

Marking the Moche: Tattoos and Body Modification in Ancient Peru
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[Animated ROM logo appears with sound sting]

[Justin Jennings standing in the preparators studio in front of a Moche mask]

Hello, I'm Justin Jennings, curator of New World Archaeology here at the Royal Ontario Museum, and also, curator of *Ancient Peru Unearthed*, our new show about the Sicán culture of Northern Peru from about 900 to 1100 A.D. *[View of three gold masks: Moche "King" Mask (gold alloy with spondylus shell eye insets, Linden 119.155), Moche Fox head (gold alloy, Linden 119.154), Moche Mask (gold alloy with spondylus shell eye insets, Linden 119.156), with text underneath: "Objects are on loan from the Linden Museum, Stuttgart, Germany and are on display at the ROM until August 06, 2007"]* Here with me today, though, are Moche objects. Moche is another culture from the North coast that dates from about 100 A.D. to 800 A.D. And these three pieces in particular are from around 200 to 400 A.D. *[Return to view of Justin speaking, gesturing towards the objects]* They are from the height of the Moche culture and they are actually three pieces that come from a royal tomb that was unearthed by a Peruvian architect around 1917, I believe.

These pieces are from Huaca de la Luna, a platform mound in the capital city of Batán Grande. *[Close-up view of three masks]* And, they are incredible examples of Moche gold work. All of them are made out of metal, with shell insets. The metal is *tumbaga*, which is an alloy of gold, copper and silver. *[Justin gesturing towards the masks]* And it's interesting here, that they would have been found with a green tint to them, and these have been conserved to their original colour.

The inlay is probably, ah, the shell inlays are oftentimes spineless, with thorny oyster. *[Justin points out the shell inlay in the Moche "King" Mask and the Moche Mask]* You see the inlay in the eye in both of these masks, *[Justin gestures to the Moche Fox Head teeth; close-up of teeth]* and then also in the teeth of this fox head. *[Close-ups of both the Moche "King" Mask and the Moche Mask]* The two masks are death masks, they would have probably been placed on the face of the individuals buried in the tomb. *[Close-up of Moche Fox Head]* This mask probably would have, perhaps would have decorated some other object, it could have stood on its own. We don't have a lot of information about the context of these particular tombs.

[Return to Justin speaking; close-up of Moche Mask]

Um, I want to focus today on this one particular piece that I find of great interest, because of what it says about body modification of the Moche, and about Moche society in general. *[View of Justin gesturing towards the mask]* There are three features of this mask that I find particularly interesting. The stains that you see on either side of this gentleman's eyes. You see the detailing, geometric motif that are found in the nose, the mouth, and along the chin.

Then finally, you see the large holes in, ah, the earlobes that would have been used to put ear spools in. Now, these two features – the geometric motifs as well as the staining on either side – these are probably marks from tattooing. And when you look at these stains, they look almost black. If you look at, for example, the chin, you will see that they were probably red. *[Close-up of the painted chin]* And it could

have been quite a vibrant red at the time in which this mask was buried. *[Justin gesturing to the details on the mask]* Outside of these tattoos here – these larger stains – you see these smaller details, these wonderfully drawn geometric motifs that are probably representative of animals and plants. *[Close-up of black line drawings of geometric motifs around the chin of the mask]*

So, for example, on either side of the nose, that's more than likely an octopus motif. These motifs might be fishes or perhaps plants. *[Justin speaking about the mask and gesturing towards some of the features]* Now, I mentioned that these are likely tattoos. Because, we have evidence for tattooing from human remains on the north coast of Peru. The north coast of Peru is very dry. And ah, so, we have found people with skin still on them – mummified individuals – that have tattooing just like this. So it is likely to be tattooing here, and not just some sort of facial painting that's going on.

The final feature that I want to draw your attention to are the ears. *[Close-up of ears with large round holes]* And you see these, these large holes, they would have been for, as I said, for those ear spools. *[Justin motioning with his hands how the ear spools connect; gesturing towards the masks]* You have a front part, a back part – two circular flanges – and then a connector in between. And so, this would be the connector, then you'd pop each one of those sides on. These were quite large, often times being ten, or even twenty centimeters in diameter and weighing about the size of a small apple, so it's a lot of weight to be putting on ones ears.

In fact, the Incas – a later culture that were conquered by the Spanish – the Spanish often called these individuals *Orejones* because their earlobes were so long they would actually sometimes hit against their shoulders. And it gives you a sense of how large these ear spools could be in these, in these folks.

Now, one of the questions that might come to mind is, why? Why are people doing this to their ears, to their face, the tattooing, the ear spools, etc. And the reason is likely markers of social status. We know that, for example, the ear spools mark social status among the Inca, and we see that a lot of times the elite are the people that are being buried with tattoos among the Moche. So, these were probably very visible symbols of, of elite status among the Moche and so you could, you could signal someone from very far away that "I am different," "I am Moche," "I am a Lord," and I think that therefore, when you look at this, it gives you a sense not only of what the Moche would have looked like, but also gives you a sense of how those looks tried to separate people within their society.

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