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Evidence of the Individual in the Cultural Material of Tapestry

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In research for support material for a presentation on my conservation of an important Pre-Columbian tunic of the Huari people of Peru, I came upon a statement that intrigued me as an artist and conservator. The statement comes from Rebecca Stone Miller in her PhD thesis on Huari tunics, completed at Yale in 1987:

The sheer elaboration of imagery made possible through material and technical choices bespeaks both an investment of importance of the images depicted and a corollary investment of labor in their creation. The importance of the woven images takes place in the realm of beliefs and ritual, the weaving itself becomes a virtuoso act of praise, the depictions sacred, and by extension, the wearer a participant in the sacred realm.¹

For an accepted scholar to take the leap from the secular world of anthropology to the sacred world of belief in the description of her subject caught me by surprise, yet resonated with my own understanding of the symbolic significance of the tapestry medium.

What might be the conclusive evidence within the accepted archeological and anthropological findings to substantiate such a claim? As a tapestry artist deeply invested in the idea of material content of a craft-based medium and its possible symbolic import, I thought I'd speak to you today of my discoveries found in the literature on Pre-Columbian tapestry, with the hope of stimulating discussion on specific ancient tapestry materials and technique, and suggest to contemporary weavers to participate in the professional dialog on weaving technology and its cultural implications.

I base my thoughts today on over twenty years as a tapestry artist and 15 years hands-on experience as restorer and conservator of ancient and antique textiles. I am also a student of Buddhist imagery as captured most specifically in the *tangka* form, where image and symbolic content has reached a zenith. I am susceptible and invested in the idea of the efficacy of an object of art, that by its making, an artist imbues her art with tangible and effective content. Thus my appreciation of the opening statement, and my immediate, visceral response to the textile I show you now (figs. 1-3).

In 2003, I was offered the opportunity to conserve an important Huari tunic, dating from the Middle Horizon period of 600-800 AD. During the conservation treatment, the textile had such an impact on me in the evidence of individual choices made by the weaver as well as in its imaginal content – I had to know more.

The foundation for organizing these ideas is based on the concept of “material culture.” As stated by Jules Proun, of the dept of History of Art at Yale, material culture

¹ Stone, Rebecca R. “Technique and Form in Huari-style Tapestry Tunics: The Andean Artist, AD 500-800,” PhD dissertation, Yale University, May 1987, p. 91.

is the study through artifacts the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time.² Thus the organization of a design could infer the organization of a people. Rebecca Stone Miller extrapolates the pattern of standardization seen over a wide survey of Huari tunics to be evidence of state regulation, seeing “artistic license and imperial control dovetail in official Huari style”³. Anne Gayton says “the persistent core of aesthetic ideals seem to have been a form of classicism wherein canons of quality, design, and color usage were early established and never wholly abandoned.”⁴ Already we are seeing a people of strong cultural identification and constancy. By describing specific traits of the woven cloth, it may “be possible to demonstrate how choices were made within the technical domain and infer what these choices mean in the aesthetic and social realm” Stone Miller says.⁵

The material – wool, which was a highland commodity, is generally the weft or pattern-based threads, and cotton, a coastal commodity, is to a large proportion the warp or load-bearing threads of Huari tapestry. Both warp and weft are predominately Z-spun, and S-plied. Each have distinctions that speak of trade and norms of production.

Anne Gayton, in her 1961 article “The Cultural Significance of Peruvian Textiles” sets an important foundation for future study of structure. She remarks on the next step in textile production – “spinning is a skill which even in its highest proficiency can scarcely be called an art, yet that skill is an essential contribution to any textile which has artistic status”. She goes on – “but consistency of diameter with a uniform degree of twist – is the criterion of perfection”⁶. The impeccable surface of Huari tapestry is a hallmark of this proficiency. The word perfection is appropriate.

Gayton postulates “that spinners formed a separate occupational class in old Andean culture” here we are to understand that by textiles of exceptional fineness, we can infer special classes of artisans, possible wide stratification of people with elite usage of non-utilitarian, sumptuous textiles. Rebecca Stone Miller calls it a “virtuosity pushed to the extreme.”⁷

Once spun, the yarns become either warp or weft. Rebecca Stone Miller’s survey found an average of 115 weft/inch with a range up to 210, and 30 warp/inch, up to 55 per inch found. The tunic highlighted today averages 127.5 weft/inch (108 –144) and 31.4 warps/inch (26-37).

Many of us know of other cultures which exceed all levels of necessity to create a textile of exceptional design color and fineness, yet I maintain, in view of the Huari culture’s pre-literate world, their fine tapestry is potentially more “pregnant” with material cultural meaning.

² Proun, Jules David. Winterthur Portfolio Vol. 17, No. 1, Summer/Autumn 1982.

³ Stone-Miller, Rebecca. *Art of the Andes from Chavin to Inca*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996, pp. 148-49.

⁴ Gayton, A.H. “The Cultural Significance of Peruvian Textiles: Production, Function, Aesthetics”. In *Peruvian Archaeology*, Eds. John Rowe and Dorothy Menzel, Palo Alto: Peek Publications, 1973, pp. 275-92.

⁵ Stone, *Technique and Form*, p. 88.

⁶ Gayton, p. 279.

⁷ Stone, Rebecca. *Technique and Form*, p. 88.

Our picture of the individual weaving the cloth widens when we look at the arrangement of the yarns on the loom and loom design.

Junius Bird and Milica Skinner, in their seminal article “The Technical Features of a Middle Horizon Tapestry Shirt from Peru”⁸ show this arrangement of distribution of cotton and wool warps in the Huari tunic they examined (fig.4), and Gayton in her same volume acknowledges “a covert virtue of Peruvian fabrics is the perfection of the original warping before weaving was done”. Thus, warp was not a continuous element, like in Aymara or Navajo weaving, which shows a greater spontaneity towards material use, and also brings about the resultant edge finishing particular to Huari. It also points to a tensioning and heddling mechanism refined enough to create an flawless evenness of weave. Cultural values of enduring and timeless must be present in a garment of such magnitude.

Huari weavers created a loom unique to all other Pre-Columbian cultures that I consider very similar to those worked on in the high-warp French tradition. The Huari developed a “width-wise warp” using a loom that exceeds the limitation of a back-strap loom. The tunic I conserved was made of two panels approximately 82” wide by 20” high. Stone-Miller’s survey ranged from 20.5”-23.5” high and 6.5’ – 7.3’ wide. This unique loom and capacity is the next level of information towards our understanding of the Huari individual and their concepts.

We can postulate a free-standing loom of high tension was used. Here is an image of a loom design Bird and Skinner detailed in their 1974 article (fig.5), yet I maintain this loom design is insufficient for tension and stability. To weave such a masterpiece of control, might there have been some architectural component to aid in loom support? Anita G. Cook’s current scholarship of architectural analysis, in the book of essays “Ritual Sacrifice in Ancient Peru”⁹, where she documents important architectural features of Huari and surrounding areas, may hold some clues to support this idea.

This wide loom surface brings us even closer to the individual by encouraging the use of lazy lines in the weaving. William Conklin at the Junius Bird Conference at the Textile Museum in 1984 states “The first evidence concerning the exact viewpoint of the artist weaver during creation is seen in the so-called lazy lines of the weaving.”¹⁰ Conklin reproduces the lazy line diagram used by Bird and Skinner (fig. 6). Bird and Skinner write that “the only explanation why (weavers use lazy lines) is so that one can work without opening the shed the full width of the fabric.” And they conclude “this in turn provides almost conclusive proof that two weavers were at work.”¹¹

⁸ Bird, Junius and Milica Skinner. “The Technical Features of a Middle Horizon Tapestry Shirt from Peru”. *Textile Museum Journal* 4, No. 1 (1974), pp. 5-12.

⁹ Cook, Anita G. “Huari D-shaped Structures, Sacrificial Offerings, and Divine Rulership”. In *Ritual Sacrifice in Ancient Peru*. Eds. Benson and Cook, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, pp. 137-63.

¹⁰ Conklin, William. “The Mythic Geometry of the Ancient Southern Sierra,” in *The Junius B. Bird Conference on Andean Textiles 1984*. Ed. A. Rowe. Washington DC: Textile Museum, 1986, pp. 123-136.

¹¹ Bird and Skinner, p. 7.

Here is a diagram of lazy lines of the tunic half I worked on (fig.7), and from being a weaver, and watching the logic and consistency of lazy lines and anomalous interlocking, I suggest that one person could very well have woven this tunic. I'm not sure what this says – but if the weaving is going to be ritual or sacred we might like to know if it is a collaborative effort, or like the “woman’s warpath” tradition of Borneo, an individual act defying traps of technique towards perfection. (the tunic and culture similarly highlight severed heads!) The other half of this tunic is accessible and now being offered by a prominent gallery in Santa Fe, and it is my hope to document the lazy line configuration of the other half of the tunic to further support these ideas and conclusions.

While loom design affects certain technical choices of weaving, much has been inferred of how it might influence the artist weaver’s rendering and content of iconography.

With the width-wise warp, iconography was generally woven on its side, to viewed vertically when the tunic was worn. Those of us lucky enough to have had coursework in the history of pictorial tapestry may remember studies comparing designs woven in the warp or weft direction. My training and experience cause me to use the flexibility of the weft direction towards mastery of line and color blending. No doubt the Huari weaver is doing the same. Documenting the mesmerizing progression towards abstraction of Huari iconography, Stone Miller queries whether weavers had a stronger tendency towards abstraction based on images being woven on their side, out of the reality context of the weavers.¹² Multiple design orientations of weaver and wearer add up to movement of design elements from correct to possible for anthropomorphized content.

In another seminal essay of the 60’s, Alan Sawyer took the ingredients of loom design and position of weaver to an innovative discussion of the weaver’s relation to the horizon, where the weaver created a diminishing horizon of bands of iconography that condense towards the outer edges of the tunic¹³. He draws conclusions from this involving perceptions of space of the individual wearing the tunic, and the planned “trick of the eye” of a cylindrical wide presence.

Anita Cook makes another type of comparison of the Pre-Columbian’s relation to the landscape that takes Sawyer’s ideas further. She states that “part of making sense of Andean cosmology is understanding that the natural landscape and Andean social organization is closely linked.” In this tunic, our stripes are the weaver’s parallel, pulling us to the ground to sit as this weaver sat in her “local spacio-ritual landscape,” Cook’s phrase. Once these stripes ascend to the vertical, a whole new imaginal reality is created beyond them.

This discussion above brings the tunic discussed today into more vivid focus and may help us to bring greater substance to the iconographic symbolism implied. With many known Huari tunics tending towards abstraction, the willfulness of the imaginary space surrounding the representational images in this tunic is in itself a great pictorial abstraction. This spatial zone is non-gravity, thus non-worldly in nature. And two types

¹² Stone, Rebecca R. *Technique and Form*, pp. 102-03.

¹³ Sawyer, Alan. “Tiahuanaco Tapestry Design”. In *Peruvian Archeology*, Eds. Rowe and Menzel, Palo Alto: Peek Publications, 1974, pp. 165-77.

of people can go there, the blue and the tan based faces, and each can metamorphize, thus the butterfly elements - if we can be so bold to assume corollary symbolism. Even a new element is introduced in the side panels, which could be identified as a chrysalis. The content is very rich. To feel the magnitude of the physical creation itself may be all we can ever know. The sacred is no doubt for us to feel.

Iconography will continue to figure substantially for providing the conceptual understanding of the Huari weaver/citizen. I maintain that a deeper knowledge of the technical underpinnings of that iconography will bring us closer to our early weaver companions.

I appreciate very much the contributions of the panel of South American textiles yesterday, watching the classical Peruvian weaver's riff on colonial decorative themes with Elena Phipps, and understanding the deep thread between ancient and contemporary American weavers with Lauren Whitley. Americans, that is, in the widest sense. I hope this paper brings one more facet of the dialog into focus as we continue to look back as we look forward as scholars and artists.

To sum up – to go back in time: sitting at the loom, remembering the ply of the yarn, how the gold seemed a little coarser, or the slight difference in tension in that one section of the warp, and how you compensate. It is a language, and some of us here are at least bi-lingual, that of word and cloth.

But without their words, as we ponder one of the world's greatest textiles from a particular date and time on the Southwest coastal mountains of Peru, what can we learn from these ancestors as we consider our common language of tapestry?

As we weave, through which doors of content do we speak, and through our appreciation of the ancient craft, how can we embolden our own language of cloth?

Better still, how can our language of the contemporary textile idiom help to inform the scholarly discussion of anthropologists and archaeologists as they map the material culture and environmental patterns to tell a story of a wondrous people, a non-literate people who choose to tell some of their most enduring, salient stories in cloth?



Fig. 1. Huari Tunic half, before conservation.

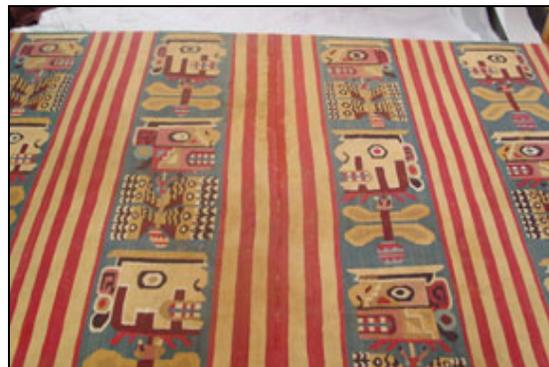


Fig. 2. Tunic central area, after conservation.

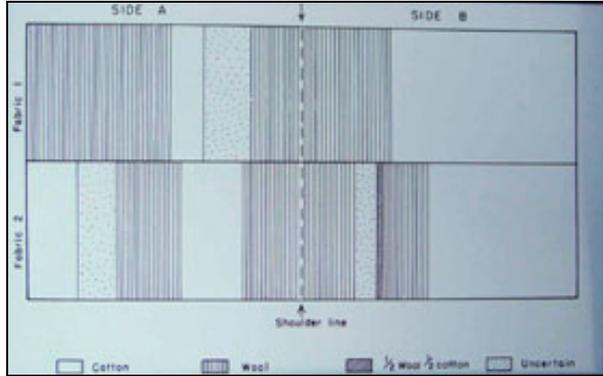


Fig. 3 (left). Completed Conservation and Display mount.

Fig. 4 (right). Warp fiber content distribution. Middle Horizon Tunic.
From J. Bird and M. Skinner, *TMJ Vol.IV, No.1, 1974.*

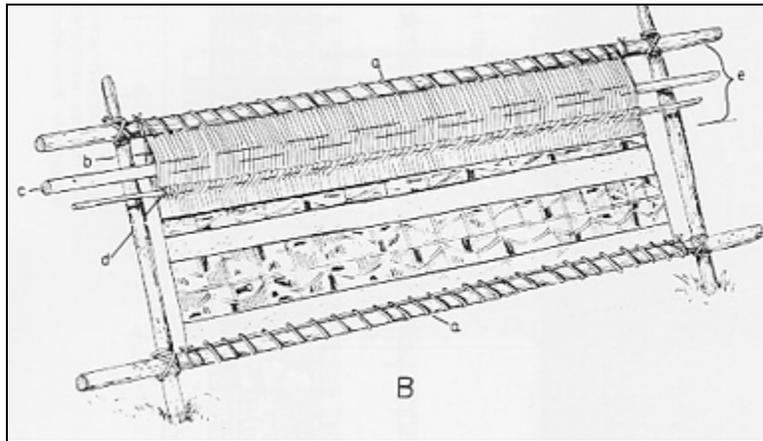


Fig. 5 Projected loom schematic.
From J. Bird and M. Skinner, *TMJ Vol.IV, No.1, 1974.*

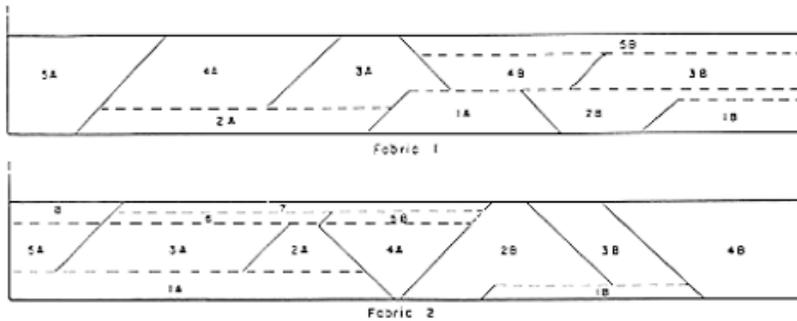
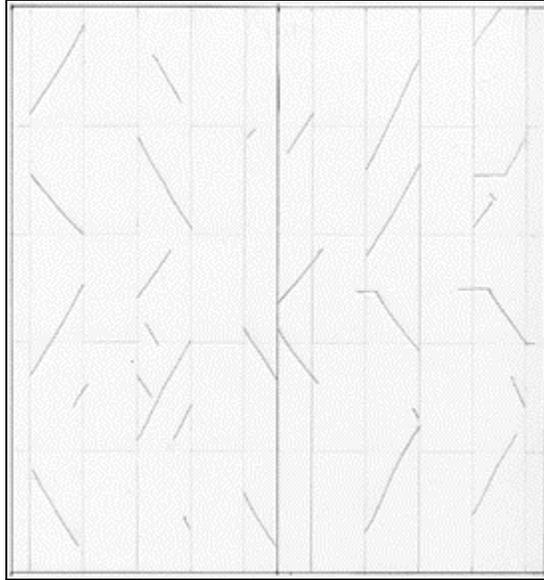


Fig. 6. Projected Lazy line schematic, Middle Horizon tunic,
oriented in direction panels were woven.
From J. Bird and M. Skinner, *TMJ Vol.IV, No.1, 1974.*



*Fig. 7. Lazy line configuration, Huari tunic.
Oriented as worn, with neck slit at top center.*