Peruvian Textiles: A Recent Purchase

by JOHN GOLDSMITH PHILLIPS

Curator of Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Art

The Annual Report of the Board of Trustees for the year 1882 noted that “during the year we have been enabled by a gift of money from one of the Trustees, to acquire a small but remarkably valuable collection of American Antiquities, which are added to those formerly in our possession.” The donor of money was Henry G. Marquand, who in 1889 was to become the Museum’s second president; and the objects were those in the Gibbs Collection, which contained among other items a group of fine Peruvian textiles. These fabrics were the first examples of pre-Columbian weaving to enter the Metropolitan’s collections.

It is interesting to continue to read what the Trustees had to say at that early date in the Museum’s history—only twelve years after its founding—about the place of American art of the pre-Columbian periods in the Museum’s collections. “The antiquities of our own continent should form a prominent feature in an American Museum, and we are charged with a special duty to make here a Museum of old American art for the study of American scholars as well as scholars from abroad. . . . In gold and other metals, in stone, in textile fabrics and in pottery, are found works which sufficiently indicate the possession by ancient Americans of many useful arts, and a cultivation of the love of beauty, measured by an independent standard which, however distinct from ours, nevertheless proves the presence of intellectual and art loving races of men. . . . We ask attention to this subject as one in which members can by personal effort, assist the Trustees in establishing a department of old American art.”

Although the course of the development of the Museum did not lead to such an establishment, our collection of Peruvian textiles, begun at that time, has nevertheless grown through the years by gift and by purchase. One of the most instrumental in that growth was George D. Pratt, a Trustee from 1923 to 1935, who made a number of important gifts which raised our collection to a point of high eminence in this country.

This past year the Museum has been able to acquire by purchase through the Fletcher Fund a group of particularly notable examples that further add to the wealth of our holdings. There are ten pieces in all, and each is distinguished by the brilliance of its colors and the effectiveness of its design. Technically they are marvels of intricate weaving.

Four are from the southern coast of Peru and three are in the Nazca style, the other being in the related Paracas style. These feature various

ON THE COVER: Wool panel in interlocked cloth weave showing stylized anthropomorphic figures in bright blue, yellow, and red on black. Peruvian, Nazca (Coastal) style, v-vii century A.D.

FRONTISPICE: Front of a shirt, decorated in featherwork on canvas with four anthropomorphic figures in vivid shades of orange, blue, green, yellow, and black. Peruvian, South Coast, ix-xiv century A.D.

All the textiles described in this article were purchased through the Fletcher Fund, 1959.

Contents

Peruvian Textiles: A Recent Purchase
By John Goldsmith Phillips 101

The Annunciation from a Book of Hours
for Charles of France
By Margaret B. Freeman 105

The Danish Tradition in Design 119

December 1960

101

105

119
Fig. 1. Border of a brocaded cotton garment with a geometric repeat pattern in black, brown, and beige, on an undyed cotton background. Peruvian, Central Coast, X–XIII century A.D.

Fig. 2. Wool panel in interlocked cloth weave with a geometric repeat design in bright blue, yellow, and red on black. Peruvian, Nazca (Coastal) style, V–VII century A.D.

weaving, embroidery, knitting, and interlocked darning techniques, and are quite as fascinating as examples of virtuoso work with needle and loom as they are by merit of their designs, vivid and arresting as these are. They are early works, believed to date from about the third century B.C. through the seventh century A.D. (See Cover, Figures 2 and 4.)

From the central coast of Peru comes a matching set of mantle, skirt, and girdle (Figure 1): garments ornamented with an attractively conventionalized design brocaded on a fine cotton gauze. These pieces are of more recent date than the ones in the Nazca style—they may be as late as the tenth to the thirteenth century A.D. Two

Fig. 3. Detail of a painted cotton cloth with animal, bird, and geometric designs in orange, two shades of brown, tan, and white. Peruvian, Central Coast, VIII–IX century A.D.

Fig. 4. Detail of a panel embroidered in wool on cotton with conventionalized figures in red, tan, green, black, and white on a black ground. Peruvian, Paracas (Coastal) style, III–I century B.C.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art BULLETIN
VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 4, DECEMBER 1960

Published monthly from October to June and quarterly from July to September. Copyright 1960 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street, New York 28, N. Y. Re-entered as second-class matter November 17, 1943, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of August 24, 1912. Subscriptions $5.00 a year. Single copies fifty cents. Sent free to Museum Members. Four weeks' notice required for change of address. Editor: Marshall B. Davidson; Associate Editor: Rosine Raoul; Designer: Peter Oldenburg.
other rare specimens are believed to have been found in the central coast region: a panel of wool brocade with a single anthropomorphic figure of weird appearance, supplemented by numerous bird motifs (Figure 5), and a panel of painted cotton with puma and bird decorations arranged in a stepped diagonal pattern (Figure 3). These two pieces seem slightly earlier in date than the matching set of apparel.

But the outstanding piece in this group of new acquisitions is a shirt whose design is completely carried out in featherwork (Frontispiece). On a bright green feathery background are four winged human figures with skull-like heads in shades of orange, blue, black, and yellow. The colors are those of the feathers of tropical birds brought from eastern Peru, and the effect is spectacular. This rare piece is reputed to be the finest example of such work to have entered a museum in our country. It comes from the south coast, and is presumed to date from the ninth to the fourteenth century A.D.

In our day, when highly conventionalized forms have become familiar through the agency of contemporary painting and sculpture, these textiles seem far less outre than they once did. We need not be put off from our enjoyment of them by their strangeness; with disabused eyes we can appreciate them for what they are: superlative creations of those remarkably gifted peoples whose cultures flourished in the New World long before the time of the Conquest.

The consolidation of textile activities marked during the past year by the integration of the Costume Institute into the Museum's organization should prove catalytic on the future growth of these combined collections. The purchase of the Peruvian textiles described above, like that of the Russian ecclesiastical vestments recorded in the November Bulletin and of the famous Lewknor tapestry from Elizabethan England, soon to be displayed, may be taken as auguries of an activity that will raise our textile collections to even higher levels of excellence.

Fig. 5. Brocade, wool and cotton, with standing conventionalized figure of a man, and bird decorations. Brown, pink, and yellow on a beige ground. Peruvian, Central Coast, IX-XI century A.D.