

Larco Museum - treasures from ancient Peru

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Introduction

My dear father, Rafael Larco Hoyle, was only twenty-three years old when, returning from his studies abroad, he received from my grandfather, Rafael Larco Herrera, the beautiful ceramic portrait vessel that would form the kernel of the Larco Museum collection. For Rafael Larco Hoyle, it was the beginning of a lifetime devoted to the meticulous and systematic study of Peru's ancient cultures.

Only three years later, on July 28, 1926, the younger Larco inaugurated the *Museo Arqueológico Rafael Larco Herrera*, naming it after his father as a gesture of gratitude, and as a tribute to the elder Larco for having ignited in him a passion for Peru and its ancient past. Larco organized and catalogued the pieces which now form the core of the museum's collection, making use of the limited information available at the time. During that process, many difficult questions arose that could only be resolved through fieldwork. And so, in the 1930s, Larco found himself surrounded by dust and sand, conducting research in the harsh coastal deserts of northern Peru. The more he excavated, the more tombs he discovered belonging to the region's most advanced cultures, namely the Moche and Chimú.

Fascinated by the amount of information that Moche ceramic vessels revealed, he began the monumental task of studying and recording practically every aspect of the lives of the people of this rich culture. As a result, in 1938 he wrote his monumental work *Los Mochicas*, which was republished in 2001. However, this interest in Moche culture made clear the necessity of establishing a general chronology that would enable a better understanding of the emergence and development of distinct Pre-Columbian cultures. Larco began by defining the chronological periods, which he termed "epochs", during which these cultures developed. After discovering Cupisnique culture, he had proposed it as the earliest origin of advanced culture in Peru, but this hypothesis clashed with the theory that placed the origin of Peruvian culture in the highlands, at Chavín de Huantar. Later, Larco also discovered the Salinar and Virú cultures and identified their development as pre-Moche.

In 1946, at the Chiclín Conference, Rafael Larco Hoyle presented the first coherent chronology of Peru's northern coastal cultures. Subsequently, Larco devoted himself to writing and publishing essays on the cultures and artistic styles that he had helped to discover. In 1963, he published *Épocas Peruanas*, which was followed in 1966 by *Perú*, and it was in these two works that he refined his theories regarding Peru's Pre-Hispanic chronology.

Larco worked alone on his research and analysis associated with the museum's collection, choosing not to surround himself with protégées or students. His busy schedule prevented him from engaging in university teaching. During his own time, his discoveries and research failed to reach a wider audience, but the Larco Museum is his great legacy. By attracting visitors from

all over the world, the museum has disseminated his ideas and contributed significantly to our knowledge of Peru's Pre-Columbian past.

Today, the objects Larco studied remain in the museum just as he left them, organized and catalogued by culture and chronology. This system has enabled us -with the help of modern technology such as the museum's online database- to share information about his wonderful collection with the whole world.

Time and advances in archaeological techniques have served to confirm many of Larco's theories, such as the coastal origin of advanced Peruvian culture, the chronology of the different regions of Peru, and the five-phase sequence for Moche ceramics. Such contributions confirm his place as the true father of Peruvian archaeology. As an institution, the Larco Museum works to convey Larco's visionary contribution to our understanding of the development of Pre-Hispanic Peru. To this day, his great passion for ancient Peru serves to guide every decision made by the museum. In this spirit, the goal of the Larco Museum is to continue a mission that Rafael Larco Hoyle saw as essential: that of sharing with the world the splendor of our ancient past.