

# **Nasca Ceramic Iconography: An Overview**

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## **Nasca Ceramic Iconography: An Overview**

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Two thousand years ago, a new ceramic tradition emerged on the south coast of Peru. It was distinguished by the use of polychrome slip paints applied to both effigy vessels as well as a broad range of utilitarian shapes. Named “Nasca” after the major river valley where it was found, this pottery is now recognized as among the finest made by any of the Pre-Columbian cultures of the Americas. The ancients made their pottery from local clays, some of which included mica as a natural constituent which appears as glass-like inclusions on the finished product. Cooking and storage vessels were tempered with sand and crushed quartz, but the finer clays used for the fancy polychrome pottery required little or no temper (Carmichael 1998:217). Vessels were manufactured using a combination of techniques. Potters used a shallow plate or bowl as a support on which to build the vessel. Although the true potter’s wheel was absent, these platforms served as a rotational device upon which to build a vessel. Pots were constructed using combinations of coiling, drawing and direct shaping, with some use of the paddle and anvil technique (Carmichael 1998:219). It is important to note that unlike the Moche, molds were never used by the Nasca in making their ceramics.

The wide range of polychrome slips were made from mineral-based pigments like manganese and iron oxides such as hematite, limonite and magnetite and white clays such as kaolin. These were ground to a fine powder and mixed with fine clay at varying ratios to produce different color densities (Ibid.). Deflocculants such as wood ash, sea salt and potash alum may have been added to keep the mixture suspended in water. The colored portions of the designs were first painted onto the vessel with brushes made from llama or alpaca fur, and then the black outlines added last, perhaps to prevent smearing during the burnishing process.

During firing the mineral pigments were transformed into different colors depending on variations in the temperature, firing process and impurities. Their color spectrum included black, white, purple, red, dark red, light red, orange, light orange, yellow, gray, brown, violet and pink. Light blue was added in the middle of the sequence, and specular hematite provided a sparkle to some of the gray tones. Although no Nasca firing sites have yet been discovered, modern studies suggest that pots were fired in oxidizing fires in shallow pits using wood of the local huarango tree, rushes or llama dung as probable fuel.

Nasca pottery developed over a 700 year time span, having its roots in the earlier Paracas style (900-1 B.C.). As with any art tradition lasting this length of time, many changes in the subject matter, technique and manner of depiction took place. Lawrence Dawson subdivided the style into 9 distinct phases of unequal length in the 1950’s, and this “Berkeley” scheme has been used by most scholars since that time (Rowe 1960). In the earliest phases (1-4) motifs include many naturalistic depictions including birds,



Fig. 1

plants, animals, and fish as well as supernatural themes (Fig. 1). These phases are sometimes referred to as “Monumental Nasca” or “Early Nasca” (see Proulx 1968, 1983). Phase 5 is a transitional period, issuing in new innovations including the first traces of proliferous elements. “In the proliferous substyle the proportion of geometric designs is greater, and the representation themes often include abstract elements as part of the design. Large numbers of rays and tassels are appended to many of the designs, particularly those depicting mythical subjects, producing a visual impression of almost infinite multiplied elements..” (Roark 1965:2). Phase 5 is often referred to as “Transitional Nasca” or “Middle Nasca.”



Fig. 2

Phases 6 and 7 are known as “Late Nasca” or “Proliferous Nasca” because of the highly abstract nature of the art (Fig. 2). In addition to the attached proliferous elements mentioned above (volute, rays and tassels), the figures become disproportionate with the heads of supernatural figures becoming the center of attention, and the remainder of the bodies much abbreviated. Baroque elaboration of minor motifs such as mouth masks and forehead ornaments characterizes the art of the proliferous strain. These took on a life of their own with the further addition of series of chained heads, rays, and volutes. By

Nasca 6 the proliferation of the style was complete. The human elements of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being and representational features of other main figures became subordinate to the proliferated minor themes. Finally, outside influences from the Highlands greatly affect the Nasca style in Phases 8 and 9. Motifs become almost purely abstract conventions. These last phases are sometimes called “Disjunctive Nasca.”

The Nasca people who made this pottery lived between 1 and 700 A.D. in the desert valleys of southern Peru, with their heartland in the drainage of the Rio Grande de Nasca and in the neighboring Ica Valley (Proulx 1999a). Unlike the contemporary Moche Culture of the north coast, the Nasca did not constitute a primitive state with a centralized government, but rather were comprised of a multitude of local chiefdoms, each with a



Fig. 3

local leader exercising authority over a limited territory, but sharing a common religion and culture. As time passed, their society became more militaristic. Warfare, including the taking of human heads as trophies and for ritual use, became common and is reflected in their art (Fig. 3). The majority of the people lived in small villages with only a few larger urban centers discovered to date. Cahuachi, a huge site covering 150 hectares, was once thought to be its capital city, but has now been reinterpreted as a vacant ceremonial center, visited by pilgrims on ritual occasions throughout the year and used as a place of burial and offerings.

The Nasca are best known for the giant ground drawings etched onto the surface of the desert. These “Nasca Lines” or geoglyphs consist of geometric forms (trapezoids, triangles, parallel lines and spirals) as well as some 30 “biomorphs” or naturalistic motifs including birds, killer whale, monkey, lizard, etc. The geometric figures can extend for several kilometers in length, while the biomorphs often are the size of a modern football field. They can be dated to the Nasca culture because the designs on the desert are replicated exactly by motifs on their pottery. The geoglyphs seem to have multiple functions: ritual pathways leading to sacred sites, lines connecting sacred locations, representations of major “mythical beings” or deities, and a map of subterranean water resources.

The harsh desert environment and lack of rainfall in their homeland shaped Nasca religious beliefs. Nasca religion centers on agricultural fertility and on the forces of nature that controlled their destiny. Powerful creatures of the sky (condor), earth (feline) and sea (killer whale) were thought to oversee the availability of water, the fecundity of the land and the growth of the crops. The taking of human heads in warfare and the preparation and ritual burial of these heads in caches also symbolized death and regeneration (Proulx 1971, 1989a, 1999b). Trophy heads often are depicted on the pottery sprouting plants from their mouths, and plant motifs sometimes incorporate aspects of trophy heads, making them interchangeable. Much of the ceramic iconography of the Nasca Culture reflects these religious beliefs.

The reader must be reminded that none of the Pre-Columbian civilizations of South America had writing—unlike their counterparts in Mesoamerica, the Maya, Mixtec and Aztec. Art and archaeology are the primary means of reconstructing their society. While the excavation of tombs, ceremonial sites and living areas have provided important data on the nature of ancient Nasca life, the iconography painted on their rich pottery has not only supplemented the archaeological data, but in many cases has provided the only

basis for reconstructing many aspects of the culture of these long extinct peoples. Interpretation of the iconography, on the other hand, is no simple matter. Many years ago Erwin Panofsky wrote of the difficulty in understanding the “intrinsic meaning” of symbols, especially for a society whose worldview and mindset is quite different from our own (Panofsky 1955 [1939]:30).

As an anthropologically trained archaeologist, I have found the following techniques most useful in interpreting Nasca iconography: (1) archaeology. Many motifs painted on the pottery have material counterparts found in archaeological excavations. For example, the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being (Fig. 4) is depicted wearing a gold mouth mask and forehead ornament, a spondylus shell necklace, ornaments or bangles in its hair, a club and human trophy head in its hands, and is wearing a striped tunic and long cape.

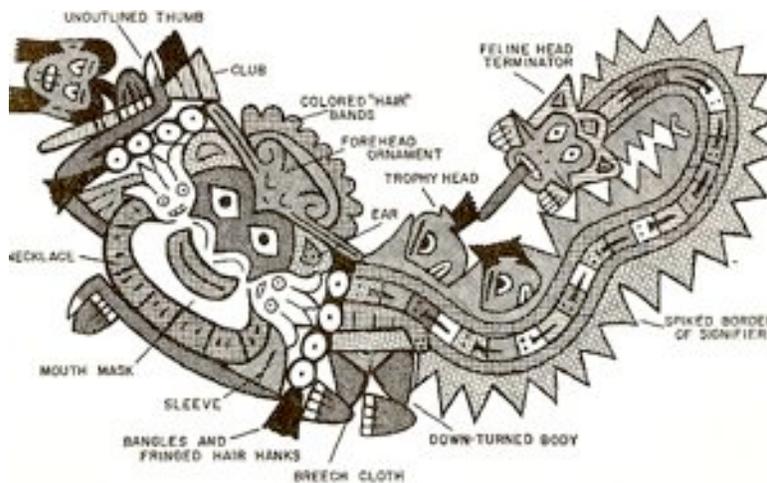


Fig. 4

Virtually all of these items have been found in Nasca graves or Nasca archaeological sites. These have served to reinforce our initial visual interpretation of the items, and in some cases have been the only means of identifying strange objects seen in the art. (2) Ethnographic Analogy is a technique of archaeological

interpretation based on the

similarity of artifacts or patterns of behavior to those of living peoples. A good example is the explanation I use to explain the pinned lips of Nasca trophy heads. Most painted trophy heads on Nasca pottery have two parallel lines drawn through the upper and lower lips. Archaeology has provided preserved examples of human trophy heads with one or two huarango thorns piercing the lips, but the archaeology cannot explain why the lips were treated in this manner. An historic example of similar behavior is found in the Jivaro Tribe of Ecuador and Peru. The Jivaro believe that everyone is born with a type of soul that protects the individual from sickness and death. Over time this soul loses its power and must be replaced. The primary means of obtaining a new soul is to murder another person. This act, however, is spiritually dangerous, because the avenging spirit of the dead person (Muisak) can harm the killer unless it is contained within the head of the victim. Therefore the Jivaro take the heads of their murder victims, shrink them to the size of an orange, and then sew the lips shut to prevent the muisak from escaping. I believe the function of the thorns through the lips of the Nasca trophy heads serves the same purpose. (3) Art History. The final method for interpreting iconography is derived from art historians such as Panofsky and Kubler who use different levels of analysis in looking at symbols. Panofsky talks about “primary subject matter” that delineates the “pure” or representational forms, “secondary subject matter” that looks at the relationship

between icons—the “thematic approach” used by Donnan on Moche art, and finally “intrinsic meaning or content” which is the most difficult stage of analysis since it tries to understand the thinking of ancient pre-literate peoples.



Fig. 5

In looking at Nasca ceramic art, one is immediately struck by the relative paucity of scenes of everyday life—so common in contemporary Moche art—and by the prevalence of supernatural creatures, natural objects and geometric designs. The “Early” or “Monumental” phases exhibit a broad range of plants and animals present in their environment. Some of these were utilized by them as sources of food: corn, beans, peppers, squash and local plants such as achira, lucuma, jiquima and manioc. We also find maritime creatures such as fish (anchovies, corvina, bonito, and many other species), sharks, killer whales, shrimp, crabs, eels, etc (Fig. 5).

Animals include foxes, monkeys, llamas and alpacas, guinea pigs, mice, pampas cats, and deer. A wide range of birds are also carefully depicted so that exact species are identifiable: hummingbirds of several types, the Inca tern, egrets, condors, ducks, cormorants, herons, falcons, owls, etc. Competing the list of naturalistic items are insects, frogs and toads, snakes, lizards, and pollywogs. Carmichael (1994:81) has argued that “..the entire body of Nasca imagery is a sacred interrelated system laden with symbolic meaning...” including these representations of plants, animals, and birds. I disagree with this interpretation as being too restrictive and oversimplified. I truly believe that the Nasca did intend to display the natural world around them in their art, but I agree with



Fig. 6

Carmichael that in some instances the symbolism lies on two different levels. For example, the black-winged swift, or Vencejo as it is known locally, is associated with water and fertility. It appears when the first water from the mountains runs down the river valleys, and thus issues in the planting season. Other creatures, like the fox, protect the agricultural plants from predators such as mice, and thus also has a dual meaning (Fig. 6). Yet the vast majority of

naturalistic motifs simply celebrate the natural world of the Nasca.

More complex are the supernatural motifs that form a large percentage of the ceramic iconography. The Nasca did not have “deities” in the Western sense of the term. Their religion incorporated the concept of spirits and supernatural power (huaca) incorporated in natural objects: mountain peaks, sacred rocks, and, especially in the case

of the Nasca, in the most powerful creatures of the air, water and earth. Thus we find symbolic representations of these spiritual forces, often in anthropomorphic form, represented in an infinite variety of ways on their pottery. I refer to these motifs as “mythical beings” rather than gods. The most common of these creatures is the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being (Fig. 4) who appears as a human dressed in a long cape (signifer) and wearing a gold mouth mask, forehead ornament and holding a club and trophy head in his hand. There are several varieties of this creature, especially in the earlier phases, but it continues through the entire chronological sequence. Some scholars (Paul 1990:85-87) have argued that the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being is actually a



Fig. 7

religious leader dressed in the costume impersonating the mythical creature (see Fig. 7). While I will not deny that occasionally shamans did don the garb of mythical creatures (the ornaments have been found in graves), the vast majority of the representations are merely symbols of the spiritual forces. This point of view is best demonstrated by the wide variety of symbols associated with this creature. The signifers (or cloaks) can contain symbols of the fox, killer whale, birds, plants, water, felines, etc.

My research (Proulx 1983, 1989b, 1990) has indicated that some of the mythical beings seem more likely to be associated with human trophy heads (symbols of death, regeneration and fertility) and others with plants (symbols of agriculture and fertility). In addition to the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, described above. Other motifs



Fig. 8

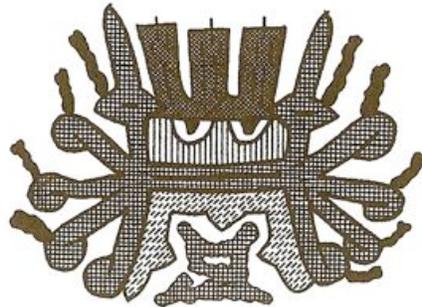


Fig. 9

associated with trophy heads include the Mythical Killer Whale, representing the most powerful creature of the sea. The creature is depicted naturalistically in Nasca Phase 1 with the exception of the human arm extending from its ventral side. Soon, however, Mythical Killer Whales are depicted holding knives or human trophy heads in their anthropomorphized hands (Fig. 8); this association with trophy heads and blood continues through the entire ceramic sequence. In Nasca 5 radical changes take place in the depiction of some of the Mythical Killer Whales. An abbreviated form appears, representing a frontal view of the creature's head characterized by open jaws and a patch

of blood (symbolizing a trophy head). Roark (1965) coined the term "Bloody Mouth" for this variant form (Fig. 9). The Bloody Mouth variety is most prevalent in Nasca 5 but continues into Nasca 6; in Nasca 7 and 8 it is replaced by a profile form with a jagged-toothed jaw.



Fig. 10

The Horrible Bird is an anthropomorphized raptorial bird, probably a combination of condor and hawk, representing one of the most powerful forces of the sky. In the earliest Nasca ceramic phases the Horrible Bird is depicted as a naturalistic predator, often shown eating human body parts. Beginning in Nasca 3, the motif becomes anthropomorphized with the addition of human legs to the creature. Its form becomes more stylized with a long, white-tipped beak clutching a human trophy head, and wing panels which also depict trophy heads (Fig. 10). Even more variations with bizarre innovations are seen in Nasca 5, when the Horrible Bird reaches its apogee. The motif suddenly and inexplicably disappears at the end of Nasca 5; there are no Horrible Bird representations in the prolific strain.



Fig. 11

Another bird-like mythical creature has been given the name Harpy after a similar form found in ancient Greek art. The Harpy has a human head and an avian body (Fig. 11). The head, crowned by two or three black lobes, often has hawk markings around the eyes and a protruding tongue. Black "hair hanks" cascade from either side of this head. Like the Horrible Bird, the Harpy's wing panels often depict human trophy heads. The Harpy has a short life in the pottery style, beginning in Nasca 3 and reaching its height in Nasca 5, after which it disappears from the repertoire.



Fig. 12

Turning to early mythical beings associated with agricultural plants, we begin with Mythical Spotted Cat. It is now clear that this image represents a small local feline known as the pampas cat, characterized by semi-lunar pelage markings, striped tail, and small ears separated by a "cap." Beginning in Nasca 2 a mythical version with mouth mask appears, and in Nasca 3 plants are attached to the body, a feature which

links this creature to agriculture and fertility (Fig. 12). The Spotted Cat becomes more angular in Nasca 4, and Hawk markings are often found on the eyes. Like the Horrible Bird, the Mythical Spotted Cat virtually disappears at the end of Nasca 5.



Fig. 13

The Serpentine Creature is composed of a snake-like body with a human or feline head attached, sometimes wearing a mouth mask (Fig. 13). This mythical being seems to be associated with vegetation and fertility. Its origins go back to the Paracas Culture where representations of the creature are found as appendages or streamers attached to the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being on textiles. The Serpentine Creature is a common theme in Monumental Nasca art, but the motif disappears during Nasca 5.

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Another new motif, that emphasizes the concept of fertility, is a creature known as the Harvester, which is present in both secular and mythical forms. The Harvester represents a farmer, wearing a conical "dunce" hat that is stitched vertically up the front, and at the rear has a cloth flap that covers the back of the neck.



Fig. 14

The Harvester is depicted in a frontal position with hands outstretched to the sides and holding plants (Fig. 14). The vast majority of the Harvester representations are found in Nasca 5, after which time they quickly and completely disappear from the style. Earlier modeled effigy forms of the Harvester are found in Nasca 2 and 3, where it is recognized by spotted facial painting and the painted plants held in the hands. A mythical variety of Harvester is distinguished by the presence of "supernatural" traits, such as Spondylus shell necklaces, painted or spotted faces, and mouth masks. The Mythical Harvester also is associated with agricultural plants.

As we move forward into the "Late Nasca" or "Proliferous" (Phases 6 and 8) substyle, several new mythical beings come into existence in the ceramic art. The Hunter appears in Nasca 6 and, with few exceptions, appears to be restricted to that phase. The Hunter is a warrior drawn horizontally on the surface of vases and double-spout-and-bridge bottles with the head always pointing to the left (Fig. 15). We are considering this a mythical representation because of the homogeneous manner in which he is depicted and his association with trophy heads. Unlike other Mythical Beings, the mouth is open, displaying a row of teeth. A "Z" shaped red stripe of facial painting extends from the warrior's pointed nose, curving beneath the creature's eye. The head is covered with a rounded black cap or helmet decorated with an "X" design over a horizontal bar. The figure's shirt is decorated with representations of human trophy heads, and a loin cloth



Fig. 15

with elaborate ties covers his lower body. In his right hand, which appears to emerge from the back of his head, he holds a spear thrower. His left hand, which extends forward beyond his head, is grasping a highly abstracted staff decorated with quartet rays (see Roark 1965: fig. 34c for examples). Small tufts of human hair attached to this rayed band, however, reveal that the creature is indeed holding a group of trophy heads. This is made more emphatic by the realistic depiction of trophy heads in bands both above and below the figure. Like the Nasca 5 AMB with a multitude of spears attached to its body, the Hunter reflects the emphasis on militarism in Nasca 5, 6 and 7 and symbolizes the importance of headhunting in Nasca society.

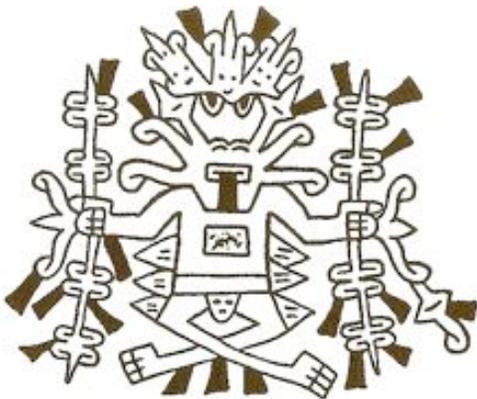


Fig. 16

The Jagged Staff God is a minor mythical creature that is also found mainly in Nasca 6, although its origins may go back to Nasca 5. Unlike the Hunter, the Jagged Staff God is more variable in appearance. He is usually depicted facing frontally, sitting with crossed legs. The head of the creature is highly elaborated with flutes and volutes protruding from the top; often a tongue emerges from the creature's mouth. Invariably this mythical being holds staffs with jagged rays in both hands (Fig. 16). Hair hanks attached to the staffs suggest that these, too, may represent symbolic trophy heads.

The Mythical Monkey or Affendämon was initially characterized as a "jumping" or "springing" demon, but later was referred to as a masked demon in an ape or monkey mask. Found primarily in Nasca 7, the Mythical Monkey is a very distinctive motif consisting of the sinuous body and curled tail of a monkey surmounted by a very distinctive head (Fig. 17). This head, often turned 180 degrees to look backward toward its tail, has a mouth filled with jagged, bucked teeth, quite unlike the teeth of a naturalistic monkey and more like the jaws of a killer whale. A small pug nose rises above the mouth area. A single eye, eyebrow and curled ear are found near the top of the

head. On its head the Mythical Monkey wears a hat or forehead ornament. Its hands grasp proliferous staffs which may represent plants or perhaps weapons.



Fig. 17

of warriors. This method of portraying motion in the figures as well as the use of floating fillers is new to the Nasca style in Phase 7. The source of these innovations may be contact with the contemporaneous Moche culture of the north coast. Indeed the Mythical Monkey figure itself, which appears so suddenly in the iconography, may be derived from the so-called Moche "humped animal" or "moon-animal" (Bruhns 1976).

Although this Mythical Monkey may be associated with agricultural fertility and/or water, there is also a military aspect to the figure. The creature has the same running stance seen in warrior representations in Nasca 7 as well as a plethora of "fillers" or elements which surround the body. Many of these floating elements appear to be missile stones or spears, also seen in representations



Fig. 18

pot, and occasionally the decapitated head of the mythical monkey itself. Also drawn on the vessel in many cases are a series of circular elements with a central dot, much like an eye, but often with lines radiating out from beneath them. Like its more complete counterpart, the Mythical Monkey, this creature seems to be more closely associated with symbols of warfare and decapitation. For example, the symbols for earth or terrain are seen between its legs, much in the same way that human warriors are depicted in the art. By the end of Nasca 7, the Mythical Monkey and the Decapitated Mythical Monkey are replaced by a circular decapitated head with jagged teeth which seems to have been

In Nasca 7 another variety of the Mythical Monkey appears, the Decapitated Mythical Monkey. This creature is usually painted in a solid black color on a white background, its back and tail arched upward, and its headless neck pointing into the ground, much like an ostrich (Fig. 18). Human trophy heads are often represented on the

derived at least partly from these more naturalistic forms. In Nasca 8, these decapitated heads are commonly depicted in the art.



Fig. 19



Fig. 20

numbers of “fisherman bottles” are present in collections. These portray a single fisherman straddling what appears to be an inflated skin or boat, holding fishnets in his hands. No archaeological examples of either floats or boats have yet been found to confirm this type of activity.

A few vessels portraying childbirth are known, but children are virtually absent from the repertoire. Other rare vessels show women leading tethered llamas or people carrying burdens on their backs. Burial scenes are present on a handful of vessels. A mummy bundle is flanked by shamans who play pan pipes and shake rattles while holding trophy heads in their hands (Fig. 21). One or two vessels show family groups; one famous

In addition to the representations of supernaturals in the style, Nasca art provides insights into many other aspects of everyday life, although these are quite limited in scope. Warriors and farmers are the most commonly depicted humans on the ceramics. Warriors carry spears, spear-throwers, slings, clubs or bolas as weapons and later examples are elaborately dressed with distinctive headgear and capes (Fig. 19) Battle scenes including decapitation of victims are depicted on late Nasca vessels. Corpses, blood, ceramic head jars and the ritual interment of caches of trophy heads are evidence of the importance of warfare and head-taking in this culture (Fig. 20). Modeled vessels of both women and men, some approaching portraiture, are common in the Middle and Late Nasca phases. Farmers engaged in agricultural rituals are the second most prevalent activity seen on the pottery. Male farmers

dressed only in loin cloths and wearing caps with long flaps to cover the back of the neck are clearly represented, sometimes holding pointed digging sticks. Ritual scenes, probably at harvest time, show groups of farmers engaged in drinking beverages from small cups while musicians play pan pipes, clay trumpets and drums. It appears from the associated cacti shown on the same vessels, that the brew they are drinking may be a hallucinogenic drink made from the San Pedro cactus. Fishing is another important subsistence activity. Aside from the many vessels painted with sea creatures, large

plaque made of modeled clay shows a group of people in procession perhaps going to a ceremonial site.



Fig. 21

Most interesting is what is not depicted in the art. There are no scenes of class differentiation—no leaders being attended by subordinates or of elaborately dressed elites, such as is common in the art of the Moche, Maya and other early civilizations. The portrayal of normal women’s activities such as cooking, weaving and childcare are extremely rare in the art of this patriarchal society. Landscapes such as mountains, rivers and the ocean as well as celestial manifestations such as the sun, moon and stars are either absent or rarely seen.

Thus Nasca iconography seems to concentrate on supernatural and military themes, especially in the late phases. More naturalistic motifs occur in the earliest part of the sequence, but these suddenly become subordinated to mythical creatures, trophy heads, and warriors beginning in Phase 5. An understanding of the ceramic art has been a major asset to archaeologists attempting to understand the nature and meaning of Nasca society. Much work needs to be completed before the final chapters can be written.

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