

## **Liberated in confinement: The resilience of two Peruvian artists through textile handicrafts**

Liberadas en el encierro: La resiliencia de dos artistas peruanas a través  
de las labores manuales textiles

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**Abstract:** Two Peruvian artists from Lima have managed to overcome the emotional difficulties during the recent 2-year pandemic due to the specific characteristics of their plastic proposal linked to the intimacy of the decorative and artistic handicrafts. Through their life stories, the factors in their creative processes that have promoted their resilience are analyzed. The effectiveness of decorative textile crafts in achieving emotional balance, even for non-professionals artists, is also proposed.

**Keywords:** Embroidery, handicrafts, textile arts, decorative arts, resilience, cultural heritage.

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**Resumen:** Dos artistas peruanas limeñas han logrado remontar las dificultades emocionales experimentadas durante la pandemia de los últimos dos años, gracias a las características de sus propuestas plásticas vinculadas a la intimidad de las labores manuales artísticas y decorativas. A través de sus historias de vida se analizan los factores en sus procesos creativos que han promovido su resiliencia. Se propone también la efectividad de las artes manuales textiles decorativas para lograr el equilibrio emocional, aun para personas no profesionales del arte.

**Palabras clave:** Bordado, labores manuales, artes textiles, artes decorativas, resiliencia, herencia cultural.

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### **Introduction**

For most people in Lima, the critical context that Peru has been undergoing for the past year and a half due to the health emergency has considerably modified the organization of their daily activities, as houses have become the workplace and the space for family life. This major change is compounded by the individual confrontation with a range of new and negative emotions, including fear of illness, sudden loss of loved ones, anxiety about the confinement and sadness due to lack of direct socialization.

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Artists who tend to link their creative processes to their own emotionality have experienced this period in a particularly difficult way and at the same time have found many opportunities. This is the case of the two Peruvian artists whose creative processes during the pandemic we will review in this article. Claudia García and Sol Toledo have not been indifferent to the effects that the circumstances have generated in the majority; however, they have managed to overcome them thanks to their work. One particularity that unites them is the plastic language with which they express themselves, since both use textile and decorative handicrafts as means of plastic expression, activities usually associated with the feminine and the home in Western culture since the 19th century.

Even before the pandemic, an intimate tone could already be perceived in their themes, and the secluded situation fostered in their introspection and feelings based on their feminist stance. Sol Toledo's narrative has focused on aspects related to her family and her inheritance, her home, and childhood memories. Meanwhile, Claudia García uses resources such as poetry, fantasy, and reverie to construct idyllic, peaceful, and hopeful scenes, where she recurrently projects herself in representations of fabulous women.

An additional interesting issue to observe in both artists is that virtual social networks have had significant relevance in the context of isolation. Virtual interest groups have been configured as the most important means for women artists and non-artists from different latitudes to exchange knowledge and experiences and exhibit their work with no greater pretensions than those of mutual accompaniment and emotional support.

From this initial approach to the particular cases of these artists, some questions emerge that outline the research of this article: Have the decorative textile arts played a therapeutic role in their lives during the pandemic? What aspects of the creative processes have contributed to these artists' ability to cope with the negative emotions caused by the pandemic? Could the development of manual arts contribute in a similar way to improving the lives of other non-artist women?

The method of qualitative analysis of life stories was used to answer these questions. The aim is to identify the common variables in the artists' narratives to reach the article's essential conclusions. It is intended that this reflective study will generate new questions that will motivate further research related to the benefits that decorative textile arts can have on people's lives, especially when they are going through difficult circumstances.

Before continuing with the central theme of the research, I will review some of the ways in which decorative textile arts have been conceived in the Peruvian territory throughout history. For this, I elaborate on four subtitles to approach their functions, relevance, and meanings. Through them, we seek to understand some elements that are part of the discourse of the artists who are the protagonists of this paper.

## **1. Embroidery, the feminine and the artisanal**

The history of the evolution of embroidery as a human activity is extremely extensive and rich, probably as rich as that of writing. Embroidery involves developing mental and mechanical processes of varying complexity, which have taken on different characteristics according to the territories in which it has emerged. Its execution is based on technological practices involving affections, memories, feelings and identities, and the resulting products are aesthetic and artistic. As a result of colonization, however, the history of Western art seems to have established hierarchical divisions with respect to other artistic mani-

festations developed by native peoples, which are not included among the so-called fine arts. This has relegated embroidery and other activities such as ceramics, basketry and weaving to the world of craftsmanship with a lesser value, a subject that remains taboo in Western art studies (Blanca, 2014, p. 20).

Despite this, there is abundant evidence of the embroidery practices of different social groups around the world at different times, which attest to its relevance, not only because of its aesthetic nature but also because of the resources that its creation demands. From a gender perspective, for example, it is possible to easily identify how the activity of embroidery and other manual tasks typical of the decorative arts have been a fundamental factor in defining women's social roles over time (Blanca, 2014 p. 20). Complementarily, from the point of view of social development, embroidery and other manual work of a similar nature are artistic manifestations through which it has been possible to rescue and preserve the memory of ancient cultures, which has generated leaderships and built productive value chains for the creation of social capital in the most vulnerable communities (Wong, 2019, pp. 12-14).

## **2. Textiles of the Tahuantinsuyo and the effects of Spanish colonization**

The ancient cultures of the American territory prior to the Spanish colonization still show their magnificence through their textiles. The most representative of all, the Paracas (800 B.C.-200 A.D.), reveal a high technical and aesthetic complexity in its manufacture. The quality and perfection of the decorated textiles of those times, as well as the architectural contexts where they have been found, make it clear that their exquisiteness was mainly due to the hierarchical distinction within their social systems. This idea is reinforced by the symbolism of their iconography, which is coherent with the cosmovision of these cultures and shows mythical and anthropomorphic characters, fauna, and flora typical of each geographical area, stars, and elements of nature, as well as basic geometric figures repeated in a modular fashion. The images are eloquent and, most of the time, describe daily activities, celebrations, and beliefs (Buitrón, 2000).

The great event of Spanish colonization entailed a long process of critical changes for the native communities of America. An interesting example in terms of textiles refers to the changes in the clothing of the native Mayan women of Yucatan, in Mexico, in the sixteenth century, with the introduction of the huipil, a simple rectangular garment, colorful and adorned with hand-embroidered motifs, to cover their usually naked torsos (Centro de Innovación Tecnológica Turístico Artesanal Sipán, 2007).

The native clothing of the Tahuantinsuyo involved a very elaborate manufacturing process that began with the transformation of animal and vegetable fibers. However, women's clothing was simple and unadorned, while high-hierarchy men's clothing included gold and silver accessories. During colonization, natives were forced to dress in the Spanish style under the pretext of protecting the Spanish textile industry that was beginning to grow. It is possible to deduce that during this process of profound social transformations of colonization, many of the original textile traditions practiced in Tahuantinsuyo were lost. We can also observe that most of the clothes that Peruvians recognize as typical result from the miscegenation that occurred with the transformations and additions of European garments to the original pre-Hispanic ones (Ríos Acuña, 2007, p. 42).

### 3. **Embroidery as a popular, commercial, and identity-related artistic activity**

Due to the miscegenation produced by colonization, embroidery has survived through time as one of the most used techniques in decorating clothing. Currently, in several Latin American countries, the most famous traditional representations allude to nature, flowers, and animals of the countryside. The multiple variations of their color palette, stitching techniques, and motifs represented have emerged from the preference and the development of identity with the natural and cultural heritage of each region. In Peru, among numerous styles, particularly noteworthy are the hand-embroidered flowers of Monsefú in Lambayeque, those of Huanta in Ayacucho and those of the Mantaro valley (Wanka embroidery) in Junín, the machine embroidery of animals and flowers of Colca, in Arequipa, and the geometric and symbolic hand-embroidery of the Amazon, of the Shipibo community-based in Cantagallo, in Lima. (Centro de Innovación Tecnológica Turístico Artesanal Sipán, 2007).

Today, traditional embroidery in Peru is a commercial activity undertaken by groups of artisans, and the best-known part of its production is aimed at the tourist market. Its confection is applied to items and accessories of urban clothing. However, the highest quality embroidery is still reserved for the garments used in the festivities of local regions. They serve to identify the dancers and differentiate their roles and importance within the dances. Some communities still conserve their original costumes, and with them, they denote their social relations. This is the case of the inhabitants of the island of Taquile in Puno or of the province of Yauyos in Lima, who have kept their original garments for a long time. In the last decades, it is worth mentioning that these populations have been integrating industrial yarns and synthetic fibers into their natural fabrics, with due respect to the traditional color palette that identifies them.

### 4. **A Peruvian artist reclaims decorative textile arts**

At the beginning of the 20th century in Lima, strongly influenced by European customs, Elena Izcue (1889-1970) was academically trained as an artist at the National School of Fine Arts. Dedicated to teaching drawing in the elementary schools of Lima and Callao, Elena soon developed with great interest an exhaustive study of the iconography of Peruvian pre-Hispanic cultures based on her visits to museums and her meticulous observation of the textiles and ceramics they housed.

In accordance with the concepts used by some artists of the time that questioned the dominant rationalism and pictorial academicism, Izcue also described pre-Hispanic artistic manifestations as “primitive,” but in a positive and even vindicating sense and referred more to “what is ours” and “what is true” (Vargas, 2011, p. 153). Her approaches to the knowledge and aesthetic reproduction of pre-Hispanic designs seem to agree with the critical stance towards the history of Spanish colonization. Through her work, we can perceive a genuine interest in aesthetic beauty, associated with a romantic sentiment of Peruvian identity, the historical memory of a nation and the clear intention of vindicating ancient Peruvian cultures “interrupted, but not killed by the Colony” (García Calderón quoted by Majluf and Wuffarden, 1999, p. 25). It is also interesting to note that as a woman, Elena’s studies, unlike some male antecedents, did not have a functional or scientific purpose but were undertaken out of self-motivation and interests directly related to her work (Majluf

and Wuffarden, 1999, p. 52). Her status as an artist and prominent art teacher gave her more outstanding agency and autonomy in the social context of the time.

Although it would be interesting to continue investigating the political stance of women artists in Peru in the early twentieth century, what motivates the mention of Izcue in this article is the impact that her work generated, as she successfully applied pre-Hispanic motifs to textiles and household items in the collections of major fashion houses in Paris and New York. This fact is relevant because it incorporated the Peruvian aesthetics and identity in the contemporary decorative arts of the world's great capitals for the first time. Later, in 1940, when Elena returned to Peru from Europe, she created the National Workshop of Applied Graphic Arts with the government's support. The creation of this educational institution is the antecedent of what we know today as the centers of technological innovation of design, through which the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Tourism promotes the improvement of handicraft activities, that is to say, the artistic manifestations of the rural communities of Peru to promote tourism. This shows that since the 1940s, there was an interest and social concern for the craft communities to be better compensated for their work with the support of didactic, artistic, and productive components.

## 5. The *detentes* embroidered by the nuns of the Convent of Santa Clara

The following example shows the development of decorative textile work in the religious sphere. It consists of more than 1,350 small-format *detentes* (cloth pins) embroidered by cloistered nuns and intended to be sold to earn income for their sustenance, as was the usual practice in the daily life of these nuns since the seventeenth century (Van Deusen, 2012, p. 37).

According to the data provided by the Peruvian antiquarian Jorge Bustamante Arce, owner of the collection mentioned above, the *detentes* were used by soldiers in wars and by people in general during pandemics such as the current one, as a protective sacramental amulet. This assumption could be supported by the representation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that usually appears in its center, as well as by the shape of the Peruvian coat of arms. (Fig.1)

## 6. Life stories

The following narratives have been drawn from individual conversations with embroidery artists Sol Toledo and Claudia García between April and July 2021. The dialogues referred at first to their artistic productions and their particular connections with embroidery and sewing techniques. In a second moment, they focused on personal reflections based on their emotional reactions and attitudes in the face of the critical situation caused by the pandemic in Lima.

### 6.1 The paths of Sol

Sol Toledo's work in recent years has consisted of a daily exercise of rescuing the natural elements that she has been able to find in the midst of the overwhelming city of Lima, in the cold pavement and its cracks. Photography has been her favorite medium to make this non-invasive compilation of symbolic images of the natural life that persists in the middle of the cement and the gray sky on her daily commute from home to work. This visual record is not improvised for Sol, but neither is it produced; the objects photographed



Figure 1. Embroidered *detentes* with the Peruvian Coat of arms and the Sacred Heart of Jesus by the cloistered nuns of the Convent of Santa Clara, Lima, Peru, in the early 20th century (private collection of Jorge Bustamante).

seem to lead her almost directly to memories of her childhood and youth in Chachapoyas and Cali, where vegetation and rain abounded and constituted a space of freedom and joy. With an agronomist father from Puno and a mother from Medellin, constantly traveling and moving, Sol approaches her personal past imagery through embroidery on its own or amalgamated with the photographs she takes daily. She has two ongoing projects and the pandemic has given her the necessary time and space; the first is titled *Botánica urbana* (Urban botanics) and in the series *Aflora*<sup>2</sup> (Sprouts) she includes photographs of flowers and fallen branches, some of which have already been walked on, but still retain their shape and color. By means of embroidery, the artist rescues them and “detaches” them from the rough ground on which they fell, thus creating a personal botanical study of the city. The second project is titled *Herencia* (Heritage) and in it she is developing the *Ingredientes* (Ingredients) series with embroideries that illustrate the feeling of the mixed heritage of different and similar cultures, such as the Colombian and the Peruvian cultures, based on symbolic elements of Sol’s cuisine. The Latin American culinary tradition carries within itself the task of transmitting love. Sol says: “When there is a celebration at home or when my daughter receives an award, a good meal is prepared because it is the expression of affection and reward.”

Resorting to embroidery has been part of the inheritance received from her mother, who used to embroider in cross-stitch. Sol’s artistic sensibility makes her perceive that the work goes beyond drawing and even painting since, with each stitch, the fibers fuse to give shape, relief, and color to these elements of nature, memory, and heritage. (Fig.2)

The pandemic has brought Sol more positive than negative experiences. For her, confinement has been synonymous with slowing down, and house, home, family, and tranquility have taken center stage.

Being at home has also meant devoting more time to cooking, but not as a mechanical or obligatory act, but as a pleasurable activity that has increased her love for the ingredients and the scents they emit. The artist affirms: “Tasting the flavors that I cook and that identify me is for me like when I embroider and pierce the fabric with the needle to give color not only to the surface but to all of it.”

Another positive aspect of Sol’s experiences during the pandemic is the use of virtual social networks. She prefers Instagram because she considers it more visual and professional. Through her page, Acus-Sutura (‘sewing needle’ in Latin), the embroiderer feels that she is involved in the embroidery community and receives authentic feedback: “It is thanks to social networks that I have been encouraged to make new projects and carry them out... I prefer to receive feedback, especially from strangers. It gives me security and support.”

## 6.2 Claudia’s poetic fantasy

*Cuentos para colgar* (Stories to hang) is the name of Claudia García’s artistic project. She composes fantasy characters such as bird-women, birds, animals, and plants in idyllic landscapes that materialize her intimacy and inner world through small pieces. Music, poetry, nature, memories, and everyday life are the elements that constantly intertwine in each stitch that Claudia makes in the small pieces of fabric to narrate visual stories.

2 TN. *Aflora* is a verb that can also be translated as “appears” or “emerges”, usually related to geology. The artist takes advantage of its etymological similarity to the verb “bloom” to relate it to botanical themes.



Figure 2. Sol Toledo. Ingredientes series, from the Herencia project, Lima, 2021. Cotton thread embroidery on canvas, 19.5 cm diameter each. Prints in b/w.



Her first approach to embroidery was as a child through her maternal grandmother, Esther, from whom she inherited her dedication to the craft. Then, in the eighties, during her stay in Chile, Claudia made her first embroidery in a card to send to her grandmother by post. She did it on a piece of jute on which she intuitively embroidered a landscape. Sending a handmade embroidery was her way of showing affection and love to those who were far away. With this experience, Claudia discovered the expressive power of her embroidery. For this self-taught artist, hand embroidery is a poetic and meditative action. Claudia says: “The feel of the fabric, the traversing of the needle, and seeing how each stitch is engraved is for me a way of materializing the intimate.”

For Claudia, the pandemic era has disrupted the space of connection she used to have with her creative process. Now, she finds it more challenging to work with the same rhythm and stability as before: “The situation of our country and the world, in general, have made our emotions overtake us.” However, with the serenity that characterizes her, the artist practices rituals before sitting down to work. Then, once she has the needle and thread in her hands, everything seems to flow outwards through a serene connection with her inner self.

Two months after the first conversations, although Claudia again mentioned the discomfort of the health crisis, she has a resilient attitude, saying: “After all this time, we have realized that we are not in control of our own lives and that situations are very unpredictable. However, I have rediscovered how to relate to difficult situations and have begun to flow freely. The same has happened with my productivity.”

The artist continually mentions the loss of energy during the pandemic due to the worries she had to bear while caring for loved ones around her. However, she also comments that it has been thanks to the return to her work that she has been able to bounce back: “My textile work allows me to communicate and see myself through that process. The connection with my work has become more personal and more intimate.”

As for socialization through virtual social networks, Claudia perceives it as a positive effect because the networks have allowed her to connect with women who have similar interests, such as embroidery and sewing, and her link with poetic narrative: “I have been able to connect with other embroiderers, especially Chilean and Argentinean, and I have also participated in haiku workshops, among other things, because I wanted to go through the experience of poetic relationships with music, some readings and my plastic expression with fabrics and threads.”

As a result of these new forms of communication, the artist tries to make (emotional) “deliveries” of companionship and support: “I have been able to see in other women and myself, tenderness, beauty, and poetry. My work is at the service of the community; I desire to help other people emotionally through the message that my pieces communicate.” Claudia concludes: “It may be a small thing, but it is what I want to do.” (*Fig.3*) (*Fig.4*)

## 7. Reflections and conclusions

- From the testimonies of the two artists, it has been possible to identify the similarities that constitute the answers to the questions initially posed in this article. The conclusions and reflections that have motivated them are presented below.

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- Decorative textile handicrafts have played a therapeutic role and have facilitated the resilience of the artists in the face of the vicissitudes experienced during the pandemic.
  - Although each of the artists has perceived the pandemic differently, both have found effects that have contributed positively to their emotional balance in their textile works. They have noticed a greater involvement in their production thanks, among other factors, to the reduced mobility caused by the confinement. The small formats of their works and the easy access to materials have facilitated their work. Working at home has allowed them to combine care and attention to the family in a profitable way. At the same time, they have been able to dedicate more time and concentration to the intimate, mental, and mechanical processes that sewing and embroidery demand.
  - The mental and emotional processes experienced during sewing and embroidery have enabled the artists to channel their negative emotions effectively. This has been possible due to the restructuring of their time and the reinvention of their workspaces with daily household chores.
  - The themes of both artists require reflection, introspection, and a meditative attitude. Each of them has managed, in different ways, to strengthen their work, deepen their themes and dedicate more time and concentration to their artistic work. They have been able to enrich their discourses with new elements derived from their reflections in the face of critical moments.
  - The activity of decorative textile handicrafts has had a positive impact on the artists. Through the virtual interest groups, they have verified that there are many women around the world who obtain benefits on an emotional level thanks to their textile work.
  - Socialization through virtual channels and common interest groups play a fundamental role in attenuating isolation and generating spaces for sharing, teaching, and learning manual work. The free availability of information and human contact have greatly facilitated the dissemination of techniques and their plastic possibilities.
  - Textile handicrafts promote people’s creative processes, even if they are not professionals.
  - The nature of decorative textile handicrafts is gaining popularity, especially in the virtual interest groups of the most used social networks. This allows for a “democratization,” in the sense that anyone, professional or not, has the opportunity to make their work visible and submit it to criticism.

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Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Figure 3. Claudia García. Work processes, 2021

Figure 4. Claudia García. *Cada una con su propio universo* (Each one with her own universe), Lima, 2021. Wire and fabric soft sculpture, 25 cm x 25 cm.

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