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26 PERU a) Primitive methods of weaving

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One of the highly developed arts of the people living in the Altiplano of South America in ancient times was the art of weaving, and even today this skill continues. Earliest examples of weaving taken from tombs and mummies show that the fibers used were from the Maguey plant, cotton, and wool. Cotton, native to Peru, is of two kinds, one a pure white and the other a rich golden brown. When the Spaniards came to this region, they found textiles of cotton so fine that they were mistaken for silk. Wool is provided by the alpaca, the vicuña, the llama, and more recently the sheep. The vicuña wool is most highly prized as it is the softest, finest, and most silky. That of the llama is comparatively coarse and is usually used for the rough clothing of the poorer Indians.

The loom used by many Indians today is much like that of his ancestors and consists of two sticks, one at the top and one at the bottom, staked to the ground. Over these two sticks the warp (vertical) threads are stretched. A rod the width of the textile to be woven is used to separate every other thread, and so provide an opening through which the "filling" or weft (horizontal) thread is passed. This thread is attached to a spindle and a separate bobbin is used for each color.

In spite of the simplicity of the loom and the primitive manner of weaving, a great variety of techniques developed, the finest of which is tapestry weaving. Textiles of these countries appeal not only because of the skill and perfection in the weaving but also because of the brilliant colors used and the imaginative quality of the conventionalized designs. Since weaving is the interlocking of threads at right angles to each other, the resulting designs, if ideally suited to the technique employed, must be planned as flat pattern and of necessity be geometric in character.



"Four motifs continually occur in Peruvian decorations: The human figure, the bird, the fish, and the puma....The Peruvians of the coast region worshipped the sea as one of their gods and the fish being a natural symbol of the sea, accounts for the frequency with which it appears in their art."<sup>1</sup>

"The coastal region of Peru is famous for the large beautiful Guanay, Piquero and Alcatraz birds which live there, and it is therefore not surprising to find representations of bird forms in the textiles woven in this region."

"The puma, like the ocean, was one of the gods worshipped by the Peruvians, and the puma god, part man - part puma, is often represented in the arts of the Tiahuanaco or Megalithic people."<sup>2</sup>

"The conventionalized human figure is found in textiles from many parts of Peru, as are mythological characters and other strange combinations of animal and human forms. Simple geometric unit repeat designs of great variety are also frequent."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to weaving, the tombs of the early Inca have revealed an almost lost art of featherwork. "Feather textiles are made by attaching the different colored feathers to cotton cloth. These

1. Charles W. Mead, Peruvian Art, Guide Leaflet Series No. 46, Fifth Edition, (New York, the American Museum of Natural History, December, 1929).
2. Ibid
3. Ibid

feathers are strung on strings that are as long as the textile is wide. A string so prepared is placed horizontally across the cloth and sewed to it. The second string is added, the feathers overlapping the first string in shingle fashion. The design of necessity had to be most carefully planned out from the beginning, and the various colored feathers so strung on the strings as to form the total design. Overlapping ends were trimmed off with a sharp tool, leaving the lines even and clean."<sup>1</sup>

Mosaic featherwork was produced by gluing bits of feather to cloth, or sometimes to the skin of the Maguey plant. It is believed that the glue was taken from the Orchid plants. An outline or skeleton drawing was made on the material and then the feathers were pasted on and clipped to the desired size so that the edges were even.

- 26A A primitive method of weaving is to stretch the loom on the ground and fasten it with sticks.
- 26B Methods and techniques of weaving vary. Here we find the weaving being done by a woman whose loom is leaning against the side of a house. She is seated on the ground in front of the loom.
- 26C Side view of the same loom. Note the way in which the colored warp threads have been stretched over the loom - and the manner in which the weaving is done.
- 26D Detail of the hands, showing the method in which the shuttle is passed through the warp threads in weaving.
- 26E This picture, in close-up, shows the method of threading a loom which is placed parallel to the ground.

1. Charles W. Mead, *Old Civilizations of Inca Land*, Handbook Series No. 2, (New York, the American Museum of Natural History, 1932).

- 26F Occasionally a primitive loom such as this is stretched on a frame supported on branches, enabling the weaver to sit on a stool or log rather than on the ground. Note in this picture the way in which the long warp threads are tied in a skein and fastened to a stick in the ground at the extreme end of the loom. The skein is unwound as the weaver uses it.
- 26G This Indian woman of the highlands is wearing a shawl typical of the region. Note the richness and variety of design used in the border.
- 26H True descendants of the Inca, these two women rest in an old Inca doorway. Notice the Inca stone masonry in the background construction, and the beautiful weaving of their shawls.
- 26I Detail of a Peruvian tapestry of the colonial period. The decorative designs of this fine tapestry weaving demonstrate the use of Indian motifs, such as conventionalized birds, animals and Inca flowers. Similar designs are found in contemporary weaving in this country.
- 26J This is a detail of colonial tapestry weaving of Peru. Note the use of conventionalized design of a face, combined with geometric pattern.