Family Activity: Gods in Ancient American Art
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Introduction:
Ancient Mesoamerican and Andean region civilizations believed in cults of gods that displayed both human and animal traits. These gods became symbols of the behaviors valued by the people of ancient America.

For example, the god whose body stretches over this Nazca ceramic vessel has a face that is both human and catlike. His spiky fins recall those of a shark or killer whale.

The Nazca people knew that felines and killer whales were fierce predators at the top of the food chain. The ruling Nazca warrior class associated itself with the images and characteristics of these powerful creatures as it expanded and defended Nazca land.

Activity

Materials Needed:
- Paper
- Pencil
- Watercolor
- Scissors
- Cardboard cylinder, such as an oatmeal container

Steps:
1. Choose an animal with whom you share certain qualities. If you like to swim, for example, pick an animal that enjoys the water. If you enjoy running, choose a fast land animal, such as the jackrabbit.
2. Use a pencil, watercolors, and paper to create a composition that combines animal traits with your own self portrait.
3. If you’d like, make an ancient American pot by wrapping your painting around a cardboard cylinder and taping the ends.

Glossary

Andean region (n)
territory defined by the Andes Mountains in western South America. It is common to describe as Andean those people who developed complex societies in this vast region,
especially those of coastal and upland Peru and Bolivia. The term may also be extended to include the ancient people who lived in present-day Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and the northern highlands of Chile and Argentina.

**ceramic** (*adj*)
made from fired clay

**feline** (*n; adj*)
an animal of the cat family; catlike

**Mesoamerica** (*n*)
geographical area between North and Central America comprised of the modern nations of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador as well as the ancient cultures of the Olmec, Teotihuacanos, Maya, and Aztec. The term is used to define the cultural and historical context of the people who have inhabited this area for millennia.

**self portrait** (*n*)
a portrait of oneself done by oneself