

Working with
Guatemalan textiles



*WHIRLPOOLS GOING ROUND 'N' ROUND, 56" x 56", 1999.
Designed, constructed, and quilted by the author.*

Priscilla Bianchi represents a unique personality in today's art quilting world. She was born and raised in Guatemala City, Guatemala, where she still resides today. Her distinctive style is characterized by the use of bold, bright colors, a daring approach to choosing and combining fabrics and textures, and a thirst for experimentation and risk-taking. Her one-of-a-kind art quilts, with a definite ethnic appeal, incorporate the richness of Guatemalan hand-woven textiles, colors, patterns, and symbolism, giving life to a myriad of works of art that are fresh, vibrant, and innovative.

With a body of work of over 60 art quilts that have been exhibited internationally, her passion and enthusiasm for her work, as well as her origins, make Priscilla a truly unique quilt artist. In this story, told in her own words, Priscilla outlines why she uses Guatemalan fabrics. She also explains how other quilters can use these unique fabrics in their quilts.



by Priscilla Bianchi

Coming from a country with a rich textile heritage, but no quilting tradition at all, I've had to overcome many obstacles.

The wonderful Guatemalan landscape, the people with their costumes and traditions, the Mayan culture, and the bountiful harvest of fruits and flowers never cease to inspire me. My influences and views of this magic, mystical world give my pieces a Latin American flavor, and set them apart from the works of other fiber artists.

Guatemala has one of the richest textile traditions in the world. The country is made up of 23 distinct indigenous groups, each with its own language, culture, and customs. Many of the textiles and ancient weaving methods have survived through the centuries.

The country's diversity is reflected in unique patterns and colors and outstandingly beautiful clothes. Every group or town has its own dress, woven by its people, with the traditional symbolism of their history and ancient gods forming the pattern. You can identify where a person is from just by looking at their costume.

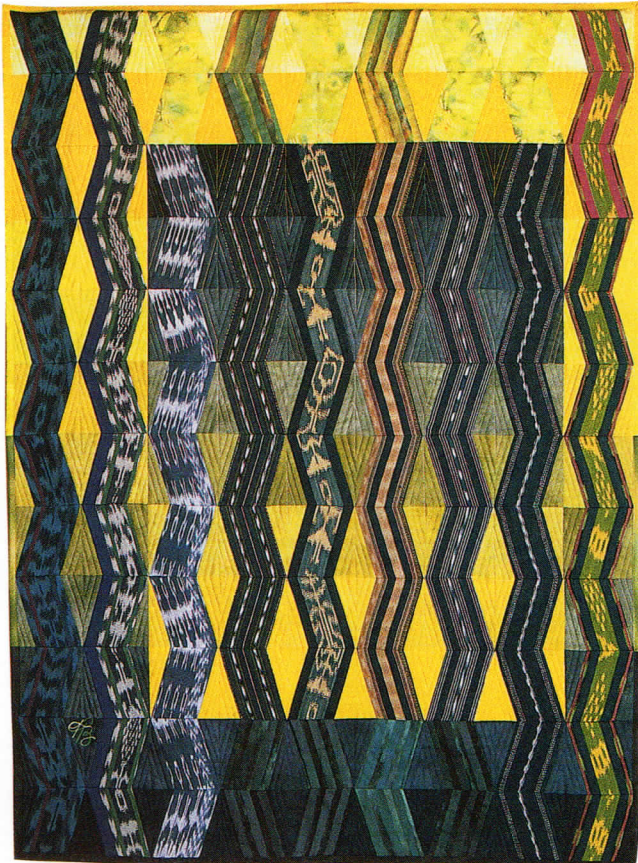
Incorporating Guatemalan hand-



WE COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER, 44" x 53", 2000. Designed, constructed, and quilted by the author. ABOVE LEFT: Detail.

woven textiles into my art quilts evolved as a very natural, comfortable thing to do. Being Guatemalan and proud of my heritage, I wanted to imprint my cultural identity into my

work. I've always had the freedom to experiment and try out new things without being limited by "the rules." Using Guatemalan textiles gives such life and vibrancy to my quilts! For me,



RAIN FOREST, 36" x 49", 2000. All the fabrics in the graduated background (lime green to navy blue) are hand dyed. Designed, constructed, and quilted by the author.

this is a wonderful way of representing my country and my people in a positive, beautiful light.

There are many different types and thicknesses of Guatemalan fabrics. The kind that I use in my quilts is relatively difficult to find. I use 100% mercerized cotton of top-quality, light-to-medium thickness. It has a silky texture, great drape-ability, and a nice sheen. It is perfect for the many seams involved in the quilting process, and it's also suitable for lined or unlined garments, home furnishings, and many other uses!

These hand-woven fabrics are labor-intensive to produce. Every step involved in their making is done by hand, from choosing the cotton fibers, knotting and dyeing the threads to produce ikat motifs, to the weaving process itself. Ikat motifs are patterns like flames, zigzags, trees, or human figures, created by a very labor-intensive process of tying portions of cotton thread so tightly that the tied parts do not take on the color when dipped in a dye bath. The warp and weft fibers

will make up the pattern when the cloth is woven.

The fabric is usually 34" to 36" wide due to the size of the ancestral foot looms that men use to weave the cloth. Many of the centuries-old designs, patterns, and colors have been passed on from generation to generation making these textiles heirlooms in their own right!

Guatemalan fabrics have a number of positive qualities that lend character and personality to my designs.

They have a unique beauty – a hand-made, rustic quality, rich texture, and strong colors in stripes and ikat designs.

The fabrics are stable, and hold their shape when ironed. On the other hand, the looser weave makes it very fudge-able! When sewn together with lighter weight fabric (which I do all the time), iron seams

towards the lighter weight fabric. When sewing two Guatemalan fabrics together press seams open to avoid bulkiness. I also recommend the use of steam with these fabrics.

The fabric is reversible, a wonderful feature when working with symmetry, or when you have made a mistake and forgot to turn your template over for cutting reverse pieces!

Prewashing fabric

Prewashing is a must before sewing Guatemalan textiles into your quilts or garments. Here's how to do it:

- Zigzag or serge raw edges to prevent excessive fraying.
- Separate fabrics by color into darks and lights. Be particularly careful with reds and blues as they tend to bleed.
- Machine wash the fabrics using a gentle cycle with a hot wash temperature and a warm rinse.
- To the wash water, add 1 teaspoon of Retayne™ per yard of fabric. This fixative will ensure that colors don't run and that they stay bright. (Retayne™ can be purchased at any

quilt shop.)

- Don't worry if the water in the machine is tinted dark. This is the excess dye coming out and will not stain your fabrics.

- Take the fabrics out of the washing machine as soon as the complete wash cycle is finished! Leaving them damp and crumpled could stain them.

- Tumble dry the fabrics for half an hour or so on a low temperature. Remove promptly and then hang until completely dry.

- Ironing at this point is optional, but not necessary.

Shrinkage

Due to its handmade nature, the fabric does shrink an average of 5% to 8% after being washed. Please, take this into account when calculating yardage.

Machine washing

Guatemalan fabrics are strong and tough and hold up just fine to repeated machine washings. This fabric can last for years and years! I suggest using cold water, a gentle cycle, and a detergent with color guard to protect the colors. Use low-temperature drying.

Guatemalan fabrics are so versatile that they fit into many different styles. You'll find a lot of stripes and ikats, plaids and solids in many color ways, brights, and also subdued darks. Some are more cosmopolitan, others typically Guatemalan with bold colors, Mayan designs, and multicolor schemes. There are many patterns to suit every taste.

Depending on how you incorporate them into your design and composition, they can become contemporary, African, ethnic, naïve, Mayan, and yes, even traditional. Take risks and try using more daring fabric choices! ■



Priscilla Bianchi, quilt artist and international teacher, lives and operates her textile export business from her hometown in Guatemala City, Guatemala. An experienced teacher, Priscilla travels throughout the United States to lecture and teach. Contact her via the AQS website, www.AQSquilt.com – click on American Quilter magazine, Fall 2002 issue.