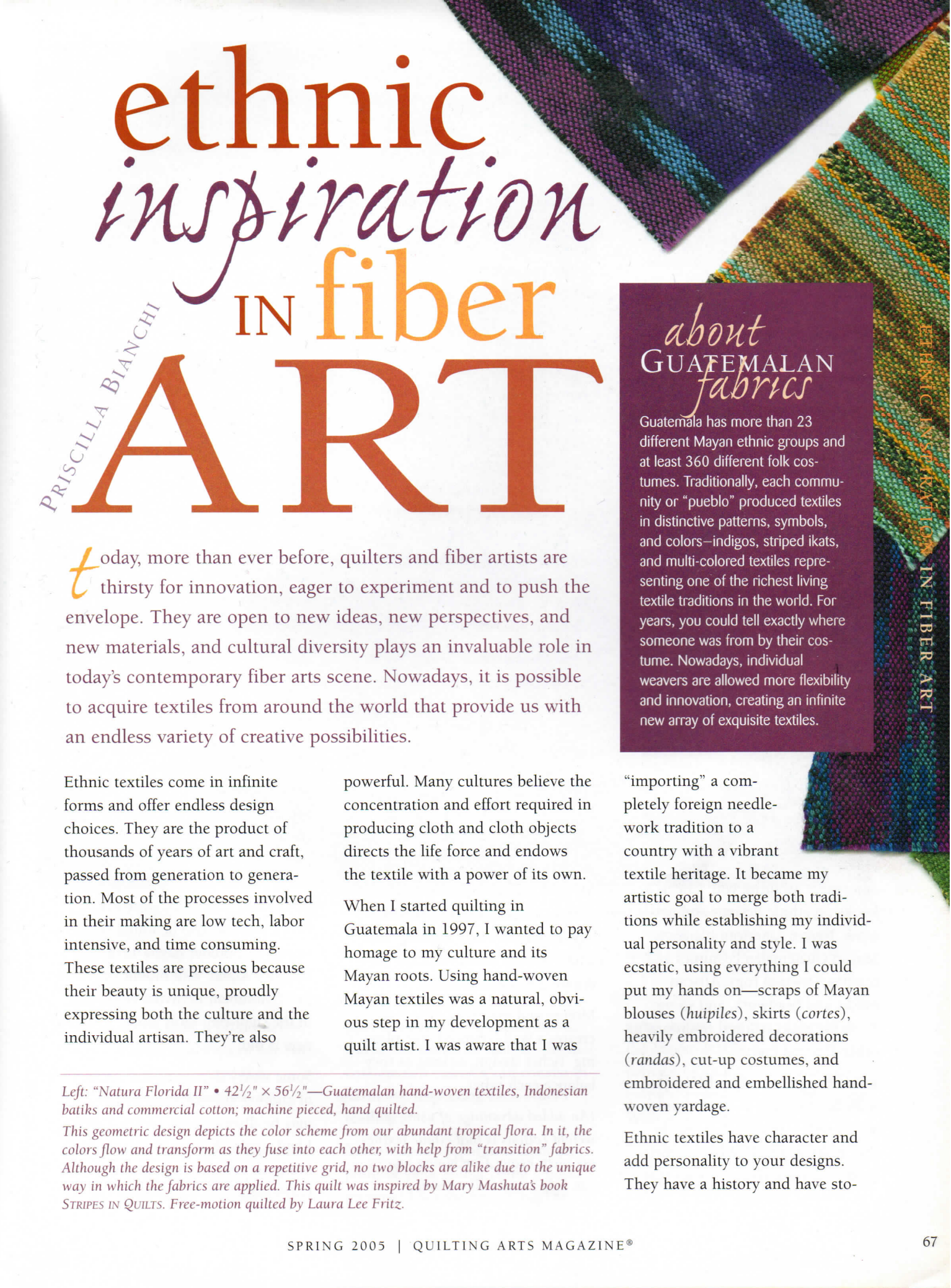




ETHNIC INSPIRATION IN FIBER ART



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about GUATEMALAN fabrics

Guatemala has more than 23 different Mayan ethnic groups and at least 360 different folk costumes. Traditionally, each community or “pueblo” produced textiles in distinctive patterns, symbols, and colors—indigos, striped ikats, and multi-colored textiles representing one of the richest living textile traditions in the world. For years, you could tell exactly where someone was from by their costume. Nowadays, individual weavers are allowed more flexibility and innovation, creating an infinite new array of exquisite textiles.

Today, more than ever before, quilters and fiber artists are thirsty for innovation, eager to experiment and to push the envelope. They are open to new ideas, new perspectives, and new materials, and cultural diversity plays an invaluable role in today’s contemporary fiber arts scene. Nowadays, it is possible to acquire textiles from around the world that provide us with an endless variety of creative possibilities.

Ethnic textiles come in infinite forms and offer endless design choices. They are the product of thousands of years of art and craft, passed from generation to generation. Most of the processes involved in their making are low tech, labor intensive, and time consuming. These textiles are precious because their beauty is unique, proudly expressing both the culture and the individual artisan. They’re also

powerful. Many cultures believe the concentration and effort required in producing cloth and cloth objects directs the life force and endows the textile with a power of its own.

When I started quilting in Guatemala in 1997, I wanted to pay homage to my culture and its Mayan roots. Using hand-woven Mayan textiles was a natural, obvious step in my development as a quilt artist. I was aware that I was

“importing” a completely foreign needlework tradition to a country with a vibrant textile heritage. It became my artistic goal to merge both traditions while establishing my individual personality and style. I was ecstatic, using everything I could put my hands on—scraps of Mayan blouses (*huipiles*), skirts (*cortes*), heavily embroidered decorations (*randas*), cut-up costumes, and embroidered and embellished hand-woven yardage.

Ethnic textiles have character and add personality to your designs. They have a history and have sto-

Left: “Natura Florida II” • 42½” × 56½”—Guatemalan hand-woven textiles, Indonesian batiks and commercial cotton; machine pieced, hand quilted.

This geometric design depicts the color scheme from our abundant tropical flora. In it, the colors flow and transform as they fuse into each other, with help from “transition” fabrics. Although the design is based on a repetitive grid, no two blocks are alike due to the unique way in which the fabrics are applied. This quilt was inspired by Mary Mashuta’s book *STRIPES IN QUILTS*. Free-motion quilted by Laura Lee Fritz.

ries to tell. The more I work with ethnic fabrics from around the world, the more I want to know about their history and origin, the reasons behind the fabrics. Where are they from? How were they made? How are they used and what role do they play in people's lives? What symbols do they contain and what do these symbols mean? This is an enlightening process, it broadens your horizons and your mind; it enriches your life.

Guatemalan textiles are the main component in my work, but I experiment constantly, teaming them with other ethnic fabrics. I have incorporated Indonesian batiks, African, Aboriginal, Native American, Japanese, and hand-dyed or hand-painted fabrics that share the same exciting rustic, primitive, one-of-a-kind qualities. This mix-and-match adds variety, interest, and visual impact, all of which I consider essential for a unique, contemporary look.

Incorporating ethnic textiles in art quilts and wearables

- **Study ethnic costumes and textiles from around the world.** There's a virtual treasure trove of inspiration and enjoyment awaiting you. Check out books on ethnic designs and patterns: Native American blankets, Mayan Guatemalan costumes and textiles, Oriental rugs, African masks and beadwork, and so on. Look for multi-cultural traditions in other arts and crafts.

- **Select a variety of ethnic fabrics you really like.** Respond to them emotionally as well as practically. How do they make you feel? What are their most noticeable characteristics (pat-

tern, color, texture)? How can you use these elements to best advantage?

Many of the Guatemalan hand-woven fabrics I use are striped because of the weaving techniques used to make them. Instead of fighting against them or wishing they weren't there, I constantly experiment, trying to expand the possibilities of stripes as far as they will go.

- **Use ethnic textiles as the starting point of your design.** Let the fabrics take you by the hand and lead the way. You may use a variety or "mix" of ethnic fabrics in each piece. If you stick to just one kind, your piece may be too busy, too overwhelming, or just plain boring. But try to keep to one same style or "look." I wouldn't advise adding sophisticated motifs (e.g. art nouveau, Jacobean) unless you're absolutely sure of what you're doing. Combining rustic and sophisticated motifs can be very tricky.

- **Add mix-and-match "blender" fabrics** such as commercial cottons, hand-dyes, homespun, plaids, stripes, and geometrics for added richness. Choose what enhances your key fabrics, not what competes. When I use scraps of Mayan blouses, I'm always aware that the fabric already has a lot going on in terms of texture, color, pattern, symbolism, and embroidery. My goal is to showcase it with supporting fabrics. Instead of adding new elements, I take my cues from what's already there, choosing coordinating colors and motifs.

Mixing and matching other fabrics creates a well-balanced, eye-pleasing, richer design, as long as they balance each other.

(An added advantage of using quilt-weight cottons is that ethnic textiles are often heavy. Combining fabrics can help avoid bulky seams.)

- **Try to keep the integrity of the cloth.**

Use large pieces so you don't lose the inherent beauty. There's no point in cutting up these gorgeous textiles in little pieces; show them off in big chunks instead.

- **Do not seek perfection!** Stripes don't have to match; motifs don't need to be centered, points can be blunt—perfection is not the point. Give yourself permission to be "human;" use scraps, make do. Remember you're dealing with hand-made fabrics that may have irregularities from the artisan's hand; your fiber art is therefore allowed to share the same distinct characteristics as the cloth you're using.

Working with ethnic textiles is both liberating and humbling. It keeps us grounded. Here we are, thinking we're so advanced, inventing new techniques and unique patterns. Then we discover that ancient cultures had the same ideas centuries ago. A 4,000-year-old Egyptian mummy is wrapped in a cloth patterned with log cabin blocks; a pre-Columbian ceremonial cape from Peru displays Ohio stars. The same diamond "T" and "X" shapes appear in Navajo blankets, 19th century Anatolian rugs from Asia Minor, beaded Zulu aprons from South Africa, and a raffia Kuba cloth from Zaire. The 2,500-year-old Greek key can also be found in an Aztec shoulder bag, a 14th Century Arabic wall mosaic, a pre-Columbian Peruvian cloth, and in the snail-trail quilt block. What's new is old.

Some worry that using the materials of another culture in their artwork may be disrespectful. In May 2002, I had a solo show at the National Museum of Modern Art in Guatemala City. The Minister of



"Holiday in Nebaj" • 40½" × 41"—Guatemalan hand-woven and embroidered textiles; machine pieced and quilted.

A multi-color, geometric design where triangles of striped fabrics are carefully placed together to create larger squares and optical illusions that emerge from the sub-patterns along the seam lines. Inspiration for this color-rich design came from the shapes and colors on the traditional sash worn by the people of Nebaj.

Culture at the time, a proud native Mayan dressed as always in her ethnic group's attire, opened the exhibit with words that put my mind at ease:

"Priscilla's work relates to our culture and puts into practice what I refer to as positive inter-culturality.

Through her artistic and symbolic work, she shows us that the distinct Guatemalan cultures can coexist in harmony, respecting each other's identity.

"What's most important, from my point of view, is that being a novel proposal [aka the art quilts], the

artist doesn't lose the authenticity of the Mayan textile, nor [does she] damage or attack in any way this cultural expression [aka the textile]. With it, the artist ratifies that creativity can be inter-cultural, as long as you treat the sources of inspiration with respect." ♦