

A bowl from Peru – probably made between 200 and 600 AD



Before Christopher Columbus landed in 1492, potters in the Americas had no potter's wheel, no high-fired stonewares and generally no glazes. However, they did have a tradition of superbly crafted and beautiful earthenware, which had continued for well over a thousand years. The main elements of this tradition were vessels and figures, often burnished to a shiny finish, which had lively figurative and geometric painted decoration using slips of different colours. Pots following this general description, but varying in many details, have been found in most of the countries on the west coast of South America, throughout central America and in the southern parts of North America.

The bowl in the photo above was made by the Nasca (or Nazca) people, who occupied a region in present-day Peru during roughly the first millennium AD. It appears that beautifully decorated pottery was central to the Nasca culture as the remains of such pottery have been found by archaeologists in all settings (domestic, religious, civil) and from all periods. It is likely that my bowl was made some time between 200 AD and 600 AD. The slip decoration of the earliest Nasca pottery, prior to these dates, was thick and crudely done, and after around 600 AD images of birds became less frequent and it was common to place decoration on a white background.

Published photos and drawings of Nasca pottery generally show complex geometric designs with images thought to relate to their life, religion and rituals. These arouse interest because they offer the possibility of interpretation, revealing something about the lives of the Nasca people. However, a substantial proportion of the pots found by archaeologists have images relating to the natural world, with birds being a favourite subject (as far as I am aware no images of Paddington Bear have yet been found). The bowl shown above appealed to me because of its lively simplicity. I imagine the potter enjoyed painting those birds.

I enjoy a bit of ceramic ornithology and I have tried to identify what these birds might be. The shape of the body and beak suggests a duck, but I am not aware of any South American ducks (or indeed other birds) with white spots like these and I suspect that the focus was more on a striking design, rather than being true to life. However, there is a type of duck which is known to have been present in Peru when the first Europeans arrived, and has white splashes on its plumage. That is the Muscovy Duck, and I wonder whether it was that which originally inspired the bird image seen on my pot.



Muscovy duck

I was reinforced in this view when I found the following bowl which is in the Art Institute of Chicago. The birds on this bowl are rather misshapen but they have similar colouring and spots and I think it is likely that they are intended to be the same type of bird. Most significantly, on the Chicago bowl you can see on each bird an additional feature above the beak, which is reminiscent of the red fleshy protuberance (known as a caruncle) above the beak of the Muscovy duck.



My bowl is light and thinly potted, with an elegant profile and a round base, as is the case for all Nasca pots. It is possible that the hollowed-out base of a gourd was used to contain the base of the pot as it was being made. In some Nasca pots it is possible to see marks from the internal features of a gourd on the base of the pot, though there is no evidence of those on mine. The maker of my bowl concentrated on decorating the exterior, presumably on the assumption that the interior would usually be hidden by the contents of the bowl. The interior is coated with a plain orange-brown slip and lacks the shiny burnished finish of the outside. Five different coloured slips have been used on my bowl. The Nazca are known to have used at least fifteen different slip colours (though not all on one pot!). It is said that the most 'diagnostic' colour of Nasca pottery is a purple-red, which is the colour used for the base of my pot and a narrow band around the rim.

Interestingly, the people who preceded the Nasca in that part of Peru, the Paracas, also made decorated pottery, and much of the Nasca imagery appears to have derived from the Paracas. However, the Paracas decorated their pottery by painting with resinous organic pigments after firing and they made relatively little use of coloured slips. The big innovation of the Nasca appears to have been to use fired coloured slips for detailed decoration.

Some of you may have heard of the Nasca people because of the huge figures and long tracks they made by clearing the surface rocks in lines on the desert plain. Those of you who are old enough (like me) may recall the book by Erich von Daniken called 'Chariots of the Gods', which gained a lot of publicity in the 1970s by saying that these lines marked out an airfield for extraterrestrials to land. More prosaically it has been shown that the lines tend to align with important sources of water and the figures are similar to those shown on much of their pottery. We still don't fully understand their meaning, but there is no need to invoke creatures from outer space.

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