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Ancient Designs for the Modern Era: Artists Interpret Andean Textiles

Abstract

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Beginnings are usually more interesting than elaborations and endings. Beginning means exploration, selection, development, a potent vitality not yet limited, not circumscribed by the tried and traditional. For those of us concerned in our work with the adventure of search, going back to beginnings is seeing ourselves mirrored in others' work, not in the result but in the process.

Anni Albers, *On Weaving*, 1965, p. 52

Artistic re-interpretation of the works of earlier centuries has become a mainstay of modern design. Textiles bearing Andean designs that appeared on pre-Columbian objects and the products of contemporary weavers using motifs from their own cultural traditions are well represented among cloth items used and marketed in Peru today. Only 150 years ago, however, pre-Columbian Andean textiles were little known. In the early twentieth century, knowledge of indigenous American cultures increased rapidly as archaeologists excavated previously unimagined cultural riches. Simultaneously, the international modernist movement toward streamlined design pushed artists and designers to seek inspirations for their bold new efforts. Especially but not only for Peruvian artists, both ancient and contemporary Andean cultures provided abundant inspiration.



Panelists in Andean Textiles: In Memory of Elayne Zorn. Left to right, Ann Rowe, Andrea Heckman, Ann Peters, Blenda Femenías, Flora Zárate, Sophie Desrosiers.

This paper explores the politics of representation revealed in twentieth-century interpretations of Andean textile designs and structures. It focuses on the production of artists who discovered Peru's ancient

heritage and, inspired by the aesthetic and technical virtuosity shown in textiles, created their own, related art works. These artists both paid direct homage to the original creators and freely adapted the designs and structures. Prominent among them are three women, all born in the late nineteenth century but closely associated with twentieth-century modernism. Each promoted indigenous artistry as she produced her own, Andean-inspired works: Julia Codesido (1883-1979), Elena Izcue (1889-1970), and Anni Albers (1889-1994). Codesido and Izcue were both Peruvian, but Codesido was raised in England and France and returned to Peru as an adult while Izcue grew up in Peru and lived in France and the United States as an adult, ultimately returning to Peru. Albers, originally associated with Germany's Bauhaus movement, gained real fame once she had moved to the United States. The paper contextualizes these developments within the realm of creativity writ large, examining how indigenous artists' and artisans' placement within contemporary art scenes intersected with academic "fine" arts education.

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About the author: Blenda Femenías (Ph.D., Cultural Anthropology, University of Wisconsin-Madison) teaches anthropology at the Catholic University of America and the University of Maryland-College Park. A specialist in gender, race, ethnicity, and the arts in Latin America, she has conducted research in the Andes for almost three decades. Her current projects include the history of Peruvian national museums and the transregional configuration of Andean identity in Argentina. The author of *Gender and the Boundaries of Dress in Contemporary Peru* (2005, <http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/books/femgen.html>) as well as "In Cloth We Trust" in *Reviews in Anthropology* (2010, <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/grva20/39/4>) and numerous other articles, she is also the author-editor of *Andean Aesthetics: Textiles of Peru and Bolivia*.

