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The Journey of A Moche Vessel

When you look at this Pre-Columbian Peru vessel, you see a journey. I was originally drawn to this piece because of my love for ceramics and, as a member of the artist community, I couldn't resist learning more. I searched for even an ounce of information on this artifact in the museum, however, I found almost nothing. The provenance of this artifact is very limited. This vessel was donated to a Museum in Washington DC near the Smithsonian back in the 1960s from the personal collections of diplomats and intelligence officers (Duffy). It was then offered to the Orma J. Smith Museum. In some sense, these previous two sentences are the only true concrete facts that are known about this artifact. Through this research, I discovered a lot about the centuries-long journey it must have made to get here. This piece of ceramic pottery represents a greater significance of culture, religion, and historical injustices that occurred along its journey over time, and are preserved through this vessel.

This artifact was built with a purpose to last a journey and exist with complex beauty. When you enter the Orma J. History Museum and walk toward the vessel's home in the artifact's exhibit section, you can see this vessel sitting peacefully in a glass enclosure that encases its long journey and beauty. You can see the ceramic red-orange earthy shade of color with a lighter white color on it to add detail and line quality to the vessel. Then you can observe the molded shape of the vessel and see the ducks holding up a dog-like animal. The ducks seem to have a

subtle slit in their bill and a hole on the top of their head so when the object is blown, or when water sloshes around in the vessel, it would make a whistling noise. Around the animal molded shapes, there are small pots attached to the outside. When looking at this vessel created with a unique complexity, it can cause the viewer to wonder, “What might this vessel have gone through on its journey to the Orma J. Smith Museum, and why does it look like this?”

Understanding the process of creating this complex ceramic artifact will help the discovery of the origins of its journey. This artifact appears to have the features of fire clay which is clay created due to wind erosion, and from the earth, this artifact began its journey as clay (Peterson 130). This type of clay has deposits of “metal oxides and free silica” making up the “rusted red or darker brown” color of this artifact, one of its defining features (Peterson 131). This type of clay is very abundant around the world. Fire clay has “impurities which add color and plasticity” allowing the artifact to exist and remain whole along its journey (Peterson 129). The line decoration around the artifact is most likely made from “slip glazes” which are watered-down clay (Peterson 108). Once the clay has been molded, it is set to dry to a leather-hard consistency, which is the state of clay “before (becoming) bone dry clay” (Peterson 398). The artifact would most likely have been burnished, which is the process of “polishing with a smooth stone on leather hard clay” (Peterson 395-398). After burnishing, the clay is set to dry to greenware, which is “finished, bone dry clay that is not yet fired or raw” (Peterson 400). After the decoration process is finalized, the artifact is put through a firing process to make it have the life-long-lasting quality of plasticity that allows for the clay to harden and never to change as the artifact continues on its journey (Peterson 129).

The firing process allowed this artifact to be stored over time and the ware of its journey. The firing process either occurred in a pit or wood fire. The pit firing would have allowed the

shine of the clay to stay. The wood fire might have been done because it allows for a higher temperature which might have been necessary due to Peru's high altitude. A high temperature would have been necessary for the oxidation and reduction process to occur because Peru has an average altitude of over 5,000 feet (Basecamps). The oxidation and reduction process did occur to the artifact as evidenced by the orange color of the piece and its solidified state allowing the artifact to bare the rest of its journey. In either case, the overall firing process would have taken days to complete. First, the work must be completely dry and fired in a homemade aerated kiln, after that, the oxygen flow would have needed to have been reduced with a cover. Then, someone would have needed to continuously watch the fire to make sure it stayed going at a consistently high temperature for around 1 to 3 days with another 3-4 days for cooling. Overall the process of creating this original piece would have taken many days, intricate craftsmanship, knowledge, and skill for this artifact to be observed, to continue its journey, and still stand today. Not only does this art take technique, but it also takes many generations of artistic influence on its journey.

This piece of artwork is not only pleasing to the human eye based on the artistic technique, but it also offers clues to its origins that influence this artifact at the beginning of its journey. In order to discover the origins of this particular ceramic artifact, every detail should be evaluated. This piece is identifiable due to its modeled structure, reddish orange color, shiny and buffed exterior, and specific molded animals that are also whistles. Through the information from the book *Ancient Peruvian Ceramics*, I discovered that this piece was mostly from the style of "Mochica" between the periods "Period II-III", but this discovery wasn't easy to reach. It is important to note that the Mochica, more commonly known as Moche, style of ceramics has

become the style that is the most well known today, but this culture of art originally derived from many other previous cultural styles that influenced the popular Moche style.

The majority of this artifact's journey took place in Peru, where the ancient Peruvian tribes were mostly all loosely united through a cultural belief that started in 900 AD. The culture of Chavin united all the artistic cultures that influenced this artifact over time carrying the artifact through its journey. The first influence of the Moche style was the Cupisnique ceramics. This culture's style of ceramics included "gray to carbon black colors" with "bold" decor or "humans, feline, and birds of prey heads" and "other brief symbols of central motifs" on "bottle gourd" shapes (Sawyer 17). These qualities of the Cupisnique do have central themes similar to this artifact of research such as the bird motifs and symbolisms but the work of the Cupisnique tends to have sharper and more bold qualities rather than the rounded soft edges and peaceful molded ducks of this artifact. The next culture that influenced Moche art was the Salinar culture. The ceramics of the Salinar culture used "well-prepared clay" making the final product "orange in color" (Sawyer 18). The color, along with the making pots with a "central handle" were the main influences the Salinar culture had on future Moche artwork in this present artifact. This artifact of choice also has an orange color like the Salinar culture's work but the main difference is that the motifs on the pot are three-dimensional rather than "flat geometric patterns" (Sawyer 18). The next influence of this Moche artifact was the Gallinazo culture, one might assume this culture had little influence over the piece of Moche art because this culture lived further south, but this knowledge of the discovery of the whistle spout in Gallinazo art has allowed for the discovery that this Moche artifact might be a whistling object (Sawyer 19). This discovery is unsure because this artifact is too fragile to remove from the display case in the Orma J. Smith Museum but the tiny slot in some of the modeled ducks' mouths and the poked hole in the top

create the whistle spouts similar to the Gallinazo culture's work. This discovery also allows the further uses of this object, partially religious uses which will be discussed further on into the research. All of these cultures influenced the artwork of this vessel made by the Moche culture. These cultures often were in conflict with one another with "periods of intense interactions" which even lead to the Moche culture being "forced out of their homeland by the Salinar and Gallinazo" cultures (Sawyer 17, 21). Lastly, other cultural influences of the Moche culture include the use of molded symbolic natural/animal motifs and red slip for decoration both of which are very commonly found in Moche artwork (Sawyer 21-23). Overall these cultures grew separately, but have influenced each other to grow into one dominated artistic style, the Moche Art. These cultures were the journey of this artifact before it was even created. The influence each tribe had on this artifact shaped this artifact's beginning and the start of the popular Moche style.

The origins of this piece of art stem from the Moche reign of power in coastal Peru dating it from sometime between 100-800 CE. The Moche style has five main periods. The first period was just the emergence in the Moche culture of art, but the second period contained the style of the artifact of focus. The second period was filled with work made with "slip and oxidation fires" that were mostly "silhouettes" with main shapes, like the duck and dog motifs around the artifact. It also was typically made from "molds" and were often painted like the line quality on the vessel of investigation. The reason there is speculation that this particular artifact of study might have been created in between the second and third periods would be because of the orange color and red slip that was used in the third period (Sawyer 29). The third period consisted of sharp lines and more realism rather than the second period's use of the silhouette figure, creating the conclusion that this artifact was mostly made between the second and third periods of the

Moche culture. The one artifact presented before you has so gone through so many cultural influences that dictate the way it was created. This artifact not only expresses the culture of the Moche people of Peru but the many cultures that came before it, existed during the same time, and after the artifact's journey with the Moche people. This leads to the wonder, what cultures existed after the Moche that helped preserve this artifact to allow it to exist further along its journey.

In Pre-Columbian Peru, many cultures coexisted or took over one another which influenced this artifact's journey. There is no exact timeline for these occurrences, this artifact appears to include the mixing of several cultures. While the style of the pot suggests it originated with the Moche culture, it was also found existing with the Wari people. The Moche style of "opaque orange or orange-brown" colored pots, "decorative motifs" and "the style of burnishing" were often found in the excavated tombs of the Wari people (McEwan 103). During the reign of the Wari culture, and many other cultures, at the time, were very separated, were all united by a long-standing culture or belief influenced many years prior in 900 AD called Chavin which shared the same architecture, lifestyle, and religious beliefs ("Pots and Pyramids"). Overall explains the close ties each culture has to one another even though they have had a conflict, but draws attention to the fact that they still share common beliefs which unite this Moche artifact's journey to the Wari tribe.

This artifact likely had to withstand many changes in power in its time, even before the Spanish conquest, but the main reason it made it through its journey and is still here today is because of the Wari's way of life and cultural influence. This artifact's journey outlived the Moche people's journey because the Wari tribe eventually took over, but left the Moche tombs and architecture untouched because they respected the Moche's traditions and beliefs. The Wari

people were expansionist, but they never changed the way of living of those around them which allowed for pre existing tombs to stay intact allowing the artifact to stay preserved and continue on its journey (“The Wari”). They chose to not change the places they expanded to rather than take over the local way of life allowing this artifact to stay safely preserved. If the Wari’s had defeated the Moche people and destroyed their tombs and belongings, this artifact would not exist to research. This relatively smooth takeover created the cultures to blend rather than fully disappear. The Wari’s created an advanced society with access to many natural resources and terrace farming styles that allowed for dominant agriculture creating spare time for further advancement and more artwork to be created (“The Wari”). The Wari’s advancements were even carried out and adopted by their predecessors the Incas. According to the text *The Wari—Foundations of the Inca Empire?* The Wari’s are often considered to be “ancestors” of the Incas because of the similarities of their “burial tombs, terrace farming, road systems, architecture, and art styles” (“The Wari”). The close connection the Wari people had with the Incas created a sense of unity between the two tribes so they both protected the artifact because of a centuries-old cultural belief called Chavin which most ancient Peruvian cultures shared. Chavin united the ancient Peruvian tribe’s architecture, lifestyle, and religious beliefs, and in turn protected this Moche vessel and its cultural ancestry, allowing the artifact to live on its journey. Even though the Moche people were taken over and ended by other ancient Peruvian tribes, the only tribe that still predominantly existed was the Incas. The artifact still lived on with the Incas because they carried the same values as the Moche people. In turn, the Incas are able to continue preserving this artifact along its journey.

This artifact remained in the land of Peru and was respected by many native cultures, but the Spanish invasion is what began the destruction of this artifact’s history and ultimately the

ending of this artifact's journey. This artifact tells the story about how the unity of these cultures, although separated by hundreds of years, has built on each other by carrying out many of the same traditions. Even after centuries of different communities and cultures taking over one another, they still practiced a lot of the same cultural and religious ways of life, but the Spaniards knowingly wiped the identity of any existence of ancient Peruvian culture. When Francisco Pizarro arrived in the Incan land he saw Peru as land to be claimed and used as a commodity. He also proceeded to take advantage of every aspect of the land that the Incas, Waris, Moche, and every other ancient Peruvian society cared for years. He then went on to rob the Incas of their possessions, land, and ancient graves. The Spanish also stole lots of ceramic vessels like this artifact and brought the pottery back to Europe to be bought and sold as a commodity rather than a religious or cultural symbol. Now pieces that have been excavated or stolen serve as symbols of what the Spaniards or Europeans took from the land of Peru, not just the Incas, but stolen from the Moche people, most likely from someone's grave that rested in Incan land (Reinhard 64). Any purpose this object once had, whether it was for ceremonies, used to respect Gods, or stored in a tomb to honor the dead or sacrificed Moche people, was ultimately silenced by European intervention and ended the artifact's journey.

The Spaniards again unknowingly took from the Incan people by killing off the population through infectious diseases, but then continued to abuse the Incan people and any sense of the Moche culture that was still liked with the Incas in turn ending the artifacts journey in Peru. When the Spaniard led by Fransico Pizarro invaded Peru in the 1530s they brought infectious diseases with them such as smallpox and influenza. Only around 3% of the Incan population remained after being exposed to these infectious diseases (Marks 77, 80). The vast death toll led to easier domination and control over the Incan people. The Spaniards took

advantage of the opportunity and also took control over the already existing “Mita” system (Espinosa 80). This system was used by the Incas originally to call people to work for a portion of time for “required state labor” in a particular task (Espinosa 81). This system worked well for the Incas, but once the Spanish arrived they abused this system and justified it because the Spaniards believed that the Incas were “uncivilized” and “barbaric” because of the Incas religious practices and lack of ability to record knowledge (Sepúlveda 23). The Spanish shallowly assumed the Incas were uncivilized, because the Incans did have a way of communication through weaving textiles—something the Spaniards couldn't comprehend (Marks 76). This view that the Incans were “barbaric” led to the justification of practical slavery and the terrible working conditions of the exploited Mita system. Espinosa, a Spanish priest, recounts the horrible pay, crowded workspaces, and terrible work conditions (which often lead to death) of the silver mines acknowledges all of the injustices the Spanish inflict on the Incan people. The mita system still continued because it was morally acceptable due to the extreme riches it brought to Spain (Espinosa 81). The Spaniards were able to justify killing so many of the Incans and never failed to drain the Incas from any aspect of life they had left. The Spanish brought disease, stole ancient Peruvian treasures, and forced the Incas into dangerous labor which ended up killing the Incans and the connection this object once had to its ancestors and its native land. These actions ended many living ties to Peru, this artifact is left without a home and has lost its main purpose because of the Spanish conquest that lead to the genocide of the use of this artifact and ended the artifacts journey.

It is unclear the specific purpose this object once had, but after the cruel European intervention, the journey of this artifact ended, thus killing off any religious purpose this object might have had. This artifact and its many artistic qualities might have held significant meaning

in a religious context. After extensive research, it is clear to see that the ducks and animal (dog) structures are symbolic motifs of some kind, but the meaning is still left to be wondered about. The tie to religious ceremonies though is the whistle aspect of this artifact might have “given voice to the inanimate object used in ritual”(Sawyer 15). Unfortunately, the reason for the intricate line, the choice of animals, and stacked structure have been evaluated by many archeologists but for this particular shape, the meaning has been lost in time. This loss of this aspect of the story of this artifact is greatly to blame by the takeover of the Incan people by the Spanish and although this artifact wasn't of Incan origin, Incan's religion and all predeceasing pre-Columbian Peru cultures were closely linked on this artifact's journey, but all killed off by the Spanish conquest for power and commodity.

This piece of art, because it was preserved over time along its journey, hints at a greater religious significance. Because of the unknown aspects of the use of this object over time and in many cultures, the religious significance is rooted across the varying Peruvian cultures. Cross-culturally, in particular, the Moche, Wari, and Incan have all used ceramic pottery in their burial process. Pottery has been excavated from tombs and is often used to determine how important a person is based on the number of pots they are buried with (Reinhard 163). A Moche tomb of a roughly 40-year-old man named “Lord of Sipan ” was buried with an abundance of precious metals and over 1,000 ceramic pottery items' ' which were preserved over time (“Pots and Pyramids”). The Incans also practiced this method of burial, but often made an offering with a “human sacrifice” and the ceramic was always “high quality” and “played a symbolic role” in these human sacrifices” (Reinhard). Overall, it was very important for these cultures to respect their dead and often created burial tombs that were often like “shrines” to those who died (The Wari). This relatively fragile artifact has been preserved over hundreds of years, likely because it

had been buried in a tomb. This suggests that it was stolen from the burial site, probably during the Columbian Era, by Europeans. This artifact went on a journey and once had a purpose, but now its purpose has completely changed and was never intended by the Moche people.

Any purpose this object once had, whether it was for ceremonies, used to respect Gods, or stored in a tomb to honor the dead or sacrificed Moche people, was ultimately silenced by European intervention. The journey of this Moche artifact might be over after centuries of cultural influence, but it now resides in the Orma J. History Museum where it silently attempts to continue telling the story of its journey to the generations yet to come.



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