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Transformative Prospects: Textile Structure and the Social Organization of Pre-Columbian and Colonial Andean Production

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The pre-Columbian Andean material culture record is especially crucial for trying to understand social organization. Because Andean societies apparently did not employ what Europeans recognized as “writing,” the evidence is contained in the objects themselves. This evidence thus bears a larger burden in helping scholars analyze how social life was structured to enable a huge volume of cultural production in pre-Columbian times. Among the many artists and workers who were active in ancient Andean societies, a large proportion made cloth, and they did so using a remarkable variety of techniques. Those artists and workers thoroughly dominated the art and skill of weaving, and so the technical skills and the aesthetic dimensions of the woven textile have become major considerations for scholars of Andean cloth. But even societies with highly skilled weavers often utilized other techniques, and they did so in selective, deliberate, and sophisticated ways. The most obvious feature of a cloth may be distinctive figures that embody political and religious meanings; beyond iconography, however, meaning resides in the interplay of technique and image, and is closely connected to cultural ideas about participation in creative work that is also human labor.

“Transformative Prospects,” the paper I summarize here, was originally presented as the first of four papers in a session titled “Transformations in Pre-Columbian Cloth: Weaving and Its Aftermath” at the October 2004 Textile Society of America Biennial Symposium. Ann Peters, Ann Pollard Rowe, Elayne Zorn, and I, in individual papers, were all concerned with exploring diverse transformations in the structures, iconography, designs, and embellishments of Andean cloth. We organized the panel and selected the theme in honor of one influential scholar, our friend and colleague, the art historian Anne Paul, who died in 2003.

Throughout the paper I presented at the Symposium, I refer to a special relationship between intellectual curiosity and exacting scholarship. It was this precise combination which made Anne Paul’s work noteworthy during her lifetime, and which will ensure its influence for many decades. As much as it presented evidence about Andean textiles, or analyzed any one kind of Andean cloth, my paper explored current and potential directions for research, as new scholars of Andean material culture in general and of textiles in particular are both born and made. In this sense, the “transformations” and “aftermath” of our panel’s title, and the “transformative prospects” in my paper’s title, refer to the legacy of one scholar, the collective influence of a body of scholarship, and to the legacies of the thousands of textile artists and producers who created the works we study—that is, to the creative possibilities and responsibilities embedded in the material record and in our scholarship about it.

In terms of analyzing Andean matters, my own research has been directly concerned with several subjects that Anne Paul had explored. Two primary concerns are the creative and productive processes involved in designing and making complex cloth and garments,

and the relationship between weaving and other structures, especially embroidery. Anne Paul's explorations of embroidery have proved especially significant. Before Anne Paul's work, had been no systematic analysis of Andean cloth that related embroidery to weaving. Her discussion of motifs, especially embroidered figures, and their relationship to the ground fabric on which they were positioned has played crucial roles in expanding our ability to analyze all Andean art. In effective and original ways, Anne Paul used the evidence in textile objects, especially from the Paracas culture, to further our understanding of social organization as well as iconography and aesthetics.

In the paper, I explore ways that several aspects of the analytical approach that Paul developed for Paracas textiles could be applied to the analysis of Inca and colonial Andean textiles. I am especially concerned with cloths that combine woven structures and techniques with embroidery and other structures. The main woven structure I address is tapestry, because it occupied a disproportionate share of the textile production in Late Horizon and colonial times. Embroidered motifs and trims are more common in colonial textiles than in pre-Hispanic cloth, and thus have received some scholarly attention, and lace and depictions of it also figure uniquely in colonial cloth. One goal of my paper is to re-evaluate some of the long-standing assumptions about European origin and influence that pervade the literature. In addition, I attend closely to the significance of such secondary structures in terms of their occasional presence in regional Inca-style cloth. My examination includes the differing significance of textile evidence for pre-Columbian polities and for so-called literate societies, such as Spain's Andean colonies. In terms of my own scholarly trajectory, reconsidering some broad themes involving colonial material has also jostled some my own previous ideas. These alterations are effectively addressed by focusing on selected Inca and colonial tunics and mantles. In particular, I have selected depictions of one medium in another, especially lace, and translations of one medium into another, especially embroidered designs that mimic tapestry, mainly *tukapu* motifs. The visual literacy of Andean material culture contains, I emphasize, a sophisticated use of visual language that includes this sort of "play on words," or more accurately, "play on images," even visual puns—further demonstrating the tremendous communicative value of this visual and material realm, which can impart meanings not accessible through writing.

In this Proceedings volume, I include only this summary of "Transformative Prospects," which is very much a work in progress. For further information on this research, please contact the author.

Anne Paul left a distinguished record of publications, primarily about the textiles, art, and culture of Paracas. Her principal publications will orient the reader to her contributions (*see below*).

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