



# THE MOCHE *of* ANCIENT PERU

Media and Messages

*Jeffrey Quilter*

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*Media and Messages*

Jeffrey Quilter

Foreword by Luis Jaime Castillo B.

Photographs by Mark Craig

Rubie Watson, Series Editor

*Peabody Museum Press, Harvard University*

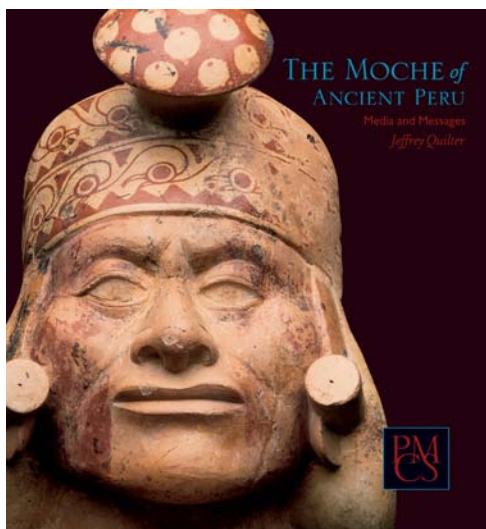
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FRONTISPIECE: For seven centuries the people of the north coast of Peru participated in what has come to be called the Moche Archaeological Culture. Moche is best known for remarkable ceramics that depicted gods, heroes, and, apparently, ordinary people—as shown in this group photograph. Top row, left to right: PM 46-77-30/5031, 46-77-30/5088, 46-77-30/5065; middle row, l-r: 09-3-30/75622.5, 46-77-30/4961, 09-3-30/75631, 09-3-30/75614; bottom row, l-r: 09-3-30/75604.2, 46-77-30/4967, 09-3-30/75622. 98060003. J. David Bohl, photographer. Copyright © 2005 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

FRONT AND BACK COVERS: Front and rear views of Moche Phase IV portrait head stirrup-spout vessel from the Virú or Chicama Valley. PM 16-62-30/F729. Front: 98750073; back: 98720052. Mark Craig, photographer. Copyright © by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

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## Contents

*List of Illustrations* vi

*Foreword: Luis Jaime Castillo B.* xi

*Acknowledgments* xv

INTRODUCTION 3

MOCHE AND ITS ART STYLE 9

ANCIENT LIFE ON THE NORTH COAST 13

MOCHE IN ANDEAN PREHISTORY 21

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MOCHE STUDIES 31

MEDIA FOR MOCHE MESSAGES 39

THE MESSAGES OF MOCHE ART 49

GODS, PRIESTS, LORDS, WARRIORS, AND HEROES 59

MEDIA, MESSAGES, RELIGION, AND POLITICS 67

RECONSIDERING MOCHE 79

THE PEABODY MUSEUM COLLECTION 89

COLOR PLATES 91

*Notes* 142

*Suggested Reading* 151



## *Illustrations*

FRONTISPIECE: Moche ceramics *ii*

### FIGURES

Maritime Frieze at Huaca Cao Viejo *x*

Early Moche stirrup-spout vessel *2*

View of the Virú Valley *4*

Nineteenth-century looting of a Peruvian site *5*

Scars of looting at El Brujo *6*

The Huacas de Moche *8*

Map of the north coast of Peru *10*

Metal nose ornament *12*

Moche vessel in the *florero* style *15*

Moche jar depicting a deer hunt *16*

Aqueduct of the Ascope Canal *18*

Cupisnique-style bottle *20*

Time spans of Peruvian ceramic cultures *22*

El Paraíso, a Late Preceramic complex *23*

Stone mace head *25*

Huari-style canteen *27*

Courtyard at Chan Chan *28*

The Great Pyramid of Moche *30*

Rafael Larco Hoyle *33*




|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Gordon R. Willey in the Virú Valley Project       | 36  |
| Moche portrait head vessel                        | 38  |
| Castillo Modeled ceramic sherds                   | 40  |
| Figurine mold                                     | 42  |
| Vessel buried with a sacrificed victim            | 45  |
| Artist's rendering of Huaca de la Luna            | 46  |
| Stirrup-spout vessel with a grotesque face        | 48  |
| Drawing of the "Revolt of the Objects"            | 51  |
| Goblet in the form of a deity head                | 52  |
| Drawing of the "Presentation Theme"               | 53  |
| Vessel portraying a Moche woman                   | 54  |
| Moche erotic vessel                               | 54  |
| Moche erotic vessel                               | 55  |
| Wooden statuette with a cut lip                   | 57  |
| Deity head friezes at Huaca de la Luna            | 58  |
| Frieze depicting the Degollador God               | 61  |
| Burial of a priestess                             | 66  |
| Modern woman dressed as the Señora de Cao         | 70  |
| Vessel depicting a curer with mother and child    | 75  |
| Ruins of the urban site of Mocollope              | 78  |
| Prisoner Frieze at Huaca de la Luna               | 81  |
| Prisoner Frieze at Huaca Cao Viejo                | 82  |
| Aipaec Frieze at Huaca Cao Viejo                  | 83  |
| Moche pottery photos for Harvard classroom use    | 88  |
| Flower design on a stirrup-spout bottle           | 94  |
| Insect design on the same stirrup-spout bottle    | 94  |
| Front view of a bottle depicting a llama          | 97  |
| Rear view of a jar depicting a monster            | 98  |
| Side view of a jar depicting stirrup-spout pots   | 106 |
| Fragment of a slit tapestry mantle                | 110 |
| Side view of a portrait head stirrup-spout bottle | 112 |

- Rear view of a portrait head stirrup-spout bottle 114  
Drawing of a fine-line painting of a Moche warrior 116  
Frieze of felines at Huaca de la Luna 118  
Burial bundle of the Señora de Cao 128  
Drawing of a scene on a Moche vessel 128  
Top view of a bottle depicting a curing session 130  
Low-relief modeling on a stirrup-spout vessel 132  
Rear view of a figural group with cup 133  
Rear view of a paired group of figures with attached cup 135  
Drawing of the Decapitator God 136  
Vase drawing of Moche consuming coca 138

#### PLATES

- 1 *Flojero* with catfish design 93
- 2 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a Muscovy duck 95
- 3 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a llama 97
- 4 Jar depicting a fanged head 99
- 5 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a hunt scene 101
- 6 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting an owl 103
- 7 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a feline-headed snake 105
- 8 Jar depicting stirrup-spout pots 107
- 9 Metalworking die 109
- 10 Slit tapestry mantle border 111
- 11 Portrait head stirrup-spout bottle 113
- 12 Portrait head stirrup-spout bottle 115
- 13 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a headdress 117
- 14 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a puma attacking a prisoner 119
- 15 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a prisoner 121
- 16 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting anthropomorphic creatures 123
- 17 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a recumbent male 125

- 
- 18 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a danse macabre 127  
19 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting humans with a funeral bundle 129  
20 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a curing session 131  
21 Figural group with attached cup 133  
22 Paired group of figures with attached cup 135  
23 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting the Decapitator God 137  
24 Stirrup-spout bottle depicting a Moche deity 139  
25 Trumpet 141





Detail of the Maritime Frieze at Huaca Cao Viejo, Chicama Valley, Peru. Photo by Hal Starratt.

## FOREWORD

# THE CHANGING WORLD OF MOCHE ARCHAEOLOGY

*Luis Jaime Castillo B.*

ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE LONG REGARDED the Peabody Museum's collection of Moche artifacts as one of the finest in the world. Beginning with a contribution of materials by Julio C. Tello, one of the founders of Peruvian archaeology and a Harvard alumnus, and enhanced by later additions from various scholars and donors, the collection includes many outstanding pieces, each deserving its own detailed analysis. In the pages of this book, those acquainted with Moche research will immediately recognize emblematic objects such as the portrait head vessels in plates 11 and 12 and on the cover; the curing session presided over by an owl-healer in plate 20; or the congregation of skeletons around a mummy bundle in plate 19. With this publication, an important part of the Peabody's collection becomes available to the general public for the first time—providing an opportunity to enjoy and ponder the meaning of these enigmatic objects.

Although archaeological dogma gives absolute primacy to objects found *in situ*—that is, in original settings and excavated through a rigorous archaeological

procedure—it is also unquestionable that museum collections, often composed primarily of unprovenienced artifacts, contain information that can be essential to understanding ancient societies. Purists would like us to ignore artifacts that were not found and registered by trained excavators, but to do so would exclude some of the most compelling portrayals of Moche society—objects that could have been produced by no one but the Moche. The “unique object,” a piece that has no copies or that portrays aspects of Moche life that can be seen nowhere else, can be admired and studied by scholars even as we condemn the way in which it was obtained. What we cannot do is ignore an artifact, particularly an exceptional one, for the way in which it was found. As archaeologists and museum curators, our responsibility is to preserve it for the future, not only assuring its integrity but also contextualizing it within the grand narratives of its original society. This catalog is a tribute to these types of artifacts: distinctive pieces that deserve detailed explanations, objects that beg to be considered from many angles and that are great creations of the human spirit. By themselves, however, the objects cannot accomplish the purpose of communicating who the Moche were and why their study inspires us.

In *The Moche of Ancient Peru*, Jeffrey Quilter presents the artifacts from the Peabody Museum collection—beautifully photographed and explained in great detail—wrapped in an account of the Moche that enlivens the objects and gives meaning to the society that produced them. Putting together this up-to-date narrative of the Moche, and of what archaeologists have figured out about them, has not been an easy task. An enormous amount of new information has emerged from the excavations on the north coast of Peru in the last twenty years, and readers are fortunate that this study was written by a scholar who has been at the forefront of this research.

During Quilter’s academic lifespan, the Moche of northern Peru have become one of the most thoroughly researched and recognizable archaeological cultures of ancient South America, but they remain among the most complex, mysterious, and difficult societies to summarize in a single volume. Only a few years after the discovery in 1987 of the royal tombs at Sipán—the richest ancient burials yet found in the Western hemisphere—large-scale and long-lasting multidisciplinary research programs began at the Huaca de la Luna, Huaca Cao Viejo, and San José de Moro. These



research programs were followed by many others ranging from research on specific sites to whole regions and from generic, society-level approaches to the examination of specific subjects such as paleoethnobotany, the genetic composition of populations, and the technology used to produce ceramics and metals.

Before 1987, when Walter Alva and his team of archaeologists excavated the first royal tomb at Sipán, Moche research was perceived as a fairly closed subject. It was widely thought that the excellent work led by Rafael Larco and followed by scholars like Christopher Donnan and Michael Moseley had revealed all that could be learned about this ancient people. Larco's chronology, based largely on a detailed study of his collections, now housed in the Rafael Larco Herrera Museum in Lima, was widely confirmed, as were his ideas about Moche religion and ritual life. For much of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, work had focused on the interpretation of Moche's rich iconographic record, revealing its structure and function—including Jeffrey Quilter's original work on the narrative structure of Moche iconography. But events unfolding in Sipán were to demonstrate that the facts of Moche life were far from settled.

No *mochicologo* (a student of the Moche) expected in the mid-1980s that a royal burial would be excavated in his or her lifetime. The largest Moche burial found to that point had been that of the Warrior-Priest of Huaca de la Cruz, excavated by William Duncan Strong and Clifford Evans in the late 1940s as part of the Virú Valley Project led by Harvard's Gordon R. Willey. It was assumed that all other burials must already have been looted, many by early Spanish settlers. But when royal and high-elite burials appeared at Sipán, La Mina, San José de Moro, Huaca de la Luna, Huaca Cao, and Úcupe, we realized that the Moche were much more highly developed than originally thought. The conditions revealed by empirical archaeological data about technological advancement, social organization, political configuration, and artistic tradition proved to be more complex than anything previously imagined by Peruvianist archaeologists.

These research programs have resulted in hundreds of scholarly publications based on the extraordinary material manifestations of Moche achievements, including large research collections of artifacts with numerous museum-quality pieces; royal, elite, and commoner burials; and large temples decorated with polychrome designs.

Rather than making the Moche more comprehensible, this wealth of information and materials—ably described and analyzed in this volume—has ironically created a high level of confusion about this ancient society and reminds us that often in archaeology, the more we know of a phenomenon, the less we understand it.

Jeffrey Quilter's concise and provocative book on the Peabody Museum's Moche collection approaches the Moche through the lens of an anthropological archaeologist interested in understanding the social and cultural processes that shaped this unique society. Luckily for the reader, it also indulges the fascination provoked by the exceptional artistic qualities of Moche material culture. Quilter's intimate relationship with the Moche—an enduring affair that has led him to explore many different manifestations of Moche society—is expressed in this book's passionate and deliberately subjective account of a research subject in constant flux. Even as we write these pages, new excavations and new insights are contributing new information. *The Moche of Ancient Peru* more than fulfills its mission of introducing and illustrating some of the most fascinating archaeological investigations currently being undertaken in the New World.

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**MANY PEOPLE HELPED** bring this book into being. I thank William L. Fash, director of the Peabody Museum, for initiating the idea that I curate the exhibit from which the book was developed, and Rebecca Chetham, then deputy director, for helping with the finances to make it happen. Thanks also to the many staff members of the Peabody Museum who helped make the exhibit a reality, particularly Samuel Tager, Nynke Dorhout Jolly, Genevieve Fisher, and Pamela Gerardi.

For this book, I especially thank Joan K. O'Donnell, Donna Dickerson, and the members of the Publications Committee of the Peabody Museum. The staff of the museum's Collections Department was helpful in many stages of working with the Moche collection, for both the exhibit and the book. Many are to be thanked, but I offer my special appreciation to Steven LeBlanc, director of collections, David DeBono Schafer, senior collections manager, and Susan Haskell, curatorial associate for special projects. Thanks also to Mark Craig, who took the beautiful photographs for the plates in this book.



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Donald McClelland was generous in allowing me to use the fine renderings of Moche art made by his late wife, Donna. A number of other colleagues, friends, and institutions also lent the products of their talents, particularly Santiago Uceda and Ricardo Morales, directors of the Huaca de la Luna Project, Andrés Álvarez Calderón Larco, executive director of the Museo Rafael Larco Herrera, curator Ulla Homquist of the same institution, and photographer Ira Block.

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The Moche of Ancient Peru



Early Moche stirrup-spout vessel. The volutes in the painted design might refer to ocean waves or the tentacles of an octopus. The design typifies Moche artists' delight in playing with positive and negative spaces that express opposed but complimentary forces or things. PM 09-3-30/75626.9 (W 17 × H 21.5 cm). 98540019. Mark Craig, photographer.

## INTRODUCTION

PERU'S NORTH COAST is a barren strip of desert fronting one of the world's richest maritime habitats, a bountiful fishery created by the cold waters of the Humboldt, or Peru, Current. Inland the desert gives way to mountains and plateaus of the Andes, dissected by rivers running roughly parallel to one another from east to west and debouching onto the coastal strip. From remote antiquity until today, well-engineered irrigation systems drawing on these rivers have nurtured vast green fields of maize, beans, and squash in the valley bottoms. The cornucopia of food provided by the ocean and the valleys supported a sequence of complex human societies beginning in very early times. One of the most spectacular of these ancient cultures, dating from about A.D. 100 to 800—in European terms, from the time of the early Roman Empire to the reign of Charlemagne—is known as Moche.

On the summits of dazzlingly painted, adobe-brick temple complexes, Moche priests and priestesses once stood resplendent in elaborate costumes of gold, precious stones, textiles, and feathers. Presenting themselves as gods to crowds of





The Virú Valley, looking upstream. The small stream in the foreground is a result of the siphoning of water by irrigation canals. The Andes can be seen in the distance. Photo by the author.

onlookers gathered in plazas below, they watched as warriors armed with shields and clubs, spear throwers and slings paraded captured prisoners to be sacrificed.

Priests and warriors occupied the highest ranks of Moche society, ruling over members of the lower classes, who tilled the fields and produced the elaborate paraphernalia for rituals and war. Next to the largest temples stood cities with streets and avenues along which lay residential compounds. Within them and at specialized workshops, artisans produced some of the most beautiful metal objects found in the New World. Others created one of the Americas' most distinctive ceramic traditions (pl. 1). The works of these craftspeople were used in rituals, served as status symbols

among the living, and entered the tombs of both low- and high-ranking Moche to accompany them in the afterlife.

Today, in museums throughout the world, Moche ceramics commonly capture the attention of visitors. The Moche's representational art style, depicting gods, priests, warriors, animals, plants (pl. 4), and seemingly the full spectrum of everyday life, appeals strongly to modern tastes and sensibilities. It is primarily through these ceramics and the personages and scenes painted and modeled on them that scholars have attempted, for more than a century, to understand the ancient Moche.

The appeal of Moche ceramics, together with the lure of the gold that lies buried in Moche ruins, has also had unfortunate consequences. Ever since Spaniards arrived on the north coast of Peru in the 1530s, people have been pillaging Moche temples, burials, and other ancient sites for their wealth. Many archaeological sites in Peru are so pockmarked with looters' holes that they look like the surface of the moon. Until after World War II, most of the looting was for gold. Collecting pottery in the wake of looters often became, ironically, a form of "salvage" archaeology. Many important museum collections, both in Peru and abroad, were built through this practice or through "excavation" using standards that would be unacceptable today. Even so, such museum collections, consisting of artifacts lacking detailed information about archaeological context—or provenience, as it is known in archaeology—can still aid scholarship and inform the public through exhibits and publications.

The great number of poorly documented ceramics and other artifacts in museums in Peru and around the world has created a peculiar situation for understanding the Moche.



Looting of Peruvian archaeological sites was celebrated in popular literature in the nineteenth century. In this illustration from *The Gold Fish of the Gran Chimú*, by Charles F. Lummis (1895), hard-working looters defend their "rights" against a proposed law banning excavations in the "mummy mines."



Craters of a moonlike landscape at the El Brujo archaeological complex, in the Chicama Valley, bearing witness to centuries of looting. Looting has stopped at this site but continues elsewhere. Photo by the author.

We know a great deal about certain aspects of the ceramics—how they were made, how they were decorated, and how styles changed over time—yet great gaps exist in our knowledge. As just one example, until recently we have had only rudimentary knowledge of regional variations in the Moche style, because so many pots lack identification even of the valleys where they were found. Furthermore, although study of the images molded or painted on ceramics allows scholars to make reasonable inferences about Moche religion, warfare, economics, and other aspects of life, a dearth of archaeological evidence has meant that theories derived from studies of ceramics and other unprovenienced artifacts could not be tested with independent data. Happily,

this situation is changing as the results of recent field archaeology begin to be published. Archaeologists are providing valuable information about ceramics found in tombs, houses, workshops, and other locales. They offer carefully pieced-together views of political organization and other aspects of the people and societies that produced these artistic masterworks.

The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University houses an impressive collection of Moche artifacts. These objects, especially the ceramic vessels that make up the greatest part of the collection, were media that conveyed messages about the way people thought about themselves, their gods, and their places in the universe. Because of the richness of the collection, it became the subject of an exhibition I was asked to organize for the Peabody Museum. Titled *The Moche of Ancient Peru: Media and Messages*, it ran from October 2005 to January 2008. In this book I discuss many of the artifacts shown in the exhibition and present archaeologists' latest thinking about Moche society.





View of the Huacas de Moche site, in the lower Moche Valley, from the summit of Huaca de la Luna looking west to Huaca del Sol. The urban sector lies between the two in the valley bottom. Some excavated residential units are visible in the middle distance. Photo by the author.

## MOCHE AND ITS ART STYLE

THE NAME “MOCHE” comes from the Moche Valley, the location of two large, prehistoric adobe structures known in Spanish as the Huacas de Moche—loosely translated as “the Temples of Moche.” It was there that the first archaeological excavations of Moche artifacts took place in the late nineteenth century. The name for the valley and the site likely derived from the word “Muchik,” the name of a language spoken on the north coast of Peru at the time Spaniards arrived there in 1532. It survived until sometime in the eighteenth century. Some archaeologists use the term “Mochica,” also derived from the name for the language, to refer to the same archaeological phenomenon. This term emphasizes the long continuities that many archaeologists see on the north coast, although we do not know what language or languages the Moche spoke. Many archaeologists use “Moche” and “Mochica” interchangeably, and generally scholars place no great import on one term over the other.<sup>1</sup> Another convenient name for the north coast area where the Moche art style and associated cultural practices predominated is “Mochilandia.”



The north coast of Peru, showing principal Moche archaeological sites. Many more than these exist. Map by the author.

Details of the origins and demise of the Moche style are unclear and are currently being investigated. Researchers commonly think of the Moche Valley and neighboring Chicama Valley as the Moche heartland, but variants of the art style were eventually made as far north as the Chira Valley and as far south as the Nepeña Valley.

Among the art styles of ancient South America, the Moche tradition has received much attention because of its use of a representational mode that seems “readable” to modern people, depicting plants, animals, and personages. Although other pre-Columbian cultures, especially those to the north, employed “realistic” representations in their art, Moche artists were exceptional in the degree to which they used this style, the length of time over which they developed and elaborated it, and the range of subject matter they covered.

Although Moche art initially seems very approachable, once past a superficial engagement the viewer faces many challenges in interpreting it. Why, for example, is a spiny shell depicted as a ceramic vessel? Are the personages shown in this battle scene gods or mortals? Is the ceremony depicted one that actually took place or a reference to some kind of celestial get-together among

the gods? Over the years, scholars have offered varied views on such issues, and even today, interpretations differ considerably.

As Maya archaeologist Simon Martin has observed, the Moche mode of artistic representation provides an easy, “entry-level” means of reading the code presented by the images.<sup>2</sup> Comprehending the “texts” expressed in such a code usually requires extra information, beyond the images themselves. In a comparable example, a Christian who knows the story of the birth of Jesus is able fairly easily to interpret Christmas cards and imagery such as sculptured crèches. For some art styles, written texts can provide these sorts of external references. We have no such references for Moche, which, like the other ancient South American cultures, had no writing.

The very fact that one can discuss Moche or any other art style using the analogy of texts is significant, because this is only one of many ways in which art may be interpreted. For example, some works of art, such as large, repeating, iconic images of the faces of gods or geometric patterns across a wall, may reasonably be understood not as telling a story, the way texts do, but as designed to create an experience. This is the case with much of Moche art, especially mural art at temples. Nevertheless, many Moche images were made in reference to gods and heroes and to religious narratives about them—frequently, though not exclusively, on ceramics.

Lacking written records, our understandings and interpretations of the Moche are based mostly on archaeology and the study of the rich visual record ancient artists and craftspeople left in their creations, especially pottery. Several hundred years passed between the end of Moche society and the arrival of Spaniards with their quills, inks, and papers. The Spaniards occasionally wrote down local legends and stories as they attempted to document native beliefs so that they could extirpate paganism and convert natives to Christianity. The recording of legends in aid of eliminating them unwittingly ran counter to the Spaniards’ aims, for such records now serve as testaments to pre-Hispanic beliefs. In addition, some cultural practices proved strong enough to last from Moche times into the early colonial period. Consequently, Spanish records of legends and other aspects of sixteenth-century life on the Peruvian north coast can be used, with care, to interpret the long-gone Moche.





Nose ornament, silver and gold alloy, depicting the deity called the Decapitator standing on a two-headed feline-serpent. The ornament was buried with the Señora de Cao, a high-status young woman at the site known as Huaca Cao Viejo. Courtesy Fundación Wiese.

## SUGGESTED READING

Publications on Moche have grown exponentially since the discovery of the Sipán tombs in 1987. Despite this, synthetic discussions are relatively rare, especially in English, and sources exist mostly as professional articles and books focused on specific themes. In many ways, three foundational books in English, published more than 30 years ago and now out of print, are still of value. They are *The Mochica, a Culture of Peru*, by Elizabeth P. Benson (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1972), *Moche Art and Iconography*, by Christopher B. Donnan (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Studies 33, 1976), and, also by Donnan, *Moche Art of Peru: Pre-Columbian Symbolic Communication* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1978).

Benson's book covers Moche in general. Much of what she discusses is still accepted, although some particulars have changed. *Moche Art and Iconography* presents Donnan's research program for studying Moche art, including the use of ethnographic examples, archaeology, and the all-important thematic approach. *Moche Art of Peru* is an exhibition catalogue, but it provides plenty of text covering many of the points raised in Donnan's other book.

As of this writing, the most recently published monograph on the Moche is *The Moche*, by Garth Bawden (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996). It covers the environmental setting, everyday life, political organization, and symbols and rituals of power from early times to the

Moche collapse. Bawden is the first scholar to clearly attempt to view political organization and religion as separate but related on the north coast during the Moche era.

Christopher Donnan is not only the premier scholar of Moche culture but also a prolific writer. His books on Moche topics of interest to general readers as well as specialists include the following: *Moche Portraits from Ancient Peru* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); *Moche Tombs at Dos Cabezas* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, 2008); with Donna McClelland, *Moche Finesline Painting: Its Evolution and Its Artists* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Culture History, UCLA, 1999) and *Moche Finesline Painting from San José de Moro* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, 2007); and with Walter Alva, the catalogue for the Sipán exhibit, *Royal Tombs of Sipán* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Culture History, UCLA, 1993). As the titles suggest, these volumes include discussions of ceramic traditions and coverage of fascinating and important excavations.

Steve Bourget recently published his summary view of Moche iconography, *Sex, Death, and Sacrifice in Moche Religion and Visual Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). With Kimberly L. Jones he edited a volume covering a range of topics: *The Art and Archaeology of the Moche: An Ancient Andean Society of the Peruvian North Coast* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008). *Moche Art and Archaeology in Ancient Peru*, edited by Joanne Pillsbury (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2001), is a set of chapters from a scholarly conference. The contributions mostly present good summaries of current knowledge about Moche in specific valleys, craft production, sacrificial rituals, and other topics. It is a fine source for readers who already have a general understanding of Moche. A recently published book that presents varying views of Moche political organization is *New Perspectives on Moche Political Organization*, edited by Jeffrey Quilter and Luis Jaime Castillo B. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 2010).

A large, richly illustrated book with texts in English and Spanish discusses the extensive research at Huaca Cao Viejo at the El Brujo archaeological complex: *El Brujo: Huaca Cao, centro ceremonial moche in el valle de Chicama/Huaca Cao, a Moche Ceremonial Center in the Chicama Valley*, edited by Elías Mujica Barreda (Lima: Fundación Wiese, 2007). A more scholarly treatment of a late Moche site complex is Izumi Shimada's *Pampa Grande and the Mochica Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). Besides looking specifically at Pampa Grande, Shimada includes a thorough introduction to Moche topics, including a review of previous studies, the environment, Andean culture history, and earlier Moche.

For readers of Spanish, the collected works of Rafael Larco Hoyle were recently published in a two-volume set, *Los Mochicas* (Lima: Museo Arqueológico Rafael Larco Herrera, 2001), which rapidly sold out its entire print run. We may hope for a reissue.

For readers interested in more general discussions of Peruvian prehistory, I recommend the following:

Berrin, Kathleen, editor

1997 *The Spirit of Ancient Peru: Treasures from the Museo Arqueológico Rafael Larco Herrera*. London: Thames and Hudson.

This catalogue of some of the finest artifacts in the Larco Herrera Museum is much more than a set of pretty pictures. It includes articles by six leading scholars, mostly from the United States, and extensive discussions of the individual objects in the book. It serves as an introduction for novices and contributes new views for more advanced scholars.

Burger, Richard L.

1995 *Chavín and the Origins of Andean Civilization*. London: Thames and Hudson.

A masterful text and many illustrations grace this book, which covers the archaeology and art of ancient Peru from the Preceramic period through Chavín. Burger's presentation is clear yet detailed. This is "required reading" for obtaining the equivalent of an advanced seminar in the early prehistory of Peru.

Lumbreras, Luis Guillermo, editor

2007 *Peru: Art from the Chavín to the Incas*. Paris: Paris Musées/SKIRA.

This book illustrates artifacts from a large exhibition at the Petit Palais, Paris. Its essays, covering current knowledge and theories about the major archaeological cultures of Peru, are written by Peruvian and European scholars, including the editor, the preeminent Peruvian scholar of Peruvian prehistory.

Moseley, Michael E.

2001 *The Incas and Their Ancestors* (revised edition). London: Thames and Hudson.

This is a foundation document for studying the Andean past. Moseley begins with the Inca, the best-known Andean civilization, and then returns to prehistoric beginnings, covering Andean prehistory from earliest times through the eve of Inca expansion. Although the prose sometimes reads like a textbook, Moseley packs a tremendous amount of information into relatively few pages.



Quilter, Jeffrey

2005 *Treasures of the Andes: The Glories of Inca and Pre-Columbian South America*. London: Duncan Baird.

Despite its hyperbolic title, this book is filled with color photographs of Andean sites and artifacts from early prehistory to the Spanish conquest. The text is relatively brief, but it summarizes the key features of major cultures and the significant events of Andean prehistory for general readers.

Stone-Miller, Rebecca

2002 *The Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (second edition). London: Thames and Hudson.

Another essential book for beginning reading on the ancient Andes. Stone-Miller, an art historian, builds her discussion outward from exemplary objects, types of artifacts, and key archaeological sites to consider the cultures and ideas that produced them. Readers gain an understanding of the way arts and crafts developed in the contexts of changing social, political, and economic forces.

