



by Mary Jane Mucklestone

PERU! Peru has the longest continuous textile record in the world, going back almost 10,000 years. Invented long before pottery and just as humans started agriculture, Peruvian fiber manipulation began with simple spun fibers, moved on through cords and nets and by 500 C had developed into complex weaving, employing practically every technique known today. Thanks to this ancient culture's careful burial practices and a very dry coastal climate, thousands of fiber pieces have been preserved to inform and inspire modern textile artists.

This spring, I fulfilled a dream of mine by visiting Peru with Cynthia Gravelle Lecount, author of *Andean Folk Knitting: Traditions and Techniques from Peru and Bolivia*. With Cynthia as guide we began by touring the archeological sites on the coast, where I began to grasp the full impact that textiles have had on the region. I quickly saw that the artists of Peru continue to build upon ancient traditions, creating new work that evolves idiosyncratically by region, village, and individual knitter.



When we finally got to the highlands and the city of Cuzco, I saw from a knitter's perspective how

the city serves as a vivid metaphor for Peru's textile history. This charming colonial city is built right on top of the historic capital of the Incan Empire because the Incan stonework proved too massive to tear down. And so it is with the textile arts in this magnificent country—the modern both rests upon and nestles fundamentally within solid, ancient traditions.



Maybe it was the altitude in Cuzco, but I was almost weak with delight, encountering interesting textiles everywhere I turned. Beautifully woven rectangular shawls (called *mantas*) are used for carrying all manner of things—including babies. Indigenas selling goods or leading llamas for photo ops wander the streets wearing layers of brightly trimmed handwoven skirts (*polleras*), brilliant acrylic sweaters or embroidered and embellished jackets, and brimmed hats decorated in the character of their home villages. The narrow streets of the old town are lined with stalls offering piles of knitted hats and devil masks, along with woven belts, ponchos, blankets, shawls, and bags. I loved everything from the electric colored acrylic hats to the elegant (and expensive) naturally-colored baby alpaca throws. All were beautiful, but my heart belonged most of all to the “antique” chullos sometimes found buried in the back. These were the amazing 20-stitches-to-the-inch hats I’d dreamed of; stiff as a cardboard cone, with up to 38 colors in a round. I was in my element, surrounded by texture, color, and pattern.



Visiting fantastic museums, I learned of the many sophisticated cultures that predate the Inca. Ancient but colorful bas-relief murals at several archaeological sites we visited presaged the patterns found in those modern chullos. A type of nåbinding was sometimes used in the constructions of pre-conquest hats and these hats would often signify the wearer's region and rank, much the same way as knitted chullos do today. (Knitting is a relatively new technique, introduced to the area sometime after the Spanish Conquest in 1532.)

The first stop for any textile enthusiast should be the non-profit Center for Traditional Textiles of Cuzco (CTTC), which was established to preserve the textile traditions of the region by creating community weaving centers in surrounding Andean villages. The center encourages the elders of the communities to pass on their textile knowledge and provides talented weavers and knitters with a place to sell their work, eliminating middlemen. Director Nilda Callanñaupa was the first person in her village to attend college and returned determined to give back to the community that raised her. The center she runs is loaded with tapestries, weavings, toys and tassels, all produced from 100% natural fibers and colored with natural dyes. There is an interesting textile museum on site, and weaving demonstrations all day long. Tourists, though, are not the only ones to find CTTC interesting. Groups of indigenas stream in for inspiration and to see what their neighbors are up to.



We were lucky to have Nilda take us up to a few of the CTTC's outlying weaving centers. Recent mud slides (the same ones that closed Machu Pichu for two months) had washed out the road to Sallac, one of the few villages that still weaves with an ikat dying technique, so three master knitters met us on the main road where they demonstrated their method of knitting chullos. Dressed in festival costume, they wore their naturally dyed alpaca chullos perched jauntily on the tops of their heads in a manner North Americans might think too small. The earflaps, some with buttons and beaded cords attached, act as a kind of counterbalance to keep them on.





There on the road, I had my first encounter with the tabbed intarsia in the knitting I observed with the “corded join” named and described by Cynthia in her book. A cord is attached perpendicularly to the work at the beginning of a multicolored pattern band, serving as a turning point and anchor for every row. With the working yarn tensioned around their necks and working from the inside, the knitters begin purling with one background color, adding, in turn, many different intarsia colors, which are wound in small bobbins. When encountering a new intarsia color, they wrap the new shade around the current one and then continue knitting with the new color. When the beginning is reached again, they wrap the yarn around the cord, and purl back in reverse, moving the stitches back to the left hand needle. This is a surprisingly quick process. The hats characteristic of Sallac feature geometric diamond patterns, with diamond decorated triangular earflaps, and a tri-colored tassel at the top of each sharply pointed peak. Exquisite!



We were the only outsiders in the bustling Sunday market in Urcos, finding a wide array of goods for sale, from produce to tire sandals, medicinal herbs to nylon rope. I'd become fascinated with polleras and followed a woman wearing an exceptionally full collection. When she leaned down to buy some lupine seeds, her skirts tilted like a tea cup revealing even more underskirts, including fluorescent cotton-polyester petticoat with deeply pointed eyelets and a machine knit white one with a wide crocheted flounce. I followed her and her fantastic skirts to the textile stall selling a dazzling array of acrylic yarn, rick rack, ribbons and trims. It also supplied the straw and geometric felt bases for the women's hats (called *Monteras*) which an individual embellishes to her own liking in the style of her village. There were also vibrant-hued acrylic chullos for sale designed with an ingenious curved earflap typical of the town and sections of multi-hued colorwork achieved with a corded join.



Up at the weaving center in Pitumarca, a festival atmosphere reigned, everyone wearing their fancy clothes while weaving knitting, spinning, cooking and chattering in the brilliant afternoon sun, surrounded by the towering peaks of the Andes. The star here was Jamie, a knitter of incredible speed doing amazing colorwork. The hat he was working on used twelve dangling bobbins of color in every round, making intarsia patterns of branching flowers. As we watched it became clear that he was not using a corded join, though the effect was the same. Just how was it done? It took a lot of steady watching to figure it out. He was always working in the same direction, so on the first round everything was fine, but on the following round, the bobbins were on the wrong side of each color section, so he estimated the amount of yarn he needed, bringing it across the area like a float, and began to knit the estimated yarn. Wild! If his estimation wasn't quite right, he used the little hooks, flattened at one end of his needles to work the yarn back across the needle.

It just goes to show there are often many ways of achieving the same results, even just a town away. Everyone here worked with the yarn around their necks and used the same winged bobbins and needles made out of baling wire, fashioned with little flat hooks at one end. They often peek over to the front of their work to make certain the pattern is progressing properly. No one uses any charts — the patterns are all in their heads.



Nilda described the value skilled textile artists have in Andean communities and how it features in daily life. She explained if a courtship is progressing, prospective in-laws might check out the weaving of the girl to judge the quality of her work and thus her character. Similarly, a bachelor's chullo might give hints to the fellow's patience, planning skills, and creativity.

The textile center in Acche Alta was crowded with weavers and kids. Everyone gathered in the dark indoor room of the center — lit only by the open door—to watch a demonstration of kurpa-making, the popcorn stitch used to decorate one type of chullo from Accha Alta. Though a kurpa is often knit into a hat, the folks of Accha Alta developed a new technique five or six years ago. They finger crochet each kurpa (or *grumito* in Spanish), creating long strings of them spaced along like beads. The best are made by children — small fingers make fine work. After a hat is knit, the kurpa are pulled through the knitting with the hooked ends of the needles, creating perky popcorn designs. Even though the hats are traditional, the method is recent—an improvement on a tradition. These knitters are not burdened by ritual, but are always seeking new methods, building upon the ancient foundations and keeping the techniques vital with fresh creativity.



The ancient traditions are in good young hands. In Cuzco, I took a lesson in knitted kurpas and the Andean purling-from-the-inside technique from 16-year-old Phetra of Pitumarka, and on one of our final days, spent in Machu Picchu, I found the most amusing chullo of my entire collection: Erasmio Aymes, eager to impress the girls, knit his telephone number into his hat. This typifies Peru in many ways for me. New life and youthful creativity ensure that like the city of Cuzco building on its past, the living tradition of Peruvian textiles will continue to flourish and surprise.

I could write so much more just about my collection of chullos.

I might be insane.

For more information on this and Mary Jane's many other adventures, visit her website at maryjanemucklestone.com

Other useful links:

Behind the Scenes Adventures www.btsadventures.com

Center for Traditional Textiles of Cusco www.textilescusco.org