Birds, Monkeys, and Shapes, Oh My! Investigating Intersecting Motifs on Vessels, Stamps, and Candeleros

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Introduction

Ongoing design description and analysis have revealed commonalities in the decoration of diverse ceramic artifact classes in the Naco Valley, NW Honduras (Figure 1). Here we outline the specifics of these design features, focusing on depictions of monkeys and birds, geometric designs such as crosshatching and dots, and how these are used individually and in combinations. The use of similar designs on diverse pottery artifact classes suggests a commonality of accepted design elements, although there are differences between classes in design grammar.

Analysis

Design analysis of 3 classes of clay objects (sherds, stamps, candeleros) was undertaken at a variety of points during the analysis of Naco Valley materials. The oldest, and most in-depth, analysis focuses on locally-made bichromes and polychromes and involves an extensive coding system (Figure 2), enabling an understanding of design grammar as well as patterning of design elements throughout the valley. Preliminary analysis shows a shift in certain designs throughout time and space in the valley, suggesting that locally-made ceramics played a crucial component of projecting an identity both within the valley and between the valley and other political entities. Analysis of stamps was done with drawings of the stamps (Figure 3) in the US (sherd designs were coded in the field). Stamps were grouped into like motifs and these groupings were further refined. Stamps are considered to have been made from molds, thus contributing to a standardization of design. Candeleros are the artifact class most recently subject to analysis and designs appear to be simpler, allowing for a presence/absence type of analysis.

Discussion

While each type of analysis brings to light the variety of designs pertinent to each particular class of items, there are 3 types of designs which cross categories. More work is needed to explore why these particular designs cross categories and what this cross-over might mean.

Birds

Birds appear on locally-made bichromes (Figure 4), polychromes (Figure 5), and stamps (Figure 6). While the birds appear to be different species, the fact that birds cross onto all categories is interesting. The exact meaning of avian symbolism may not be known, but there can be no doubt of the importance.

Monkeys

Monkeys appear on locally-made polychromes (Figure 7) stamps (Figure 6), and candeleros (Figure 8). While the monkeys on polychromes and stamps appear to be similar, and are known as “dancing monkeys”, the monkeys on candeleros are shown from a different perspective. No firm conclusions may be made, but the vessel and stamp monkey looks strikingly similar to spider monkeys.

Geometrics

Geometric designs ranging from simple painted or incised lines to more elaborate arrangements (Figure 9). The design motif that crosses bichromes, stamp and candelero classes is that of crosshatching (Figure 10). Interestingly enough, this motif is incised on stamp and candeleros classes, but painted on bichromes. While there are incised bichromes, the incision is sine curve, or jagged sine curve in nature.

Conclusion

Design analysis on distinct classes of ceramic artifacts is interesting in and of itself. Looking at design commonalities across classes is a newer endeavor, but one that suggests there was a specific body of designs that were drawn upon for use in the Naco Valley. While the exact meaning of the designs may never be known, distribution patterns may lead to insights regarding social organization and political differentiation within the Naco Valley.

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