

Chimú Culture

The Chimú (or Chimor) kingdom arose between 900–1100 CE in the Moche valley, centered on its great capitol of Chan Chan. While the founding of Chan Chan is dated to around 900 CE, the Moche Valley as a whole didn't fall under Chimú domination until the middle of the eleventh century. It conquered most of the North Coast, although as a maritime-focused civilization its territory never expanded far inland.

Chimú society was organized in a four-level administrative hierarchy; lower order centers managed local production and passed tribute on to the dynastic center at Chan Chan. At its height more than 12,000 artisans were based at the capitol. Pottery was mass-produced in specialized workshops which were to some degree controlled by the state, although perhaps not to the extent of later Inka craft production; greater variability in pottery form and finish is observed as distance to an administrative center increases. The glossy, burnished, and lustrous Chimú blackware, made by firing in a reducing atmosphere, is immediately recognizable.

Chimú is generally thought to be the last political entity that might have stemmed Inka expansionism, but in 1470 Chimú's last ruler, Minchancaman, was overcome by Topa Inka Yupanqui.



Effigy Jar in the Shape of a Duck

Chimú, ca. 1100–1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAC 2007-03-003)

Ducks appear frequently in Chimú pottery, textiles, and metalwork. While the species of duck depicted here is uncertain, the Muscovy Duck (*Carina moschata*) was domesticated in Peru in pre-Columbian times. The Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605 CE) was one of the first Europeans to describe this species, based in part on accounts by Christopher Columbus.

Hélène Bernier argues that birds—and ducks in particular—had few associations with warfare and conflict in Chimú iconography, but instead symbolized prestige and abundance, unlike the iconography of the Moche and Nazca.



Frog Effigy Jar with Rider and Handle

Chimú, 1100–1470 CE

Terracotta (MAC 1966-0730)

Each of the disparate elements of this strap-handled composite, in which a human or monkey figure (the vessel spout) sits astride a frog (the vessel body), was formed separately then joined.

Chimú was a water-focused culture; myths claim that the founder of the great capitol at Chan Chan, Taycanamo, came from the sea, and much Chimú iconography concerns aquatic creatures, fishing, and a maritime focus. Chimú economies were dependent on irrigation-based farming, with the scale of irrigation and water-control projects increasing steadily until the Chimor kingdom is conquered by the Inka.



Stirrup-Spout Vessel with Zoomorph

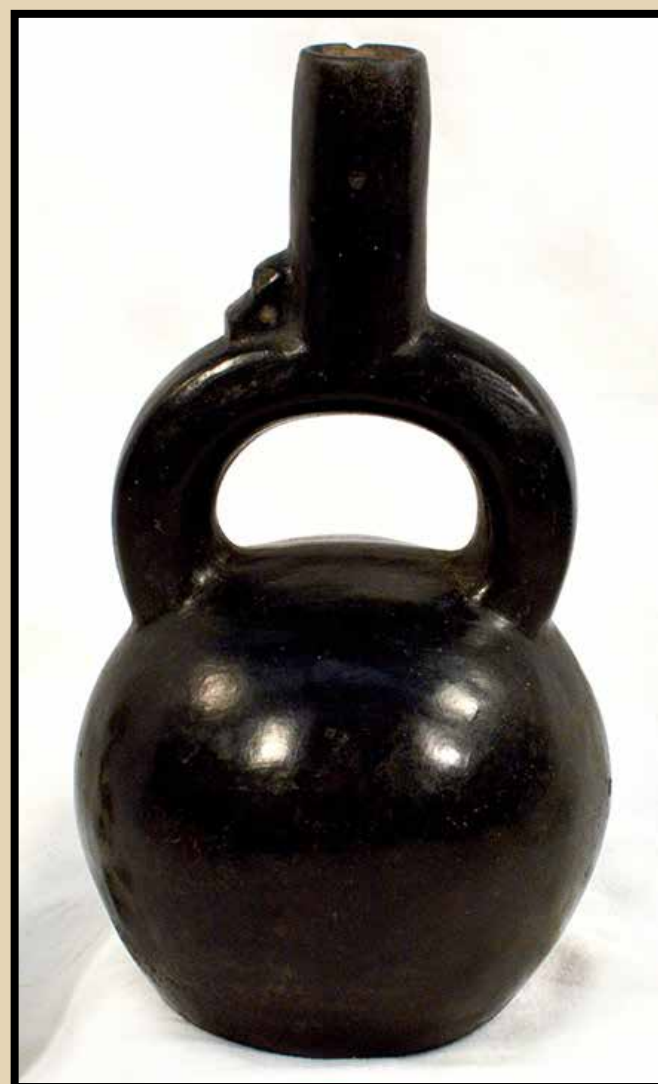
Chimú, 1100–1470 CE, probably ca. 1400 CE

Terracotta

(MAC 1966-0729a)

The rounded body of this stirrup-spout vessel contrasts with the flat slab of the stirrup. Small, terraced or stair-step forms are often placed at the juncture of the stirrup and spout; in this case the form is distinguishable as a monkey. While decorative, these elements also serve to buttress the spout, strengthening a structural weak point in the vessel's construction.

The 'horns' below the stirrup-spout are often identifiable as small upturned effigy heads, but in this case they are too highly stylized to be certain what they represent.



Stirrup-Spout Vessels

Chimú, 1100–1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAC 1966-0728 above; MAC 2007-03-002, below)

Two quite similar stirrup-spout vessels, both with small stairstep figures at the spout junction, illustrate the effect of oxidizing vs. reducing atmospheres on similar clays. In the presence of sufficient oxygen these clays fire to a rich brown; in its absence they fire jet black.

Because oxidizing and reducing kiln atmospheres are controlled by the amount of fuel relative to the amount of oxygen, they can be modified during firing.

The lustrous black finish was its own decoration, but red-surfaced vessels were sometimes painted in fine black lines, particularly in later periods.



Double-Chambered Effigy Jar

Chimú, 1100–1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAC 1966-0729b)

One of the distinctive forms of Chimú vessel is the double-chambered “whistling” jar. One neck is a normal spout, the other is “blind,” and has only a small opening, modeled into or hidden behind an effigy or figure surmounting the other spout.

As liquid is poured from one chamber, the air replacing it in the other chamber creates a whistling sound, as it rushes through the small hole in the blind spout. The whistle’s pitch varies based on changes in the amount of liquid in the chamber.



Tall Necked Bottle with Relief Scene

Chimú, 1100-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 61.54.6)

Most decorated Chimú vessels are polished, but this mold-made bottle has a plain and partially exfoliated surface, showing the character of the underlying paste.

All Chimú pottery does not exhibit the iconic, lustrous black finish. Vessels made further from the centers of specialist manufacture, and utilitarian wares of the kind that rarely find their way to museums, either do not exhibit the highly polished and reduced finish or do so to lesser degree.



Water Jar with Zoomorph

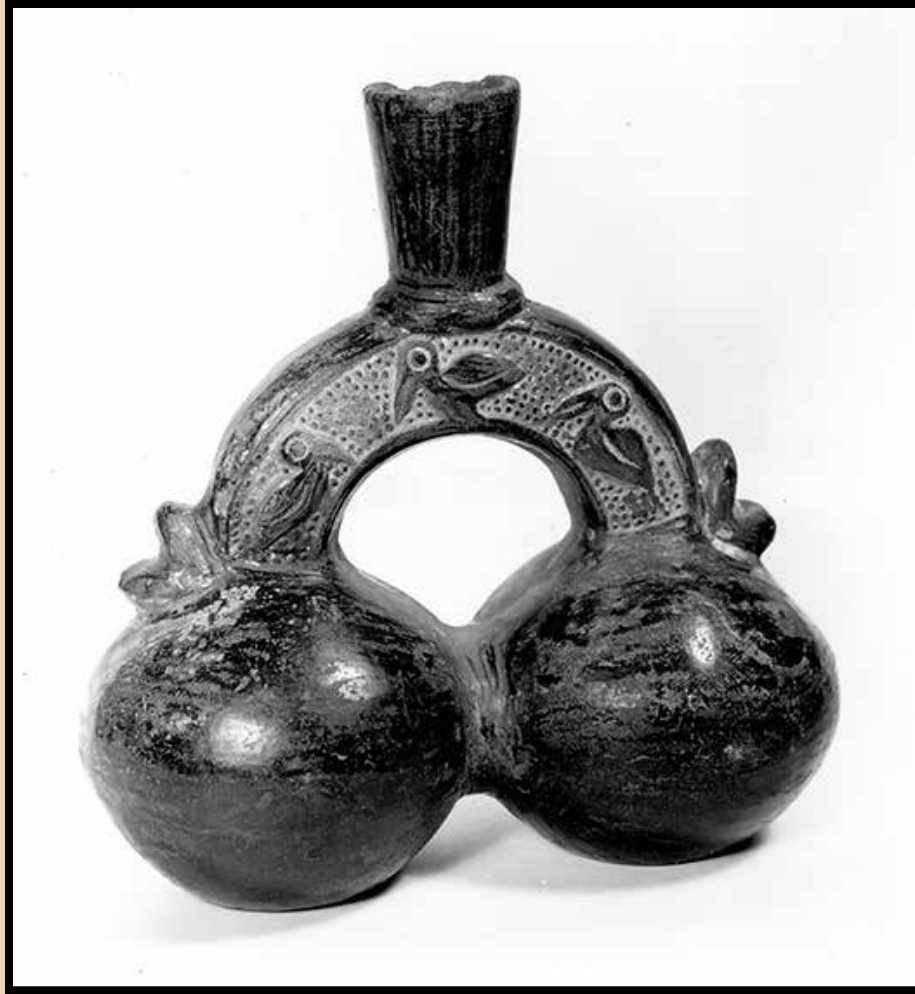
Chimú, 1100-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 62.43.6)

Cleverly designed, this press-molded jar uses nodes to roughen the gripping surface, reducing the likelihood of slippage.

Dampening the surface of the vessel would also promote evaporative cooling of the contents, with its effects somewhat increased by the greater surface area of the noded surface. The modeled zoomorph and small lug handles help conceal the mold seam.



**Stirrup-Spout Double Chambered Vessel
and
Stirrup-Spout Quadruple Chambered Vessel**

Chimú, 1100–1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 62.43.4 above; MAA 2010.34 below)

While the creation of compound, stirrup-spouted vessels like these required many parts, each part could be treated as a separate element using simple molds and later assembled as a final stage. These techniques allowed Chimú potters to create elaborate vessel forms relatively quickly in state-sponsored workshops.

Many of the characteristic locations for decoration reflect this assembly technique, creating molded adornos for placement in areas where the mold joins would be most evident, especially at the junction of spout and body.



Effigy Vessel with Rayed Face

Chimú, 1100-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 2010.35)

This small effigy vessel exemplifies two-piece mold technology, with separate molds used for front and back, then joined. The seam is well-smoothed on the exterior, but visible inside the neck, where the spout has been broken off and the surface re-ground to allow continued use.



Stirrup-Spout Vessel in the Shape of a Seed Pod

Chimú, 1100–1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 73.235)

Seed pods, thought to represent the pacay (*Inga feuillei*) bean tree, are frequently depicted in Chimú ceramics. Beyond their nutritional value—pacay are sometimes called ice-cream bean trees because of the sweet flavor and creamy consistency of the pulp—they are also legumes producing root nodules that fix nitrogen, improving the agricultural productivity of the surrounding soils. Pacay pods and seeds have been found in tombs in the region as early as 1000 BCE.

In the early post-contact period, Pedro Pissaro records the Inka emperor Atahualpa sending pacay pods to Francisco Pissaro as a gift.