



## Art and Opportunity in Guatemala

by *D e b o r a h C h a n d l e r*

**When the world was being created, the Goddess Ixchel taught the first Mayan women the art of weaving on a backstrap loom.** They have been passing that knowledge on to their daughters and granddaughters ever since. For thousands of years, Mayan women have been weaving for their homes, for barter, and for sale. Coming from a society steeped in tradition, the similarities in today's cloth and clothing can lead many to think little has changed in all that time. Not true. Mayan women are as interested in fashion as women anywhere, and as artists they are acutely aware of innovation in color and design. While ancient, the world of the Maya is not static.

A history of Guatemala could begin with the arrival of the Spaniards, various declarations of independence, a merging of cultures, and too many wars. The most recent conflict lasted 36 years, killed 200,000 people (especially but not exclusively Mayan), and ended with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. It was a scary time for everyone. For many, it was a time of hiding their identities, and often themselves, in order to stay alive. Many traditions were shattered and people who had lived in the same villages for generations were suddenly catapulted into a new world. The future came, ready or not.



*ABOVE:* Lake Atitlan in Sololá, Guatemala, is a popular destination visited by all Mayan Hands guests.

The story of Mayan Hands, a fair trade organization, begins at the height of the war in the late 1980s, when Guatemalan anthropologist Brenda Rosenbaum was doing field work with Mayan women. Touched by their warmth, distressed by their poverty, and in admiration of their strength—all the while being dazzled by their weaving—Brenda and her husband Fredy dared to believe that they could help by providing these accomplished weavers with a market in the United States. Since 1989, Mayan Hands has helped hundreds of women working in cooperative groups with “a hand up instead of a handout” by providing work, and therefore income, on a steady and fair trade basis.

*LEFT:* A butterfly basket designed by the women of Xeabaj after Michele Hament’s 2010 basketry workshop.

As anyone who sells knows, the key to continued success is new markets, new products, or both. One way to make new products is to develop new designs using new materials, techniques, and skills. The best way to introduce all that newness is through workshops taught by good teachers, with all the backup and follow-up needed to make them work. For the past decade, Mayan Hands has been offering workshops to Mayan women in Guatemala with the clear intention of greater opportunities for sales, and therefore income. For women who somehow managed to survive on less than \$1 a day prior to their relationship with Mayan Hands, having steady work that pays fairly is a miracle.

*BELOW:* Michele Hament’s basketry workshop in El Adelanto, 2006.

Through the generosity of a star-studded list of North American teachers, Mayan Hands has been offering a series of workshops that are as enriching to the teachers as they are to the students. Ten teachers have taught 18 workshops to 65 women in pine needle basketry, natural dyeing, needle felting, and rug hooking. With tangible results as the goal, the lessons have been reinforced with multiple workshops. Some of the teachers have made repeat visits. Every teacher has said she wants to come back.





Mayan women from the village of Xeabaj making miniature baskets with pine needles and raffia.

### **Pine Needle Basketry**

*"I feel amazingly fortunate to have gone to the highlands of Guatemala and met people I never would have had the opportunity to meet had I not been a basket maker."*—Michele Hament (San Francisco, California)

Baskets have been made in Guatemala forever with traditional materials such as *pajon* (tall grass), *cheche* (from the maguey plant), *mimbre* (wicker), and *bejuco* (a vine). Michele Hament, an internationally celebrated basket maker and teacher, began teaching basketry to groups of Mayan women in 2006. She introduced them to the idea of using pine needles, raffia, and RIT dye, along with a contemporary sense of design. The result has been such a huge demand for the baskets that the existing groups have needed to grow and a whole new group is about to be formed in Xeabaj. RIT is even poised to put the Guatemalan basket makers on their website. Raffia-in-hand, two women from Xeabaj, Chimaltenango, expanded their knowledge earlier this spring by attending the natural dye workshop in San Rafael.

*"Please give our clients our thanks. I thank every client who buys our baskets. The baskets benefit our families. Most of the money goes to*

*education. Today all my children are in school because of this work. It is a big effort making these baskets, but I and my family receive a big benefit."*—Sabina (Xeabaj)

### **Natural Dyeing**

*"While our original intent was to connect the women to local materials, it became evident to us that these hard working women could not possibly add growing and harvesting dyestuff to their routines. Any gardening energy needs to be directed to growing food for the table."*—Donna Brown (Littleton, Colorado)

Natural dyeing was common in Guatemala for thousands of years before synthetic dyes came along. With the rise of interest in all things environmentally friendly, natural dyes are making a big comeback everywhere in the world. The group of weavers in San Rafael, Baja Verapaz, had no history of dyeing until a 2012 workshop led by Guatemalan natural dye expert Olga Reiche. This past spring, natural dye experts Donna Brown (Littleton, Colorado) and Catharine Ellis (Waynesville, North Carolina) led the group in a second workshop, this time using mostly powdered dye extracts with fresh banana tree trunks to provide supplementary tannin.



LEFT: Catharine Ellis teaches a 2013 natural dye workshop in San Rafael, and shows the group that indigo is not toxic.



RIGHT: The group naturally dyeing cotton and raffia.

BELOW: Sculpture of a Mayan mother and daughter reading together (wool, needle felting, 5" x 3", 2013) made by women in Vasconcelos.

Mayan Hands began offering scarves and towels woven with naturally dyed yarns in their existing market, but the cost involved made them difficult to sell. Irene Schmoller from Cotton Clouds is now helping with a marketing plan and its execution to sell the yarn to appreciative weavers in the US. This is still very much a work-in-progress.

*"When we started dyeing, we were working with local plants, but the results were not good. Now we are using the powders and the results are better, but they raise the cost of dyeing the yarn. We like the project and want to keep going if it will work."*—Elvira (San Rafael)

### Needle Felting

*"The women were amazing!"*

—Fran Irvine (Concord, New Hampshire)

The idea of trying needle felting grew out of observing local sheep whose fleeces were going to waste. The women of Vasconcelos, Solola, began felting simple animals and nativities in a workshop with educator and fiber artist Fran Irvine in 2005. Through workshops taught by Fran, Sharon Costello (Rensselaerville, New York) and Dee Dee Triplett (Bryson, North Carolina), the group now makes detailed sculptures of colorful whimsical animals, the Holy Family in native dress, and Mayan women reading with their daughters. Mayan



Hands took all of the women to the Guatemala City zoo this past spring, where they took pictures with their cell phones of giraffes, elephants, and penguins.

*"I am very happy and thankful and also very excited when we make new products. This gives us the opportunity to create and invent and to show the world what we are able to do. We are very happy for your voice because it motivates us to do better each day. Even more, because the income we receive sustains our families, I work on the animals with joy. We are open to do new things. If you want something, we can do it."*—Diega (Vasconcelos)

### Rug Hooking

*"During the second class, I distributed pencil and paper to the women to begin drawing a rug design. Carmen sat frozen like a deer in the headlights. She had never made a mark on paper before... It's about access to opportunities."*—

Mary Anne Wise (Maiden Rock, Wisconsin)

The most outstanding aspect of Mary Anne Wise's eight-part rug hooking course was that it began with general design concepts and ended with students from various groups teaching other women in their regions, extending its outreach many times. Wise is a rug designer and maker, and co-founder with Jody Slocum of the shop Cultural Cloth, which supports women artisans around the globe. Slocum has assisted with the workshops since they began in 2009. Rug hookers from the US have hooked side-by-side with Mayan rug hookers, sharing an experience unhindered by the language barrier. The success of



TOP: Sharon Costello teaching needle felting to a group in Vasconcelos, 2011.



Mary Anne Wise leads a teacher training class, examining small brocaded elements of *traje* to enlarge as rug designs, 2012. Photos: Mary Littrell.

these cross-cultural encounters is found in the common languages that connect them—the work of their hands and intentions of their hearts.

*"I used to have to go to the mountains every day and chop wood many hours with my machete. I hauled wood down the mountain on my back and sold it walking door to door in my village. But now that I am selling rugs, I don't have to go to the mountain any more. I am a lucky woman and I am grateful for this opportunity for a better life."*

—María (Chirijquiac)

These are just a few of the inspiring stories that have come from the educational efforts of Mayan Hands, with many still to come. A major goal is to offer Mayan women in Guatemala tools with which to construct their futures. It is very challenging, and very exciting work.

Mayan Hands

[www.mayanhands.org](http://www.mayanhands.org)

Cultural Cloth

[www.culturalcloth.com](http://www.culturalcloth.com)

Sharon Costello

[www.blacksheepdesigns.com](http://www.blacksheepdesigns.com)

Dee Dee Triplett

[www.spiralcreek.com](http://www.spiralcreek.com)

Michele Hament

[www.michelehamentartwork.com](http://www.michelehamentartwork.com)

Olga Reiche

[www.customtextiledesign.com](http://www.customtextiledesign.com)

Catharine Ellis

[www.ellistextiles.com](http://www.ellistextiles.com)

Donna Brown

[www.tablerockllamas.com](http://www.tablerockllamas.com)

Mary Anne Wise

[www.maryannewise.com](http://www.maryannewise.com)

*—Deborah Chandler now lives in Guatemala after teaching and writing about weaving for 30 years in the US. She is the former Director of Mayan Hands-Guatemala and the author of Learning to Weave (Interweave, 1984).*



*INSET LEFT:* Teachers Jody Slocum (left) and Mary Anne Wise (right) with student Yessica and her hooked rug in progress. *ABOVE:* Yessica's completed rug (recycled fabrics on monks cloth, 56" x 26", 2011). Photo: Mary Anne Wise.