

**ANCIENT STORIES IN CLAY: GREEK, MOCHE, AND MAYA PAINTED CERAMICS WITHIN ONE BOOK.  
(Review on Saunders, D., O’Neil, M. E. (eds.), 2024, *Picture Worlds: Storytelling on Greek, Moche, and Maya Pottery*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum.)**

**Marie Stadnik**

**Стародавні історії в глині: розписна кераміка греків, моче та майя в одній книзі.  
*Saunders, D., O’Neil, M. E. (eds.), 2024, Picture Worlds: Storytelling on Greek, Moche, and Maya Pottery*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum.**

**Марія Стаднік**

*Книга ‘Світи зображень: розповіді на кераміці греків, моче та майя’, за редакцією Девіда Сондерса та Меган О’Ніл, є каталогом, випущеним у супровід виставці, що відбувалася в музеї Гетті та музеї Майкла Карлоса впродовж 2023 року. Головною особливістю публікації є її незвичайна тематика, адже дослідники об’єднали в одній роботі три абсолютно різні культурні традиції. Послідовно досліджуючи контекст та особливості виробництва кераміки для кожної культури, автори звертають увагу на їхні спільні і відмінні риси. Значну увагу приділено іконографії та аналізу форматів і стилів оповідання історій на керамічних виробах. Книжка містить велику кількість якісних ілюстрацій, що можуть стати у пригоді як пересічному читачу, так і професійному досліднику. У цій рецензії окреслено деякі основні ідеї, на які спираються автори публікації, проаналізовано структуру книги та виділено її сильні і слабкі сторони.*

**Ключові слова:** розписна кераміка, мистецтво, декоративний розпис, керамічна традиція, міфологія, майя, моче, Стародавня Греція.

What is the characteristic that unites the ceramics of ancient Greece, Moche, and the Late Classic Maya? All of them used various production methods for their fine wares. Their pottery differed in forms and adornment techniques – after all, they served different purposes. All three societies produced images on various materials. Nonetheless, while textiles and metalwork could degrade, painted pottery lasted. Even if ceramics were broken (intentionally or not) and thrown away, we still find fragments that could often be pieced back together. Terracotta is a tough and very durable material, therefore, it can usually be found in large quantities during excavations and in museum collections, which gives us a valuable source of information for studying these cultures (Saunders & O’Neil 2024, p. 13).

In the book ‘Picture Worlds: Storytelling on Greek, Moche, and Maya Pottery’, the authors for the first time explore the painted pottery of ancient Greece (700–323 BCE), Moche (200–850 CE), and the Late Classic Maya (550–850 CE) within one volume, side by side. This publication complemented an exhibition showcased at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Michael C. Carlos Museum.

Iconography is an extremely important source of information, and sometimes also the only one. While in the case of Ancient Greece, it is possible for us to compare the images on ceramics with existing written sources such as *Illiad* or *Odyessy*, it's a different matter with Maya and Moche,

where the latter is believed to have had no writing at all. Therefore, Moche ceramics, carrying important information about the basic cosmological ideas, mythology, and rituals in its iconography, served as a form of non-verbal communication (Golte 2009, p. 18).

The Maya, using a phonetic writing system, left behind an extensive corpus of sources. The bulk of written references were passed down to us on stone and ceramics. Most of the Maya texts are devoted to the political history of its people, calendar ceremonies, and individual rituals, which, in the absence of a wider context, often remain incomprehensible to researchers. We often learn about Maya mythology from pictorial sources instead of written ones. This underscores the significance of exploring painted ceramics in this context. It is likely that mythological narratives, legends, and tales were originally recorded in paper books, but due to climatic factors and the passage of time, they have not survived till the present day.

We know about the widespread use of paper books by the Maya from visual, written, and archaeological sources (Carter & Dobereiner 2016, pp. 711-712). Nonetheless, only four Maya paper books, made from amate, a wild fig tree's inner bark, and referred to in the literature as codices, have survived to this day. They are all dated to the Postclassic period, with the oldest among them, known as the Grolier codex, dating back to the 11th-12th centuries (Стаднік 2022, с. 12).

In 'Picture Worlds: Storytelling on Greek, Moche, and Maya Pottery', the authors compare three completely different ceramic traditions in an attempt to identify their common features and understand what role painted ceramics played in these cultures. In the book, they argue that vase painting is not only a historical source but also a means of communication, and serves as an important example of social activity and interaction.

Researchers draw our attention to the problem of classifying subjects of painted ceramics, which included their division into 'mythological' or 'supernatural' ones, and those of 'daily life' or 'generic'. 'Mythological' scenes on ceramics portray distinct ritual attributes and contain figures or objects distinguishable as such either by inscriptions accompanying them or by the contextual separation of the imagery from the contemporary world in which the vessels were crafted. The scenes that fail to meet these criteria are frequently categorized as 'historical', 'daily life', 'generic', etc. However, while clear examples of both types exist, applying this strict classification reveals several methodological challenges discussed in the book's introduction.

David Saunders, the first editor of the volume, is an associate curator of antiquities at the J. Paul Getty Museum. He primarily focuses on ancient Greek and Roman art, classical archaeology, ancient Greek vase painting, iconography, and restoration history. Additionally, he contributed to the volume as the author of two chapters dedicated to the examination of ancient Greek painted pottery. Megan E. O'Neil, the second editor, is an assistant professor of art history at Emory University and holds the position of Faculty Curator of the Art of the Americas. She specializes in the ancient Maya civilization and other cultures of the ancient Americas. Her research encompasses various aspects, with a particular focus on the ancient Maya stone sculpture. O'Neil has contributed multiple articles to scholarly journals, delving into Maya sculpture, painting, and ceramics. She produced the part devoted to the Maya ceramics alongside Stephen D. Houston, a well-known Maya researcher, anthropologist, and epigraphist. Other researchers specializing in the three cultures also contributed to the book.

In the introduction, the authors note that the iconography on the vases allows a more free, flexible interpretation of its scenes and images rather than telling a concrete clear story as writing does. Both Greek and Mayan scribes used a single word to mean 'to write' and 'to paint'. In the case of the Maya, it is based on the word with the root *tz'ihb* (write/paint), for the Greeks, it is the verb *graphein*, which also translates both as 'to write' and 'to paint' (Saunders & O'Neil 2024, p. 13).

The bulk of the book can be divided into two main parts. The first one presents an overview of three distinct societies — Greek, Moche, and Maya — in chronological order. It commences with a broad survey of each society, delving into geographical aspects, timelines, religious background, and political organization. Each section comprises three chapters, starting with an overview that

provides general information about the society in which a particular pottery was crafted. This gives us an excellent context to further understand the specifics of production, techniques, styles, iconography, uses, and others contained in the following chapters.

Subsequently, the book contains dedicated essays that examine the creation of painted pottery within these three cultures, supplemented by concise analyses highlighting the archaeological contexts of selected vessels. Transitioning from societal and cultural insights, the second part of the book is dedicated to the realm of imagery, revealing individual stories and plots conveyed on ceramics, and elucidating various techniques and perspectives for interpretation.

The unconventional approach to bringing together the ceramic traditions of Ancient Greece, Moche, and Maya within a single publication is noteworthy. The book's strength lies in its design, featuring high-quality, large-format illustrations throughout. The second half of the book, starting from page 133, includes plates serving as a catalog of ceramics referenced in the text. These plates showcase large, high-quality photos accompanied by brief descriptions in the final listing. Moreover, the publication is written in clear and accessible language, making it easily comprehensible for readers of all backgrounds. Such books hold appeal for both scholars and general readers alike. Particularly interesting would be the experience for those who attended the exhibition this publication accompanies.

As mentioned earlier, the second part of the book contains essays on the analysis of iconography and storytelling tradition in Greek, Moche, and Maya ceramics. Since it is presented separately, a gap is inadvertently created in the information presentation sequence. The authors intended to explore the stylistic and iconographic traditions of these cultures in a separate part so that it would be more convenient to compare them and see certain parallels. However, the iconography cannot be explored without the wider context, which is presented separately in the first part of the book, prompting uninitiated readers to return to earlier parts.

Simultaneously, the book attempts to provide brief, generic information without overloading the text with intricate details and specialized terminology, which serves as a great starting point for those who wish to explore the ceramics from these cultures. Each section also includes notes that allow interested readers to explore further details on particular topics.

'Picture Worlds: Storytelling on Greek, Moche, and Maya Pottery' is a brilliant introduction to the intricately adorned terracotta vessels of three distinct civilizations. Despite being geographically and temporally separated, these cultures all utilized pottery as a means to narrate stories, articulate main ideas, elucidate the cosmos, depict fundamental beliefs and, ultimately, please those who gaze upon them whilst serving a practical purpose. Those interested in the three cultures or painted ceramics could learn more about each ancient society, discover interesting similarities and differences, and gain new perspectives on how images and stories intertwined across civilizations.

### Список джерел та літератури

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**Ancient Stories in Clay: Greek, Moche, and Maya Painted Ceramics within one book.  
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*'Picture Worlds: Narratives in Greek, Moche, and Maya Pottery,' edited by David Saunders and Megan E. O'Neil, is a catalog published to accompany the 2023 exhibition at the Getty Museum and the Michael C. Carlos Museum. The publication's main appeal is its unusual approach, combining three distinct cultural traditions into one comprehensive work. By exploring the context and characteristics of ceramic production in each culture, the authors highlight both commonalities and unique aspects of the ceramic work in these three cultures. Significant attention is given to iconography, the analysis of storytelling formats, and styles depicted on ceramic pieces. The book includes a wealth of high-quality illustrations, making it valuable for both general readers and professional researchers. This review summarizes the authors' key ideas, analyzes the book's structure, and assesses its strengths and weaknesses.*

**Key words:** *painted ceramics, art, decorative painting, ceramic tradition, mythology, Maya, Moche, Ancient Greece.*

**Marie Stadnik**, PhD student. Faculty of History, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Ukraine).

**Марія Стаднік**, аспірантка історичного факультету Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка (Україна).

**ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4889-0965>.

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