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Chapter

Shipibo Conibo and Chilean Diaguita Visual Art: Cognitive Technologies, Shamanism and Long-Distance Cultural Linkages

Paola González Carvajal

Abstract

Pre-Columbian art in all its varied forms offers rich terrain for furthering our insights into the cultural and symbolic lives of Amerindian peoples. This paper studies decorative patterns of Diaguita origin which present a visual logic characterized by the use of complex symmetries, illusory optical vibration, endless variability stemming from simple geometric forms, *horror vacui*, and gradual structural complication, among other techniques. The features described, the association of this visual art to an animal alter ego (jaguar), and the evidence of hallucinogen use together suggest a cultural link with specific ethnographic (Shipibo-Conibo) and archeological (Mojocoya) visual art. In this case, we are dealing not with a notation system but with visual "technologies of enchantment" (sensu Gell 1998) that are used to produce decorative patterns with social agency that captivate viewers with their visual artifice—the non-mimetic appearance of animation. In 2015, a large cemetery was excavated at the Diaguita site of El Olivar. The graves therein belong to an early Diaguita cultural period, during which the Diaguitas created a techno-stylistic material identity, expressed in visual languages rooted not only in the Andean world, but in ancient cultural traditions of the eastern lowlands of Bolivia and the Peruvian Amazon.

Keywords: Chilean Diaguita culture, Shipibo-Conibo culture, South American shamanic art, cultural symmetry, long-distance cultural linkages, indigenous art concept

1. Introduction

Structural analysis of Diaguita visual art [1] revealed certain decorative patterns (the predominance of abstract designs, the heavy use of symmetry, and the presence of spotted feline representations). The designs' minimal units and symmetrical structure have been shown to be sensitive to issues of group identity and cultural interaction processes [2], in which each culture selects and appropriates a limited number of symmetries that form a specific universe of socially recognized forms, and only these are approved for use.

Pre-Inca Diaguita art displays a series of traits that allow it to be considered representative of a specific South American shamanic art tradition. Notable among these traits are the association of the designs with an alter ego (jaguar or spotted feline), the

practice of hallucinogenic consumption, and the development of non-figurative visual art featuring complex symmetry. The image of a spotted feline (jaguar) has been recorded from the Diaguita II phase on duck-shaped pitchers, zoomorphic serving bowls (**Figure 1**), and spatulas used for the consumption of hallucinogenic substances.

Evidence that Diaguita culture engaged in this practice includes tubes and spatulas, as well as the scallop shells that held the psychoactive substance itself (**Figure 2**).

The Diaguita culture developed in the semi-arid region of what is now Northern Chile, between the Elqui and Choapa rivers. The Diaguita were skilful potters who developed an abstract, symmetrical visual art style that was tremendously complex and beautiful. The variety, extraordinary complexity, and intricate composition of Diaguita ceramic designs comprise one of the most stunning visual universes of the pre-Colombian Americas (**Figure 3**). Two phases can be clearly identified in the development of this pre-Colombian people—a pre-Inca period (900–1470 A.D.) and a period of Diaguita-Inca contact (1470–1536 A.D.)—each with its own characteristic style of visual art.

Before Inca contact, the Diaguita were a peasant society with little social stratification, in which the family served as the basic social unit. The Diaguita of this phase practised small-scale farming and adapted to their environment without altering it significantly. They had a disperse settlement pattern, which suggests that they managed space through kinship-based residential units that occupied the transverse



Figure 1.
Diaguita zoomorphic serving bowl (spotted feline). Grave 62, El Olivar site.



Figure 2.
Spatula, tube, and shell used for consuming psychoactive substances. Grave 99, El Olivar site.



Figure 3.
Duck-shaped pitchers (Diaguita II phase). Museo del Limarí N°31.



Figure 4.
Male accompanied by spatula, tube, and shell for consuming psychoactive substances. Grave 99, El Olivar site.

(East-West) valleys of their territory. As the basic social units, individual families practised small-scale farming to provide for their members, forming communities that were both economically self-sufficient and politically autonomous.

Evidence from pre-Inca Diaguita burial contexts in the Choapa Valley [3] has shown that there was little social differentiation in these communities, at least in regard to burial practices, as the nature and distribution of ceramic grave goods was largely homogeneous across age and gender. However, the presence of offerings associated with the consumption of hallucinogenic substances (spatulas and scallop shells) indicates that certain males—who have been interpreted as shamans—seem to have occupied a slightly different social category (**Figure 4**).

In terms of social organization, researchers have affirmed [4] that the Diaguita had a dual social structure, with groups organized in complementary halves, similar to several pre-Hispanic and present-day Andean and Amazonian societies. Ethnohistoric evidence indicates that, at the time of the Spanish arrival, the Diaguita were organized into dual *señoríos* (chiefdoms).

2. Diaguita Pre-Inca visual art and South American shamanic art tradition

Aspects such as the optical illusion of movement and vibration (**Figure 5**); interminable variability based on simple geometric forms (**Figure 6a–c**); *horror vacui* (**Figure 7**); hypnotic attraction (**Figure 8**); positive/negative views (**Figure 9**), and

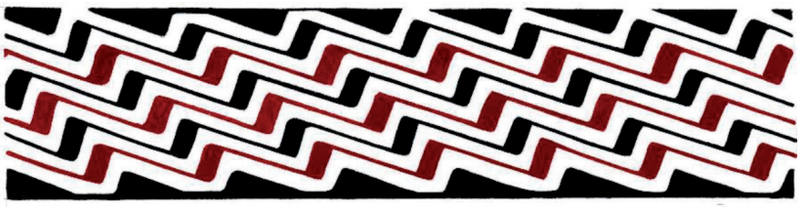
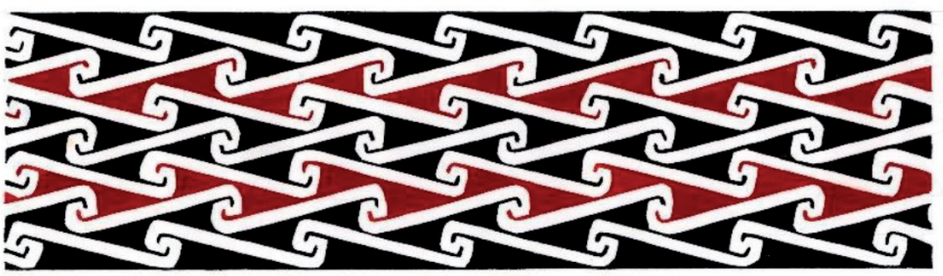
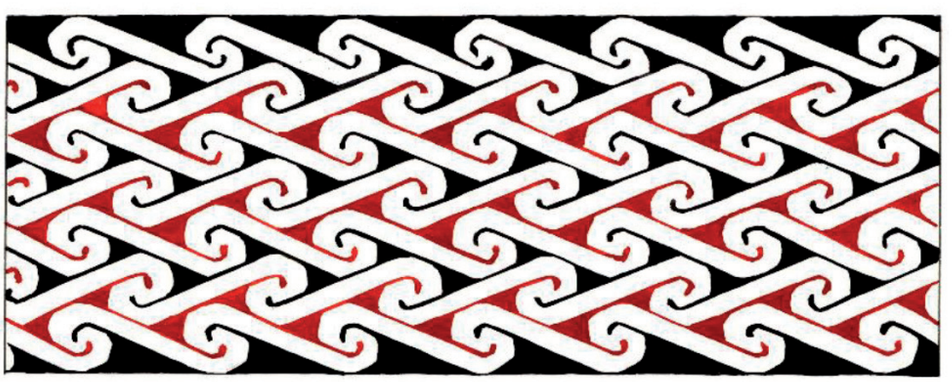


Figure 5.
Optical illusion of movement and vibration. Diaguita F2-2 wave pattern ([1], p. 118).



a



b



c

Figure 6.
Interminable variability based on simple geometric forms. (a) Diaguita C5 wave pattern ([1] p.111); (b) Diaguita C6 wave pattern ([1], p.111; (c) Diaguita C7 wave pattern ([1], p.112).

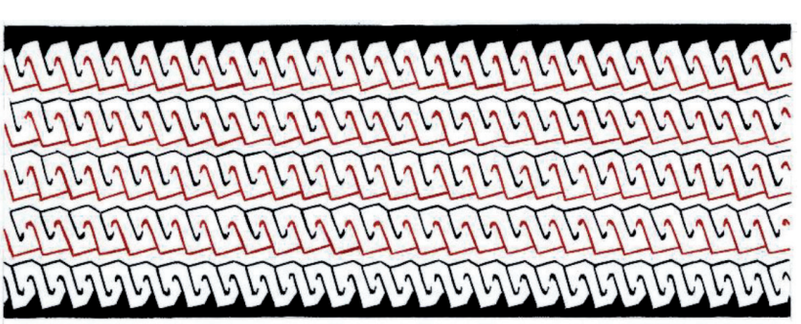


Figure 7.
Horror vacui. Diaguita J 1-1 wave pattern ([1], p. 123).



Figure 8.
Nearly hypnotic attraction. Diaguita A2 labyrinth pattern ([1], p. 152]).

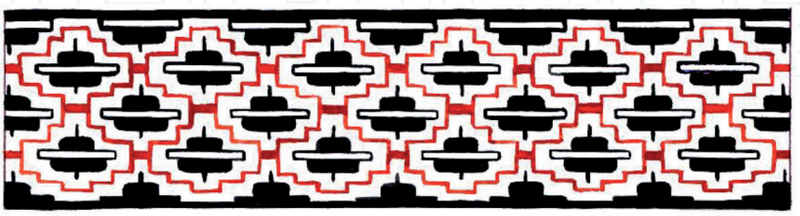


Figure 9.
Positive/negative designs. Diaguita stepped motifs, reflection B ([1] p. 149).

designs organized according to the principle of gradual structural complexification, among other features.

Recent investigations have made headway in identifying Diaguita rock art in the Limarí and Choapa river basins [5, 6]. Certain rock art representations (petroglyphs) have been attributed to the Diaguita culture on the basis of their formal similarities with Diaguita ceramic designs, both in terms of motifs and minimal units (labyrinth, stepped designs and stepped fret borders, for example) as well as in regard to the complex symmetrical operations performed by the creators. On this rock support we find the same visual logic that is recorded on Diaguita ceramic decoration, which is marked by its abstract character and complex symmetry (**Figure 10**).

Our comparative examination of Diaguita art and other South American ethnographic visual art styles linked to shamanic religions, especially those of the Amazonian Tukano [7], Shipibo-Conibo [8], and Caduveo [9] cultures, reveals a set of shared characteristics [10]. Two common external associations of these visual art traditions are the reference to an animal *alter ego* (jaguar, anaconda, feline) and the practice of hallucinogenic consumption (**Figure 11**).

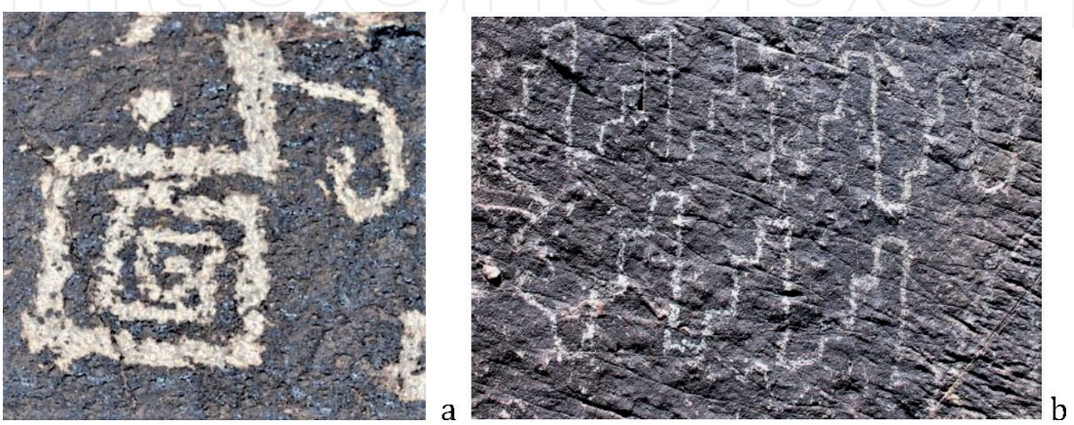


Figure 10.
Diaguita rock art. (a) Diaguita labyrinth pattern, Choapa Valley; (b) Diaguita double zigzag pattern, Choapa Valley.



Figure 11.
Polychrome vessel with feline representation. Diaguita-Inca phase. Grave 59, El Olivar site.

Diaguitas and Shipibos also share the practices of ceramic urn burials, intentional cranial deformation, and the use of "sacrificial" objects in burial contexts. But the most prominent similarities are found in the styles of these South American indigenous art traditions, which employ complex symmetry to articulate the motifs, using three or more inter-operational symmetrical principals, and the frequent use of mirror reflection [10] (**Figure 12**).

For instance, in relation to Shipibo art, De Boer [11] affirms

> *"...the basic cross is mastered first. This element is then successively submitted to a number of increasingly complex operations that entail concatenation, repetition, compounding- first in one, then in two dimensions- and finally various partitioning and orientational transformations. The strength of this sequential pattern suggest that a powerful maturational program of the kind famously diagnosed by Piaget [12] is at work."*

Another trait is the endless continuation or the self-generative power of the compositions, which endows them with an outstanding rhythmic quality. In contrast, the principle of *horror vacui* and the sectioning of the designs in delimited fields are also present. Yet another characteristic is the interplay between positive and negative perspectives. The use of (strictly abstract) geometric motifs,



Figure 12.
Mirror reflection. Shipibo textil, Panaillo community.

combined with complex symmetrical structures that makes them barely intelligible, is another characteristic feature of Shipibo visual art [10].

These are elaborate and systematic procedures of graphic creation, visual litanies that generate a hypnotic attraction (**Figure 13**) through designs executed in different media such as facial paint, textile decoration, ceramics, and home decor.

In relation to this specific class of South American visual art, present in ethnographic contexts and associated with shamanic practices, Reichel-Dolmatoff ([7], p. 292) has linked the ingestion of psychoactive substances to geometric designs. The author highlights how the hallucinatory experience offers a potentially rich array of symmetrical images, which are then reproduced by the Tukano people in their art. He comments:

> *one of the most important discoveries in the last decades, in the ethnology field consists in the confirmation that art and shaman religions are closely related to the use of hallucinogenic drugs"..."the ingestion of hallucinogenic drugs represents the principal mechanism that induced states of shaman visions, accompanied by the*

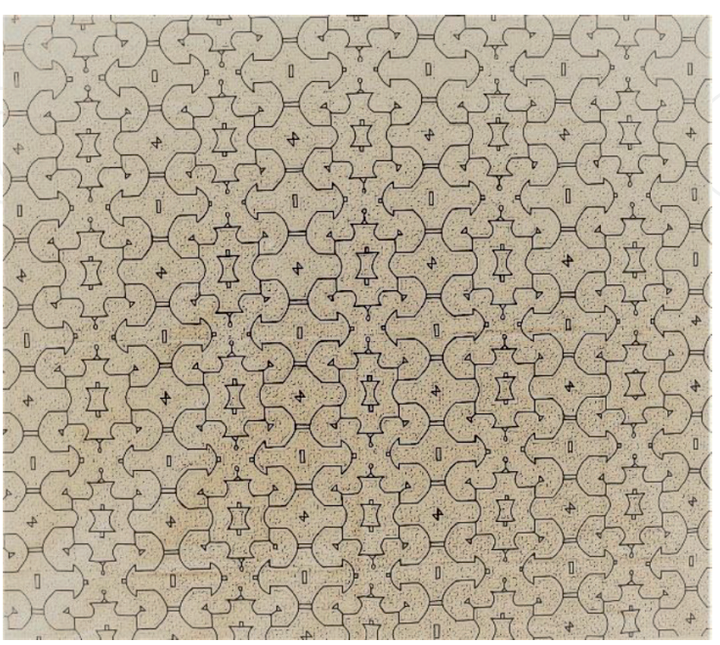


Figure 13.
Nearly hynotic attraction. Shipibo textil. Paola González collection.

> *illusion of flying through the air, animal transformations and the penetration into other cosmic dimensions, out of this world*

Similarly, among the Shipibo-Conibo people, *kené* designs left on a material support (ceramic, fabric, or wood) suggest designs perceived during shamanic visions resulting from the ingestion of Ayahuasca and believed to hold great healing power. Thus, these symmetrical, non-figurative designs have a therapeutic as well as an esthetic function. For the Shipibo people, the execution of these complex and extraordinarily beautiful designs constitutes a collaboration with the sacred, spiritual realms, erasing the dividing line between religious and esthetic experience. Thus, there is an evident link between shamanic practices, the consumption of hallucinogenic substances (Ayahuasca), and synesthetic healing therapies, which range from the artistic to the musical [8]. Gehbart-Sayer ([6], p. 161) points out:

> *the visions of the designs are described as non analytical impressions on "pages" or "sheets", organized in a pattern that flicker rapidly in front of the eyes of the shaman then disappear as soon as he tries to take a closer look.*

This synesthetic quality of South American shamanic art also includes the transition between visual art and music, with the use of symmetry being a common feature in both. Gehbart-Sayer ([8], p. 170) comments, *"symmetry prevails in the formal, melodic, and rhythmic characteristics of the songs. An example of a more complex consonance is the lateral symmetry of melodic inversion."*

In these communities, artistic activity goes hand in hand with the sacred; shamans and female artisans create magical-religious objects, in which esthetic beauty is not an end in itself. For example, the Shipibo-Conibo people believe that individuals are "marked" at birth with invisible decorative patterns. When an individual becomes ill, the healing designs are spiritually projected upon the patient by the shaman to bring them back to a healthy state. The attributing of agency to the symmetrical pattern is evident in the story of Netén Vita (a Shipibo shaman from Caimito), as related by Illius ([13], p. 197). Netén Vita affirms that, in order to heal, the shaman must contact the guardian spirits, who are "the bands of drawings from my heaven (*noco naina kené*)." Furthermore, recent studies of Amazonian peoples have revealed the existence of a series of pan-Amazon beliefs [14, 15], expressed in different stylistic traditions. Such commonalities include the representation of specific animals, particularly jaguars and snakes, as well as abstract art, shamanic practices, and the consumption of hallucinogenic substances. These findings point to a longstanding shared ideology, the common elements of which can be found in both present-day cultures and in the archeological record [14]. Also on the basis of archeological and ethnographic evidence, Roe proposes the existence of a common cosmology within the South American tropical forest, pointing out that, *"with its vast interconnecting web of waterways knitting together similar microenviroments, the Amazonian region is a perfect highway of ideas"* ([14], p. 26).

In terms of the temporal depth of this shamanic art tradition in South America, Taylor ([16], p. 16) affirms that "*it is possible that what we see in the contemporary Amazonian graphic tradition is only the preservation of a tendency present since pre-Colombian times, the fruit of an ancient cultural tradition, of an eminently intellectual, cerebral, elaborate and complex form of art*".

In the paragraphs below, we will examine archeological information which suggests the existence of long-distance relations that played a determining role in Diaguita ethnogenesis. These cultural relations will also explain the cultural linkages that one observes between the Shipibo-Conibo and pre-Hispanic Diaguita peoples, despite their separation in both space and time.

3. The Mojocoya culture, a nexus for understanding the cultural linkages between the Chilean Diaguita and Shipibo-Conibo peoples

Affirming the linkages between the Chilean Diaguita and Peruvian Amazon Shipibo-Conibo peoples (which considers stylistic aspects, social practices, and material culture), and following the arguments of Lathrap [17], González [8] proposed the existence of a common antecedent between the two cultures, namely the Mojocoya culture of the Bolivian lowlands. As the cultural ancestor of the Shipibo people, Lathrap proposes the Cumancaya culture (Alto Ucayali), which also displays evident parallels with Chilean Diaguita culture.

González [8] confirmed the presence of patterns in Mojocoya iconography that were previously identified in Diaguita iconography, including the Wave A, stepped vertical reflection, and Chain C [1] patterns. The coincidences observed are not limited to the identification of minimal units (stepped borders, triangles combined with scrolling, simple stepped motifs, etc.), but also include symmetrical principles (or groups of them) that make up these units (reflection, displacement combined with translation, double specular reflection, horizontal reflection, rotation, and translation, among others). This structural similarity is a very good indicator of cultural interrelatedness [2].

According to Brockington et al. ([18], p. 4), the Mojocoya culture originated in the Amazon-Chaqueñas lowlands of Bolivia expanded into the areas around the highlands of Cochabamba and Chuquisaca. Based on their ceramics, two phases have been identified: an early, pre-Tiwanaku one (ca. 1-600 A.D.) and a later one (600 – 900 A.D.) that displays the influence of Tiwanaku. Mojocoya designs are executed in black and red on orange, with some use of white. The most frequent motifs include triangles; triangles with scrolling; stepped and triangular stepped motifs with scrolling; and zig-zagging lines in alternating colors, very often organized in bilateral or quadrilateral symmetry. We add to this list recorded examples of the labyrinth pattern A2 [1]. The main ceramic forms include simple convex bowls, tripod bowls, kero cups, and "effigy pieces" [18]. Monochrome ceramics include urns and other large vessels.

For the Mojocoya culture, archeologists have noted the practices of child burial in urns, cranial deformation, and the consumption of psychoactive powders. At the El Tambo site (1-600 AD), researchers have found copper bells with folded bases [18], which have also been recorded at Diaguita sites in Chile's semi-arid north. The authors emphasize that the Mojocoya sites are located near traffic routes connecting the Andean and Amazon regions, which would have facilitated the movement of people and goods among different ecozones. Along the same lines, Pereira and Brockington ([19], p. 2) hypothesize that the area southeast of Cochabamba would have operated as a focal point for social complexity, a place where a variety of social processes emerged over time, making it *"an area of historic interplay between environmental factors and Andean, Amazonian, and Chaqueño peoples, with a dynamic that had major repercussions and wielded significant influence even beyond its sphere of interaction as a zone."*

4. New research on the origins of Chilean Diaguita culture: El Olivar archeological site

In light of the above information about the Mojocoya culture and its ceramic tradition, it is interesting to examine analyses of recent discoveries at the Diaguita site of El Olivar [20, 21], which have identified more stylistic coincidences between

the Diaguita and Mojocoya representational universes [8], while at the same time shedding light upon the genesis and development of the Diaguita culture itself in Chile's semi-arid north.

An extensive cemetery was discovered during construction of a highway between the Chilean cities of La Serena and Vallenar, and excavated between 2015 and 2017 [20, 21]. The funerary contexts recovered correspond to 212 individuals in primary graves, 39 of which contained one or two camelids, along with another 44 secondary graves. Among the whole, 86 burial contexts correspond to the period in which Diaguita culture was emerging, which we have called the Early Diaguita phase [21]. The evidence unearthed suggests that it was during this stage that the Diaguitas created their own techno-stylistic material identity. And although there was some degree of interaction with neighboring communities in the semi-arid North, Diaguita ceramics forged an identity all its own, developing visual languages with roots that were linked not only to the Andean world, but with the ancient cultural traditions of the Eastern Bolivian lowlands.

Included among the discoveries associated with those Early Diaguita funerary contexts were novel polychrome vessels, including an anthropomorphic bi-globular polychrome pitcher, which bears a rather crude version of the Wave A pattern on the back of its "head" (**Figure 14a,b**). Also outstanding among the grave goods found is a polych-rome anthropomorphic cup decorated with a labyrinth pattern on both sides of the face and body (**Figure 15a,b**). Yet another notable vessel is the polychrome globular pitcher with a flared neck, which displays the minimal units of the Chain B pattern (triangle combined with a rectangular hook), also present in Mojocoya iconography (**Figure 16**). Lastly, we wish to highlight the four-footed anthropomorphic-zoomorphic vessel (**Figure 17**) found at the site, for both its shape and the designs molded and incised on its "face" (nose, eyes, ears), both of which qualities bear evident similarities to the "effigy pieces" illustrated by Brockington et al. [18].

It is interesting to note that, as Diaguita culture consolidated over time, these early motifs gradually transformed and became more complex, until achieving the esthetic and geometric virtuosity characteristic of the Classic Diaguita style and the Diaguita-Inca phase. Clearly, the Wave pattern remained a point of reference throughout Diaguita development, acting as an "axis of formal coherence" [22], an essential formative aspect of Diaguita identity. In effect, when we look at how Diaguita ceramics has evolved over time, we observe the persistence of certain



Figure 14.
Bi-globular anthropomorphic polychrome pitcher with wave A pattern A. Grave 182. El Olivar Site; (a) Front section; (b) Back section.



Figure 15.
Polychrome anthropomorphic cup decorated with labyrinth pattern. Grave 182, El Olivar site. (a) Front section; (b) Lateral section.



Figure 16.
Globular polychrome pitcher with flared neck, displaying the minimal units of the chain B pattern. Grave 58, El Olivar site.

complexly structured designs, expressed in a simpler version in the Early Diaguita phase (the Wave A pattern, for example). These decorative patterns were taken up and enhanced time and time again by the Diaguita people in a kind of ongoing sequence that withstood the passage of time. This insistent reproduction of a set of specific designs is a clear expression of how memory constructs and establishes identity. In this sense, we propose that designs like the Wave A pattern, which can



Figure 17.
Four-legged anthropomorphic-zoomorphic vessel. Grave 186, El Olivar site.



a



b



c



d

Figure 18.
Evolution of Wave A pattern over time: (a) Mojocoya trichromatic design (Lathrap 1970, p.143); (b) Sherd of the Wave A pattern, Early Diaguita period, El Olivar site; (c) Wave A pattern in trichromatic cup, Diaguita pre- Inca period, Grave 149, El Olivar site; (d) Wave A1 pattern in felinomorphic bowl, Diaguita-Inca period, Grave 59, El Olivar site.

be traced back to the earliest times of the Mojocoya culture and is represented in Diaguita culture without interruption from its origin to the Inca stage, is an "axis of formal coherence" [21]. These particular forms and designs are used by a group of people as a means of their own social reproduction (**Figure 18a–d**).

Obviously, the Mojocoya and Chilean Diaguita cultures are separated by a major gap in both time and space, making it difficult to speak of a direct link between the two. Perhaps the latter can be thought of as an original source of the concepts and designs that spread, albeit with some variations, over a geographically extensive area that stretched to the eastern lowlands and likely into the Amazon uplands as well.

5. Pre-Inca Diaguita art: the agency of art and technologies of enchantment

A detailed examination of pre-Inca Diaguita visual art [1] from the perspective of its motifs, formal logic, and symmetrical structure suggests that this representational universe does not seek to communicate specific concepts of any kind. Notably, the hyper-concentrated visual litanies of that period were crafted by artisans highly skilled in intricate, complex symmetrical operations. For us, it appears that their aim was more likely the creation of what Gell [22] has termed "technologies of enchantment."

In turn, the same author considers decorative art a special form of technology. Gell comments [23],"the decoration of objects is a component of a social technology, which I have elsewhere called the technology of enchantment" [22], and continues, "this psychological technology encourages and maintains the motivations 6necessitated by social life. The world is filled with decorated objects because decoration is often essential to the psychological functionality of artifacts, which cannot be dissociated from the other types of functionality they possess, notably their practical or social functionality" ([23], p. 74).

As Gell explains, work of art captivate the viewer with the difficultly of their conception and execution. Their uniqueness and beauty transform them into active agents in the social sphere. In particular, abstract art exploits our perception of internal agency because

> *"Patterns, by their multiplicity and the difficulty we have in grasping their mathematical or geometrical basis by mere visual inspection, generate relationships over time between persons and things, because what they present to the mind is, cognitively speaking, always "unfinished business" ([23], p.23)*

The author goes on to argue that this "sets up a biographical relation – an unfinished exchange – between the decorated index and the recipient" ([23], p. 81), and thus attributes this "cognitive stickiness" of abstract patterns "to this blockage in the cognitive process of reconstructing the intentionality embodied in artefacts."

Thus, by employing these visual strategies, the abstract patterns acquire properties, such as the illusion of movement and vibration, that help to captivate the viewer and enhance the agency of the pattern. In the words of Gell ([23], p. 77), "nothing could be more animated than the tessellations (tiling patterns) devised by Islamic decorative artisans...it seems, to inspire ever more effective inducements to captivation by visual artifice, the non-mimetic appearance of animation".

In this regard, Taylor [16] notes that in the Amazonian representational universe, figurative representations of the entities of the cosmovision are virtually absent, while abstract and geometrical representations abound. The author concludes, "*any surface with geometric motifs can evoke subjectivity or personality. Even*

paintings themselves can be treated as persons. For example, the Jíbaro people have ritual songs that are sung directly to body paintings to ask them for a certain type of intervention" [14 p. 6]. The author therefore proposes that the abstract body painting of Amazonian groups was intended to *"represent complete beings as "incarnations."* This suggests that this geometric, non-figurative Amazonian art was not "iconophobic," but rather played a major role "*in the perpetuation of this tradition of figuratively imagining supernatural beings*" ([16], p. 13).

6. Conclusions

In this article we have attempted to build our understanding of the visual logic deployed by the Chilean Diaguita people, as expressed in the designs of Diaguita polychrome ceramics. The use of symmetry in Diaguita culture is remarkable. In their pre-Inca designs the highly skilled Diaguita artisans managed to create complex abstract constructs that were highly symmetrical and capable of producing optical effects such as vibration and movement. Without a doubt, these reinforced the active social role of their visual art, in association with a shamanic belief system. Current reflections about Amazonian animism offer extensive opportunities for interpreting pre-Inca Diaguita art, which, as we have previously proposed, seems to be part of a larger cultural tradition that remains alive in different parts of South America, particularly among indigenous groups of the Amazon region.

Furthermore, the surprising similarities observed in both the visual art and certain social practices of the Chilean Diaguitas and the Shipibo-Conibo people, despite their spatial and temporal distance, can be better understood by observing the dynamic long-distance cultural contact that likely took place between peoples living in the Bolivian, Andean, and even Amazonian lowlands. If we are to better understand the pre-Hispanic past of the southern cone of the Americas as well as its ethnographic present, we must broaden our perspective and grasp that in the distant past, cultural traditions possessed of a clearly recognizable identity exercised their influence over extensive geographic areas and diverse ecosystems. 3 In the case presented, the analysis of symmetry was crucial in demonstrating that cultural contact did exist, and has proven to be an approach well suited to detecting processes of cultural inter-relatedness and exchange.

It is also interesting to examine the esthetic facet of symmetry, and how it helped define the elusive concept of *beauty.* In the pre-Inca Diaguita representational universe, its function in the creation of highly complex abstract images is evident. At the same time, the painstaking display of symmetry in a significant number of designs from across the entire Diaguita territory demonstrates the social importance that Diaguita artisans attributed to managing and comprehending symmetry. Indeed, the use of symmetry enabled communities in different valleys to affirm their individual identities, while marking Diaguita identity as a whole.

So, how did the Diaguita people conceive of such vessels loaded with symbolic content? We find it difficult to believe that they were simple, everyday pieces crafted to hold food. Instead, based on their complex iconography and rich esthetics, it would appear that they were invested with an active social role.

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Author details

Paola González Carvajal
Sociedad Chilena de Arqueología, Santiago, Chile

*Address all correspondence to: paoglez@gmail.com

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