Early Nazca culture, Peru, Ica Valley

_Bridged Double-Spout Bottle of Cat God Wearing Trophy Head_

Early Intermediate period, 100 BCE–300 CE
Burnished polychrome-slipped pottery
7¾ × 5¾ × 5¾ in. (19.7 × 14.6 × 14.6 cm)
Museum collection, University Gallery purchase
C-71-5

The stunning painted pottery of the south coast of Peru during the Early Intermediate period (200 BCE–600 CE) served as grave goods accompanying elite mummy burials of the chiefdoms in the Ica and Nazca Valleys. These valleys, like all of the Peruvian Pacific Coast, were extreme deserts except for rivers that flowed from the high Andean snowcaps down to the Pacific, creating agricultural lands in which the beans, squash, maize, fruit, and root crops were grown.

This bottle depicts a supernatural being with a white, whiskered face (possibly a mask) and short, black, feline ears surrounding football-shaped white eyes and a mouth with protruding tongue. The feline character of the face has led to its being nicknamed the Cat God, although others have proposed otter and falcon aspects. Its most naturalistic renderings suggest derivation from the Pampas cat, a small wild feline of the region. The most conservative name is the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being.

The only anthropomorphic features are the front hands, which have curled-up human fingernails and thumbs that extend straight down. Its back paws are clawed, like the paws of a feline or an otter. The falcon features are the wings, the feathers of which hang down the sides of the being. Small trophy heads flank the front of the wings and the upper border attaching the wings to the body. A large trophy head hangs from the back of the head down to the tail; it has human qualities in its flesh-colored skin, but its eyes seem half sunken under a horizontal brow line. Its mouth, however, echoes that of the cat god on the front of the vessel, suggesting that the two are related; perhaps the deity is in fact a human impersonator, whose taking of heads fertilized the land, as Elspeth K. Gordon in _Pre-Columbian Pottery of Peru from the Collection of the University Gallery_ has proposed. Some cat gods in fact present agricultural crops in their hands, implying that their sacrifices increase agricultural fertility.