

# Duality Under The Sea

## *Double chambered bottle, Artist Unidentified*

Have you ever picked up a seashell and admired its beauty? Or looked more closely and imagined what lived inside? Have you ever wondered about opposites or the concept of duality?

The *Double chambered bottle* is a vessel made from molds of two different shells: spondylus and strombus. The spondylus, or “spiny oyster,” is a bivalve mollusk found in warmer oceans around the world, including the coastal regions of Northern Peru. The ceramic depiction of the spondylus’ unique shell features small “thorns” protruding from the upper half of the chamber. By contrast, the strombus is a spiral-shaped mollusk that lives at shallower depths. The ceramic strombus chamber is detailed with curvilinear lines and carefully sculpted to reflect the unique spiral-formed shell.

A spout emerges from each shell chamber of the vessel, then curves up and joins the other to form a combined stirrup-spout. While it is possible to fill the bottle through the spout, stirrup bottles may have served a wide range of functions and purposes.

This bottle was crafted by a Moche (pronounced “Mo-chay”) artist, who was part of a culture that flourished in the 1st through 8th centuries CE in what is now Northern Peru. The Moche ceramicists were known for their highly detailed representational artworks. Shells were important for the Moche not only for artistic inspiration but also for use in religious rituals, ceremonies, and trade.

Throughout the Ancient Americas, spondylus and strombus shells were highly valued for millennia. In the Andes, ceramic representations of these conjoined shells have been found as early as 1500 BCE. Such shells have been found as offerings in Maya building foundations, in tribute lists kept by the Aztec, and in royal Moche tombs. Indeed, spondylus shells were deemed so valuable that Moche people endangered their lives by free diving up to 60 feet below the surface to retrieve them.

In Moche art, these shells carried symbolic meaning. Spondylus represented the feminine and was often cut to form beads or inlays; strombus represented the masculine and was often used as a ceremonial trumpet and was associated with the water cycle. The Moche were unfamiliar with the marine creature that inhabited the strombus shell and represented it in artworks as a monster. This artwork unites the two shells to represent dualism and complementary opposition.



Artist Unidentified. *Double chambered bottle*. 1-650. Moche region, North Coast, Peru. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of the Austen-Stokes Ancient Americas Foundation, Upper Nyack, New York, BMA 2005.31

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## Challenges for students

The Moche are known for their highly detailed representational artworks and complex iconography. Take your students on a deep dive into the world of the Moche.

**Visit [artbma.org/moche](http://artbma.org/moche) or [artbma.org/mocheiconography](http://artbma.org/mocheiconography) to learn more about Moche icons and their culture.**

Take a close look at the bottle and discuss what you see: How does the artist achieve balance? What textures do you notice? From there, create a sculpture or draw a design of something from nature that uses these elements/principles in your own way.

Many artists use duality as a theme in their artwork. Discuss the concept of duality with students, e.g., light & dark, stillness & movement. Have your students sketch or sculpt a vessel that addresses a duality of their choice. While working, ask your students to use visual elements to reinforce the opposition of these elements/concepts, like color or texture, just as the *Double chambered bottle* does.

Print the following page for your students.

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Moche Civilization Map

<https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/moche-maps.htm>