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Transitional Bodies: Amputation and Disfiguration in Moche Pottery*



KATHERINE A. P. ISELIN

The art of the Moche culture, which thrived from 100 to 700 c.e. in Peru, is well known for its exquisite portrait vessels. These skillfully crafted ceramics include a variety of individuals shown in such detail that one can distinguish the passing of time through the aging of certain subjects. Although the Moche did not have a writing system, much can be learned about the Moche people through archaeological evidence and the complex iconography that appears in their art. The emphasis on individual characteristics found in Moche portraits is a trademark of Moche art and one commonly discussed by scholars. This affinity for realism and individuality in Moche art is further shown in the frequent depiction of individuals with facial disfigurement, mutilation, or amputation. Figures such as these are, however, often ignored in art historical scholarship. The majority of scholarship on amputation and disfigurement in Moche art has been published in the medical field, although a few art historians have visited the subject briefly in publications on other aspects of Moche art. The sole scholarly work that discusses the imagery of amputees in Moche art from an art historical perspective is an article by David Arsenaault published over two decades ago, in which he examines the representation of individuals with a prosthesis on an amputated foot.¹ Another significant contribution to this topic was published in 2004 by Jürgen Heck, in which he catalogued the various types of deformations found on 800 different ceramic vessels.² Thus, the subject of individuals with disfiguration or amputation in Moche art needs to be revisited and examined from a new perspective. This article will look at two examples of Moche pottery from the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri, both of which feature individuals with facial disfigurement and one with amputated feet, and examine them within the context of the Moche preference for portraiture and individual characteristics in art. Additionally, this article will consider



Fig. 1. Vessel in the shape of a kneeling figure with facial disfigurement and amputated feet. Moche, 200–500 C.E., pottery, H. 21 cm, W. 8.9 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (73.241). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

how gender relates to such representations. The frequency of disfigured individuals in Moche art, along with their appearance in ritual activities, suggests there may have been a large number of amputees or disfigured persons within the population, possibly even maintaining a level of status in both life and death.

Both of the vessels from the Museum of Art and Archaeology came to the museum in 1973 as gifts from Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Westreich of Bethesda, Maryland. There is no archaeological context for either of the vessels or a history of ownership before that of the Westreichs. Moche vessels such as these are, however, most often found in

a funerary context, so it is quite possible that both of the museum's pots were from a grave or graves.³ Both objects have been dated to about 200–500 C.E., the early part of the high point of the Moche culture.

The first vessel shows a kneeling figure with a disfigured nose and mouth (Figs. 1–4).⁴ It is a stirrup-spout vessel, with the body of the pot in the form of

a figure.⁵ The spout widens slightly at the opening and where it attaches to the vessel body. It is mold-made and entirely slip painted. The vessel is intact with very little of the paint worn off. The figure has a large, rotund body and kneels on undefined legs. The bottom of the vessel is flat, but the artist has differentiated between the white of the clothing and the pink of the legs with both color and an incised line (Fig. 4). The legs end where the ankles should be, and instead of feet there is a single, vertical groove (Fig. 3). The figure rests the right hand on the waist and holds a white staff or cane in the left hand (Fig. 1). The hands are imperfectly rendered, but display four fingers and a thumb on each hand. The artist has also indicated fingernails on each finger with white slip. Figures such as these are interpreted as males by scholars, but this is not a certainty, as will be discussed below.



Fig. 2. Vessel in the shape of a kneeling figure with facial disfiguration and amputated feet (profile view). Moche, 200–500 C.E., pottery, H. 21 cm, W. 8.9 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (73.241). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

The head is wrapped in a white cowl that comes to a point at the middle of



Fig. 3. Vessel in the shape of a kneeling figure with facial disfiguration and amputated feet (back view). Moche, 200–500 C.E., pottery, H. 21 cm, W. 8.9 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (73.241). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

the back between the shoulders. The artist used the same technique as on the waistband to indicate a knot. Underneath the cowl, hair and another headdress are shown. The neck is indicated in front and is distinct from the hair. The second headdress goes over the forehead of the figure and underneath the cowl and appears in the back on the neck as well.

The face is painted a darker red color, the same color as the stirrup spout. The eyes are detailed, with both eyelids indicated. The artist has also painted the whites of the eyes. The irises are the red of the face, but some of the paint is worn. The face shows some sort of mutilation.

The figure's nose is deformed, missing the whole front part (it is almost as flat as the rest of the face). The nostrils are indicated by a deeper depression. The upper lip is completely gone, and the lower lip looks swollen. Six teeth are detailed on top, by a low semicircular ridge and white paint. The lower lip also bears three painted white dots, possibly also to indicate teeth.

The clothing is characteristic of similarly disfigured individuals. It consists of a white tunic with a collar that comes to a point at the front of the figure's neck. The tunic hangs all the way down the back and in the front between the knees and is indicated on the vessel's bottom (Fig. 4). The top and bottom are separated by a pink waistband (the same color as the figure's legs, hands, and neck). This waistband is tied in front, as one end goes over the band and the other is noticeably rendered behind it.

The waistband widens in the back.

The second vessel is in the shape of a heterosexual couple engaged in coitus (Figs. 5–7).⁶ The vessel is in reasonably good condition, with two major breaks that severed the heads of the figures having been repaired before their donation to the museum. A few small chips are missing from around the breaks. There is no evidence of paint on the pot, but it may originally have been painted. The vessel was mold-made but is not of the highest quality. The red clay is somewhat coarse, leaving the surface a little rough from some white and dark purple inclusions and a few gold flecks.

The lower figure is presumably female and is on her elbows and knees. Her hands hold the base of the vessel. Five fingers are indicated by straight lines



Fig. 4. Vessel in the shape of a kneeling figure with facial disfiguration and amputated feet (bottom view). Moche, 200–500 C.E., pottery, H. 21 cm, W. 8.9 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (73.241). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.



Fig. 5. Vessel in the shape of a heterosexual couple engaged in coitus (three-quarter view). Moche, 200–500 c.e., pottery, H. 15.3 cm, L. 15 cm (base), W. 9.9 cm (base). Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (73.234). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

with no distinct thumb. Her feet are flexed and sit on the balls of her slightly discernable toes. Her face is not particularly detailed or individualized aside from a distinctly large nose, which has two small depressions for the nostrils (Fig. 6). Her mouth is cursory, with just a line for the lips. The eyes are not symmetrical, although the eyelids are detailed, and the left eye has the iris rendered. She wears either a headdress or a helmet-like hairstyle, which ends as bangs on her forehead and at the level of her chin on the sides and back. She faces straight ahead. She does not appear to display any emotion, although the left side of her mouth goes up in what seems to be an intentional manner. The right side also goes up, but that seems to be due more to the artist's haste in portraying her mouth. A seam is not visible on the back of her head, but

the area looks reworked. No breasts are visible and if her genitals were initially rendered, they have since worn away (Fig. 7). Because of the number of Moche vessels depicting copulating couples that do indicate female genitalia, however, and the rare occurrence of homosexual activity in Moche art, it is safe to assume this figure is also female.⁷

A male figure sits on top of her and penetrates from behind. His feet sit flat on the floor, and only four toes have been indicated with cursory lines on each foot; it is difficult to know whether the number of toes was intentional. His hands hold the shoulders of the female, and four fingers and a thumb are distinctly rendered. There is a double band around his waist and lines over his buttocks to suggest an underwear-like garment. Two protrusions shown in the area of the woman's genitals probably represent his testicles. Because of the condition of the vessel, it is difficult to discern where the garment stops and flesh begins. On top of his lower back and buttocks is a flanged opening, which indicates the function as a vessel, as with the other museum pot.

The male figure's head is individualized (Fig. 5). His eyes are sunken (like a skeleton's), and he has an overlarge brow. There does seem to be some indication of eyelids, especially on his right eye where the sculptor used two horizontal lines. The left eye has a slight trace of a top eyelid. The male figure's nose is smaller than the



Fig. 6. Vessel in the shape of a heterosexual couple engaged in coitus (front view). Moche, 200–500 c.e., pottery, H. 15.3 cm, L. 15 cm (base), W. 9.9 cm (base). Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (73.234). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.



Fig. 7. Vessel in the shape of a heterosexual couple engaged in coitus (back view). Moche, 200–500 c.e., pottery, H. 15.3 cm, L. 15 cm (base), W. 9.9 cm (base). Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (73.234). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

woman's and turned upward with the nostrils detailed (not just as poked holes); the nose is probably deformed, but not to the extent of that on the first vessel. The upper lip seems to be missing but has three vertical incised lines on his right side and four on the left. His lower lip protrudes out a great deal, further than the lower lip of the figure on the first vessel. It is difficult to see because of wear, but teeth also seem originally to have been detailed. His chin is also distinct. He wears the same cowl headdress as the figure on the first vessel. Since he is turned to his right (perhaps toward the viewer?), the cowl comes to a point on his left shoulder. There are two ridges on the lower part of his forehead, above his brow, indicating another headdress underneath.

Although these two vessels represent very different subject matters, the disfigurement and amputation shown on the figures are quite common in Moche art. The nose and lip deformation present in both vessels is the most common type of disfigurement, as shown in the data offered by Jürgen Heck. His study of 800 ceramic vessels revealed 977 disfigurements.⁸ The majority of these contained abnormalities of the head, with 603 occurrences. Of these, 275 of the deformations were of the nose-lip variety like that shown on the museum's vessels.

The cause or causes of disfigurement are unknown, although the most likely possibilities are disease or purposeful mutilation. The most widely accepted natural cause for this type of facial disfigurement is a disease called leishmaniasis. This disease is a parasitic infection that results from the bite of the sand fly. One particular type—mucosal leishmaniasis—eats away at the nasal and oral mucus membranes and can be fatal. As it still is today, the disease was common in Peru during the time of the Moche. It is likely that the museum's kneeling figure depicts an individual who had suffered from leishmaniasis.⁹ The disfigured nose and scarred upper lip of the male figure on the sex pot indicate he may have also suffered this affliction.

Interestingly, a large number of figures in Moche art with nose-lip deformities seem to record purposeful mutilation. Heck identified 217 instances of artificial nose-lip mutilation among the 275 examples, citing symmetry and a straight edge around the mouth, a visible septum on the nose, and a lack of swelling as the criteria for an unnatural cause of disfigurement.¹⁰ For those afflicted with leishmaniasis, the disease would have eaten away at the septum and the swelling may have remained even after they overcame the disease. Heck's criteria are, however, largely subjective. Both museum vessels exhibit some of these characteristics, but not all. The male figure on the sex pot shows a clearly defined septum, but his mouth

does not have a straight line around his missing top lip, as it would if it had been cut with a sharp knife. Instead, the asymmetrical vertical lines indicate scarring, which suggests the individual is in the process of healing, although whether this is the result of natural or artificial disfigurement is ambiguous. The lower lip is also noticeably swollen, a possible permanent side effect from leishmaniasis. On the kneeling figure, the nose contains far less flesh, although a septum is slightly shown dividing asymmetrical nostrils. The overlarge, asymmetrical nostrils are indicative of a leishmaniasis infection. On the figure's mouth, however, a cleanly cut line outlines the top row of teeth, which may indicate the use of a knife.

Why would the Moche have purposefully mutilated the faces of individuals? Additionally, why would they amputate one or more limbs on any particular person? The most common reason cited by early scholars was that the Moche practiced punitive mutilation.¹¹ There is absolutely no evidence to support this theory. Instead, it is far more likely that these purposeful disfigurements had a ritualistic intention. Steve Bourget has suggested that artificial disfigurement of the face was done in emulation of leishmaniasis. According to Bourget, this mutilation was done to "transform the face of a living being into that of a skull, a sort of authentic living-dead."¹² Since leishmaniasis is a potentially fatal disease, someone afflicted with it would need to overcome death. The flesh and mucus membranes are often affected so severely by the disease that the bone begins to show through.¹³ Additionally, lesions can return months or even years after the initial recovery, which suggests the affected individual lived in a continuous state of liminality between life and death. Thus, the facial scars would have been visible reminders of that person's survival of and constant struggle with death; they symbolized the transition between the realms of life and death. It is possible that, by imitating these scars, the individuals bearing the surgical wounds embodied these abilities as well. Likewise, an amputee would have to overcome the traumatic experience of losing a limb and thus would also embody ideas of transition and overpowering death.

Bourget's suggestion echoes his theory that Moche sex pots were associated with the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead. He speculates that the sex depicted on the sex pots is some sort of ritual copulation, done as an inversion of life and death at funerary or sacrificial rites.¹⁴ Bourget suggests that a sacrificial victim would participate in ritual copulation prior to the sacrifice and thus would exist simultaneously in both the world of the living and the world of the dead during the ritual.¹⁵ Rebecca Stone continues this line of thinking and suggests that survivors of leishmaniasis were more apt to be associated with the

role of a ritual practitioner in Moche culture.¹⁶ According to Stone, ritual practitioners were seen as “wounded healers,” having already healed themselves of some injury and now having the ability to guide others through the process.¹⁷ She attributes this elevated status of healer to individuals in Moche art that display other types of deformities as well, such as the permanent physical effects of rickets.¹⁸ This status likely also applied to amputees. The frequent depiction of such individuals may suggest they held a higher status as healers in Moche culture.

Both Bourget and Stone emphasize the transitional nature of the figures represented on sex pots and individuals represented with facial disfiguration. It is important to note, however, that the figures represented on sex pots have a wide range of physical attributes, from representations of humans both with and without physical deformities to skeletons that are clearly not even living beings. There are also many examples that include animals (both with each other and with humans) and specific iconographical figures, such as the character called “Wrinkle Face” (who Bourget asserts is only found in representations of vaginal copulation).¹⁹ While it is difficult to discern a pattern among these representations, it seems likely they held various meanings. Even so, Bourget contends that representations of vaginal copulation are associated with the afterworld and that sex scenes that do not feature vaginal copulation (such as anal penetration, masturbation, or sexual touching) were related to the transition between life and death.²⁰ The large number of figural types involved in these various activities indicates, however, a very complex iconography that likely included numerous meanings for each representation. Since many sex pots do not clearly indicate what type of sex is being performed, it seems likely that the individuals involved were more significant.

The variety of participants in the sexual activities makes it difficult to identify a clear meaning. Perhaps the skeleton figures that appear in some of them symbolize the transitional psychological state of a ritual practitioner. The differences in the types of disfigurements could also indicate individuals at different points of the sacrificial process. The scars present on the mouth of the male figure of the museum copulation vessel suggest a passage of time between the physical mutilation of his face and the copulation ritual. This emphasis on the process of healing and movement through time further supports the transitional nature of the individual represented.

Considering this liminal status of the figures, it is possible that the individuals represent a transition between genders as well. Bourget has observed that in sex scenes with skeletal beings, the skeletal figure is always white and the female

(when she is depicted as a living person) is always red.²¹ Bourget argues that these colors function as a duality between the genders, as well as between life (red) and death (white).²² He notes that even a white skeleton has its penis painted red, linking the sex organ to its role in life. Mary Weismantel also sees a duality between gender and life and death in such representations, with the fleshly penis acting as a transitional element between them.²³ The skeletons, as well as male figures in copulation scenes, often wear a red hood or cowl—a garment that is typically worn by female healers.²⁴ Bourget contends that the incorporation of both opposing colors was a way to represent this dichotomy. He writes, “The red capes worn by skeletal males would not only reinforce the association with the feminine gender but also with the dualist concept of life (red cape) and death (white corpse).”²⁵ Significantly, this headdress is worn by both “male” figures in the museum vessels (although on the kneeling figure the cowl is predominantly white with red on parts underneath). The contrast between white and red is a common occurrence in Moche art, from garments on portrait vessels to the bichrome slip used in two-dimensional vase paintings. It could be argued that the dichotomy of color in skeletal sex scenes not only represented a duality of gender but also a fluidity in gender. The skeletons are in a transitional phase not only between life and death but also between genders. Likewise, the human figures could also represent this liminal quality.

On some vessels, the male and female counterparts even cease to be separated. A sex pot in the Art Institute of Chicago shows a human female masturbating a male skeletal-like figure (Fig. 8). The right hand of the male touches the



Fig. 8. Handle spout vessel in form of a female and skeletal figure in a sexual embrace. Moche, 100 B.C.E.–500 C.E., pottery, H. 20.3 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Buckingham Fund (1955.2677).

female's chin as she touches his penis with her left hand. A single, white garment encloses both figures into one, making it impossible to discern where one body begins and the other ends (although his left hand is embracing her around her neck on the back). Two legs appear in the front, but again it is impossible to identify to which body they belong. Significantly, the feet do not appear to be "normal," nor do they show the cleft associated with an amputated foot. The woman's face is naturally sculpted and features elaborate face paint. The male figure is fleshy, but the sunken eyes, small nose, and toothy mouth suggest he is closer to the deathly realm than the living world to which the female clearly belongs. The incorporation of two genders into one being, as well as the dichotomy of the living and the dead, give this vessel a liminal quality.

Similarly, the male figure of the museum copulation vessel may indicate a living being, but the sunken eyes, deformed nose, and missing upper lip convey a "skeletal" quality to the individual. The inclusion of a headdress associated with female healers on a male figure also shows a fluidity between the genders. This may also be the case for the female figure.

The hairstyle on the female figure of the museum sex pot is one that is found on warriors and sacrificial victims and seen on decapitated heads on Moche fineline pottery.²⁶ It is not a gender marker and since her genitals are not visible, the only reason she can be identified as female is the lack of homosexual representations in Moche art. While the biological sex of the figures on sex pots is often easily identifiable because the genitalia are usually visible, the appearance of breasts is uncommon. This makes identifying male and female individuals on other Moche vessels more difficult, although scholars often rely on garments or headdresses. Unfortunately, as shown with the cowl and headdress, this method is not definitive.

This ambiguity of gender markers makes the gender identification of amputated individuals much more difficult. Some scholars avoid discussion of the gender aspect and gendered pronouns (e.g., Stone), while Heck identifies them all as male.²⁷ It is easy to see why Heck does this. None of the amputated individuals display biological markers such as breasts. Archaeological evidence shows, however, that women were also subject to amputated limbs and could easily be some of the figures represented in the pottery.

John Verano, Laurel Anderson, and Régulo Franco identified three instances of amputation in which the people continued to live and use the amputated limb(s) for a significant period of time after amputation occurred.²⁸ Two of the

individuals come from the complex at El Brujo. The first is a complete adult male skeleton from Tomb 4, one of four male bodies in the same burial (one other adult and two adolescents). No foot bones were present in the burial, confirming that both feet had been amputated. The second example is the tibia and fibula of a male found in the disturbed fill of a high status chamber tomb in the Huaca Cao pyramid, also at El Brujo. The third example is the almost complete skeleton of a young adult female at Mocollope (a site just under twenty-three kilometers from El Brujo). Her right foot had been amputated.

The authors examined the bones and found that, in all three instances, there was wear and use of the limbs following the amputation of the feet. All three individuals appear to have been healthy and of normal size, and the remaining bones do not indicate any type of infection that would have required amputation (although the authors do state that trauma or disease of a foot cannot be ruled out).²⁹ The evidence suggests the disarticulation of the foot through the ankle joint, an amputation technique established later in Western medicine by Sir James Syme during the mid-nineteenth century. The remains show that the individuals were able to heal properly after the procedure and the bones show evidence of bearing weight after healing.³⁰ The representation of amputees in Moche art with the cleft at the bottom of the leg correctly depicts how this surgical procedure would have healed, as seen in the kneeling figure on the museum vessel (Fig. 3).

Similar burials were found in the royal tombs at Sipán. In Tomb 1, there were several individuals with amputated feet.³¹ As excavators dug below a pyramid directly above Tomb 1, the first burial they found (about four meters below the surface) was that of a twenty-year-old male, possibly a warrior. Both feet were missing. As they excavated further below him, they found an elaborate tomb enclosed by large wooden beams to create a sort of room. At the center of this was an adult male individual with a number of grave goods, luxurious beyond anything previously known by archaeologists. It was surrounded by the burials of five other adults, all in coffins, and a child. The child was buried on the floor in a seated position near the head of the elite burial and likely had poor health during life. Two adult males flanked the elite burial, and one of them was missing his left foot. Two adult females were placed in two stacked coffins at the head of the elite burial. The upper female, also missing her left foot, was turned downward to face the lower female. A third female was buried at the foot of the main burial. All three women showed no signs of illness or violent death, but

they had predeceased the main deceased individual. Some of their bones had been moved into positions that would have been impossible unless they were already decomposed or in the process of decomposing. Some sort of textile wrapping had kept the bones together, which suggests the missing foot of the upper female was not simply lost in transit.

Tomb 2 also housed an elite male individual placed within a room delineated by wooden beams.³² He was accompanied by three adults (one male, two females) and a child. None of the skeletons exhibited any limb amputation. Above the chamber, however, was another “warrior” burial like that above Tomb 1. Here, too, the adult male was missing both of his feet. Verano says that he himself examined the skeletons of both “warriors” for Tombs 1 and 2 and then states that “two articulated human feet were found in an adjacent room.”³³ The excavators, Walter Alva and Christopher B. Donnan, describe these “human hands and feet” as offerings and suggest they were “trophies” taken from sacrificial victims.³⁴

Clearly the amputation of feet held some sort of ritual significance for the Moche and was likely part of funerary customs. Even though the Sipán burials do not indicate how much time passed between the amputation of feet and when the amputee was buried, the El Brujo and Moccollope burials tell us that at least some individuals continued to live after the loss of their limbs. Erica Hill examines the transformative nature of sacrifice itself, for both the ritual practitioner and sacrificial victim.³⁵ Although she focuses on the victim who is sacrificed and dismembered after death, her observations on the power of the dismembered body parts are applicable. She suggests that the limbs become sacred objects after separation from the body and that dismemberment was a way to disperse this power, not unlike the function of relics during the medieval period in Europe.³⁶ Amputation on a still living person utilized this transformative power, a power that likely resided in the sacred object (the separated limb) and the surviving donor of the limb.

The number of figures in Moche Art with amputated limbs suggests that these individuals were regularly part of the population and, because they were frequently represented, that they possibly also held a high status. Of his 800 vessels, Heck identifies 127 instances of foot amputation, the most of any type of limb disfigurement.³⁷ Seventy-nine figures had both feet amputated, twenty-five had the left foot missing, seventeen were missing the right foot, and with six it was unclear. Many of these figures wear garments similar to those worn by the kneeling figure on the museum vessel, and a few feature a prosthesis that looks

like a cylinder worn on the bottom of the leg.³⁸

In 1913, the Peruvian physician Lizardo R. Vélez López also wrote about the discovery at Moccollope of a male skeleton with both feet amputated that had two wooden prostheses buried with him, both of which showed significant signs of wear.³⁹ No photos were taken, however, and the whereabouts of the remains are unknown, so it is difficult to say more about this burial.⁴⁰ Regardless, the use of prostheses can be confirmed by the imagery found in Moche fineline painting, as well as in a few sculpted vessels.

While individuals with amputated feet regularly appear in Moche sculpted vessels (such as the museum's kneeling figure), they are also occasionally pictured with prostheses. These figures are usually represented sitting down with their legs crossed. Sometimes they wear the prosthesis on their amputated foot, at other times they lay the amputated foot on top, to show it, and then display their prosthesis in their hand.⁴¹ Only figures missing one foot are shown with a prosthesis, however, a rule that holds in the fineline painting representations as well.⁴² Arsenault argues that individuals with amputated feet performed important roles within certain Moche rituals, a relevant claim considering their frequent appearance in art and inclusion in elite burials. He examines the representation of individuals with at least one amputated foot in twenty-six scenes in Moche fineline pottery, identifying five contexts in which an individual with an amputated foot is prominently displayed. They are found in scenes of a ritual feast, a ceremonial game with spear shafts, a ceremonial dance, human sacrifice, and preparing ceramic offerings for deposit in tombs.⁴³ Arsenault contends that the placement and actions of the amputees within these contexts suggests their role as a supervisor for "maintaining order and good conduct" in the presence of and for the leader of the community.⁴⁴ While his identification of amputated individuals in some of these scenes is problematic because of his assumption that sitting, cross-legged individuals have an amputated limb, Arsenault's identification of an individual with a prosthesis in representations of the realm of the dead (the ceremonial dance scenes) is intriguing.

Arsenault looks at two different scenes that reflect the world of the dead: a scene that features figures associated with death (Fig. 9) and another that shows a leader transitioning into the world of the dead (Fig. 10).⁴⁵ The figures included in the scenes may vary slightly between representations, but the key roles are usually included. In Figure 9, the dead leader is identified as the frontally facing skeletal figure with the elaborate headdress and costume. Two small musicians

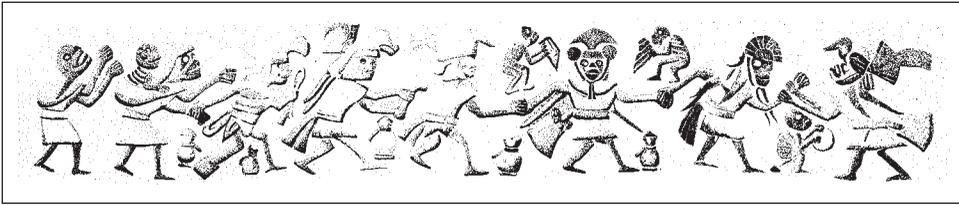


Fig. 9. Death dancing scene. Moche, MOCHE IV, pottery. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin (VA 17883). Drawing: Donna McClelland. The Christopher B. Donnan and Donna McClelland Moche Archive, Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 10. Transition ceremony scene. Moche, MOCHE IV, pottery. Private collection. Drawing: Donna McClelland. The Christopher B. Donnan and Donna McClelland Moche Archive, Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, D.C.

flank his head. He is the central figure in a chain of other individuals with extravagant costumes, all of whom hold hands, indicating they are dancing. Donnan has suggested that dance scenes such as this separate the groups into major and minor figures.⁴⁶ Major dancers can be identified by their more elaborate costumes and are often larger in size, such as on the two connecting figures that flank the dead leader on each side. To the left of this chain is a group of three figures and a baby, the minor dancers, who run toward the chain of elite individuals. An individual with an amputated foot seems to be the primary figure for the minor group due to its placement between the two groups.⁴⁷ A prosthesis can be seen on one foot, and the figure carries a whip in one hand and drags a female carrying a child on her back with the other. Arsenault contends that the individual with the prosthesis was responsible for keeping social order in the realms of both the dead and the living.⁴⁸

In another version, shown in Figure 10, two levels are depicted featuring primarily skeletal-looking figures with a larger human figure, likely the dead

leader, being pulled between the levels. Several of the figures echo those found in Figure 9. The lower level features a group of four individuals on the left that Donnan has identified as dancers, mimicking the four from the minor group in Figure 9.⁴⁹ To the right of them is a figure on a llama holding a club and wearing a prosthesis. Above the figure on the llama is an individual holding a musical instrument. On the left of the top level is a copulating couple, both human. Arsenault believes that the figure wearing the prosthesis is overseeing the events in both scenes, which would indicate that the figure's role extended into the realm of the dead as well.⁵⁰

All the figures on the lower level are skeletons, which Arsenault interprets as an association with death.⁵¹ Most of the figures on the upper level, however, also feature skeletal qualities. The only figures that are fully human are the transitioning leader and the copulating couple. Significantly, these figures are also considerably larger than all the others in the scene. Donnan suggests their size and difference in appearance indicated that these two activities are the focal points for the entire scene.⁵² He also proposes that the placement of the copulating couple with the dancers may imply they were all part of the same ritual. Bourget uses this scene as proof that "sexual performances are related to the funerary ritual."⁵³ He goes on to suggest that the scene revolves around a transition after death: from the world of the dead on the bottom into the afterworld on the upper level.⁵⁴

Anne Hocquenghem, on the other hand, has suggested that this scene is the separation of the world of the living (top) and the world of the dead (bottom), with the deceased individual in the center transitioning between them.⁵⁵ Arsenault interprets the scene as the dead leader being welcomed into the world of the dead on the bottom.⁵⁶ Donnan, however, points out that many examples of Moche art show the interaction of skeletons and humans and thus this does not have to be the separation of the world of the dead from the world of the living.⁵⁷ Regardless of which interpretation of the scene is correct (if any of them are), the placement of the dead leader between the levels shows an association with transition. Additionally, the similarity in size between the copulating figures and the leader, as well as their human status, show a direct correlation between the two actions. Thus, the figures involved in the ritual could also embody this liminal quality. Due to the importance of the ritual, this association may have transferred to representations in art outside the context of such a scene.

In his landmark article, "The Thematic Approach to Moche Iconography," Donnan shows that complex scenes in Moche fineline pottery could be

abbreviated so that only a few key elements needed to be depicted in order to represent the whole.⁵⁸ These segments of the whole scene could be used in varying combinations, and some of the individuals were even depicted singly in other media (such as sculpted figures on ceramic vessels). He examined “The Presentation Theme,” an elaborate scene of almost twenty figures that depicts the giving of a goblet from one elite individual to another. It seems likely that this method would transfer to other scenes in Moche art, such as with the transition ceremony scene (Fig. 10). This means copulating couples or individuals with amputated limbs represented singly could embody all the facets of the roles they performed in ritual activity. Thus, the two sculpted vessels from the museum would reference the rituals in which each individual participated and the role they occupied within the Moche community due to their participation in those rituals.

The importance of copulation within Moche rituals and the participation of individuals with facial disfigurement and amputation are supported by the number of vessels depicting such individuals, as well as the archaeological evidence. Arsenault suggests that the deceased individuals with amputated feet at Sipán correspond to the individuals with prostheses in the ceremonial funerary scenes depicted in the fineline pottery.⁵⁹ The inclusion of amputated individuals in complex group burials confirms the participation of amputees in funerary rituals, but the practice of amputation on both males and females implies that gender (or lack thereof) may be more significant than previously realized by scholars.

First, it is important to remember that more than one individual in the tomb had amputated feet. This suggests that amputated individuals were a substantial and meaningful part of the burial ceremony for such an elite person. Additionally, the remains of both male and female skeletons featured an amputated foot, as well as the male “warrior” found above both tombs who was missing both feet. This indicates that the individual with the prosthesis in the ceremonial transition scene cannot be positively identified as either male or female. Even though figures with amputated limbs are usually considered male due to their lack of breasts, the lack of breasts on the majority of female figures in copulating vessels shows that this biological marker was often ignored. This results in a few possibilities. First, it is possible that gender did not matter for these individuals and that both males and females were included without discretion. The second possibility is that individuals with amputated limbs were considered outside the binary gender division of male and female and instead

were part of a third gender. Another option is that these individuals were without an assigned gender, or perhaps they possessed a fluidity in gender. A flexibility in gender would connect well with the notion of transition, especially in consideration of life and death.

Likewise, this fluidity in gender also appears in the copulation scenes, even though the male and female genitals are clearly depicted. The male figure wears a headdress that was often associated with female healers, while the female wears a hairstyle that was used on both male and female sacrificial victims. As previously stated, the genitals are often the only way to identify the sex of the individuals due to the lack of secondary biological markers. The liminal space between genders parallels that between life and death, especially since some of these figures are involved in the transition ritual for the deceased (Fig. 10). While this article has not focused on the other figures included in the transition ceremony, it is noteworthy that none of them exhibit gender markers either.

It is clear that these individuals occupied a specific role within Moche culture, likely in association with certain ritual activities. At what point, however, do these individualized characteristics stop signifying the subject's role, status, or position and begin indicating a specific person? Moche art features copulating figures and amputated individuals with an array of facial characteristics. In the transition ceremony of Figure 10, the copulating couple seems to consist of a human male and female, both likely with face paint. Neither of them seems to have any type of facial mutilation, and they are the only figures other than the deceased leader that do not have any skeletal features. The skeletal qualities of all the other figures, including the figure with the prosthesis, do, however, suggest facial mutilation. These figures may not be individuals at all but, rather, representations of a certain role that was played within these copulation and transition rituals that also included mutilation. But the level of individuality in the sculpted vessels like those in the museum's collection—especially the number of different types of mutilations that are represented—would suggest that many of these individuals are not anonymous figures.

This theory of portraiture is supported by the discovery of the fragments of over fifty-two unfired, full-figure portrait vessels in the walled courtyard at Huaca de la Luna (Temple of the Moon), located in the Moche capital city. Found adjacent to the remains of seventy-two “mutilated and dismembered” sacrificial victims (all adult male warriors), these portrait vessels depicted seated nude prisoners, each with a unique face.⁶⁰ Not only are all these figures sculpted



Fig. 11. Handle spout vessel depicting a couple engaged in coitus. Moche, 100 B.C.E.–500 C.E., pottery, H. 17.2 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Buckingham Fund (1955.2682).

individually, but each one features distinctive face paint as well.⁶¹

Likewise, the method used to create Moche pottery indicates the artists' affinity for sculpting individual subjects. Even though the museum sex pot is mold-made, the artist used a tool to create the "scar" incisions on the male figure's upper lip after the clay was removed from the mold (the upper lip may

also have been scraped away after being removed from the mold). Furthermore, a similar vessel in the Art Institute of Chicago shows a great deal of care given to the faces of both copulating individuals (Fig. 11). The male is again presented with sunken eyes, although lines inside the sockets indicate eyelids. There is evidence his face was painted. He has a heavy brow and the same headdress as the male figure on the Museum of Art and Archaeology's vessel. His nose is also missing the tip and the bottom portion, suggesting leishmaniasis. Even so, both his lips are fully intact, unlike those of the figure on the University of Missouri vessel. The female, in contrast to the Museum of Art and Archaeology's sex pot, is accurately rendered and features detailed face paint. The artist has sculpted her face so realistically that she even appears to have bags under her eyes. Her lips are painted black, and a fleur-de-lis shape extends from the corners. Both cheeks have a curved black line extending down from the middle of her bottom eyelid. Sideburns appear under her hair on each side, which may indicate she is

wearing a wig or a headdress.

While the artist has paid a great deal of attention to the facial characteristics of both figures, the bodies are sloppily executed and not proportional. The artist emphasized the heads of both individuals, a common characteristic in Moche art. Stone has pointed out the cephalocentrism commonly found in Moche art, suggesting that the head was seen as “the seat of authority.”⁶² Although she discusses this primarily within the context of ritual practitioners, the Moche practice of using the head to express individuality is evident simply from viewing the large number of portrait head vessels that survive.⁶³ Thus, the head was used to show specific individuals, even though they may have been represented in a role that was performed by many other individuals as well.

Even though copulating figures and amputees may be linked in their transitional nature and the use of facial disfigurement in both contexts, there seems to be a very significant difference between the two roles. Significantly, no sex pots feature an individual with an amputated limb.⁶⁴ As seen on the vessels with the transition ceremony scenes, there are numerous individuals involved in the ceremony. It seems as though the figures involved in the copulating ritual had different responsibilities from the figures with the amputated foot. All are part of the transition ceremony but performed different roles. The attributes are also significant: Only individuals with a prosthesis or amputated foot hold the cane or whip in any of the death rituals. Since this attribute is found on representations outside the transition ceremony (for example, the amputee on the University of Missouri’s vessel holds the cane), it is likely part of the set iconography for the role of such individuals.

The facial mutilation found on both amputated individuals and copulating individuals again suggests that the liminal status between life and death was a desired characteristic in such individuals. Because not all copulating figures feature facial disfigurement it is, however, difficult to prove that mutilation was a requirement for this role. Copulating figures are found in other contexts and scenes too, suggesting that copulation was an important part of numerous Moche rituals. It is also possible that purposeful mutilation was performed on one or both individuals after the copulation ritual. Arsenault also points out that individuals may have suffered some other affliction that would not have been visible (such as being deaf or dumb).⁶⁵

It is possible that those individuals who display some sort of disfiguration, whether on the face or another part of their body, occupy a similar position

within the Moche culture. Interestingly, there is no pattern to the presence of the various types of disfiguration on individuals. Not all figures with amputated limbs have disfigured faces and vice versa. Nor is there a pattern to the number of individuals with one or both feet amputated, although the greater number of figures with both feet amputated does seem significant, especially since Arsenault has shown that only individuals with one amputated foot (not both) are engaged in the Moche dance ceremonies. The only distinct difference found between the figures with mutilated faces and those with amputated limbs is that there are no depictions of amputated individuals engaging in coitus. This cannot, of course, be taken as definite as many Moche vessels are unpublished and could possibly feature such individuals. Their absence from published material does, however, at the very least indicate a very low representation in that context. Thus, it seems likely that individuals with amputated feet occupied a particular role within Moche culture, one that required their participation in specific rituals. Since representations of such figures include an array of facial disfiguration, or none at all, it seems as though the artists were referencing specific individuals in their representations. Similarly, a lack of consistency in the facial characteristics of figures engaged in coitus suggests numerous participants, likely also participating in various rituals.

There is always the possibility that these are anonymous representations. These figures may not be individuals at all but, rather, representations of a certain role that was played within these copulation rituals that also included mutilation. But the level of individuality in the figures—especially the number of different types of mutilations that are represented—would suggest that many of these are not anonymous figures. Some of the portrait head vessels also feature various facial deformities, implying some sense of individuality in the full-figure representations as well.⁶⁶ There does not seem to have been a standard type of mutilation across the board for these types of figures, in either portrait vessels, sex pots, or representations of amputees. Indeed, it seems appropriate to assign a higher status to these individuals. Their repeated representation in art, possibly in what appears to be actual portraits, suggests that these individuals were held in high esteem in Moche culture. This is also supported by the discovery of several individuals with amputated feet in the burials of elite leaders at Sipán.

The number of Moche pots that depict facial disfigurement, in both portrait-head vessels and full body representations, indicates that these individuals played such a significant role in Moche culture that representation in the art was

important. The use of distinctive facial characteristics shows that the depiction of specific individuals was not limited to portrait-head vessels. The repeated appearance of a variety of distinct facial characteristics suggests some form of individuality in the figures represented, especially when comparing individuals occupying the same role in another representation (such as with the sex pots). Although several attributes were used to convey information about the figure's status (such as engaging in coitus or holding a cane), another marker was the fluidity of gender. For these transitional figures, it is the role they perform that is important. A flexibility in gender reflected their transitional nature. Thus, the only gender markers used in copulation vessels were the genitals, and no gender markers are identifiable in representations of amputees. Consequently, it was important for the artist to find other ways to show the unique characteristics of the individual represented. It is quite possible that the two vessels housed in the Museum of Art and Archaeology represent particular individuals, forever remembered in ceramic form because of their roles within Moche rituals.

NOTES

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1. David Arsenault, "El Personaje del pie amputado en la cultura mochica del Peru: Un ensayo sobre la arqueología del poder," *Latin American Antiquity* 4:3 (1993) pp. 225–245.
 2. Jürgen Heck, "Krankheit und Körperdeformation in Darstellungen auf Moche-Tongefäßen: Analyse und Synopse aus ärztlicher Sicht," *Baessler-Archiv* 52 (2004) pp. 105–124.
 3. Mary Weismantel, "Moche Sex Pots: Reproduction and Temporality in Ancient South America," *American Anthropologist* 106:3 (2004) p. 501.
 4. This vessel has been featured in two earlier publications as an illustration of leishmaniasis occurring among the Moche people. Fabio Bergamin, "Wenn Viren Parasiten

- helfen,” *Horizonte* 95 (2012) p. 25, and M.-A. Hartley, K. Kohl, C. Ronet, and N. Fasel, “The Therapeutic Potential of Immune Cross-Talk in Leishmaniasis,” *Clinical Microbiology and Infection* 19 (2013) pp. 119–130.
5. Acc. no. 73.241. H. 21 cm; W. (bottom) 8.9 cm; D. (rim spout) 2.3 cm.
 6. Acc. no. 73.234. H. to top of the male figure’s head 15.3 cm; L. base 15 cm; W. base 9.9 cm. L. female figure 18.3 cm. D. (spout) 5.2–5.4 cm. Many Moche vessels depict figures engaging in assorted sexual activities, which can be referred to as “sex pots,” a term used by Mary Weismantel to describe vessels showing sexual activity (Weismantel, “Moche Sex Pots”). Similar imagery shown in Moche pottery may include figures with detailed genitals, or the genitals alone (male or female, realistic or anthropomorphized). This article will avoid any mention of the word “erotic,” as it is unlikely that these vessels functioned as a way to create arousal.
 7. A recent article eliminated the confusion on the surviving examples of representations of same-sex copulation in Moche art (Janusz Z. Wołoszyn and Katarzyna Piwowar, “Sodomites, Siamese Twins, and Scholars: Same-Sex Relationships in Moche Art,” *American Anthropologist* 117: 2 [2015] pp. 285–301). Contrary to many earlier, gender-driven publications, Wołoszyn and Piwowar identify only two extant vessels depicting sex between two male figures, one of which they were unable to verify due to lack of a response from the holding museum. The authors suggest more originally existed but were “purged” by private collectors, museum workers, and explorers wishing to destroy representations of immoral acts in the early twentieth century (pp. 288–289). Even so, the dearth of surviving same-sex representations makes it highly unlikely the receptive figure here is definitively male.
 8. Significantly, Heck does not include in his study any sex pots. He states that any vessels depicting sexual acts should be considered their own category (Heck, “Krankheit,” p. 106).
 9. Jeffrey Wilcox, registrar and curator of collections at the Museum of Art and Archaeology, first suggested this possibility to me.
 10. Heck, “Krankheit,” p. 110.
 11. Lizardo R. Vélez López, “Las mutilaciones en los vasos antropomorfos del antiguo Perú,” *XVIII Session of the International Congress of Americanists* (London, 1913) pp. 267–275 and Oscar Urteaga-Ballon, “Medical Ceramic Representation of Nasal Leishmaniasis and Surgical Amputation in Ancient Peruvian Civilization,” *Human Paleopathology: Current Synthesis and Future Options* (Washington, D.C., 1991) pp. 95–101.
 12. Steve Bourget, *Sex, Death, and Sacrifice in Moche Religion and Visual Culture* (Austin, 2006) pp. 55–56.
 13. Rebecca R. Stone, *The Jaguar Within: Shamanic Trance in Ancient Central and South American Art* (Austin, 2011) p. 172.
 14. Bourget, *Sex, Death, and Sacrifice*, p. 177.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
 16. Stone, *Jaguar*, pp. 171–176. Stone prefers the term “shaman,” but as it is extremely problematic to use that term outside its original culture in the region of Siberia, “ritual practitioner” will continue to be used here.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
 19. Bourget, *Sex, Death, and Sacrifice*, pp. 157–172.

20. Ibid., p. 177.
21. Ibid., fig. 2.41.
22. Ibid., p. 108.
23. Weismantel, "Moche Sex Pots," p. 501.
24. Stone, *Jaguar*, pp. 187 and 200.
25. Bourget, *Sex, Death, and Sacrifice*, p. 108.
26. Christopher B. Donnan, "The Thematic Approach to Moche Iconography," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 1 (1975) fig. 1.
27. Heck, "Krankheit," p. 118.
28. John W. Verano, Laurel S. Anderson, and Régulo Franco, "Foot Amputation by the Moche of Ancient Peru: Osteological Evidence and Archaeological Context," *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 10 (2000) pp. 177–188.
29. Ibid., p. 181.
30. Ibid., p. 178.
31. Walter Alva and Christopher B. Donnan, *Royal Tombs of Sipán* (Los Angeles, 1993) pp. 55–125.
32. Ibid., pp. 143–165.
33. Verano, Anderson, and Franco, "Foot Amputation," p. 185.
34. Alva and Donnan, *Sipán*, pp. 164–165.
35. Erica Hill, "Sacrificing Moche Bodies," *Journal of Material Culture* 8:3 (2003) p. 288.
36. Ibid., p. 291.
37. Heck, "Krankheit," p. 107.
38. Christopher B. Donnan, *Moche Portraits from Ancient Peru* (Austin, 2004) fig. 1.3.
39. Vélez López, "Las mutilaciones," pp. 267–275.
40. Verano, Anderson, and Franco, "Foot Amputation," p. 185.
41. Urteaga-Ballon, "Medical," figs. 18–21.
42. Arsenault, "El Personaje," p. 232.
43. Ibid., p. 236.
44. Ibid., p. 240.
45. Ibid., p. 229.
46. Christopher B. Donnan, "Dance in Moche Art," *Nawpa Pacha* 20 (1982) p. 98.
47. Arsenault, "El Personaje," p. 232.
48. Ibid., p. 240.
49. Donnan, "Dance," p. 101.
50. Arsenault, "El Personaje," p. 240.
51. Ibid., p. 232.
52. Donnan, "Dance," p. 101.
53. Bourget, *Sex, Death, and Sacrifice*, p. 180.
54. Ibid., p. 181.
55. Anne Marie Hocquenghem, *Iconografía Mochica* (Lima, 1989).
56. Arsenault, "El Personaje," p. 232.
57. Donnan, "Dance," p. 102.
58. Donnan, "Thematic Approach."
59. Arsenault, "El Personaje," p. 240.
60. Donnan, *Moche Portraits*, pp. 136–137.
61. Ibid., figs. 7.45 and 7.46.

62. Stone, *Jaguar*, p. 77.
63. Donnan, *Moche Portraits*.
64. The skeletal masturbation vessel from the Art Institute of Chicago (Fig. 8) admittedly challenges this statement. The odd rendering of the “feet” on that representation, however, makes it difficult to identify definitively the representation of amputation. Additionally, I have not found other representations of amputation on any other vessel depicting copulation.
65. Arsenault, “El Personaje,” p. 235.
66. Bourget, *Sex, Death, and Sacrifice*, figs. 1.7 and 1.53.

About the Authors



Katherine Iselin is a doctoral student in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Missouri. Her research focuses mainly on Greek and Roman art, but she also works on the art of the ancient Americas. Her interest in gender, sex, and the body is incorporated into both these areas.

Margaret Fairgrieve Milanick graduated in December 2009 with an M.A. from the Department of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Missouri with a specialty in eighteenth-century art history. She is currently a doctoral student in the department, specializing in nineteenth-century American art. She is also a docent at the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri and has served on the museum's Advisory Committee.

Douglas Underwood recently received a Ph.D. from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. His primary topic of study is late antique urbanism and archaeology, particularly in the western Mediterranean. He completed a M.A. in Classical Archaeology at the University of Missouri in 2010.

Maxime Valsamas is a third-year doctoral student at Washington University in St. Louis. His research focuses on Honoré Daumier's oeuvre and French caricatures of the nineteenth century.