

**Portrait Head**  
**Stirrup-spout terracotta vessel**  
**Moche IV**  
**400-500AD**

Presented by JoAnn B. Yochim  
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Sixteen hundred years ago, someone along the northern coast of presentday Peru, South America, sculpted this personage. He belonged to a group of people known as the Moche.

People began occupying these river valleys around four thousand years ago. With the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Andes to the east, the river valleys provided level land for the cultivation of crops. As plants were developed more leisure time was available to improve technology, art and the aspects of their culture important to the people.

The Moche appeared around 800 BC and reached the apogee of their culture from 150 BC to 550 AD (Stage IV). What little we know today of this great civilization, has been learned through the study of these vessels.

Prior to 1000 BC ceramics were unknown; food and liquids were prepared and stored in bottle gourds. Clay found in this area contains iron and is a light to dark brownish red. When fired the ceramic resembles terra cotta. "Clay was considered a sacred substance. Clay came from the earth, which was home to the ancestors and to the living roots of plants. The most basic and sacred elements went into the manufacture of pottery, which held nourishment for people and gods." "The World of the Moche" Benson

The stirrup-spout vessels frequently produced by Moche potters were an ancient form of ceramic. They were commonly spherical in form, with a flattened base. The spout was formed by using three tapered rods; the flattened clay was rolled around a wooden rod and then the rods were removed, leaving a hollow tube. The spout was ready to be attached to the top. Many of these vessels were in the form of human heads. We know, from the variety of such vessels, that they weren't stylizations but demonstrated considerable individuality and are amazingly true to nature.

Fired sectional moulds taken from models have been found. This allowed for production of multiple copies of a popular form. Much about daily life is revealed in this art form. Local animals and plants are represented. Even more frequently humans were represented. Faces that are proud, commanding, conveying warmth and humor are clearly modeled from life, probably in clay that was not fired. Individual personages are recognizable; sometimes groups of portraits of the same person have been found.

Moche potters did not use a potter's wheel, but they could rotate a vessel during its formation by placing it on a shallow, round bottomed plate that served as a turntable.

The decorative ornamentation was most commonly bi-chrome, with red-brown paint on a white or cream slip. Black was sometimes added for detail. Vessels were polished with care and reworked and polished with smooth stone and bone tools after moulded sections had been assembled. The result is a smooth and lustrous finish. The feline design is of interest as it depicts a connection to the Chavin culture of the past. The vessel was then fired in a shallow, open pit that allowed oxygen to freely circulate around it.

We may not understand the meaning behind the sculptures, but we "can appreciate the thoroughness with which the shapes of nature are transformed into consistent patterns." E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*.

The potter is working with a purpose and his artistry is "bound by the object and he can only manifest that part of his vision of beauty which does not impair their extra-aesthetic but fundamental purpose." Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*. Gombrich states there is "no such thing as art, merely artists." *Op cit.* Gombrich. As we think about the mentality of the creator of this piece, we may begin to understand how his image - making was not only connected to his religious-ecclesiastical, spiritual, theological thoughts - but may be a first form of writing.

We certainly read this piece of art to learn about the past.

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