



# CULTURAL HEIGHTS

For the first time, thanks to a recently published book,  
the Bradley R. Cross Collection of textiles from the  
Bolivian Andes has become accessible to a wide audience.  
Distinguished fibre artist **Gerhardt Knodel** interviews  
the pioneering collector to discover more





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1 Aymara ikat *poncho*, possibly Lake Titicaca, Department of La Paz, Bolivia, circa 1850 or before. Camelid fibre, 1.42 x 1.75 m (4' 8" x 5' 9"). All textiles Bradley R. Cross Collection

2 Aymara *ponchito* (and detail previous spread), Sica Sica, Department of La Paz, Bolivia, ca. 1850. Camelid fibre, 1.17 x 1.09 m (3' 10" x 3' 7")

When Bradley Cross arrived in Bolivia as a young man in 1975, he knew next to nothing about textiles. However, a spark of interest had been ignited in Colombia: 'I was a Peace Corps volunteer to Native American Guambiano Indians,' he says. 'Their clothing was specific to their own village. After the Peace Corps, I went through Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and I saw more and more of these villages that had custom costumes for their particular village. And that was really fascinating to me. It was like a time warp. It sort of made me think I was back in the 1850s in North America.'

Four decades on, Cross is recognised as a pioneer collector in his field, the woven textiles of the Bolivian uplands, where Aymara and Quechua people form most of the indigenous

I myself experienced the magnetism of these artefacts when I first met Bradley Cross in 2006. He had just pulled down from the attic in his home eight or ten black plastic bags filled with Aymara textiles that had not seen the light of day for decades. As the contents of each bag were revealed, I was dazzled by a treasure trove of fantastic weavings that had been quietly asleep for thirty years, and were now being reawakened, breathing fresh air in a new environment. I realised that the circumstances of his life had kept him from paying attention to the collection for many years.

After his Peace Corps duties ended, the ostensible reason for Cross's return to South America had little connection to textile collecting. He was studying for a Masters degree (and simultaneously pursuing a career) in conservation and wildlife management.

*Sometimes just one little thread will make the difference as to how the imagery pops off the textile*

population. A recent book by Robert Macgregor Duff concentrates on the Bradley R. Cross collection, utilising high-density scanning to bring out the extraordinary subtlety of the weave itself, which contributes vastly to the mesmerising effect.

'I was fascinated by the quality,' says Cross. 'And as I studied the pieces more and more, I began to find out why. Sometimes the part that really piques your interest is in just one warp. They might combine fibres of different colours together to create an abrash effect and spin them either left or right to create different reflections as sunlight plays on the threads. And that endless detail that's built into every one of these textiles is what intrigued me. I could be looking at a piece every day for two weeks and each time I'd see something that I hadn't seen before, because there's so much depth.'

But already the allure of the Andean weavings was distracting him. 'When I got to La Paz, I kind of got derailed by looking at all these weavings and buying them. So every day I would go down to the market and go through the stores, talk to the Indians on the street. And every day was a fresh exploration because the new stuff came in from the field.'

For Cross, the spur was acquisition rather than an eye for profit. 'I was in competition with other dealers. There was a pack of twelve of us in La Paz in that time period. I knew most of them: one, my friend Robert Duff, I met in 1976, and is the author of this book. At the time the native people were trying to become westernised very rapidly. They wanted to get into jeans, they didn't want to be wearing weavings. So there was a flood of this material. And I was the only one there that was buying for myself. The other people were buying because there was money in



3 Aymara *iscayo*, Calamarca, Department of La Paz, Bolivia, circa 1850 or before. Camelid fibre, 1.42 x 1.07 m (4' 8" x 3' 6")



Aymara *Iscayo*

This *iscayo*, or woman's ceremonial mantle, woven in two pieces, with characteristic broad striping in a distinctive rectangular format, was woven in the vicinity of the ancient village of Calamarca. This style of cloth was pan-Aymara in use, with only subtle variations between tribal groups. It was worn by the *tallamama* (the wife of a community leader) at

festivals and served as a status designator textile for that office. Such garments, kept in near mint condition, might be stored for many centuries. Duality is an important metaphysical principle for the peoples of the Andean altiplano. The decorative centre join of the textile, known as the *chaupi*, is the interface between the two halves of such a duality.

4 A Jalq'a culture couple from the mountains west of Sucre, Bolivia, in festival display carrying heirloom textiles, 1975

5 Quechua *aksu* (half), Potolo, Department of Chuquisaca, Bolivia, circa 1900 or before. Wool, 0.64 x 0.79 m (2' 1" x 2' 7")



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it. They knew they could take them up to San Francisco or New York and turn some money.' So, if he was not looking to start a dealership, why did Cross buy so much? 'Because they talked to me in an artistic way,' he says with certainty. 'And I hadn't had any real artistic training in college. I was a natural resource kind of guy. I put visiting national parks on the back burner, and kept going back and looking at more and more weavings. They weren't souvenirs. These were, to my way of thinking, real pieces of art that I could afford. And they were affordable enough that I found that I'd like to get another one. And I'd think, this one's different, I haven't seen that one



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before. That's beautiful. So I just kind of collected that way. And eventually I ended up going out into the field, going into villages, and going to smaller towns that had different markets. So I got out of La Paz, which is what all the other dealers were doing.' 'In many villages I would go into, maybe just one child spoke Spanish. All the rest of the people spoke Quechua or Aymara. So you couldn't really have a conversation except through this eight-year-old child. That's how remote these places were. And the people were all wearing their costumes.' Most of Cross's collecting at source took place when he was between twenty-five and

thirty-five years old. After that the acquisition of pieces continued, though he was buying from dealers as other commitments restricted the opportunity for field trips. As it turned out, neither wildlife conservation nor textile trading was destined to be Bradley Cross's main source of regular income. Although he had begun building up a consultancy business working on sustainability in developing countries, in 1981 the United States elected a new hard-line president who wasted no time in cancelling all government-sponsored conservation projects. *Plus ça change.* However, a decade before Reagan's presidency, Bradley's brother, Jeff, had started up a bell-



making business on a ranch in Arizona. When tragedy struck and Jeff Cross was murdered, Bradley took over the bell foundry, now relocated to Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Still flourishing under Bradley Cross's directorship, Harmony Hollow Bell Works retains some of the hippy-era ethos that Jeff imbued it with: '...a sound that helps you get back in touch with Mother Nature's pulse' reads a product description on its website. When it comes to his textile collection, Bradley talks expansively about the 'magic' in these weavings, but that does not mean he is not eager to discover the science that makes the captivating beauty possible. He has spent hours studying them with a magnifying glass.

'They would use a red weft, and sometimes a blue weft that you wouldn't really see except when the textile moved just a little bit,' he says. 'And then the bright sun would reflect off it and you'd see that glint of a red tint. And that was

*The endless detail that's built into every one of these textiles is what intrigued me*

fascinating to me. Then they make *chimi*—a technique of spinning, where you take different colours and put them together into one yarn. And so you get a multitude of colours woven together and it creates kind of a miniature rainbow effect. And they put them together in such a way that they would fade from one shade to another across the textile. And if you can hold it up, it sort of looks like a landscape, in an impressionist way.

'I was fascinated with the S and Z spinning method, where they'd spin in one direction, spin in another, warp them up so you could clearly see lines that were exactly the same colour—but the only thing that changed to create these lines was the reflection of the light. It's called *lloque*.'

Cross is very pleased that the high-density scans in the new book will allow readers to discern these intricacies of manufacture. But I am keen to ask him how much importance he attaches to the bigger picture—the visual language of the imagery, and the cultural significance of the textiles.



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He begins his answer tentatively. 'The imagery... we don't really know that much about it... There hasn't been that much research as to what exactly each symbol means. We have general ideas about the symbolism, but what we do know is that certain villages have this cast of image characters that would always be in their village's textiles. Within that range, the artist that made the textile had variations of their own. So you could tell it was from a particular village, based on the shapes and the patterns. But you could also tell the difference between the way they would finish them, and then

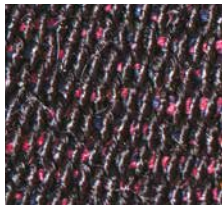
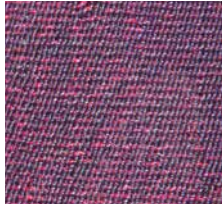
what we call the "termination". Or the colour combinations, slightly more brilliant, the width of the banding, a minute variant. Each woman had an individual take on it, even though they had to fit within that village's prescribed patterns.'

I ask if there is a difference between the way the maker will have seen the work and the way he sees it now. 'I'm sure there is,' he affirms, 'because the maker knew what the symbols stood for. And I, as a westerner not growing up in that culture, don't get that extra boost that comes from knowing what this symbol means, or maybe this view of the world.'

6 Aymara *llacota*, possibly Department of Oruro, Bolivia, circa 1750 or before. Camelid fibre, 1.04 x 1.30 m (3' 5" x 4' 3")

7 Aymara *mantilla*, possibly Ingave, Pacajes Province, Department of La Paz, Bolivia, circa 1800. Camelid fibre, 0.70 x 1.09 m (1' 3½" x 3' 7")

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8 Aymara camelid fibre and silk weaves (details), Peru, Department of Puno, circa 1850 or before. Top: *luto ahuayo*, Juli, with red silk wefts; middle: *luto ahuayo*, Juli, with alternate sky-blue warps; bottom: *phullu*, with *chimi* blue and red wefts

I raise the concept of time—whether that has a significant influence on his collecting or his response to the textiles. 'Well, there's two parts of that time question,' he says. 'One has to do with, how much time did it actually take to make them? And that was deeply impressive to me, because each one of these textiles takes hundreds of hours, if not a thousand hours. And people have been doing this for thousands of years, but now they're getting out of it. They're going into western culture and getting out of something they've been doing for so long that took so much labour. And the other side of time is, how old are these pieces? How long have they

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lasted, and in what kind of condition are they? You know, I've got pieces that are four or five hundred years old that have never been buried. Always been out and exposed to culture, society, all kinds of festivals, and they still look like they could have been made two years ago. The colour hasn't faded. They've been maintained with great integrity. People really honoured these. Passed down from the ancestors.'

One of the motivations when Cross began collecting was the thought that he was rescuing the textiles from being cut up to make patches on jackets or souvenir handbags and spectacle cases for tourists. On the other

hand, by adding them to his collection, he was necessarily separating them from the civilisation that had once nurtured them.

'That's a good point,' he acknowledges. 'They are orphans divorced from their culture. But they were disappearing, and they were not going to be maintained. Their culture was being shattered by the western influence. So I did what I thought was a good thing to do. I brought them to America and I've safeguarded them. I haven't lost anything to moths. They're in very good shape—same shape as when I got them, but they've been cleaned. And I think because I can see them with western eyes, I get





9 Aymara *ccahua*, Department of Potosi, Bolivia, circa 1700 or before. Camelid fibre, 0.79 x 0.66 m (2' 7" x 2' 2"). This simple, single loom width, man's ceremonial tunic was woven by one of the tribes in the Yura or Quijaro regions, possibly as early as the time of the last Inca incursions into these territories in the early 1500s. It combines a classic local costume that has been finished with the embroidered binding of an Incan official. Detroit Institute of Art, Bradley R. Cross Collection, 1978-2009



10 Aymara *urcu*, Department of La Paz, Bolivia, circa 1800 or before. Camelid fibre, 0.56 x 1.83 m (1' 10" x 6' 0")



11 Aymara *ponchito*, Bolivar, Department of Potosi, Bolivia, circa 1800 or before. 0.94 x 1.07 m (3' 1" x 3' 6")

something out of them from our culture that is not the same thing that would happen in Bolivia. They had treasured customs that the textiles played key roles in. In my case, it's art, it's the aesthetics.'

The resonance these textiles have with western art is an obvious point to address as we sit in conversation in my studio in Pontiac, Michigan. According to Cross, 'A lot of attention has been paid to people who say that some of these Aymara pieces are like Mark Rothko's art, and the idea that this gives them great value. But in my way of thinking, they're a lot more interesting than a Rothko painting, because

they're built one warp at a time. And sometimes just one little thread will make the difference as to how the imagery pops off the textile. Where I get my "value" from is just the integrity of the piece—does it have it or doesn't it?'

I quickly make clear my own view that the way Rothko applied the paint is an important part of the experience his paintings offer. They are just different media, and they're handled differently, a viewpoint Bradley Cross is happy to agree with after consideration. I also suggest that many who justify their collecting of historic materials from other cultures by claiming parallels to

contemporary art are not actually that interested in the art of our own times.

What I find more interesting is the possibility that our own contemporary art might illuminate our interpretation of objects from the past. 'Well, that's very true,' says Cross. 'What I do at my house, with my wife Nancy, is to lay antique pieces right next to contemporary art, contemporary craft. We don't segregate. I've gone to probably five hundred, and participated in five hundred art and craft shows. So my eye and my cultural understanding of what I see is pretty well refined. I can walk through a craft show and

pick out the interesting things to me, at a pretty good clip. Other people that haven't developed their eye like that, everything is brand new and they have to study it in a lot more detail.'

At the same time, Cross emphasises the simple, direct appeal of these weavings. 'I think that people without any background in these textiles can easily see the beauty of them. The guy who did the scanning for the book, when he saw the roll of weavings there that we were going to scan, he immediately made a beeline for them and said "Where did this come from?" He's a computer nerd with

no art training, but he was so attracted to this—it drew him right across the room.'

Since our first meeting in 2006, the pieces have been given limited exposure, partly through a textile discussion group that Cross hosts. 'I'm not on a campaign to share my collection with everybody that I come across,' he says. 'But when the time comes, when another museum show comes up, where Aymara could be on display, or even the Quechua ones too, I think it would be a blockbuster show. They're timeless, and people just haven't been exposed to them that much.'

Meanwhile we have this book, in which the vivid and detailed scans of the weavings are complemented by Cross's own photographs of his days of collecting in the field. 'Because then people can see not only the art of the textile, they can also see the context,' he says. 'And they can see how people were really using these, and get a sense of what it was like to be in Bolivia in 1975, going into these villages.'

Robert Magregor Duff, Master Weavers of the Altiplano: the Ancestral Artistry of Highland Women. [Textiles & Photographs from the Bradley R. Cross Collection.] La Paz Publications, 2015.