

South America

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Ancient indigenous art of South America is unique in part because of the nature of this geographical region. This lesson explores:

1. Time Period and Location: South America
2. Nasca Line Images
3. Moche Portrait Bottles
4. Moche Ear Ornaments
5. Tiwanaku



BIG IDEA

The ancient Indigenous cultures of South America are actually older than the more familiar Mesoamerican cultures, and their people were accomplished artists, architects, and metalworkers.

1. Time Period and Location: South America

Ancient societies thrived throughout South America, with cities being discovered deep inside the Amazon rainforest. However, the cultures that lived in and near the Andes mountains have some of the best-preserved examples of artwork and architecture that art historians and archaeologists have studied in depth for an extended period of time. At the same time, the Andean region has a great deal of variation in terms of its climate and includes everything from high altitude and mountainous environments to rainforest and coastal areas. Each one of these areas produced unique forms of art and architecture.

One of the first societies to live in the Andes is known as the Caral and existed from 3500 to 1700 BCE. There is much debate regarding whether we can consider the Caral to be a true civilization since there is no solid evidence that agriculture took place there. The Caral were the first people that we know of to use the quipu, which are knotted lengths of cord that Andean people used as a sort of writing system, for communicating messages, record keeping, and even for mathematical calculations. Originally, scholars did not think that the shape of the quipu corresponded to phonetic sounds and for this reason, did not constitute a valid form of writing, but recent research has begun to change this conception.



Quipu in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art, 1476–1534

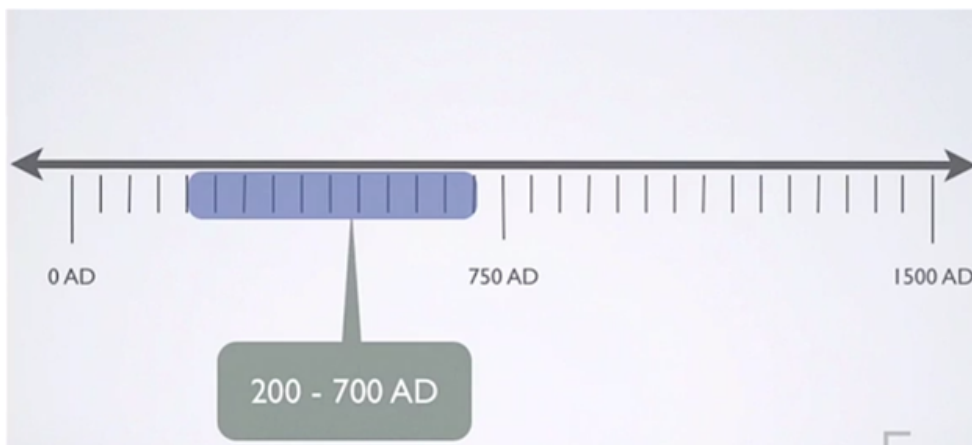
Agriculture began in South America around 2500 BCE, earlier than it did in Mesoamerica. People of the Andes grew lima beans, potatoes, quinoa, and corn, and ate guinea pigs, llama, and fish. One of the first cultures in the Andes was known as Chavín culture, which developed around 1000 BCE and was named after the site of Chavín de Huántar, where an enormous stone temple was built. This structure was a flat-topped pyramid that was built in many stages and renovated constantly over time.



Chavín de Huántar

Peru

1200–500 BCE



2. Nasca Line Images

The **Nasca** lived in Peru from 100 BCE to 750 CE. They worshiped deities based on animals that they were familiar with, including killer whales, spotted cats, and birds, and farmed the region where they lived to the point that their deforestation of trees most likely contributed to their demise. They also created polychrome pottery in up to 12 different colors that featured images of animals, birds, and humans. They covered their ceramics in slip, or a thin layer of colored clay, as a way of applying different colors.



Nasca pottery on display at an exhibition at the National Museum of Lima

The Nasca are probably best remembered for their land images or Nasca line images. These line images were made by drawing relatively wide paths in the earth, and then removing the darker stones from the Nasca plain where they were made, in order to reveal the lighter stone and soil beneath. While the true purpose of these drawings still remains somewhat of a mystery, theories include possible ritualistic processions along the lighter paths or a possible symbolic mapping system with a religious purpose.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Below is an example of a line drawing of a monkey.



Nasca line images

Peru

400–650 CE

At first glance, the above image might appear to be a cave drawing or a painting. However, it is an aerial view of a very large land drawing, or **geoglyph**.



DID YOU KNOW

In 2022, researchers from Yamagata University in Japan used drones to discover 168 new Nasca geoglyphs that were previously undiscovered. These images can be extremely difficult to perceive at ground level, so drone technology played a crucial role in their discovery. There is a lot of mining at the location where the geoglyphs were found, so this research will help ensure that they will be protected and not destroyed through mining.



TERMS TO KNOW

Nasca

A pre-Incan culture located in southwest Peru; also the name of a city and valleys in the same region.

Geoglyphs

Arrangements of elements of landscape—rocks, earth, gravel—to create artwork.

3. Moche Portrait Bottles

The **Moche** were another culture that flourished in the northern parts of Peru. They were not a single society, but rather a loose grouping of people who had cultural similarities but different rulers, much like the Maya.

Their civilization existed at the same time as the Nasca; however, they were more sophisticated, with irrigation systems that channeled water from the mountains into their fields, beautiful examples of metalworking, and ceramic portrait heads. Artists used molds to produce these vessels, which would have allowed them to create multiples of the same image. We think they are accurate likenesses of individuals. They only used three different colors but reveal a striking level of sophistication and naturalism.

➞ **EXAMPLE** This portrait bottle below is an example of their skill with ceramics and depicts what may be a warrior or a ruler:



Moche portrait bottles

Peru

100–700 CE

Painted clay

The above is an impressive example of the level of detail and realism that the artists were able to achieve.



TERM TO KNOW

Moche

An early civilization characterized by iconography and monumental architecture.

4. Moche Ear Ornaments

The Moche were also accomplished metalworkers and made beautiful gold jewelry inlaid with shell and precious stones. People of high social status wore these ornaments both during their lives and when they were buried. It was thought that these ornaments would transform them into otherworldly beings after their death. The Moche were so skilled at metalworking that they had even mastered an early form of gold plating.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here is an example of ear ornaments in gold and semiprecious stone from Sipán, Peru:



Ear ornament

Sipán, Peru

300 CE

Gold and semiprecious stone

This is another impressive example of the attention to detail that these artists had. Each tiny piece would have been independently cut, shaped, and applied on a miniature scale. These were found with an assortment of other funerary items in a tomb of a warrior priest in Sipán.

5. Tiwanaku

The Tiwanaku civilization existed from 600 to 1000 CE in and around southern Peru, Bolivia, and northern Chile. It is named after the capital city located near Lake Titicaca in Bolivia, where close to 30,000 people lived at the height of Tiwanaku culture. They were people of different ethnicities who came together for political purposes and to build monuments. The monolithic Gateway of the Sun has today been moved from its original location but is a rather large block of carved stone with a central doorway. Above it is a carved relief depicting a deity, possibly a sun or sky deity, with rays emanating from his head.

➞ EXAMPLE Below is an image of the monolithic Gateway of the Sun.



Gateway of the Sun

Tiwanaku, Bolivia

375–700 CE

Notice the puma. The puma was the largest predatory animal in this region and would have been a symbol of power. There are smaller attendant figures beneath him. The entire piece would have originally been elaborately decorated, the deity in gold and turquoise inlay, and the lower reliefs in colorful paint.

➞ EXAMPLE This is an example of a Tiwanakuan stela sculpture, which contrasts noticeably with the realism of the Moche portrait bottle shown previously in this lesson.



Tiwanaku stela sculpture

Tiwanaku, Bolivia

200–400 CE

This is a very boxy, stylized depiction of an individual rendered in shallow relief. Its discovery in a temple and the fact that it appears to be holding some sort of tablet may suggest that it served some sort of religious function or simply as a marker to the entrance of a sacred structure.



SUMMARY

Ancient Indigenous cultures of South America, such as Nasca, Moche, and Tiwanaku, had many accomplished artists, architects, and metalworkers. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of South America**.

You explored art from these three South American civilizations. You started off by looking at **Nasca line images**. These enormous drawings were made by drawing relatively wide paths in the earth, then removing the darker stones. Next, you explored **Moche portrait bottles** and **Moche ear ornaments**. Finally, you learned about **Tiwanaku**, a civilization that existed for almost 1,000 years.

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Nasca

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