

# Transparency 10

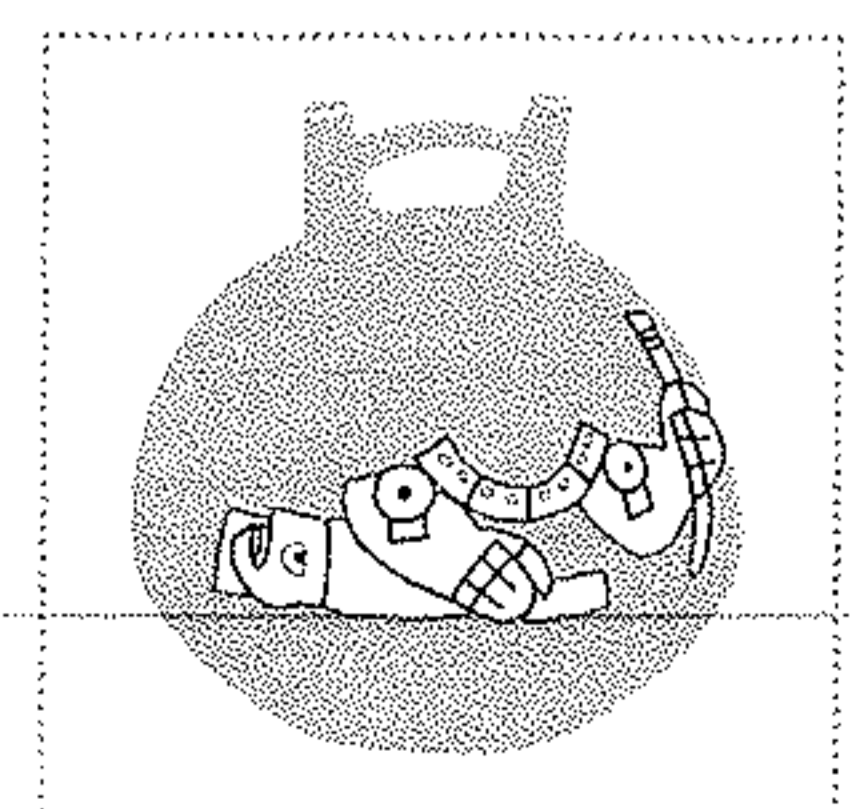
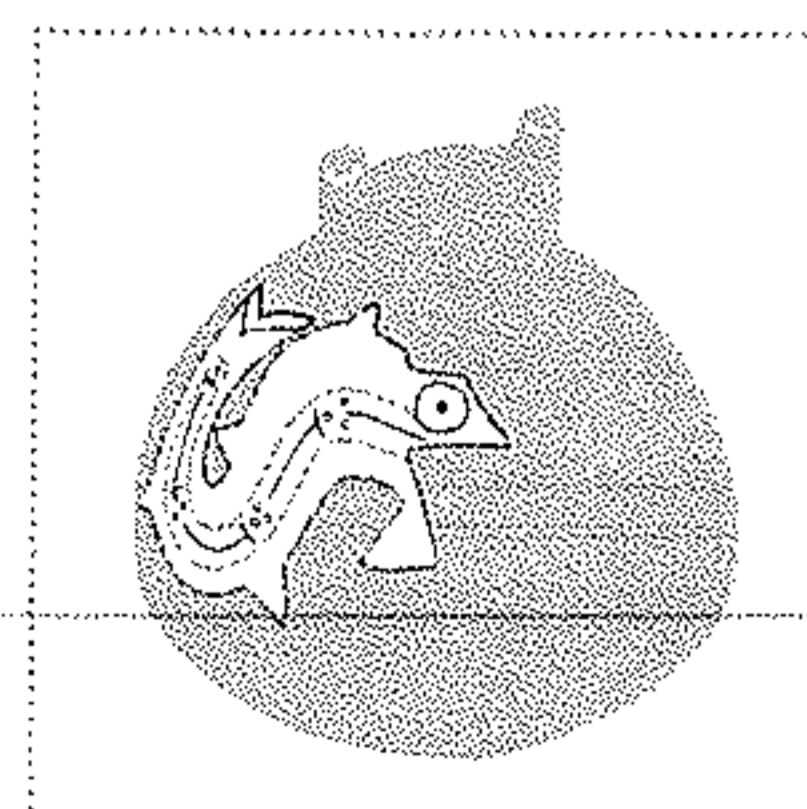
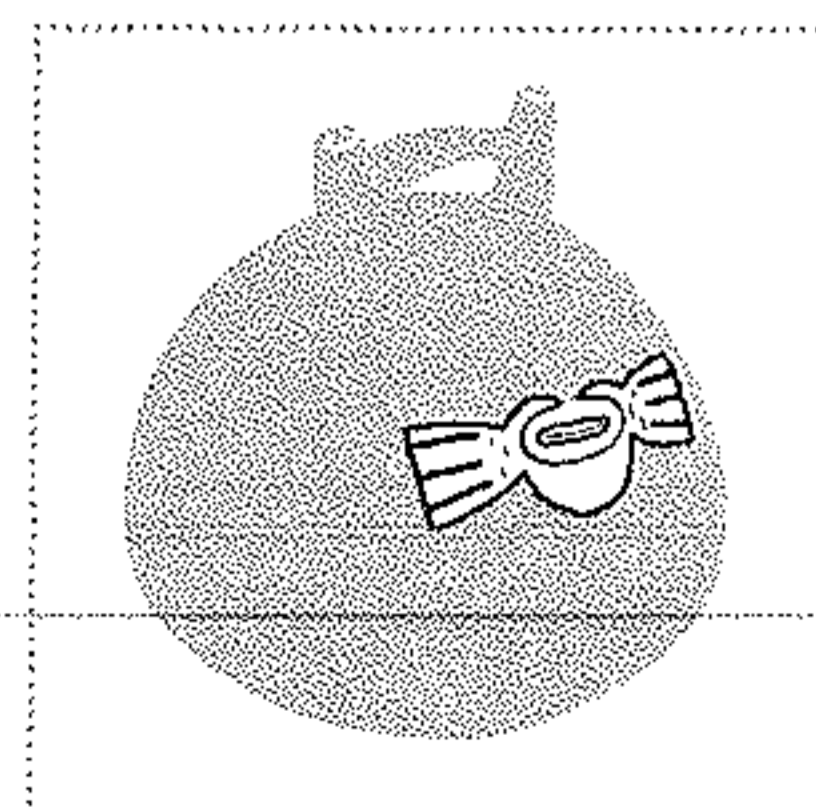


Peru, south coast, Nazca culture *Vessel Depicting Composite Fish, Feline, and Human Figure*, 180 B.C.—A.D. 500 Earthenware; 7.3 in. x 6.8 in. (18.56 x 17.2 cm) Kate S. Buckingham Endowment, 1955.2100



The composite creature painted on this vessel is one of the most important and recurring images in the art of the Nazca people, whose society flourished on the south coast of Peru from approximately 180 B.C. to A.D. 500. The two identical figures on this vessel combine **abstracted** human, cat-like, and marine animal traits to form new, fantastic creatures (figure 35). On their faces, the figures wear cat-like masks with large whiskers, crowns, and dangling discs. Their powerful, curving bodies have the spiky fins of sharks or killer whales. In their human hands, the fanciful creatures also hold batons and decapitated trophy-heads of enemy warriors. The image draws parallels between

the chief predators of the sea and the fields—the killer whale and the feline, both of which are at the top of the food chain—and the Nazca warrior-chieftains, who associated themselves with these fearsome animals when they raided their enemies and defended their own territories. Given the inclusion of fierce sea and land creatures, this vessel was probably used in military ceremonies marking either the beginning of hostilities or the final victory. It may also have been used in **rituals** associated with the success of hunting, fishing, and farming—for fertility and war were considered **complementary** concepts by the Nazca people.

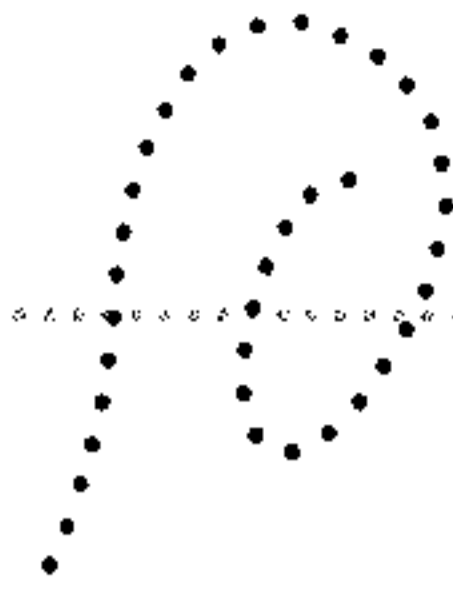


**FIGURE 35**  
Illustrations of the creatures  
seen on the Nazca vessel

## THE USES AND STYLE OF NAZCA VESSELS

Nazca vessels often served dual purposes—to make sacrificial offerings in ceremonies as well as to hold everyday food and beverages. The stirrup-like handle made carrying the jar easier, and the two spouts allowed smooth pouring of the liquid contained inside: as air flowed in one spout, liquid flowed out the other. Vessels appear in basic geometric shapes—round, cylindrical, or domeshaped—with smooth surfaces for figural images. Typically, the images on the vessels are flat and abstracted in form and depicted in vivid colors. Artists achieved a wide range of colors on their ceramic works by applying liquid clay, or **slip**, mixed with various mineral **pigments** and then firing the pieces. Some vessels contain as many as seven colors. Earth red, cream or white, yellow ochre, black, and orange are the most common colors used for vessels. These colors can be found on the *Vessel Depicting Composite Fish, Feline, and Human Figure*. On later vessels, as the technique of firing color developed, Nazca ceramicists were able to employ up to 12 colors in their patterns.

In all of their arts, the Nazca portrayed animals, plants, insects, human activities, and abstract designs such as spirals and zig-zags that they observed in their region. Zig-zags perhaps represent lightning and rivers, while spirals suggest seashells and the ocean. Certain birds, such as herons and swallows, were interpreted as signs of rain. Pelicans were associated with successful fishing. Felines were associated with war and territorial protection. In effect, the ceramic art of the Nazca constitutes an encyclopedia of all the important forms of life in the world around them. All of these **motifs** were tied to the seasonal cycle and the social, economic, religious, and geographic concerns of the Nazca culture. They comprise a **symbolic** visual language that may be read like a text, transmitting beliefs, traditions and **cosmological** principles, and expressing the intimate relationship between humans, nature, and the mysterious forces of life and death.



### Sacred Mountains and Streams

The Nazca people structured their belief systems around agricultural fertility, celebration of harvests, and the worship of deities identified with mountains and springs. Rain rarely fell on the southern desert region of Peru where the Nazca people lived, perhaps only once every 15 years. The narrow, green valleys farmed by the Nazca received water only when rains fell over the high **Andes** far to the East and runoff poured into the valley, similar to the annual rise of the River Nile in Egypt. For the rest of the year water was obtained from the water table below ground. The Nazca built ingenious systems of underground tunnels with water courses connecting long lines of wells to provide water from below the desert surface, a technology unique among the cultures of the ancient Americas and also independently invented in the ancient **Middle East**. The Nazca paid homage to an enormous mountain of sand located near the center of the Nazca plain, which was symbolically associated with the tall, water-supplying peaks of the distant Andes mountain chain.

## LAND DRAWINGS

The most spectacular creations of the Nazca are the immense land drawings, called geoglyphs, scattered across the desert surface on plateaus above the green river valleys. Similarly, the Paracas people (see *Paracas Textiles* sidebar, page 84)—who preceded the Nazca in the previous millennium—had made earth drawings several hundred years before the Nazca arrived, but their geoglyphs were small and made by mounding stones to outline their figures. The Nazca, by contrast, made enormous geoglyphs by digging through the dark surface of the plain to reveal the light gravel beneath. The glyphs have remained visible to modern observers because of the lack of rain in the area.

The land drawings incorporate the same motifs seen on ceramic vessels: animals, birds, fish (figure 36), and **anthropomorphic** figures, but many are geometric diagrams formed by long, continuous lines that may run straight for many kilometers, often converging in radial patterns upon knolls or other specific topographic or man-made features. Some drawings are spectacularly intricate depictions of insects, animals, and composite creatures, all with seasonal associations, as in the ceramic and textile art. The glyphs are so large that they may only be viewed without distortion from the air. One enormous land drawing on the Nazca plain overlooking the Ingenio Valley in southern Peru shows the curving body of a killer whale with a human trophy-head similar to that seen on the Art Institute vessel.

The function of the geoglyphs continues to puzzle scholars to the present day. One bizarre theory

(not held by an archeologist) proposed in the 1960s held that the Nazca lines were actually landing places for extraterrestrial spaceships! Another odd speculation asserted that the Nazca must surely have invented hot-air balloons from which to view the designs, because they can only be seen in their entirety from great height. Until very recently, the dominant interpretation of the lines has been that they were aids in making **astronomical** observations, linked to the need to keep track of the seasonal calendar to which all important activities were linked. Yet new studies have revealed that the alignments between the land patterns and the arrangement of stars are coincidental.

Perhaps the most plausible meaning of the lines is that they were used as ritual processional pathways pointing to features of the land that were either symbolically or actually associated with water. Many Nazca lines depart from points of land overlooking the fertile fields to distant sites, such as the mountain Tunga, where water sources were worshipped, or to other features that had related natural or mythical connections. Even today throughout the southern Andes, religious leaders from many communities travel on lines of **pilgrimage** to sacred places where offerings are made to the earth or the sky. (It is a system of reciprocity, with people feeding the land just as the land feeds the human community.) Thus the linear forms of insects and other animals can be interpreted as creatures that have strong seasonal association with water, cultivation of fields, or harvesting of the sea. Both the designers of the land drawings and the ceramicists of the brightly colored vessels created forms—big and small—that addressed the rhythms of life in the Nazca universe.

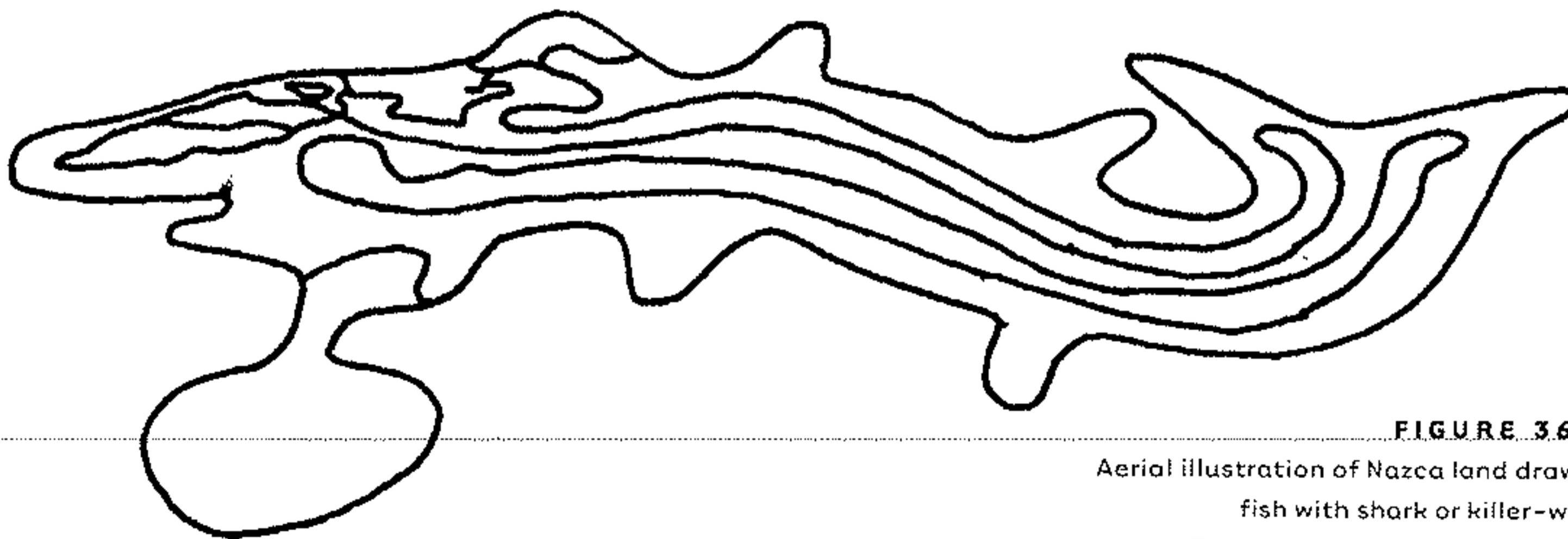


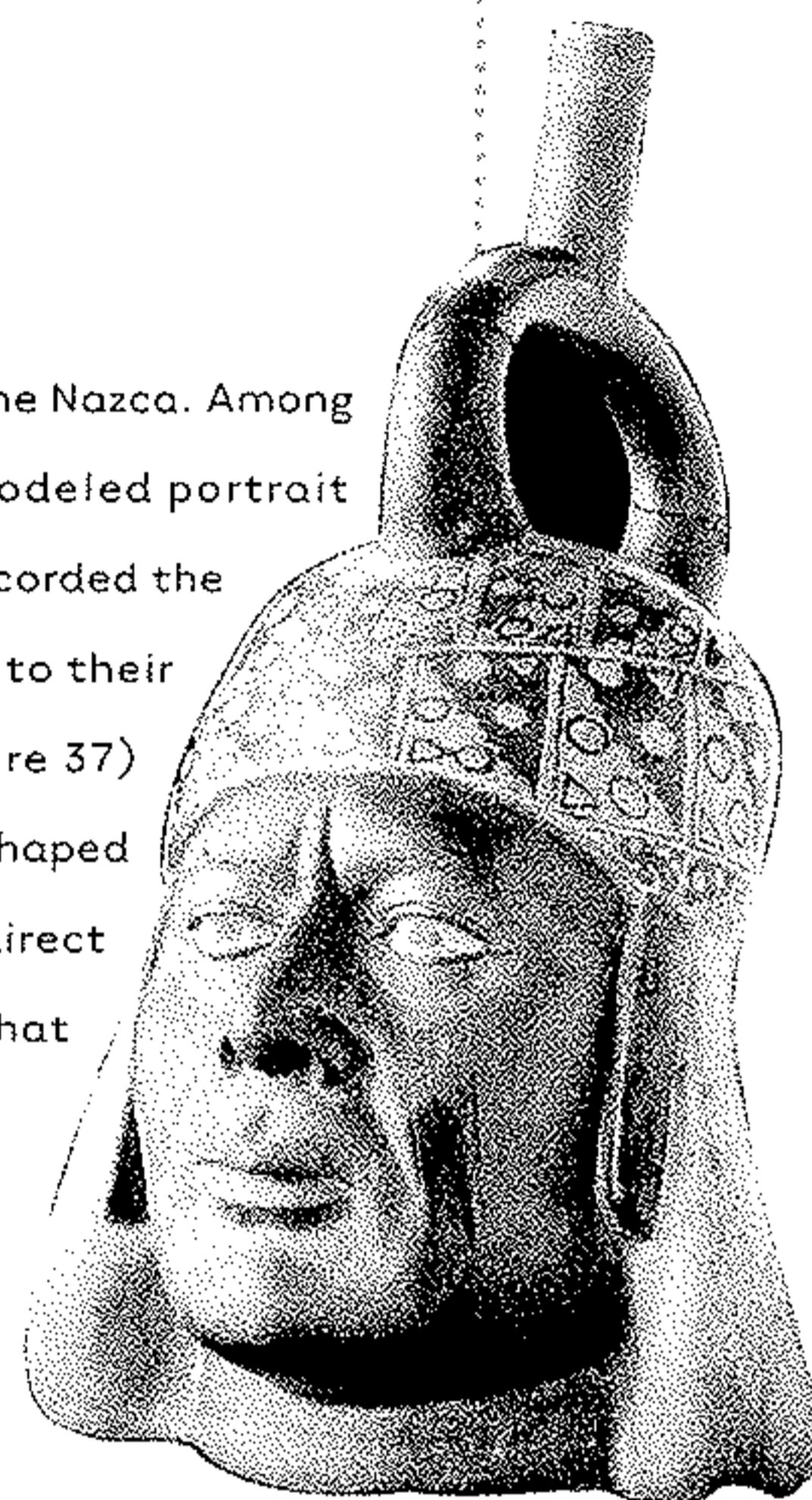
FIGURE 36

Aerial illustration of Nazca land drawing depicting mythical fish with shark or killer-whale motifs. This land drawing is about 200 feet in length.



## Moché People

The Moché people shared the Andean region on the Peruvian coast to the north of the Nazca. Among the immense variety of their sculptural ceramic production are sensitively modeled portrait vessels depicting individuals with distinctive facial features. Vessels accurately recorded the age, sex, and facial features of these rulers, but they also paid great attention to their personality, character, mood, and psychological state as well. This vessel (figure 37) illustrates the physical traits of a young warrior—prominent cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, distended nostrils—and provides details of his aristocratic headdress. The direct gaze and slightly furrowed brow reveal the introspective, thoughtful, and somewhat melancholic mood of the warrior.

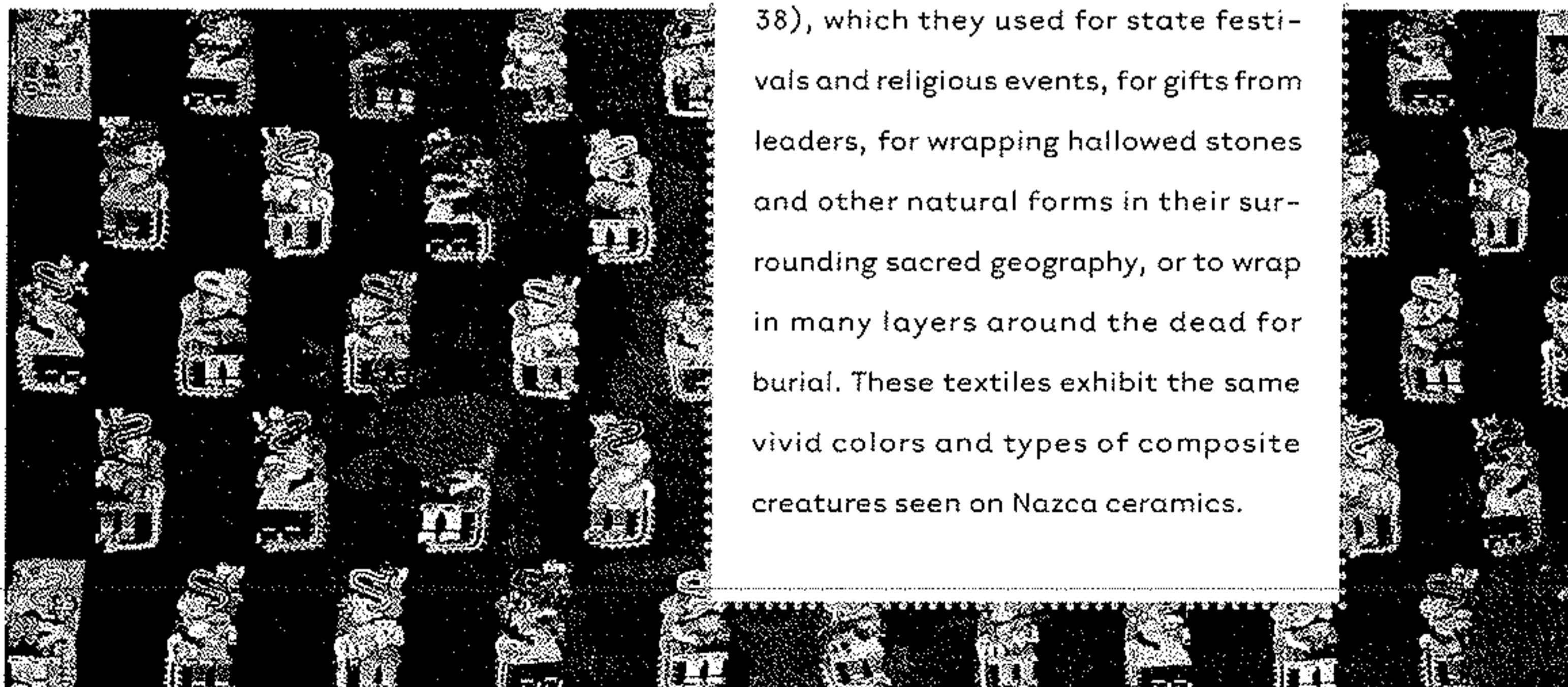


**FIGURE 37**

Peru, North Coast, Moché culture. *Portrait Head Vessel of a Ruler, Mochica V*, c. 100 B.C.–A.D. 500. Ceramic and pigment; h. 14 in. x 9 1/2 in. (35.6 x 24.1 cm)  
The Kate S. Buckingham Foundation, 1955.2338

## Paracas Textiles

The main **aesthetic** products of the Paracas people were textiles (figure 38), which they used for state festivals and religious events, for gifts from leaders, for wrapping hallowed stones and other natural forms in their surrounding sacred geography, or to wrap in many layers around the dead for burial. These textiles exhibit the same vivid colors and types of composite creatures seen on Nazca ceramics.



**FIGURE 38**

Peru, South Coast, Paracas culture.  
*Embroidered Mantle*, 500–200 B.C.  
Wool, plain weave; 93 in. x 41 3/5 in.  
(238.3 x 106.5 cm)  
Emily Crane Chadbourne Fund, 1970.293

# Classroom Applications

## Transparency 10

Peru, South Coast, Nazca culture. *Vessel Depicting Composite Fish, Feline, and Human Figure*, 180 B.C.—A.D. 500

### 1. Meet the Creature

Encourage students to imagine what would happen if they met the composite creature depicted on this vessel. What do you think the creature would be like? Where would it live? How would it move? What would it do? What would it eat? Have students write an adventure story about meeting this creature. As they create with their scenarios, challenge the students to answer the following questions: How did they meet this creature? When did the meeting take place? Who else was there? What happened? Why did this encounter take place?

State Learning Standards: 3B, 25A

### 2. The Animal in You

People from the Nazca culture believed in gods who displayed both human and animal traits. These gods became symbols of the behaviors valued by the people of ancient Peru. Which animal parts does this creature display? Which personality traits do these animals suggest?

Have students choose an animal with which they share certain qualities. For example, a student who likes to swim may select an aquatic animal, such as a fish or dolphin. Have students create a self-portrait that combines traits from the animal they selected and themselves. Using crayons, markers, or paint, have student draw their self-portraits in a **style** similar to the creature on the Nazca vessel, using clear black outlines, geometric shapes, and vibrant colors. If a kiln is available, have students make clay coil pots and paint their self-portraits on the pot. Students can also make a three-dimensional sculpture or mask that displays the animal traits they chose. Students should share their self-portraits with the class and explain the animal traits they have included and why.

State Learning Standards: 18A, 26B

### 4. Land Drawing

In addition to decorating vessels with figural drawings, the ancient Nazca people etched similar designs, often on a large scale, into the ground. These earth drawings are known as the “Nazca lines.” The designs are most easily deciphered from the sky because of their large scale. Have students research these mysterious earth drawings and read about the various theories about the purpose and meanings of the Nazca lines.

Have students create their own large landscape drawing using chalk. Determine a place outside where the students can make the drawing, such as a parking lot

or playground. It is also best if this space can also be viewed from above. Sketch the outline of one of the Nazca line figures on a regular-sized sheet of paper and then draw a grid on top of it. Assign a box to each student, making sure that there are enough boxes with lines in it for each student. The grid is used to guide the drawing of the enlarged figure outside. Once you are outside, draw an enlarged grid with chalk. Have each student draw the lines of his or her box in the appropriate chalk box. When the drawing is complete, view the drawing from above. Invite other classrooms to also view your landscape line drawing.

State Learning Standards: 5A, 26A, 27A

### **5. Various Vessels**

This vessel, like many Nazca ceramics, has a bridge-like stirrup handle and two spouts. Why does it have two spouts? Do an experiment with two metal cans containing a liquid, such as a can of tomato sauce or olive oil. Punch out an opening on the top of the first can and have students time how long it takes to pour out one cup of liquid. Punch out two openings opposite from each other on the second can. Time how long it takes to pour out one cup of liquid. In which case did the liquid pour quicker? In which case did the liquid pour smoother? Why? What is the benefit of the Nazca vessel having two spouts instead of one?

There are many possible shapes for vessels that contain liquid. Have students bring in a variety of bottles and containers, such as water bottles, canteens, ketchup bottles, soft soap dispensers, etc. Have students consider the different design elements of each of these containers and how the various shapes and spouts relate to their contents and function. What are some of the pros and cons of these different shapes and pouring mechanisms?

Have students imagine they live in the middle of the forest. What type of container would they want to store their water for cooking? Drinking? Bathing? Cleaning? Farm needs? What type of water vessel would they want to have as they took long hikes through the forest? Have students make drawings of their various water containers and write descriptions explaining the various functions.

State Learning Standards: 3C, 11A, 11B, 26B

### **6. Beyond the Faucet and Drain**

Water was very important to the Nazca people because they lived in a desert region. Modern hydraulics has made it so easy for us to obtain water that we do not often reflect on where the water originated. Ask students to consider how water gets to our faucets. What is the source of the water? How is this water cleaned so that it is safe to drink? Where does the water go when it disappears down the drain? Have students research these issues (see *Student Bibliography and Related Picture Books*).

Have students write and illustrate a silly story about the adventures of a drop of water that begins in Lake Michigan, is treated, journeys through the city pipes, and ends up in a home. What was it like as a small drop in the large lake? What happens at the water treatment plant? How does the water go through the city and into their home? How is the water used in their home?

State Learning Standards: 1C, 3C, 5A, 12E, 26B