



## Moche Sex Pots: Reproduction and Temporality in Ancient South America

**ABSTRACT** This article asks the question: What is a reproductive act? Ceramics produced by the South American Moche (A.D. 150–800) depict a wide variety of sex acts but rarely feature vaginal penetration. The cross-cultural literature, especially from Melanesia and Amazonia, is used here to argue that the relationship between sex and reproduction has been variably defined, with many acts—including anal and oral sex—sometimes perceived as reproductive. It contrasts notions of time found in Western ideas of procreation and in pornography to the expanded reproductive time frame of kin- and lineage-based societies and argues that Moche ceramics, with their emphasis on the movement of fluids between bodies, do in fact portray a reproductive process. In the stratified context of Moche society, where these pots were produced for elite consumers who often placed them in tombs, these representations solidified the power of ancestors, elders, and elites. [Keywords: Moche, sex, reproduction]

**S**EX IS THE SUBJECT of hundreds of clay pots produced on the North Coast of Peru during the first millennium A.D. These ceramics, made by a people we know today as the Moche, are among the finest of the ancient Americas, striking for their naturalistic style and consummate craftsmanship. Their wide-ranging subject matter encompasses much more than sex: On Moche pots, people, animals, and gods go hunting and to war; make music; visit their rulers; bury the dead; and cure the sick. Collectors have long prized this art; it is estimated that 80,000 to 100,000 Moche vessels have made their way to museums and private collections worldwide, almost all of them from looters' pits.

To my knowledge, no one has attempted to quantify the percentage of Moche ceramics that display explicit sexual imagery; at least 500 are known to exist. A large percentage of other Moche works have related imagery, such as war captives with exposed genitalia, dancing skeletons with erect penises, and vessels with highly suggestive motifs and forms.

Like other Moche ceramics, the sex-themed vessels are both functional clay pots, with hollow chambers for holding liquid and stirrup-shaped spouts for pouring, and works of three-dimensional sculpture. As sculpture, they typically depict lively little figures engaged in a startling variety of acts involving the hands, nipples, genitals, anus, mouth, and tongue.

These sex-themed effigies have long been known to scholars but have rarely been the object of sustained study.

There are a scattering of articles, and passing mention in more general texts, but only one major monograph—Larco Hoyle's *Checan*, published in Peru in 1965.<sup>1</sup> In the decades since, interest seems to have waned; sex makes only an occasional appearance in Christopher Donnan's otherwise compendious publications on ceramics (Donnan 1978, 1992, 2001, 2003; Donnan and McClelland 1999). Noteworthy published studies include Joan Gero (in press) and Susan Bergh (1993).

This neglect corresponds oddly with the explosion of scholarly interest in the subject of sex, which has produced a wealth of new research on societies ancient and modern. Moche scholars appear largely uninterested in this body of work;<sup>2</sup> and, for their part, students of sexuality have shown little interest in Moche art, although the latter constitute a major corpus of non-Western, premodern representations of sexual acts. The time seems ripe, then, to revisit the Moche sex pots and bring these two disconnected scholarly literatures together.

These artifacts offer a daunting interpretive challenge. They come to us without context, stripped of archaeological data, and absent any written records. Their meaning is quite enigmatic; but this very opacity, and their utter disconnection from more familiar historical traditions, offers the possibility that their study might move our thinking about sexuality beyond contemporary categories of thought.

The first surprise is what is and is not represented. While sodomy, masturbation, and fellatio are frequently depicted,

