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# Sex Pots: 50 Shades of Moche

## Heather Wiley

This article is a look at Pre-Columbian Moche people, their history of unique ceramics, and the possible meanings behind various unique and intriguing pieces of work. The article focuses on pottery from the Moche, and more specifically the famous “sex pots,” connecting the Moche’s unique perspective of life, death, and the afterlife.

### Introduction



*Fig. 1: Moche pottery depicting two human figures engaged in sex. Photo credit: Ruben Mendoza.*

Pre-Columbian Moche times are a time of great mystery for archaeologists around the world. Because prehistoric sites had a high rate of looting, it is very hard to piece together what evidence remains into a picture that can be universally understood. To paint an accurate image of the past would nearly be impossible; however, many archaeologists have strived to do just this. In this article, I will first explain Pre-Columbian Moche Ceramics. Next, the article will focus on the significance of death and the rituals and beliefs that the Moche people practiced. Finally, I will connect the theory of semen, water, and agriculture as a central theme that relates to the Moche sex pots.

When looking at Pre-Columbian Moche art, the western mind cannot help but pick out

a few instances where it can feel as though the individual artist may have had an elaborate sense of humor. However, a trained archaeologist can see past the surface and look at the bigger picture. An example of this archaeological perspective would be what has been deemed by many as “Moche Sex Pots.” Many of these “sex pots” contain scenes of couples performing acts of sodomy. The couples are not always human; often times they are mixed. It is common to see Moche pottery depicting animals, humans, and skeletons alike performing acts of sodomy, either with animals or with the same species. Figure 2 is an example of sodomy being performed as a theme for this particular vessel.

The majority of ceramics in Pre-Columbian Moche sites are found in burials representing grave goods for the individual who has passed. However, it is sometimes unclear why erotic pottery is placed in particular graves. For example, “[the pots] have been found in infant as well as adult

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Fig. 2: Moche pottery depicting sodomy. Photo credit: Ruben Mendoza.

graves and [...] no more than two vessels with sexual representations are placed in a single burial” (Larco Hoyle 1946, Larco Hoyle 1965, Bergh 1993). Bergh also notes that an equal amount of this style of ceramic is found amongst female or male burials. To understand the significance, looking at burial practices of the Moche could be an important key in dissecting the meaning behind the sex pots.

### The Significance of Death

Scholars have discussed the importance of Andean people’s ancestry and funerary rites, such as the practice of paying tribute to their ancestors by removing their bodies from burial, cleaning them, redressing them, and giving new offerings (Millaire, 272- Benson, 523). Many archaeologists believe that sex pots have a high correlation with death, afterlife, and the rituals associated with both. Scientists believe this because many of the ceramics that are currently curated in museums were found within Moche burials, and since 2011 that number has been increasing rapidly (Weismantel, 501). Moche believed that it was only after death that an individual could achieve the zenith of political, social, and cultural prestige over others, and influence over the gods for the good of their kin. Weismantel says, “Fertility was the source of this

ancestral power: life, health, and abundance flowed from the dead and could be taken away if their happiness and goodwill were not constantly cultivated through ritual action.”



Fig. 3: Moche pottery depicting skeletal figure masturbating. Photo credit: Ruben Mendoza

Sex pots often depict skeletons involved in sex acts (Figure 3), and archaeologists believe this is because to the Moche, fertility took place in both the current life and the afterlife. The repeated theme of the dead copulating with the living through sodomy and not vaginally also points out two of the four Andean worldviews. The copulation of the dead with the living entails an exchange of fluids, but not through the vagina, which is the means of fertility necessary for the bearing of children. Anthropologists argue that anal copulation suggests another type of fertility, fertility of the land. To the Moche,

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fertility of the land was directly tied to the ancestors' sexual activity (Weismantel 2004).



*Fig. 4: Moche pottery depicting anthropomorphic figure. Photo credit: Ruben Mendoza.*

### Water and Semen

Andean people believed that the celestial river runs through the sky, and also through the underworld, where the Andeans believed their ancestors would then bestow gifts of rain and good harvest. In a society that was mostly dependent on agriculture, a good harvest would have been a vital factor in the survival of the Moche people therefore the importance of care, ritual, and pleasing of their ancestors would have been essential to survival.

Water was clearly important to the Moche in both a spiritual and physical sense. During the wet season, melting snow and rain water flow down into the dry coastal

valleys from the highlands. The Andeans thought water was controlled by the mountain deities and spirits. The ritual cleaning of the irrigation canals known as *Yarqa Aspi* was viewed a preconception cleaning of Pachamama (Mother Earth). Pachamama was said to be waiting for the mountain god's semen for fertilization and she is thought to go through gestation until the harvest of the crops (Bergh, 82).



*Fig. 5: Moche pottery depicting fellatio. Photo credit: Ruben Mendoza.*

The flow of water as symbolic semen from the mountains to the goddess Pachamama is only one example of the connection between water and semen for Pre-Columbian people. This belief was practiced among the Moche people and Wari alike. For western minds, it may be a hard concept to accept, however to trained scientific minds, this type of practice is just proof of the power of water, semen, fertilization, rebirth, and a

general cycle of life for the Moche.

### Conclusion

With the evidence which has been put forth by Benson, Millaire, Bergh, and Weismantel, a strong correlation between Moche sex pots and their representation of both human fertility and fertility of the land can be drawn. Many scientists continue to uncover the secrets of the Andean people, and new theories may develop. However, we may never know the true meaning behind any of these mysterious people and the beautiful clues they have left behind.

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