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## Geometric Abstraction in pre-Columbian Tapestry and its Enduring Influence

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## GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION IN PRE-COLUMBIAN TAPESTRY AND ITS ENDURING INFLUENCES

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Making art requires looking back and looking forward while maintaining a strong presence in the current cultural world. As a tapestry weaver, when I look back, I look at pre-Columbian weaving for inspiration. It is looking at the art and architecture of these ancient cultures that has allowed me to appreciate weaving as the basis for geometric pattern and abstraction. With an understanding that pre-Columbian weavers developed their images for completely different reasons than those of the contemporary artist, I respond to their respect for the woven grid and their apparent desire to work with this structure instead of against it. In our culture and educational system, young artists work with fluid media first and it follows that they will paint and draw in a very organic manner. When and if they do learn to weave, a natural disagreement between their previous knowledge of art making and the format of tapestry may easily occur. For some of us this natural disagreement does not occur, instead a deeper understanding of order and image develops.

As a young artist my work was primarily influenced by the work of other contemporary artists. My understanding of tapestry was formed by seeing catalogs from exhibitions where tapestry as a technique was being used and exploited until its connection with the long history of pictorial tapestries was severely questioned. I thought of tapestry as a progressive art form. I am not proud of my lack of knowledge of the history of tapestry at that time, but that lack of knowledge did allow me to use the technique without the weight of that information. I thought that tapestry was perfect for building fabric that had tremendous body and a strong object quality. I was interested in color, form and surface. The book "Beyond Craft: the Art Fabric" was published in the mid seventies and many of the artists in this book were very influential to my understanding of the potential of tapestry.



**Figure 1, left.** Wari Culture, Winged jaguar Staff-bearer, image from "Amimal Myth and Magic",  
Vanessa Drake Moraga, OLOLO Press, 2005

**Figure 2, right.** Wari Culture, Bird Shaman, image from "Amimal Myth and Magic",  
Vanessa Drake Moraga, OLOLO Press, 2005

When I first saw ancient Peruvian tapestries, and of course the broad range of amazing fabrics of many techniques, I felt an immediate connection. I was the child of twentieth century abstraction and the level of abstraction in some of these textiles was familiar in a contemporary way and made me question so many things including the hierarchy of media. Many of these pre-Columbian textiles, especially those from the Huari culture, exemplified an active and energetic abstraction that I equated to 20th century questioning of image and meaning. (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) As I studied these textiles through the eyes of an artist, I saw highly abstract compositions that challenged my understanding of abstraction and

contemporary thought. They broadened the way I thought about woven structure and the process of weaving. As I continued to research, I had to keep reminding myself that I was seeing these textiles quite differently than the people who had made them.

My tapestries, woven in the late 1970's through the mid-1980's, were influenced by my day to day reaction to living in an urban area. The visual influence of architecture and the fracturing of vision that occurs while viewing a dense and chaotic environment led me to complex compositions of overlapping lines and planes. My interest in the object quality of tapestries, the relationship between the warp/weft grid, and the making of images were primary in this work. When looking at the Peruvian tapestries, I was especially interested in the foreground/background visual shift due to color and value changes within a repeated pattern. In my own work, I was very interested in edges, the visual edge between architecture and sky, and the edges between sky, land and water. These Peruvian textiles also seemed to be about edges and the shifting of perceived space through color interactions and value shifts. I recognized a similarity in how I viewed the world and how they were representing their images.



**Figure 3, right.** *Sacsahuaman near Cuzco, image by author.*

My passion for Peruvian textiles led me to visit Peru in the late 1970's. I found that while the textiles I went to see were wonderful, the architecture and the landscape of Peru were equally inspiring. (Fig. 3) I became obsessed with the idea that these wonderful textiles had been buried for so many years, placed in the ground with ceremony and meaning, then dug up by archeologists or grave robbers. Their history was so complex and rich and they were seemingly so completely different from the textiles of my own culture.

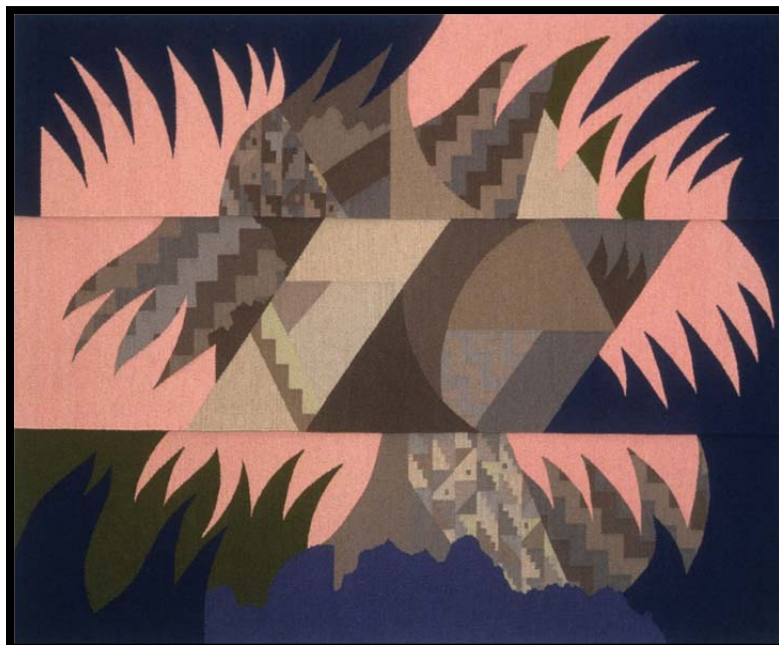
I was fascinated by these pre-Columbian cultures that placed so much importance on their textiles, devoting the time and energy to make them, and then preserve them through the burial process. Efficient and expedient means of production, so valued in our current culture, didn't seem to be important but rather they seemed to think about the construction and embellishment of textiles in a very different manner. Time, I thought, must have had a different meaning within these cultures.

Most of my work from 1984 through 1990 expressly referenced pre-Columbian textiles and culture. I responded directly to my travels in Peru and to my continued study of the varied cultures. I worked on several series including one titled "Ancient Burial" and I completed many tapestries about different areas

of Peru. (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) Working with the woven grid, or at least acknowledging the grid as I worked on drawings for the tapestries, led me to mimic some of the basic shapes found in so many pre-Columbian tapestries. I see idea and technique as equal partners in the art making process. This means that there is a constant conversation between the two throughout the entire process.



**Figure 4.** *Ancient Burial IV - Night, 6' x 7'6", wool tapestry, 1989, image by Katherine Wetzel.*



**Figure 5.** *Ancient Burial 5, 6' x 7'6", wool tapestry, 1990, image by Katherine Wetzel.*

At some point I realized that, even though I was growing further and further away from my initial source information, I could go on and on weaving tapestries that were specifically about Peru and Peruvian textiles. Whenever I get too comfortable with something in the studio, I get suspicious of my intentions and feel the need to move on to new ideas. I began a series that explored the way we see objects and



respond to sounds in low light situations. Specifically, I was interested in the magic that happens at dawn and at dusk when shapes are morphed by our imaginations and sound becomes more tangible. This is a time when what we know to be logically true is altered by both our fears and our hopes. (Fig. 6) At the time I thought that this new series had nothing to do with my previous obsession with Peruvian cultures, but I was wrong. This was brought to my attention when I was showing images of my work to a group of advanced students. One of them, who had also taken a class from me about ancient Peruvian textile techniques, made the observation that there was a strong similarity in the markings on these tapestries with the Nasca lines. After thinking about this for a few days, I had to acknowledge that this was true. So I really hadn't separated myself from the Peruvian influence as far as I thought I had.



**Figure 6, right.** *Night View - Ancient Message*, 6' x 8", wool tapestry, 1992, image by Katherine Wetzel.

Over the next decade I completed several series of tapestries. Some of the work was very abstract and some was more figurative. One of these series dealt with my obsession with dreams and the process of dreaming. This work, using silhouettes of figures along with fractured images of dreams, included strong visual references to patterns and shapes found in pre-Columbian tapestries. (Fig. 7) Whether or not there is a strong visual connection to the Peruvian tapestries, there remains a constant respect for the grid of tapestry weaving and the way that informs my image making.



**Figure 7.** *Dream Sequence*, 32" x 6'7.5", wool, linen & silk tapestry, 2007, image by Taylor Dabney.

As an artist I carry a multitude of images with me at all times. Many of the images that inhabit this imaginary world have to do with Peru, the mountains of the western United States, and aerial views of the land that clearly show the differences between the natural landscape and the landscapes that have been altered by the intervention of humans. My recent work is specifically about the natural world around me in rural Virginia. The three tapestries that I have completed this year seem to be unrelated to the Peruvian textiles that have inspired so much of my work. (Fig. 8) I am patient and will wait a while to see them with more clarity and perhaps a reference to the ancient Peruvian world will reveal itself. Right now I know that these new works are about the process of observation, the feeling of being surrounded by the natural world, and gravity, both the phenomenon and the current political/environmental situation.



**Figure 8.** *Verdant*, 4'3" x 7'4" x 6", wool tapestry, glass, 2010, image by Taylor Dabney.