The people of Paracas buried their dead in elaborate funerary bundles, wrapping them in layer upon layer of finely woven and embroidered textiles. Many of these bundles contained sheet-gold masks as well as offerings of Spondylus shell imported from the Ecuadorian coast far to the north.

The lords of Paracas lived in multi-tiered dwellings built on the slopes of hills and wore stunning garments decorated with embroidered images of their gods; the rich colors and intricate designs of their garments resemble paintings more than embroidered textiles. Fine garments such as these defined social position and status. In addition, the members of the Paracas elite wore wigs or colored their hair with a red pigment containing poisonous mercury that often led to an early death for the society’s elite.

Male Headdress I of the Late Paracas Period

21 cm x 23 cm
pencil on paper
Pencil Drawing by Christiane Clados

Male Headdress I of the Late Paracas Period

Turbans were the predominant head garments of the Peruvian South Coast. The lords of Paracas wore elaborately wrapped turbans, some of which reached seven meters in length when undone.

Turban Band of the Paracas Culture
Ann Paul 1990
Paracas Ritual Attire: Symbols of Authority in Peru

The turban in the reconstruction portrait is wrapped so that the tassels on both ends adorn the ruler’s forehead. The gold discs on the sides of his face are not earrings; they are attached to the wig he wears under his turban. His shirt and his richly embroidered mantle are part of a set; the mantle covers his shoulders leaving only the collar of his shirt visible.
Both are decorated with a motif that represents a mythical being linked to the cycles of death, rebirth, and agricultural fertility. These motifs are also associated with headhunting and the trophy cult, widespread phenomena of the Peruvian South Coast.

Gold discs are attached to the two bands of the turban that appear on both sides of his face, and his hair is colored red and braided under the turban. The palette of colors and the labor invested in Paracas garments are astonishing. Nearly 190 different colors are recorded and as many as seven artisans may have worked on a single mantle. (Clados 2004)

Paracas mantles from Peru feature figures of ritually costumed priests, each clutching an animal by his side. Both priests and animals display human and animal traits, illustrating the religious connections between the social and natural orders. Mantles of this complexity belonged to the ruling elite and were worn only on important religious and festive occasions. Some were intended as burial clothes to be worn in the afterlife, representing the deceased’s status and office in the land of the ancestor spirits.

Male Headdress II of the Late Paracas Period

This reconstruction shows the headdress of an elegantly dressed man of Paracas. His tall turban consists of multiple bands embroidered in their entirety with colorful motifs that represent mythical beings.

Turban Band of the late Paracas Culture Decorated with Mythical Beings
Helmut Schindler 2000
Staatliches Museum f. Voelkerkunde
Muenchen, Muenchen

Paracas Embroidered Mantle Edge
Deborah Brinckeroff
Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, Greenwich, Connecticut

Paracas Woven Mantle
Nacional de Anthropologia y Arqueologia, Lima
The Paracas culture is named after a desert peninsula on the southern coast of Peru. In translation, the word Paracas means, "sand falling like rain". During the 1920s, ancient desert cemeteries were discovered in the Paracas area. Since this coastal region of Peru is so extremely dry, the climate has preserved the bodies of the dead and their burial goods. Each of the bodies was wrapped for burial upon layer upon layer of clothing and other textiles, forming what archaeologists call a "mummy bundle."

The Paracas culture is famous for the craft and beauty of these once-buried textiles, which, amazingly, have survived for over two thousand years. Look carefully at these textiles. What do you notice first? Identify the images that are repeated over the whole surface of many of the textiles.

A mantle is a large rectangular cloth worn over the shoulders like a cloak. The area without fringe would have been placed over the wrists. Each of the motifs is embroidered onto the woven fabric. Besides being very beautiful, this much stitchery took a great deal of time to complete. Do you think this piece of clothing was worn everyday or reserved for a special occasion? Explain. Since the mantle is so elaborate, the owner probably would not want to tear or soil it. Since it is large and took a long time to make, it must have been a precious item. Since it was buried with the dead, it must have been a special piece of clothing. A lord with great authority, a priest, or a ruler would have worn a mantle such as this. It probably was worn only for special occasions and would have been buried with the owner. The elaborateness of this mantle displayed his prestige and power to all who saw him.

Many of the birds on the textiles represent a large South American condor, a vulture whose wingspan can reach seven feet. Condors live in the Andes Mountains and are keen-sighted, strong creatures that soar in the skies. Refer to an encyclopedia for more information.

The chief, king, or priest who wore these mantles would have been covered in birds and would have been identified with the condor, lord of the skies. What condor qualities would be important for a man?
Look carefully at this textile mantle. What do you notice first? Identify the images that are repeated over the entire edge of the textile. How has the image of the heads been varied? Although there are several variations in the color and size of the figures, they all have diadems, wide wingspans, and long legs ending in heads. Here is a detail of one of these figures.

Ask the students to read The Leaping Llama Carpet by Marian and Ruth Waller. Identify the repeated images on the carpet. How has the artist used the images from Peruvian textiles for the illustrations? Design a repeat pattern border motif for a mantle of your own.

Have students conduct their own research about how a fabric is made—research through the library, Internet, fabric stores. Have them bring in samples if they can, which can be displayed. Look at the different kinds of construction techniques used such as knitting, tabby, netting, tapestry, looping, openwork, braiding, plaiting, feather work, beading, and embroidery. Make a chart and/or sampler of each of the techniques. Make detailed chart of drawings using designs from Chimú, Chancay, Nasca, Paracas, and Moche cultures--great flocks of pelicans, gulls, ducks, and fish. Various plant forms, monsters with huge eyes, head trophies, felines, birds and serpents.

TEXTBOOKS

Unwrapping Ancient Mysteries
Invitations to Literacy
Level 6 Theme 3
Houghton Mifflin 2001

Discover Our Heritage
The Ancient Americas
Level 7 Chapter 6
Houghton Mifflin 2001

RESOURCES


INTERNET LINKS

*Ancient Peruvian Textiles and Pottery*
http://www.rain.org/~pjenkin/textile/textile.html

*Ancient Peru*

*Clay and Cloth*
http://www.textilemuseum.ca/clay_cloth/

*Mummy Bundle Named Big Bird*
*California Institute for Peruvian Studies*
http://www.cipstudies.org/wallace.htm
GLOSSARY

Turban
A traditional headdress consisting of a long scarf of woven bands that is wound around the head.
Context: The turban is the predominant head garment of the Peruvian South Coast. The lords of Paracas wore wrapped turbans. Those turbans consisted of turban bands, some as long as seven meters.

Mantle
A loose outer garment; a cloak.
Context: Paracas mantles from Peru feature figures of ritually costumed priests, each clutching an animal by his side.

Mummy bundle
A well-preserved body that resembles an embalmed body placed in a bundle.
Context: Mummification was practiced, and mummy bundles were placed in either shaft tombs or in stone vaults.

Mythological beings
Relating to, or recorded in myths or mythology.
Context: The mantle is decorated with a motif representing a mythical being that is associated with the trophy cult and the field’s fertility.