PLATE I

BRIDE WEARING CEREMONIAL WEDDING HUIPIL. QUETZALTENANGO, GUATEMALA. THE SCARCELY VISIBLE HEAVY, WHITE BROCADING IN THE LOWER PORTION LENDS A DELICATE, SUBTLE CHARM TO THESE GARMENTS AS MAY BE SEEN ALSO IN THE HUIPIL SHOWN IN PLATE V.

TWO GUATEMALAN WEDDING HUIPILS

by JUNIUS BIRD

THROUGH the centuries, wherever marriage has involved some formality or ceremony, a woman's wedding dress has been something to cherish. As a possible symbol of a universal hope for happiness in marriage it will more often than not represent the best that is available to the person who wears it. The care in its preparation and decoration, the quality of the materials used and the styling often make it the finest dress a woman may own in her lifetime. Where everyday costume or dresses for other occasions may show individuality, there is apt to be far greater recognition of tradition in the wedding costume. Even in our own society where great effort is directed toward individuality within the limits of current style, we still make some concession to tradition for a bride. In a culture where costume is strongly standardized by tradition, though there may be less to set the wedding dress apart, it still shows greater care in workmanship, greater effort to make it attractive. Thus if it were possible to assemble a collection of wedding dresses from different ages and different lands it would be uniquely interesting. Only a comparable collection of fabrics used in religious or royal ritual would surpass it in quality, but with these there could not be the same bond of common, almost universal, experience which is such a part of their interest.

In a special exhibit prepared for the members of the Needle and Bobbin Club at the American Museum of Natural History last January, two unusually fine wedding huipils from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, were shown. These are part of the remarkable collection of Mrs. Elsie McDougall, which was featured; a collection primarily of Mexican and Central American looms and fabrics. Though there are no precise data on when the huipils were made, Mrs. McDougall considers them to be 19th Century products. Coming as they do from a region where every girl was trained to spin and weave, where pride in these crafts was highly developed, where tradition in design, techniques and costume was strongly established, they merit careful study. We can expect to see in them the best work their makers were capable of, and this lends added interest.

For these reasons we feel that a few comments on them are worth recording.

The huipil has been classed as a blouse. This may be misleading if we do not at the same time recognize that it perpetuates one of the really ancient untailored types of costume, the rectangular tunic or poncho-shirt. As a common feature of a woman's dress in highland Guatemala it may now be worn with the lower portion drawn together and covered by a skirt. Where local custom dictates a short length, it may be worn with the lower edge hanging free at or above the waist line. Large ceremonial ones may be worn still differently with just the face showing through the head opening and the lower portion hanging outside the skirt well below the waist line (Plate I). It has been suggested that this strange way of wearing the huipil arose in colonial times as a means of complying with the requirement that a woman's head be covered in church. This might well be the explanation if the women then lacked a formal or otherwise suitable type of head covering.

In some sections of Central America the huipil may be made of a single loom product folded at the shoulder line and seamed down the sides below the arm openings. Others are made of two or three complete lengths, or sections of cloth joined together to provide greater width. The ones shown here fall into the latter category and appear to have been made by cutting one long strip of material into three sections of equal length and sewing them together to form a large rectangle. At the exact center a small circular head or face opening was cut, its edges embroidered with a collar-like ring. By folding transversely on the center line and by sewing the side edges, a sack-like tunic results. Designs are identical front and back and must be woven so the details match evenly after the sections of cloth are joined together. To do this on looms which are little more than an assemblage of a few wooden sticks, though dignified by the term backstrap loom, calls for great skill and careful planning.

The specimen shown in Plate II, unpatterned and seemingly simple as it registers in a black and white photograph, is remarkable for its texture and the method in which color is used. The warp yarn is fine, single, Z spun cotton, with crêpe twist, handspun with the simple prehistoric-type spindle and probably reworked to impart the desired degree of crêping. The same yarn is used as weft in regularly repeated stripes of plain or tabby weave, but on it at frequent intervals red and gold silk floss has been wrapped (Detail of Plate II). As the weave is loose and the fabric almost sheer, these colors are readily visible and the added bulk of the silk

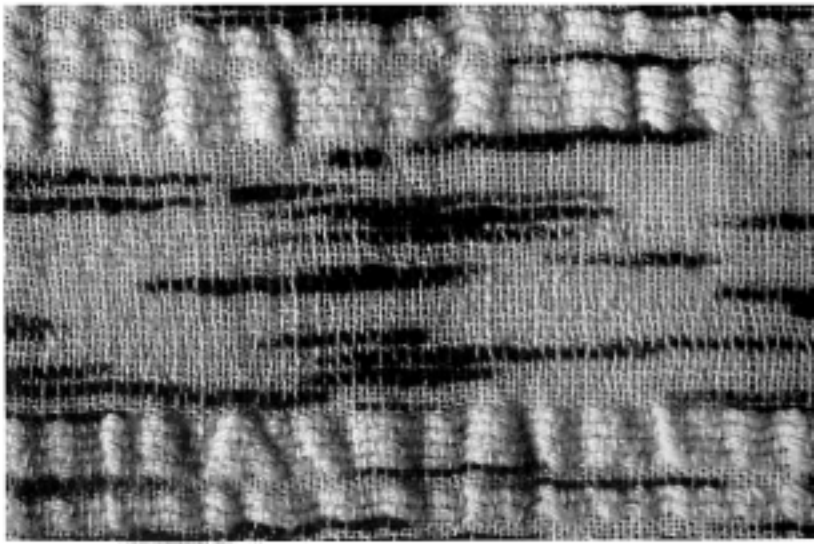

PLATE II

NINETEENTH CENTURY WEDDING HUIPIL FROM QUETZALTENANGO, GUATEMALA, 39″ WIDE X 42″ HIGH, WITH DETAIL SHOWING SILK FLOSS WRAPPED ON WEFT, AND CRÊPED WEFT STRIPES.

varies the texture. Between the plain-weave, color-flecked areas are heavily ribbed weft stripes created by meticulously laying in either paired or quadrupled weft yarns of different quality with no tension applied to them as they are passed through the warp. As with many textiles, an attempt to portray verbally what was achieved not only fails to convey the desired picture but is both confusing and boring. Perhaps if we remember that the wefts in the plain weave stripes measure about 13 inches from selvage to selvage, while the adjacent crêped stripes have paired, soft-spun cotton singles measuring approximately 17 inches in length between the same selvages, we can more easily appreciate the problem of construction. Any hand-weaver will realize what this involves, but at the same time will be puzzled by how it is accomplished. The explanation lies in the most important difference between the simple backstrap loom and modern mechanical or semi-mechanical looms; the fact that the former permits the weaver to vary the warp tension at will.

Actually, this crêped stripe is not a rare thing in Central America and is often seen alternating with areas of leno or gauze weave. How ancient the practice may be is still unknown. As it is a non-European technique, there is scant reason to consider it anything but pre-Spanish. Unfortunately, conditions in Central America are such that virtually no prehistoric textiles have survived. Apart from a series of fragments from the sacred well or cenote [1] at Chichen Itza in Mayan territory and a few from dry caves, nothing is available. In this totally inadequate sample none of this type of striping technique has been reported. In Peru only a very few instances of the same thing have been found, all, as far as one can trust the records, from the central coast area. As all can be considered late in terms of the total Peruvian textile chronology, perhaps 16th Century, there is a possibility that the idea may have been introduced into Peru by the native allies or troops recruited in Central America by the Spaniards. The records that such people, both men and women, were brought to Peru are clear and positive, but nothing is known of their ultimate fate nor of their possible influence on native Peruvian culture.

The principle of wrapping additional lint or floss on restricted sections of yarn for texture or color variations is a far rarer feature. With modern mechanical spinning equipment this is no problem and nub yarns are commonly used to produce an effect comparable to what we see in this

[1] Sacred Well of Chichen Itza in northern Yucatan where, according to old Mayan tales, sacrificial victims were cast in times of drought or disaster to propitiate the angry gods who lived in its depths. (Ed.)

specimen. With yarns spun on a hand spindle, however, the application of additional fibers must have been an exceedingly painstaking and laborious process, for the colored fibers are loosely twisted around the outside of the yarn and are not integrated with it. The rarity of examples of this technique in other Guatemalan fabrics and the fact that in this instance it was employed for a garment of unusual importance may reflect the difficulty of the task. As there is nothing to prevent the colored fiber from slipping, it is surprising that some Guatemalan fabrics are said to have it on warp yarns. The string heddles[2] used on the backstrap looms create strong friction on the warps, so the colored fibers must have been added to the sections of the warps between the heddle and the weaver as the work progressed.

For data on the antiquity of this technique in America we must turn again to Peru. There, too, it is extremely rare and only a few examples are known. The oldest, dated at about 900 B.C. by the Carbon 14 method,[3] were found by the author while excavating material of the Cupisnique or Chavin horizon in the Chicama Valley. The use of these names to designate cultural material does not mean that we know who the people were or whence they came. We do know that they brought maize to Peru and if, as some evidence now indicates, maize diffused from Central America, they had at least some contacts in that direction. The same people also introduced new weaving techniques into Peru, among which we find this system of wrapping additional fibers on warp yarns during weaving.

As used by them it was not a method of adding color nor of achieving a pleasing variation in texture, but it served to create clearly defined patterns and designs in plain weave fabrics. Unfortunately, the fragments recovered are too incomplete to identify or reconstruct the figures. They show (Plate III) little more than that such figures were achieved by materially increasing the diameters or thickness of the warp yarns at certain intervals after the warps were set up in the loom. The result is that, in relatively loosely woven fabrics, figures of seeming compactness are produced. In southern Peru, after the use of dyes was mastered, we find dyed fibers used to make such patterns more distinct and pleasing. The finest known example of the technique is to be seen in the famous Paracas period fabric displayed at the Brooklyn Museum (Plate IV). This specimen, dating perhaps from the third century B.C. is noted for

[2] Cords hanging from a stick which, by an action of the hand, cause half the warp yarns to be raised to form an opening for the shuttle.

[3] See the *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1953, pp 23-26.

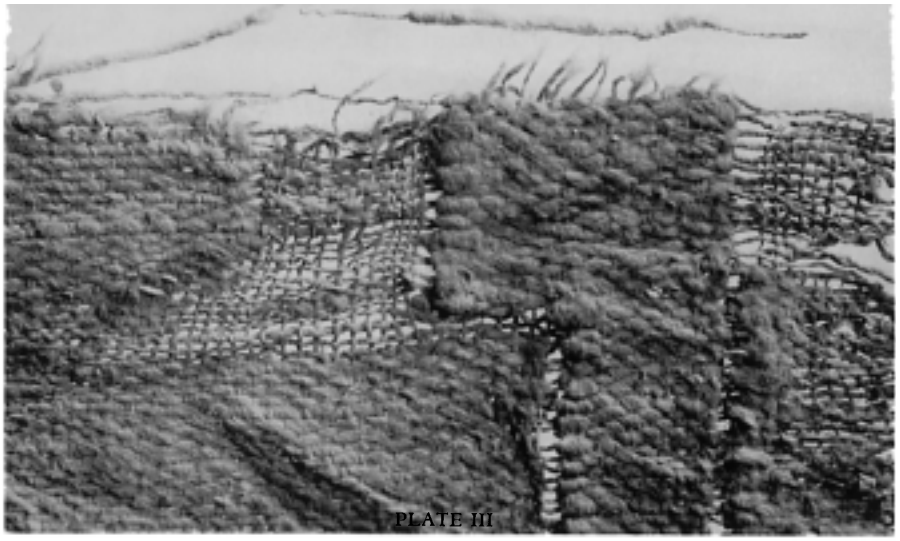

PLATE III

DETAIL OF MONOCHROME WARP WRAPPED FIGURE, C. 900 B.C., PERU.

PLATE IV

PARACAS TEXTILE. WARP WRAPPED FIGURE AT RIGHT, NEEDLEWORK BORDER AT LEFT. 3RD(?) CENTURY B.C., PERU. BROOKLYN MUSEUM 38.121—A.

the beauty and complexity of its elaborate needle-worked border. Attention has been focused almost entirely on this, and the importance of the almost sheer central area has been overlooked. Mrs. McDougall was the first to point out and to identify correctly the method used in creating the colored figures in it. Though only a plain weave, great care and effort were obviously required in its production.

A few other examples of this patterning method have been found. One is definitely of the Nazca period and might have been made between 600 and 900 A.D. Another could be from a later period, but knowledge of the method seems to have been lost long before the Spanish Conquest.

To return to the huipil; there are a few other details which are evidence of the special care and attention given to it. Across both the front and back of the central area are weft stripes of gold and cerise silk, and three of a light purple cotton in which the number of weft passages have been counted off to achieve perfect matching. The purple yarn, which is the same as that used for the seam stitching, has been dyed laboriously, an inch or two at a time, with a fluid obtained from a marine snail, *Purpura patula,* found along the Pacific coast of Central America. As in the Mediterranean area, the shellfish dye was valued both for the quality of its color and its fastness, and possibly because it represented something which was difficult to obtain and hence rare. Cotton yarn with this dye was until recent years, and still may be in a limited way, a valued article of trade. As a luxury item it was widely distributed and was so highly prized during colonial times that the people of one community in Costa Rica sought and received Papal permission to use it for their church altar cloths instead of silk. In checking this particular yarn we note that it is made in a way which is unique among native American fabric yarns, as far as these are known. The spinning direction is Z (counter clockwise); the doubling is opposite to this (S): then two of these two-ply yarns are firmly twisted together in the same direction in which they were doubled. This is a cable twist yarn, and it is difficult to explain why such construction was employed unless it is better suited to the dyeing process. Such data as this may seem like hair-splitting attention to detail, but it might serve to identify some center of dispersal for the Purpura dye, and might help in tracing the distribution of the product.

Each of the weft stripe areas mentioned have two stripes of an "under two over two" twill, with fine silk yarns used as weft. As it is doubtful that the weaver fitted additional heddles to her loom just for these stripes, the only alternative would be hand selection of the warps to be lifted for

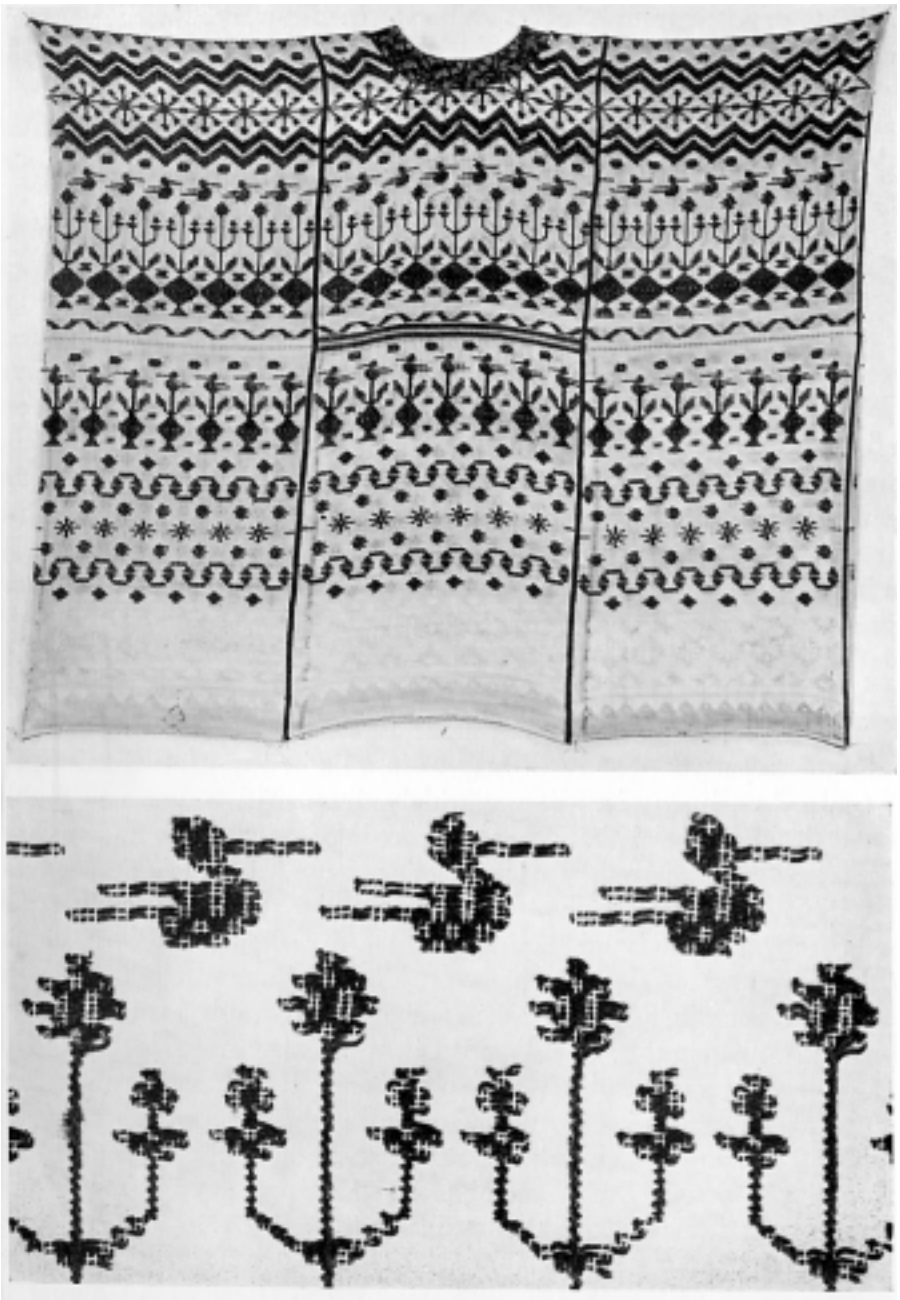

PLATE V

BROCADED COTTON WEDDING HUIPIL FROM QUETZALTENANGO, GUATEMALA. (WIDTH 46½", HEIGHT 39", A. M. N. H. 65/5297), WITH DETAIL BELOW.

each passage of the weft. Any weaver will agree that this must have been a boring chore, to phrase it mildly.

In Guatemala the weaving of twill on Spanish-type foot treadle looms is not uncommon, but twill weaves from the native-type looms are rare. It is doubtful if this can be attributed to the difficulty of preparing and operating the heddles, for this simple loom can be adapted to any construction the weaver really wishes to produce. In prehistoric times in America there was no lack of knowledge of twill construction, as is proved by a very complex twill fragment from the Chichen Itza cenote and others from Peru and elsewhere. Its use by our native weavers seems to have been quite localized, where interest developed as it did during the Mochica period in northern Peru. It would seem that the technique failed to satisfy the weavers as a challenge to their ingenuity. No economic demand for it developed within their culture, as it has in ours. Only after the Spaniards introduced the foot treadle loom, which could not compete with the native loom for diversity of product, has its use become common. Perhaps its occurrence in the huipil might serve as an example of the native loom operator's attitude; "We can weave it if we want to."

The second wedding huipil (Plate V), like so many articles of native apparel in Guatemala, is brocaded. In size and proportions it is similar to the first, and is also made of three lengths of material with vertical stripes formed by the decorative stitching of the seams. It, too, has horizontal weft stripes, front and back, of silk and cotton, and a circular neck opening embroidered with a floral pattern in bright colored silks. Warp and weft yarn is a slightly heavier handspun single cotton, with less crêpe twist. Four strands of the same yarn are used for the white brocaded figures at the bottom of the garment, and for weft stripes. The rest of the brocading is done with a paired, three-ply purple cotton yarn similar to but of a darker shade than the shellfish dye in the first specimen. This is obviously an attempt to duplicate the rarer product, and it may possibly have been dyed with an aniline product introduced by Germans who knew that the demand for the natural product far exceeded the supply.

The workmanship throughout is excellent. The six repeats of all figures as they occur front and back on each section of the material match almost perfectly. As far as checked, this seems to have been accomplished by counting off the warps and wefts involved in each figure and in their spacing. Again we find that the number of wefts in the horizontal stripes, front and back, are the same. Such variation as is visible seems to be the result of slight differences in the beating in of the weft.

What significance, if any, the figures may have had is not known. Similar ones occur in other Guatemalan fabrics, but there is no way of checking their antiquity. All we can do is to point out that the brocading technique is prehistoric and widespread. Examples were found among the Chichen Itza fragments. Others are known from the southwestern United States, and many have been secured in Peru. Curiously, in that country brocading never became as popular as it did in Guatemala. The oldest examples occur at the same level as the warp wrapping but other methods of patterning were preferred for nearly two thousand years. Then, in the centuries immediately preceding the Spanish conquest, there is evidence that it was becoming more fashionable and common.

The preceding comments will give some idea of what one may find of interest in just two specimens. The evidence of skill in utilization of ancient knowledge, the obvious pride in craftsmanship are pleasing memorials of the two Quiché Indian girls for whom, and possibly by whom, these huipils were made.