Reflecting on the Moche Past

2000 Years of Mirrors in Andean Art

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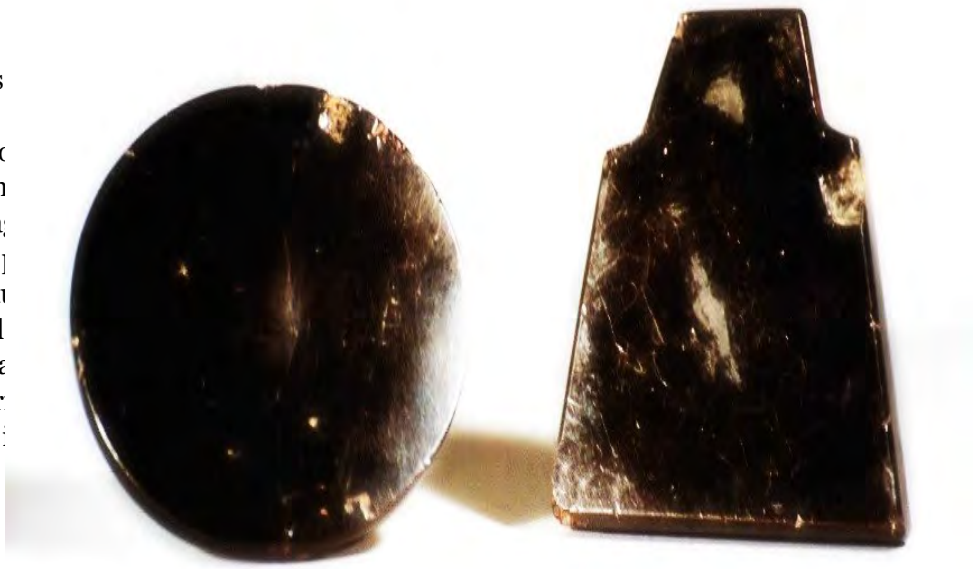
Mirror Frame
Moche, Loma Negra, Peru, AD 500-800
Gilded copper/bronze
H. 9 ¼ in. W 5 in.

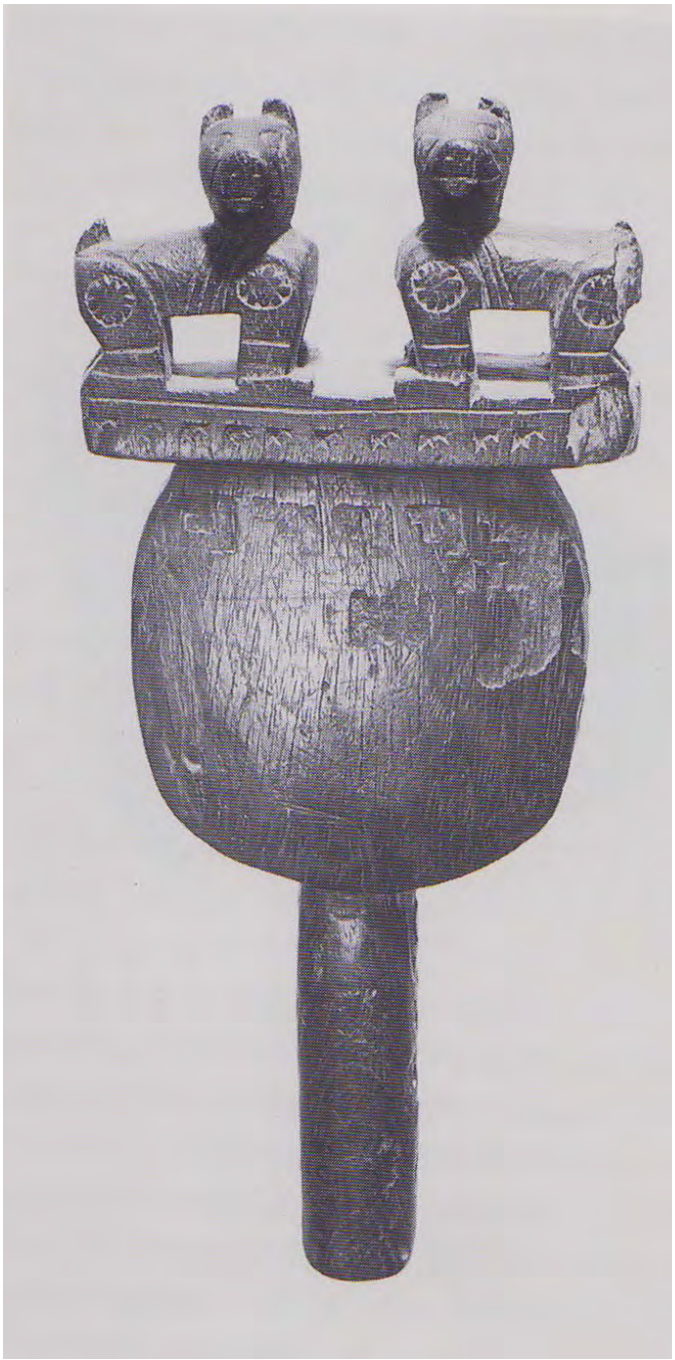
Mirrors, useful for seeing one's own image, or for reflecting light, are a commonplace today. But in ancient times pooled water was the only readily available reflective surface. Artificial mirrors could be made only by processing rare natural substances or forging new man-made materials. Vanity is a universal human trait, and ancient peoples undoubtedly sought to admire their own faces, coiffures, and bodies. Numerous ceramic vessels portray individuals with elaborate coiffures or using pincers (tweezer-like tools) to pluck facial hair. At least two ceramic vessels portray women holding small black disks – presumably mirrors - up to their faces. After the conquest, Garcilaso de la Vega wrote about mirrors: "Los espejos en que se miravan Las mugeres de LA sangre real eran de Plata muy brunida y Las comunes en acofar [The mirrors in which the women of royal blood looked were of highly polished silver; commoners used bronze mirrors]" libro II cap xxxviii. But pre-Columbian mirrors were undoubtedly used for purposes far more significant than facilitating personal adornment. Mirrors made by laboriously mining, shaping, and grinding dark, shiny minerals were exchanged over long distances, incorporated in public and private rituals, and sometimes were buried with the dead.

Today's mirrors are made from glass or plastic sheets coated with silver or another reflective material. While glass was never manufactured in the ancient Americas, dark volcanic glass – obsidian – was sometimes ground flat and polished to produce a reflective surface. At the time of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico the Aztec warrior deity Tezcatlipoca, whose name means "smoking mirror" had a circular black obsidian mirror replacing one foot. Ancient Andean peoples also used **obsidian** mirrors. To the left is an Aztec obsidian mirror in a sixteenth century carved wood gold leaf frame. The American Museum of Natural History Diameter 13 3/4 in. diameter. Obsidian is volcanic glass that was valued for its reflective qualities.

Perhaps the earliest Andean mirrors
late Preceramic period (before 1700
zon (1800-200 BC), anthracite mirr
on the north coast, and Shillacoto an
204, 206). Many such mirrors or fra
terpreted as a shaman's grave (ibid,
used inside the dark, subterranean t
through carefully positioned vertical
with the deliberately disorienting ma
bus shell trumpets, could have contr
an anthracite mirrors are preserved



Ancient Andean peoples also used obsidian mirrors: an example with a wooden handled frame (south coast region of Peru, ca. AD 700-1000) can be found in the Ebnöther collection (Museum zu Allerheiligen 1992, p. 145). Other carved wood frames with now-empty circular depressions may have once held obsidian mirrors as well.



Another material employed in both Mesoamerica and the Andes to create mirrors is **pyrite**, an iron ore that can be polished to a dark, silvery reflective surface. A well-known Olmec jade figurine of a seated woman, excavated at La Venta, Veracruz, Mexico (ca. 900-600 BC), wears a pyrite mirror on her chest. Similar in date is an unusual mirror from Las Bocas, Puebla, that consists of a toad-like ceramic creature with the oxidized remains of a pyrite mirror on its belly.

Pyrite often occurs in layers with slate, and some Mesoamerican mirrors have a solid layer of polished pyrite with a natural slate backing, see below. More common are circular mirrors with a reflective surface of carefully cut and fitted pyrite tesserae adhered to a slate backing, which may be decorated. Ornate Teotihuacán -Maya examples have been excavated from elite tombs at Kaminaljuyú, Guatemala (Kidder, Jennings and Shook 1946, fig. 175). In Teotihuacán imagery, high status figures o ften wear circular mirrors at the small of the back; sacrificed warriors buried at the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl wore mirrors in just this position (Cabrera Castro 1993, p.103). An extensive literature discusses the distribution, function, and meaning of Mesoamerican mirrors (Healy and Blainey 2011, Gallaga and Blainey 2016).

Pyrite mosaic mirrors are also known from the ancient Andes, but these have received far less study.

An early example is a Recuay (c. 300 BC - AD 300) pyrite-mosaic disc set in a circular cast-bronze pendant, decorated on the reverse side with supernatural animals and a deity face.

Not only is this mirror quite rare, the deity face with rays may have influenced the later South Coast cultures like the Sihuas hat took on the Rayed Face symbolism.

A rare Moche specimen from Peru's north coast retains the original pyrite mosaic mirror, set in a wooden frame decorated with a high relief crab with human features (dated AD 100 - 600). The pyrite mosaic is one of the few intact Moche mirrors known. Ebnöther collection (Museum zu Allerheiligen 1992, p. 146)

This rare Moche cast bronze spatula has a finial in the shape of a hand holding an actual pyrite mirror, resembling a modern day woman's makeup compact mirror.

@ Met Museum - Wari wood mirror frame with handle 28.6 x 15.9cm

A beautiful Wari-style mirror frame has lost its reflective mosaic. Exceptionally carved in relief on the frame's back is an animal-headed figure holding staffs that terminate in prisoners, one of whom appears to have been cut in half. Along the top of the frame are four three-dimensional heads. On the mirror side, notice that the faces on top are turned away from the viewer. Carved around the border of the mirror are feline heads facing condor heads in profile. At the base of the handle is a modeled feline head facing downwards similar to the Dumbarton Oaks example that follows.

A provincial example (likely from the north-central coast of Peru), has also lost its reflective mosaic. The back of its wooden frame is decorated with a low-relief warrior figure standing in a boat, holding a club and a knife; there are four Wari-style heads along the top. Similar in style is a mirror frame with a staff-bearing figure in a running pose; two carved heads top the frame is in the Denver Art Museum.

A famous pyrite mosaic mirror in the Dumbarton Oaks collection is set in a wooden frame completely covered in mosaic of shell and semi-precious colored stone (Cook 1996). Although this object is usually identified as Wari (and dated AD 650-800), the mosaic deity face on the back also exhibits strong affinities to the Recuay style of the northern highlands, and recalling the Recuay bronze mirror mentioned above. In each of these handled examples, the mirror area is roughly square; two of the handles are animal-headed. The relatively well-preserved condition of these mirrors suggests that they were burial goods or offering items, deliberately interred in locations protected from disturbance or flooding. This mirror may have been a gift from another chiefdom.

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Quite unusual in form is a long-handled mirror frame that contains a circular mosaic surface. Atop the frame are two realistically carved deer. The imagery of all these mirrors suggests an association with the supernatural beings, warfare, and sacrifice. Even the deer likely relate to this meaning, as the white tail deer (now extinct on the Peruvian coast) were netted, clubbed, and speared by the Moche in ritual hunts.

By the end of the middle horizon, the northern valleys saw the demise of the Moche and a more unified group formed the Chimu kingdom. The occupied almost all the Northern valleys and unified them under a central rule with its capital ChanChan. Power took on a new meaning under the Chimu. They maintained their rulership by presenting lavish gifts of gold, silver and copper along with woven garments to local leadership to ensure loyalty. The large wooden mirror has a carved image of a ruler in full regalia holding in each hand a tumi knife. On the reverse side is a single piece of circular cut pyrite mirror. It is in unusually good state of preservation.

Inca polished bronze mirror illustrated by Arthur Baessler in 1906 in *Altperuanische Metallgerate,* Berlin.

Diameter: 4 inches.

In ancient China and in the Mediterranean region, polished bronze disks were commonly used as mirrors. Below is an Etruscan mirror with an unscripted mythical scene . Given that metallurgy was well-developed in the ancient Andes, sheets of gold, silver or copper certainly could have been used there to create mirrors. In the century immediately prior to the Spanish Conquest, the Inca did employ bronze mirrors, such as a small, polished bronze disc with a suspension tab and an incised geometric border on the backBut it is notable that for millennia, the Andean preference was for dark, polished natural minerals such as anthracite, obsidian and pyrite. Perhaps their dark color and underground source imbued these materials with chthonic powers that made them especially suitable for ritual purposes. The dark, subterranean passage of the Chavin temple, where the powerful, terrifying image of the Lanzon resides, may be been the site of such rituals. Used in shamanic rites or divination, the dark, reflected image of an individual have been perceived as an alter-ego, or spirit-world version of the self. Dualism is a pervasive concept in the indigenous Andes.

The mirror below his is the first published mirror from the ancient Andes.

To date, only two Andean mirrors are known that have handled frames made of metal: one, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, has a roughly rectangular frame of gilded copper rimmed by two converging files of birds. The second has processions of felines marching around the rim; like its counterpart, it was cast using the lost wax technique. The Metropolitan mirror's original reflective surface is now entirely lost, but fragments of the feline frame's pyrite mosaic survived, permitting accurate reconstruction. In both cases, the pyrite tesserae were adhered to a copper backing. Pyrite often oxidizes into a yellowish powder or stain when exposed to moisture only in exceptional conditions does the original mirror-finish survive. Both of these copper/bronze mirror frames are attributed to the Moche civilization of Peru's north coast (ca. AD 100-800), a desert region subject to periodic flooding by the El Niño weather phenomenon. The north coast is renowned as a center of ancient metallurgical innovation in the Americas. Finely crafted Chavín-style gold ornaments have been discovered in the region; metallurgists of the later Moche, Lambayeque, Chimú, and Inca civilizations built upon such early technological achievements.

The two Moche mirrors are similar in size and proportions, with hollow, tapering handles that contribute about half of the total height. However, the frame with felines has rounded corners, while the corners of the bird-ornamented frame are much sharper. The twenty original birds (one is now lost) are presented standing upright, with folded wings. They have sturdy bodies, short tails, and strong, slightly curved beaks. The species is difficult to identify, but they clearly are not condors or ducks, birds frequently depicted in Moche art. Subtle differences among the birds on the frame demonstrate that each was individually modeled in wax before casting. The ten felines on the second frame are also individually modelled and fully three-dimensional. The tail and feet of each cat rest on the mirror frame, anchoring them firmly in place. The rounded ears, short muzzles, and long tails clearly identify the animals as felines, but the species is uncertain. The Moche and other Andean peoples revered pumas and jaguars, but these dangerous big cats were probably rare on the Andean coast. Smaller felines (such as jaguarundi) do live in northern Peru and may have been domesticated by the Moche. The meaning of converging processions of birds and felines, such as those seen on the mirror frames, is open to interpretation. Such behavior does not occur in the natural world, so it is likely that the animals are portrayed enacting human or supernatural activities.

Metropolitan Museum of Art

The unusual gilded metal frames of the two mirrors must have created a strong visual contrast with the dark pyrite reflective surfaces. In the ancient Andes, gold was associated with the masculine, life-giving sun, the center and the source of all creative energy and spiritual power. And unlike pyrite, anthracite, and obsidian, which are natural materials extracted from the earth, cast metal is created through a transformative process: ***"Metals... possess notable qualities that afford a unique potential for ritual marking and mystification. This is due partly to the complexities of the various technological processes that must be mastered in order to produce finished objects. These are matched in the symbolic realm by the nature of metals, as something cold and hard, made from something hot and liquid, and something that can be shaped into an endless variety of cultural forms from lumps of raw material via technological ingenuity and the mediation of fire. This mix of practical and ritual processes yields materials with peerless reflectivity that is the potential to contain, gather, and dispense light, and thereby symbolize in material form the cultural valuations bestowed on light itself"*** (Saunders 2003, p.23). Mirrors composed of both shiny, golden metal (created via technological transformation), and darkly reflective pyrite (mined from the earth), surely provided unique access to spiritual realms. Thus, the feline and avian Moche mirrors were likely employed by the same Moche ritual specialist. The mirrors interred in a tomb of a high status individual to facilitate the continuation of sacred roles in the afterlife.

David Bernstein Fine Art

The mirror decorated with sculptural felines is reportedly from Loma Negra, a site on the far-north coast of Peru, separated from the more southerly Moche heartland by the Sechura desert. Tombs at the site have yielded thousands of Moche-style metal artifacts, including jewelry, regalia, and tools. Most are fabricated of copper sheet metal (sometimes gilded or silvered), but items of gold and silver sheet are also known. The Metropolitan's mirror decorated with birds (collected by Arnold Goldberg in the 1960's), has no certain known provenance, but its similarity to the feline mirror may suggest a common place of origin. The feline mirror was excavated in the 1960s - the same time period in which Goldberg assembled a large collection of material from Loma Negra (much of which was later bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Gilding was seemingly present on both mirrors, but corrosion of the underlying copper obscures its appearance. In the southern Moche territory, gold- or silver-rich surfaces were usually achieved through a depletion process that removed copper from the surface of an alloy that included gold or silver in its content. In contrast, both Vicús and Loma Negra metalwork from the far north was commonly made of copper plated with gold or silver (most often using an electro-chemical process to deposit a very thin layer of precious metal on the artifact's surface) (Centeno and Schorsch 2000). Scientific analysis of the metal content and determination of the process used to gild each mirror may help determine regions of manufacture.

Both mirror frames were constructed in exactly the same way; in three bronze parts, the lost wax cast frames, the forged handles and the hammered backing plates for the pyrite.

The fabrication of ancient Peruvian sheet metal objects has received considerable study from scholars such as Heather Lechtman, who has elucidated not only the technological processes developed by the Moche, but also the cultural values embodied by the finished goods. As she notes, sheet metal with depletion-gilded or depletion-silvered surfaces was valued for plasticity, malleability, toughness, and color. Although copper is an essential component of Andean alloys, Lechtman views it as secondary, added to strengthen and toughen the noble metals, and affect their color (Lechtman 1996). **Metal casting** has received comparatively little attention - Lechtman states that casting technology "was paid scant attention by Andean smiths" (ibid, p. 36). Yet Moche metalworkers were clearly adept at casting, as evidenced by implements with intricate cast silver components discovered in Tomb 1 at Sipán (Alva and Donnan 1993, 96-101), and by the mirrors under discussion. Numerous items of cast copper, usually alloyed with a small amount of arsenic to create a form of bronze, have been discovered at Moche sites. The most common implement form is identified variously as a scepter, spatula, chisel, or knife by scholars; its true function is unknown. Other cast copper objects include tumi knives, mace heads, finials, and garment pins. For the most part then, north coast Peruvian metalsmiths employed copper and arsenical bronze for casting tools and implements, evidently selecting these metals for their physical characteristics of hardness and rigidity, and their ability to take a sharp edge. Created with the lost wax casting technique, these tools were decorated with intricate sculptural imagery, often related to warfare or sacrifice. The gilding and extensive sculptural decoration of the two Moche cast-metal mirror frames suggest that they were highly valued ritual objects, probably interred with individuals of special rank or status. **These combined qualities led to the creation of an object charged with ritual meaning. The mirrors' materials, technology, and iconography combined to project extraordinary political, ritual, and spiritual power.**

This Middle Horizon vessel depicts a person plucking facial hair and holding a mirror up to his face. In the background is an anthracite mirror of similar use. American Museum of Natural History.

Detail of a Nasca vessel with a man's head with facial hair

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