

Large print exhibition text

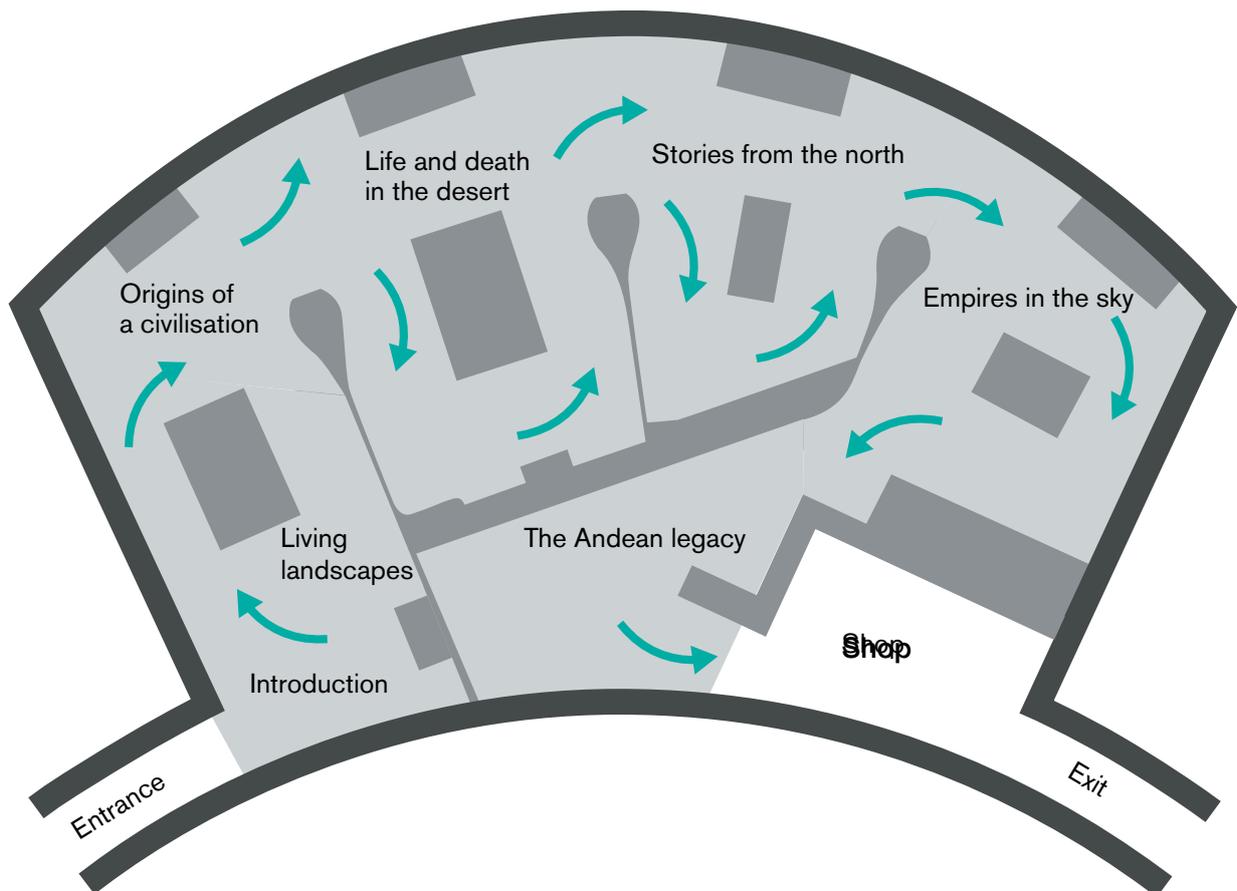


Peru a journey in time

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Peru: a journey in time

Peru sits at the heart of the Central Andes and is home to an extraordinary story of cultural development, completely independent from the rest of the world. Over millennia, people have created ways to thrive in the diverse landscapes, developing unique ways of living and of understanding the world around them. These practices and principles live on today and challenge ideas of what makes a successful society.

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Organised with the
Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru

Introduction

Wall case

[Group label]

Living objects

In the Central Andes, objects and garments such as these were recognised as living beings that played an active role in special ceremonies to seek help for communities and to prepare the dead for the afterlife. They are embodiments of power and meaning, created by skilful and well-trained artists working with ceramic, textiles and metal. In societies with no writing, objects were especially vital for expressing symbolic meaning and communicating ideas and beliefs. In this exhibition we interpret these object stories to better understand the remarkable cultures that created them.

Funerary mask

Copper and shell, Moche, AD 100–800

Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru | Donated by
James Reid

Musician playing a flute

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

British Museum | Donated by Henry van den

Bergh through the Art Fund

Art Fund_

Tasselled band with feather motifs

Cotton and llama/alpaca wool, Chimú,

AD 900–1470

British Museum | Donated by the Wellcome

Institute

[Label]

Young learners

People in the Central Andes used symbols not writing to describe their world. Pictures of the landscape, daily life and beliefs can be seen on objects in the exhibition. Look out for these labels, which help you to spot symbols on the objects.

Living landscapes

More than 15,000 years ago, people migrated to South America from the north and settled in the Central Andes.

Over time, cultures such as Chavin, Nasca, Moche and Inca successfully adapted to arid deserts along the Pacific coast, the high mountains across the Andes and Amazonian tropical forests to the east. They used resources from the sea and cultivated the land, their success dependent on cultural knowledge and technological innovation.

For Andean people, nature itself is a living being, sustaining all life and woven into shared belief systems, in which the natural and supernatural worlds are intimately connected. Andean objects show divine beings embodying the power of plants and animals, reflecting how these living landscapes can address the needs of society.

[Map heading]

Central Andean region showing Peru and some of the major archaeological sites mentioned in the exhibition.

[Wall label]

Audio: Sounds of Peru

There are sounds of *antaras* (pan flutes), *pututus* (conch shell trumpets), rattles and drums, as well as natural sounds, playing throughout the exhibition.

Ronald Sanchez Pacheco & Fred Clarke Alvarez

Projection: Landscapes of Peru

Scenes from the coastal desert to the highlands and the Amazon show the diversity of Peru's landscape.

Pond5

Living landscapes

Central case

[Group label]

Pacific coast, Andean highlands and Amazon rainforest

In this group of ceremonial objects, the diversity of the Andean landscape is represented by fish from the Pacific Ocean, a llama from the Andean highlands and a yucca plant from the tropical forest of the Amazon. Such vessels were used not only as containers, but as canvasses for expressing meaning through images. The ready availability of clay made pottery a perfect medium of communication for all Andean societies.

Bowl depicting fish

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

British Museum

Llama container

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

British Museum

Yucca vessel

Moulded and painted pottery, Moche,
AD 100–800
Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

[Label]

Feathered tunic

Communities particularly valued objects that brought together raw materials from distant regions, embodying environmental diversity. This sumptuous ceremonial tunic, probably found in a burial in the coastal desert, would have been worn by a high-ranking individual. It is made from two pieces of plainly woven cloth with a hole for the head, and is stitched with brightly coloured birds' feathers from the Amazon.

Cotton and feathers, Central coast,
AD 1400–1532
British Museum

Living landscapes

[Label]

Breastplate with feline heads

People transported luxury goods such as semi-precious stones and shells long distances across the Andes, in a network of routes spanning as far as modern-day Chile and Colombia. In this breastplate, opaque gemstones have been carefully carved to fit into four panels made from white shells. Miniature feline heads of shell and turquoise decorate the border.

Strombus shell (conch), chrysocolla and turquoise, Cupisnique, 1250 BC – AD 1
Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

[Label]

Painted tunic

The symbols on this tunic represent different landscapes, painted in cream and brown tones after the textile had been woven. They have been arranged in two bands, one showing

feathers representing the Amazon, and the other concentric circles possibly representing Andean mountain lagoons or cochas. A running scroll design at the bottom depicts the moving waves of the Pacific Ocean.

Cotton with painted designs, Chancay–Inca,
AD 1000–1470
British Museum

[Young learner label]

Landscape: Look for the symbols showing bird feathers from the rainforest, circular mountain lakes and ocean waves.

What other landscape features can you see nearby?

Living landscapes

[Group label]

The Andean pantheon: feline, bird, snake

Artists created many objects depicting birds, felines and snakes, which symbolised sky, earth and underground. These creatures were central to the Andean worldview and held the key to the pantheon of gods and ancestors. Birds represented the sky and were a symbol of night-time and war, while felines represented earth and power. Deities and fierce warrior priests were often shown with the features of owls or other birds of prey, or with feline fangs and tail. Snakes were believed to have the ability to travel the underworld, where they could access the power of ancestors and connect the realms of past, present and future.

Feline

Moulded, painted pottery, Moche, 200 BC
– AD 500

Donated by Petrus and Verónica Fernandini

Bird

Moulded, painted pottery, Moche, 200 BC
– AD 500

Donated by Petrus and Verónica Fernandini

Snake

Moulded, painted pottery, Moche, 200 BC
– AD 500

Prado Family Bequest Museo de Arte de Lima,
Peru

[Image caption]

Image from a carved stone slab representing a being that combines snakes, feline and bird features. Image courtesy: John W. Rick

[Young learner label]

Pacific Ocean riches: fish were an important food source.

What other food sources can you spot?

Living landscapes

[Group label]

Maize deity

Maize was first grown in the Andes around 6,000 years ago, and has been part of people's basic diet ever since. It can be ground and eaten, or used to make a ritual alcoholic drink known as **chicha de jora** that remains an essential part of Andean festivals in the highland valleys of Peru today. Both vessels show maize plants. In one, a deity with feline fangs holds a maize stalk and wears a headdress decorated with maize crops.

Maize plant vessel

Painted pottery, Nasca 100 BC – AD 650

Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú

Deity holding maize

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

British Museum | Donated by the Wellcome Institute

[Image caption]

A food market in Cusco, Peru, today.

Photo courtesy: Janine Costa/PROMPERU

[Group label]

White-tailed deer

White-tailed deer had a special significance among Andean societies and were a part of their mythology, as creatures able to transform into hybrid humans. In the upper coastal valleys, people carried out ritual deer hunts, in order to extract their blood as well as small bezoar stones (hard lumps built up around undigested material) from their stomachs. These were believed to have magical and healing properties and are still used in traditional medicine today.

Human-deer vessel

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

Living landscapes

Deer vessel

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

British Museum

[Group label]

Apu mountain spirits

Mountains were hugely important in Andean societies, with some of the highest peaks in the world, and people living at the highest-known altitudes. Still known as **apus**, or the spirits of the mountains, mountain peaks are believed to have sacred and protective significance. Some ceramics show sacrifices or mythical scenes taking place in these landscapes, others are more stylised. Here the stepped triangle represents the mountains while the crest at the top symbolises water flowing through river valleys to the sea.

Stepped triangle vessel

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

Bottle in the shape of a mythological mountain scene

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 400–700

Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru | Donated by Petrus and Verónica Fernandini

[Image caption]

Moche line drawing showing human sacrifice taking place in the mountains.

Redrawn from Kutscher, 1983. Image courtesy of Museo de Arte de Lima

Andean time and society

The exhibition is a journey in time, structured chronologically and focusing on some of the many Indigenous cultures that have existed in the Central Andes over the last 3,500 years.

In an Andean understanding of time, however, the past, present and future are directly interconnected and happening in the same moment. Knowing this, we can appreciate how societies view the world in completely different ways and immerse ourselves in their cyclical patterns of life, death and rebirth. The objects, people and places in this exhibition transcend time, bringing a living past into the present to influence and inform the future.

[Caption]

A representation of an Andean concept of time.

[Timeline caption]

Central Andean cultures

The names of the cultures come from adaptations of Indigenous terms. They often refer to the regions, towns and river valleys where these cultures developed.

[Timeline caption]

Ancient civilisations

The Central Andes is one of the cradles of world civilisation, and one that developed completely independent from the rest of the world.

Origins of a civilisation

About 5,000 years ago, populations expanded in the Central Andes and more people settled permanently, growing crops and making pottery vessels to store food and water. They built both public and sacred architectural spaces.

Towards 1500 BC, a new belief system spread rapidly from the pilgrimage centre of Chavin de Huantar. Here, the sound of water rushing through human-carved underground channels provided a spectacular setting for religious ceremonies. Its mythology merged human, feline, bird and snake imagery, which artists recreated in pottery and carved into stone walls. This new worldview unified coastal, mountain and tropical forest regions.

[Map heading and captions]

Early cultures and Chavin, 3000–500 BC

Major archaeological sites from the early cultures and the Chavin period

Wall images:

Chavin de Huantar, Chavin, about 1500–200 BC

Photo: Daniel Giannoni

Portico de las Falconidas, Chavin de Huantar,
Chavin, 1500–200 BC

Photo: John W. Rick

Wall case

[Group label]

Burial of a high-status 40-year-old man

This headdress and pair of ear plates were found in a tomb at the religious centre of Kuntur Wasi,

Origins of a civilisation

in the Andean highlands. They are embossed with motifs of human faces with feline fangs and hanging snake decoration, making a clear link with the belief system of Chavin de Huantar, more than 400 kilometres away. The ear plates are decorated with semi-precious stones, shells and mother of pearl inlays, showing how luxury items were traded across long distances.

Ear plates with feline features

Gold alloy, semi-precious stones, shell and mother of pearl, 800–550 BC

Headdress with mythical feline heads

Gold alloy, 800–550 BC

Museo Kuntur Wasi

[Image caption]

The tomb site at Kuntur Wasi, where the headdress and ear plates were found in 1997.

Photo courtesy: Yoshio Onuki

[Label]

Contortionist

The ability to transform the human body into different forms had a special status in Andean society. This figure might represent someone born with a disease known as Marfan syndrome, which causes loose joints, giving a person the ability to transform their shape through flexibility. The tattoos on his face and body are similar to the stylised human faces found in Chavin sculptures. The vessel was found in a grave on the north coast.

Pottery, Cupisnique, 1250–500 BC

Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru | Donated by Petrus and Verónica Fernandini

Origins of a civilisation

[Label]

Musician figurines

As early as 1500 BC, Andean artists began to use figurines to represent ceremonies that we know took place in the real world, often repeated at particular times of the year. Communities used music to create soundscapes, bringing energy to the rituals. Both these figures appear to have painted faces. One is a musical instrument – an ocarina, and the other holds a **Strombus** shell conch-trumpet, an instrument made by cutting one end of the shell and replacing it with a copper mouthpiece.

Pottery, Cupisnique, 1250–500 BC

Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru | Donated by Petrus and Verónica Fernandini

[Image caption]

Drawing showing the front and back of the figurine displayed on the right.

Image courtesy of Museo de Arte de Lima

[Label]

Seashell vessel

The seashells shown on the vessel are **Spondylus** (spiny oyster) and **Strombus** (conch), which are found off the coast north of Peru. They were associated with fertility and valued as highly as silver and gold. They also symbolised feminine and masculine, reflecting the important Andean concept of opposites, or dualism. The shells were used as ceremonial offerings, as musical instruments and as raw materials for personal adornments.

Pottery, Cupisnique, 1250–500 BC

Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru | Donated by Petrus and Verónica Fernandini

[Image caption]

Drawing showing a Chavin deity holding **Strombus** and **Spondylus** shells.

Image courtesy: Museo Nacional Chavin

Origins of a civilisation

[Label]

Pestle and mortar

The fine designs on this stone pestle and mortar show that they were used in ceremonies rather than daily life, possibly for grinding hallucinogenic plants. The motifs represent feline, snake and bird features, highlighting the importance of these animals in early Andean beliefs. Shamans took hallucinogenic substances during ceremonies to achieve a trance-like state, allowing them to take on animal form or characteristics and travel through time.

Stone, Pacopampa, 800–200 BC

Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

[Young learner label]

Powerful creatures: birds represent the sky, big cats (like jaguars and pumas) have power and snakes can travel through the underworld.

Keep your eyes open for these animals – they appear lots of times!

Contemporary perspectives case

[Label]

Andean roads

Over thousands of years, Central Andean peoples created a remarkable network of roads following natural contours, clinging to the sides of mountains and crossing ravines. This road system extended more than 40,000km. Known as Qhapaq Ñan, it connected the coastal valleys, highlands and eastern tropical forest slopes. It allowed long-distance connections and exchange of goods between different societies and regions. Many sections of this network are still used and carefully maintained by communities today.

[Digital media label]

Andean roads

People walking and celebrating the Qhapaq Ñan today, and work being carried out to maintain one of the rope bridges along the route.

Origins of a civilisation

This film is silent

Duration: about 2 minutes

Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), Proyecto Qhapaq Ñan – Sede Nacional, Ministerio de Cultura del Perú, IWC Media

[Label]

Muscular leg with sandal

The realism of the leg and sandalled foot in this vessel celebrates the role of the Chasqui in Inca society. The Chasquis were fast runners stationed throughout the Inca road network to transport messages, food and gifts. Way stations were interspersed every eight to 35 kilometres so that a relay of runners could carry a message nearly 3,000 kilometres from Quito in the north to the Inca capital of Cusco in just five days.

Painted pottery, Inca, AD 1400–1532

British Museum

Life and death in the desert

The Paracas and Nasca peoples lived along the south coast of Peru, one of the most arid places on the planet. Here, the Nasca created a network of underground canals and wells to sustain their communities, which transformed the rocky, infertile desert into colourful landscapes of vibrant life.

Following earlier Paracas traditions, the Nasca used the landscape itself as a canvas, creating massive lines and drawings known as geoglyphs, which could only be seen in their entirety from the sky. They did this by removing the top layer of earth and exposing the lighter sediment beneath. Ceramics, offerings of shells and post holes for roofs suggest that people walked among the lines and performed rituals to celebrate their relationship with the living landscape.

Life and death in the desert

Nasca people thrived in this challenging region for hundreds of years through successful and innovative ways of living. Eventually, a combination of climate change and overuse of resources led to increased desertification and people abandoning their settlements.

[Map heading and captions]

Paracas, 900–200 BC

Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Major archaeological sites from the Paracas and Nasca cultures

Wall images: Cahuachi, Nasca, AD 1–500

Photo: Daniel Giannoni

Monkey geoglyph, Nasca, 200 BC – AD 650

Photo: Walter Wust / PROMPERU

Wall case

[Label]

Vessel showing a music ceremony

Music and the consumption of hallucinogenic plant extracts were important in Nasca rituals, giving individuals the ability to transform into different states of being and transcend time. Here, a musician is shown mid-transformation, holding a panpipe in one hand. Flanked by other musicians, he wears a snake headdress that alludes to the supernatural world. Beside him is the powerfully hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus and vessels used in its preparation.

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú

[Image caption]

Drawing showing the scene on this vessel, highlighting the panpipes.

Life and death in the desert

Redrawn by Carla Rodríguez. Image courtesy of Museo de Arte de Lima

[Group label]

Sounds in the desert

Panpipes, drums and whistles once sounded across the desert spaces, played by musicians during Nasca ceremonies. Many of these instruments have been found in archaeological sites, while other objects were painted with images of such ceremonies. One particularly striking find was the discovery of 27 broken panpipes at Cahuachi, a major ceremonial centre. Archaeologists think the instruments were deliberately broken as a form of object sacrifice, possibly in a ceremony to bring fertility to the land.

Two Panpipes

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Bird-shaped whistle

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Whistle in the shape of a masked being

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

British Museum | Donated by the Wellcome
Institute

[Image caption]

Groups of panpipes excavated at the Nasca site
of Cahuachi, excavated in 1995.

Photo Courtesy: Giuseppe Orefici-Archivo
CISRAP

[Label]

Human killer whale

Some of the images depicted in the desert
landscapes were also represented in ceramic,
such as this whale with sharp teeth and large
fins. Sea creatures reflect the value of abundant
marine resources from the Pacific Ocean. This
whale has human characteristics, carrying human
heads and with a knife in his hand, as if returning
victorious from ritual battle.

Life and death in the desert

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

[Label]

Hummingbird textile

The hummingbirds on this well-preserved Nasca textile hold objects, perhaps flowers or nectar, in their beaks and against their tails. Their red and yellow colouring is distinct against an indigo background. Peru is home to more than 100 species of hummingbirds, which play a vital role in pollination, increasing plant fertility across the region. The Nasca celebrated them in ceramics, textiles and geoglyphs. Textiles like this took months of skilful work.

Woven cotton with llama/alpaca wool embroidery,
early Nasca, 100 BC – AD 200

British Museum | Donated by Henry van den
Bergh through the Art Fund

Art Fund_

[Science label]

Colourful dyes

This magnificent border, probably part of a Nasca funerary blanket, was created by someone with expert knowledge of weaving and dyeing. The base is cotton, while the hummingbirds are finely embroidered with camelid fibre from the llama family. Recent analysis at the British Museum has confirmed that plant-based dyes were used to add colour to the neutral yarns: **relbunium** for red, **baccharis** for green and **lutelin**-based yellows and mixtures with indigo to obtain blue and other shades.

[Image caption]

Multispectral images showing the presence of dyes through ultraviolet light (top) and infrared light (bottom).

Life and death in the desert

[Digital media label]

Aerial views of the Nasca geoglyphs

These views, taken by drones, show how Nasca people created gigantic lines, shapes and images known as geoglyphs. The largest are up to 2 km long.

This film is silent

Duration: about 3 minutes

Alfonso Casabonne / Estudio Casabonne

[Label]

Scene of a ritual celebration with music

This unique Nasca vessel shows a scene of eight women seated around three large vessels. They wear headdresses and are taking part in a ceremony to prepare and consume **chicha**, an alcoholic drink made from fermented purple maize. Scenes like this remain a common sight throughout the Andes today. Here, one woman

plays a drum to accompany the ritual. Two pyramid-like structures around the edge suggest that the ritual is taking place within a built, architectural space.

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú

[Group label]

Women in Nasca art

Towards the end of the Nasca period, as desertification meant that water became scarcer, artists seem to have created more images of women. This has been interpreted by some scholars as an association of women with fertility. Here we can see a man and a woman having sex, as well as a woman with long hair and a painted face. One of the most unique objects is the carved shell with what appears to be a woman's face made of shell inlays.

Life and death in the desert

Man and woman having sex

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Donated by the Wellcome Institute

Shell with a woman's face

Spondylus (spiny oyster) shell, mother of pearl, resin and string, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Woman wearing a cape with intricate designs

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

British Museum

Central case

Death and the afterlife

When a Paracas or Nasca person died, the community came together to ensure their safe journey into the ancestral realm, where they could continue to protect the living.

Skilled weavers made large patterned textiles to wrap around the dead body, creating funerary bundles to place in tombs. Inside, they placed offerings, including headbands, waistbands, metal objects and ceramics. These would ensure the continuation of the integrated cycles of life, death and rebirth. Artists also created pottery that represented severed heads and ancestors, which reveal the importance of the afterlife for these societies.

Life and death in the desert

[Digital media label]

Creating a funerary bundle

This 3D animation shows the different layers of textiles used in the process of wrapping a dead body to create a funerary bundle. It is based on detailed archaeological evidence from the cemetery of Wari Kayan in the Paracas Peninsula.

This film is silent

Duration: about 3 minutes

Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru / Mitorama Studio:
Christian Alarcón

[Label]

Funerary blanket

This textile was one of many layers used to wrap a funerary bundle before the deceased was placed in the tomb. It is embroidered with 74 images,

Life and death in the desert

28 of which have been woven into the borders. They show different versions of a human-like being holding a severed head. The figure wears a headdress, a diadem and a nose plate with feline whiskers, elements often used in images of deities and mythical beings. This imagery represents the belief that at death, an ancestor was transformed into a deity through the funerary rite.

Cotton and llama/alpaca wool, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 100

Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru | Prado Family Bequest | Restored with a grant from the Bank of America Conservation Project

[Image caption]

Image embroidered in the textile showing a human figure wearing a diadem and nose ring and holding a severed head.

Drawn by Rember Martinez. Image courtesy of Museo de Arte de Lima

Life and death in the desert

[Group label]

Funerary traditions

These rare and beautifully preserved textiles are about 2,000 years old, protected from the elements in underground tombs in the dry desert coast environment. They were used as headbands or as borders for the blankets that made up the many layers of a funerary bundle. Their fine quality and designs indicate that the Paracas and Nasca peoples must have had a sophisticated and organised textile tradition, which remains alive in other regions of the Andes today.

Textile fragment depicting birds and flowers

Cotton and llama/alpaca wool, Nasca,
AD 100–400

Fragment of a blanket with embroidered designs

Cotton and llama/alpaca wool, Nasca,
100 BC – AD 200

Headband

Cotton and llama/alpaca wool, Paracas,
500 BC – AD 1

British Museum | Donated by the Wellcome
Institute

Wall case, right

[Group label]

Severed heads

Nasca artists often depicted severed heads, both in a stylised form and realistically with eyes and lips sealed shut with thorns. They represent heads taken from sacrifice rituals and used in life-giving ceremonies, in which the life force of individuals was symbolically extracted to maintain balance in the natural cycle of life. Often the heads are held by mythical beings using a rope attached to a hole cut in the skull. Sometimes plants sprout from the heads to show the interdependence of life and death.

Life and death in the desert

Severed human head vessel

Pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Donated by the Wellcome Institute

Figure holding a severed head

Pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Donated by the Wellcome Institute

Bowl with painted severed heads

Pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

British Museum

Wall case, centre

[Label]

Ceremonial drum with painted mythical scenes

This striking drum features one of the principal scenes of the Nasca worldview. It represents the capture of defeated enemies in ritual combat,

Life and death in the desert

firmly grasped by the hair by ancestral beings, who are identified by their feline mouth masks. It also includes a group of five ancestral deities with animal features. Towards the top, three images hanging from snake-like cacti depict the main elements of the narrative: a corpse-like human hanging from a branch, a severed head on a rope and a human transformed into an ancestor. The drawing below shows this mythical scene.

Ceramic, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

Private collection, Lima

Drawing showing the mythical scene depicted on the drum.

Redrawn from Morales, 1995. Image courtesy of Museo de Arte de Lima

Life and death in the desert

Wall case, left

[Group label]

Nasca mythical being

Scholars have identified the Nasca's principle deity as a humanlike creature, sometimes described as the Masked Being. This being adopts elements of different animals but is always shown wearing a nosepiece with feline whiskers, a diadem, a bracelet and necklaces with irregular oblong beads. These objects have also been found in graves, worn by the deceased, suggesting that people might have used them in real life ceremonies, perhaps performing as deities. The drawing above shows a detail from the bowl of a figure wearing a nose ring and diadem.

Bowl depicting the mythical being

Painted pottery, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

British Museum

Gold diadem

Gold, Paracas, 900 – 200 BC

Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú

Nose ring with feline whiskers and snakes

Gold, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

British Museum

Bracelet

Gold, Nasca, 100 BC – AD 650

British Museum

[Young learner label]

Mythical beings: can you spot the twitching cat whiskers and the snake heads?

What other animals can you see being used to represent powerful mythical beings?

Stories from the north

Moche people lived in large settlements along the coast and inland valleys of northern Peru. Their impressive adobe clay buildings rose up from the desert landscape, itself transformed by large-scale irrigation systems developed to cultivate the land and provide food for a growing population.

The Moche took artistic production and design to a new level, using ceramics to tell intriguing narratives of Moche life. Their symbolic images were also carved and incised on wood and metal, and painted on the walls of palaces and pyramids. Archaeological finds reveal that some of these ceremonies took place in real life.

[Map heading and captions]

Moche, AD 100–800

Major archaeological sites from the Moche culture

Wall images: Huaca de la Luna y de la Sol,
Moche, AD 300–700

Photo: Eduardo Hirose Maio

Mural wall at Huaca de la Luna, Moche,
AD 300–700

Photo: Eduardo Hirose Maio

Contemporary perspectives case

[Label]

Sailing in the Pacific Ocean

Fishermen have been using reed boats in the coasts off northern Peru for more than 3,000 years. Today fishing boats are still made using the same techniques, from collecting and drying the reeds to final construction. These specialised skills and knowledge of the sea have been handed down among coastal communities for generations.

Stories from the north

[Digital media label]

Sailing in the Pacific Ocean

Interview with fisherman and boat builder Victor Huamanchumo, Huanchaco, Trujillo, north coast of Peru.

This film is silent

Duration: about 2 minutes

Alfonso Casabonne / Estudio Casabonne

[Label]

Fisherman in a reed boat

This vessel shows a sailor leaning confidently forwards as he pulls on his oar, rowing through the waves of the Pacific Ocean. This sea is one of the most marine-rich environments in the world and has always been a great resource for coastal people. They became skilled boatmakers and learned to navigate safely along the coastline and out to offshore islands.

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches
Museum

Wall case

[Label]

Human portrait vessels

Naturalistic human portraits such as these give us a rare glimpse of Central Andean people at the time. Some vessels have similar features suggesting that these were particular people at different stages of their lives. Perhaps the portraits represent individuals who held important political, military or religious positions. Their accessories and clothing, such as headdress and earpieces, and the use of face paint, are evidence of high status.

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

British Museum

Stories from the north

[Label]

Ai-Apaec, the maker

The main Moche deity is identified by feline fangs and a belt decorated with snakes. The name Ai-Apaec, meaning 'the maker', is constructed from remnants of the Moche language. On this vessel, he wears a ritual cape, similar to the copper cape shown alongside. The bottom of the vessel is flanked by a two-headed snake, and shows a **Strombus** shell and a lime container used in rituals. The scene symbolises Ai-Apaec's role in maintaining balance in the world.

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 200–600

Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú

[Label]

Moche ritual cape

A feline face stares out from this ritual cape, giving the wearer the symbolic power of a Moche deity. It would have been worn by an important member of the community, probably in a special ceremony to ensure the health and prosperity of the the whole group. The cape, found inside a cane basket at the site of Huaca de la Luna, reveals great artistic skill.

Cotton, copper, resin, shells, feathers and semi-precious stones, Moche, AD 200–600

Huacas de Moche: Museo 'Santiago Uceda Castillo' — Proyecto Arqueológico Huacas de Moche, Perú

[Group label]

Coca leaves, lime and ritual ceremonies

Two vessels show figures holding a lime container, similar to the gourd container

Stories from the north

displayed alongside. Its dipper still has traces of lime powder. Lime – a powder made from burnt shells or limestone – was chewed with coca leaves to make their active ingredient more effective. Officials were placed in charge of chewing coca, which played a role in many Central Andean rituals. The tradition of chewing coca leaves, which have medicinal properties that help to suppress tiredness and hunger and overcome altitude sickness, continues in Andean communities today.

Vessel depicting a figure holding a lime container

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 200–600

Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

Vessel depicting a figure holding a lime container and dipper

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 200–600

Lime container and dipper

Gourd, leather and wood, Central coast,
1400–1532

British Museum

[Label]

Human figure holding a shirt

Textile weaving for Central Andean peoples was a collaborative activity demanding many years of training. Textiles were needed for everyday clothing, but the most valuable materials and greatest skills were used to create garments that were worn in special ceremonies and for funerary purposes. Here a Moche weaver is shown displaying his most recent creation, probably awaiting approval from his supervisors.

Pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

British Museum

Stories from the north

[Label]

Weaving scene

This vase shows the earliest painted scene of textile weaving from the Central Andes. The activity is shown taking place in a workshop where eight women are weaving textiles using waist looms. Alongside are ceramic vessels and spindle whorls, which were weights used with spindles to spin the yarn. The scene also shows textile samplers, which the women would have used as a guide for different techniques and motifs. Men, wearing elaborate headdresses, are exchanging goods.

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–800

British Museum

Central case

Ritual battles and human sacrifice

Although the Moche did not fight to expand their territories and conquer others, warriors and prisoners were a common theme in their representations of the world. This was because the most important Moche ceremony took the form of a ritual battle in which pairs of finely dressed warriors engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Once the battle was over, the losing warriors were stripped and taken to mountains or islands off the coast, where they were sacrificed. Ritual battles and sacrifice were considered essential in appeasing the gods and maintaining a balance between the natural and supernatural worlds. Archaeological finds prove that these events, illustrated on buildings and on objects, actually took place.

Stories from the north

[Label]

Moche warrior pot

Moche potters created thousands of ceramics in the shape of human figures, such as this wide-eyed kneeling soldier, about to take part in a ritual battle. His tunic is decorated with spirals and circles that match those on his helmet. He wears a bracelet, probably made from gold, and holds a club and shield.

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–600

British Museum

[Image caption]

Line drawing from a Moche vessel showing two pairs of warriors engaged in ritual battle.

Image courtesy: Moche Archive, Dumbarton Oaks

[Label]

Sleeping warrior and nose ring

Moche leaders wore fine accessories, such as this crescent-moon nose ring with little discs that rattled as they moved. Moche narrative representations suggest that battles began with days of ceremony and music, in which both sides took part. The modelled figure alongside shows a sleeping warrior, arms folded across his chest, wearing a distinctively patterned helmet and uniform, large circular ear plates, and a similar crescent-shaped nose ring. These accessories symbolised a person's high status and their ability to embody a divine being during the celebrations.

Nose ring

Turquoise and gold, Moche, AD 100–600

Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

Stories from the north

Sleeping warrior

Pottery, Moche, AD 100–600

British Museum Donated by Henry Van den Bergh
through the Art Fund

Art Fund_

[Label]

Prisoners being taken for sacrifice

This boat is in the shape of a demon fish. It shows a scene in which the deity Ai-Apaec, with feline fangs and snake belt, navigates a boat taking naked prisoners to an island for sacrifice to restore order to the world. The scene includes sea wolves, or South American sea lions, which have lived along the Andean coast for thousands of years.

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–600

Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

[Label]

Priests and prisoners

Vessels such as these show figures caught up in a bigger narrative. Piecing together Moche imagery, we know that once a ritual battle was over, the defeated warriors were stripped of their clothes and a rope tied round their neck. They were then taken to ceremonial spaces, where they were presented to the priests to be killed. Moche people believed that this offering of blood to the gods was essential to maintain the balance of nature and human wellbeing in a sustaining world of life and death.

Prisoner in front of a ruler

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 500–700

Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru | Prado Family
Bequest

Vessel in the shape of a prisoner

Painted pottery, Moche, AD 100–400

Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

Stories from the north

[Image caption]

Detail from a Moche pot showing prisoners being led to sacrifice.

Image courtesy: Moche Archive, Dumbarton Oaks

[Label]

Bone spatula in the shape of an arm and fist

Spatulas were associated with ritual drug taking during special ceremonies. This unique example has been carved with narrative scenes and images in which a Moche deity, half-human and half-owl, directs the sacrifice of a naked prisoner. Other motifs include war clubs, felines and sea creatures. The images are similar to those painted on Moche ceremonial buildings, where such rituals actually took place.

Llama/alpaca bone and turquoise, Moche,

AD 100–700

British Museum

[Image caption]

Drawings showing scenes incised in the bone spatula.

[Group label]

Wooden figures from the Macabi islands

These extraordinary sculptures of leaders, mythical beings and naked prisoners were found in the Macabi islands, just off the north coast of Peru. They had been preserved in layers of guano (bird excrement) and were discovered in the late 1800s during mining by a British company, when guano was in high demand as fertiliser. Research is ongoing, but archaeologists think these islands were the location of important Moche sacrificial ceremonies of the kind shown in narrative imagery.

Three prisoner figures

Wood, Moche, AD 100– 800

Stories from the north

Human-owl playing panpipes

Wood, Moche, AD 100– 800

Two staffs, each depicting a ruler in a building

Wood, Moche, AD 100– 800

Club head

Wood, Moche, AD 100– 800 British Museum

[Image caption]

Acquisition records made when the carvings were discovered in 1871.

[Science label]

Research on the Macabi island carvings

Scientists at the British Museum have analysed the carvings found on one of the Macabi islands using a technique known as Variable Pressure Scanning Electron Microscopy (VP SEM). This

has shown that all the objects are made of wood from the carob tree. The tree grows in several South American countries and is still used for building and fuel, as well as food and drink. One of the staff carvings and the human–owl figure show traces of cinnabar, a red pigment used to prepare a body before burial.

VP SEM image of a sample of carob (**Prosopis**) wood on one of the carvings, showing the fragile and brittle cellular features. The white particles show the red pigment cinnabar.

[Label]

Gold and silver nose rings

These nose rings were found in the tomb of an important Moche female leader. Alongside her tattooed body lay hundreds of objects including pottery vessels, textiles and fine metal objects. The nose rings are made from gold and silver, associated with the sun and moon, reflecting the

Stories from the north

concept of dualism, or of everything having an equal opposite – an idea central to the Andean worldview.

Gold, silver and precious stones, Moche,
AD 100–400

El Brujo: Complejo Arqueológico El Brujo |
Fundación Augusto N. Wiese

[Image caption]

Wrapped body of a Moche female leader, known by archaeologists as the lady of Cao.

Photo © Complejo Arqueológico El Brujo |
Fundación Augusto N. Wiese

[Young learner label]

Double meaning: these nose rings are made from gold and silver, metals that symbolised the sun and moon. Now spot the pairs, including lobsters, snakes, birds and big cats.

Back wall

Chimu: the north coast kingdom

Over time, Moche influence in the region declined and the Chimu emerged along the north coast of Peru, their territory centred on the city of Chan Chan and its many palaces with towering walls. About 70,000 people lived in the adobe brick capital and surrounding neighbourhoods. Chan Chan was the largest cosmopolitan city in South America at the time, with residential areas and specialised workshops where artists produced metals, ceramics and textiles in a form of mass production. From about the mid-1400s, the Chimu were absorbed into the Inca empire, the last of the great Central Andean societies before the arrival of the Europeans.

Stories from the north

[Map caption]

Chimu, AD 1000–1400

Wall case, right

[Label]

Model of a palace complex in Chan Chan

This Chimu model recreates the space inside a ceremonial palace in Chan Chan. It shows wooden figures representing musicians, officials preparing chicha, offerings (chests and probably architectural models like this one) and representations of two funerary bundles. In real life, funerary bundles were taken out of the palace and into the city as part of a pilgrimage to represent the living ancestors taking care of society, and to show they remained alive in the collective consciousness. The line drawings above show figures displayed in the model holding offerings and musical instruments.

Wood, resin, bone, semi-precious stones and clay, Chimu, 1440–1665

Huacas de Moche: Museo 'Santiago Uceda Castillo' – Proyecto Arqueológico Huacas de Moche, Perú

[Image caption]

Adobe frieze on a palace wall at Chan Chan.

Photo: Danial Gianonni | Drawings courtesy:

Museo 'Santiago Uceda Castillo' – Proyecto Arqueológico Huacas de Moche, Perú

Wall case, centre

[Label]

Feathered headdress

This intricately made headdress was probably created for an important member of the Chimu–Inca elite, as the Inca empire expanded along the coast. It has small feathers for the

Stories from the north

main area and long feathers at the top. On the back (see right), a sea-creature motif is marked out with green, orange and yellow feathers, set between colourful geometric panels. The drawing shows how the headdress was worn.

Cotton and feathers, late Chimu–Inca,
1470–1532

British Museum

[Group label]

Lambayeque and Chimu

In about 1350, the Chimu conquered the Lambayeque, a people known for their skills in goldworking and other crafts. In order to improve their own skills, the Chimu forced the Lambayeque to resettle in Chan Chan and produce decorative and ritual objects for the city's elite. Archaeologists have found traces of their workshops in some of Chan Chan's lower status neighbourhoods.

Bottle with four human faces

Silver, Lambayeque, 1300–50

Tapestry showing bird-like beings with clubs

Cotton and llama/alpaca wool, Chimú, AD 900–1470

Ear plug showing a mythical figure

Wood, mother of pearl and shell, Lambayeque, 1300–50

British Museum

[Young learner label]

Looking good: the person on this earring is wearing a large headdress and ear decorations to show their status.

Can you see anything else that important people might wear?

Stories from the north

Wall case, left

[Group label]

Spondylus shells

Spondylus shells, valued in Central Andean societies as highly as gold and silver, are found off the coast of Ecuador, but move southwards with the El Niño climate-warming event that occurs about every four years. Only skilled divers trained to dive down between 15 and 30 metres and remain underwater for a long time were able to collect these sacred offerings of the sea. The shells were associated with the coming of the rains, fertility and the riches of the ocean. The drawing above shows high-status figures on the bowl, with divers holding *Spondylus* shells.

Silver bowl with engraved motifs of human figures, divers and *Spondylus* shells

Silver alloy, Chimu, AD 900–1470

Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

**Vessel with modelled representations of
Spondylus shells**

Pottery, Inca, 1400–1532

Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru

Drawing by Percy Fiestas. Image courtesy: Museo
Larco, Lima – Perú

Empires in the sky

In about 1400, the Inca empire emerged in the highlands of the Central Andes, eventually covering a vast expanse of territory that included parts of modern-day Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia, and all of Peru.

From their capital in Cusco, the Inca expanded their empire through negotiation and alliances, connecting their territories of influence through an extensive network of roads that bound together diverse communities and cultures.

While the Inca are well known, some of their technological developments were inherited from an earlier empire in the same region, the Wari. The Inca built on these, and also took their own systems of administration, engineering, architecture, communication, language and rituals to a new level, creating the largest empire in the Americas.

[Map heading and captions]

Wari, AD 600–900

Inca, AD 1400–1532

Major archaeological sites from the Wari and Inca empires

Wall images: Mountains surrounding Pikillacta,
Wari, AD 500–1200

Photo: Mark Green / Alamy Stock Photo

Pikillacta, Wari, AD 500–1200

Photo: Mark Green/Alamy Stock Photo

Machu Picchu, Inca, 1450–1572

Photo: Sébastien Lecocq/Alamy Stock Photo

Terraces at Machu Picchu, Inca, 1450–1572

Photo: David Wall/Alamy Stock Photo

Sacsayhuaman, Inca, 1400s

Photo: Daniel Giannoni

Empires in the sky

Contemporary perspectives case

[Label]

Inca engineering and agriculture

High up in the Andes, the Inca created more than two million acres of terraced agricultural land from mountainous terrain. This feat of engineering allowed them to grow a variety of crops at different altitudes and in different ecological zones to provide food for the empire. Modern farmers still use similar principles today, reflecting a deeply rooted relationship between people and landscape.

[Digital media label]

Inca engineering and agriculture

Interview with conservationist, agricultural engineer and farmer Manuel Choque Bravo, Urubamba Valley, Cusco, south-east Peru.

This film is silent

Duration: about 2 minutes

Alfonso Casabonne / Estudio Casabonne

[Label]

Ceremonial vessel (paccha)

The bottom part of this **paccha** is shaped as a foot plough, which a farmer used to prepare the soil for planting. Above it are representations of an ear of maize and a long-necked vessel that contained **chicha** – an alcoholic drink made from fermented maize used in rituals. **Pacchas** were used for pouring water during fertility ceremonies to ensure a good harvest.

Empires in the sky

Wall case

[Label]

Wari high-priest ruler wearing a four-cornered hat

The Wari had a sophisticated administrative system in which different parts of society, such as religious or political life, were overseen by rulers. Here, the man's ceremonial shirt and four-cornered hat, patterned with Wari symbols, show his high status. The tapestry techniques used to create such shirts were adopted and developed by Inca weavers.

Painted pottery, Wari, AD 600–900

Museo Amano, Lima

[Young learner label]

Colourful designs: this figure has patterns on their hat, face and shirt. They also appear on pots, textiles and jewellery.

Look out for more patterns – they are everywhere!

[Label]

Wari four-cornered hats

Four-cornered hats were a mark of status in Wari society, and were finely woven to create a particularly soft, velvet-like texture. Their patterns represent versions of deities and mythical beings, and these motifs were governed by strict rules laid down by Wari rulers.

Knotted textile, Wari, AD 600–900

British Museum

[Group label]

Running an empire: khipu

The **khipu** is an ingenious alternative device to a counting system that was introduced by the Wari and developed by the Inca. It was made up of a series of coloured, twisted and knotted cords that stored information, such as the number of people in a community or amount of food harvested.

Although we don't know exactly how they were

Empires in the sky

used, we do know from Spanish chronicles that they were also used to record histories, poems and songs. Research is ongoing, but Inca rulers clearly relied on **kipu** to record information and run their empire.

Wari kipu

Cotton and llama/alpaca wool, Wari,

AD 600–900

Fundación Temple Raadicati-UNMSM

Inca kipu

Cotton and llama/alpaca wool, Inca, 1400–1532

British Museum

[Image caption]

An Inca chief treasurer holding a **kipu**, drawn by chronicler Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1615.

Image courtesy: Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen

[Image caption]

An Inca **kipu** worked according to a decimal system, in which each number was represented by a different type of knot.

Image courtesy: Museo de Arte de Lima

[Group label]

Coca leaf bags

Chewing coca was an essential part of Wari and Inca life, and these bags were made to carry the leaves. Coca leaves were, and still are, shared between people when they meet as a symbol of the mutual exchange system that underpins Andean economies, not based on monetary values but on reciprocal obligation. They contain an intoxicant that reduced altitude sickness while journeying through the empire, and were also used as offerings and placed reverentially on apus (mountain tops and passes), making the bags both practically and spiritually important.

Empires in the sky

Coca bag with fringes

Woven, embroidered textile, Nasca–Wari, AD 600–800

Coca bag

Tapestry and loop, Wari influence, AD 800–1000

Coca bag

Woven, textile, Inca, 1400–1532

Coca leaves

Brazil, 20th century

British Museum

[Science label]

Finding coca leaves in an Inca bag

Scientists at the British Museum used Variable Pressure Scanning Electron Microscopy (VP SEM) to analyse the inside of the Inca coca bag. The focused beam of electrons magnified

the fibres to reveal miniscule fragments of 1,000-year-old coca leaves, confirming what the bag had been used for.

VP SEM image showing a fragment of coca leaf (*Erythroxyllum*) found inside one of the textile bags.

Central case

[Label]

European collecting and Peruvian archaeology

This Wari ceremonial shirt was collected by German geologists Wilhelm Reiss and Alfons Stübel in the 1870s and appears in their publication shown alongside. Many European explorers travelling to South America at the time became fascinated by the ancient cultures of the Andes. They recorded what they found, and sent items back to Europe, where they ended up in private collections and museums. This

Empires in the sky

contributed to the dispersal of Central Andean heritage in pursuit of both scholarly curiosity and the acquisition of others' cultural artefacts. The objects provide a material record of cultures repressed by colonising Europeans.

Funerary shirt

Llama/alpaca wool, Wari, AD 500–800

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum

Manuscript

The necropolis of Ancon in Peru: a contribution to our knowledge of the culture and industries of the empire of the Incas, being the results of excavations made on the spot by W. Reiss and A. Stübel, published 1880–87, A. Ahser & Co. Berlin, Germany
British Museum

[Image caption]

Detail from textile showing two mythical beings, one with wings and feline claws.

[Young learner label]

Clothing: this red and yellow tunic has panels decorated with complex designs.

Look closely and find people with wings and tails.

[Digital media label]

Machu Picchu

The Inca are famous for creating built landscapes in which distinctive stone architecture merges with the natural setting. Machu Picchu is a typical example and is one of the most famous archaeological sites in the world. In 1983 the site was made a UNESCO World Heritage site.

With a name that means ‘ancient mountain’, the citadel was built high up in the cloud forest,

Empires in the sky

during the reigns of Pachacutec and his son Topa Inca Yupanqui, in the late 1400s and early 1500s. It was probably an administrative and ceremonial centre, and a strategic hub between the high mountains and the Amazon, connected by Inca highways. Machu Picchu is one of several palaces built by the Inca in a place known as the Sacred Valley of the Incas, 60 km north-west of Cusco, the empire's capital city.

This film is silent

Duration: about 2 minutes

Casabonne / Estudio Casabonne, Pond5

Wall case, left

[Label]

Sacrifice rituals or Capacocha

The Inca believed that people, places and objects could bring together past and present in harmony. One of the rituals to ensure this was Capacocha,

a ceremony that involved the sacrifice of children from the community. It usually took place high in the mountains, after years of preparation. People would parade for weeks, before setting off on a journey through extreme high-altitude conditions to reach the mountain shrines or apus. After the sacrifice, the children were buried with miniature offerings in the form of human and animal figurines, textiles and pins.

Three miniature figures

Gold and silver, Inca, 1400–1532

Miniature tunic and miniature shawl and pins

Woven textile, silver, Inca, 1400–1532

British Museum

Empires in the sky

[Image caption]

A miniature figurine dressed in ritual attire as part of the Capacocha ritual.

Image © The Trustees of the British Museum

[Label]

Official Inca art: ceremonial tunic

The Inca were tolerant of other beliefs and practices, but used their own official art to signal their influence and power as the empire expanded from Cusco into other territories. Thousands of skilled craft workers were sent to provincial centres, to produce objects used in rituals and ceremonies. Textiles were a part of this organised system, and representative of wider social innovations and creative achievement.

Tapestry, Inca, 1450–1532

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum

Wall case, centre

[Label]

Carved stone llamas

Unlike the art of earlier cultures, most Inca art appears abstract in design, though their geometric motifs still had meaning and significance. An exception was the production of miniature figures known as **conopas**. These ones are in the shape of llamas or alpacas with hollows in their backs. Early colonial reports explain how Andean peoples used these objects in the preparation of offerings. Llamas and alpacas were perfectly adapted to the landscape and vital to the Andean economy for food, transportation and wool.

Carved stone, Inca, 1400–1532

British Museum

Empires in the sky

[Group label]

Containers for ritual drink

Official Inca art included distinctively shaped ceramics, produced in centres across the empire. These were used to hold liquids, possibly water or chicha, an Andean alcoholic drink made from fermented maize similar to beer. The pointed base meant it could be anchored in the ground while it was filled. People would then carry them on their back using a rope attached to the handles.

Container for ritual drink

Pottery, Inca, 1400–1532

Container for ritual drink in the shape of a person

Pottery, Inca, 1400–1532

British Museum

[Label]

Gold llama figurine

The llama is an iconic animal of the Andes and this miniature version would have embodied and communicated ideas and beliefs related to the Inca living landscapes. Such carvings and figurines were used in ceremonies in which people, place and objects came together, cutting across time, to hold the living past, present and future in one moment.

Gold, Inca, 1400–1532

British Museum

Colonial impact and enduring traditions

In 1532, the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro and his troops arrived on the coast of northern Peru. His ambition was to exploit the territory, conquer its peoples and add to the growing Spanish colonies further north.

The impact of the conquest was devastating. Disease and warfare decimated populations, and Andean practices were suppressed. The Spanish outlawed Inca beliefs and exploited the empire's resources, sending its riches back to Europe. Andean ways of life, however, were so rooted and resilient that despite this oppression, Indigenous peoples found strategies to endure, and hold on to their ways of life while dynamically adapting to a globalising world.

[Image caption]

Convent of Santo Domingo, built on top of the Inca temple of Coricancha, 1200–1600s.

Photo courtesy: Proyecto Qhapaq Ñan – Sede Nacional, Ministerio de Cultura del Perú

[Group label]

Ceremonial cups (keros)

Under Spanish rule Inca artists continued to make traditional objects, such as these wooden **keros**, adapting them over time. The Inca vessel has a delicate pattern of inlaid silver dots. The colonial version is more highly decorated with a scene of musicians, showing the diversity of migrant peoples.

Ceremonial cup (kero)

Wood and silver inlay, Inca, 1438–1532

Museo de Arte de Lima | Donated by Pedro

Ugarteche Tizón

Empires in the sky

Ceremonial cup (kero) with painted scene

Painted wood, colonial period, 1700s

British Museum

[Group label]

Ceremonial vessels (pacchas)

Water was often scarce in the Andes and some of the most important rituals included objects related to ensuring its good supply. People poured water into the **paccha's** nozzle, which then flowed along a series of channels. These vessels continued to be made in later periods, where they continued to play a vital role in agricultural rites.

Paccha with figure holding a shell

Painted pottery, Inca, 1438–1532

Paccha with an animal as the bowl and a human as the spout

Painted wood, colonial period, 1600s

British Museum

Wall case, right

[Label]

Colonial Andean tunic (uncu)

This finely made **uncu** is red on one side and blue on the other, both colours associated with Inca nobility. The geometric motifs set in squares, symbolising power and authority, and the motifs of birds and insects are also typical Inca designs. The technique of reversed colours, however, and the position of the motifs suggest that it was made in colonial times.

Tapestry with cotton and llama/alpaca wool, colonial period, 1650–1700

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum

Empires in the sky

[Label]

Early colonial manuscript

This manuscript is probably the earliest illustrated work on the history of the Incas. It includes images on their lineage, ceremonies and traditions, and was documented during the first decades after the conquest. Although early colonial writers often misinterpreted the significance of what they saw, the images are very detailed and include examples of the fine ceremonial tapestry shirts worn by Inca rulers, of which few survive.

History of the origin and royal lineage of the Inca rulers of Peru, of their acts, traditions, costumes and forms of administration,

Martin de Murua, about 1580–1616

Private Collection | Martin de Murua manuscript images (on screen) kindly provided by Juan Ossio Acuña

[Label]

Dress pins (tupus)

Pins made from copper, silver and gold, known as **tupus**, have been used in the Andes for thousands of years. Inca women used them to hold their dress or shawl in place, and the pins continued to be worn during the colonial period and up to today. In Peru, there is a village called Tupu, reflecting the endurance of this practice. Later engraved and patterned pins contrast with the simplicity of earlier ones.

Gold, silver, Inca/colonial period, 1433–1700

British Museum

[Image caption]

Inca women wearing clothing fastened with **tupu**, drawn by chronicler Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1615.

Image courtesy: Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen

The Andean legacy

Two hundred years ago, in 1821, Peru gained independence from Spain. Today the country reflects a combination of cultures, religions and transformations. Despite centuries of colonial repression and Western influence, many Central Andean beliefs and practices live on.

About five million Peruvians speak an adapted form of Quechua, the language used to communicate across the vast Inca empire. From weaving to agriculture, from social organisation to environmental challenges, the timeless connection between people and place still plays a vital role.

In many ways, past traditions inform present practice, and the enduring belief that humans are a part of the living landscape helps to shape our shared future. The objects in the exhibition

connect this narrative and provide a brief glimpse of these remarkable societies from whom there is so much to learn.

Wall case

[Group label]

Textile shawls (Ilicllas)

These shawls were produced near the border of Peru and Bolivia. The weavers have used techniques and designs seen in some of the early textiles in this exhibition. The first one is coloured with natural dyes, while the second uses both natural and chemical dyes, showing Western influence.

Aymara woman's shawl

Llama/alpaca wool, Bolivia, late 19th or early 20th century

The Andean legacy

Quechua woman's shawl

Woven and painted cotton, Peru, early 20th century

Tupu pin with emblem of Peru

Silver, 19th century

British Museum

Wall case

[Label]

Winaypaq Qaytu (Threads of Time)

Produced by weavers from the community of Pitumarca, Cusco, in collaboration with Nilda Callañaupa, founder of the Cusco Centre for Traditional Textiles

This artwork is the result of a collective project by weavers from the highland community of Pitumarca. Spanning more than 1,000 years of tradition, it reflects on the nature and significance

of textile weaving for Andean peoples. The piece is made up of four sections, each produced using a technique from a different period of Peruvian history: Wari and Inca (top), colonial and Republican (bottom). At the centre is a woven Chakana – a stepped cross motif that dates back to pre-colonial times.

Alpaca and sheep fibre, natural dyes
British Museum, Acquisition Fund, 2021

[Image caption]

Gregorio Ccana Rojo, Marina Maza Huaman,
Concepción Chuquichampi and Alipio Melo Irco
with the new textile.

[Digital media label]

Weaving for ever

Textile weaving is an important part of Peruvian identity, a tradition that stretches back more than 5,000 years. In different communities, such as Pitumarca, near Cusco, men and women still weave on looms, using cotton and llama fibres, as well as natural dyes. Here Nilda Callañaupa talks about the new textile, produced specially for this exhibition.

This film is silent

Duration: about 3 minutes

Alfonso Casabonne / Estudio Casabonne, Pond5

[Wall quote]

When we talk about time, we describe it as grandparents of grandparents: this connection is strong, it is in the weaving and in the landscape all around us. The old knowledge is better – the textiles are stronger, the colours don't fade, just as we hope the memory of our ancestors doesn't fade either.

Nilda Callañaupa, Founder of the Cusco Centre for Traditional Textiles

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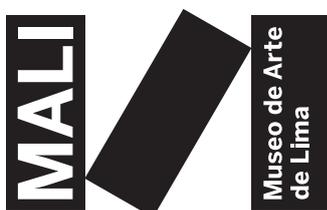
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