

Nasca Lines, People, and Pottery

By Mark Watkins

Nasca is a modern town 300 miles south of Lima, Peru. Today, it is a destination for airplane tours flying over the region to see enormous lines and figures drawn in the desert or pampas.

Ancient Nascans removed black, oxidized rocks scattered on the desert surface to expose the lighter colored soil underneath. They did this to create over a thousand lines and shapes, called geoglyphs, which are spread over a 400 square mile area.

They built these art works on the pampas throughout the life of the Nasca civilization between 100BC and 600AD. In the early part of this time period, they created the figures of animals: monkeys, condors, a killer whale, spiders. Later, they swept out lines in geometric shapes like rectangles and cones.¹ The Nasca lines and figures are contemporaries of the Mint's Nasca ceramic collection.

Maria Reich, a German archeologist who studied the lines for 52 years, found broken pottery scattered along the outline of the geoglyphs, and she discovered intact vessels buried at the intersections of the lines.⁹ There were no burials found, so she thought these pots and pot pieces must have had something to do with rituals or festivals.²

Why would these people make lines in the desert? Although on the Pacific Ocean, the Peruvian coast gets little rain. The Nascans farmed river valleys and fished coastal waters. Making lines may have been a call to a sky god for rain or to a mountain god (you can see the Andes in the distance) for a greater river flow.³ Maybe the figures were pleas for fertility or better fishing. Whatever inspired them to draw on the pampas, styles and subjects in their ceramic making may have been chosen for the same reasons.⁹

The ancients lived along the Rio Grande of Nasca and its six principal tributaries. The area's largest archeological site is Cahuachi with its platforms, terraces, houses, and cemeteries. Primary daily use for their pots and bottles was to carry water, but most of the ones discovered at Cahuachi are ceremonial or funeral vessels.⁴

Ideas for some pottery shapes and for their painted backgrounds found among Nasca ceramics may have come from Moche artisans. Moche is far to the north, but did have contact with Nasca. A greater influence was nearby Paracas.³

The Paracas people lived in the Ica River valley a hundred miles north of the Rio Grande. Today they may be best known for their elaborate textile making. The late Paracas period overlaps the early Nasca. Knowledge of Paracas fabric and pottery making was absorbed by Nasca. Nascans also made beautiful textiles, but their pottery designs advanced beyond what the Paracans had been doing.³

Paracas ceramic makers used organic paints after firing. Nascans used inorganic paints before firing, a technique less susceptible to damage later by heat or moisture.³

Nascans used mineral pigments to develop thirteen colors: white, purple, dark red, light red, red, orange, light orange, yellow, gray, brown, violet, tan, and pink.⁴ As a comparison, Paracas pottery used up to six colors, and the Moche potters used only three. Nascans "mastered polychromatic slip painting", and their ceramic style was "remarkably uniform," says archeologist Christopher Donnan.

Clay mixed with crushed stone, shards, mica, and shell bits was shaped on turntables. Models and molds were used, but coiling was the more prevalent way of working the clay. To make a bottle, two coiled bowls were fit together. Coil marks were removed

by scraping and wiping with gourds, corn cobs, or cloth. For spouts, clay tubes were attached to holes punched in the top of the bottle.⁴

Slip was applied while the surface was still leathery. Then the piece was burnished with a cloth until smooth and fired in an open kiln. Double spout bottles, bowls, jars, and effigy forms were the most common shapes. The most common objects painted on their ceramics were mythical beings, felines, condors, monkeys, fish, and trophy heads, but subjects changed over time.⁵

Ancient Nasca ceramic-making falls into early (100BC-200AD), middle (200-300AD), and late (300-600AD) time periods.⁶ In the examples below, I am taking dates from the Mint's gallery labels.

Works from the early period are simple constructions with natural subjects painted on them such as fruits, vegetables, birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, and fishermen. The Mint's **double spout and bridge (handle) bottle with anchovies (100-200AD)** and the **fisherman effigy spout and bridge bottle (100BC-100AD)** are examples from this early time period. It is possible the geometric fish net on the fisherman's bottle was inspired by Paracas weaving designs.

More complex and more colorful are middle period ceramics like the Mint's **double spout and bridge bottle with masked otters (200-300 AD)** and the **flaring bowl with masked being (200-300AD)**. The otter mask is worn by a cat with paws, and its right front paw is grasping a plant. Plants symbolize abundance.⁷ A second plant is coming out of its mouth. The face mask has the up-turned whiskers of an otter. Nascans thought otters were a type of cat.⁸ In this middle period it was common to mix face mask features in order to appeal to more than one deity at a time.⁵ Both monkeys and felines were considered magical, and both were more likely to be found inland in the mountains or jungle from where river water flows.

Another common subject in the middle period is a human mask with animal attributes. The masked being on the flaring bowl has cat-like whiskers, tongue, eyes, and ears, but it is wearing a human's turban headdress and necklace.

Late period ceramics used fewer colors and became chaotic, violent, abstract, and preoccupied with death.⁵ Both the Mint's **double spout bridge bottle with masked being (300-400AD)** and the **flared bowl with dismembered bodies (400-500AD)** have trophy heads on them.

On the bowl (exhibited bottom side up in the Mint's display case), the frenzied, serrated design between the head and dismembered body represents blood. The masked being on the bridge bottle is holding a digging stick for planting, and vegetation is sprouting from the trophy head. Plants are associated with both fertility and war. Taking an enemy head was thought to transfer to the victor the victim's strength and his talent. A talent might be his ability to farm and grow food.⁸

Why did late period ceramics evolve into these violent designs? Around this time, Nasca was invaded by highlanders from Tiahuanaco upriver. When the two groups first met, fighting over water, land, and food could have been the reason for this shift in subject among Nasca potters.

Civilizations absorb other group's art and invade another's territory. However, no other group among ancient Peruvians seemed to have interest in desert lines and figures with one exception: the Incans incorporated Nasca lines into their highway system.

End Notes

- 1 Aveni
- 2 Bernard
- 3 Donnan
- 4 Proulx
- 5 Witek
- 6 Sawyer
- 7 Anton
- 8 Hadingham
- 9 Morrison

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