THE MOCHE PAINTINGS
of
VICKY ARANA

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About the exhibit

My paintings of Moche motifs are closely based on a wealth of fineline drawings painted on ceramics by Moche graphic artists over more than six centuries (ca. 100-800 CE) and unearthed since the mid-nineteenth century by grave robbers and archaeologists from scores of archaeological sites in northern Peru. Those ceramic vessels are now important components of pre-Columbian collections in museums around the world. Their graphic depictions of Moche life have been made more widely accessible in the past two decades, through the photography of Christopher Donnan. In collaboration with him, Donna McClelland, also an archaeologist, produced and published rollouts of the pots’ images, samples of which appear in their book *Moche Fineline Painting: Its Evolution and Its Artists (1999)*. To suggest my paintings’ relationship to the archaeologists’ impressive pictorial reproductions of the original Moche art, I have created sidebar panels to accompany each of my paintings.

To document the hundreds of ceramic vessels he was studying, Donnan took multiple photographs of *each* one, recording all 360 degrees of its rotated surface. His photographs are numbered and catalogued in the Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library in Washington, D.C. The same numbers correlate to McClelland’s rollouts. The sidebar panels to my paintings present the relevant pots and rollouts—and bear their identifying DORL/ICFA catalogue numbers.

McClelland’s rollouts—hundreds of awesome achievements in themselves—serve a serious scholarly purpose by enabling methodical analyses of Moche motifs, but they do not exactly *revel* in the information conveyed by the Moche people who, not having a written language, nevertheless skillfully communicated so very much about their daily lives, beliefs, and cultural rituals in their remarkable works.

Moved by that awesome collaborative, cross-cultural communication of such *longue durée*, I wanted to produce a tribute. Not being an archaeologist, I found a personal way, with current painting methods, to honor the storytelling implicit in Moche pottery. Excited by particularly evocative pots and their rollout drawings, I have sought to portray the energy of Moche society—and the grandeur of its cultural rituals and spiritual belief systems. My paintings are done in bright Jo Sonja matte and metallic acrylic paints on Arches cold-press, 156 lb. rag paper and reflect also my own direct experience of the Moche landscape, its geography, atmosphere, flora, and fauna. I found further color clues in faded traces of Moche painted murals, in rare relics of Moche textiles, and in the rich array of gold, silver, and other natural materials recovered from the gravesites of the affluent. Their clothing, armor, jewelry, weaponry, and other accessories are featured in the world’s museums and private collections. These survivals enlarge our capacity to imagine living, laboring, worshipping, even ruling in the times and places of the Moche civilization. My paintings are an expression of my joy in learning so much from Moche artists and from those who have preserved and studied their work.

Inspired by Moche art, I celebrate my Peruvian identity as well as the history and lore of the northern coast of *mi Patria*, and I relive my good luck in having bumped into Moche culture at a formative point in my childhood. I honor in my paintings the hard work of Peruvian historians and archaeologists and of their foreign colleagues. My paintings—joyful, colorful, and grateful—are also conceptions of the long and varied story of the land of my birth.

Vicky Arana (2023)
1. Moche Fertility Rite // El rito de fertilidad

This painting is closely based on the fineline drawing of the images on this ceramic vessel:

Here, the iconic fruit *ulluchu* features prominently hanging from the tree in what appears to be an important comprehensive representation of a fertility rite, performed by Wrinkle Face and attended by his culturally revered familiars—Iguana, a shaman in the form of a bird (seen in my painting at top right), and Mythic Dog—a ritual to renew social and agricultural generation. The pot’s rollout design (below) reveals where and how the *ulluchu* fruit grows on trees, is collected by trained monkeys, and is held in the supreme deity’s right hand, as he joins with a naked female, ritually dressed in gold earrings, gold nose rings, and a ritually painted face.

The mysterious *ulluchu* is also associated with other important Moche rituals—including the preparations for war, prisoner sacrifices, burials, and celebrations of power depicted in my other paintings. It is thought that the *ullucho* acted as an aphrodisiac as well as an anti-coagulant used in blood-collecting and blood-drinking ceremonies, and as a psychotropic stimulant boosting courage in battle. A second tree (pictured alongside the *ullucho* on other pots) bears another ritual fruit, the *espingo* (as seen in my painting): an intoxicating, psychotropic substance being roasted in an oven and ground by the bird figure into a shamanic powder.
2. Fishing in the Teeming Ocean // La pesca del mar repleto

This painting draws from many Moche sources, including ceramic vessels that situate the narrative action in or near the sea, traditionally signaled by an underlying ribbon of regular waves. The Moche potters drew all kinds of sea dwelling creatures and seabirds on their pots. Many pots feature human or mythological beings fishing or hunting. In my painting I include several kinds of fish, shrimp, shellfish, snails, snakes, a ray, and seabirds, including pelicans, drawn in the Moche manner.

Here is a rollout drawing from a Moche pot of a seaside seal hunt, for comparison:

The large abstract zig-zag figure full of dots that appears just over the band of waves represents masses of kicked up sand and the violent turbulence of this food gathering activity.
3. Moche Fisherman in a Reed Canoe // Pescando en caballito de totora

This painting follows very closely the design on the following ceramic pot:

Here is its fineline rollout drawing:
4. Wrinkle Face Snags the Demon Fish // Ai-apaec engancha al Pez Demonio

The Demon Fish, a sacred mythical creature, is denoted by the *tumi* blade it holds in his human-like hand and by its painted anthropomorphic arms and legs. The divinity Wrinkle-Face scowls, in humorous contrast to his fellow fisherman, who seems to smile, having caught a fancy but unproblematically natural fish. Here are two photographic images from the original ceramic vessel:

Here is the fineline rollout of the entire original design:

The Moche evidently had a sense of humor, as suggested by the contrasting facial expressions of the two figures fishing.
5. Moche Agricultural Activities // La agricultura mochica

This painting is a composite of many fineline ceramic pots telling the stories of agricultural activities. Topmost appears an abstract design to symbolize sun, water, and the elaborate irrigation systems the Moche civilization designed and built, many parts of which are still in use in the northern coastal river valleys of Peru. The next three panels of my painting refer to the many ceramic vessels that depict farmers tending the soil, gathering the crops, and transporting their harvest. In the bottom two panels, I feature, first, a female shaman (curandera) at her table in the market along with other merchant women; and below that, a fairly common comic Moche meme: the iconic battle between bean-crop farmers, denoted by anthropomorphic warrior beans, and their marauding enemy, the anthropomorphic warrior deer. For that final panel, I used the pot and the fineline drawing depicted below:
6. Moche Runners // Corredores

Moche runners are nearly always depicted carrying small bags in their outstretched hands. A ribbon that connects their headdresses to their belts flies behind each of them. Anthropologists and historians differ in their theories as to what the bags might have contained. Some runners are human beings; others are anthropomorphized totemic creatures of all sorts, as seen in the fineline drawings reproduced below.
7. Moche Deer Hunting Party // La caza de ciervos

This painting is a composite of images found on many Moche vessels that depict deer hunters, their spears and spear launchers (atlatls), the netting customarily used, and (often also) tree and bush branches of the thickets around which the hunts generally took place. I here have layered bands of different Moche landscapes, added typical plants and local animals, including the Andean Black and White Hawk-Eagle (*Spizaetus melanoleucus*), itself a revered hunter. The scene at bottom left of the painting tells a story of human compassion, or animal husbandry, and provides the sorts of insights into the Moche soul that graphic narratives afford. The ceremonial vestments worn by the hunters’ leaders imply the sacred nature of the deer hunting ritual. Anthropologists have noted that deer bones are seldom found with food remains and that deer may not have been considered a human food source.

Below are some sample fineline drawings of Moche deer hunts made from photographs.
8. Moche Snail Hunt // La cosecha de caracoles

Moche snail hunters harvested snails that eat the hallucinogenic fruit of certain cacti. My painting features the hunters climbing the mountains (depicted sculpturally on some pots) to find those special snails. Those hunters who are some of the snails experienced visions and sometimes are shown falling deep, drugged sleep.
9. Moche in Fierce Seaside Battle against Savages // Batalla intensa contra salvajes cerca de la orilla del mar

Many Moche pots depict warriors battling tattooed savages who are armed only with slingshots and stones, as this pot below does, or wielding atlatls and lances. The savages sometimes wear feather headdresses, earrings, and skirts made of animal skins, suggesting that these enemies have invaded from interior rainforests rather than coastal settlements. The Moche warriors, in contrast, are most often dressed in helmets, armored shirts, backflaps, and wrist guards, wielding either traditional clubs or spears, and holding round shields. Floating psychotropic *ulluchu* fruits, uprooted plants, torn clothes, and spurts of blood signify a brutal, drug-intoxicated encounter. Hummingbirds darting above generally imply the swift speed and violence of the activity.
10. Moche Divinties on the Warpath // Divinidades guerreros

Mythological warriors smoking or inhaling *ulluchu* raise symbolic dust clouds and tear high above *ulluchu* groves when they race swiftly to battle, as depicted on the pot below. The Sun-Rayed Deity rides on the shoulders of winged porters, one of them an anthropomorphized hawk and the other a superhuman, each of whom carries a small runner’s bag. The Deity is dressed in gold and smokes from two pipes of a substance taken from a small clay bowl at the front of his seat. He is escorted by dog, fox, bird, lizard, insect, and owl warriors. In my painting, I have added an *ulluchu*-harvesting monkey looking on while grabbing a falling *ulluchu*. And I have placed the hairless Peruvian dog racing ahead instead of behind. Snakes and cats are among the company, as in the original pot.
11. Wrinkle Face and Iguana Beat the Enemy // Ai-apaec e Iguana combaten al enemigo

While I have followed the pot’s original design closely, I have added a stylized water border at the top and a band of jaguar and foliage at the base, to suggest the geographical range of wide Moche activity. Uprooted plants and the hummingbird denote fast and furious action. Snake belts and animated knives always imply the high status of the principal figure and his faithful companions. Their headdresses—like those of many warriors and runners—are ornamented with condor, coati or olingo pelts, including their heads and long ringed tails. Even the fighters’ tumi knives are animated by eared snakes. An ordinary dog often accompanies Wrinkle Face and his friend Iguana across a full spectrum of their activities, as I show. Altogether, this ceramic encodes a vigorous high-stakes struggle.
12. Moche Divinities Presenting a Captive // La entrega del cautivo

The Presentation motif appears in countless contexts—after battles, at sacred ceremonies, for astronomical festivals, or to ward off catastrophes. The ceremony has standard features across the hundreds of years of Moche rule. The victims are naked if conquered on the battlefield and are tied with ropes around their necks. Sacrificial offerings otherwise may involve higher status individuals, aliens or locals. My painting depicts a ceremonial ritual involving the Rayed Divinity wearing gold headdress ornaments, breast ornaments, earrings, mailed apparel, wrist guards, and backflap. The presenters also wear gold mail apparel, gold and feathered helmets. The anthropomorphized bird’s headdress features a golden Decapitator (or perhaps a mythological octopus). The mythical fox’s headdress is animated by a spotted coati. The ulluchu fruits always appear when blood is flowing.
13. Moche Musicians and Dancers // Fiesta mochica

This painting is based on a variety of conventional figures of dancers and musicians as drawn on many Moche ceramic vessels, with the dancers shown moving up a spiral layout and or with musicians occupying the spaces above the dancers. The sky is blue and the sun is shining on the colorful revelers.

My painting shows the dancers and musicians on stepped tiers, a Moche design convention indicating that the activity takes place in a ceremonial space. Among the human figures, I include a mythical deer tympanum player, a symbolic nod to the sacred nature of this festive activity. I've represented some of the most frequently depicted musical instruments: clay and reed wind instruments and various drums and noise makers. The dancers sport painted legs, rattles or bells tied to their calves, face paint, earrings, nose rings, colorful textile garments as well as resplendent headdresses and feathers; one is winged. The following fineline drawing informed my arrangement of the dancers.
14. The Moche Toss Spear-Throwing Contest // El concurso de lanzadores

Designed something like skeet-shooting, but with lightly weighted badminton shuttlecocks as targets and cross-barred lances as “shots,” a target is launched by a dignitary, and the contestants compete to snag the slowly down-drifting target. In my painting, Wrinkle Face shoots the target into the air, and Iguana keeps score. Of the three contestants in the foreground, only one is happy, implying that it was his lance that captured a target. Countless ceramic pots depict this Moche game. Sometimes the participants are mythological figures. Sometimes they are human beings, or a mixed company. Samples appear below.

Chris Henry (of Paleoarts) and his students reimagined and made Moche-style atlatls, launch and capture lances, and feathered targets for what Henry named the “Moche Toss” game. The student group reenacted what countless ceramic pots depict across centuries of Moche society. The best video of a reenactment is this one: https://www.archaeology.org/exclusives?slg=moche-badminton. See also: https://worldatlatl.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Atlatl-102015.pdf for technical information.
15. Moche Moon Goddess Sails the Skies // La divinidad nocturna navega la luna

Some archaeologists believe the Moon Deity may have been more powerful than Wrinkle Face from time to time or in particular locales because her realms were sea and tides, all the sea creatures, and nurturing rain clouds and foul weather—in sum, crucial elements of survival for Moche societies that lived near the sea or depended on it for their very being.

In my painting she is, as usual, fanged, as were all powerful divinities. She wears a bejeweled snake, a feathered headdress that dangles across her back, and a tall diadem that bears an exaggerated resemblance to the two-part headgear of seagoers. Her gold earrings are jewel-encrusted. She holds an eared snake baton in one hand and a chalice in the other. Her long braid ends in another eared snake. Her Moon Boat carries ceramic pots among other things and shoots out bright rays of light, much brighter than the stars that surround her. Below her I have placed bits of the wave band and the conventional Moche icon for sea anemone. On the specific ceramic vessel that inspired my painting, the Moche artist drew the throngs of Moon rays animated at their ends by eared snakes with forked tongues.
A Note about the Christopher Donnan & Donna McClelland Collaboration

Among the documents reposited in the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library’s division of Image Collections and Field Notes, I found a Ziplock bag that included Christopher Donnan’s tiny proofs for pot #811, the full series of photographs capturing the full rotation and top of just that one pot, and a complete set of print enlargements of them judiciously scissored by Donna McClelland to facilitate rearranging the images into her map-like rollout of the full design. Dumbarton Oaks holds all of Donnan’s Moche photography and the related rollouts that McClelland produced. Once McClelland had joined the jig-sawed pieces and had taped them into a flat image, she traced, then inked the tracing to create an exact rendering of the activity the pot depicts. Over several decades, McClellan made countless such pot rollouts from Donnan’s photographs. Her meticulous replicas published in *Moche Fineline Painting* (Donnan & McClelland, 1999) have contributed profoundly to current analyses of Moche cultural practices and belief systems. (Vicky Arana, Winter 2022)
My desktop at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, with the contents of a file from Christopher Donnan’s archive of archaeological photos. (Vicky Arana, Winter 2022)
Some Moche Graphic Memes Featured in My Paintings

Painted Borders: Many Moche pots feature bands of decorative designs that serve to signify a location for the activity depicted in their fineline drawings. My paintings feature some of the principal ones.

For example:
- Bands of rolling waves signify the ocean or seaside.
- Bands of reeds or branches signify coastal or forested sites.
- Bands of steps signify ceremonial spaces or activities.
- Bands of different flora or fauna signify their different natural habitats.

Spiral Layouts: These generally appear in representations of many figures moving in one direction across the (spinning) pictorial field. My paintings represent that format by means of ramp layouts.

For example:
- Strings of runners.
- Rows of dancers and musicians.
- Ceremonial processions.

Layered Layouts: These generally signify special relationships, distances, or different elevations.

Marked Differences in Scale: These may represent status, relative importance, or perspective.

Other frequent graphic memes are symbolic signifiers:
- Divinities. Fanged humanlike figures. Sometimes surrounded by rays, wearing snake belts, etc., thus contrasting from natural animals and human beings.
- Ulluchus. Gourd-like fruit floating above certain ritual activities. They appear to have been used to embolden actions, to thin blood, and/or to signify ceremony.
- Espingos. Psychotropic seeds are associated with shamanic activity. See, for example, my Fertility Rite painting.
- Hummingbirds. Stylized, long-beaked birds soaring above-head generally signify speed in the activities depicted.
- Dust clouds. Irregular amoeba-like drawings, enclosing dots, signify turbulent activity, as in my Moche Divinities on the Warpath.
- Uprooted plants. These signify the violence or brutality of activities.
- Painted faces, arms, legs. Painted knees, feet, elbows signify warriors; polka dots, revelers.
- Anthropomorphized animals. Sacred versions, or icons, for their natural traits.
- Weapon bundles. Shields, spears, and mace—depicted as one design—signify militancy.

My Colors: Body ornaments, when worn by royalty or divinities or persons performing in important ceremonial activities, appear as golden in my paintings, and are based on the golden artifacts discovered in tombs and displayed in museums around the world.
Patterned fabrics, following designs on the pottery, feature the colors of textile remnants retrieved from archaeological digs or pigments surviving on Moche murals.
A Very Select Bibliography for My Moche Paintings


Chris Henry, “Moche Toss Game,” The Atlatl, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k99dR1UTqPM.

_____._ “Moche Badminton,” Archaeology Magazine (May/June 2019), online;


Acknowledgements

Individuals

Colin McEwan, Former Director of Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.


Bettina Smith, Manager, Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, Washington, D.C.

Lisa Trever, Department of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University, New York City

Libraries, Museums and Institutions

Embassy of Peru in the United States of America

Complejo Arqueológico El Brujo (Museo y Huaca Cao Viejo), Magdalena de Cao, Ascope, La Libertad, Peru

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.

Huaca del Sol y de la Luna, Moche, Trujillo, Peru

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Museo Huacas de Moche, Universidad Nacional de Trujillo, Trujillo, Peru Museo Larco, Pueblo Libre, Lima, Peru

Museo Larco, Pueblo Libre, Lima, Peru

Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú, Plaza Bolívar, Pueblo Libre, Lima, Peru

Pañamarca, Archaeological Site, Capellania, Peru

I was born in Lima, Peru, into a large bi-cultural and multilingual family—my father Peruvian, my mother American. I was christened **Rosa Victoria Arana** after my father’s parents. When I was four years old, we moved to Hacienda Cartavio—a sugarcane plantation next to the Chicama River in Northern Peru, between the Jequetepeque and Moche rivers. I spent my early childhood amid Moche *huacas* and played with the descendants of the long-ago Moche civilization. It was a landscape surrounded by the fertile agricultural fields once irrigated and cultivated by Moche farmers, a wide area bound on one side by the Pacific coast, the rich source of the Moche people’s plentiful seafood, shells, and the cattail reeds used for their seafaring vessels, the famous *caballitos de totora*; and on the other side, by the Andes. I attended a Spanish-language school for local children for some time and was later taught by private tutors, my parents, and a Canadian nun, who taught in English.

When we moved back to Lima, I attended The Franklin Delano Roosevelt School as a seventh grader. That was when I began my formal training in drawing and painting, as a pre-teen at the Escuela de Bellas Artes in Miraflores. I continued painting from then on.

My family eventually moved again, this time to Summit, New Jersey, a commuter town very close to New York City, where I continued my academic studies at its public high school. Then came Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, where I studied art and art history along with an array of liberal arts courses, majored in English, and minored in Romance languages. Upon graduation, I won fellowships at Princeton University to study Farsi and Middle East history and culture; and from the George Washington University, where I earned a Ph.D. in English literature and literary criticism. At the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., I took practicums in oil painting and participated in sessions of constructive critique with painter Pat Mercer Hutchens and others.

For many years I also studied Chinese brush techniques and classical aesthetics with master watercolorist Helen Sze. I was inducted as a fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts, London, United Kingdom, in January 2006.

I have always been interested in global history and geography, and particularly fascinated by world cultures and their arts. Since childhood, I have been an archaeology buff—and especially fascinated by Peruvian topics and sites. Professionally, I have been a lobbyist, a policy analyst, and a literary scholar and university professor. On my own, I have studied Inuit mythology, Mughal miniatures, books on Peruvian archaeology, trees and dendrology, and the power of water. My various painting series over the years have reflected each of those interests, one after another. All of them have met in my most recent concentration: my paintings focused on the iconography of the richly informative and fascinating fineline pottery of the Moche civilization.