The Columbia University Exhibition of Ancient Textiles from Peru

THE CENTRAL COAST

Foreword

Most of the fabrics in this exhibition were produced by the people of the Chancay valley of Peru (some fifty miles north of Lima) during the period of approximately A.D. 1200 to 1450. Chancay weaving and other coeval styles represent the glorious sunset of what is almost certainly the greatest textile-making tradition the world has ever seen—that of pre-Columbian Peru. This tradition lasted over three thousand years, only to vanish forever with the Spanish Conquest in 1533.

Pre-Columbian textiles would have perished too, were it not for the exceptionally dry climate of coastal Peru. (The last significant rainfall at Lima was in 1925 and before that in 1887.) Thanks to this desiccation, and to the ancient custom of burying quantities of cloth with the dead, innumerable examples of these resplendent fabrics have survived, often in a remarkable state of preservation. For, in striving to provide suitable raiment for the dead in afterlife, the Peruvians succeeded in elevating their craft to the status of a fine art and thereby secured for their textiles an enduring place of honor in the history of world art.

D.F.

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Techniques

Though restricted to wool and cotton fibers, the pre-Columbian weavers of Peru employed virtually every technique known to the modern textile industry as well as several others that are impossible to duplicate on machine-powered looms. Especially favored were such techniques as brocade, tapestry, doublecloth, and pattern weave, all of which involve intricate manipulations of the weft (the threads woven back and forth across the longer warp strands). Other fabrics made in ancient Peru include delicate gauzes and laces, upon which designs were sometimes embroidered, three-dimensional knitted borders, sumptuous featherwork, and cloth spangled with shiny metal sequins. Frequently a single textile combined several techniques in a brilliant display of the weaver's virtuosity. Color, too, varied astonishingly; over one hundred ninety hues were used in Peru and as many as twelve may appear in a single fabric.

Weaving was the special province of women. Seated at her simple tension loom, one end of which was attached to a post, the other strapped around her waist, the Peruvian woman wove away her life. In death, her personal workbasket containing spindles and thread accompanied her to the grave. But woman's work was never done; often an unfinished web was placed beside her in the grave to keep her fingers busy in the next world.

S. G.

Meaning

The emphasis placed on textiles in Peru, amounting almost to an obsession, suggests that some special merit or spiritual value was ascribed to the act of weaving or to products of the weaver's work. That Peruvian textile art actually had symbolic meaning is corroborated by Inca testimony. The early Spanish chroniclers report that Inca women were required to spend the better part of the year making cloth for the use of the gods and rulers. In addition, textiles played an important part in all major Inca ceremonials. Each stage in initiation ceremonies for the Inca youth called for a complete change of clothes, and at one point in the rites the mother and sisters of the initiate had to weave four garments for him in a single day! At the conclusion of these rituals, the initiate was given a completely new outfit, perhaps symbolizing his rebirth. At death, too, new garments and accessories were required to clothe the deceased.

Religious practices also surrounded the instruments of weaving. Shrines dedicated to female ancestors venerated by the Inca usually included a spindle and a handful of cotton as gifts or offerings. These tools were carefully guarded during an eclipse when, it was thought, a comet threatened to destroy the moon (a female symbol). The people feared that spindles, if not protected, would turn into snakes, and the looms into bears or jaguars. In the eyes of the Inca, then, cloth and clothmaking occupied a position of crucial importance for the culture.

The high regard for textiles in the Inca Empire continued a long-standing tradition, as is demonstrated by the abundance, variety, and quality of pre-Inca fabrics. Even the woman's role in creating textiles was depicted in funerary ceramic as early as the Mochica period (ca. A.D. 200-800, see photomural). Peruvian textiles were almost certainly sacred objects and the women, while executing these beautiful fabrics, probably felt they were performing a ceremonial act of creation. The making of cloth in pre-Columbian Peru, in fact, may be viewed as an essential contribution to the unending quest for fertility and regeneration.

D.W.

Apparel

Despite their technical versatility, the ancient Peruvian weavers addressed their skill almost exclusively to the making of wearing apparel. They completely neglected such standard woven products as blankets, towels, or curtains. Within the self-imposed limit to items of clothing, however, the Peruvian weaver achieved a remarkable range and variety of expression.

The costume of the pre-Columbian people of Peru consisted of mantles, ponchos, skirts or loincloths, and sandals. Ponchos, the most prominent item of dress, varied in length and were made with or without sleeves. Other accessories included caps, fans, shawls, bags, slings, and sashes of all sizes. Bands of various lengths were used either as headbands or as waist sashes. Frequently too, long bands were crossed over the torso like bandoliers, then tied in front.

None of the apparel of the pre-Columbian peoples of Peru was tailored to shape, or cut from larger pieces of cloth. Every item of dress was woven to the desired size. Nor were any pockets provided; their place was taken by a wide variety of textile bags or pouches, often decorated with pompoms, fringes, or feathers. Attached to some of these bags were small embroidered images of human heads which hung upside down and probably symbolized trophies taken in battle. But for all the diversity of the costume, it is clear that the different items of apparel were intended to be seen together and to harmonize with one another so as to form an ensemble, whether worn in life or buried with the dead.

J. P. and D.W.

Patterns and Motifs

GEOMETRIC PATTERNS

To create a unified costume, the Peruvian weaver employed various artistic devices including the use of recurrent geometric patterns. Two of the most common are the "step" design and the "volute" pattern. Although these seem to be merely decorative, there is reason to believe they may have had a deeper significance. The "step" motif apparently represented a mountain or the earth, while the "volute," often found in a repeated sequence, seems to refer to water. This interpretation is suggested by several earlier Mochica ceramic vessels (A.D. 200-800) which depict a human sacrifice taking place on a mountain. On one of these vessels the mountain is replaced by a stepped design which terminates with a "volute." As the purpose of the sacrifice appears to have been connected with the guaranteeing of water supply from the mountains, this vessel perhaps illustrates an epitome of fertility in which water and earth, the fundamental elements of life, are unified in a single geometric pattern: the "step and volute" motif. This analysis helps to shed some light on the wide variety of geometric motifs used in Peruvian art, since in nearly every case, these patterns relate either to the "step" or the "volute" or to their cosmological combination.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL MOTIFS

Compared with the formality of geometric designs, human and animal motifs were interpreted by Peruvian artists in remarkably varied and imaginative ways, for example, in the depiction of a frontal human figure wearing an elaborate costume (and possibly a mask). Although this theme has a long history in Peruvian art, its meaning is obscure; the figure may represent a god or priest dressed as a god. Simpler, uncostumed figures are still more difficult to interpret, but in view of the mortuary function of the textile, they may represent ancestors or the dead.

Images of birds, snakes, fish, and feline creatures also abound in Peruvian fabrics. Simplified or geometricized in treatment, their poses are nevertheless often animated, and motion is frequently implied. For example, birds grasp fish in their beaks or are shown in flight. Religious meaning can also be imputed to these figures, although again interpretation is speculative. The various combinations of birds, felines, and fish may refer in some way to the sky, earth, and water which are their respective domains.

M.B. and H.C.

'Dolls'

The function and meaning of miniature cloth figures—the so-called dolls—from Chancay is uncertain. They may have been surrogates for clay or wooden figurines, but the purpose of the latter is by no means clear. Stuffed with reed or fiber, these tiny figures are carefully dressed in clothing woven to size; their facial features are rendered either in tapestry or embroidery. Details of costume—netted headcloths for the women and slings for the men—indicate that the figures represent human beings rather than remote deities. A curious aspect of the Chancay dolls is the frequent use of women's weaving spindles as armatures for the arms and legs. Some cloth effigies also hold a ball of cotton, piece of yarn, or actually engage in weaving. Since the Chancay cloth effigies were buried with the dead, images of this type may have been intended to honor ancestral weavers or to perpetuate the role of the woman as weaver in the afterlife.

S.R.

Painted Textiles

Unlike woven fabrics, the painted cloth of Peru falls into two distinct categories. The earliest known examples dating from the Paracas period (ca. 300 B.C.-A.D. 100) resemble woven textiles in their diagonal designs, although the painted colors were limited to brown and buff. Similarly, Chancay ponchos of painted cloth have zigzag patterns, "step and volute," and bird forms which echo motifs worked into the woven fabrics from that area. In this tradition, then, the designs painted on textiles run parallel to the decoration of woven cloth.

This conception is almost entirely lacking in the large painted cloths. Such paintings come from Supe, a hundred miles north of Chancay, and date from about A.D. 1000. Wrapped around mummy bundles, often with the bold designs clearly visible, they employ a subject matter that is emphatically cosmological, including the staring frontal face (probably of the sun), the double-headed or double-bodied sky-serpent arching over the whole design, and various astral symbols. The sweeping curvilinear shapes and rapid outlining of these designs have little in common with the angular, repetitive treatment of geometric and human forms in the other painted cloths. Smudges, unfinished details, and paint splatters further differentiate these expansive designs from the meticulous tradition associated with weaving. It may be postulated, then, that the creation of these cosmological cloths was a supreme act hastily executed by a specialist immediately before the burial in order to envelop the corpse and its worldly goods with the symbols of eternity.

J.S.

Trees

Among the most enigmatic of all Chancay grave finds are tree models constructed of reeds and wrapped with colored thread. These models represent specific trees known in Peru. The *Lucuma,* an evergreen long cultivated for its edible fruit, is represented in the model (see cover). Note the globular hangings and tufted blossoms. Another Chancay tree model represents the *Inga pacae,* a shade tree that produces large, sweet, pulpy beans. As both of these trees contributed important items to the diet of the ancient Peruvians, their representation in the form of models to be placed in the tomb may be an attempt to insure a continuing food supply in the next world. By the same token, the large seeds of these trees may also have served as symbols of fruitfulness, abundance, or even regeneration.

Apart from these possibilities, a close relationship may be noted between tree models and weaving. The *Lucuma* tree model (see cover) grows out of a pedestal which is constructed of a woman's workbasket covered with fabric (see *Techniques*). Topping the tree is a single ball of red needlework that serves as a perch for a small textile bird. In another Chancay tree, cloth is wrapped tightly around the trunk, while tiny swatches dangle from the branches. In a third specimen, a doll-like figure of a woman has attached her tension loom to the tree and is busily engaged in weaving. It is tempting to see these juxtapositions, not as merely accidental or representational, but as a deliberate effort to wed the nurturing, creative functions of the woman to the generative forces symbolized by the seed-bearing tree.

Support for these speculations may eventually be found when the tree is properly studied as a Peruvian iconographical theme. The subject is particularly characteristic of the north and central coasts and almost all representations are relatively late in date. Of outstanding importance are Chimu ceramics which show a pair of mythological figures dancing or copulating under a large tree. All in all, it may not be going too far to suggest that Chancay tree models actually are images of the Tree of Life.

D. F.

The Columbia University exhibition, *Ancient Textiles from Peru: The Central Coast,* is the fourth in a series designed to illuminate the scientific and artistic properties of archaeological materials. Earlier exhibitions have dealt with *Chinese Archaic Jades, Ritual Bronzes, Weapons and Related Eurasian Bronze Art; The Ceramic Arts and Sculpture of China;* and *Pottery, Bronzes, and Jewelry of Ancient Iran.*

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The selection and identification of specimens and the writing of the texts were undertaken by the following students of the Department of Art History and Archaeology: Mino Badner, Herbert Cole, Sarah Gill, Jeanette Peterson, Suzanne Rudy, John Scott, and Deborah Waite. Douglas Fraser supervised these activities and edited the brochure.

Edward Lanning examined the textiles and helped with identifications. The exhibition was designed and installed by Gene McCabe.

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Mr. Edward B. McMenamin *and the Staff of the Office of the Secretary of the University*
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