An artist often makes a choice between object making and image depiction as a structure for expression. The appeal of the pre-Columbian embroideries from the Paracas peninsula of southern Peru lies in the marriage of these two artistic approaches. The artists were concerned not only with imagery, but also with the potentials of embroidery as a surface treatment and with the physical qualities of fabric as an artistic medium. By looking at these three aspects of Paracas embroideries I intend to show how medium and imagery were unified in the symbolic meaning of the whole.

Between the approximate dates of 450 and 150 B.C. the culture which buried its dead at the Necropolis site on the Paracas peninsula, (Figure 1), developed a sophisticated embroidery style, examples of which have been preserved in their burials. Various textiles were wrapped layer upon layer around the dead forming large conical mummy bundles. Some of the textiles are recognizable garment shapes, but the majority are non-specific rectangular pieces which have been roughly categorized as mantles. These vary in size from six to nine feet in length and from three to five feet in width, (Sawyer 1975: 82). Figural depictions on ceramics or textiles do not indicate that the Paracas peoples wore mantles during their lives, (Sawyer 1979: 129). Many of the pieces are too large or small to have been functional, and they show no signs of wear. Although some of the textiles may have had limited use before interment, scholars feel that the majority of the textiles were intended as shrouds or funerary offerings, (Carrión Cachot 1949: 23, Pomar 1971: 111, Dwyer

ARS TEXTRINA 9 (1988), pp. 191-210
The shrouds (or mantles) as well as other textiles were vehicles for the imagery carried on their surfaces.

Imagery and Style Groupings

Embroidered imagery on the textiles has been categorized in three style groups: linear, broadline, and block. Linear designs are geometric, being composed of series of straight parallel lines, as seen in Plates 1–3. Except for the use of diagonals these lines for the most part follow the warp and weft of the ground fabric. Both colors used and subject matter are limited. The broadline style, exemplified by the fragment in Plate 4, is also largely composed of straight lines though some curves are used. Instead of using multiple lines to construct figures as in the linear style, the broadline uses single broad lines, (Paul 1982: 263). Examples of the block style are shown in Plates 5–7. In this style figures are outlined and then filled with solid blocks of color. Shapes are not dependent on the fabric structure, and a wider range of colors and subjects are used. While the broadline style was rare and seems to be related to a particular group or family, (Paul 1982: 277), linear and block style embroideries were numerous and often found together in mummy bundles.

In both linear and block styles the design accentuates interior details, and motifs are composites in which the parts seem more important than the whole. Figure definition in the linear pieces is dependent on the lines since the filling color within figures is the same as the background. The contrast of color in the lines, combined with the distortion and abstraction of the figure, make the geometric patterns of individual shapes read more easily than whole motifs. Different features come into focus in each unit according to the color combinations used in that unit. Whereas the linear style tries to describe the illusive nature of non-perceptual knowledge by camouflaging the whole, the block style tries to portray things as physical realities whether they are part of the perceptual world or not. The ground figure and details of the figure are separated with contrasting colors. Details are given identifiable or conventionalized traits, and the contours of subjects are adjusted to facilitate the description of details. Birds are shown with head and feet in profile and wings spread or delineated. Fish and felines are made in profile as shown in the drawn mantle in Figure 2. Humans are depicted frontally

192
but with legs turned, often showing bent knees. Feet are distorted so that the heel as well as all the toes show, as in the figures in Plates 5–6. The principal figure becomes a vehicle for carrying details. For example, we are given no information about the figure in the motif of Plate 7 other than through the elements of his costume and mask. Chronologically the direction of the style seems to imply that the artists were continually striving to improve definition and naturalism, whether real or imagined (Dwyer 1979: 115), as well as to increase the amount of readable detail in each motif, (Dwyer 1979: 124), as illustrated in the contrast of Plate 6 with Plate 7.

In the linear embroideries the “Oculate Being” was one of the main motifs. The “Oculate Being” is a name given to a figure-type that has large concentrically ringed, polygonal eyes, an upturned mouth, and long appendages that wrap around the figure. There was generally one or more textiles in each bundle depicting the Oculate Being, (Dwyer 1975: 152). Oculate Being heads are used in the border of the mantle in Plate 1. This motif changed little over time while innovations occurred in other motifs. Such design conservatism was perhaps due to the sacredness of the symbol, (Dwyer 1975: 153). The Oculate Being took on traits of a number of mythical beings such as the serpent, bird, or feline, which has been used as a motif in the mantle of Plates 2–3. These traits, in many cases, were themes interrelated to other textiles within a bundle and were perhaps clan or kinship identifications, (Dwyer 1975: 158, Paul 1986: 88). If, during his lifetime, a person was in some way associated with a particular symbol or totem, then the textiles surrounding him in death would contain depictions of that symbol in both linear and block style. All of the totemic animals associated with the Oculate Being are carnivorous, and many are shown with a trophy head close to the mouth or being eaten (Dwyer 1975: 154). These people may have seen death and the taking of life as a necessity for maintaining life. Perhaps they saw their own deaths as that which fed the Oculate Being.

Some of the details, such as trophy heads, fan shaped tumi knives, and headed appendages, are found in both styles. The depiction of trophy heads is particularly important not only in the linear style Oculate Being, but also in subjects of the block style. In the lower right corner of Plate 3 a trophy head can be seen attached to the paw of the Oculate Being. Trophy heads are also held by the figures in Plates 5–7. Block style
figures are either mythical or from the natural world. Human figures often wear costumes (note the bird costumes in Plates 5-6). In many cases the costumes are related to the mythical being depicted on other fabrics of the same bundle. It is possible these are depictions of humans acting out the role of the Oculate Being, (Dwyer 1979: 119), or that they are collecting trophy heads for the Oculate Being. Scholars have felt that related themes within a bundle give the impression of representing incarnation or of transformation from the human state to the supernatural (Dwyer 1979: 126, Carrión Cachot 1949: 32). Since tumi knives, trophy heads, and details of costume were so prominent, it seems that these elements were important in relating the deceased in the center of the bundles in some way to the supernatural. The motifs were perhaps symbols of an individual’s social status (Dwyer 1975: 160), or gave protective powers to the enveloping cloths on which they were carried. Luis Valcarcel saw them as ‘documents’ borne by the corpse: “the dead one was a traveler to Ukju-Pacha, where the germs of life were kept, - - and he brought a message to the powers under the earth, - - a plea for food, for resources where with man, animals and plants might subsist”. (Pomar 1971: 111).

Design Format

A textile is made up of a plane (or two sided plane) with edges. The unique quality of the medium lies in its pliability. While the fabric may be initially designed two-dimensionally, it has the ability to take on a variety of three-dimensional forms depending on how this pliability is treated (draped, formed, suspended, etc.). Because of this fluidity, no top or bottom is physically inherent in the structure (as is the case with pottery or sculpture) unless an orientation is established with the depiction of imagery. What sets textiles apart from other media are the edges which define the fabric plane. The Paracas embroiderers chose to emphasize the edge by using the color in the solidly embroidered borders to contrast with the central ground. To this they added knitted edgings or multi-colored fringe.

In most of the embroideries the fabric plane is covered by patterns made from the repetition of a single motif. Placement of motifs in linear style embroideries were often stripes (Plate 1), checkered groups
of stripes, or checkers formed by embroidered squares against a plain
ground (Plate 2). In block style embroideries the motifs were usually
either in checkered blocks or were independent figures floating in rows,
(Figure 2), of diamond repeats (Plate 5). In many pieces the orientation
of the repeated motifs was varied. When different orientations, such as
right side up with upside down, are used in a single design layout, it is
possible to use the fabric in more that one direction. No matter how the
fabric falls in covering an underlying form, a certain number of the mo­
tifs remain readable. This same technique is used today by the textile
industry. The example in Figure 2, which combines linear embroidery
in the borders with block embroidery in the body, uses four orientations
in the central panel. The result is a pattern of stripes created by the close
alignment of the feline heads.

Color was also used to create pattern networks. In Plate 2 the blocks
of the central portion of the mantle appear to be different colors or values
but when viewed more closely (Plate 3), it can be seen that the blocks are
the same color while it is the cat outlines that differ. The outlines have
diffused or changed the background color (Stafford 1941: 33). These
color relationships have been used to form horizontal rows.

Junius Bird analyzed a number of embroideries in which he found
the colors were repeated in a sequence from design unit to design unit,
as in the mantle in Plate 5, (1954: 20–21). The color combinations for
major parts of each motif are always in the same relationships to each
other: figures with blue green shirts always have navy blue and white
wings and gold arms and legs; figures with gold shirts have blue-green
and gold wings and navy arms and legs; etc. The color unit repetitions
are arranged 1–2–3 from left to right, which means the same color com­
binations form diagonal lines. The inversion of each row and the linear
direction fo the wings give the piece a horizontal emphasis. The diago­

Looking at design format, we can see that the embroiderers used
the qualities of fabric to greatest advantage by emphasizing its surface
through repetitive pattern. Betty Park describes repetition as a method
of organizing accumulated detail in a way that magnifies its importance
by quantity (1979: 4). Pattern repetition causes the piece to be read as a total field rather than as a relational composition, (Alloway 1968: 50). The "accumulated detail" of the embroideries is coordinated by the pattern schemes superimposed on it. In looking at a whole textile the eye tends to find a means of organizing the data through color. All similar shapes of a similar color form a visual network and become intensified.

In these pieces the choice of overall pattern was appropriate to the usage of the fabrics as burial wrappings. This meant that it was not necessary for the whole piece to be seen, as for example, it was for the Bayeux Tapestry. Being a historical narrative, this 11th century embroidery from France needed to be viewed in its entirety, and needed to be displayed flat. The Paracas embroideries were not narrative, nor were they designed to be seen flat. No matter what the final orientation when placed around the mummy bundle, the fabric needed to be designed so that the meaning of its motifs was clear from all perspectives. Another contrasting example would be the Chilkat twinings from the Pacific Northwest. Heraldic in nature, these pieces were made to be worn in a specific manner. They were designed with a central image and single orientation. In the Paracas embroideries we find instead small multiple images. The viewer would see the sum of a number of units and details. Because the overall design was not dependent on the form over which it was placed, the form did not control the imagery.

**Embroidery as a Surface Treatment**

The design or image carried by a textile can be created in several ways. The design may be part of the woven structure, as in gauze weaves and tapestries, it may be painted on the surface, or it may be attached as in the case with embroidery. All of these methods were utilized in the Paracas Necropolis culture but embroidery was preferred. This choice was both aesthetic and practical.

Embroidery is an extension of the woven plane because it is enmeshed with the foundation structure and uses similar components for construction (yarn/thread). It can impart intricate detail to the surface of a fabric without destroying its pliability, though it does add mass and weight. In the Paracas textiles embroidery visually heightened areas of emphasis. The raised surface and heavier body of the embroidery cre-
ated contrasts between solidly embroidered borders and exposed areas of foundation fabric in the center. The added bulk gave more importance to the edge, or to the element that most defined the plane of the fabric.

I feel that embroidery offered the Paracas designer several advantages over woven imagery. Weaving was accomplished on simple back-strap looms. A strap around the weaver’s waist attached to a bar holding the warp. Since the weaver provided the warp tension by leaning back from her work, it would have required a certain effort to sustain the tautness necessary for weaving weft face tapestry. It would have been easier to weave a warp face or tabby fabric where less tension was required, (Bird and Bellinger 1954: 95). When imagery was woven on Paracas fabrics it was commonly done in tabby double cloth. While the tension was easier to control in this technique, the spacing of patterns in the warp direction, or length, was still difficult because the selvedges at beginning and end were predetermined (Bird and Bellinger 1954: 95). In addition, the completed portion was not visible to the weaver, being rolled up as it was woven. Design placement was easier with embroidery because the pattern could be laid out on the existing fabric beforehand with measured lines of basting stitches (Paul 1985: 92).

Scholars have suggested that linear style embroidery was a logical outgrowth of weaving because the style conformed to the restrictions of warp and weft found in the base fabric (Bird and Bellinger 1954: 58, Paul 1985: 93). While linear embroidery is geometric and therefore similar to earlier woven images, it probably was not a desire to copy woven structure that accounted for the continuance of the style. Even in its strictest interpretations linear embroidery differs greatly from Paracas woven imagery in its detailing and complexity. As stated earlier, one reason a geometric style was adhered to lay in the sacredness of the already established dictums of mythological representation, particularly of the Oculate Being. Because preservation of the forms was of primary importance, a method of passing on the conventions was necessary. Anne Paul found that the method of embroidery, row by row rather than shape by shape, meant a pattern could be repeated and transmitted by a formula of counting embroidery stitches and threads of the ground fabric (1985: 99).

Block embroidery motifs were not strictly repeated from textile to textile and did not require a row by row formula. After placement and
proportions for a repeated figure within a piece were established by lines of basting stitches (Paul 1985: 92), shapes were outlined and then filled in. One of the inherent characteristics of embroidery is that the needle can carry the thread any direction on the ground. In the block style the artist could take advantage of this. The outlines disregarded warp and weft directions and allowed curved lines and shapes to develop, resulting in a growth in the style toward more naturalistic representations.

Not only did Paracas artists use embroidery for its aesthetic qualities, they also used it for its practical advantages. It appears that economy of labor in design execution was a factor. Junius Bird felt that the uniformity found in the yarns of both the woven fabric and the embroidery suggests an industry where certain craftsmen were delegated to specific portions of the process such as spinning, dyeing, weaving, etc. (1954: 102). In a workshop environment quality not only would be increased but also efficiency. Those methods which gave optimum effect for labor spent would be encouraged. Jane Dwyer has noted a change from a few colors to the use of a wide range of colors, (1979: 112). As Paracas dyers developed more colors it would have been natural to search for a means of incorporating them in textile production. Double or triple cloth limited the weaver to the two or three colors of warp used in a given area. Adding more layers or warp to increase the palette would have been slow and cumbersome. The limitations of layered weaving were overcome by exploiting embroidery. An enlarged color range enhanced the definition of details, the goal of the block style artist, without appreciably increasing the amount of labor involved.

Since the definition of details was the most important design concern, those technical aspects which would obscure their clarity were minimized. For this reason the potentials of texture (such as a wide variety of stitches) were not exploited. It might be thought that this would encourage the development of fabric painting which would present even less texture visually. Painting however had disadvantages. Animal fibers are difficult to paint on because of their springiness and lack of absorbancy. They also require simmering in the dye in order for the dyes to take effect. Cotton, while absorbant and smooth and not requiring cooking, does not take the dye as well as animal fibers, offering fewer colors. It also requires additives to make the dye washfast, (D'Harcourt 1962: 6), with the exception of indigo and a purple dye made from shellfish.
Chemically fixing the dyes for painting was a process generally not in use in pre-Columbian Peru, (Sawyer 1979: 129). Embroidery has the additional advantage of providing a more cautious method of applying design. If a mistake is made, the offending thread can be removed, but in painting this is not so.

Embroidery was a preferred medium because a cultural taste for involvement with thread had developed. It contributed to the textile medium by expanding design capabilities and saving labor as well as by contributing aesthetically by adding density and technical virtuosity to the fabric.

Conclusion

Just as great importance was attached to the coverings and embellishment of the deceased, so was importance attached to the embellishment of the figures in the embroideries. Activities were not the subject of these images. The spiritual information, or artistic content was transmitted by identifiable details in the repeated motifs and by their relationships conceptually and physically to the corpses they covered. In producing these sumptuous fabrics, the Paracas artist made design decisions that utilized the potentials of fabric as an art medium, especially with the emphasis on the surface flatness of fabric, its pliability, and on the elaboration of its edge. Embroidery was preferred as a design technique for its intrinsic qualities, as well as for its technical advantages over painting and weaving.

Embroidery, like weaving, is built from components, much the same as laying brick. The whole is not possible except as a synthesis or parts. Likewise, the design style within the motifs and the symbolic content of these pieces depended on the parts that made up the whole. The arrangement of the motifs themselves on the fabric were also composite organizations. Only with multiple units were the overall patterns of organization possible. This consistency of approach unified the imagery with the techniques used for its realization.
Acknowledgements

The author would like to express her appreciation to the following persons for their help in this endeavor: Tom Cummins, Janet Taylor, Emily Umberger, and Susan Davis.

Bibliography

Alloway, Lawrence


Bird, Junius and Louisa Bellinger


Carrión Cachot, Rebecca


Dwyer, Edward and Jane Powell Dwyer


Dwyer, Jane Powell


Harcourt, Raoul D’


Park, Betty


200
Paul, Anne


Pomar, Felipe Cossio del

1971 Art of Ancient Peru.: Felipe Cossio del Pomar.

Sawyer, Alan R.


Stafford, Cora

Figure 1 - Map of Peru showing relation of Paracas Peninsula to other sites and cities in Peru.

Figure drawn by author
Figure 2 - Drawing of mantle with central portion of block style felines and border of linear style. Original - Peabody Museum - (32-30-30/45).

Figure drawn by author

203
Plate I — Mantle embroidered in the linear style with “Oculate Being” motif in the borders. (Photo courtesy of American Museum of Natural History.)
Plate II – Mantle (with one border missing) using feline motif and embroidered in linear style.
(Photo courtesy of The Textile Museum of the District of Columbia.)
Plate III – Detail of mantle in Plate II
showing the border figure from the right hand corner.
(Photo courtesy of The Textile Museum of the District of Columbia.)
Plate IV – Mantle border fragment in the broadline style.
(Photo courtesy of The Textile Museum of the District of Columbia.)
Plate V – Mantle embroidered in the block style with costumed men holding trophy heads.
(Photo courtesy of The Textile Museum of the District of Columbia.)
Plate VI – Detail of the mantle in Plate V
showing a figure from the central portion of the mantle next to the left corner.
(Photo courtesy of The Textile Museum of the District of Columbia.)
Plate VII – Border fragment of a complex double faced embroidery.
(Photo courtesy of The Textile Museum of the District of Columbia.)