

Civilization shows age in ceramics

Memphis sees history molded in ancient crafts

By Whitney Smith
Staff Reporter

Ceramics are often among the few clues that ancient civilizations really existed.

They have been important in tracing the inhabitants of the New World, especially in Mesoamerica and the Central Andes — the area now known as Peru.

Memphians haven't been unexposed to these important clay artifacts. The Memphis Pink Palace Museum exhibited some Mexican pieces last year. Through Nov. 3, the University Gallery at Memphis State is showing ceramics found within 60 miles of Memphis.

And now, through Jan. 12, the Pink Palace is showing *Art of the Andes*, a collection of more than 150 Peruvian ceramics dating to centuries before the Spanish conquest of 1532. This is one of the Pink Palace's largest changing exhibits, occupying the lobby and a portion of the second floor.

Ancient Peruvians never developed writing, so the objects offer a rare look at how the population lived.

Sculpted and painted objects trace the development of a dozen cultures going back 3,000 years. The collection was assembled by psychiatrist-publisher Arthur M. Sackler, whose Sackler Foundation is a collector of Far Eastern and Central American art. Many of the Peruvian pieces have been donated to the Museum of American Indians in New York.

Art of the Andes is comprehensive and stresses what the ceramics show about the Peruvians' lives. Blown-up photographs of the Andes mountains are used as companion pieces to the ceramics.

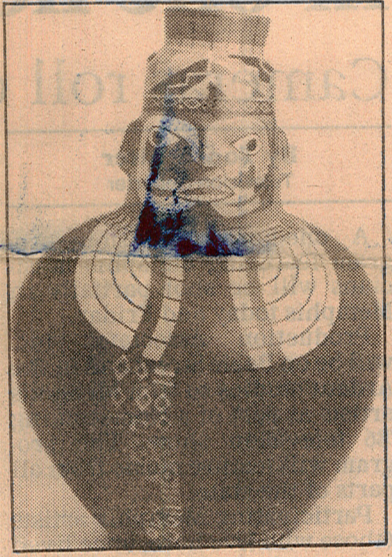
The exhibit is heavily scripted — so much, in fact, that there's little hope viewers can take it all in. Unless visitors spend two hours reading, the important data that would help them tell one culture from another is lost in a forest of information.

About a dozen cultures are represented. Some are in northern Peru, known for its beautiful carvings and modeling. The southern areas, by contrast, feature more sophisticated decoration.



Sculpted earthenware

• The Lambayesque-Chimu culture, which focused around Huari, a city-state in southern



Painted earthenware

Peru that collapsed about 900 AD, after years of military expansion. Huari ceramics are

unique in that they include footed bottles, tapered spouts and more intricate clay slip designs.

• The Chimu kingdom, a savvy, highly organized society that lasted to 1470. Known for its black color and metallic sheen, Chimu ceramics often were mass produced in molds.

• The Imperial Inca culture (1470-1532) was the last civilization to emerge in pre-Columbian Peru. Located in the south Highlands, the culture thrived for 300 years. Cultural achievements were outshined by the group's social and political skills. One strong piece is an effigy stirrup bottle dating to about 1400. Painted with black designs, it has an Egyptian look and depicts a man playing a pan flute.

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The pieces were produced when the potter's wheel was unknown to the New World. Basically, the ceramics were made by coiling clay and scraping it smooth. They were decorated mainly with pastillage, applique and strap work. Glazes were unknown. Most pieces were burnished or left with a matte finish.

Cultures represented include:

- The Moche culture (300 BC-700 AD) in the Moche River valley of northern Peru. The earliest pieces are simple and spherical. Archeologists used them to establish five phases of development. Among the early works are some frightening supernatural creatures. A spouted bottle from 300-100 BC has the head of an ogre, with tusks and flared nostrils. A vase from about 200 AD is shaped like a deer, indicating the deer may have been respected.
- The Chavins (400-1000 BC), who lived in Peru's northern Highlands. Representative of this culture are a black bottle skillfully decorated with bird figures and a stirrup spout bottle with serpents.
- The Recuay culture (100 AD-700 AD) of northern Peru. Their ceramics were found in the upper Santa River region. They had thin walls and were made of white kaolin. Many pieces depict warriors, cats, condors and serpents. Redware pieces often were painted with basic black-and-white clay slip designs.
- The Viru culture (300 BC-100 AD) Among the artifacts is a red burnished double bottle with a head shaped like a macaw.
- The Salinar culture, an early Chicama River valley settlement that introduced new bottle types. Archeologists consider this group to have been technologically advanced. Under their guise, firing techniques improved. Their vessels depicted animals, and even sexual scenes.
- The Vicus culture (100 BC-700 AD), was discovered near the Ecuadorian border in 1961. Their ceramics were less refined than others and often employed negative-style painting.
- The Nasca culture (370 BC-540 AD), was located on Peru's south peninsula. Their ceramics feature intricate clay-slip painting. The Nascas used nine colors, compared to two or three used elsewhere. This era produced many master craftsmen who made highly technical pottery. Much of it was discovered in 1925. Among the most striking pieces at the Pink Palace are a clay pan pipe that still functions, a bowl depicting three warriors with spears and jars shaped like men's heads.