

TELAS DE LOS MUERTOS

PERUVIAN TAPESTRY

by Suzy Sewell

The ancient Peruvians brought tapestry weaving to a degree of excellence seldom attained, and its use was very wide spread. Among ancient Peruvians it was a technique for forming highly ornamental clothing, textiles, or decorative borders, bands, medallions and corner motifs. These latter tapestry touches were sometimes woven separately and sewn to the textile, but most often it was woven directly on the fabric.

Structure and Materials

Tapestry weaving generally involves two fundamental principles: hiding the warp with closely packed wefts to secure solid color, and weaving independent wefts back and forth each in its own pattern area. Tapestry weave is generally weft-faced plain weave.

Peruvian tapestry is nearly always made of a fairly strong cotton yarn for warp and a weft of fine, flexible wool. Weft of cotton is quite rare. Wool warp is found only in very fine tapestries of highland Peru. All of the more than forty examples in the collection of the Science Museum of Minnesota have a cotton warp and wool weft (cotton wefts are present only in small areas of some other-wise all-wool tapestry fragments; these cotton areas are usually white). Tapestries in the SMM collection date for the most part from the Middle Horizon to Late Intermediate Periods.

Today's contemporary tapestries have a warp sett of 6-12 ends per inch. The average weft passes number approximately 10-20 to cover a warp at today's sett. Compare that with the Peruvian tapestries of average quality that have a sett of 20-30 warp ends per inch and 75-125 weft ends to the inch!

This points out the expertise with which the Peruvians spun their warps. They were able to spin fine, uniform threads with great control and had no rotating fly wheel! Imagine the time spent in both spinning and weaving to create a finished product.

The textiles of tapestry structure in the SMM collection range from 15-45 warp ends per inch. Weft passes number 35-145 per inch.

Excluding the weft-faced tapestry bands (striped and present as a border or dividing element in the textile) there are few if any wefts that extend the full width of a tapestry woven fabric. The structural feature that is therefore most significant in distinguishing between varieties of tapestry weave is to be found at the meeting point of the wefts of laterally adjacent areas. According to the nature of the connection or lack of connections between areas, tapestry weave is called slit, dovetailed, or interlock.

Slits (figure 1) and single interlocking (figure 2) are the joins most often used in Peruvian tapestry woven fabrics. Highland tapestry is very finely woven on wide looms (probably vertical) with single interlocked joins. On the Coast, slit tapestry was the predominant form. The examples in the SMM are mostly the slit tapestry form.

Designs in Peruvian tapestry weaving are often in geometric form, repeated with regularity and not unduly large. The small slits formed in this case were acceptable and often desirable to the weaver, having an ornamental function. In other cases when a color join resulted in an undesirably long slit, the worker connected the join with needle stitches after the weaving was completed.

Patterns were sometimes made to run diagonally so as to close the slits during the weaving as far as possible.

Yet another way to avoid the "slit" problem was the use of non-horizontal wefts. In ordinary weaving, the weft threads cross the warp threads at right angles and the process of insertion and beating down made it difficult to vary this formal relation of parts, but in tapestry there is much more freedom. The density of wefts can be controlled and varied; they can be carried to conform with the curves of the figure. Wefts that deviate from their normal right-angled relation to the warps are usually referred to as eccentric wefts. SMM has several examples of tapestries with such wefts.

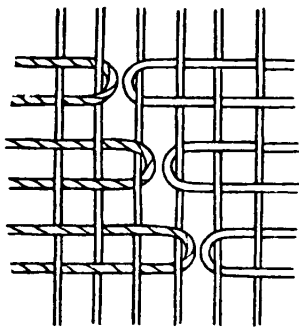


Fig. 1

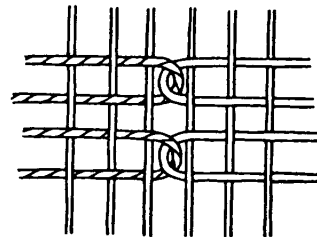


Fig. 2

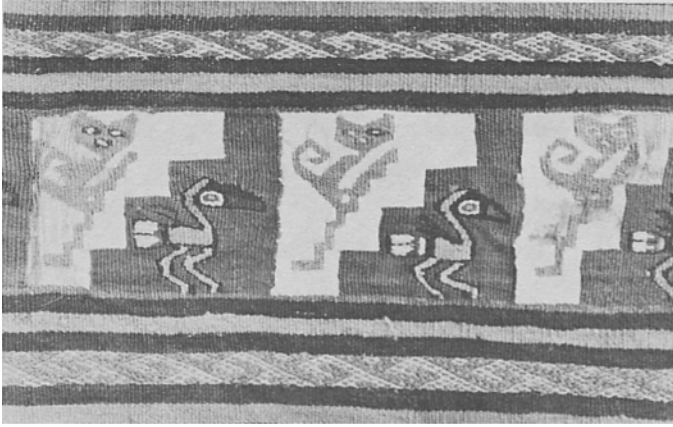


Photo 1

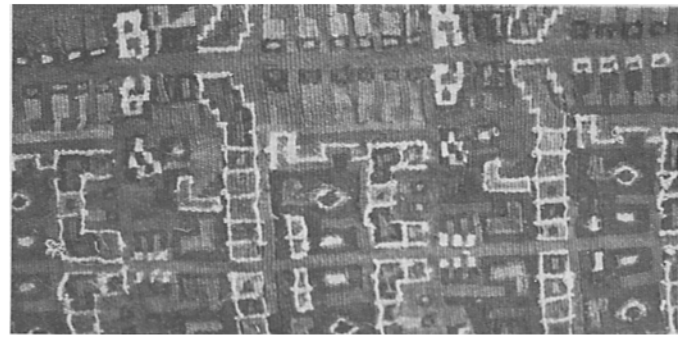


Photo 2

Design

The Peruvians used animal figures, humanoid forms, and geometric shapes in their tapestry designs. (See photo 1, SMM 74-17-61.) Motif arrangements on diagonal, rather than horizontal or vertical, add drama to the designs.

Tessalation, or checkerboard and mosaic-tile organization is common both as the primary design element and as a means of presenting motifs. Variation within a single motif is achieved through using several colors and shifting their positions within the motif and/or outlining parts or all of the motif. (See photo 2, SMM 73-13-14).

In finishing their textiles, the Peruvians used special decorative techniques such as tassels, open band tapestry tabs and fringes. All are carefully designed as an integral part of a textile, rather than incident to ragged edges.

Peruvian tassels are made mainly of wool, and the lustrous quality of the alpaca fiber enhances their ornamental value. The bindings are carefully wrapped and often ornamented by needlework. In photo 3, SMM 72-24-36, each tassel has a "cap" of knottless netting on its rounded top above the binding thread. Peruvians arranged their tassels singly in groups, or in a kind of multiple structure in which the cord for the lower tassel is incorporated as part of the tassel above it. A terraced tassel may have several stages, usually each of a different color.

The tapestry woven tab fringe seems unique to Peruvian textiles. Not usually applied separately, it was woven at the beginning and/or end of a larger fabric using slit tapestry technique. Although one source states these tabs were always woven of one color, the SMM has a fine example in two colors with the design placed diagonally on the tabs. Note that the loom cord is still intact. (See photo 4, SMM 72-24-29.) Woven fringes can also be shaped to relate to the design motif. (See photo 5, SMM 72-24-16. The cover photo.)



Photo 3

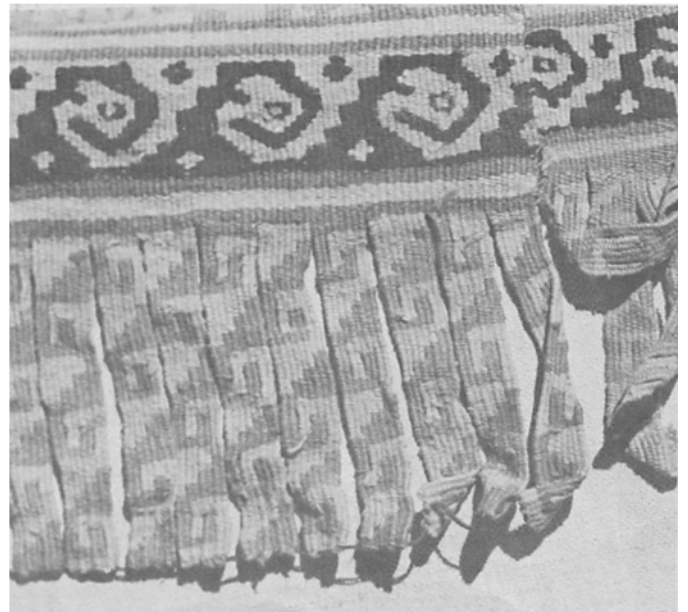


Photo 4

As used in Peruvian textiles, nonwoven fringes are deliberate and well designed. Knotted fringes are never found on Peruvian textiles. They may be extended sections of either the warp or the weft or made as separate bands that were sewn on to the textile selvages.

When the fringe is an integral part of the fabric, it is usually made by the ends of the warp yarns. These ends, which are in the form of loops because of their high twist, naturally form tendril-like strands. They are sometimes cut, sometimes not. The length of fringe may vary greatly from less than half an inch to nearly a foot.

Fringes can also be made with wefts which extend beyond the warp ends at selvages. These loops may also be cut or not. In order to keep the selvege intact, not every weft yarn is extended to form a loop.

Both warp and weft loops can be extended to controlled lengths, usually using a scaffold thread, later removed. If each neighboring loop is extended increasingly longer, then increasing shorter, a picot or scalloped edge is formed.

The fringe can also be an independent piece sewed on to the main fabric. The woven part is reduced to the passage of a few wefts across the warp, leaving loops which are handled in the same manner as the integral fringe.

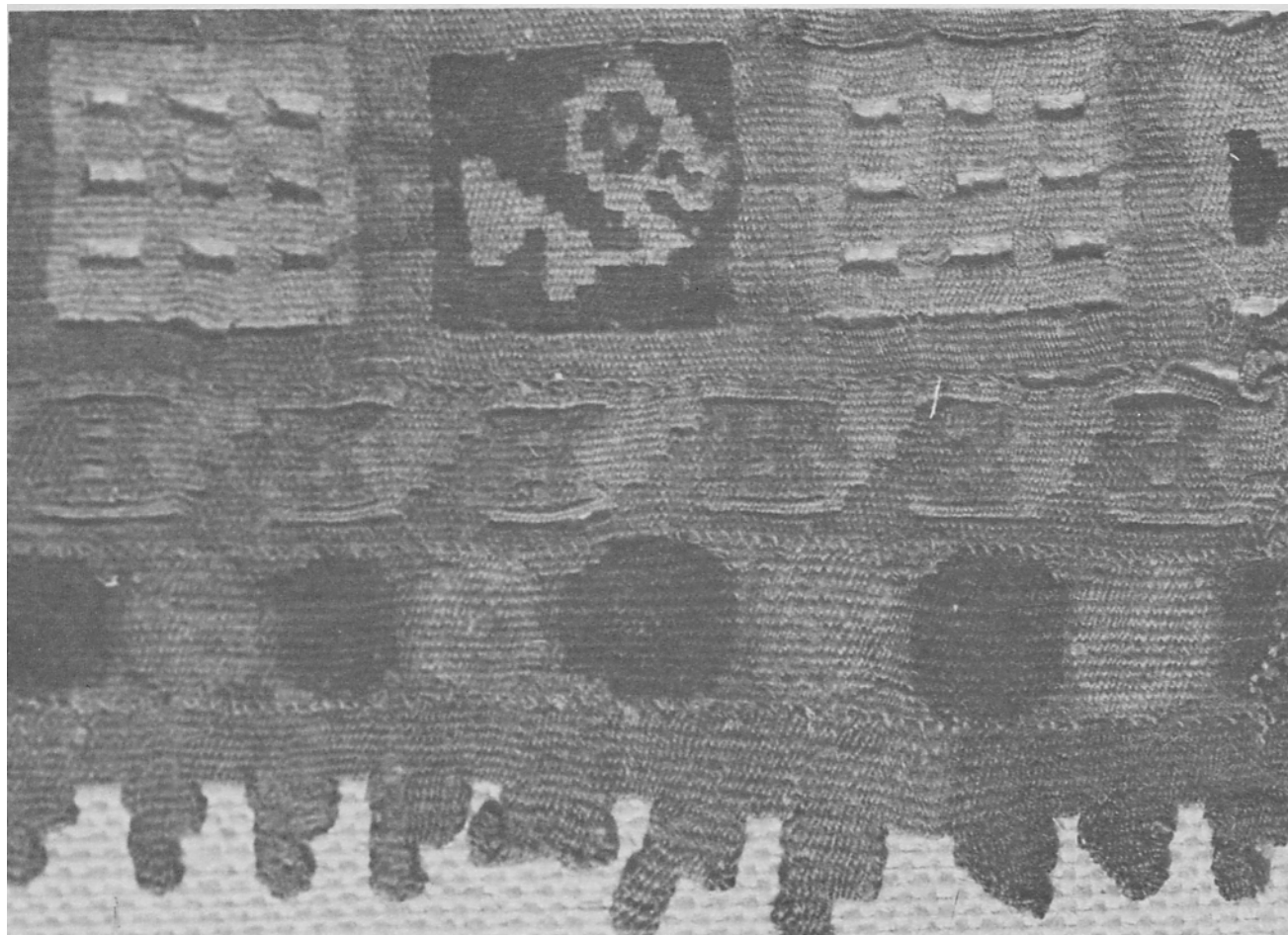
Note: This is the final article in this series on the Peruvian textile collection of the Science Museum of Minnesota.

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A doll from a Peruvian burial site dressed in textile fragments.



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DATES TO REMEMBER

Thursday, April 6, 1:00 p.m., Guild meeting
Guest Speaker: Merle Sykora

**Friday, April 7, 7:30-10:00 p.m. Fund Raising
Party**

Thursday, April 13, 9:30 a.m., Board Meeting

April 13-19, Stitchery/78 demonstrations
(see page 1)

Thursday, April 20, 9:00-12 noon, Workshop
"Tricks of the Trade"

Thursday, May 4, 1:00 p.m. Guild meeting.

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