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Sacred Currency: The Value of Textile in Colonial Andean Painting
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In this 18th century colonial Andean image painted in the former Inka capital of Cuzco, Peru, a wreath of flowers encircles a small female figure sitting upon a richly textured seat (Figure 1). She wears clothing that connotes distinction; her features and gestures are as delicate as her garments yet her eyes are fixed and discerning. Our eyes are drawn to her eyes. What does she see? What is her role? We also turn these questions on ourselves: what do we know about this figure that gives the painting meaning? We tend to interpret the work through her identity.

![Image](image-url)  
Fig. 1. The Child Mary Spinning  
Collection of Carl and Marilyn Thoma  
Peru/Cuzco, 18th Century  
31.125 x 24.875 inches  
Oil on canvas

However, it is also relevant to examine the painting’s other elements, for example the rich textiles that hold place in the composition, or the spindle and distaff that indicate a valued material and an important task. Thus, instead of asking questions about the figure’s identity, I would like to think in terms of textiles and how they can expand our understanding of cultural values within the flux of the early modern period in colonial Peru.

This painting in the Collection of Carl and Marilyn Thoma shows the Virgin Mary as a child, spinning wool, with symbolism firmly embedded in a Christian story of faith tested and sacrifices made. The lily and the rose reflect her purity and sacrifice; the crown of twelve stars is

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1 This article is derived, in part, from the article "Threshold objects: viewing textiles in a colonial Andean painting," published in World Art (Vol. 7, No.1) in March 2017, available online: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2016.1260047](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2016.1260047)
a sign from the Book of Revelation, also serving as the halo of her sainthood; there, in the wood distaff, we see an intimation of the cross upon which her son Jesus will be crucified. Taking into account its Andean context, scholars have also commented that Mary codes references to the region’s Inka past: could her red bow allude to Inka royalty, who were seen as semi-divine and would have worn headdresses adorned with red wool fiber? Is she wearing a mantle type—a lliklla—that identified Andean women in both the pre-Conquest and colonial periods? Likewise, could the rays of light emanating from behind her head also point to the Sun God, Inti, whom the Inka revered?

My interest, though, is not to look at Mary as a contested site of meaning. I will discuss instead how textiles transmitted meaning in the colonial Andean region of South America, with special consideration of their agency within an indigenous value system that persisted and even carried over into devotion towards a Christian figure like Mary. Religion in colonial Peru was complex and uneven in its expressions and devotions despite the Church’s prolonged investment in making Catholicism the sole spiritual practice. Thinking about textiles instead of Mary herself, we can look more closely at this ‘unevenness’ and take into account cultural processes that are hidden from view here.

*Translating tradition*

I will initially point out ways in which the mantle in the painting seems to exclude Andeanness but I will subsequently develop counter arguments to allow for a broader reading. My argument is not that the mantle seen in the Cuzco School painting has no link to a Spanish-Christian visual culture, but to consider how it especially would have been read in the colonial Andean space because the mantle form—called a lliklla in the Quechua language of Cuzco—serves so critically as an index of Andean culture, defining the attire of indigenous girls and women for hundreds of years pre- and post-Conquest. More specifically, I will bring to light how textiles were used in socio-religious practice in the pre-Conquest Andes.

One obstacle to reading the mantle in the painting as an Andean fabric is the painting’s lineage. It was created in Cuzco, Peru, in the 18th century but its prototype is thought to have been an early 17th century painting from Seville, which also depicts the Child Mary wearing a mantle. In addition, the mantle’s underside, as seen at the neck, does not share the pattern of the frontal side, unlike in traditional high-quality highland Andean weavings. Other markers are skewed, such as the fabric’s striping, which is represented as vertical when actually Andean women’s

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2 Book of Revelations 12:1 and 12:2; Biblehub.com: as of June 2016, the website had text for the King James Bible version of this text.


4 Unlike the Andean man’s traditional uncu (tunic) or the woman’s anacu (gown), which gradually gave way to more European forms of dress, the lliklla maintained its place as elemental to native costume. See Elena Phipps, ‘Textiles as Cultural Memory: Andean Garments in the Colonial Period’ in *Converging Cultures: Art and Identity in Spanish America*, ed. Diana Fane (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 148-52.


mantles typically had lines set horizontally. However, while these are relevant points, changes in traditional practices brought on by colonization created allowances in how indigenous garments would be patterned, and composed, and also represented.

For example, lace was added as ornamentation to native wool mantles or, alternately, became a motif embedded in weavings—something not correspondent with pre-Conquest textile display. Similarly, in a 16th century native woman’s testament, she describes her prized possessions—her *llikllas*—as being made of green Castillian damask with golden edging…[as well as] primrose colored satin with needlework and golden edging…” In other words, the visual impression of a *lliklla*, adherent to a particular native technique or material, seems to have been less significant in the colonial space than the idea or category of the garment type or form. And it is the garment type and its uses in the Andean context that are worth dwelling upon.

**In terms of textile**

As a particular form presented on a body, the mantle in the *Child Mary Spinning* immediately engages with the mantle that is the ‘hallmark of an Inca woman’s identity’, the *lliklla*. And while most of the extant *Child Mary Spinning* paintings seem to depict mantles that look embroidered or are decorated with European lace, one painting surfaced at auction in 2016 with a mantle rendered to look much more like a traditional woven textile (Figure 2). Perhaps the dearth of Andean paintings where the mantle reads emphatically like a woven textile speaks to an awareness of how easily the garment type could recall pre-Christian practices, which I will discuss further.

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8 Ibid., 27-33.
11 This Cuzco school painting of *The Child Mary Spinning* was sold through the auction house Isbilyas Subastas in Spain in the early summer of 2016. It is the only example I have been able to source thus far that suggests something closer to woven textile.
Spanish and native chroniclers writing after the fall of the Inka document the importance textiles had within socio-religious practice. The 17th-century Jesuit scholar Bernabé Cobo describes the Inka sanctuary of the Sun at Lake Titicaca as a concavity in the living rock adorned with sheets of gold and “a curtain cumbi, which was the finest and most delicate piece [of cloth] that has ever been seen.” Other chroniclers and subsequent scholars have also referred to a statue of the Sun kept in the sacred Inka temple enclosure, the Qorikancha, at Cuzco. Shaped in the form of a young boy, it was purportedly dressed in the finest textiles: “…the caretaker of the Sun …dressed it in a tunic of very finely woven gold and wool in a variety of styles. He put a certain band on its head, according to their style and custom. Then he put on it a fringe like the one used by lords, and on top of it a gold disk…” The 16th-century extirpator of idolatries Cristóbal de Albornoz documents numerous cases where confiscated objects, which the Spanish deemed idols, were “were publicly burnt with their clothing and offerings.” These burnt ‘idols’ were the objects that Andeans term ‘wak’a’ (also variously spelled guaca, waka, huaca), which are important to how we can think about textiles in the Andes.

Of wak’a and relational power
The concept wak’a, often understood as a material object with embodied or potentially sacred presence, is often closely linked to textiles. Any object or material thing can potentially ‘become’ wak’a, making the division between non-active and active agents in the Andes quite permeable, and allowing for a universe full of ‘threshold’ meaning. Mannheim and Salas Carreño point out,

however, that it is appropriate to think of wak’a in broader terms, not just as ‘sacred entity’ but as having more to do with a way of functioning in social practice—with respect to ‘scope of influence’—than with oppositions between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’.\textsuperscript{15} In this sense, wak’a involves how some material thing or place or body acts (has agency) \textit{socially}—having ‘presence’ or animacy, therefore, only if it functions within a ‘web of relatedness’.

How might Mary’s mantle be associated with wak’a? That is, how does it relate to social-slash-sacred efficacy? Catherine Allen references Alfred Gell’s concept of the ‘distributed person’ to explain how a textile can act relationally, taking on creative agency through its connection to the weaver, so that a kind of “personhood [extends] into multiple sites beyond the boundaries of the body.”\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, textiles in the Andes seem to grant objects—not just people—subjectivity. Tamara Bray notes that ‘dressing’ things is a way in which Andeans indicate the ‘personhood’ of objects, signalling their social effectiveness.\textsuperscript{17} Significantly, textiles could both dress a wak’a object, indicating that object’s ‘personhood’, or could themselves be recognized as wak’a, and have ‘personhood’ if they had socio-sacred effectiveness.

In extension, I posit the painting’s mantle (and here I would add the spun fiber as well) is implicated in the “notions of power, agency, reciprocity, and ethical obligation” that Mary invokes.\textsuperscript{18} In other words, it engages the concept of wak’a but in application to the Christian context. Someone familiar with the historical tradition of dressing wak’a objects would perhaps have looked at this mantle, connotative of the Andean woman’s mantle and yet now dressing Mary, and recognized the agency of the textile functioning in a new network of relations. From early in the colonial period, Andeans were incorporating the Christian divine into their traditional practices. As Maya Stanfield-Mazzi so evocatively explains of the Christian extirpation of idolatry campaigns across the Andean sacred landscape: “The \textit{huacas} [became] unmoored, made both immaterial and invisible, and they thus had to struggle to be honoured.”\textsuperscript{19} Where could the wak’as—formerly material beings, now ghosts in the landscape—have gone?

\textbf{Surface readings}

This painting is associated with the Cuzco school; marked as developing towards the end of the 17th century and lasting for more than a hundred years. It has also been called ‘\textit{mestizo}’ or ‘Andean baroque’, and is posed against earlier modes that were stylistically more in concert with a European aesthetic.\textsuperscript{20} Often identified according to certain localisms that to varying degrees have been qualified as ‘Andean’, it included a taste for gold embellishment (called \textit{brocateado} in emulation of brocade fabrics), Mannerist stylization residual from the early colonial period,

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\textsuperscript{15} Bruce Mannheim and Guillermo Salas Carreño, “Wak’as: Entifications of the Andean Sacred” in \textit{The Archaeology of Wak’as}, ed. Tamara L. Bray (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2015), 63.
\textsuperscript{17} Tamara L. Bray, “An Archaeological Perspective on the Andean Concept of Camaquen: Thinking through Late Pre-Columbian Ofrendas and Huacas’,” \textit{Cambridge Archaeological Journal} 19 (3) (2009): 364.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 360.
\textsuperscript{20} Teresa Gisbert and José de Mesa, \textit{Historia de la Pintura Cuzqueña} (Buenos Aires: Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas, 1962) 130-131.
\end{flushright}
colorful and decorative environment, and religious subject matter.\textsuperscript{21} This is not to say that only native Andean artists painted in the Cuzco style, nor that Andeans had no interest or ability to paint according to a more European aesthetic; tendencies as such did not follow ethnic lines.\textsuperscript{22} Nonetheless, an aesthetic based on local preferences did develop and it was into this matrix that this painting type of the young Mary entered. These aesthetic notions, I suggest, further help locate the mantle within a singularly Andean socio-religious practice.

The Northern European painter Jan Brueghel introduced the encircling assortment of flowers into European Marian imagery in the early 17\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{23} His images eventually transferred to the New World through prints, becoming especially linked to mid-17\textsuperscript{th} century Cuzco paintings.\textsuperscript{24} Though this painting’s Spanish predecessors sometimes have Mary surrounded by cherubs, in Cuzco the clear preference was for the flower garland, which would have been much more impactful to Andean sensibility. Where linguistic barriers in the colonial project impeded the recitation of prayers, imagery of flowers were said to have been highly effective;\textsuperscript{25} not only were flowers, and specifically roses, long linked to European devotion, but Andeans also favoured the sensory appeal of flowers in their devotional practices. Alan Durston points out that in early colonial Quechua translations of the Marian litany, native Andean flowers were often used instead of European botanical references to Mary to more strongly associate with the Andean context.\textsuperscript{26} The yellow flower slightly below the garland’s center on either side of Mary, for example, seems to be the \textit{amanca\‘y}, a slightly smaller Peruvian lily that often translated for the white lily of European Marian devotion. Interestingly, this painting shows both the \textit{amanca\‘y} and the white lily, further above, inviting the analysis that the painting was made for more than one audience’s frame of reference or, one audience’s multiple frames of reference. The abundant use of flower metaphors in pre-Conquest Andean folkloric traditions, particularly love songs, would also inform a more amplified Andean reading of this painting and its elements.\textsuperscript{27}

The painting’s attention to strong color also resonates with a pre-Conquest Inka aesthetic that perhaps prevailed in Cuzco. The Inka put great emphasis on chromatism: light and the clear definition of colors corresponded to an ordered universe.\textsuperscript{28} Relatedly, it is possible to read the mantle’s red stripes contrasted against the dark nearly black background as meaningful in both sacred and profane contexts in the Andes. Veronica Cerceda discusses a term, \textit{wayruru}, which Andean highlanders used in reference to a seed found in the lowlands that is characteristically red and black. The \textit{wayruru} is documented as having magical properties and is often used in amulets and for divinatory purposes, but \textit{wayruru} also meant ‘beauty in the highest degree’ as applied to the virgin maidens chosen for their beauty and purity to serve the Inka ruler: “…

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{21} Ibid., 157, 185-86.
\bibitem{24} Stanfield-Mazzi, 149.
\bibitem{25} Ibid., 62-63.
\bibitem{27} Ibid., 266.
\end{thebibliography}
‘huayruru hajlla’ meant extremely beautiful young girl.\(^{29}\) Wayruru was a fluid term that slipped past binding categories. Cereceda suggests that what Andeans valued as ‘beauty’, embodied in the wayruru, was not a fixed idea but rather the sense-appealing contrast of colors encompassed in the red and black seed and that could also identify other remarkable things: this kind of contrast was also what gave something magical properties.\(^{30}\) Interestingly, wayruru was also the name given to a type of poncho woven near the sacred Lake Titicaca and nearby valleys that used a pattern of contrasting red and black stripes.\(^{31}\) Is the black and red mantle in this painting wayruru, or ‘beautiful’— according to a particular Andean perception? Does it recall the virgin maidens, or notions of magic in an idiosyncratic Andean manner, and does it thus allow for a fuller reading of the mantle? To further ground my inquiry into whether the mantle would have been thought of in terms of wak’a socio-sacred relational networks there are a few other points to make about the painting’s context.

**Cloth in context: social and political value**

Well into the 18\(^{th}\) century the former Inka capital of Cuzco took great pride in its pre-Conquest cultural and political lineage in contrast to Lima, which lacked this history, and Cuzco viewers brought this heritage to bear on their interpretations of events and objects.\(^{32}\) Despite the fall of the Inka empire in the 16\(^{th}\) century, an idealizing admiration for its accomplishments had persisted in cultural and political discourse among the mixed population. Affected by the Cuzco legacy, Spanish, creole, mestizo, and indigenous interest alike continually turned toward various reflections of what ‘Inka’ signified: in 1572 the Viceroy Francisco Toledo, responsible for reorganizing the Spanish colonial administration to increase efficiency and profit through the tribute system, is known to have commissioned a portrait series of the line of Inka royalty up to the conquest, and similar painted or engraved portraits are attributed to various artists and collectors in following periods.\(^{33}\) Between the 16\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) centuries these portraits made reference to an elite ‘Inka’ heritage through modified representations of woven textiles and mantles, acknowledging the social effectiveness of cloth. By the same measure, the painted mantle in the Child Mary Spinning evokes native textiles and invariably their historical association with wak’a (relational and socio-sacred) agency.

Another eighteenth-century occurrence in the Cuzco region heightened awareness of the value of textiles in the socio-political, if not sacred, landscape. In late 1780, José Gabriel Condorcanqui Noguera, an indigenous administrator (kuraka) and intermediary between the indigenous population and the colonial Spanish government, led a rebellion from the outskirts of Cuzco that drew on symbolic associations with the former Inka empire, channelling the vaguer cultural-

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\(^{29}\) Veronica Cereceda, “Aproximaciones a una Estetica Andina: de la Belleza al Tinku,” in *Tres Reflexiones Sobre el Pensamiento Andino*, ed. Javier Medina (La Paz: Hisbol, 1987), 168-69. Cereceda references Padre Ludovico Bertonio, a 17\(^{th}\) century Italian Jesuit missionary who wrote the *Vocabulario de la Lengua Aymara* and was the first to translate Aymara into Spanish: ‘‘‘huayruru hajlla’…young girl… ‘hermosa en sumo grado’” (translation mine).

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 169-73.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 178.


social tone that had prevailed regarding the Inka legacy into a more emphatically political one. His movement stoked the idea of an elite but enlightened indigenous rule against the corruptions of the current Spanish administration. Emblematically, Condorcanqui took on the name Túpac Amaru II in homage to the last of the Inkas’ imperial line, who was captured at Vilcabamba and later executed by the Spanish in 1572.

As Condorcanqui’s, now Túpac Amaru II’s, insurgency spread over nearly a year, its participants showcased their indigenous identity through, among other things, garments that would be equated with a highland identity, however generalized – wearing clothes designated as ‘Indian’ in their campaigns because they were made of coarse wool. The same insurgents also insisted on wearing Christian crosses in their hats, for they were devoted to Catholic doctrine. My suggestion is not, therefore, that Túpac Amaru or anyone in his context would have registered the function or use of textiles as socio-sacred wak’a ‘over’ any Christian symbolism, but neither is it necessary to eliminate the idea that an understanding and acknowledgment of Andean wak’as could have coexisted with Christian belief without infringing on it. My point is that, according to the multiplicity in its nature—with power rooted in its socio-relational and communicative agency—the presence of wak’a was possible whether or not it was understood as a ‘religious’ actor in any way that would have been familiar according to Christianity.

**Spiritual and material resources**

Certainly, analysis of this work rests heavily on who exactly interacted with the painting. Its provenance is not clearly determined in scholarship, though its type would have been commissioned by a convent or a female worshiper for private devotion. The inhabitants of Cuzco’s convents and informal religious institutions such as beaterios, or lay associations, came from a variety of social, cultural, and financial backgrounds. Though by the 1700s Cuzco’s convents more typically catered to the elite creole and Spanish populations, they also included servants, slaves, and laypersons who, at least early in the colonial period, mingled freely with the professed religious. On the other hand, the less formal beaterios that proliferated in Cuzco over the centuries, were typically founded and endowed by indigenous donors—and housed young women from predominantly mestiza or indigenous backgrounds. Though there is no doubt these spaces were meant to indoctrinate young women in the Christian example of modesty, obedience, and religious devotion, we do not really know how Christianity was talked about, what points of reference were engaged among indigenous women, or how they looked upon the religious paintings that adorned their walls. Kathryn Burns asks a key question when she remarks on a Lima beaterio for elite indigenous women, and which I would like to ask as well—“What spiritual and material resources did [the Christianized Andean viewer] control?” and how did these affect the reception of imagery such as this painting?

35 Ibid.
36 Stratton-Pruitt 2006, 182.
39 Ibid., 90.
Conclusion

The thousands upon thousands of religious paintings created during the colonial period attest to the value of visual representation within the Christian religious imperial process. However, the question I have posed is how the mantle in this painting may trace, even subtly, a pre-Conquest Andean belief system where textiles had socio-sacred value within wak’a networks or could be wak’a objects themselves. I am not suggesting that a viewer who could recognize a social and relational function in the mantle here would have been a duplicitous convert to the Christian religion. My point is rather that the mantle could connote native Andean socio-religious practices while equally effectively connecting to Mary’s holiness.

The colonial period brought a new religion to the Andes that had ‘uneven’ impact— even as it was significant. Extirpation of idolatry campaigns tried to eliminate the ‘idols’— or wak’as— in the name of more effective conversion but it would have been impossible to entirely eliminate underlying cultural systems that had shaped Andean life for millennia. The profound and layered socio-religious networks in the Andes require that we look more carefully at religious representations such as this one for less discernible cultural processes. With that in mind, I pose the questions asked at the beginning about Mary—but ask them now about the mantle. What does it see? What role does it play?

Bibliography


Book of Revelations 12:1 and 12:2; also Matthew 27:51, Biblehub.com: as of June 2016, the website had text for the King James Bible version of this text.


