

Nearly all ancient civilizations developed some means of portraying specific individuals. This often involved a generic depiction of a person the same age and sex as the subject, along with symbolic elements that enabled the viewer to identify the individual. Some ancient societies created caricatures of the individual's face or emphasized an unusual anatomical feature to facilitate identification. Others provided accompanying text that named the individual and described his or her role and importance. Only a few ancient civilizations actually developed true portraiture—showing anatomical features of a person with such accuracy that the individual could be recognized without relying on accompanying symbols or texts. Of all the civilizations that developed in the Americas prior to European contact, only one perfected true portraiture and produced it in quantity. That civilization, the Moche, flourished on the north coast of Peru between approximately A.D. 100 and 800.

Moche portraits are among the most varied, objective, and confident portraits produced by any civilization of the ancient world. They include an astonishing range of physical types, and allow us not only to meet Moche people who lived more than fifteen hundred years ago, but even to sense the nuances of their individual personalities.

Moche portraits were made as portable ceramic vessels. They range between six and forty-five centimeters in height, but most are between fifteen and thirty centimeters. They were made as bottles, jars, or bowls—all of which could have been used to contain liquid. Usually, the faces are somewhat smaller than life-size.

Most Moche portraits are in the form of human heads (figs. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7), but there are also full-figure portraits with realistic portrait faces (figs. 3, 4). This study, which centers on the portrait head vessels, is based on a systematic analysis of more than nine hundred examples that today are in museums and private collections throughout the world.

The Moche

The Moche inhabited an arid coastal plain, bordered on the east by the Andean Cordillera and on the west by the Pacific Ocean. Most of their settlements were located in a series of valleys whose rivers cut across the coastal plain, carrying water from the mountains to the sea.

By channeling the rivers into a complex network of irrigation canals, the Moche greatly extended the land under cultivation, thus supporting abundant agriculture. They therefore sustained a dense, highly stratified population and were able to allocate large numbers of workers to the construction and maintenance of irrigation canal systems, pyramids, palaces, and temples.

Although the Moche had no writing system, they left a vivid artistic record of their beliefs and activities. Moche metalworkers produced remarkable objects of gold, silver,



and copper, while weavers created sumptuous fabrics from cotton and wool. Other artists pyroengraved gourds, painted colorful wall murals, and carved and inlaid bone, wood, and stone.

Yet the Moche are most well known and widely appreciated today for their beautifully modeled and painted ceramic vessels. Moche potters were consummate masters of three-dimensional sculpture. In clay, they created lifelike animals, plants, and anthropomorphic deities. They portrayed hunting and fishing activities, mountain tableaux, rituals of combat, and elaborate ceremonies. True portraiture was among the greatest achievements of Moche potters.

Unfortunately, more than 95 percent of Moche portrait vessels in museums and private collections today were looted by grave robbers, and their provenance is unknown. Although we can be confident that nearly all of them came from graves, they were not made for funerary purposes. They were made to be used, and indeed most show signs of wear—abrasion, chipping, or mended breaks—that occurred prior to their placement in graves. It is likely that only a small percentage of the total number of ceramic portraits produced by the Moche were ultimately put in graves. Most were probably broken while in use; their shards are sometimes found in Moche refuse deposits, usually at important centers that have associated pyramid and palace complexes.

Portrait head vessels have been found in only a few of the Moche graves that have been excavated archaeologically. They occur in graves of both males and females—almost exclusively those of high-status individuals. When found in a grave, usually only one or two examples of the vessels are present. This implies that they were not produced in great number and were seldom available to the common people.

There is no evidence that portrait head vessels were ever buried with the individuals they depicted. Although nearly all are portraits of adult males, they are sometimes found in female burials.¹ Moreover, multiple portraits were often made of the same individual, and these were ultimately placed in the graves of various people.

How the Portraits Were Made

Moche ceramic portraits were made with readily available raw materials, using simple procedures and rudimentary tools. The great achievement of the Moche potters was their mastery of the full potential of available materials and simple techniques in order to produce portraits of extraordinary artistic and technological virtuosity.

Good sources of clay, suitable for making fine ceramics, are available in most areas of the Peruvian north coast. Moche potters used two types. Their most frequent choice by far was clay that contains iron and is generally buff to dark brown in color. When fired, the resulting ceramic resembles terra-cotta, so we refer to this clay by that name. Portrait head vessels were made of terra-cotta, and it was also the primary ingredient of red and orange slips that were used to paint them.²

Much less available than terra-cotta clay, and less frequently used, was white clay. Moche potters may have imported it from the highland areas of Peru, where most of the known sources are located. It contains little or no iron and is white or gray-white. This clay was not used to make portrait head vessels but was used to create the slip with which they were painted.

Portrait head vessels were made in molds. To make a mold of a human head, the potter began by sculpting a mold matrix—a ceramic form that had the exact shape and surface detail that was to be on the finished portrait. The matrix was allowed to dry thoroughly and was fired. It was then ready to be used for making molds.



Fig. 1 Portrait of an individual wearing an elaborate bird headdress. Ceramic, c. A.D. 550. Museo Rafael Larco Herrera, Lima, Peru

To make a mold, a thick layer of clay was packed around the exterior of the mold matrix and divided with a vertical cut to make front and back halves. As the clay began to dry, the halves were carefully removed from the mold matrix, allowed to dry completely, and then fired. These two halves then became the mold in which portraits were made.

To create a portrait, soft clay was pressed into each half of the mold, and the halves were then pressed together. An opening at the bottom of the mold allowed the potter to reach inside to bond the two halves together and smooth the seams. Ropes of clay were then added to close the bottom and make it flat. As the moist clay inside the mold began to dry and shrink, the two halves of the mold were removed. The potter would then add a spout to make the newly formed chamber into a bottle, a jar neck to make it into a jar, or simply cut the top open to make it into a bowl.

The chambers of some portraits have projecting elements that could not have been produced in a simple two-piece mold. Some bird heads (fig. 1) were made in other sets of molds and subsequently attached to the portrait.

Nearly all of the portraits were painted with one or more colors of slip while their clay was still moist. After the slip was applied, the portrait vessels were carefully burnished by rubbing the damp surface with a smooth stone or bone. This left the surface smooth and lustrous.

Moche portraits were probably fired in shallow earthen pits, a method that is still utilized widely by traditional Peruvian potters. More than 95 percent of the portraits were fired in an oxidizing atmosphere, which left the unpainted areas an orange to buff color; the red slip became dark red, orange, or reddish brown, and the white slip became gray-white or cream-colored. The slip paints bonded permanently to the surface of the vessels during

the firing. A few ceramic portraits have an overall gray or black color that resulted from a modified firing technique (fig. 2).

After firing, many ceramic portraits were decorated with organic black pigment to make the hair black, or to represent face paint, mustaches, eye elements, and designs in headdresses (see fig. 7). This pigment was most likely a plant extract that was nearly clear when applied to the ceramic surface. When the vessel was heated over an open fire, the organic material scorched to a gray-black or brownish-black color. The pigment is not as permanent as slip, and often only traces of it remain on portrait vessels.

Multiple Portraits of Individuals

It is possible to recognize multiple portraits of many Moche individuals. These portraits are often so similar in size and form that they appear to have been made in the same mold, or in molds made over the same mold matrix. Yet the Moche potters and painters achieved a striking degree of variation in multiple portraits of one individual by altering the headdress, ornaments, and face paint. This clearly demonstrates that there was no concept of an "official portrait" of an individual, wherein his headdress, ornaments, and face paint were standardized and all portraits of him were to conform to that standard. On the contrary, the variations suggest that these individuals owned and commonly wore a variety of headdresses, and painted their faces in various ways.³

A great variation in multiple portraits of an individual might be expected when different artists made and painted the portraits, but even when several portraits of an individual appear to be the work of the same potter or painter, they can differ significantly. It appears that potters and painters deliberately avoided duplication, and attempted to make each portrait unique.

Warriors and Prisoners

Most, if not all, of the individuals shown in Moche portraits would have been important figures in their society, and probably participated in various ceremonial activities. From their portrait head representations alone, however, it is extremely difficult to determine what those activities may have been. Fortunately, in some instances it is possible to identify individuals who are depicted in portrait head vessels and are also depicted in full-figure portraits. Because the full-figure portraits illustrate how an individual dressed and what he held in his hands, they provide interesting clues about the activities in which that person participated. Full-figure portraits indicate that some of the individuals depicted in portrait head vessels were warriors who participated in ceremonial combat and ultimately suffered capture and ritual sacrifice.

Moche artists frequently depicted warriors and warrior activities, and hundreds of these depictions can be found in museums and private collections today. These can be arranged into a sequence of activities that we refer to as the Warrior Narrative.⁴ It begins with paintings of warriors who are ready for combat. They are elegantly dressed in elaborate clothing and ornaments, and generally hold weapons and shields. Some paintings portray the actual fighting, which almost always involved pairs of warriors engaged in hand-to-hand combat. The objective was to capture rather than kill the opponent. Once a warrior was defeated, his clothing, weapons, and ornaments were removed, and he was paraded nude to a ceremonial precinct. There the Sacrifice Ceremony was enacted—the captives had their throats slit to drain their blood, and the blood was consumed from tall goblets by priests and priestesses.

Given the elaborate clothing, weapons, and ornaments of the Moche warriors, they must have been people of high status. In this regard, they were similar to Medieval



Fig. 2 Portrait of Bigote. Ceramic, c. A.D. 450. Private collection/Daltnau, Lima, Peru



Fig. 3 Portrait of Bigote as a warrior. Ceramic, c. A.D. 450. Museo Rafael Larco Herrera, Lima, Peru



Fig. 4 Portrait of Bigote as a prisoner. Ceramic, c. A.D. 450. Museo Rafael Larco Herrera, Lima, Peru

European knights who dressed themselves and their horses at great expense in order to participate in jousting matches with splendid pageantry. In Moche society, the high-status adult males who participated in combat must have done so willingly, even though capture and sacrifice of some of the participants would have been the predictable outcome.

One of these warriors shown in portrait head vessels can be easily recognized by his large, bushy mustache, round goatee, and forelock (fig. 2). I have named him Bigote, the Spanish term for mustache. Some full-figure portraits show Bigote as a warrior holding a war club and shield (fig. 3). Other full-figure portraits show him at a later time, as a captive who had been defeated in combat—nude, with his hands tied behind his back and a rope around his neck (fig. 4).

It is interesting to consider why some of the individuals shown as portrait head vessels, like Bigote, are also shown as nude or seminude captives with ropes around their necks. One possibility is that these individuals were captured from an enemy group, and artists of that group subsequently commemorated the capture by producing portraits of these men as prisoners. But the portraits were not produced in peripheral regions that may have been engaged in warfare with the people of these valleys. All evidence strongly indicates that the portraits of individuals as prisoners were produced by the same group of potters that made the other portraits of them—not by a foreign group.

Portraits of individuals as captives must have been made to commemorate the capture and sacrifice of specific individuals whose role, status, and appearance were well known in Moche society. It is unlikely that their nude portrayal, with ropes around their necks, was demeaning or insulting. On the contrary, it may have been seen as praising or honoring the individual, commemorating the fact that he was ultimately sacrificed for the common good. This concept may be more easily understood if we consider the reasons for producing depictions of the crucifixion of Christ and the emotions that these works engender when viewed by Christians.



Fig. 5 Portrait of Cut Lip at about ten years of age. Ceramic, c. A.D. 500. Museo Rafael Larco Herrera, Lima, Peru

Fig. 6 Portrait of Cut Lip in his early twenties. Ceramic, c. A.D. 500. Museum Reitberg Zurich, Switzerland; Eduard von der Heydt Collection

Fig. 7 Portrait of Cut Lip in his mid-thirties. Ceramic, c. A.D. 500. Private collection, North Carolina

Individuals Portrayed at Different Ages

In studying Moche portraits, I became intrigued with the possibility of finding portraits of individuals that had been made at different times in their lives, but I wondered how they could be identified.⁵ The difficulty is that an individual's appearance changes significantly as he grows older, and a portrait of someone in his youth may have little resemblance to a portrait of that person years later. It occurred to me, however, that facial scars might provide a key—if an individual acquired distinctive facial scars in his youth, and these scars were consistently shown in his portraits, they could be used to identify portraits of him at any later age. With this possibility in mind, I began to search for portraits of individuals with distinctive facial scars.

One individual who has such scars is shown in figure 5. It is fortunate that there are forty-six portraits of him in our sample—the largest number for any individual. Key to his identification is a distinctive scar on the left side of his upper lip. In many of his portraits, this scar consists of two short, slightly converging lines that in some portraits actually merge to form a wishbone shape. Most of his portraits also exhibit two short parallel scars above the right side of his upper lip; some display another short scar there as well. I have named him Cut Lip.

There is no way to determine the precise age of an individual in any Moche portrait. Even estimates are clearly subjective and cannot be verified. Nevertheless, in the discussion that follows, I have suggested Cut Lip's age in each of his portraits, based on the judgments of various people who were asked to arrange photographs of his portraits in sequence from youngest to oldest and assign an age to each. There were some discrepancies in the way people sequenced the portraits and in the ages they assigned to them, but there was considerable consensus in selecting the youngest and oldest portraits, and the overall sequence and approximate ages were similar.

Figure 5 illustrates what appears to be the youngest portrait of Cut Lip. It portrays him as a boy, at perhaps ten years of age. Several images in the sample show him somewhat older, perhaps in his mid-teens, and three others show him in his late teens.

Four portraits show Cut Lip in what may be his early twenties (fig. 6), several more in his mid-twenties, and some in his late twenties. Two portraits also show him in his early thirties. But by far, the greatest number of Cut Lip's portraits depict him in what appears to be his mid-thirties (fig. 7). Since the apparent earliest portrait shows Cut Lip at about age ten, his status was probably inherited rather than acquired; it is unlikely that he could have done anything at such a young age to earn a position of importance in Moche society. It is much more likely that he was ascribed high status in his youth by being part of an elite family. Only later, as he matured into adulthood, would he have assumed important roles.

In many of his portraits Cut Lip wears a tapestry band wrapped around his head. The amount and type of elaboration on the band varies considerably, but the decoration does not become more complex as he ages.

In contrast, the use of ear ornaments does appear to correlate with age. None of the younger portraits—those showing him before his early thirties—have ear ornaments. Yet nearly all portraits of him in his thirties portray him with ear ornaments or with large holes in his earlobes from which ornaments had been removed. Perhaps he did not wear ear ornaments until he was in his thirties.

The use of face paint also appears to correlate with age. None of the portraits of him younger than his early twenties has face paint. From then until his mid-twenties, however, an increasing percentage of portraits show him with red cheek-stripes, and nearly all of his later portraits show him with this type of face paint. Organic black designs painted on his face and neck do not occur on portraits of him until his mid-thirties (fig. 7).

The portraits of Cut Lip probably showed his appearance at the time that each portrait was made. We cannot eliminate the possibility, however, that the portraits of him in his youth were produced when he was considerably older. Still, it is noteworthy that the scar on the left side of his upper lip changes between his earlier and later portraits. All portraits showing him younger than thirty depict the scar with a distinctive wishbone shape, while nearly all showing him after that age depict the scar as two unconnected lines. Part of his scar may have faded over time, thus eventually making it appear as two separate lines. This would imply that his portraits were indeed made as he aged.

We do not know how many other Moche individuals had their portraits made at different stages of their lives. Unusual factors have enabled us to identify portraits of Cut Lip at different ages: he had distinctive facial scars that are shown clearly and consistently, and he acquired these scars early in his life. Without these scars, it would not have been possible to demonstrate conclusively that the youthful portraits were of the same person as the portraits done later in life. This suggests the interesting possibility that some portraits of youths in our sample may be of individuals for whom we also have adult portraits.

Another factor helping us identify portraits of Cut Lip at various ages is that many portraits of him have survived and are available for study. The greater the number of portraits of an individual, the higher the probability that the portraits will show him at different ages.

Observations and Conclusions

It is important to consider how our perception of Moche portrait head vessels is affected by the nature of our sample. Only a small fraction of the portraits that were produced are in museums and private collections today. Most of them were probably broken through

use, and relatively few were put in graves as funerary offerings. Of those that were put in burials, many have been destroyed during looting. Others are undoubtedly in graves that have not yet been excavated.

Perhaps the best evidence of the relatively small size of the existing sample comes from the nature of portrait head production. If only one or two portraits of an individual were to have been produced, it would have been much more efficient simply to hand-model them. Yet highly skilled potters invested considerable time and effort making the mold matrices, and additional time and materials in producing the molds. This would have been warranted only if many copies of the portrait vessel were to be produced. Of the more than 750 distinct individuals included in the sample, however, most are represented by only one portrait. The greatest number of portraits that appear to have come from the same mold is six. Moreover, the sample includes thirteen molds for making portrait head vessels, but only one can be matched with a vessel that was produced in it. The other twelve must have been used to produce many portrait head vessels, but not one example has been located. Clearly, our sample includes only a tiny fraction of the portraits that the Moche produced.

One of the greatest limitations of our sample is the general lack of provenance data. Most of the portrait vessels came from plundered graves; we seldom know even which valley the vessels are from. Without more information on provenance, we are limited in the ability to reconstruct the production and distribution of Moche portraits or to understand how and where distinct portrait styles developed. If sets of portraits could be connected to specific sites, relationships between contemporaneous styles could then be reconstructed and an assessment made of their impact on the development of Moche portraits through time.

Even more could be achieved if the vessels were from archaeologically excavated burials, where the age and sex of the individuals, as well as the full inventory of associated materials, could be documented. Hopefully, such vessels and their associated data will become available for future research.

The existing sample of portrait vessels could potentially provide valuable information through chemical and geological analysis of clays. It would be particularly interesting to know whether the portraits of specific individuals were made of the same clays and whether distinct clays can help determine workshops, or even valleys, in which the portraits were produced.

Nearly everyone who has seen Moche portrait vessels has wondered why the Moche produced them and how these portraits functioned in their society. These questions are not answerable with currently available evidence, but some clues do exist. First, the fact that the portraits were made in molds strongly suggests that they were to be produced in great numbers. When we examine multiple portraits of the same individual that appear to have been made in the same mold, it is often evident that they were produced by more than one potter and painter. This suggests that multiple potters and painters were working together, perhaps in the same workshop, and sharing the available molds.

All this leads us to wonder how these potters and painters were supported, and how the portraits were distributed and used. An important piece of evidence comes from an observation by Rafael Larco, who lived for many years on the north coast of Peru and developed an extraordinary collection of Moche ceramics. He noted that portraits of the same individual could be found at different Moche sites in the same valley and in some instances even in a different valley.⁶

All of the portraits of an individual may have been produced in one locale, and subsequently distributed elsewhere. A plausible explanation for this would be that the potters and painters were supported by the important individuals whose portraits they were producing, and that the portraits were then distributed to other powerful people in order to cement allegiances or demonstrate relationships. Those who received the portraits, whether living

at other sites in the same valley or living in different valleys, would then have a tangible and recognizable object to document their affiliation with the individual whose portrait they possessed.

Alternative scenarios are also possible. Since the portrait molds were produced on mold matrices, multiple molds may have been made for distribution to ceramic workshops in different locations. Portraits of the same individual could then have been made in various workshops, including some that were far apart. If this were the case, however, the distribution of the molds to separate workshops is still likely to have been governed by social and political allegiances, and the possession of portrait vessels may still have been a means of demonstrating affiliation to the person depicted in the portrait.

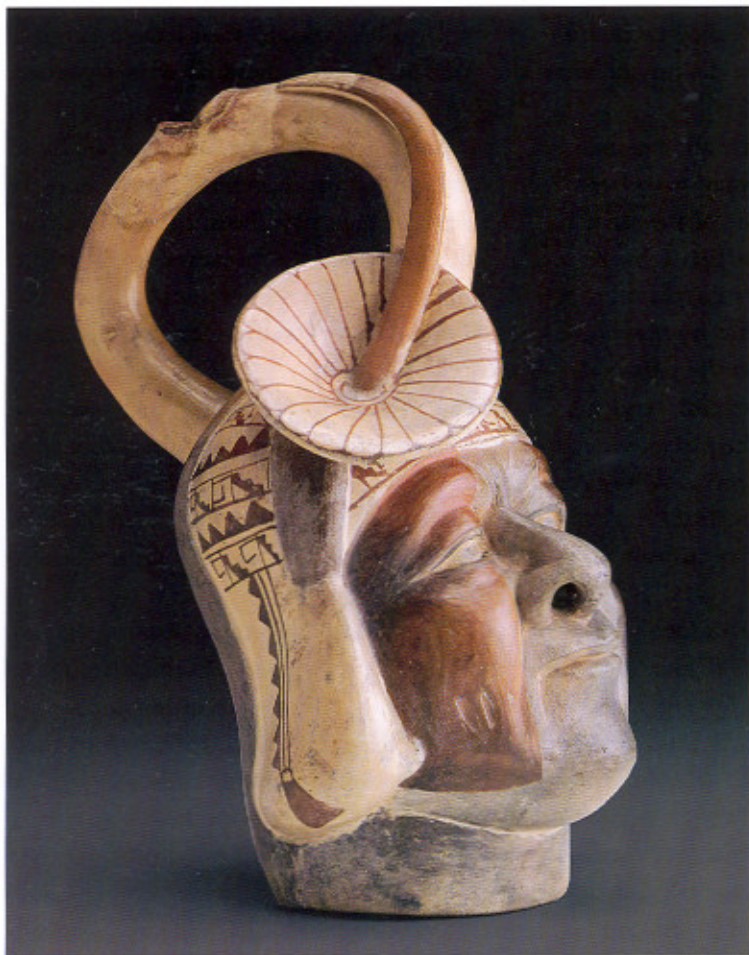
The evidence of wear and breakage on portrait vessels indicates that they were in active use, presumably in the places where they were distributed. How they ultimately were chosen to be included in someone's grave is impossible to reconstruct on the basis of the information available today. It is clear, however, that the portraits often ended up far from their place of production, or at least in locations different from where the original mold matrix was made.

Curiously, the Moche suddenly stopped producing realistic portraits about A.D. 600, and during the last phase of their civilization they made only generic human-head representations. The sudden loss of realism has interesting parallels with other aspects of Moche art. During the early phases of Moche culture, the predominant subjects in their art were supernatural figures, supernatural activities, and animals. Later, this began to shift to a greater emphasis on human figures and activities. This emphasis peaked at the same time that the greatest quantity and quality of realistic human portraits were produced. At that time, the art focused heavily on the activities of high-status adult males: deer hunting, Ritual Running, ceremonial combat, and the parading and sacrificing of prisoners were among the most frequently depicted activities. When portrait production ended, the predominant focus of Moche art suddenly returned to supernatural figures and activities.⁷ This strongly implies that the development of Moche portraiture was closely linked to the emphasis on depiction of high-status males.

The cause of this sudden shift is not clear, but it correlates with other indications of a severe disruption of Moche culture. The Moche suddenly abandoned major settlements that had been occupied for centuries, and they established new centers of power. It has been proposed that a severe and prolonged drought, occurring between A.D. 562 and 594, played a major role in the disruption.⁸

Whatever the cause, Moche art was clearly not immune to the turbulent upheaval within the Moche world that marks this time period. The sudden decrease in representations of high-status adult male activities, along with the sudden end of realistic portraits, strongly indicates a fundamental change in Moche society and in the function of Moche art. The focus on high-status adult males, which had been continually increasing for centuries, suddenly turned away from this evolutionary trajectory. The fact that both portraiture and the overall subject matter of Moche art reverted to what it had been earlier suggests that an archaic revival was involved—perhaps a deliberate attempt to return to what had worked in earlier times.

The causes of archaic revivals have been many and varied in human societies, but they generally involve dissatisfaction with present conditions and a longing to recapture the better conditions of a previous time. As more evidence is available, it will be interesting to try to reconstruct the circumstances responsible for the end of portraiture in Moche society. Meanwhile, we are left with a fascinating corpus of portraits whose artistic and technological quality rank them among the most remarkable of the ancient world.



1 *Man with a Flower Headdress*

Unidentified artist (Peruvian, Moche culture)
 Painted earthenware, 26 cm (10¼ in.) height, A.D. 100–600
 The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois

2 *Portrait Jar of Man with Scarred Lip*

Unidentified artist (Peruvian, Moche culture)
 Painted earthenware, 15 cm (5¾ in.) height, A.D. 100–600
 The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois

3 *Stirrup Head Vessel*

Unidentified artist (Peruvian, Moche culture)
 Painted earthenware, 30 cm (11¾ in.) height, A.D. 100–600
 The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; Buckingham Fund





4 *Male Effigy Vessel*

Unidentified artist (Peruvian, Moche culture)
Painted earthenware, 24 cm (9 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.) height, A.D. 100–600
The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; gift of Nathan Cummings

5 *Male Effigy Vessel* (stirrup missing)

Unidentified artist (Peruvian, Moche culture)
Painted earthenware, 10.5 cm (4 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.) height, A.D. 100–600
The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; Buckingham Fund

The Moche people of the north coast of Peru were outstanding ceramists and among the earliest portrait-makers in the Americas. Most Moche portraits were integrated into mold-made ceramic stirrup-spout vessels, usually no taller than thirty centimeters. Often they were produced in multiples and distributed over wide distances. In some cases, portraits show the same individual at different ages. Archaeologist Christopher Donnan, an authority on Moche portraits, has stated that Moche potters “excelled at rendering facial features accurately, and did so with such skill that the portraits often provide a sense of the individual’s personality.”