Basic Detail Report

Feline Effigy Pot with Trophy Head

Date

ca. 1300-1470

Medium

Blackware

Description

Burnished Chimu blackware pot, mold-made, with large flaring rim, decorated with a large feline face with bared teeth above a small human face or trophy head. One small chip on rim, otherwise in good condition. _____ This mold-made Chimú vessel of burnished blackware has a large flaring rim and is decorated with a large feline face with bared teeth above a small human face or trophy head on the side of the vessel body. Feline (or cat) imagery was commonly employed on a wide range of Pre-Columbian artifacts, including pottery, textiles, metalwork, and even in site planning (the archaeological ruins on the slopes of Mount Sangay, Ecuador, consist of tolas mounds arranged in the shape of a jaguar, and the Inca capital city of Cuzco, Peru, was laid out in the form of a puma). Recognizable by a typically snarling face with prominent fangs, cat-like elements are often blended with human characteristics as well as features from other animals such as snakes and birds to form a variety of fantasy creatures, including "monsters" and "dragons". Jaguars are the largest and strongest spotted cats in the Americas, and have had a profound influence on prehistoric art. Because jaguars are equally at home in trees and on land, they are seen as mediators between ground-dwelling humans and the divine; deities communicate to the world of mortal men through the jaguar. Both studies of modern people from lowland South America and writings from shortly after the Spanish Conquest emphasize the close association of shamans with jaguar spirits and the recurrent themes of jaguars as procreators, sexual unions with jaguars, jaguar-men and jaguar clans. Jaguars are usually depicted with curly tails in Pre-Columbian art. For more information, please see The Cult of the Feline (1972), edited by Elizabeth P. Benson, Dumbarton Oaks: Washington, DC. Trophy heads are common subjects in Nazca art, where they are often painted on pottery vessels, but they far less common in Chimú art. Over 100 trophy heads are known from Nasca archaeological sites; they show evidence of careful preparation and mummification, with brains removed and occasionally with padding added to the skin of the face for a more lifelike appearance, and they have holes bored in the foreheads for carrying ropes (sometimes made from human hair taken from the trophy head itself). The artistic conventions of painted trophy heads appear to have their origins in verifiable cultural practices. Findings of actual trophy heads are rare in prehistoric Peruvian cultures other than Nazca, although there are two documented cases from Moche contexts in northern Peru. (reference: "Modified human skulls from the urban sector of the pyramids of Moche, northern Peru, " (1999) by John W. Verano et al, in Latin American

Antiquity 10(1): pp.59-70.). Blackware is a generic term used to describe the dark-colored ceramics fired in a reducing atmosphere, that is, without oxygen. A reducing atmosphere is produced in several different ways, but usually involves smothering the fire just enough to remove excess oxygen while still allowing it to burn hot enough to successfully fire the pottery. Unlike ceramics fired in an oxidizing atmosphere with plenty of oxygen, which may be various shades ranging from creamy buff to orange or red depending on the color of the clays used, ceramics fired in a reducing atmosphere will be gray or black in color. The process used to produce blackware is also called smudge-firing. Burnishing is the process of producing ceramics with a shiny surface without using a glaze. To produce burnished surfaces, potters must wait until the ceramics are nearly dry, and then must rub the surface to align the surface clay particles with a smooth object, usually a round, flat-sided stone. Sometimes only certain areas of a pot or a figure are burnished, since the contrast between glossy burnished surfaces and matte unburnished areas can produce a variety of decorative effects. What was this used for? The function of pre-Columbian ceramic vessels is not easy to ascertain. On the one hand, the vessels in the Johnson Museum's collection are lovely pieces of art, often with detailed imagery which makes their appearance of interest apart from any mundane functionality. On the other hand, these lovely vessels were still created as vessels rather than as figures, so presumably their functional aspect was important to the maker. Because these pieces of pottery were deposited in graves, the question also arises as to whether or not similar items were used on a daily basis. Were these vessels made for the dead, fancy grave goods with specific religious or mythical imagery, or were they treasured possessions used in life? Many of the ceramics found in the Johnson Museum are highly decorated, but it should be remembered that in any archaeological site, these fancy vessels are only a small fraction of all the pottery found. Although the vast majority of pottery made in the past was functional ware used to cook, store, or serve foods, more elaborate (fancy) pieces served the additional purpose of conveying social information. Just as your grandmother might have kept her fancy china on display in a cabinet to show it off to friends and family, it appears that pre-Columbian people may have similarly had special items for display in their homes. According to the earliest chroniclers after the Spanish conquest, people put pottery on display in their homes which reflected what they did to make a living; for example, fishermen displayed pots with sharks in their homes, while hunters displayed pots with deer and other land animals. Chimú (AD 900-1470) The Chimú Empire, or Kingdom of Chimor, was established in the Tenth Century in the Moche Valley on the north coast of present-day Peru. By 1400 AD, the Chimú ruled an empire 800 miles long, encompassing the fertile, agriculturally productive irrigated coastal valleys stretching from Tumbez to Chillón. The imperial capital of Chan Chan, located near the modern city of Trujillo, covered 20 square kilometers, housed a population of 50,000 to 100,000 people, and included pyramids, residences, markets, workshops, reservoirs, storehouses, gardens, and cemeteries. Chimú architecture is made of adobe decorated with geometrically patterned mosaics or molded bas-reliefs of stylized animals, birds, and mythological figures. Chimú artisans used similar decorative elements in their pottery, metal ornaments, and finely detailed textiles, many of which are embellished with ornate featherwork. Chimú pottery was mass-produced in molds by craft specialists and is typically highly burnished blackware, with a wide variety of decorative motifs including birds, fish, animals, fruits and vegetables, and people. The most common shape was the stirrup-spout bottle, which often has a small monkey figure located on the spout. After the Inca conquest of Chimor in 1470, during the reign of Pachacutec Inca Yupanqui, Chimú vessels tend to have broad, flaring spouts similar to those on Inca

aryballoid jars. Chimú-Inca vessels often have shapes similar to the Inca aryballos or urpu, but are made of typically Chimú blackware and are decorated in characteristically Chimú style. Suggestions for Further Reading about Chimú: Cabello, Paz and Cruz Martínez (1992): Catálogo de la Colección Arqueológica Noperuana del Museo Casa de Colondel Cabildo Insular de la Gomera. Viceconsejeria de Cultura y Deportes Gobierno de Canarias: Tenerife. Short, pamphlet-length Spanish language text includes Sicán and Chimú objects. Cornejo B., Luis E. and Carole Sinclaire A. (Eds.) (2005): Chimú: Laberintos de un Traje Sagrado/Labyrinths of a Sacred Costume, Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino : Santiago. Text in both Spanish and English; excellent review of Chimú textiles. Martínez, Cruz (1986): Cerámica Prehispánica Norperuana: Estudio de al Cerámica Chimú de la Colección del Museo de América de Madrid. BAR International Series 323: Oxford. Text in Spanish; many vessels illustrated in black and white; compendium of Chimú ceramics with Sicán vessels mixed in. Moseley, Michael E. and Alana Cordy-Collins, Eds. (1990): The Northern Dynasties: Kingship and Statecraft in Chimor : a Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks 12th and 13th October 1985. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection: Washington, DC.

Dimensions

Height: 6 1/2 inches (16.5 cm)