



## Mythical being effigy vessel

### Date

AD 0-300

### Primary Maker

Unidentified artist

### Medium

Earthenware

### Description

Polychrome early to middle Nazca (or Nasca) ceramic vessel with strap bridge handle and tapered spout, in the shape of a whiskered anthropomorphic mythical being holding pointed objects on its knees. This type of being is

often referred to as an agricultural deity because of the crop plants in its hands, but is also known as a cat god or demon because of its whiskered feline face. More upswept whiskers may depict otter-cat deities, while side-extending whiskers such as the one on this vessel may be more typical of the trophy head cult monkey deity. Similar two-dimensional beings are frequent subjects in contemporary textiles and vessels of other shapes such as bowls and cups. The multiple-point object on the figure's left knee is probably manioc or yuca (*Manihot esculenta*), the starchy root crop from which we get tapioca; eaten boiled in soups, yuca is still a common food in Peru. The figure wears a headdress or hat with a second whiskered face, a waist-length, short-sleeved tunic, and collar-like necklace; pictures of (body painting, tattoos, textile motif, or actual) trophy heads are located on arms. This vessel has a burnished red-brown slip ground with the vivid red, tan, orange, and brown paint typical of Nasca wares. Excellent condition; whole and unbroken. All 19 known examples of similar anthropomorphic mythical being vessels date from Nasca Phases I through III (Proulx 2006). Trophy heads are common subjects in Nazca art, and are often painted on pottery vessels. 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.). Suggestions for Further Reading: Proulx, Donald A (2006): *A sourcebook of Nasca Ceramic Iconography: Reading a Culture Through Its Art*, University of Iowa Press: Iowa City. A nearly identical piece is published in Proulx 2006, p. 78.

## Dimensions

$8 \frac{1}{16} \times 5 \frac{1}{2} \times 4 \frac{1}{2}$  inches (20.5 × 14 × 11.4 cm)