



A Sourcebook of Nasca Ceramic Iconography

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**Reading a Culture
Through Its Art**

Donald A. Proulx



A SOURCEBOOK OF NASCA CERAMIC ICONOGRAPHY



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Reading a Culture through Its Art

DONALD A. PROULX

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA PRESS



Nasca Ceramic Iconography



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This book is dedicated to the three individuals most responsible for inspiring my interest in Nasca iconography, for their friendship and guidance throughout my career.

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Preface

Among the premier art styles of Precolumbian America is the beautiful polychrome pottery of the Nasca culture of south coastal Peru. Nasca ceramics, which include both modeled and painted varieties, display naturalistic renderings of the plants, animals, birds, and fish that were indigenous to their homeland on the coastal desert, as well as a myriad of supernatural anthropomorphic creatures whose form and meaning are often incomprehensible to Western eyes. As the Nasca pottery style evolved through time, many of these motifs became more abstract and abbreviated, further confusing the nonspecialist.

The purpose of this book is to describe and explain the form and meaning of the major themes painted on Nasca pottery and then to use this information to augment our archaeological knowledge of Nasca society. The focus is on iconography—the painted and modeled symbols that represented a complex system of meaning to this nonliterate civilization. Art was the primary means of symbolic communication in Nasca society, especially to convey sacred or religious ideology.

Interpretation of the art of a nonliterate society can be a major challenge to the anthropologist and to the art historian. This study utilizes a combination of techniques to arrive at a plausible Andean explanation of the meaning encoded in the symbolism. But first a systematic description of the main artistic motifs must be presented. Thus a good portion of this study is devoted to an outline of the major themes displayed on Nasca ceramics.

Art, like other aspects of human society, changes over time. With the Nasca culture we are dealing with a period of at least seven hundred years, during which artistic conventions were greatly transformed—sometimes due to natural internal evolution and sometimes due to external contacts with other cultures which influenced the art and society of the Nasca people. Some discussion of chronology and artistic change is necessary here. The minute changes that allow for a fine seriation of the art style, however, will be the subject of another book. My goal is to describe the canons of Nasca art to make them understandable to the general reader as well as the scholar and then to demonstrate how this knowledge can lead to a better understanding of ancient Nasca society.

To provide the reader with some elementary background, the text begins with an overview of the Nasca culture. Next I explore the canons followed by Nasca artists in producing their pottery that distinguish this art style from that of other cultures. A historical section dealing with the discovery of the Nasca style is followed by a discussion of scholars' attempts to develop a relative chronology for the evolution of the style. Another background section recounts the efforts of earlier scholars to interpret the complex iconography before I present my own methodology of iconographic analysis. A detailed outline of the main themes in Nasca iconography is presented next, along with my interpretation of their meanings. Finally, I use these iconographic data to augment what we know about Nasca society from the archaeological record.

THE SIZE OF THE sample used for this study was necessarily in constant flux due to the regular addition of new specimens to my archive and the shifting of individual pieces from one phase or category to another as analysis progressed. For the purpose of the statistics presented here, a total sample size of 6,173 vessels was used. This number is based on classification by vessel shape, which gives a more accurate total than using the sums derived from iconographic themes (because several themes can be represented on an individual vessel). The total represents 5,228 vessels recorded in my photographic archive and an additional 945 vessels published in catalogs or books. These statistics have been used only in the chronological portion of this book, to demonstrate changing frequencies from one phase to another; for this purpose alone the percentages are accurate and useful. The sample of iconographic themes is much larger, for I have been adding to the archive on a daily basis. In this regard, the sample size is closer to 8,000 specimens.

The vessels used in this study come from 151 different collections of varying size located in 17 countries. Some are better documented than others. Although every effort was made to eliminate vessels of questionable origin and date, it was not always possible to detect forgeries from photographs alone. Among the largest and best-documented collections are those from the Lowie Museum of Anthro-