

ALPACA CULTURE



June 2016

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A Decision for the American Alpaca Industry

Sweater Trends

By Meyla Bianco Johnston





Are sweater trends relevant to anyone on earth besides fashionistas?

Certainly alpaca breeders growing fiber for fashion sweaters and designers using alpaca should be keenly interested! As one of the most amazing natural fibers on earth, alpaca can be used, in some capacity, for any fashion movement modern designers can dream up.

Photos courtesy Michael Leow, Fashion Snoops





Michael Leow runs Asia Pacific for Fashion Snoops, an online trend forecasting service that's been predicting the newest styles for more than 15 years. He presented a seminar, *Sweater Trends for Autumn-Winter 2017-18*, at Cashmere World in Hong Kong.

In the audience, I began to get very excited, visualizing to myself which new styles and trims could be made with alpaca. I had just reviewed the seminar I was about to deliver the next day, *An Introduction to Alpacas and Alpaca Fiber*. So each of the reasons alpaca fiber is so versatile were foremost in my mind and fit right into the sweater trends being presented for upcoming seasons.

Here are the main points from Leow's seminar:

Key Seasonal Items for Women's Sweaters

- **Cardigan** Button-front, embellished collar, 3/4 length sleeves
- **Crewneck sweater** Contrast yoke or sleeves, slimmed, fitted style, embroidery detail, tucked in or short.
- **Sweater vest** Can have a cami shape, using tactile materials like mohair or embroidery
- **Midi skirt shape** In between mini and maxi – hits at mid-calf
- **Duster** Oversized with self-belt
- **Turtleneck** (Leow emphasizes that this is the most important of the key seasonal items). Also with mock-neck as an alternative
- **Oversized sweater**

Key Seasonal Items for Men's Sweaters

- **Military influence** Thick, ribbed surfaces, subtle mock neck, furry utility patches
- **Sweater vest** Layering piece, seen as a novelty piece
- **Library sweater** Heavy, rib-knit, loose, slouchy, relaxed shape, dropped shoulders
- **Geometric patterns** with turtleneck silhouette
- **Retro polo** with zip front
- **Argyle** Proportions of designs larger than normal, raw edges
- **Trail cardigans** Long, *Westworld* style (sci-fi Western film) inspired

We asked Leow how, with the fashion trends developing at warp speed, natural fiber fits in. Whether or not a particular designer executes in natural or synthetic materials is of course up to them, he explained.


However, he also noted that the great financial crisis “put the hand-brake on eco-textiles developing in the early 2000s.” He is still not sure whether the world is back to thinking about anything other than costs at this time.

Of course, he said, “there will always be a segment of the marketplace for sustainable stuff.” But, he notes, the bigger thing evolving in fashion for the last four or five years is how something feels.

“Comfort is key. Performance. The athleisure trend that has been evolving is important. Because this segment is looking for stretch, it may be skewed toward synthetics.”

“Trends now are a lot less formal – suiting is no longer everyday but rather occasion wear,” he continues. The fashion industry itself has become far less formal in terms of work clothes and you see people wearing shorts to work.

Also, the ubiquitous “office sweater” has become the norm, with many workers leaving their favorite warm sweater on the back of their chair for daily use. Leow made note of the “absurdly cold” air conditioning common in Hong Kong and how this has added to the office sweater trend. But the office sweater trend speaks to a larger casual fashion work environment.

Leow's last words of advice were to be careful about branding sustainable textiles “as though they are only for the rich.” Luxury means financial pressure. If you make a sustainable fiber, material or textile seem commonplace, it becomes an everyday thing. “Blame cost on branding, not material,” he says. “Don't emphasize paying more for sustainability.” 

Learn more at www.fashionsnoops.com.



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The Ethereal Beauty and Significance of Paracas Textiles

By Meyla Bianco Johnston

"By 400 B.C., on the western coast of South America, native cultures had advanced their textiles to such a degree that all types of textile weaving currently in use today had been invented: sprang, double and triple cloths, tubular ribbons, brocades, pile knots, compound weaves, interlocked and slit tapestries, rigid warps, repps, gingham, netting, tassels, tufts, braids, embroideries, needle knitting, painted fabrics, tie-dye, batik and a distinctive warp-lock construction."

~ From *Gold of the Andes: The Llamas, Alpacas, Vicuñas and Guanacos of South America*





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Getting There

From Lima, it is a four-hour bus ride on the Pan-American Highway to the otherworldly Paracas area. As we drove through the landscape, encapsulated by the lumbering luxury bus, glimpses of the blue green ocean flitted between dozens of restaurants with curious English names.

The lack of vegetation is startling here – no trees, no bushes, not even any grass. We swayed across a veritable wasteland where it simply never rains. Really. Never. Just sand and hills tinged with red and yellow due to the mineral content of the soil . . . as far as the eye can see. Some consider this the northernmost reach of the Atacama Desert.

Few animals can make any kind of a living amid this subtle beauty – turkey vultures by day and a handful of indefatigable desert foxes roam around by night to make the best of it, but sightings are rare. Until you reach the coast, it is as if nature erased all signs of life.

At the edge of this glaring desert is an ocean teeming with more life than any other on all of planet earth. As stark and barren as the desert is, the sea is exceptionally rich because the Humboldt Current wells up from the cool deep to provide a plethora of nutrients for the

spectacular range of species here, from seabirds to sea lions and an unbelievable range of fish and underwater creatures.

There is an otherworldly beauty in this austere land, made even more fascinating by its history and connection to high quality alpaca textiles, which we were about to learn.

Richness Amid the Stark Desert

Once we finally arrived, we hired a local driver and guide to show us around the Paracas National Reserve. In the strong sun, we saw and touched some fossilized shells from 39 million years ago imbedded in gritty dirt from when this place was, inexplicably, an ancient sea. A hardpan road runs through the area, traversed by rumbling double axle trucks mining salt for the local and international market.

Incredibly, this same forbidding desert is the unlikely source of the tremendous ancient Paracas textiles. How could such a plain place, seemingly devoid of detail, seemingly uninhabitable, seemingly lifeless, be the final resting place for some of the most astoundingly baroque textiles ever made by human hands?

Actually, the very dry and unchangeable nature of this place makes for the ultimate storage facility for textiles.

Anna Javér is Textile Conservator at the Gothenburg Museum in Sweden, where many of the textiles ended up. She points out the fortuitous environment the Paracas people chose in a *Hali* magazine article, “Textiles for the Afterlife.”

“Their burial in the dry desert sand, cut off from air and light, provided perfect conditions for the preservation of organic material, with the result that the textiles have survived for more than 2,000 years.”

The pre-Columbian Paracas culture chose this place deliberately to store their precious ancestors’ bodies. They carefully wrapped them in layer upon layer of jewel-toned, intricately woven and embroidered textiles and stored them under the sand in groups. The deeper you get in the bundle, the finer the textiles.

Javér told us, “We are very restricted when it comes to hands on conservation of the collection of these 2,000 year old textiles. We have looked closely into the condition of the textiles on fiber level and have found that both the cotton weaves, and the alpaca weaves and embroideries are fragile. Especially in areas that have been subjected to body fluids from the decaying human remains as the mummy bundle dried out, buried in the dry desert sand. But also fibers with certain dyes, for example

. . . Continued on page 40

A diorama at Museo Nacional de Arqueología in Lima, Peru shows mummy bundles as they would have appeared in situ. Photo by Jared Johnston.



A resplendent, intact mummy bundle from the Museo Rafael Larco Herrera in Lima, Peru showing the exquisite quality of Andean pre-Columbian textiles. Photo by Jared Johnston.



Despite residing underground for thousands of years, the vegetable and mineral dyed colors of these Paracas textiles are still vibrant and the



imagery thrilling. The fineness and quality are simply difficult for the modern eye to comprehend.



some black dyes and some red dyes are more fragile and decayed than other fibers. Therefore, we do not add stitch supports as there is a risk for further degradation. Instead, we reduce handling of the textiles and support them fully resting flat for both storage and display. Preventive conservation instead of active conservation is how we conserve the textiles for future generations.”

The Paracas textiles are especially old and represent the very beginning of what we recognize today as the Peruvian textile tradition. Javér explains, The Paracas textiles “represent a world heritage of textiles.”

The everyday reality was that people were living in one of the most inhospitable deserts in the world and transitioning from a hunter-gatherer type culture into one that utilized agriculture, and most importantly, the products of the sea. The people must have used grit and ingenuity to survive – if they needed a tool, they had to make it. In the case of embroidery, they made tiny needles from fish bones and cactus spines. All in the name of beauty and art.

Produced around 700 B.C. to 100 A.D. during the Early Horizon Period, the Paracas textiles are considered a formative period of Andean culture far before the more well-known Incan period.

Consider for a moment that at this time in other world events, Alexander the Great had recently conquered Egypt and the Venus de Milo was being created. Columbus would not land in the New World for 2,000 years more. In Paracas society, there was no written language.

In *Woven Stories* by Andrea M. Heckman, William J. Conklin’s understanding of the Paracas textiles speaks to the lack of written language:

“Visual imagery in the Western tradition is characteristically thought of as secondary to written communication, as illustration of the basic story that is always told in words. The Western world considers this relationship between ‘word’ and ‘image’ as the very definition of ‘normal.’ . . . But there is evidence to suggest that in the Andean world not only the design but also the structure of textiles directly conveyed ideas.”

Ann P. Rowe, Curator of the Western Hemisphere Collection at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. notes, “The ‘texts’ of Paracas culture are its embroidered garments, for the rows of repetitive images on those weavings are ideograms that functioned somewhere between writing and pictures of things.”

The eloquence of the fantastic surviving Paracas textiles speaks volumes about what the people considered important.

The Significance of the Paracas Textiles

Thousands of years ago, each handmade garment was constructed with intention, with specific materials and a deliberate design for the person who would wear the garment. Larger cultural spiritual considerations were also in play.

In fact, during the height of the textile cultures, rank and social status was of paramount importance and was literally woven into the cloth tradition. The more detailed and complex your daily costume, the more power you wielded in the society and the more respect you garnered.

From *Textiles of Ancient Peru*: “Textiles provide the mirror in which the economic, social, political and religious development of every culture of ancient Peru is reflected, as well as defining the rank and status of the individual for whom they were made, possessing as they do a great mythical-sacred content through the incorporation of iconographic elements.”

For ancient people, textiles were fundamental – they covered their living bodies and the culturally important bodies of their dead. To achieve the sort of textiles worthy of this task, they had to figure out practical issues early on and then move on to the complexities of creating high level, beautiful materials.

From Wild Animals to Exquisite Textiles

First, they identified animals whose fiber qualities matched their desires – think soft, light and insulative as well as workable. Originally, the target animals were vicuñas, whose fiber remains, to this day, one of the most desirable substances on earth. It is easy to imagine how observing these animals would elicit a strong desire to possess their fiber and be the catalyst for domestication.

Next, they began the arduous and time-consuming process of domesticating animals – alpacas from vicuñas and llamas from guanacos. The idea was to keep them close to home for easy access to their fiber for use in textiles. Next, extremely fine alpacas were achieved through selective breeding the likes of which we are only now approaching in terms of fineness, uniformity and density.¹

People living in ancient Peru also managed wild vicuñas and reserved their very fine fiber for use in especially important textiles. Wild vicuña fiber is one material seen in some of the surviving pieces and holds up astonishingly well.

The fiber from the constantly developing herds was then hand spun, hand dyed and ultimately made into the surviving textiles in museums around the world today.

¹ To learn more about early camelid domestication and pre-conquest breeding practices, read “Origin and Evolution of the South American Camelids” by Dr. Jane Wheeler.

Ancient Peruvian Civilization Textile Timeline

In Relation to World Events



The very first issue of *Alpaca Culture*, from June 2012, contains a photo spread of a magnificent checkered black and white unku accented with moths against a ground of deep red. Made from alpaca fiber, it was created during Incan times, between about 1200-1532.

According to the National Gallery of Australia, “The black and white alternating squares of the checkerboard stand for the dualism underlying the visual culture of ancient Peru . . . Black and white could symbolise night and day, the underworld and the sky, while red stands for the human world, and for its element of blood.”

Since our first issue, we have broadened our education on the subject of ancient Peruvian textiles in a real life way. On our recent trip to Peru, we saw similar textiles with our own eyes. Among a variety of civilizations even older than the Incans that produced the checkered unku, the Paracas culture textiles are strikingly beautiful and were particularly notable to us because we were able to visit the actual places they were entombed by their creators.

SOURCES:

- Ysabel, Medina Castro María, and Roberto Gheller Doig. *Textiles of Ancient Peru* = Tejidos Del Perú Antiguo. Lima: n.p., 2005. Print.

Above: An unku from the Incan Period in bold checkered weave with red ground and moth design.

Right: This timeline adapted from *Textiles of Ancient Peru* gives a startling perspective on the extreme antiquity of Paracas textiles.



Cotton was another important material that came from cultivating extremely desirable strains specifically for textile use. Eventually, this cotton would come to be called Pima and to enjoy a worldwide reputation for excellence.

Materials and Techniques

Many materials and a wide variety of techniques were employed over eons of fine textile work. However, the Paracas textiles in particular were usually initially woven in one color from either llama, alpaca or vicuña wool or cotton or a combination of the two. Often, the warp was cotton and the weft alpaca or other camelid wool. We don't know why they chose this method but the textiles' survival attests to the method's success.

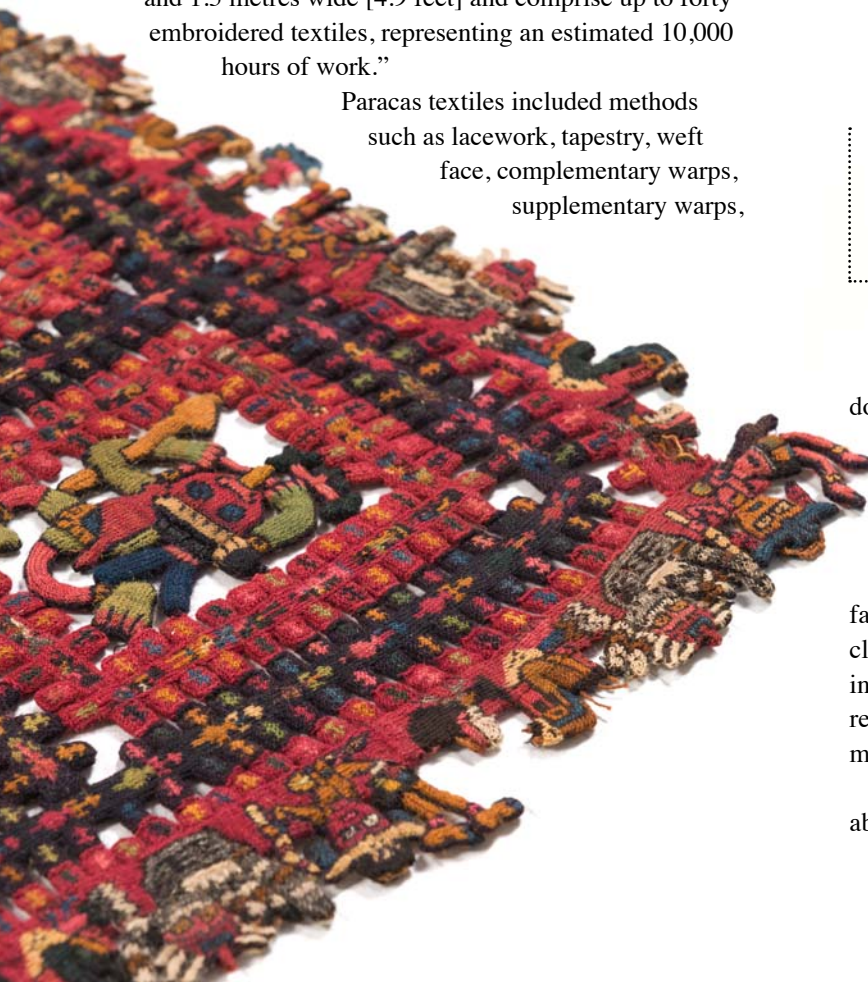
Horizontal, vertical and backstrap looms were used during the time Paracas textiles were being manufactured and the backstrap is still commonly in use today across Peru. Other pieces were knitted with very fine yarn to create 3-D figures, primarily used in borders and details, though some large pieces using this technique exist.

"We do not know how textile production was divided among the people of Paracas," Javér writes, but clearly there were specialised craftspeople. The textiles for a large funerary bundle took a long time to make. Some of the largest bundles are up to 1.5 metres high and 1.5 metres wide [4.9 feet] and comprise up to forty embroidered textiles, representing an estimated 10,000 hours of work."

Paracas textiles included methods such as lacework, tapestry, weft face, complementary warps, supplementary warps,



Left: Very fine 3-D knitting along the edge and body of a Paracas textile. **Right:** With dynamism and color, Paracas textiles continue to amaze modern viewers. This garment was designed with fringe at the shoulders that would sway and attract extra attention to the important person wearing it.



double cloth brocade, tie-dye and others. Techniques were complex and varied widely according to the artist's vision. Monochromatic fabrics were made expressly as plain grounds for dazzling embroidery.

After weaving, they were often embroidered with very fine alpaca and vicuña wool with repeating, fantastical designs. Some standouts include flying figures clutching ceremonial objects, two-headed felines carrying human heads in their mouths and a wide variety of recognizable bird species. Other figures included foxes, monkeys, whales, vicuñas and alpacas.

The spectrum of colors ancient Peruvians were able to dye successfully is amazing; around 190 shades



were commonly used in Paracas textiles. A collection of mineral and vegetable sources were used to dye the yarn including indigo, chilca, California pepper tree, annatto, cochineal, cinnabar, shells and hematite. The fixative for dyes was often human urine. When you see the textiles in person, it is exceptionally difficult to believe how old they are because the colors could not be richer or more saturated.

Javér says in the *Hali* article, “The fantastic colours of Paracas textiles are still well preserved today. The natural palette of alpaca and vicuña wool includes many shades of grey, white, beige, brown and black. Local cotton fibre is not only white but also brown and green. The natural hues

of cotton and camelid wool were supplemented by dyeing the yarn. Alpaca and vicuña fibres absorb colour better than cotton, and as a result the dyed threads are almost always of camelid wool.”

“The Paracas textiles are unique in that they are embroidered in fine spun alpaca threads, dyed to a palette of colours,” Javér told us. “One of the textiles in the Gothenburg collection has over twenty five different colors in just one border.”

The exquisite fineness of the textiles was further underscored to us by an exhibit in the Larco Museum in Lima where visitors were invited to examine the textiles inside one case with the aid of a fixed magnifying glass.

The astonishment you feel while looking at such an ancient textile is immediately heightened by the sublime beauty of the fragment just inches from your eyes.

Discovery of the Textiles

The Paracas textiles lay as they were entombed by their culture for generations. Unfortunately, ancient and modern grave looting was common and some textiles were lost to history by greed. It was not until 1925 that Peruvian archeologist Julio Tello unearthed a large number from two main sites: Paracas Cavernas and Paracas Necropolis. Paracas Cavernas dates from 500 to 300 B.C. and Paracas Necropolis from 300 to 100 B.C.

The ancients buried bundles underground in the dry sand and earth in purpose built tombs in the very hills we saw in Paracas. Some mummies were wrapped with more than forty textiles, each more resplendent than the last; in total there were nearly 400 mummies. Only the very finest and most beautiful textiles were used to wrap the dead in the Paracas culture.

Ancient peoples took pride in creating things as well

as they knew how. Their survival into the modern age makes the quality of these beautiful garments and textiles perfectly evident. The ancient people possessed great energy and a wildly inventive artistry that was unique then and now. Because they were able to domesticate alpacas from vicuñas all those millennia ago, they provided themselves a constant supply of the best natural fiber the world had to offer.

While textiles today are used for different purposes and play a different role in modern culture, the quality and transcendent beauty the ancients achieved is a source of inspiration even now.

Textiles of significance and beauty have been in continuous production in Peru from far before the time of Christ to the present. Across all ancient Peruvian cultures (around eighteen), it is clear that the people were intent on infusing beauty into all they did. The textiles get visceral reactions from modern viewers for their arresting designs, vibrant colors and contemporary relevance.


These incredible textiles inform the cultural identity of Peruvians and are a source of great national pride and international admiration.



An Exceptional Learning Opportunity


In retrospect, the sequence of events was perfect to educate us about Paracas textiles: first we visited the austere Paracas National Reserve where the textiles originated. We later returned to Lima to glimpse the actual textiles in the Larco Museum and the National Archeological Museum. At a local store, I purchased *Textiles of Ancient Peru*, a beautiful bilingual book I pored over for the remainder of our Peru trip and far after we returned home.

The novel beauty of ancient Peruvian textiles is, to me, breathtakingly moving. That human hands were able to create textiles of such enduring splendor so long ago evokes astonishment and almost always, emotion.

Hours, days and even weeks after we left the museums, I found myself asking how such textiles were possible, what it would take to make them today and if today's society is in fact more advanced than the ancient Peruvian culture of the desert coast. 

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The stark contrast of this barren desert and the biologically rich, cold Pacific Ocean make for a unique ecosystem. While difficult for humans and animals, this place is ideal for textile storage, as the Paracas Textiles show. Photo by Jared Johnston.



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Suri Alpaca Rugs


Make Their Global Debut

By Meyla Bianco Johnston

Photos courtesy Art Deco Collections / Shahab Brothers Industries

As far back as the 16th century, sheep's wool, silk and even cashmere were the materials for rugs in India. Intricately woven examples, made with time-consuming techniques graced royal and noble homes across the continent. The high quality way they were constructed allowed them to keep their beauty for years and years. The process was often so complex that a single rug took fifteen years to complete.

One rug made during this time measured an astounding 4,424 knots per inch! These works of art not only hold their value but increase in desirability with time, even if not fully intact.

A man with a mustache, wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt and dark trousers, is seated and working on a large wooden loom. He is using a tool that resembles a knife to weave a fabric. The workshop has a brick wall on the left and various spools of thread and weaving equipment visible. The lighting is warm and focused on the man and his work.

Sitaram Rishimuni weaves using a tool that Westerners may not immediately recognize as a knife. Ansari explains, "The tool is a knife, just a different kind and shape. After he ties one knot he needs to cut it and repeat the same step again and again. Assume each knot as one block, this quality has 121 knots per square inch, which means 11 blocks x 11 blocks per square inch."

A group of contemporary traditional rug makers in India are creating high quality rugs from Suri alpaca fiber for the first time.

The rugs are made by ParvezAslam Ansari and his team of skilled artisans in India. The American branch of his company, Art Deco Collections, is located in Illinois, where Ansari lives and works.

Making rugs comes pretty naturally to Ansari, whose family has been in the rug manufacturing business in India for more than 80 years.

Ansari's three elder brothers, two younger brothers and his father, "play very important roles," Ansari says. "They decide quality, design, color, thread count, weave and also manage the entire operation." The Indian company is called Shahab Brothers Industries, after Ansari's father, Shahabuddin Ansari.

Even with such depth of experience, incorporating alpaca didn't happen overnight for this fourth generation rug maker. Ansari was curious about how it might fit into the family business and started investigating.

"Back in 2012, we were discussing with our German customer about making exclusive, expensive, rare rugs that no one besides us would make in India or anywhere in the world. After a lot of research, we understood that alpaca fiber would be the best option," Ansari says.

"In the beginning, we knew nothing about alpaca so we bought some Huacaya and we made a sample. However, there was no shine after wash and finishing, so we thought maybe something was wrong with our washing procedures. We washed the fiber a few more times, but the result didn't change."

It was only later, through a series of serendipitous events and a tenacious quest that Ansari found out about Suri alpaca.

A close up of the hand-weaving process. "The weavers follow a map that has square blocks," Ansari explains. "Let's say in one inch, 11 square blocks or total 121 blocks per square inch, each square block has some color and that's how the design takes the shape, knot by knot or block by block."

How Hard Weather Led to Soft Rugs

In 2015, Ansari had his first experience with alpacas themselves through Jim and Jean Morgan of J4 Farm Alpacas in Woodstock, Illinois. He found J4 Farm Alpacas online, spoke to Jim on the phone and arranged a visit.

Ansari says, "It was winter and it had been snowing." Conditions were very challenging for travel and Jim even warned Ansari, asking if he'd like to come another day since Jim had already cleared the snow from the driveway twice and it showed no sign of letting up.

Undaunted, Ansari assured Jim he would see him later. "When he arrived," Jim says, "I saw he was not making it up the drive so I went out to help him. He eventually parked the car in the drive near the road. Seeing his wife was with him was a surprise but when she brought a baby carrier out, we were *really* surprised! I took the baby up to the house as Parvez helped his wife up the drive."

It was then that the Ansari family saw their first few alpacas from about 200 feet away. Inside the Morgan's house, they examined Suri products, saw photos of the J4 alpacas and also got a chance to feel the fiber from the animals. As he felt the Suri fiber, Ansari began to wonder if Suri could work as a material in his family's traditionally made rugs.

"We showed him all the fiber we had," Jim says, "and he picked out roughly 20 lbs. of various colors and grades. Thinking back, Jean and I both felt that he knew what would work for the rugs and mentioned that he

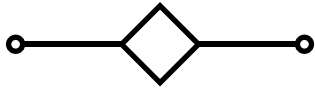
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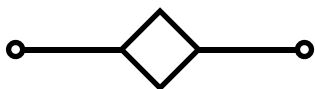


Hansa Paswan (left) and Baba Paswan (right) handwash a rug, which takes about two or three hours to complete and brings out the softness and luster of the fiber. Wooden blades act as wipers to help lift any dirt and allow it to wash away. During washing, Ansari says they use detergent and/or bleach to thoroughly clean the rugs. "After washing, the rug is rolled and put aside for a few hours or overnight so that all the water drips out. Then, the next morning, they roll out the rugs to dry in the sun. We do not try to dry the rugs artificially because we believe natural sunlight brings good shine to the rug," Ansari says.



“Every design is unique,” Ansari says. “A few of them are just from a designer’s imagination and some are ideas from pictures.

Sometimes, designs are also provided by our old customers . . . The ‘Tree of Life’ design is inspired by Persian Loribaft Gabbeh rugs.”







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didn't need the finest grade for rugs."

He bought some fiber from the Morgans, which he shipped to India for testing.

Using the fiber from the J4 Farm, the rugmakers made their very first Suri fiber sample in India. The Indian manufacturing team wanted more Suri fiber so they could make even larger samples.

"We like the results we get from Suri," Ansari says. Suri best mimics the materials they typically use for carpets because it has a nap, a brilliant sheen and wears very well.

Simply put, Suri alpaca fiber is uniquely suited for durability and lasting beauty.

"That was the beginning of our Suri rugs," Ansari says. He was now on the hunt for a steady supply of Suri alpaca.

Jim knew J4 could not supply the hundreds of pounds of Suri fiber Ansari would need, but J4 was already selling fiber to The North American Suri Company and they referred Parvez there. "We are so glad that he found Liz Vahlkamp and her North American Suri Company," Jim says.

Opposite: Nazarul Islam, also known as “Mama” shearing the rug to ensure that each fiber is evenly cut and the pile is plush and supple.

Fiber Supply – Never Enough

The North American Suri Company purchases Suri fiber directly from individual growers all around the U.S. and Liz says they also occasionally buy from cooperatives to get fiber for the rugs specifically.

Liz explains, “We have typically sold [Ansari] 2,000-4,000 lbs. (907-1814 kg) of Suri per year.” Usually they send two shipments, but Liz says this year it will be just one.

The fiber Ansari needs is considered coarse, “ideally 29 microns and up,” according to Liz. They use “primarily white, though they do use fawn and black also. The minimum length we typically send is 3.5” (889 cm) and maximum is 6.5 (15.24 cm).”

“As The North American Suri Company continues to create new markets for Suri fiber and find outlets that position Suri as a rare and premium material, [the rugs are] a great product to put coarse Suri into – it still feels great to the touch, it highlights the luster and cool feeling that Suri is known for, and the rugs are selling at a premium to standard wool, Persian rugs,” Liz says.

“The rugs initially sold only in Europe,” Liz says, “so I sold fiber to [Ansari] for a few years. Then, he decided to make an entry into the U.S. market and asked me to carry the rugs. I explained that I am strictly a fiber broker and do not sell end products. However, I said I would help get things started for him, knowing he was not familiar with the U.S. rug markets.”

Liz thought back to a moment from the previous year and had an idea.

“Deb Christner saw the rugs at the 2017 Suri Network Symposium and fell in love,” Liz explains. Deb Christner owns Akuna Matada Suri Alpacas with her husband, Doug.

“This is the quality of product I knew Suri was capable of,” Deb says. “I love the pairing of rare fiber and rare craftsmanship.”

Liz introduced Ansari to Deb, who “offered to take over the sales responsibilities for the U.S. market. She’s been a great asset and has already made good inroads in selling!” Liz says.

Branding and Distribution

Selling the rugs from Hotchkiss, Colorado offered a unique advantage for Deb and Doug.

“Growing up and living in the mountains of Colorado, close to world-class ski resorts gave me exposure to high-end design and price so I knew the combination of craftsmanship and rare fiber was unique,” Deb says.

“Currently the rugs are 25% below the ideal market price. This was offered mainly to Suri breeders so they could experience what their higher micron fiber was capable of. Word-of-mouth is powerful advertising. As the word gets out and the demand increases, then the prices will be going up so breeders can get more for their fiber,” Deb says.

So far, Akuna Matada has been selling rugs via their Facebook page and their website. Deb says that most sales occur when customers can see and feel the exceptional quality of the rugs.

For marketing, Deb says, “I am working with individuals, mainly designers in targeted areas. I also have a Facebook Marketplace account where I can hit target markets. I am currently sold out and having a hard time keeping inventory, which is a good problem, but these rugs really need to be experienced. I will be doing trunk shows when I get more inventory.”

“Purchases have been made across the United States, by men and women. Once they feel the rugs’ softness, coolness, luster and see the craftsmanship, they want one,” Deb says.

Knot Sure What Constitutes a High Quality, Well-Designed Rug?

Most people understand that rug quality is measured in a unique way.

Ansari explains, “Knots per square inch (kpsi) is very important, because that determines the quality of the rug, the time spent to make it and the material consumed in its manufacture. It also shows the kind of fine work done on the rug.”

“These Suri rugs are fine quality at 120 kpsi. Normally an 8x10 foot (2.43 x 3.04 m) rug takes two or three months to weave, if we have yarn in hand. They could be made even more fine quality, but the designs don’t require it.”

Improving Every Day

“It’s taken us couple years of trial and error to perfect it,” Ansari says, but now they are manufacturing beautiful, natural colored rugs made with 100% Suri fiber. “No one besides us in India or anywhere in the world makes Suri rugs,” he adds. In fact, according to Ansari, the Indian manufacturing team insists on Suri as a material.

Shahab Brothers Industries, in conjunction with

Akuna Matada Suri Alpacas, is still trying to increase the number of rugs they can manufacture and to shorten the time that takes. They also want to be able to supply Ansari with more fiber. But that will take more breeders growing more fiber. North American Suri is perfectly positioned to supply them with additional fiber as the American herd's clip grows.

"The North American Suri Company is about as streamlined as we can get – located in the center of the U.S., all fiber ships directly to our warehouse and we pay growers for the shipping cost as long as the weight of shipment is 50 lbs. (22.7 kg) or more," Vahlkamp says.

It takes a lot of Suri fiber to have enough of the quality they are looking for to make the rugs. If you have coarse, white Suri fiber to sell that measures 29 microns and above, Liz Vahlkamp wants to hear about it because she is always looking to buy good quality fiber to supply Ansari.

Vahlkamp and Christner have also listened to feedback from the artisans – they need to have extra Suri fiber on hand to plan manufacturing runs efficiently. But this much fiber is very difficult to provide at this time.

In fact, Vahlkamp says, "We ended up putting [Ansari] in contact with Australia." This year Ansari bought another 4,000 pounds from Surilana, owned by Ian and Angela Preuss of Victoria, Australia.

"We produce about 2,000 kg (4,409 lbs.) of fleece per year," Angela says, "which is suitable for the Suri rugs and about the same amount for other lines."

Having enough fiber on hand is key to Ansari, who has to contend with multiple practical hurdles. "If we don't have enough fiber on hand we cannot confirm the order delivery window. In India, there is always something adverse happening like rain, weavers getting sick, farming season happening and weavers taking days off to finish harvesting and planting. Then, there is also marriage season during the summer," Ansari says.

The good news for Ansari is that Angela says, "We plan to continue providing Parvez."

"If we have fiber in hand, at least we can keep the yarn ready and can provide a certain delivery window. Also to keep the everything running smoothly we need to have fiber stock otherwise it will be difficult to manage the manpower." Ansari says.

The goal for Deb and Liz and Ansari is to streamline the process. There are also still a few other kinks to work out including delivery times, a lack of efficiency in shipping and waste during manufacture.

In addition, they are just beginning to develop a marketing package and labeling for the rugs. Currently,

"the Suri Network is working on Suri fiber labels and branding," Deb says.

While Vahlkamp and Christner had planned to attend rug shows, "after doing research we realized that we did not have the inventory on hand that would be needed," Christner says. In fact, she predicts they will continue to have high demand and low inventory. But they are keen to gauge response to how the rugs feel to the public outside the alpaca industry.

As for right now, "The next step is getting this year's harvest into production," Deb says.


Future goals are to "continue to get exposure and create an on going recognition and demand for Suri fiber."

Another Win for Alpaca

The creation of Suri alpaca rugs of this caliber signals another positive step for alpaca fiber and specifically, to showcase the unique characteristics of Suri. The rugs also show that taking the risk to create a new product is rife with difficult challenges but through persistence, huge opportunities can present themselves.

Though the fiber is currently a challenge to source and the rugs are made the most labor-intensive way possible to ensure quality, the rugs are gorgeous, durable, and by all accounts, very popular wherever they are introduced.

Angela says, "We took the samples to the Australian Spectacular Show last week and people were amazed at how beautiful they were. It is pleasing to see that these rugs really promote the beautiful lustre and handle of Suri."

Now, demand greatly exceeds supply, signaling that the luxury market wants more of these 100 percent unique, naturally colored Suri rugs. Even better, they are becoming popular on three continents. The future looks bright for lustrous, beautiful Suri alpaca! 

Editor's Note:

Have coarse Suri fiber of 29 microns and above to sell? Contact Liz Vahlkamp at North American Suri Company.

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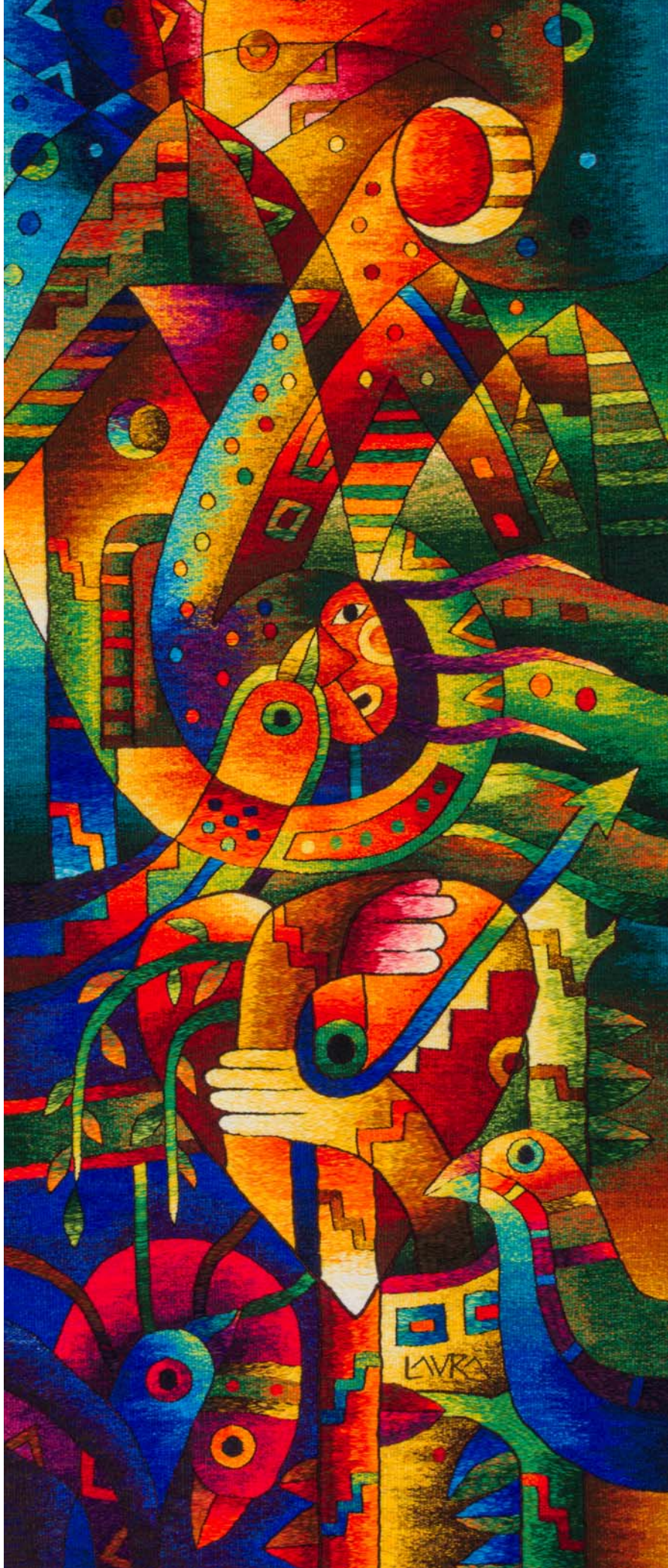
Máxima Laura

By Meyla Bianco Johnston

Photos by Prin Rodriguez and Monarca Criollo / Pariacaca



Máximo Laura in front of the
tapestry "Ritual of Love" in his
home/studio in Lima, Peru in 2017.



Máximo Laura was born in 1959 in rural Ayacucho, Peru and is a fifth generation weaver. The basis of his hometown culture was shaped by the pre-Columbian traditions of the Wari textile civilization.

As a student, Laura supported himself through lean times by weaving in Lima. The early years were not easy and Laura tenaciously hung on, in the beginning working in a studio with no roof.

At just 26 years old in 1985, he had his first exhibition at the Cultural Center of Buenos Aires, Argentina. He continued to grow his skills and reputation until in 1992 when he was awarded a Latin American UNESCO prize, a remarkable achievement.

From there, he has received many additional honors and widespread recognition. His work has been exhibited more than 140 times in 29 countries and is known worldwide for its vibrant color and intense emotional impact.

In 2011, he was awarded “National Living Human Treasure” of Peru. This honor, given by UNESCO, goes only to an artist whose role has been and continues to be to preserve and elevate the culture of their homeland.

Other awards Laura has received include: “Manos de Oro” (Golden Hands) of Peru, “Master of Iberoamerican Craft,” and “National Grand Prize Amauta of Peruvian Handicraft.” Amauta is defined as “master” or “wise one” in the Quechua language. It was historically reserved as a title for teachers in the Inca empire.

Left: “Song of the Heart.” Artist’s statement: Nature, humanity and thought manifested in a cosmological landscape with mountains; formation of a couple with a hug to freedom, representing vitality and the continuity of the center of existence: the heart. Materials: Alpaca, cotton and mixed fibers.

Opposite: The complexity of Laura’s weaving almost defies understanding and requires a Zen-like concentration, evident on his face here, in profile. Each skein here has been created by a color specialist according to his exact color specifications. Here, he is among “textures, colors and forms during the weaving process in 2017.”



How does color inform your work?

The color found or used in a piece is an enigmatic and mysterious act; a high sensitivity challenge; it gives life and spirit to a composition. The choice of the range of colors gives a level of force and expression to the message that I want to portray. The temperature is achieved with light, which at the same time determines the energy, space and the center of interest (which in my case is to find lyricism, spirituality and poetry); light and shadow helps me bring intensity, movement and dimension to my work. The color nourishes with its variety, the impact that it creates to our sensitivity, the softness and intensity gives power to each piece.

Why do you choose to use alpaca in your work?

It is a very noble fiber for its softness, brightness, texture, strength, its capacity for unlimited dyeing and fixing capacity. It allows easy handling, interlocking, twisting and combination in its use; achieving a very rich and organic texture that invites you to be close and feel its warmth. It is a perfect material to obtain the colors that I include in my

paintings, and so it gives me the freedom to color with endless possibilities.

What inspires you?

My first contact with visual art was the great universal expressions of the 20th century, particularly painting and then in parallel, the ancestral art of this continent.

Later, the traditions, legends and myths; beliefs, customs, cultures and religions. The astonishment and commotion created when living, growing and observing the nature of the cosmos, of mankind and his thought and expressions. Each piece is a recreation and testimony to that intense, unpredictable and unfathomable experience. Every life experience, every environment that I have experienced has an influence in my work, which is why I think it is deeply human, aiming towards something fantastic, realistic and spiritual at the same time.



Creating each tapestry can take Laura from a few months to much longer, depending on its size and complexity. Every inch is an artwork unto itself, showing multiple colors, textures and techniques. "I dream of creating volumetric and sculptural works . . . My favourite medium would be the fibre of alpaca and cotton. I enjoy any fibre that feels smooth and that has resistance to tension," Laura says.



Why is it so important for you to work in fiber art and when did it become clear you needed to pursue this as your life's work?

It is the awareness of the rich and millenary heritage and tradition, that gives me the challenge to work in textile art, of contributing with the continuity of this expression. Its unlimited and renewable potential, gives creativity a very special and generous space. I permanently find new challenges in weaving and coloration that give me the opportunity to imagine, draw, weave and create messages, finding new weaving structures and colors that move me, that give me the opportunity to find my own inner voice, my own humanist language and vision.

Each of Laura's tapestries begins as a drawing, which he then paints as he conceptualizes the finished tapestry. The paintings are sent to his Color Laboratory where specialists blend the yarn for Laura's use. A line drawing is then transferred to the warp to guide Laura as he weaves. Laura says, "The process requires me to be a proficient drawer, designer and colourist, as well as a painter."

“The thousand-year old Peruvian textile is an inexhaustible source and has deep connotation. Its symbolism, abstraction, and stylization are moving and have contemporary relevance and I find it to be both fantastic and inspiring.”

Why does weaving tapestries require patience?

To elaborate a tapestry in a manual loom with discontinuous and multitextural weft, which also includes the making of defined contours and curves, using a range of degradations and techniques at the same time, requires a vocation for which patience is an imperative in the preparation of this unique work. This complex process requires clearly fixing each aspect of the piece, before starting to materialize the project. It is an irreversible and intimate battle.

How does solving difficult, technical details in weaving add to your body of work?

In a slow, complex, irreversible process of technique and aesthetic, it is necessary to define, decide and choose very carefully each of the stages, elements, materials and technical resources that will intervene in the materialization of the tapestry project, even more so when we want to obtain the work with high quality of execution.

What mindset do you have going into the studio?

Positive, optimistic and critical. With intense focus and determination to obtain new ranges of colors, to sharpen the message in the compositions; to search for ways to incorporate new resources, artifices and techniques; and continue with my endless encounter with experimentation, research and achievement of renewed visions.

What about scale?

From the first years of my work (beginning in the 1980s), the designs were complex, but with the passing of the years they became even more intricate and detailed; the works became pictorial in color, adding at the same time more and more textured techniques, which determine the scale of my works. I enjoy small and medium size formats, but it is my intimate preference to develop large-scale works that I call “murals.” I feel pleasure and fulfillment with any format, as long as see that I was able to take care of each stage of creation. I determine the scale of each piece when I am drawing, even developing the same piece in different scales.

Why must you also be an expert draftsman, designer, colorist and painter to be a proficient tapestry weaver and maker?

In my style of defined forms, with iconic characters and symbolic landscapes, you need to be an expert





Above: The maestro at work, clearly enjoying himself. "I believe that art is a valuable source of sensitivity for mankind. It has made my dreams look small, in comparison to what I have lived through this beautiful passion that are textiles." **Opposite:** Artist's statement: Technical detail of a tapestry where the wrapping technique is applied to the base of the piece, with knots located at the center.

craftsman, as well as experimenting and venturing into new combinations of color with a ritualistic, spiritual and innovative pleasure. It is necessary to be aware of the design and color techniques, and fundamentally aware of the fabric. In order to be prolific in the creation of tapestries in my style it is necessary to establish a creation system and cover the creative activity with a lot of energy, dedication, discipline and organization above all.

What do the Paracas textiles and other ancient works mean to your work?

A heritage, a root and an expression of time. An inexhaustible source of wonder, inspiration and learning. The works of ancient cultures are voices that bring to the

eyes of this time their worldview and their cosmology; lessons that should serve those who intend to continue with that expression, history and tradition.

You lecture in Art and Contemporary Andean textile design as well as run seminars, workshops, conferences, consultations, and offer other artists technical assistance when asked. Why is teaching important to your art?

From my first years of receiving education, I was always interested in teaching and it seemed natural to me to share knowledge; specially because of the interest that I had in reading and researching. As time went



"Abundant Fruit of the Sea." Artist's statement: Marine landscape of fantastic and mythological realism. Shows abundance of flora, fauna, marine life and vitality everywhere. Movement, force, cyclical continuity represent the fruits of nature. Materials: Alpaca, cotton and mixed fibers.

by, I began to study education at the university, although I did not finish due to my involvement with textile art. I also learned that to share (in this case information and knowledge) is a highly effective way to develop as a person. I like teaching, in part because it helps me to learn, systematize, investigate and renew myself. I find it very important for my work, I allow myself to do it in different formats and hope to continue doing so.



"Eternal Ritual of Wiracocha to the Andes." Artist's statement: Celebration of the millenarian thought and worldview of the Andes. Presence of the energy and spirit of the omnipotent and transforming "God of Life" (Wiracocha) in a cosmic and ritualistic landscape. Materials: Alpaca, cotton and mixed fibers.

What are your goals, having already achieved so much in the art world?

When one is committed to his work, with vocation and the aspiration to achieve beauty and passion, there are many goals and challenges that appear. I would love to "consolidate" my own language in this art; I would enjoy if an important part of my projects of "murals" become tapestries. I would also like to



Detail of "Birds on a Festive Afternoon." Artist's statement: Cosmic mythological landscape with predominance of the sun and the dynamic flight of birds flying through men. Metaphor of freedom, ambition and the celebration of vitality. Materials: Alpaca, cotton and mixed fibers.

share my work with a wider audience, especially in books about tapestries and weaving techniques. I dream of creating volumetric and sculptural works.

What does it mean to you to be recognized with the "National Living Human Treasure" award in Peru?

A recognition, distinction, prize or appreciation is something beautiful and enormously satisfying, stimulating and motivating. I have never worked for acceptance or recognition; I have done it from my pure, noble and humble energy of my existence. Receiving this recognition was something I did not expect, nor perhaps deserve; however, I believe in myself, an indescribable scenario for my being; and every single day I thank and give my best to honor this recognition.

I believe that art is a valuable source of sensitivity for mankind. It has made my dreams look small, in comparison to what I have lived through this beautiful passion that are textiles. **AC**

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Black Beauty

Photos courtesy Alonso Burgos / Grupo Inca

This article originally appeared in *Twist* magazine, published by www.wtin.com

BY ALONSO BURGOS

Through innovative genetics and a special buying programme, the Inca Group is aiming to reverse a decline in the production of Peru's black alpaca fibre. *Twist* takes a look behind the story.



The alpaca is the world's only animal that produces fibres in a wide variety of colours, ranging from white to black and including many tones of browns and greys. However, in Peru, home to the world's largest alpaca population, the production of these colours, apart from white, has been decreasing for the last 60 years.

In the mid-1950s, when only the raw alpaca fibre was exported from Peru, the breakdown of colours in the country's alpaca clip was around 24% of white and light fawn and 76% of the other colours.

At that time there was strong international demand for white alpaca fibre, which raised the price considerably in the highlands of the Andes. White alpaca fibre can be dyed to different colours and this characteristic made it more attractive for textile manufacturers.

Today, the proportion of Peru's alpaca clip is around 85% white and light fawn fibre and only 15% of other colours. Out of Peru's total alpaca production, which amounts to approximately 8.5 million kg per year, only about 0.07% is of black colour, and an even smaller percentage is of pure black colour.

When taking into account the fact that alpaca fibre is classified into seven different qualities according to its micronage and that, out of this classification only about 15% in the case of black colour



Black alpacas comprise just 0.07% of the total population of Peruvian alpacas. This group of 'true black' alpacas on the altiplano is even rarer.



Alan Cruz (far left); the Pacamarca farm manager; Alonso Burgos (second from left), the Pacamarca research manager; François Patthey (fourth from left), president of the Inca Group with unnamed alpaca breeders during a special event at Pacamarca, the Inca Group's experimental genetic improvement alpaca farm in Peru.

is classified under the baby quality (22 microns), the difficulty to obtain products made out of this scarce natural fibre becomes clear.

Black alpacas are the result of a complicated genetic arrangement that has not yet been completely understood by geneticists, even by specialists in the field. What is true is that it is harder to obtain a black alpaca than a white or an intermediate colour one. Genetic selection in order to obtain a black alpaca requires much more effort than textile characteristics such as fineness or medullation.

Confronted with this situation, the Inca Group of companies has initiated a programme to try to rescue the production of black alpacas in particular and of pure alpaca colours in general. The programme is being carried out through the Inca Group's experimental genetic improvement alpaca farm, called Pacamarca, located 4,000 metres above sea level in the heart of Peru's main alpaca breeding areas.

The project, named 'Black Alpaka', is being led by Alonso Burgos, the Pacamarca research manager, and Francois Patthey, president of the Inca Group.

Carefully separated animals approach one another at Inca Group's Pacamarca farm in Peru. Even one black fiber could ruin a light lot, so good fences make good neighbors.






Black alpacas are the result of a complicated genetic arrangement that has not yet been completely understood by geneticists, even by specialists in the field.

The plan includes the creation of a new experimental pure black alpaca farm whose animals are to be collected from diverse areas of the country.

The foundation stock for the new farm will be composed of the 180 selected animals that are being bred at the existing Pacamarca experimental alpaca farm under a sophisticated system of genetic selection, with the academic advice of the Complutense University of Madrid.

The programme, the only one of its kind in the country, is based on the management of a very extensive and complete database of this experimental farm, initiated some 20 years ago. At present it is the largest and most complete alpaca database in the world.

Furthermore, the alpaca fibre processor and yarn spinner Inca Tops, part of the Inca Group and owner of the experimental farm, has initiated a special buying programme for pure colours, through which it offers to the local breeders a similar price paid for white alpaca fibre, which is usually twice as expensive as that of colour. These actions are accompanied by incentive programmes for the breeders, such as special awards in the alpaca contests. These will soon be followed by fibre contests with attractive prizes.

Hopefully, the result of these efforts in the production of colour alpacas in Peru, especially that of black colour, will be revitalised. 

Innovations

Alpaca Watch

RedJuan Shop Etsy

It's always time to talk alpacas and this watch is a great conversation starter! The face of this timepiece features a cool, retro engraving of an alpaca with a parchment-like background. With a stainless steel case quartz face and a quality movement, you'll get many opportunities to explain the difference between alpacas and llamas as the years pass and your watch just keeps on ticking. Choose a black or brown synthetic leather strap. Battery included. Visit www.etsy.com/shop/RedJuanShop.



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Macca the Alpaca

By Matt Cosgrove

This rhyming romp starts as a carefree frolic with lighthearted cria Macca as he pals around with sloths, smells the flowers and prunks. But things get scary when bully Llama Harmer comes on the scene and tries to dominate Macca with his strong-arm tactics. Macca must use his compassion to outwit square-jawed and grumpy Harmer. Happily, this David and Goliath style story ends with the two joining forces for good, emphasizing self-confidence, bravery, forgiveness and positivity along the way. Read this cute story aloud to your favorite crias as you look at the funny pictures together. Buy it at www.mattcosgrovebooks.com.



Do you have a product you'd like highlighted? Let us know. We are always on the lookout for innovative, high quality alpaca products to feature on the pages of *Alpaca Culture*. E-mail info@alpacaculture.com.

Spotlight

Quipu

A quipu is fundamentally a numerical recording device or computation method unique to Andean South America from about 1100 to 1532 A.D. Physically, they are made of camelid fiber strings of various lengths tied with knots attached to and radiating from a central cord that can have several layers. Infused with more meaning and allegory than scientists fully understand today, we do know that quipus recorded the statistics of the vital camelid herds of pre-Columbian people. Number and color of animals, fineness of fiber, quality of offspring, mothering ability and other important aspects of the herd were tracked with quipus. In use in a culture without a written language, their importance was vital for keeping track of record amount of animals, materials, goods and human resources throughout the empire. Length, color, material and knots all lent different meaning. Also called "talking knots," the word "quipu" means knot in the Quechua language.

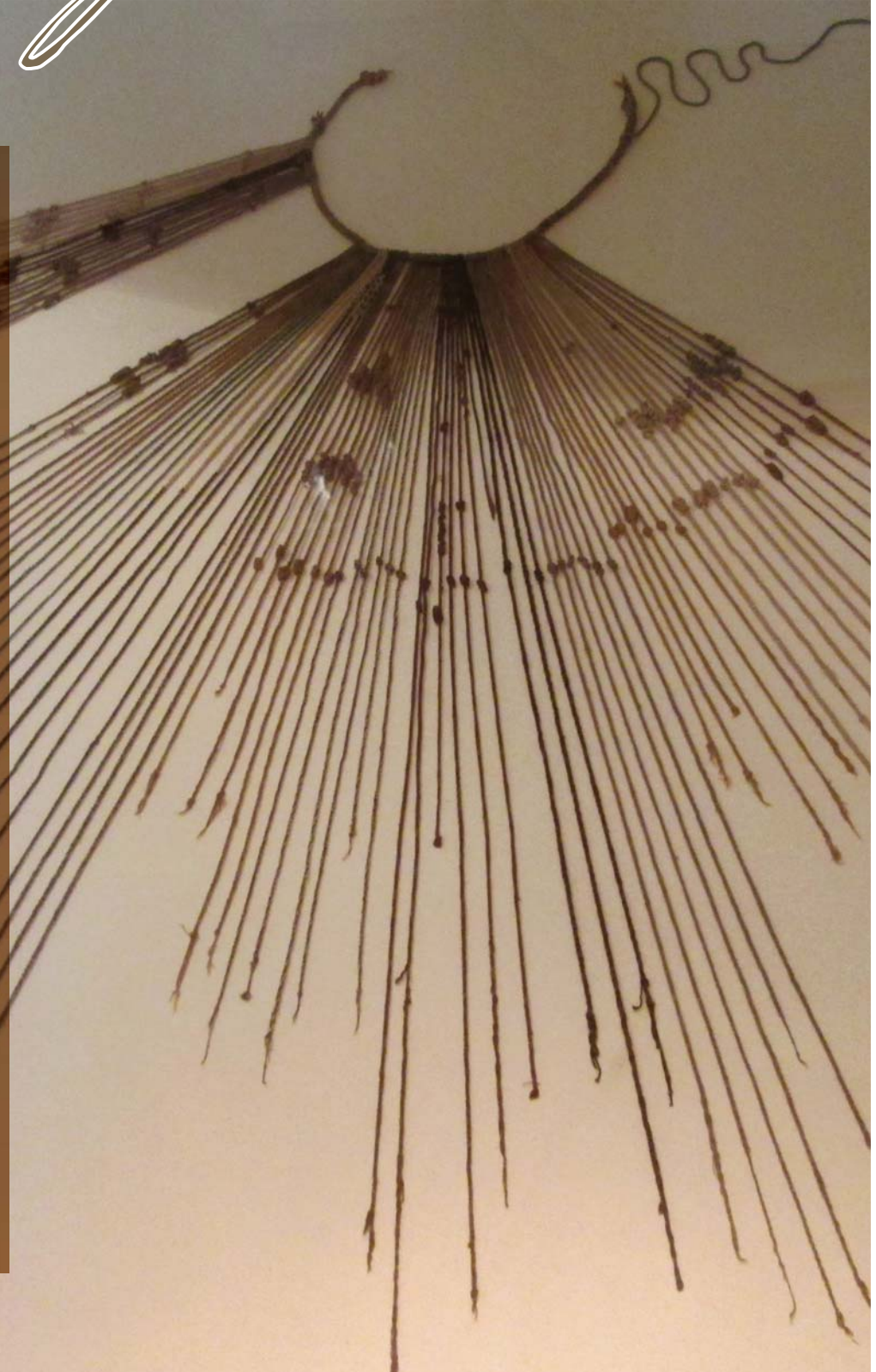


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