

title: Creations of the Rainbow Serpent :
Polychrome Ceramic Designs From Ancient Panama

author: Helms, Mary W.

publisher: University of New Mexico

isbn10 | asin: 0826315887

print isbn13: 9780826315885

ebook isbn13: 9780585182490

language: English

subject: Conte Site (Panama) , Indian pottery--Panama--Coclé (Province)--Themes, motives, Indian pottery--Panama--Coclé (Province)--Classification, Animals in art, Indians of Central America--Panama--Coclé (Province)--Antiquities, Coclé (Panama : Province)--An

publication date: 1995

lcc: F1565.1.C6H45 1995eb

ddc: 972.8/721

subject: Conte Site (Panama) , Indian pottery--Panama--Coclé (Province)--Themes, motives, Indian pottery--Panama--Coclé (Province)--Classification, Animals in art, Indians of Central America--Panama--Coclé (Province)--Antiquities, Coclé (Panama : Province)--An

Creations of the Rainbow Serpent



Creations of the Rainbow Serpent
Polychrome Ceramic Designs from Ancient Panama



Mary W. Helms

*University
of New
Mexico
Press
Albuquerque*

© 1995 BY THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS

All rights reserved.

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Helms, Mary W.

Creations of the rainbow serpent: polychrome
ceramic designs from ancient Panama/

Mary W. Helms. 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8263-1588-7 (cl)

1. Conte Site (Panama)

2. Indian potteryPanamaCoclé (Province)

Themes, motives.

3. Indian potteryPanamaCoclé (Province)

Classification.

4. Animals in art.

5. Indians of Central AmericaPanama

Coclé (Province)Antiquities.

6. Coclé (Panama:Province)Antiquities.

I. Title.

F1565.1.C6H45 1995

972.8'721dc20

95-3305

CIP

The following figures have been reproduced courtesy of Dover Publications, Inc.: Figs. 3-6; 9-26a; 27-28a; 31; 33-34a; 35-36; 38-44; 46-47; 49-52; 54-70; 73-78; 82-84, 87-91a; 92a; 93a; 96-97; 99-100.



Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	3
1 Chromatics	9
2 The Serpent	15
3 Birds and Fowl	39
4 Mammals	53
5 The Tree of Life and its Products	73
6 Body Parts and Processes	83
7 Whole-Plate Designs	91
Concluding Remarks	103
Notes	111
References	119
Index	133

"... FOR RELIGIOUS MAN
NATURE
IS NEVER
ONLY
NATURAL."

MIRCEA ELIADE.
The Sacred and the Profane.
1959:151.



Preface

In the Preface and Introduction to his report on the Sitio Conte in central Panama, Samuel Lothrop describes the difficulties that had to be overcome in order to present the lavishly illustrated and textually detailed account of ceramic materials associated with this site (Lothrop 1942). These included sheer quantity of material, its poor state of preservation, its "innate complexity" and the "archaeologically abnormal conditions" under which it was found. Ceramic material was found in refuse, in caches, and as funeral furniture in graves. The quantities of sherds found as refuse had been greatly disturbed by the digging of grave shafts and/or perhaps by floods, and were of limited use. Cache and grave ceramics also posed problems, as Lothrop explains:

The amount of pottery deposited in individual graves varied greatly. ... We cannot give exact figures because the inhabitants of the Sitio Conte had (for the purposes of this study) several very unfortunate customs. One of these was the frequent "killing" of pottery vessels intended to accompany the souls of the dead, which was accomplished by trampling. The result of this was to reduce complete vessels to a compacted and intermingled mass of sherds. ... To make matters worse, these ceramic layers, which often were several inches in thickness when vessels had been piled one over the other, frequently were dug up and scattered when later burials were introduced. ... [1942:3-5]

The existence of compound graves and the practice of "robbing" older graves to provide additional goods for more recently deceased occupants added to Lothrop's problems (ibid.). These depositional circumstances resulted in several analytical difficulties, including "repairs which have

been carried on more or less continuously for seven years, at times by several individuals" (ibid.: 5).

Lothrop speaks further about certain preparations of this material for publication, preparations that are pertinent to the following study, based as it is on Lothrop's illustrations:

A word must be said about illustrations. My feeling is that people are more interested in how things looked to the former Coclesanos than in how they look today. Restoration therefore has been carried out as far as possible in drawings, but the least uncertainty has either been indicated by dotted lines or has been noted in the text. For the same reason, photographs have been amply retouched.
[ibid.: iii]

Lothrop then thanks, among others, Mr. William Baake who prepared the drawings and whose work, Lothrop properly notes, would be of permanent value in and of itself (ibid.). Additional scholars, including myself, who in succeeding decades have continued to be fascinated by the Sitio Conte ceramics, also owe a debt of thanks to Mr. Baake for the quality of his drawings, a selection of which is reproduced in this study.

In addition, I was fortunate to secure the services of Tim Barkley and especially Valerie Ward, Creative Services Division, Learning Resources Center, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, whose photographic expertise reproduced most of the illustrations in this study. My sincere thanks to both of them. I also particularly wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Michael Robinson, director, National Zoological Park, Washington, D.C.; Ms. Margie Gibson, Office of Public Affairs, National Zoo; and Ms. Jessie Cohen, Graphics Department, National Zoo, for their generosity and kindness in helping with illustrations of the spectacled bear. The color illustrations of selected Coclé ceramics were compiled through the courtesy of the staffs of the Michael Carlos Museum at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and of the Lowe Museum at the University of Miami at Coral Gables, Florida.

Readers who wish to know more about the details of the excavations of the Sitio Conte and especially the ceramics associated with the site are urged to consult Lothrop (1942). Although illustrations from that source are reproduced in this study, the original figures in Lothrop's publications (1942, 1976) should be consulted for nuances of color contrast or design that may have been unavoidably lost or reduced in reproduction here.



Introduction

In a well-known passage from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice muses upon the peculiarity of reading a book without picturesseeking information and enjoyment from a series of tiny black spots arranged in lines upon a blank and generally colorless background. This predilection has bemused various non-literate peoples, too, when they first encountered book-reading Europeans. To some it seemed a particularly soulless activity, one that marked Westerners as peculiarly uni-dimensional and divorced from wider society, as living in another world (e.g., Hill and Wright, 1988:92-93). To literate Westerners, in turn, the modes of information management used by non-literate peoples can seem just as puzzling and just as difficult to decipher, even more so when the information system derives from prehistory and must stand alone, without the benefit of further explication by its makers.

This monograph attempts to fathom some of the semiotic characteristics of one such informational system that was encoded on a collection of polychrome ceramics thought to have been crafted approximately one thousand to fifteen hundred years ago (ca. A.D. 500-1100) by peoples of the so-called Coclé culture who lived in central Panama. Many of these wares were excavated at the Sitio Conte, a site on the banks of the Río Grande de Coclé in Coclé Province, central Panama (Fig. 1; see Linares 1977:34-38), by Samuel Lothrop in the 1930s (Hearne 1992:3). They were found in caches and burials directly associated with persons of high status, elites of some of the ranked and centralized societies or chiefdoms that were developing in Panama by at least A.D. 500 (Linares 1977:31; Cooke 1984:270-271, 287). They and similar ceramics from neighboring regions of the Azuero peninsula and

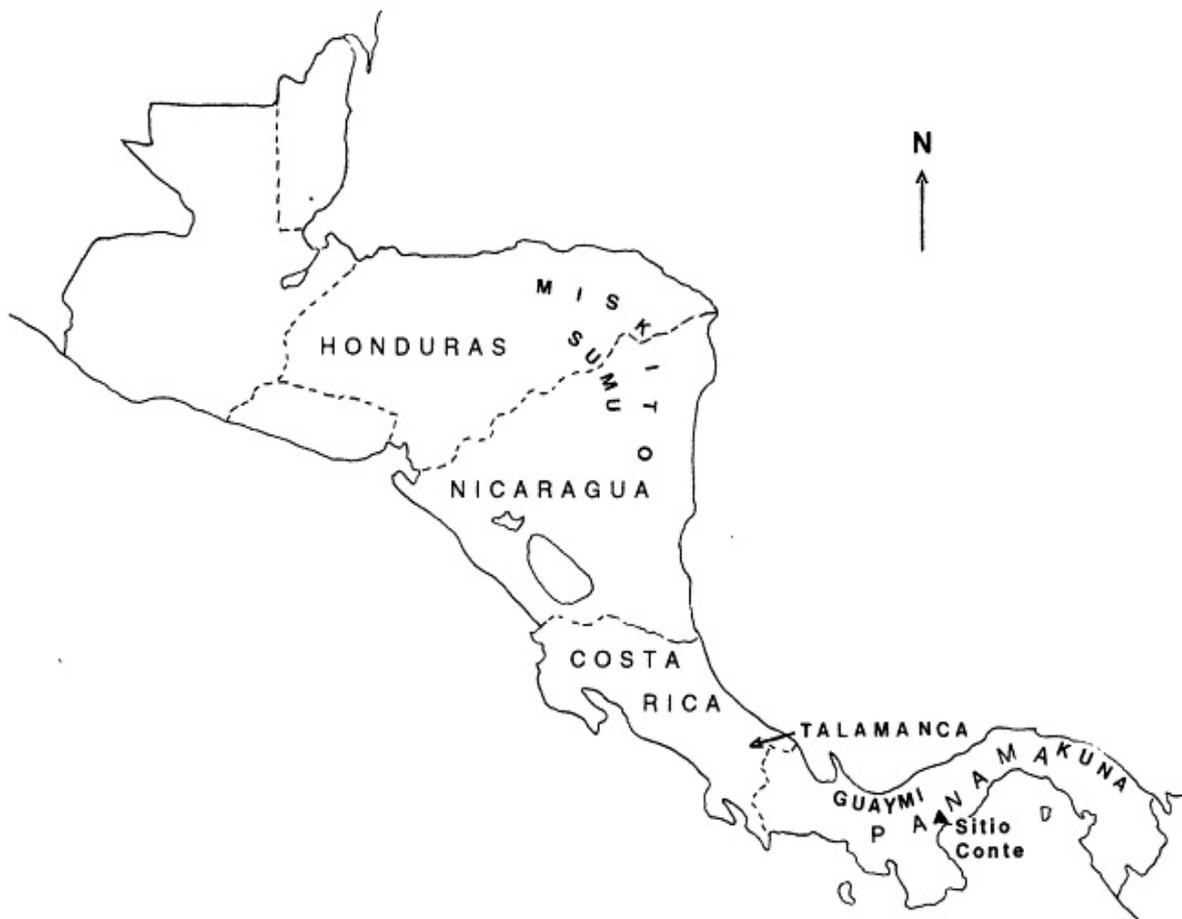


Fig. 1.

Indigenous peoples of Central America and the Sitio Conte, Panama.

southwestern Panama are described and illustrated in Part II of Lothrop's *Coclé: An Archaeological Study of Central Panama* (1942) and also appear without text in a separate publication, *Pre-Columbian Designs from Panama* (Lothrop 1976). These two publications formed the basis for this study and reference will frequently be made throughout to one or other volume particularly to alert readers to additional designs that are not reproduced in this work. Since the 1976 work, *Pre-Columbian Designs from Panama*, is the more readily available, most references to additional designs will be made to that source.

The Coclé ceramic wares are characteristically multicolored and combine geometric forms with lively, very graphic depictions of curious birds and beasts. In typologies of prehistoric Panamanian ceramic styles they are designated as Conte polychrome (ca. A.D. 500-800) and as Macaracas polychrome (ca. A.D. 800-1100), but I will refer to them simply as Coclé polychromes since the finer stylistic distinction is not pertinent to this analysis

(see Cooke 1985).

The ceramics are currently housed in Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Other pieces from the Sitio Conte are in the collection of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania (Hearne and Sharer 1992:13, 126). Numerous other examples of Panamanian polychrome wares exist in private holdings and in various museum collections (cf. Dade 1961; Lothrop 1942:iii), but only the Coclé ceramics excavated by Lothrop from Sitio Conte and related pieces also illustrated and discussed by Lothrop in his 1942 and 1976 publications are used in this study.

The pre-Columbian ceramic art of central Panama has been the subject of monographs by Lothrop (1942) and Olga Linares (1977). Lothrop's extensive analysis focused on classification and description based primarily on shape and secondarily on design (1942:11) and included attempts to identify components of zoomorphic patterns. Linares examined formal details of construction and design but has also suggested the possibility that identification of the zoological motifs of Coclé designs, based as they are on elements of nature, may be correlated with the social and political life of the Coclé culture.

More specifically, Linares considers it likely that "some of the motifs on Sitio Conte objects carried connotations of rank" and that the animals depicted were also symbolically related to status and rank (1977:61). She is particularly impressed by behavioral qualities of animals portrayed in this art, noting that they are poisonous or toxic or otherwise dangerous or predatory (1977:63-67), and suggests that "the central Panamanian art style was centered on a rich symbolic system using animal motifs metaphorically to express the qualities of aggression and hostility that characterized the social and political life" in central Panama at this time (1977:70).

In the analysis presented here, I concur to some extent with the symbolic and political-ideological components of Linares' perspective. However, rather than taking an overtly "etic" position (i.e., offering an interpretation based solely on the investigator's own perceptions and postulates of alleged behavioral parallels in depicted animal forms and human populace). I seek to interpret ceramic motifs from a more ethnographically based or "emic" perspective. Accepting the dictum that "all art is metaphor and form" (Vansina 1985:11), I wish to view Coclé designs as a semiotic code expressing sociological and especially cosmological concepts that also may have had some bearing upon the ideology legitimizing the status and activities of

political elites.

Although it is obviously impossible to ascertain directly the political, ideological and cosmological concepts held by ancient Panamanians, it may be possible to suggest some general themes by seeking parallels in the exegesis of ethnographically known art forms and design motifs of still-extant indigenous cultures of the Americas. Research in the art styles of numerous native American cultures has shown that traditional artistic styles of all the Americas provide tangible means for expressing indigenous conceptualizations of the nature of the cosmos and the place of human society and especially society's leadership therein (e.g., Whitten and Whitten 1988; Rabineau 1975; Schele and Miller 1986; Goldman 1975; Berrin 1978; Penney 1985:180-98; Morphy 1989). These conceptualizations are frequently expressed in metaphors utilizing naturalistic phenomena of the heavens, the rivers, and the ocean, and the terrestrial and subterrestrial realms. I propose that the polychrome ceramic art of central Panama contains and conveys the same type of information. Consequently, in seeking to decode the cosmological-cum-political messages and metaphors this art expresses I will draw heavily upon indigenous American mythemes and symbolism from a range of cultures. By means of such comparisons it should be possible to identify at least the types of information the art of ancient Panama may be expected to express and to gain some idea of the general content of the messages contained in such graphic symbolic displays.

In pursuing this approach it is also necessary to consider not only the identification of the motifs depicted on the Coclé art and the possible symbolism contained therein but also the significance of the use of a chromatic style of painting per se, the possible significance of at least some of the ceramic shapes employed in this art, and the significance of the production of polychrome ceramics as a type of skilled craft replete with inherent aesthetic appeal for those who made, used, and viewed these pieces. Let us begin with the latter concern and briefly consider the general significance of skilled crafting and of aesthetics in traditional society by way of providing a general context for further appreciation of the polychrome ceramics of Panama themselves.

I apply the term "skilled crafting" to the production in traditional society of goods or art forms created by what are regarded as exceptional crafting skills. Such goods or art forms also usually serve non-utilitarian (that is, non-domestic, non-private) ceremonial, prestige-related, or public purposes. Skillfully crafted things are imbued *by definition* with

qualities of honor and morality expressed as aesthetics, and they are closely associated with public political-ideological activities and symbolism. Such goods are crafted by talented artisans whose exceptional abilities are universally believed to derive from artistic creative skills first evidenced and/or taught to humans by ancestral culture-hero/creators at the time of origins of human societal existence when the power of the creators' songs or dances created the dry land, or their skills as smiths or sculptors or drummers brought humans into existence (Helms 1993a:chap. 2).

By expressing the same creative skills, contemporary living artisans, in the pursuit of their art, are believed to express a direct link to the original creator-beings. Like religious personnel, they are perceived as standing between society and the cosmological realm that lies beyond. Such skilled artisans serve as repositories for much esoteric knowledge concerning the means (both technical and ritual) by which acts of skilled crafting, as creative acts of transformation, shaping and forming, ordering and controlling, link society with the supernatural forces and energetics of the cosmological outside world that are believed to sustain society if they, too, can be ordered and controlled and put to beneficial human use. With this knowledge and by the use of their skills, such artisans also become living culture-hero/creators themselves, and their acts of crafting are believed actively to perpetuate and replicate "original" cultural creations. In so doing they not only represent but also maintain a direct living connection between the here-and-now of the current cultural setting and the there-and-then of outside space-time (Helms 1993a:chaps. 3 and 4).

In directly comparable fashion, political elites who sponsor or subsidize master artists in their work or, as is frequently the case, are master artisans themselves, are similarly linked to the ancestral conditions of cultural-cum-cosmological beginnings. Skilled crafting directly and tangibly relates and connects artisans and their politically prominent sponsors to cosmologically defined times of cultural origins and occasions of social creation. Such associations do much to legitimize the political authority of elites by relating them to undeniable and unfalsifiable ideological First Principles (Helms 1993a:chap. 5).

The qualities and political-ideological values attributed to skilled crafting are also based on qualities associated with the meaning of aesthetics. Aesthetics in traditional society essentially refers to that which is both beautiful *and*

morally good. Aesthetics expresses "truth" in terms

of what is "right" and "proper" in thought (philosophy), action (ethics), and design (art). Here again, that which is considered "proper" and "right" derives from the principles of order deemed inherent in the nature of the gods or of the universe and from the expression of that order in rules or canons of form and design prescribed by tradition and/or authority (Coomaraswamy 1935:16-17; Helms 1993a:61-68).

Since morality and thus aesthetics are essential components of proper social living, tangible expressions of these principles would be expected to be highly valued. This is to say that the acts and products of skilled artisanry are valued in large part because they are aesthetic acts and products. Indeed, the very concept of *skilled* crafting as opposed to production of more mundane utilitarian goods lies in identification of the skilled artisan as one who can create or instill the aesthetically proper design, form, and feeling in his work.

The attraction of aesthetics of that which is morally good also rests on the fact that beauty is thought not only to be instructional and exemplary but also to have a supernatural sort of power, a dynamic, of its own (Helms 1993a:63). For that reason, too, persons of influence, being concerned with all aspects of power, are drawn to associate with aesthetics and, through beauty, with ultimate truths that both guide proper social living and confirm the legitimization of their political and ideological authority (Howard 1991).

Judging by the highly decorated nature of the Coclé polychrome ceramics, by the sophistication of the designs portrayed thereon, and especially by the fact of their association, by burial, with persons of apparently high status, it seems safe to consider these vessels as products of skilled crafting and as goods believed to embody the quality of aesthetics. They were presumably made by skilled artisans whose work was considered to be directly and inalienably related to cosmological times and conditions. If these suppositions be granted, then it also seems reasonable to seek guidelines to the identities and symbolic significance of the design motifs portrayed in this art within the field of traditional native American art, cosmology, and political-ideology.