

## NASCA ICONOGRAPHY

Donald A. Proulx  
University of Massachusetts

Originally published in French, German and Spanish in: in *Inca - Perú: 3000 Ans d'Histoire*, edited by Sergio Purin, Pp. 384-399. Gent (Belgium): Imschoot, uitgevers, 1990. Minor revisions with added illustrations 2007.

For the ancient Nasca people, who dominated the valleys of the south coast of Peru between 200 B.C. and 600 A.D., life was harsh in the rainless desert environment. Although all of the major food plants domesticated in the Andean region were available to them, the unpredictability of the water supply was a constant threat to their very existence. Despite this impediment, the Nasca developed a high civilization which controlled a territory ranging from the Pisco Valley in the north to the Yauca and Acari valleys in the south. During their 800 year reign, they produced a wide variety of crafts, including finely made textiles, pyro-engraved gourds, and ornaments of gold and copper. The Nasca Culture is best known for its exquisite polychrome painted pottery decorated with both naturalistic and mythical themes. In this paper, I will examine the iconography of these ceramics and attempt to explain its meaning in the context of Nasca society.



Map 1

Ever since the first Nasca vessels appeared in European collections in the mid-19th century, they were highly prized for their beauty and complex designs (see Macedo, 1881; Hamy, 1882; Weiner, 1880 and Seler 1893 among others). The German born archaeologist Max Uhle was the first to scientifically excavate Nasca graves at the Hacienda Ocucaje in the Ica Valley during the year 1901, thus "discovering" the style and locating its source on the south coast (Uhle, 1906, 1913 and 1914). His careful

excavations in the cemeteries that he discovered and the meticulous notes he kept on the contents of each grave are of great archaeological importance. Uhle also determined the chronological relationship of this new style to later styles in the Ica Valley. His use of stratigraphy and seriation was the foundation for the chronological framework still used by Peruvian archaeologists (Rowe, 1954; Proulx, 1970).

Later work by Tello and Kroeber demonstrated that the center of this civilization was concentrated in the Nasca valley to the south of Ica. Additional gravelots were excavated by Farabee in 1922 and by Kroeber in 1926, adding to the documented sample. Today there are thousands of Nasca pottery vessels scattered throughout the collections of museums in Peru, North America and Europe. Unfortunately most were obtained through purchase from huaqueros and collectors, and little information is available regarding their provenience or context. While the lack of context prevents certain questions from being answered, this large sample is ideal for studying the nature and variability of the art style.

Iconography is that branch of the history of art that concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art (Panofsky 1939:3). Interpretation of the meaning of symbols in the art is in part prejudiced by our own cultural values and life experience. It is much easier to decipher the meaning of an art style in our own Western tradition where historic continuity, written documents and our personal experience can be brought to bear on the problem. In the case of an ancient society like Nasca, which existed almost 2000 years before our time, lacked writing, and had a completely different outlook on life than ours, the problem of interpretation and even identification of the main themes in the art can be extremely difficult. In this study I will use the techniques of archaeology, ethnographic analogy and the "thematic approach" to attempt a description and interpretation of the iconography.

Chronological control is an essential element in any iconographic analysis. Art styles invariably change through time, and the meaning of symbols can also be altered. The Nasca style persisted for over 800 years, during which time its art changed from essentially naturalistic or conventional motifs to those which became highly ornamented and abstracted to a final stage of abbreviated simplification. The basic sequence for the Nasca style was developed by the technique of seriation which can be defined as the placement of a series of artifacts in a sequence based on their similarity to one another. To use a modern analogy, one could arrange a group of automobiles parked on the street in their proper chronological order by using the stylistic changes manufacturers introduce each year as a base. A model dating to 1984 will be more similar in style to one dating to 1986 than will be one that was built in 1980. In archaeology we can arrange a series of ceramic vessels in proper sequence by carefully examining minute changes in the form of the vessels and the designs depicted on them. Using this line of evidence, archaeologists have divided the Nasca sequence into nine phases which are outlined on the following chart.

Table 1  
Nasca Chronology

PERIODS	ESTIMATED DATES	STYLISTIC STRAINS	DAWSON'S PHASES	SAWYER'S PHASES
MIDDLE HORIZON	650 A.D.	Disjunctive	9	Nasca-Wari
EARLY INTER-MEDIATE PERIOD	550 A.D.	Proliferous	8	Late Nasca
	425 A.D.		7	
	300 A.D.	Transitional	6	Middle Nasca
	175 A.D.	5		
	50 A.D.	Monumental	4	Early Nasca
	75 B.C.		3	
	100 B.C.	2	1	Proto-Nasca

The first seven phases of this scheme fall in the time period called the Early Intermediate Period (100 B.C - A.D. 650) while the final two phases fall in the succeeding Middle Horizon (650 - 1000 A.D.). A more simplified scheme, used by Sawyer (1968) and others, divides the Nasca sequence into Early, Middle and Late phases. While this latter scheme may be sufficient for categorizing artifacts in museum displays for general audiences, most Andean archaeologists now use the Dawson-Rowe 9 phase sequence for its greater chronological accuracy.

Another way of viewing the changes in the style through time is to lump together groups of phases into stylistic "strains" which reflect shifts in the methods of drawing and depiction of themes. Phases 2 through 4, for example, are classified as the "Monumental Strain", characterized by the representation of themes painted in a relatively depictive or naturalistic manner. Figures have simple outlines which enclose large areas of color (Roark, 1965:2). Many of the themes in the art are plants and animals drawn with such detail that the individual species can be identified. Even mythical creatures are easily identifiable by the uncluttered and conventional means by which they are drawn.

Phases 6 and 7 belong to the "Proliferous Strain" which is characterized by motifs that often include abstract elements as part of the design. Rays and tassels are appended to many of the motifs, particularly those displaying mythical subjects (Roark, 1965:2). Other designs become highly ornamented and elaborated, with elements being repeated several times in order to fill in vacant space. Anatomical relationships become less natural or disproportionate, and there is a tendency to multiply ornaments and body parts (Roark, 1965:54). Minor elements, such as mouth masks or forehead ornaments, become the center of attention, with much emphasis placed on elaboration of design. At the same time a shift in the number and variety of motifs takes place, with more frequent examples of military themes (warriors, weapons, trophy heads) and geometric designs occurring in the art.

Phases 8 and 9 fall under the "Disjunctive Strain". The quality of the art declines significantly at this time, perhaps due to outside pressure on the society from the emerging Wari Empire in the highlands. Designs become highly abstract, abbreviated in content, and poorly drawn. The majority of the motifs are geometric in form, but many of these are likely symbolic abstractions of earlier conventional themes. Most of the previous religious and naturalistic motifs have disappeared from the style.

Finally, it must be noted that local differences exist in the Nasca art style between valley systems and even among sites or areas within a valley system (see Proulx, 1968). During Phases 5 and 7 especially, there seem to be two or more "substyles" in existence, contemporary in time yet contrasting in manner of depiction and in themes. In Phase 5 these substyles have been designated as "conservative", "progressive" and "bizarre" by scholars (Blagg, 1975; Wolfe, 1981; Carmichael, 1988). Similar substyles have been noted for Phase 7, but these have not yet been defined.

The themes represented in Nasca ceramic art can be grouped into three main categories: (1) naturalistic motifs such as birds, animals, flowers and plants, reptiles and amphibians, fish and other sea creatures, etc., (2) religious or mythical motifs including the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, Mythical Killer Whale, Spotted Cat, Horrible Bird, Serpentine Creature, Mythical Harvester, and Harpy, and (3) geometric designs such as circles, bands, and cross-hatched lines. It is also important to note those themes that are absent from the iconography. There are no portraits or representations of distinct individuals in the art style; humans are drawn in stiff formal poses with little individuality, much like the tomb painting of Ancient Egypt. Few indications of social rank are shown, with the exception of figures wearing facial paint or wearing ear spools. There are relatively few scenes of daily activity (unlike the contemporary Moche Culture of the north coast), and these are restricted to battle scenes and ritual events found on Phase 6 and 7 vessels. Portrayal of celestial phenomena, such as the sun and moon, are absent; only stars may have been represented by geometric designs. Houses and other structures appear infrequently, and often in the form of relatively rare modeled vessels. It is clear that Nasca art was meant to be more symbolic in orientation rather than depictive.

Nasca ceramic iconography evolved directly out of the images depicted on Paracas ceramics and textiles of the Early Horizon (900-200 B.C.). Naturalistic motifs

such as the fox, condor, spotted cat, monkey, and various other forms of birds, fish and reptiles were all present in late Paracas art (see Dwyer, 1979 and Sawyer, 1961). The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, so important in Nasca religious iconography, appears fully developed on late Paracas textiles. The origins of the Mythical Killer Whale can also be seen on Paracas ceramics. Paracas and Nasca thus form a continuous cultural tradition which lasted for almost 1500 years. The origins of this tradition came partly from religious influences flowing from the Chavin Culture of northern Peru affecting Paracas, but the local south coast religious ideology predominated in this syncretism of ideas.

The beginning of the Nasca sequence is marked not by a sharp break with past traditions, but is distinguished by two new artistic conventions: (1) post-fired resin paints on pottery are replaced by slip paints that are baked on the vessels, and (2) pottery replaces textiles as the major medium for displaying religious iconography. Through time new motifs are added to the style, the frequency of depiction of others changes, and new conventions of drawing are introduced. With careful analysis of a large enough sample of pottery, the major motifs can be delineated.

The Monumental Strain (Phases 2 through 4) of the style contains a rich array of both naturalistic and mythical themes characterized by their clarity of representation and simplicity of design. Creatures from the natural world--birds, fish, and animals as well as plants--are extremely common in these phases where they are drawn with such accuracy that individual species can be recognized. Some of these represent major sources of food for the society: maize, jíquima, achira, peppers, lúcuma, and beans. It is interesting to note the absence of certain plants, mainly tubers such as potatoes, and coca leaves. Perhaps these staples had not yet diffused to the coast from the highlands. Birds are especially prevalent, including hummingbirds, swallows, condors and water birds such as the garza. The sea creatures depicted in the art range from the killer whale to small chitons and minnows. Animals, reptiles and amphibians are relatively rare in the Monumental Strain. Among the animals depicted are foxes, and the pampas cat (*Felis colocolo*). Snakes, lizards, spiders, ants, mice, tadpoles, and snails are all found in small numbers. All these motifs affirm the knowledge the early Nasca people had of their environment and their powers of observation.

Naturalistic motifs become very rare in the art of the Proliferous (Phases 6 and 7) and Disjunctive (Phases 8 and 9) strains, and when depicted they are usually reduced to minor elements attached to mythical beings. Emphasis shifts more to mythical iconography in the later phases with less interest placed on representing natural themes per se.

Geometric designs form a large percentage of the motifs throughout the entire sequence. In the earlier phases many of these appear to be purely geometric elements (spheres, crescents, spirals, step designs, etc.) but some may be symbolic of plants or other naturalistic forms. The frequency of geometric designs increases through time, becoming very high in Phases 5 and 6. By Phases 8 and 9 (the Disjunctive Strain), they make up the bulk of the motifs, yet many of these late "geometric" designs are in reality

geometricized abbreviations of Mythical Beings or their component parts. Further research needs to be done to sort out the pure geometric designs from the symbolic abstractions.

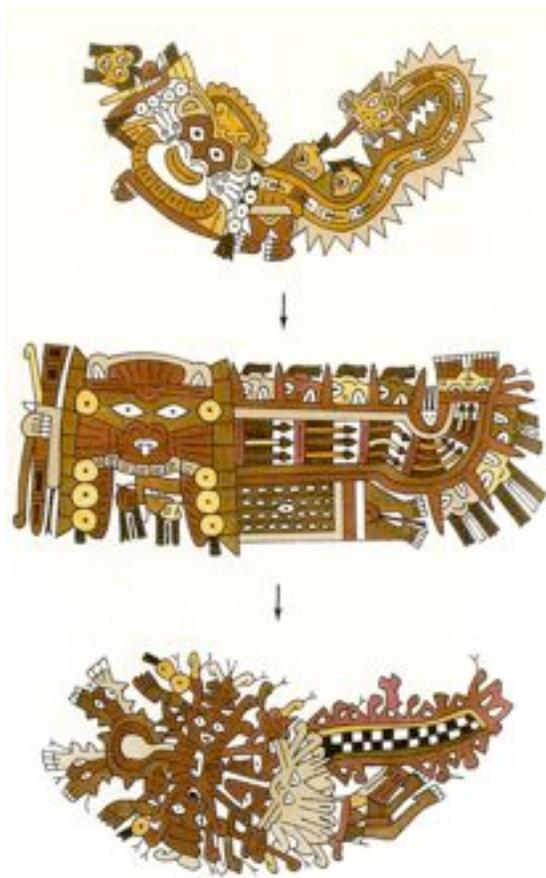


Fig. 1A to 1C

has been the archaeological discoveries of mummies found on the south coast wearing actual gold mouth masks and forehead ornaments, suggesting that elite males, perhaps shamans, dressed in the image of these mythical beings.

The most common form of Anthropomorphic Mythical Being is drawn horizontally around the circumference of a double spout bottle or vase. The body can be either extended or down-turned; a club is usually found in one hand and a human trophy head in the other. A cloak or "signifer" extends from the back of the creature's head. The signifer is usually spiked along its border, with trophy heads or plants found between its projections. The terminator or end of the signifer can take many forms, including a feline head and paws, a bird, animal, fish or plant (Fig. 1-A). The term "signifer" as used by Roark (1965) suggests that this element of the motif may have been used to denote the character or identity of the particular variation painted on the vessel, much like Christian saints can be identified by their associated elements in western art. Other forms of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being include a standing variety, more human-like in appearance, holding a club and trophy head in his hands (Fig. 2). An avian variety with

It is the mythical or religious iconography that best reveals the Nasca's perception of their world. The term "mythical creature" is applied to any anthropomorphic animal or human with special characteristics that suggest it is supernatural. The most frequently encountered "mythical creature" in the early part of the sequence is the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being. This term applies to a variety of semi-human masked creatures with feline attributes commonly found on double spout bottles, cup bowls, and less frequently on other vessel shapes. The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being has a human body clothed with shirt and breechcloth and is depicted wearing a distinctive mouth mask and forehead ornament (fig. 1-A). Seler (1923) called it the "cat demon," arguing that it was primarily an animal form with human characteristics. Blasco and Ramos (1980), on the other hand, label it as a "fantastic human," emphasizing its human qualities and suggesting that the representation is that of a human with supernatural animal characteristics. Supporting this view

wings is portrayed eating a human trophy head (Fig. 3), while yet another avian variety is depicted in a more conventional form (Fig. 4).



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being has its roots in Paracas textile art and persists in the Nasca style through Phase 6, after which time its minor aspects, such as the mouth mask, take on a life of their own, being depicted in much abbreviated and abstracted forms later in the sequence. After becoming geometricized in Phase 5 (Fig. 1-B) the greatest changes to this motif occur in the Proliferous Strain (Phase 6) when the human elements become subordinate to the minor themes, which in turn become highly elaborate, baroque or "proliferated" (fig.1-C).

The Mythical Killer Whale, representing the most powerful creature of the sea, is only second in importance to the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being. Also having its origins in Paracas art, this creature appears naturalistic in Nasca Phase 1 with the exception of the human arm extending from it's ventral side. Soon, however, Mythical Killer Whales are depicted holding knives or human trophy heads in their anthropomorphized hands (fig. 5-A), and this association with trophy heads and blood

continues through the entire sequence. In Nasca Phase 5 radical changes take place in the depiction of some of the Mythical Killer Whales. An abbreviated form appears, representing a frontal view of 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. 5-C). The Bloody Mouth variety is most prevalent in Phase 5 but continues into Phase 6; in Phases 7 and 8 it is replaced by a profile form with a jagged-toothed jaw (fig. 5-F). In the meantime, Killer Whale attributes are attached to the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being in the form of signifiers which terminate in the form of a killer whale tail (Figs. 5-B and 5-D).

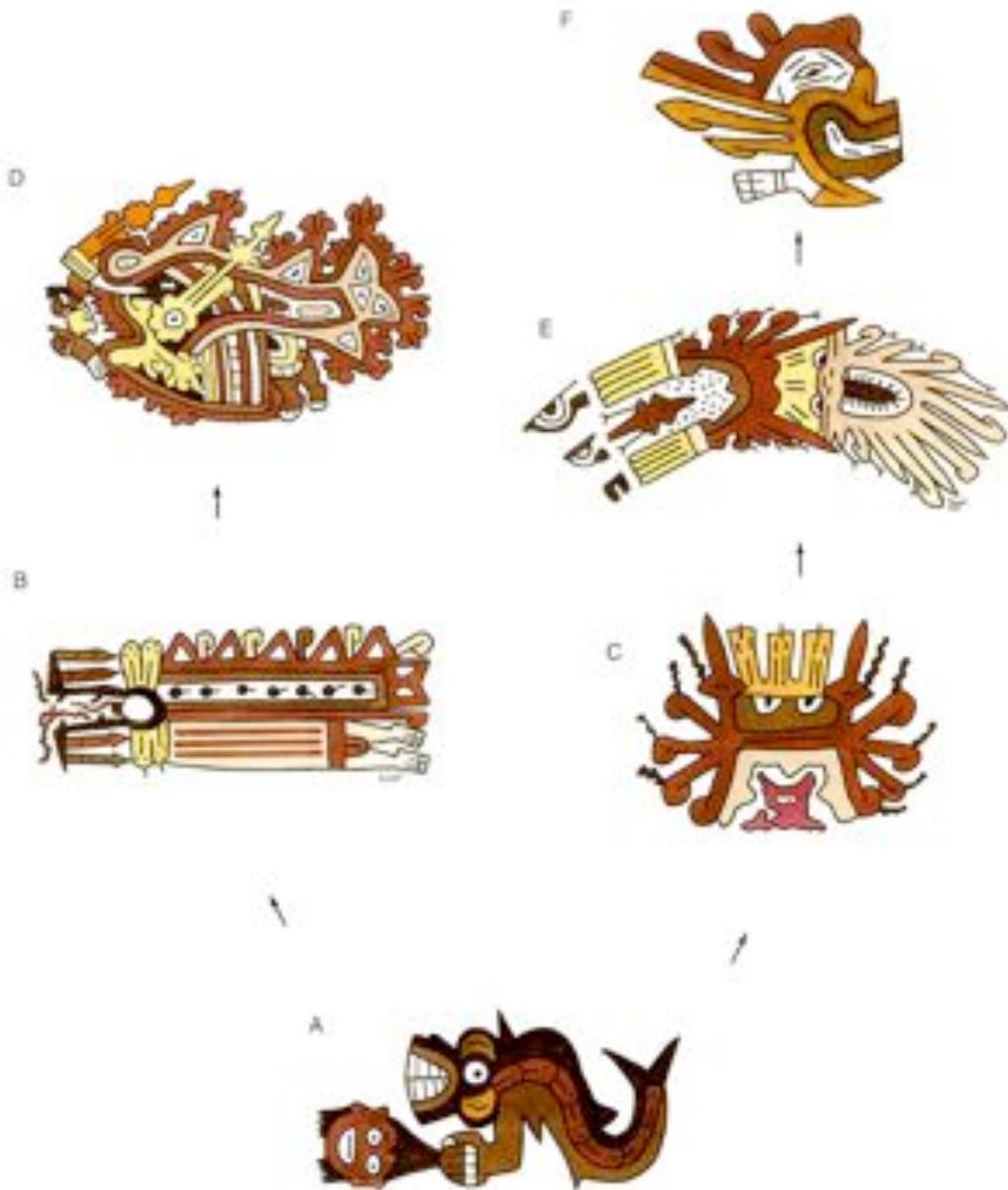


Fig. 5A to 5F

The frequency of Mythical Killer Whale representations increases through time, eventually equaling, then surpassing, the number of representations of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being. The implications of this change for our understanding of the evolution of Nasca religion are not clear, but one could argue for a gradual shift in the importance and popularity of individual mythical beings.

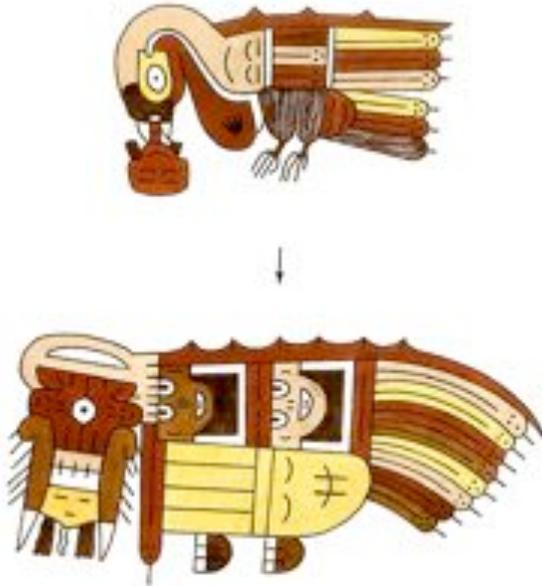


Fig. 6 A and 6B

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 phases the Horrible Bird is depicted as a naturalistic predator, often shown eating human body parts (fig. 6-A). Beginning in Nasca Phase 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 with also depict trophy heads (fig. 6-B). Even more variations with bizarre innovations are seen in Phase 5, where the Horrible Bird reaches its apogee. The motif suddenly and inexplicably disappears at the end of Phase

5; there are no Horrible Bird representations in the Proliferous Strain.



Fig. 7

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. 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 (Fig. 7). Like the Horrible Bird, the Harpy's wing panels often depict human trophy heads. The Harpy has

a short life in the style, beginning in Nasca Phase 3 and reaching its height in Phase 5, after which it disappears from the repertoire.

The Mythical Spotted Cat can be traced back to its naturalistic prototypes in the Paracas style. Once identified as a river otter or "gato de agua" by Yacovleff (1932), it is now clear that this entity represents a small local feline known as the Pampas Cat (*Felis*

colocolo), characterized by semi-lunar pelage markings, striped tail, and small ears separated by a "cap." Beginning in Phase 2 a mythical version with mouth mask appears, and in Phase 3 plants are attached to the body, a feature which links this creature to agriculture and fertility (Fig. 8). The Spotted Cat becomes more angular in Phase 4, and Hawk markings are often found on the eyes. Like the Horrible Bird, the Mythical Spotted Cat virtually disappears at the end of Phase 5.



Fig. 8

The Serpentine Creature is composed of a snake-like body with a human or feline head attached, sometimes wearing a mouth mask (Fig. 9). 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 Phase 5 which ushers in the Proliferous Strain.

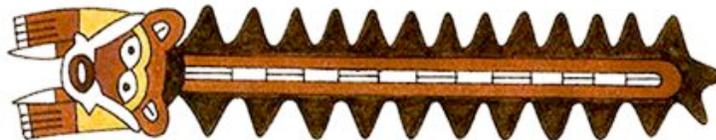


Fig. 9

Phase 5 was a period of great experimentation and innovation in the style. As noted above, many traditional Monumental Strain motifs disappeared during this time period, and a number of new traits emerged. Research by Roark (1965), Blagg (1975) and Wolfe (1981) suggests that there were two, perhaps three, contemporary sub-styles of Nasca art present in Phase 5. One the one hand there is the conservative or traditional sub-style which perpetuates many of the earlier motifs, especially religious iconography. It is basically a continuation of the Monumental Strain with minor changes in design layout such as crowding of the design space so that an entire motif is visible without having to turn the vessel (see Fig. 4).

The Progressive sub-style, on the other hand, had elements--such as darts and plants--that were appended onto the more traditional motifs (Fig. 10). Design space becomes more cluttered, with the appended elements filling the vacuum. This sub-style was important in providing a prototype for the application and elaboration of minor design elements which was so fundamental to the Proliferous Strain in the next phase.



Fig. 10

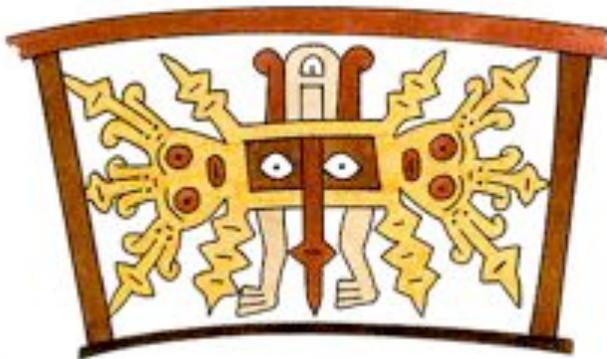


Fig. 11

The Bizarre or Radical sub-style is characterized not only by the introduction of new motifs, but with changes in the canons of drawing which include the scrambling of body parts, the designs on the surface of vessels, the elaboration of minor motifs, and the addition of proliferous elements to more traditional motifs (Fig. 11). The elaboration of minor design traits along with the subordination or disappearance of the major motif suggests that the symbolic meaning of the entire motif was evident to the members of the society, and that abbreviated portions of it could be used to recall the entire theme, much like the picture of the Christ child in the manger can evoke the image of the entire nativity scene in Christian art (see Donnan, 1978:158 for further discussion of the thematic approach).

Blagg argues that this phenomena is a radical reinterpretation of the style near the end of Phase 5, perhaps caused by a religious revolution of short duration (1975:68). She views it as more than just an aberration in an otherwise homogeneous style; it was an attempt at innovation, which was an intermediate step in the formation of the Proliferous Strain in Phase 6. Although some of the innovations of the Bizarre Sub-style were retained in the Proliferous Strain, there was a return to the more familiar iconography and an obvious rejection by the society of the new cult.

Among the new innovations taking place during Phase 5 is a great increase in military themes. This includes a new variety of Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, usually drawn horizontally around the periphery of a vessel, that has spears (or "darts") extending from both its head and arms as well as being appended to its body (fig. 10). Depictions of warriors, while found previously in the style, become much more frequent,



Fig. 12

and reach their peak during Phase 7 when several varieties, distinguished by their manner of drawing and facial markings, are found (Fig. 12). A few rare battle scenes can be found on Phase 7 vessels which show rival ethnic groups in combat (expressed by differences in facial painting, clothing and skin color) including decapitation scenes (Carmichael 1988: Illustrations 18 and 19). The Nasca culture reached its maximum extent during Phase 7 when its influence reached from the Cañete Valley in the north to the Acarí and Yauca valleys in the south and to the Ayacucho region of the highlands. There is also artistic evidence for some contact between the contemporary Nasca and Moche cultures during Phase 7 (Paulsen, 1986).

Human trophy heads are a major theme in Nasca art and have their origins in the earlier Paracas and Chavin styles. The taking of human heads in warfare has a long tradition in Central Andean civilizations. On the south coast, where preservation is excellent due to the arid conditions, over 100 examples of actual trophy heads have been found in Paracas and Nasca sites (see Proulx, 1989). The Paracas and Nasca peoples prepared these heads by removing the brain through an enlarged hole at the base of the skull, pinning the lips shut with thorns, and piercing the forehead for the attachment of a carrying rope (Fig. 13). The purpose for headtaking was primarily ritual. Ethnographic analogy using the contemporary Jivaro Indians of eastern Peru and Ecuador as a model



Fig. 13

suggests that the heads may have been taken and prepared in the manner described to prevent an avenging spirit, thought to reside in the head, from harming the warrior (Proulx, 1971 and 1989). Others have suggested that the heads were obtained through ritual sacrifice of victims as offerings to the gods (Baraybar, 1987). Sufficient archaeological evidence also exists to presume that some heads were indeed taken in warfare and were also exhibited in public on occasion. Trophy heads have a strong symbolic connection with fertility. Some are depicted with plants sprouting from the mouth of the victim. In other examples, trophy heads and blood are found linked to depictions of plants in the iconography.

Human trophy heads comprise one of the most frequent motifs in the style, beginning in the first phase and continuing throughout the sequence. They are shown both as independent motifs as well as being associated with mythical creatures. In the prolific strain they reach their peak of popularity, corresponding to the increased level of militarism reflected in other motifs of this time period. Many varieties of trophy heads can be found, from rayed faces to more realistic portrayals.



Fig. 14

The Harvester, present in both secular and mythical forms, is another motif that emphasizes the concept of fertility. The harvester represents a farmer, wearing a conical "dunce" hat that is vertically stitched up the front, and at the rear has a cloth that covers the back of the neck. The Harvester is depicted in a frontal position with outstretched hands holding plants (Fig. 14). The vast majority of the Harvester representations are found in Phase 5, after which time they quickly and completely disappear from the style. Earlier modeled effigy forms of the Harvester are found in Phases 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 Proliferous Strain, which grew in part out of the radical innovations of Phase 5, not only witnessed profound changes in the canons of depiction, but many new motifs were initiated at this time. The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being loses its traditional human/feline head and now assumes a variety of forms--some with feline traits, while others having large, grotesque eyes surrounded by yellow or black seem to be mainly killer whale in form. At the same time the outstretched human body is retained, but the signifier is reduced to bars with volutes and scrolls (Fig. 15). It would appear that the head of the creature has now taken on the function of the signifier of earlier Anthropomorphic Mythical Beings in defining the nature of the particular varieties. Further abbreviation of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being occurs in Phase 7 when the human body is eliminated and replaced by a large fan-shaped element. Emphasis now is entirely on the head which symbolizes the entire creature (Fig. 16).



Fig. 15

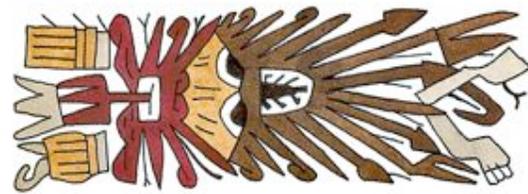


Fig. 16

Other new Mythical Beings that appear in the Proliferous Strain are the Jagged Staff God, a human figure holding "lightening bolts" in his hands, the Hunter, a human warrior with distinctive facial painting carrying spears and spear throwers in his hands (Fig. 17), and an anthropomorphic monkey (Schlesier's "affendämonen") which also holds jagged bars in its hands (Fig. 18). The Mythical Killer Whale in its many manifestations becomes more important in the religion beginning in Phase 5, if frequency of depiction can be used as support of this hypothesis. The Killer Whale motif continues

as late as Phase 8 when by which time it has been reduced to the form of a smiling head (Fig. 5-F).

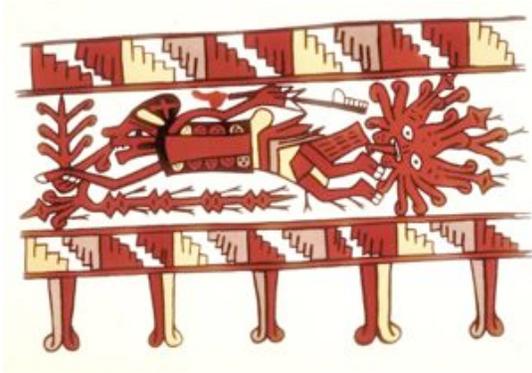


Fig. 17



Fig. 18

Elaboration of minor motifs like mouth masks and forehead ornaments characterizes the art of the Proliferous Strain. In many cases the main figure is decentralized and hidden beneath the baroque proliferation of mouth masks, series of chained heads, rays and volutes. Throughout the Nasca sequence the tongues of mythical creatures assume great importance, often physically connecting one element of a design with another. In other cases a tongue-like element, emanating from the mouth, is widened to form a field depicting a variety of themes, from pollywogs to human farmers (Fig. 19). Rayed faces, some trophy heads, the Harpy and many other creatures are routinely displayed with extended tongues. Perhaps this is yet another symbol of fertility seen in the art.



Fig. 19



Fig. 20

In the Disjunctive Strain (Phases 8 and 9) which falls at the beginning of Middle Horizon (600-1000 A.D.), the style disintegrates into a series of geometricized abstract symbols. Many of these "geometric designs" are abstracted abbreviations of mythical creatures or their various parts, now virtually unrecognizable to the untrained eye (Fig. 20). Much work needs to be done in order to sort out the major themes remaining in the style. Crude, faced necked jars appear in the style along with other "foreign" elements. At the time this art was produced, the south coast of Peru was being strongly influenced from the Ayacucho area in the highlands, a reversal of the situation in Phase 7. Politically, Nasca power was collapsing, and this is reflected in the art and archaeology of the period.

### Interpretation

In non-literate societies like Nasca, visual representations are the principal means by which culture is transmitted through time. "In an iconographic system, design elements are symbols; they refer to ideas or serve as vehicles for conceptions" (Allen, 1981:45). In order to interpret the iconography of a non-literate society, we must use techniques derived from diverse disciplines such as art history, ethnology, archaeology and ethnohistory. Edwin Panofsky in a seminal article (1939) described three stages of iconographic analysis. The first stage is basically descriptive: the identification and description of the range of motifs in the style. The process requires a large sample of pottery to insure that all the basic elements are present. Some motifs, like birds and fish, can be easily described, while mythical designs, which are foreign to our conceptual ideology, can only be described by their formal elements at this point.

The second stage connects artistic motifs or combinations of motifs with themes and concepts. With proper study and an adequate sample, one can now categorize the range of motifs and their variations in the style. Major and minor motifs become evident. At this point a "thematic approach" is often useful in helping to identify individual traits. The thematic approach, attempts to interpret the art by studying the patterns that result from artists working according to defined rules of expression learned in the context of their society (Donnan, 1976:5-10; 1978). Combinations of traits recur over and over again, such as human trophy heads with one group of mythical creatures and plants with another group. Thus certain mythical creatures can be identified and defined by their consistent association with particular design elements. When these design elements are abbreviated or even abstracted into geometric forms later in the sequence, they can still be identified using this technique. Archaeology can also be used to aid in the identification of objects and their context in the society.

In non-literate societies, visual symbols take the place of the written word to convey messages or to serve as the means for transmitting cultural traditions (see Allen, 1981:44-46 for a more detailed discussion). This artistic symbolic system is very similar to the symbolic system of a language.

"In language the speaker can modify what he is saying about an object (noun) by selecting a set of modifiers (adjectives and adverbs) and inserting them in their proper place in the message according to a set of rules (grammar). In art, the communication is between the artist and the viewer. The artist conveys information about objects such as houses, men or ceremonies--we might call these 'artistic nouns'--by using a stylistic set of modifiers or 'artistic adjectives'" (Donnan, 1978:8).

By identifying major themes in the art (the "nouns"--e.g. the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being) and subsidiary elements (the "adjectives" and "adverbs"--e.g. signifier, mouth mask), we can better understand the nature of the value system.

The third stage of analysis, which tries to reconstruct the intrinsic meaning or content of the art, is much more difficult to achieve, especially for a non-literate society. In our case it involves attempting to use the symbols to ascertain the values or basic attitudes of the Nasca people in order to understand their religion and their world-view. We are hampered not only by a time gap of almost 1500 years, but we must also be careful to avoid imposing an ethnocentric Western interpretation on the art.

The technique of ethnographic analogy has been of great value in reaching this third analytical level. Derived from the discipline of Anthropology, ethnographic analogy is a method of interpretation of nonobservable behavior of an ancient society based on the similarity of its artifacts (or pictorial representations of them) to those used by living peoples (for an example, see the discussion of trophy heads above). In the case of Nasca we use a comparative approach assuming that this ancient society behaved and adapted to their environment in ways similar to primitive peoples today. There is still an element of speculation present in such an approach, but when used in conjunction with archaeology, a reasonable and logical case can be presented.

Using ethnographic analogy and the comparative approach, we can argue that contemporary, pre-literate, agricultural societies similar to Nasca have religions which include totemism, shamanism and often the use of hallucinogenic drugs to communicate with the spirits--all concepts foreign to mainstream western religions. As Townsend (1985:122) points out, the Nasca people

"...believed that there was an active, sacred relationship between man and nature. According to this mode of thought, the divine order of the universe was reflected in the organization of society and in all important activities of human life. Thus, the control of water, planting of fields, harvesting of the crops, preparations and celebrations of war, inauguration of rulers, and similar communal events had symbolic meaning and were bound, in a ramifying network of connections, to the forces and phenomena of the surrounding land and sky. This connection of cosmological ideas and social process is a central point of inquiry in approaching the Nasca world."

In the world of the ancient Nasca, the most important forces of nature were the land, sea, sky and water, and it is not surprising that their iconography included the most powerful creatures of these realms: the killer whale, condor (Horrible Bird), feline (Mythical Spotted Cat and Anthropomorphic Mythical Being) and the snake. In many contemporary South American tribal societies, people claim descent from certain animals (totemism). Under the influence of powerful hallucinogenic drugs, tribal members "transform" themselves into powerful animals. The presence of anthropomorphic art in many societies reflects this concept of transformation. Among the Jivaro, for example, young boys are encouraged to acquire an "arutam wakani", a soul visualized as a pair of giant anacondas or jaguars (Harner, 1972:138).

The Mythical Beings in Nasca art are often drawn with such incorrect or distorted anatomical combinations, that the conclusion we must reach is that emphasis was on symbolic meaning rather than naturalistic representation (see Allen, 1981:48). The Mythical Killer Whale, for example, has a whale-like body, shark fins and a human arm and hand. It is often shown holding a severed human head or, in later phases, eating it. The icons represent the concepts of power, human sacrifice, and the sea. The Mythical Spotted Cat, on the other hand, with its association with plants, suggests concern with fertility of the crops. Even in an abbreviated form, as with the "Bloody Mouth" representations of the Mythical Killer Whale in Phase 5, the symbolism was clear to the Nasca people. A further interpretation of these creatures suggested by ethnographic analogy is that they represent the chief predators of their respective realms assuming guardianship and control over the other creatures in their domain. Some South American tribes have a belief in the "Master of Fishes" who is thought to control all other creatures in the water. The Nasca creatures may have "carried messages about power and hierarchies, the control of territory, and the ability or function of taking life..." (Townsend, 1985:133).

I have been referring to the religious motifs as "Mythical Beings" because I believe that in addition to their intrinsic symbolic meaning, they also served as the basis for many allegorical and metaphorical myths, much like the myths associated with the various Greek gods. The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, with its wide variety of manifestations and changeable signifier forms must have elicited the same type of complex religious images as the nativity scene or the crucifixion in Christian art. Shamans may have dressed in the paraphernalia of these mythical creatures. Archaeology has revealed mummies outfitted with gold mouth masks, forehead ornaments and spondylus shell necklaces which are depicted in the art. We must await further investigation to determine the exact meaning of the ritual attire.

We can only understand Nasca art in the context of a pre-literate society adapting to its environment with all the threats and uncertainties that the natural order presents. The Nasca universe and the hierarchy of spirits and creatures that inhabited it are difficult for us to perceive, but they are consistent with the traditional patterns of Andean thought and symbolism which can be understood in part through the use of ethnographic analogy. We may never be able to completely reconstruct the religion and ideology of the ancient

Nasca Culture in all its detail and complexity, yet future research, especially archaeological excavation, may reveal a clearer picture.

### Bibliography

- Allen, Catherine J.  
1981      The Nasca Creatures: Some Problems of Iconography. *Anthropology* 5:43-70. Stony Brook: Department of Anthropology, State University of New York-Stony Brook.
- Baraybar, José Pablo  
1987      *Cabezas-Trofeo de la Cultura Nasca: Nuevas Evidencias y un Planteamiento*. Trabajo de Investigación Presentado al Premio Pedro Weiss de Antropología Física Convocado por el CONCYTEC.
- Blagg, Mary M.  
1975      The Bizarre Innovation in Nasca Pottery. M.A. Thesis, Art Department, University of Texas at Austin.
- Blasco Bosqued, Concepción and Luis Ramos Gomez  
1980      *Ceramica Nazca*. Valladolid: Seminario Americanista, Universidad de Valladolid.
- Carmichael, Patrick H.  
1988      Nasca Mortuary Customs: Death and Ancient Society on the South Coast of Peru. Ph.D.Dissertation, Department of Archaeology, University of Calgary.
- Donnan, Christopher B  
1976      *Moche Art and Iconography*. Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publication.
- 1978      *Moche Art of Peru*. Los Angeles: UCLA Museum of Culture History.
- Dwyer, Jane  
1979      The Chronology and Iconography of Paracas-style Textiles. in *The Junius B. Bird Pre-Columbian Textile Conference*. Rowe, Ann Pollard, Elizabeth Benson, and Anne-Louise Schaffer, ed. Pp. 105-127. Washington: The Textile Museum and Dumbarton Oaks.

- Eisleb, Dieter  
1977 *Altperuanische Kulturen II: Nazca.*  
Veröffentlichungen des Museums für Völkerkunde  
Berlin, Neue Folge 34. Berlin: Museum für  
Völkerkunde.
- Hamy, Jules  
1882 Les collections péruviennes du Docteur Macedo.  
*Revue d'Ethnographie* 1(1):68-71. Paris.
- Harner, Michael  
1972 *The Jivaro: People of the Sacred Waterfalls.*  
Garden City: Doubleday/Natural History Press.
- Macedo, José Mariano  
1881 *Catalogue d'objets archéologiques du Pérou de  
l'ancienne Empire des Incas.* Paris: Imprimerie  
Hispano-Américaine.
- Panofsky, Erwin  
1939 Introductory. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic  
Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* 3-31. New  
York: Oxford University Press.
- Paulsen, Allison C.  
1986 A Moche-Nasca Connection. Paper presented to  
the 51st Annual Meeting of the Society for  
American Archaeology, New Orleans.
- Proulx, Donald A.  
1968 *Local Differences and Time Differences in  
Nasca Pottery.* University of California  
Publications in Archaeology 5. Berkeley:  
University of California Press.
- 1970 *Nasca Gravelots in the Uhle Collection from the Ica  
Valley, Peru.* Research Report 5. Amherst: Department  
of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts.
- 1971 Headhunting in Ancient Peru. *Archaeology*  
24(1):16-21.
- 1983 The Nasca Style. in *Pre-Columbian Sculptured  
and Painted Ceramics from the Arthur M. Sackler  
Collections.* Edited by Lois Katz. Pp. 87-106.

- Washington: The Arthur M. Sackler Foundation and the AMS Foundation for the Arts, Sciences and Humanities.
- 1989 Nasca Trophy Heads: Victims of Warfare or Ritual Sacrifice? In *Cultures in Conflict: Current Archaeological Perspectives*. Proceedings of the 20th Annual Chacmool Conference pp. 73-85. Calgary: University of Calgary Archaeological Association.
- Roark, Richard P.  
1965 From Monumental to Proliferous in Nasca Pottery. *Nawpa Pacha* 3:1-92. Berkeley: Institute of Andean Studies.
- Rowe, John  
1954 *Max Uhle, 1856-1944; A Memoir of the Father of Peruvian Archaeology*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 46(1). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sawyer, Alan R.  
1961 Paracas and Nazca Iconography. In *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*. Samuel Lothrop, ed. Pp. 269-316. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 1968 *Mastercraftsmen of Ancient Peru*. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.
- Schlesier, Karl H.  
1959 Stilgeschichtliche Einordnung der Nazca-Vasenmalerei: Beitrag zur Geschichte der Hochkulturen des Vorkolumbischen Peru. *Annali Lateranensi* 23:9-236. Vatican City: Topografia Poliglotta Vaticana.
- Seler, Eduard  
1893 *Peruanische Alterthümer, insbesondere altperuanische Gefässe der Chibcha und der Tolina- und Cauca- Stämme etc.* Herausgegeben von der Verwaltung des Königlichen Museums für Völkerkunde zu Berlin. Berlin: Dr. E. Mertens & Cie.

- 1923 Die buntbemalten Gefäße von Nazca im südlichen Peru und die Hauptelemente ihrer Verzierung. in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach- und Altertumskunde*. ed. Pp. 169-338. Berlin: Verlag Behrend u, Co. [Reprinted in 1961 by Akademische Druck-U. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, Austria]
- Townsend, Richard  
1985 Deciphering the Nazca World: Ceramic Images from Ancient Peru. *Museum Studies* 11(2):116-139. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.
- Uhle, Max  
1906 Aus Meinem Bericht über die Ergebnisse meiner Reise nach Südamerika 1899-1901. *Proceedings of the 14th International Congress of Americanists*, Stuttgart, 1904, 2:581-592. Stuttgart, Berlin and Leipzig.
- 1913 Zur Chronologie der alten Culturen von Ica. *Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris*, tome X, Fasc. II:341-367. Paris.
- 1914 The Nazca Pottery of Ancient Peru. *Proceedings of the Davenport Academy of Sciences* 13:1-16. Davenport, Iowa.
- Wiener, Charles  
1880 *Pérou et Bolivie*. Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie.
- Wolfe, Elizabeth F.  
1981 The Spotted Cat and the Horrible Bird: Stylistic Change in Nasca 1-5 Ceramic Decoration. *Nawpa Pacha* 19:1-62. Berkeley: Institute of Andean Studies.
- Yacovleff, Eugenio  
1932 La deidad primitiva de los Nasca. *Revista del Museo Nacional* 1(2):103-160. Lima.

