

# Moche Culture

**M**oche arose in the Chicama and Moche valleys of the north coast of Peru in the late second or early third century CE, and slowly spread further north into the lower Jequetepeque Valley system, the La Leche, Reque and Zaña, and the upper Piura. Rather than being organized as a regional empire, like the later Chimú, Moche seems to represent a series of relatively independent and competing polities.

Moche chronology was initially developed by Peruvian archaeologist Rafael Larco Hoyle based on the shape and decoration of stirrup spouts on pottery:

- 1) Early Moche/Moche 1–2, from about 200–400CE;
- 2) Middle Moche/Moche 3–4, from ca. 400–600CE; and
- 3) Late Moche/Moche 5, until about 750CE.

While some Moche polities may survive until later in the Moche and Chicama valleys, following a brief period of centralization and collapse most later Moche communities adopted foreign elements and melded into other regional polities.

The enormous diversity of Moche ceramics actually reflects the recombination of elements from a limited color palette—mainly slip-painted bichrome vessels with earth-tone colors on a white or cream background—and a restricted set of vessel forms, including stirrup-spout bottles, several forms of bowls, neck and neckless jars, dippers, and cups. Moche potters further modeled these basic mold-made forms and combined them in different ways to create the wealth of forms for which they are famous.

While Moche culture is best known for its elaborately modeled and decorated pottery, Moche artisans were equally innovative in metalwork and independently developed both depletion gilding (which removes other metals from gold alloy to create a pure surface) and electrochemical replacement plating. Both metalwork and pottery were elite-controlled crafts, and served to express and legitimize the authority of changing dynasties.

The Moche built large canal systems to irrigate agricultural fields in the coastal desert, as well as massive mud-brick pyramids. While many of the larger huacas were looted for gold centuries ago, an intact Moche tomb was excavated at Sipán beginning in 1987 and revealed a spectacular treasure of early Moche gold and silverwork.



### **Spouted Vessel with Ceremonial Scene**

Recuay, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Westreich (73.239)

Since the highlands Recuay culture and the Moche were neighbors, a considerable amount of cultural interchange and warfare is apparent between them.

Recuay sites represent some of the earliest fortified communities in the Andes. Recuay pottery often includes elaborate ceremonial scenes modeled atop vessels which were made with kaolin clays, giving the vessels a distinctive white color. Here a high-ranking human figure, marked by large earspools and effigy headdress and standing on a painted robe, is surrounded by five attendants. Five panels fill the lower body of the vessel. Four panels show a double-headed figure derived from the "Moon Eater," characteristically depicted with large eyes, long toothed muzzle and curved claws. Normally this figure is shown with a curved crest coming from the head; here the crest may have become part of the curved depiction of the body. The fifth panel shows a geometric motif representing a double-headed serpent.





**Stirrup-Spouted Vessel in the Form of a Kneeling Man**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Boss Partners (80.363)

Most Moche vessels were mold-made and large numbers of nearly identical vessels were produced and widely distributed by elites to lesser nobles and clients. Because the molded ceramics were then decorated by hand, using slips and paints, the finished vessels may vary in form and detail.

Figures with elaborate headgear and earpools are generally assumed to represent elite persons. This figure wears an oval hat with alternating triangles and flaps or tassels falling below the ears and down the back, a mantle falling just below the shoulder, a necklace, and elaborate earpools. Earpools were a common form of ornament in the pre-Columbian Americas, and are found in South, Central, and North America. They often served as important vehicles for iconographic images, were made of exotic materials, and could be quite sizeable. Holes in the earlobe were gradually expanded to accommodate larger earpools.



**Vessel in the Form of a Seated Captive Warrior**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of William A. Scott (2009.201)

Some scholars believe that Moche warfare was largely ceremonial and involved single or small-group combat between high-ranking individuals from warring communities or dynasties rather than between whole armies.

The iconography of warfare--both on modeled vessels like this one and on painted vessels that show depictions of actual combat--seems to place higher value on warfare between individual figures. While the valor of individual warriors may be more celebrated, some later Moche sites are fortified.

This example shows a captured warrior with his hands tied behind his back and a rope around his neck.

[Moche Depictions of Warfare](#)





### **Dipper**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Westreich (73.233)

Water represented the single most important unifying element of ancient Peruvian cultures. Scattered along river valleys cutting through an arid and inhospitable coast in the shadow of the Andes, ancient Peruvian societies relied on massive and complex irrigation systems and water management regimes to maintain high population levels. Water was generative and some theorists believe unequal access to and control of water led to the rise of ancient Peruvian elites.

Representation of plants and plant products is an important element of Moche iconography. Mold-made effigy stirrup cups depict a range of plants, some native to the Peruvian coast, some characteristic of the Andean highlands or tropical lowlands beyond. A range of plates and dippers, like this one, also depict plants and plant products, here combined with a human head at the end of the long handle. Gourds represent one of the earliest domesticated plants; here fertility of both plants and humans is suggested by the combination of effigy gourd and phallic handle.



### **Water Jar**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Renato Almansi (61.54.1)

Moche pottery is best known for its extensive use of three-dimensional modeled human forms, normally made using molds. Some of the molds may have been multi-part, or made from multiple elements that were molded and joined. In other cases, as here, simple two-piece molds could be used and the resulting vessel decorated using slip-painted designs. These techniques allowed rapid production of works in multiple, for which the Moche became celebrated.

Archaeologist Garth Bawden has argued that Moche elites can be identified by the presence of either of two headdress elements:

- 1) A conical helmet, as on Stirrup-Spouted Vessel with Figure of Seated Man (80.371), which is associated with Moche elites as warriors; and
- 2) Decorated turbans, as here, which communicated specific information about the wearer's role and rank.



**Vessel in the Form of a Couple in an Erotic Pose**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Westreich (73.234)

While potters depicted a wide range of subjects from daily life, Moche pottery is perhaps best known for depictions of erotic scenes. Some scholars have argued that the range of poses and activities suggests considerable stature and autonomy for women, but other scholars note that the distinctive and unique portrait vessels of the middle Moche periods almost exclusively depict men.

While sexual imagery is best known from Moche ceramics—more than 500 are known—vessels portraying sex are also found in Nazca, Recuay, Wari, Chimú, Lambayeque, and Vicús pottery as well.

Published: [Muse 48:107-132](#).

[Moche Sex Pots: Reproduction and Temporality in Ancient South America](#)





**Jar in the Form of a Man with a Facial Disease**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Westreich (73.241)

Moche ceramics are renowned for their figural detail. Not only is a facial disease apparent on the kneeling male figure depicted here, but it is rendered with sufficient enough detail that it has been identified as leishmaniasis, a parasitic disease spread by bites of certain kinds of sand flies.

Leishmaniasis remains widespread; a 2012 survey by the World Health Organization estimated it causes the ninth-greatest disease burden of all infectious diseases. Approximately 1.2 million new cases of the form depicted here—cutaneous leishmaniasis—are reported each year.

Published: [Muse 48:107-132](#).





**Jar in the Form of a Fat Male Figure**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Westreich (73.237)

Moche potters depicted the human form in a range of styles, with an emphasis in the middle Moche periods on naturalistic portraiture. More generic forms appear in all periods, however, in which the functional form of the vessel takes precedence over the sculptural form of the depiction.

Despite the nearly infinite variety of finished shapes and decorative motifs, most Moche vessels are built from a limited repertory of nine basic forms, elaborated as the ceramicist chose.



### **Stirrup-Spouted Vessel with a Male Figure**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century CE

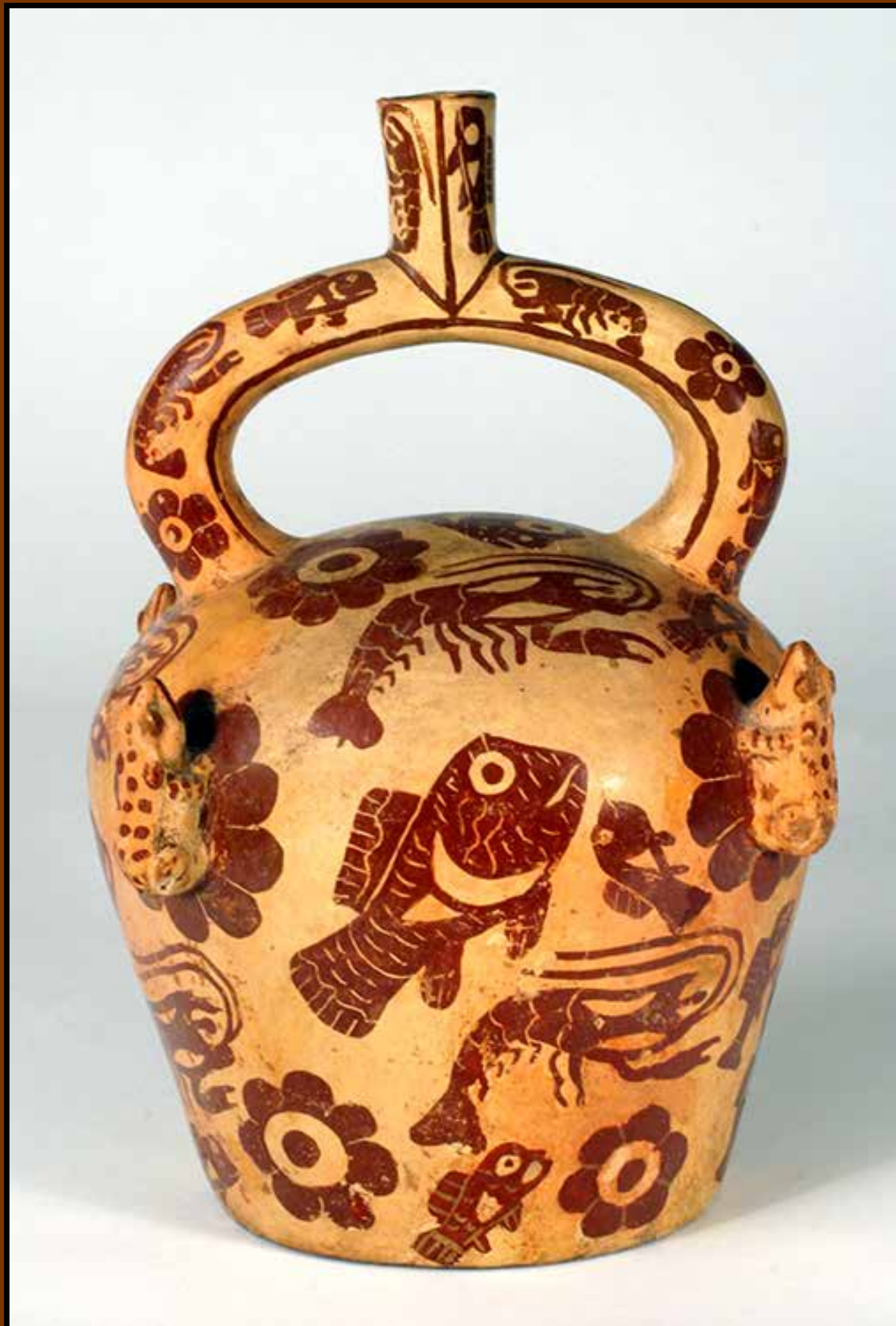
Pottery

Gift of Boss Partners (80.371)

A male figure sits atop an asymmetrical stirrup-spouted vessel; the figure wears the helmet and belted tunic of Moche warriors, but lacks armor or weapons. Moche helmets were secured with a chin-strap, shown here, and were wrapped with cloth, ending in a loose section covering the back of the neck. On this vessel that loose section becomes the asymmetrically-placed stirrup spout.

One of the most important elements in iconographic identification of warriors in Moche art is the presence of the backflap, a piece of armor worn from the belt on the back of warrior figures. The stirrup-spout on this Moche vessel emerges from behind the conical helmet, then passes into the body of the vessel through a large backflap spread behind the figure.





**Stirrup-Spouted Vessel**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Susan J. Long (78.168)

While both modeled and painted forms were produced throughout the Moche period, fine-line painted wares tend to replace earlier, more modeled and sculptural forms over time. Elites seem to have tightly controlled the iconography of vessels, regardless of whether the designs were modeled or painted.

Moche fine-line vessels depict a range of natural and human scenes, with the kinds of scenes portrayed changing over time. This vessel is somewhat anomalous: the stirrup shape—usually the main element used to assign Moche ceramics to a subphase—seems to correspond to the canons of the Moche IV subphase, while the body form and the relatively heavy-lined red painting seem more characteristic of Moche V.



### **Stirrup-Spouted Vessel in Beehive Shape**

Moche, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Westreich (73.238)

Stirrup-spouted vessels like this one were created by bending and joining two or more ceramic tubes to form the stirrup, then joining them to the shoulder of the vessel. Cuts were made in the stirrup near the join, a tool inserted to remove loose clay, then the cuts were sealed.

In the absence of detailed archaeological provenience, iconography and stylistic analysis can help place an object into an approximate cultural context. In the case of this beehive-shaped vessel, style (the form of the piece) is a more important indicator than iconography (the meanings conveyed by the piece). Broad, flat bases, absence of a beaded lip, a straight to slightly incurving neck and rim, and stirrups that pinch noticeably together at the base are hallmarks of Moche Subphase V ceramics, and in general this vessel fits the canons of that style.