



# PARACAS

**A Selection of Textiles and Ceramics**

An exhibition presented by David Bernstein Fine Art

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## PARACAS: A Selection of Textiles and Ceramics



*The Paracas Candelabra – a Paracas geoglyph, c. 200 BC, signifying for Water, Sky and Land*

### INTRODUCTION

David Bernstein Fine Art is pleased to present a [new online exhibit](#) of ancient Peruvian ceramics and textiles from the Paracas culture, c. 600 BC to AD 100. The exhibit includes 40 museum quality Paracas and Proto-Nasca objects that were collected over the course of 30 years. In order to clarify the differences between the various Paracas sites, we have included this illustrated essay in conjunction with the exhibit. The Paracas artists were renowned for their ceramic and textile arts, which are considered among the most beautiful and intriguing from Ancient South America. Their cosmology was highly animist and focused on the spirit world. Their iconography included a diverse pantheon of gods, animal deities, superhuman shamans, and chimeric animals. Paracas ceramic vessels are expertly executed, portraying a combination of fierce and friendly deities and animal attendants. The ceramics differed slightly among the various burial sites throughout the Paracas cultural zone. Paracas textiles, made from a variety of cotton, alpaca, and vicuna threads, also feature a broad range of beautiful colors and mythological imagery. Despite the harsh desert environment seemingly devoid of color, the Paracas weavers were able to create astoundingly rich color palettes. The elaborate nature of these artifacts and their placement in tombs implies an emphasis on the importance of the spirit world and the afterlife.

## THE PARACAS CULTURE

The Paracas culture was an extraordinarily creative period in Andean history that dwelled along the South coast of Peru. The term “Paracas” refers to both a culture and an area on the map of Peru where the Paracas culture thrived. However, the name originates from one location, the Paracas Peninsula, where a wealth of archaeological sites containing beautiful ceramics and textiles were discovered. The Paracas peninsula is 165 miles south of Lima, Peru. It extends west off the coast of Peru to form an ecosphere of cool, foggy desert. Its mushroom shape forms two bays: (1) Bahia de Paracas to the north, which is a protected harbor ideal for coastal maritime trade, and Lagunillas, to the south, which is open and faces the prevailing winds. The peninsula is made of majestic rock cliffs with steep drops into the Pacific and is covered by a layer of sand dunes which change shape and formation based on the wind. The stark desolation and beauty of the Paracas peninsula made it an ideal location for ritual ceremonies as well as an ideal site for the Paracas Necropolis at Wari Kayan, a major burial site central to the Paracas’ animistic belief system.

*“The peninsular location of Wari Kayan, partway up the dominant hill and looking northward over the curving bay, has the natural requisites of a ceremonial site. The majesty of the red-hued hill called Cerro Colorado and the austere vista of sand, sea, and sky are fitting for important propitiations not only for the transformation of the dead but also for the agricultural prosperity of the people living in the arid environment of (Peru’s) south coast”* (Frame, 15). The textiles found at the site of Wari Kayan, buried with the deceased, are among the most elaborate in the world - requiring unparalleled time and attention to detail. This level of devotion and virtuosity in the form of art implies an extreme effort to appease the forces of nature to secure the requisite weather for an abundance harvest.



*Playa Roja (“Red Beach”) on the South of the Paracas Peninsula off the South Coast of Peru*

While the Paracas peninsula (measuring 5 miles North to South and 8.5 miles East to West) is the only place on the map of Peru with the name Paracas. Historians have used the term Paracas to refer to a cohesive culture that thrived along a small coastal region of Southern Peru, covering approximately 100 miles of coastline, from Topara in the north, and southwards to the Ica River drainage. The Paracas people had advanced irrigation and water management techniques and made significant contributions in textile arts and ceramics - including some dyeing and weaving techniques that are more sophisticated than those in use today.



Paracas textiles are considered by art historians to be among the most striking in the world, more so than any other weavings from both antiquity and modernity. Paracas embroideries are famous for their unusual contrasting color combinations, the depth and breadth of colorful natural dyes used, and the unique cosmological tales told by the imagery of the Paracas weavers. The stunning visual mythology of the Paracas textiles would later influence the art of subsequent major Peruvian cultures—including the Nasca, Wari and the Inca on the South coast. Recent discoveries have revealed that Paracas earthworks (below, c. 1000 – 300 BC) preceded the famous Nasca lines, which were created hundreds of years later, c. 200 BC to AD 600, and presumably were influenced by the Paracas who initiated the Andean tradition of creating large scale earthworks. One such compelling Paracas earthwork is the “Paracas Candelabra,” (the opening image for this essay) overlooks the Paracas peninsula and is named so because it resembles a candelabra fig.1 – however it is quite clearly a highly abstracted symbolic image that seems to illustrate a complex animistic or political message on the importance of sea, heavens, and land.



While restoring a viewing area overlooking the Nazca Lines in the desert of southern Peru, archaeologists noticed the previously undocumented traces of a cat geoglyph crouching on a steep hillside. The 121-foot-long outline of a feline was badly eroded but has since been cleaned and conserved. Based on its resemblance to depictions of Andean cats frequently found on textiles, ceramics, and petroglyphs produced by the Paracas culture, researchers have

dated the figure to around 200 B.C. This means it predates the creation of many Nazca geoglyphs by some 400 years. “This feline seems to have been part of Paracas religious cosmology of the time,” says archaeologist Johny Isla of Peru’s Ministry of Culture. “The cat was considered a deity that represented dominion over the earth, together with the killer whale and condor that signified dominion over water and air.”

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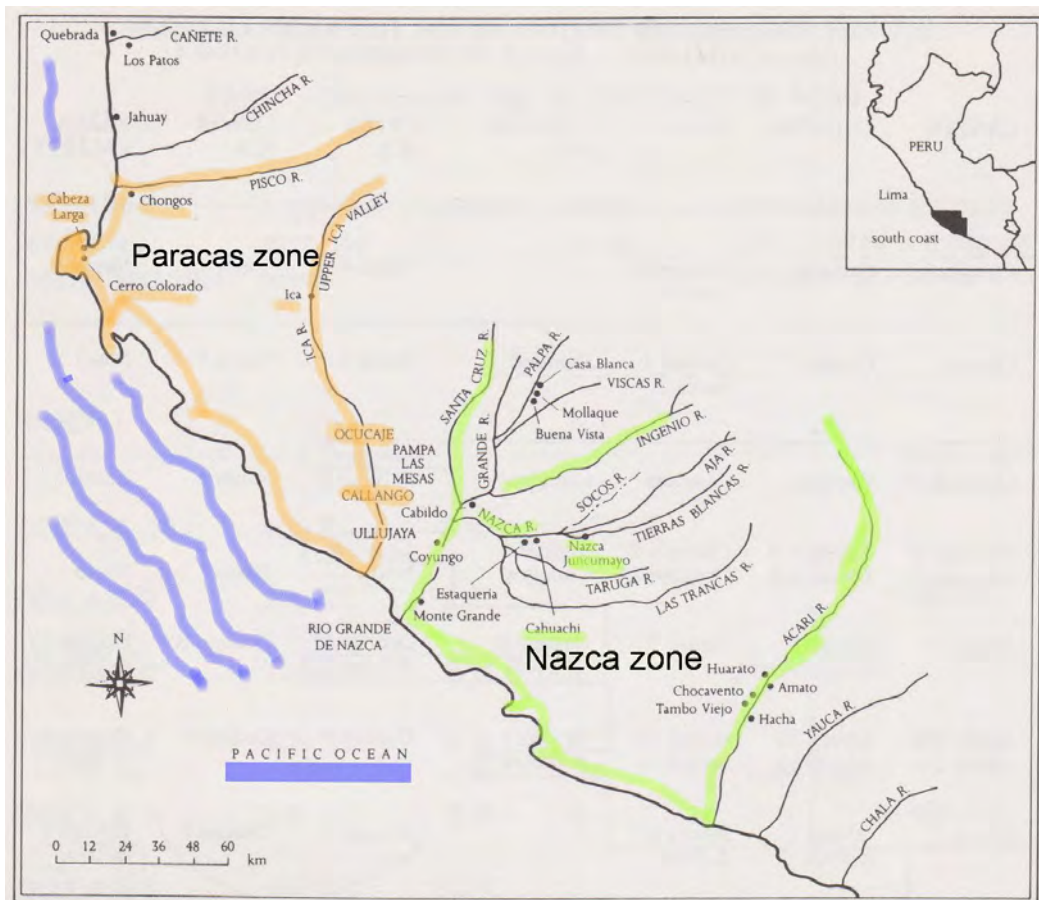
*Recent discoveries of Proto-Nasca geoglyphs created by the Paracas.*

The Paracas culture encompassed several key burial sites, ranging from the Paracas Peninsula at the North of the Paracas zone, the Pisco valley towards the north, the Ica Valley in the center, and the Ocucaje site in the South. The textiles and artifacts uncovered at each of these sites reveal a complex interaction between distinct communities within the Paracas zone, and a vibrant interchange of artistic techniques and styles. The interchange of artistic styles between locations suggests that there was healthy trade as well as political and religious exchange between each site (Frame, 4). The seven key archaeological sites which contain caches of Paracas art mentioned in the art historical literature include:

1. **Cerro Colorado:** Spanish for “Colored Hill,” located on the northern side of the Paracas Peninsula at Bahia de Paracas, named for its beautiful red sand, where two large underground burial sites, known as “Cavernas” and “Paracas Necropolis” were found on opposite sides of the hill.
2. **Paracas Necropolis/Wari de Kayan:** This key Paracas ceremonial site, where a large stash of Paracas art that appears to have been influenced by the Chavin culture was found. 429 elaborate mummy bundles of high-status deceased individuals were found at this arranged in orderly rows in underground rooms, virtually a city of the dead. “Wari de Kayan” refers to the fact that the site

was previously occupied by an earlier culture who referred to the place as Wari Kayan. Neither the Paracas nor the original inhabitants of Wari de Kayan are related to the famous Wari culture, which did not emerge until centuries later.

3. **Cavernas:** Spanish for “caverns,” is a second ritual burial just south of the Cerro Colorado where a series of bottle-shaped tombs were discovered. Both ordinary and high-status individuals believed from the local community were interred at this site.
4. **Juan Pablo:** the northeast sector of the Paracas zone, 65 kilometers north of the modern-day city of Ica. Juan Pablo artisans were highly conservative and mainly replicated the artistic cannon of their Chavin predecessors, focusing on imagery of the feline, fox, falcon, and *vencejo*, a common swift bird. It was considered an important center for ceramic production in Southern Peru.
5. **Ocucaje:** a cultural center midway along the Ica River where a significant cache of ceramics was found. These ceramics revealed a variety of styles influenced by the Chavin in the north as well as by Nasca cultures from the south.
6. **Callengo:** a site located at the southern end of the Ica Valley. The richness of the site and the population density that flourished there laid the setting for an explosion of cultural and innovation, including a variety of creative ceramics featuring felines, fox, and snake motifs, as well Chavinoid human faces. The Callengo engaged in trade with the Nasca and adopted some of their techniques prior to the decline of the Paracas and the rise of the Nasca civilization.
7. **Cahuachi:** The largest ceremonial site in the Nasca homeland that became increasingly prominent with the ascendance of the Nasca people over other groups on the South coast. Cahuachi is 47 miles south of Ocucaje as the crow flies.



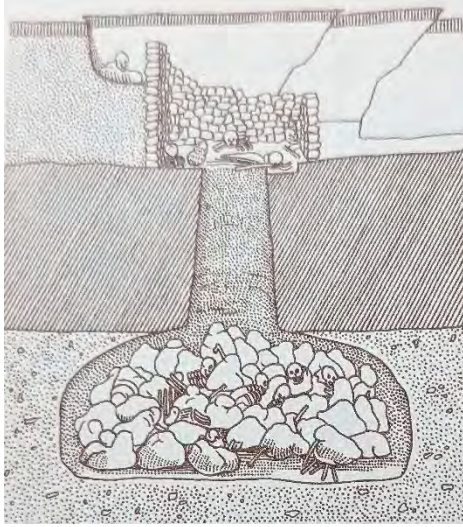
9.3. Map showing location of Early Horizon and Early Intermediate Period sites mentioned in the text.



*Key Paracas archeological sites are designated with red arrows.*

Archaeologist Julio C. Tello (b. 1880-Lima), who located these key sites and unearthed the Paracas ceramics and textiles. Tello studied Archaeology in Germany later earned an Archaeology degree from Harvard University. Tello was the first archaeologist in Peru to use scientific methods, including preservation of the stratigraphy (rock layers) to determine the age of the objects discovered. While at Harvard, his roommate was Denman Ross. Ross subsidized Tello's Harvard years by purchasing Paracas weavings from Tello. Ross later donated a large collection of Paracas and Spanish Colonial textiles to the Boston Museum of Fine Art, which is now considered to have the finest collections of ancient and post-conquest Peruvian textiles in the US.





In 1927, Tello conducted his first excavation at Cerro Colorado on the Paracas peninsula. He then discovered the nearby Cavernas site, with textiles in fair to poor condition along with a large group of ceramics spanning 300 years in time. The tomb was bottle shaped and filled with hundreds of mummies in a “cavern” shaped constructed tomb. One mile south, on his second excavation, he unearthed 429 elaborate mummy bundles, many of which were wrapped in some of the finest textiles in the world. The Paracas’ elite leaders and shamans were buried in these mummy bundles. Tello christened the site with the name *The Paracas Necropolis of Wari de Kayan*. (Illustration courtesy of Ferdinand Anton’s *Ancient Peruvian Textiles*). Although there were fewer ceramics, the mummy bundles, weavings, and embroideries were very well preserved. The dry heat of the Peruvian desert preserved the Paracas textiles Tello found at

these sites, keeping their form and color perfectly intact for over 2,000 years. To prevent the mummies from being looted, Tello arranged to have the mummies transported to Lima for safe keeping. However, the moist climate of Lima exposed the mummies to mold exposure. On a visit to Lima, Nelson Rockefeller was struck by the poor conditions and wanted to do something to help. In 1939, with Nelson Rockefeller’s financial support, Tello was able to create a proper storage space for the mummies. Tello then went on to establish the National Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology of Peru to for the study and display of the Paracas mummies, textiles, and ceramics. Their meetings helped fuel Nelson’s enthusiasm for collecting Peruvian and Colombian artifacts. Tello’s findings at Cerro Colorado and the Paracas Necropolis were and still are the most important work on the Paracas culture. (For further reading, See notes from the Rockefeller Archive at the end of this essay.)

At the Necropolis site each body was preserved inside of an elaborate “mummy bundle,” consisting of multiple layers of plain cloth alternating with complex woven and embroidered fine textiles with a magnificent range of color created with highly sophisticated natural dyeing techniques. The bodies were then placed deep in man-made underground chambers for eternity. These mummy bundles vary widely in quality, with some mummies wrapped in simple cloth only, some with one or two woven fine art textiles, and some with 10 or more sumptuous textiles layered upon one another, indicating a complex social structure with a wide hierarchal range of positions of wealth and status. The largest mummy bundle is said to have included as many as 39 layers of cloth.

Valuables were carefully arranged in the tombs, with each deceased family member buried with his own possessions, indicating the belief in a rite of passage to the afterlife. The Chroniclers recorded this practice, along with the practice of ritual storytelling that the living conducted to memorialize the stories of the deceased character and his contributions to society or lack thereof. At the time of the “Conquest,” this cultural practice was eradicated, as the Conquistadors believed it to either be foolish or Satanic, and thus implemented control systems to disincentive these rituals.



At left is a Paracas mummy bundle currently on display at the Museo de America in Madrid. Different cultural centers had different burial styles. At the Paracas Necropolis the deceased were intentionally consolidated at one major ritual site, presumably for the purpose of transporting their souls to the afterlife. At Cavernas, deep, cavernous, shaft-like tombs were intentionally dug by the Paracas for the purpose of burying the deceased. The Cavernas tombs were set apart from dwelling structures, creating a boundary between the dead and the living. In contrast, the Ocucaje buried key high-status individuals right beneath the foundations of their families' homes, rather than creating a religious center specifically for the deceased. Individuals were buried with jewelry, valuables, personal items, and food, implying a belief in reincarnation or transition to another realm.

*Paracas Mummy bundle, circa AD 100*

The Necropolis mummies were buried in social groups, with the male patriarch at the center, wrapped in the largest and most elaborate textiles available, and the other families buried in a satellite around him, with the most important family members set closest to the family patriarch (Dwyer, 150). A crucial mythological figure featured repeatedly on the textiles at the Necropolis site was the Oculate Being, a jaguar deity with large, exaggerated, eyes. Jane Powell and Edward Dwyer, authors of *The Paracas Cemeteries* postulate that the more important the buried individual, the more Oculate Beings were depicted on the textiles wrapping the body (153). Ferdinand Anton's book *Ancient Peruvian Textiles* features illustrations of how the mummies were prepared (right).



Paracas art and culture is believed to be founded by the expansion of the Chavin from the North to the far South coast of Peru. The early Paracas retained many artistic and religious influences from the older Chavin culture. The Chavin people were the first Andeans to institute a cult of jaguar worship, and they were the first to depict a canonized image of the Oculate Being, (which was often depicted in stone as a formidable feline predator with larger than life, all-seeing eyes). The Paracas, like their Chavin and Moche predecessors, were highly animistic and believed in dynamism and counterbalancing forces in nature. They developed their own stylistic cannons for depicting the Oculate Being, which regularly represented in their textiles along with a variety of human shamans and chimeric demi-gods. The Paracas' primary deities are based on a variety of predatory animals, including condors and killer whales, often holding human trophy heads. More whimsical attendant deities often appear in the form of monkeys and small desert mammals. The Paracas culture consisted loosely decentralized networks of prosperous villages, rather than a top-down central-planning model, which allowed for much more leniency and creativity for individual textile artists. This may explain the otherworldly creatures, geometric abstraction, and outlandish and intensely contrasting color palettes favored by the Paracas (Stone, 56, and Dwyer, 154).





*Paracas Necropolis Embroidered Border with 8 Large Felines, Ocucaje Period, c. 300 – 200 BC*

### PARACAS TEXTILES

Rebecca Stone describes the Paracas artists' approach as **high-intensity** with regard to the ceramics, textiles, and metalworks they created. Their works, especially the textiles, consisted of “concentrated and time-consuming labor, insistent repetition and variation of motifs, great visual profusion, extreme colorism, and attention to detail.” Paracas artists preferred “curvilinear forms and super-structural techniques, from colors painted on ceramics after firing to flowing figures meticulously embroidered on finished textiles.” They also excelled at a variety of substyles and approaches, but their textiles are often divided into two main (and radically different) techniques, known as the Linear and Block Color styles (Stone, 56).

Key themes in Paracas textiles include mythical animal chimeras, Oculate Beings (based on the Chavin feline deity), and flying or floating shamans, which indicate death and a transition to the afterlife. Flying shamans are often seen holding fans and staffs, indicating authority and status as an intermediary between natural and supernatural worlds. “The extraordinary posture [of the shamans] and the skeletal attributes have fascinated scholars, who have variously described the figure as dancing, trancing, falling, floating, flying, or drowning” (Frame, 11). These characteristics imply a belief in reincarnation or transition to other spiritual worlds after death. The most elaborate and complex versions of Paracas textiles were found at the Paracas Necropolis, and include “figures with borrowed animal traits, wearing elaborate costumes and ornaments, and sprouting serpentine appendages” (Frame, 10-11). The Ocucaje site, in contrast, contained textiles with similar themes but less elaborately executed. Ocucaje funerary textiles portray more simple geometric imagery of animal deities, as well as geometric textile masks.

## The Paracas Linear Style



The Linear style involves drawing characters and creatures by embroidering an elaborate network of individual straight lines on top of a single background color; the lines were a highly contrasting color to the background. With Linear style textiles, cosmological scenes were repeated multiple times within a grid pattern, and each scene or character was often reiterated in smaller and smaller increments, giving the impression of a complex fractal pattern. Embroidered mantles in the linear style are prominent at Wari Kayan, and linear weavings were often featured along the borders of their textiles. Often created with vivid contrasts between red and green or red and navy, linear style textiles feature geometric representations of feline deities, birds, serpents, humans, and composite creatures, or chimeras. Many of the figures are double-headed with each side symmetrically mirroring one another. Smaller animal figures are often nested inside the torsos of the primary figures. These linear styles were also present in the textiles discovered at the Ocucaje site but were not found in the level of abundance or sophistication which existed at Wari Kayan (Frame, 7).



Early Paracas Interlocking Serpent Motif, c. 300 – 200 BC



## The Paracas Color Block Style



The Block Color style involved mapping out shapes in the composition which were later filled in with a bold, saturated area of color. This style allowed for a lot of leeway in laying out a design and gives the overall impression of a painterly aesthetic with bold swaths of color, combined to form mythological scenes.



*Embroidered Textile Section with Animal Impersonator Shaman, Ocucaje, c. 100 BC – AD 50*

The Paracas' Color Block style was so sophisticated and the range of colors so wide relative to surrounding cultures that Paracas textiles resemble paintings from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century made using modern synthetic pigments. Vivid colors are highlighted by virtue of contrast with blacks and neutrals, and large fields of negative space act as a backdrop figures. The Paracas use of negative space and composition was highly abstract, even though the textiles represent narrative cosmological scenes. This sophisticated



level of abstraction shares an affinity with Modernist painting and Color Field paintings from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, and many Paracas textiles resemble the work of Modernists such as Morris Lewis, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman among others. It is this affinity with Modernism that caused many great artists such as Picasso to be fascinated with Pre-Columbian art. Many sophisticated collectors during the golden age of collecting in the 20s, 30s, and 40s built stunning polymathic collections that combined Modernist paintings with Andean textile art and sculpture.

Over the course of the Paracas Period, color-block textiles evolved and became more sophisticated in their iconography and execution. Wari Kayan is considered pinnacle of Paracas artistry, featuring Color Block textiles featuring shamans with animal characteristics, serpentine appendages in a variety of stunning colors, and elaborate costumes. The Wari Kayan Necropolis was abandoned shortly after this period of artistic sophistication. Andean expert Mary Frame, writing for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, hypothesizes that the major Paracas culture shifted southwards towards the Nasca center at Cahuachi.



*Image of Peruvian yarn made with natural dye provided by BBC. Also see de Mayolo's "Peruvian Dye Plants."*

**The colorful natural dyes** used by the Paracas weavers originated from many regions throughout the Andes, indicating that the Paracas were experts at trade and commerce. Red dye was produced from the cochineal beetle, which thrives on the red fruit of the prickly pear cactus. The cochineal was ground up with a mortar and pestle to create a red pigment. Orange dyes were extracted from a moss called "beard lichen" and yellow dyes could be made from the *qolle tree* (*Buddleja coriacea*) and Peruvian pepper berries (*Schinus molle*). For green dye, green leaves from the region were ground up and mixed with a natural mineral called *collpa* (copper oxide). More *collpa* was added to the green dye to give it a bluer hue, or pure *collpa* could be used to create a blue-green hue. The Tara plant, also native to Peru, can be distilled for its tannins, which can produce vivid blue and purple colors. These pigments were also mixed with neutral-colored earth minerals to create the beautifully complex characteristic Paracas palette, which features bright colors orchestrated together with dark blacks and subtle neutrals such as mustard yellow, olive green, terracotta, and cream white. Paracas textiles and ceramics reveal an in-depth technical knowledge of color as well as a sense of freedom in choosing unusual colors, and the ceramics reflect a similar aesthetic of mastery combined with flexibility, as evidenced by colors added post-firing.

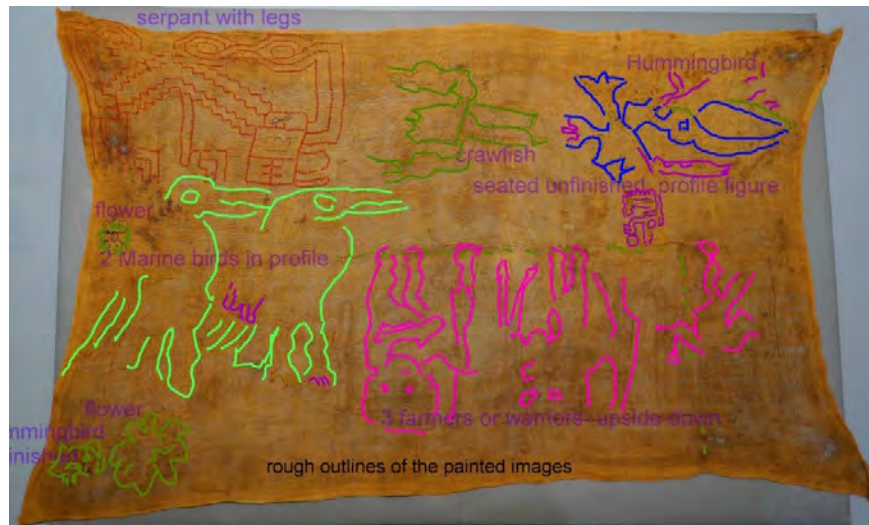
I believe that one of the sources of inspiration for the Paracas' color palette came from the ocean coral reefs that surround the Paracas Peninsula.



Anne Paul has described one of the largest Necropolis bundles as being 5'6" in height and 1'7" across the base, consisting of forty-four illustrative fine art textiles and 25 plain woven cloths. The body was seated upon a complete deerskin. These bundles involved extraordinary planning, skillful execution, and labor-intensive time commitments. According to Paul's estimate, each bundle required a minimum of 5,000 hours or as many as 29,000 hours to produce. This indicates that entire families or workshops may have dedicated themselves to creating these beautiful garments for a beloved individual in advance of their death. Great care was taken by the deceased and his family to ensure that the art enclosed in the tomb represented him as an individual, as evidenced by the varied styles from one mummy bundle to the next. For example, one tribal leader was buried with two staves, an animal skeleton, six mantles, a leather tropical cape, a finial headband, and a tunic made of yellow tropical feathers. The Paracas people were able to express a lot about a person, from hierarchical position to clan affiliation. Their textile works not only express the individuality of the deceased, but also that of the Paracas

artists. (Stone, 62-63). *At left, section of Border with Colorful Monkeys from the Ocucaje 10 or Nasca 1 Period, c. 100 BC – AD 100.*

### SAMPLER (TRAINING) WEAVINGS

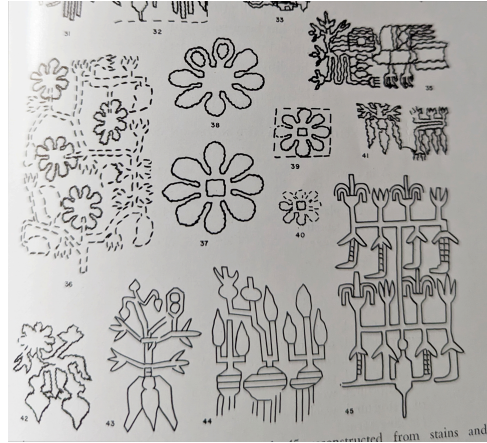


*A Paracas sampler textile used for training new weavers.*

Miniature and sampler weavings were used as training textiles, analyzed by Anne Paul and Susan Niles, reveal that the Paracas had a complex apprentice system for training new artisans. The wealth of time, energy, and patience that went into creating the finished textiles allowed each textile to be quite unique and thus capable of expressing a lot about an individual, from his hierarchical position to his clan



affiliation. According to Rebecca Stone, these choices “not only underscore the individuality of the deceased, but also that of the artists who devoted so much time to the wrappings. Indeed, careful study reveals “individual embroiderer’s hands” when comparing multiple textiles (Stone, 63). It is also interesting to note that the textile wrappings closer to the body portrayed more realistic subject matter, and with each layer the scenes illustrated become more and more otherworldly and mystical transformation. *Below: an artist’s rendering of the imagery embroidered on a Paracas textile sample from Junius Bird’s “Textile Designing and Samplers in Peru.”*”



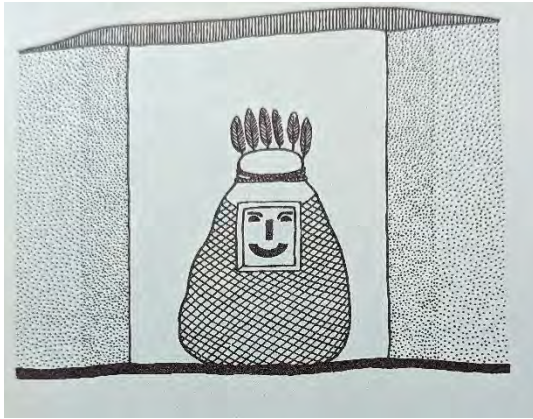
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## PARACAS TEXTILE MASKS

Toward the late Paracas period during Phases 9 and 10, painted woven mummy masks began to appear. These masks, which are created to scale with a human face, are referred to by Mary Frame as “false faces” (Frame, 15). This is an ideal phrase for explaining their function, as they were draped over the skulls of the deceased. This was perhaps done as a form of portraiture to convey the essence of the deceased individual. These masks are of narrow distribution in time and place: all seem to be confined to the Ocucaje culture residing in the Ica Valley during Paracas Phase 9 and 10. They persisted to the end of the Early Horizon, circa 100 BC. Lawrence Dawson conducted a study in which 87 of these masks were examined from Peru and at several U.S. museums and private collections.







Paracas painted textiles, including the masks, were highly influenced by the prior Chavin culture that had settled in the Paracas zone around 500 BC. These cotton cloth masks were simply woven, with the long loom warps kept in place on the mummy. The cloths were then painted with animistic iconography using loose brushstrokes with earth pigments of dark brown, orange, and rust red. Shellfish-derived purple dye occurs in some Ocucaje 9 examples, and dark blue, pink, and green pigments are seen rarely in on a few pieces. The Paracas repurposed the Chavin characters and iconography for their own cosmology; the completed painted masks were then fitted onto the top of

the Mummy bundles as a final embellishment to applaud the deities in the next life. The masks appear to have been designed precisely for this purpose, as the faces are quite wide, allowing for the flexibility of wrapping. Little is known as to the Paracas' reasons for using these masks, but one can speculate that they were intended to assist the deceased with a journey to the afterlife. These masks were the last items placed on each bundle. *Top left: a rendering from Ferdinand Anton's "Ancient Peruvian Textiles."*

Earlier phase of Paracas masks were each painted with a single large-eyed face, intended to represent the supreme feline deity, the Oculate Being. Serpents were also incorporated into the design and were usually set above the eyes. Large eyes, a pendulous feline nose, and jagged triangular border surrounding the face are all unique characteristics of these early Paracas cloth masks. A row of serpents often extends across the top of the face. Often these masks were reversible, and the composition reveals a face whether they are right-side up or upside-down. Later masks, such as the ones shown below, created during the final 100 years of this tradition, feature drawings of a head and a full body rather than just a face. These later masks often reveal a secondary smaller creature often shown inside the torso of the main figure. Many of these figures hold staffs and weapons, as do the figures portrayed in the Paracas' weavings and ceramics, which implies the presence of a male-dominated warrior cult that worshiped mythical male hero gods.



*Paracas Painted Mask with Original Yellow Macaw Feathers, and Paracas Painted Cotton Mummy Mask Depicting a Face Doubling as a Temple Entrance. Both masks are from the Ocucaje Phase 9, c. 300 -200 BC.*



One item featured in Dawson's study is an Ocucaje 9 ovoid vessel, incised and resin-painted, which features the Oculate Being flanked by warriors holding weapons. Like the cloth masks, this vessel features an Oculate feline and a series of segmented snakes. The weapons in the hands and the trophy heads at the elbows suggest that this mythical being had a war-like character. The features indicate a placement toward the end of Ocucaje 9 for this piece. *This ovoid vessel in our exhibition strongly resembles an ovoid vessel at the in the Museum of the American Indian, The Heye Foundation, New York, accession no. 23/5500.* The continued presence of the serpent motif is a universal

symbol for rain, fecundity, and health of the biosphere, which was especially important for the Paracas people living in the dry desert environment.

During his study, Dawson discovered that many of the designs from the woven cloth masks were later recreated as ceramic masks and some are considered the high point of Peruvian ceramic art.

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### PARACAS CERAMICS

Paracas ceramics are impressive in their craftsmanship, taking earlier forms from the previous Chavin culture and improving upon them. Pottery first made its appearance on the south coast of Peru in the Initial Period, circa 1,800 - 900 BC. Early crude pottery was first found in the Ica Valley, often with uneven firing and minimal decoration. The Early Horizon witnessed the appearance of the beautiful Paracas style, the defining characteristic of which was the use of post-fired resin paints for decoration. Resin paints were derived from the gummy sap of local plants such as the acacia bush (*Cercidium praecox*) and the Peruvian pepper tree (*Schinus molle*). The sap was used as a matrix into which powdered pigments such as hematite (rust red), cinnabar (red/orange), limonite (yellow/brown), malachite (green), azurite (blue), were added. These beautiful resin colors were then applied after firing, delicately painted into shapes that were delineated with incising prior to firing. The incising was a technique to prevent the colors from bleeding into each other. The Paracas potters skillfully combined ceramic arts with knowledge of pigments, painting, firing. They also perfected the art of creating symmetrical, hollow vessels without the use of the potter's wheel (Proulx, 13).

The Paracas sculpted elaborate three-dimensional facial features onto the vessels to portray deities and animal demi-gods. Incised carvings were made on the surface of the ceramics to create linear designs. The paint was used to illustrate and enhance the three-dimensional sculpture and often highlighted an individual shaman or animal deity. The post-fire painted ceramics were often reheated so that the resin-based colors flowed together, creating a smooth or glossy finished surface. Towards the end of the Paracas period, the negative resist technique was used to skillfully depict both geometric and animal images both outside and inside the dishes and plates. The Paracas' negative resist method involved coating the negative space of a design with tree sap, then firing the pottery and allowing the untreated



areas to turn black due to natural carbonization during the firing process. The sap would later be removed, allowing the remaining illustration to appear in black.

Both the Paracas and Nasca cultures feature kennings as a narrative device. Kenning is a Norse term for substitution of one element for another. An example of a kenning in Chavin art is the replacement of hair for snakes or the replacement of hands and feet with tongues with tiny faces. Kennings in the Andes originated in Chavin stone art. However, the portability of ceramics and textiles allowed the cosmological iconography and the use of kennings that originated with the Chavin to disseminate through the Andes and become adopted by later cultures. Nasca and Paracas ceramic artisans both incorporate the use of kennings in the depiction of their deities. This artistic tradition was likely brought to the south coast of Peru by Chavin traders. Paracas textile art which is replete with kennings in turn influenced Nasca and Inka art.



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### **PARACAS CERAMIC STYLES**

The archaeological cannon divides the Paracas period of Pre-Columbian history into 10 distinct, shorter Paracas phases. These phases, numbered Phase 1-10 are based upon ten distinct Paracas substyles that flourished in sequential order. The archaeological record reveals that each of these ten definitive periods had its own interpretation of the Chavin style that was also in keeping with the dominant overall cosmology of the Paracas period. The phases begin with the early Chavin-influenced Paracas culture and culminate with the Proto-Nasca style, corresponding with trends that took place in Paracas region. Many Paracas artistic trends originated in the fertile Ica zone of river valleys and plains. Satellite sites farther away from the cultural centers in the Ica valley evolved more slowly, reflecting a more conservative reaction to change. This conservatism is particularly apparent in the Juan Pablo style ceramics found in the northwestern sector of the Ica valley.

The beginning of the Nasca style is marked by the introduction of slip paints, which were applied before firing, unlike the resin post-firing paints of the Paracas. Slip paints were made from earth minerals, which were suspended in a solution of clay rather than resin. Because slip is applied prior to firing, the mineral pigments in slip paint are chemically fused to the surface of the vessel, becoming part of the ceramic

vessels' surface, unlike the post fire resin paints. Through trial and error, the Late Paracas, also referred to as the **Proto-Nasca**, and the subsequent Nasca potters studied how mineral pigments changed color during the firing process. Over time, the Nasca potters' ability to create beautiful polychrome color palettes evolved, and the polychrome style eventually expanded northwards into the entire Paracas territory.

Here we will elaborate on four major artistic styles in Paracas ceramics rather than categorizing each of the 10 Paracas Phases separately. For a greater understanding of the Paracas phases, an excellent reference detailing the sequence of the phases is Menzel, Rowe, and Dawson's *The Paracas Pottery of Ica: A Study in Style and Time*, published in 1964 by University of California at Berkely.

The four major Paracas ceramic styles found in the Ica Valley that we will focus on, excepting the last one, are categorized by region. These styles are: (1) The Ocucaje Style, (2) The Callengo Style, (3) The Juan Pablo Style and (4) Proto-Nasca style. These four styles are defined by Alan Sawyer in his 1996 Book *Ancient Peruvian Ceramics: The Nathan Cummings Collection* published by the Metropolitan Museum of art. Sawyer also believed that it was easier to categorize the ceramics by style rather than phase.

### The Early Style



Prior to the expansion of the Chavin feline cult to the Ica valley, the Paracas zone was inhabited by hunter-gathers who formed small communities scattered among the river valleys in the region. These tribes' grave goods, especially ceramics and weavings were unspectacular with very little decoration. As the Chavin people expanded to the South coast of Peru, they brought portable art objects including ceramics and textiles with complex images, promoting their feline cult. The Chavin cult influenced artisans from the smaller communities, but the Chavin leadership allowed for local differentiations in design, which led to a wealth of varying regional art styles. Over time, as regional Paracas tribes adopted the ideas and mythology of the Chavin cult, their ceramics became more visually sophisticated, displaying a variety of gods with a surrealistic abstract aesthetic for which Andean art is known. This style is evidenced in the early Paracas bowl above, which features a geometric deity's face interlocking with a red serpent.



## The Ocucaje Style

Ocucaje ceramic types are named for the Ocucaje burial site on the Ica River. The Ocucaje artisans were sophisticated consumers of a variety of styles from multiple regions, creating a singular style based upon creative fusion of a variety of methods. Ocucaje ceramics are remarkable in their consistency in size, craftsmanship, and matching color schemes. The vessels come in a variety of forms including bowls, single-chambered vessels, and the famous double-spout and bridge vessels for which the Paracas are known. Ocucaje vessels are identifiable by their carbon-blackened surfaces which were decorated with resinous paints of red, yellow, green, and dark brown, with minor accents of gold and dark olive green. Early



Ocucaje vessels are primarily focused on the Chavin feline cult and portray jaguar deities with large eyes (Oculate Beings). The same abstracted rectilinear leaping jaguar deity with whimsical diamond eyes is seen repeatedly on multiple Ocucaje ceramics. The vessels are also painted with plain geometric forms including bold circles that resemble eyes, graphic diamonds, and interlocking bands painted around the perimeters of the vessels. The treatment of the iconography painted on these vessels is said to be Chavinoid, as the focus is primarily on depicting the same fierce jaguar deity using block, bold, geometric forms. Condor deities, minor birds, and snake-like forms are also designed using basic geometric shapes as compositional building blocks and large round circles to depict exaggerated eyes (Sawyer, 7). Top right: *Ocucaje Bridge-Spout vessel, c. 200 to 700 BC*. Bottom: *Ocucaje Ceramic Dish with Two Cats, c. 300 – 200 BC*.

During the Middle Paracas period, Ocucaje ceramics feature depictions of human heads and trophy heads. As the Chavin cult expanded southward toward the Rio Grande de Nasca, these Chavin motifs also spread southward and were adopted as a cultural cannon throughout the Paracas region. At the culmination of the Paracas culture during the later Paracas phases, the Ocucaje ceramics began to feature a far more complex variety of deities and animals including killer whales and double-headed snakes. The mythology and narrative interplay between these deities also became more complex, but the same geometric block technique used to depict the characters by the early Ocucaje artisans remained.



### The Callengo Style



Callengo is located at the southern end of the Ica Valley along the Ica River. Although this region is arid today, there was evidently far more water in the region during the earlier Pre-Columbian period. The soil was fertile, attracting a large population as well as an extensive surrounding area which included multiple satellite villages. The abundant agriculture and trade afforded by the Callengo site and the population density that flourished there laid the setting for an explosion of cultural and innovation in the region, particularly the ceramic arts.

Early Callengo ceramics featured Chavin iconography including Oculate Beings, foxes, and snake motifs, as well as frontal Chavinoid human faces. These icons were painted on the

Callengo ceramics in a rectilinear, geometric style, replicating the style of the stone carvings of the Chavin. Like the Juan Pablo artisans, the Callengo ceramicists also seemed to revere the Oculate Being as it was regularly depicted on their ceramics, featured with similar diamond-shaped eyes. Callengo line drawings are complex than those of the Ocucaje and San Pablo artisans. Callengo vessels often feature the feline deity in a highly abstracted form with designed with horizontal lines, depicted around the perimeter of their vessels. Perhaps this beautiful new stylistic cannon would later influence the Inca Empire's preference for elaborate paintings of deities on the insides of their bowls. Above left: *Callengo Phase 8 Ceramic Dish, c. 300 – 200 BC.*



Like Juan Pablo vessels, the Callengo double-spout vessels also feature falcons at the spouts of the bottles, but their ears appear more pronounced. On Callengo vessels, the wings, bodies, and tails of the birds were embellished.

Sawyer illustrates these stylistic qualities with an example of a Callengo style vessel in which the legs of the bird extend to the gambrel in front, the wings and body are spread over the dome-shaped top, and the tail appears behind the open spout. Peculiar streamers with hooked sides are painted without incisions between the wings and body. Sawyer's example is comparable to a Paracas falcon effigy vessel in our collection (right).



In addition to depicting felines, foxes, snakes, and falcons, the Callengo artisans also depicted human heads. The Callengo lived in proximity to their Nasca neighbors in the South, it is likely that the Nasca were inspired by their method of creating incised shapes filled in with blocks of color for decorating ceramics. Above right: *Paracas Bridge Spout Vessel with Falcon's Head*. From the Upper Callengo basin, Phase 8, c. 700 – 200 BC.

### The Juan Pablo Style



Juan Pablo style ceramics were excavated at the northeast sector of the Paracas zone. Juan Pablo ceramics are named for the Juan Pablo site, which is 65 kilometers north of Ica. The Juan Pablo artisans' colored pigments would originally have resembled those of the Ocucaje, but most of the pigmentation

deteriorated due to the site's proximity to high levels of ground water, and only mostly only the neutral surface of the ceramics remains. It is for this reason that Juan Pablo style ceramics are associated with cinnabar, for the reddish appearance of fugitive cinnabar is often the only pigment that remains of the surface of their vessels. Sawyer limits his discussion to the most important Juan Pablo iconography which includes the feline, fox, falcon, and *vencejo*, a common swift bird. The artisans of the Juan Pablo style maintained these Chavin inspired themes longer than any of the other Paracas artisans. Only during the Late Paracas period did the Juan Pablo style change (Sawyer, 101). The term "Juan Pablo style" is not necessarily a recognizable name, but Juan Pablo style are valued for their beautiful double-spout vessels which feature whimsical animal heads carved at the tops of the handles. The Juan Pablo site was close to the Topara zone which was known as a source for abundant ceramic production. *Above: Paracas, Juan Pablo Style Falcon Bridge-spout Vessel c. 300 – 200 BC.*

### The Proto-Nasca Culture



*A Proto-Nasca Janus Head Effigy of a Smoking Shaman, c. AD 100 – 200, front and back*

An abrupt change in style came at the end of the millennium, circa 100 BC, probably due to the population increase in the communities surrounding the Rio Grande de Nasca. This style of this transitional period in between the reign of the Paracas and Nasca cultures, c. 100 BC – AD 200, is known as the Proto-Nasca style. Archaeologist Max Uhle is credited with discovering many of the Proto-Nasca ceramics, which he referred to as "beautiful painted polychrome ware." In 1901, Uhle excavated a location near a small hill now named *Cerro Max Uhle* in his honor. He found several caches near one another, with one cache containing four Nasca-style vessels and four Paracas (Ocucaje Phase 9) vessels, and another nearby with five Nasca grave lots. The proximity of these sights indicates that the two cultures, Paracas and Nasca, may have exerted cultural and artistic influence upon one another.

Nasca artisans were inspired by the Paracas but enhanced the color technology. Whereas the Paracas used post-fired resin pigments, the Nasca vessels featuring monochromatic palettes of neighboring colors painted on the surface of the vessels in flat slip, delineated with painted outlines rather than incised lines. The use of incised lines prevented the colors from running into one another. This technique was a unique



characteristic of the Proto-Nasca culture. Proto-Nasca vessels show traits of both the older Paracas style with incised lines, as well as the newer Nasca style, which took the double-spout feature directly from the Paracas but painted flat shapes surface of the vessel in monochromatic tones (Proulx,14).

The Nasca constructed their pottery from local clays, much of which contains mica, giving their ceramics a shiny glasslike appearance. Since mica can cause surface pitting and spalling due to differential thermal expansion, Nasca cooking vessels were tempered with sand and crushed quartz. However, clays used for artistic and ceremonial objects were not treated and instead retained their shiny appearance. This smooth appearance was further enhanced by burnishing the surface of the semidry vessels to remove irregularities prior to firing. Sometimes vessels were burnished a second time after the paint was applied. Some of these rare ancient vessels retain their luster thousands of years later. Although potters' wheels were not discovered at Nasca archeological sites, small platforms which served as rotational devices were found. Nasca ceramics were made using a combination of coiling, drawing, direct shaping, and paddle and anvil technique (Proulx, 14-16).



The most visible characteristic of Nasca ceramics is the use of polychrome painting. No other culture in ancient Peru or even in Pre-Columbia features the depth and breadth of colors mastered by the Nasca ceramic artisans. Rich polychrome painting was a distinguishing feature of the entire Nasca sequence in the Early Intermediate Period. Left: *Nasca Polychrome Figural Vessel of a Shaman Playing a Panpipe, c, AD 400 – 800.*

In addition to their ceramic arts, Nasca weavings employed extremely sophisticated techniques. The Nasca were known for their use discontinuous warp-weft and cross-looped three-dimensional knitted fringes. The Nasca people also created the famous large earthworks known as the Nasca Lines, etched into the vast, flat plains of desert. Realistic depictions of animals were found painted on the Nasca ceramics, woven into their textiles, and depicted in the earthworks of this region, along with both whimsical and fierce

imagery of chimeric mythological deities.



*Large-scale early Nasca geoglyph, influenced by the Paracas*

By the end of the 1st century AD, the Nasca culture expanded north into the Ica and Chincha valleys, becoming the predominant culture on the South Coast of Peru, absorbing the Paracas people into their influence.



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Paracas civilization was extremely advanced relative to other Andean cultures, as evidenced by their exceptional textile and ceramic artistry, sophisticated funerary practices, and advanced irrigation and engineering knowledge. The Paracas people left an indelible mark on history through their intricate and enigmatic iconography, found in their weavings, ceramics, and geoglyphs. Paracas weavings were incredibly technically innovative, such that even modern-day textile experts cannot replicate them. The uniqueness of the Paracas complex social structure is striking, as evidenced by the layout of their tombs and special attention paid to the mummies of elite leaders and shamans. The archaeological record clearly implies that they had a complex hierarchical society with a ruling elite, priests, shamans, and a class of highly skilled artisans. Even more impressive was the fact that the Paracas perfected these technologies in a harsh desert environment. Their iconography reveals a profound animistic belief system along with a reverence for nature, seen in the devotion of tens of thousands of hours of highly skilled craftsmanship that their artisans poured into creating such beautiful imagery of mythical animal deities placed against a backdrop of geometric symbols and the cosmos. The art historical legacy of the Paracas people serves as a testament to their ingenuity and sophistication. [Visit our exhibit online.](#)

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#### Nelson Rockefeller's Support of Paracas Art

Exeprt From the *Online Collection and Catalog of the Rockefeller Archive Center* at [dimes.rockarch.org](http://dimes.rockarch.org):

*"Portions of this series document aspects of Rockefeller's life-long interest in Latin America. Of particular interest are the following files: American-Colombian Corporation; Books and Lectures by NAR, particularly files relating to "The U.S. and the World;" Compania Anonima Hotelera Venezolana; Compania de Fomento Venezolana; Creole Petroleum; Hemisphere Films; Soper, Frank (malaria research in South America); South America, Interests in; Speeches (especially for the period 1940 to 1945); Statements by NAR; and Trips. The trip files are arranged chronologically and are title by country or region visited, filling boxes 142 through 155. They contain correspondence, telegrams, itineraries, and expense records created prior to, during, and after the numerous trips made by Rockefeller through 1971. Of special interest are those files documenting Rockefeller's first visit to Latin America in the spring of 1937. On this trip, Rockefeller made the acquaintance of Peruvian archaeologist Dr. Julio Cesar Tello, who fueled Rockefeller's enthusiasm for collecting Colombian and Peruvian art, especially recently excavated mummy bundles."*