

Art communicates history of ancient civilization

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN
SPECIAL WRITER

Sponsored in Detroit by United Technologies of Troy, the "Royal Tombs of Sipan" exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Arts is the sole Midwestern venue for a five-stop national tour. The display of royal splendors continues through April 30 at the DIA, 5200 Woodward.

The 1987 find of the royal tombs in a small pyramid, considered by "Art & Antiquities" magazine as the greatest archaeological discovery ever made in the Americas, supplies a missing link in modern day knowledge of the ancient Moche.

The final resting place of three high-ranking officials, the royal tombs reveal a culture skilled in fine crafts, and bent on ritual sacrifice. Until this discovery, scholars thought scenes depicting Moche priests and sacrifice ceremonies were merely myth.

"The discovery of the tombs is so important because there was no written language. With the absence of records, this is the only evidence we have. That's what's so terrible when people loot tombs, you lose information. We had these images on their pottery. Art was a direct sort of language for them, their way of communication, and that's why the discovery appealed to early scholars," said Michael Kan, curator for the department of African, Oceanic and New World Cultures at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

"You will be dazzled by the gold. The Inca were sort of the end of the line. One thousand years before, the Moche were the greatest craftsmen, potters, metal-smiths and weavers. They wove beautiful textiles, interlocking tapestries."

Moche costumes were

elaborate works of art in themselves with small metal platelets that resembled armor shimmering in the sunlight. Beils encased in metal work hung from their waists and rattled as they moved. Spiders, owls, and other night hunting animals appear again and again on beads, nose ornaments and costumes as well as on weapons.

Spiders embodied the fierce qualities of a warrior. The Moche admired the nocturnal creatures trapped and tied up their prey before consuming their vital fluids. An owl headdress worn by El Niño, Blood Priest of the sacrifice ceremony denotes the respect the Moche held for the predatory bird.

"The owl, the spider, these were all animals that are predators at night. Warriors went to battle wearing these. There was an identification between the rulers and the animal kingdom. The spider is a hunter and bloodsucker of his victims," Kan said.

Moche pottery sporting fine line drawings depicts ceremonies of ritual decapitation and sacrifice. The Moche used pictures and symbols on their objects to tell stories about important characters such as the Warrior Priest or Decapitator, and events in their history.

Ritual sacrifice played a significant role in their religion and lives.

"There were certain rituals that had to do with the ceremony, ritual warfare. Killing was not the object of Moche warfare. Warriors were depicted by clubs and helmets. Prisoners are usually shown with ropes around their necks and hands tied behind their backs."

"Ritual warfare was solely to gain captives for sacrifice. Papaya, as placed on a banner figure,"

said Kan motioning to a Decapitator image, "were there because papaya keep blood from coagulating."

The presence of inlaid lapis lazuli in an artwork is proof the Moche traded goods such as stone and certain sea shells found in the tombs because these materials were not native to this area.

"The Moche were pretty sophisticated. The metal beads are not cast. They were hammered in molds."

"Since the Moche buried their rulers with all of their ceremonial objects and jewelry, they employed large numbers of craftsmen to create new objects."

"This probably accounts for the discovery of some of the first pots made from molds in the tombs," Kan said.

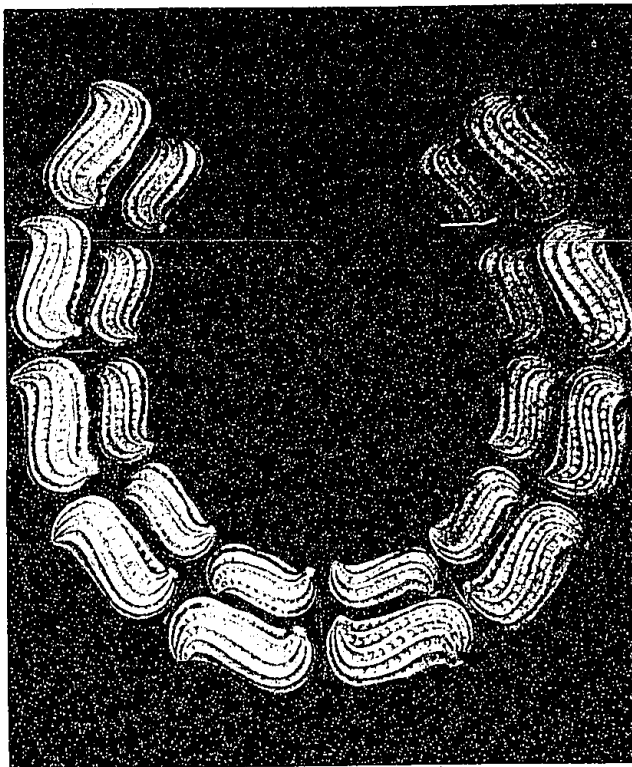
Exhibition admission to "Royal Tombs of Sipan," including a recorded tour, is \$5 for adults, \$2 for students and children. Founders Society members are free. Hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, and 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Throughout the exhibition's run a number of lectures and children's workshops will be held at the DIA.

For more information on these events, call the DIA at (313) 833-7900.

After the exhibit closes April 30 in Detroit, it will travel to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., before returning to its permanent home at the Bruning Archaeological Museum near Sipan.

A 225-page catalog authored by Walter Alva, director of the Bruning Archaeological Museum and Moche scholar Christopher B. Donnan is available in DIA's museum shops for \$37.50.



Necklace: This gold and silver peanut necklace was excavated from the tomb of the Warrior Priest at Sipan. Photo courtesy of Christopher Donnan.

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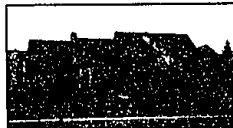


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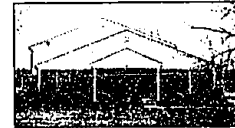
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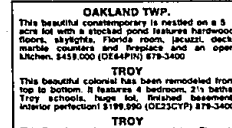
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