

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Textile Society of America Symposium  
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

---

2020

## People, landscape and wool weaving in Venezuelan Andes

María Dávila

Eduardo Portillo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Materials Conservation Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fashion Design Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Museum Studies Commons](#)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## People, landscape and wool weaving in Venezuelan Andes

María Dávila and Eduardo Portillo

[veneseda@gmail.com](mailto:veneseda@gmail.com)

Wool weaving has been practiced in the Venezuelan Andean region for centuries, specifically at the Páramo ecosystem, this activity was introduced by the Spaniards and shaped by the relation of its inhabitants with the environment, warm clothes needs, climate and the isolation of the place. Weavers who still use handspun wool, cotton and natural dyes have made blankets and Ruanas traditionally on elementary handlooms. Beauty in simplicity has built a singular aesthetic to be wearing within the mist of the mountains. This paper intend to share a personal encounter of the authors with the community of weavers, spinners, dyers, sheep breeders, farmers, landscape and culture of the Venezuelan Andes through the wool weaving, a visual journey on this encounter is discussed to illustrate and appreciate the way of life and textile making of the Páramo people and their silent experience.

The Páramo is an ecosystem of the highest Andean mountainous areas of the equatorial belt in height between 3000 and 4300 meters above sea level, it's considered to be found in the Andes of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and northern Peru. Moorlands is the word that translates into English the word Páramo. In this presentation we'll use the Spanish word Páramo and will refer to the Páramos of the Venezuelan Tropical Andes, specifically the area of Mucuchíes and surroundings.



*Páramo Valle de Las González, Mérida, Venezuela. Photo by authors*

There are several definitions of Páramo and one of them that is very close to our experience is that the páramos resemble a continental archipelago surrounded by a sea of jungles. The environmental extremes due to the strong variations in the climate and the high solar radiation allowed the development of different endemic species in the area, the most relevant and

emblematic are the frailejón plant (*Speletia spp*) and the condor (*Vultur gryphus*). The Páramos are the result of multiple environmental and anthropogenic factors.



*Frailejones (Speletia spp.). Photo by authors*



*Cóndor, (Vultur gryphus). Photo by authors*

The Páramos, and in particular their lagoons, have always been considered sacred and mysterious spaces, a perception that has been inherited up to the present by peasant societies. This region was difficult to access well into the twentieth century, a unique culture around the potatoes and wheat cultivation was formed there. In 1926 the Trans-Andean road was opened and connected the Venezuelan Andes with the rest of the country and brought great changes in the population living conditions.



*Apartaderos, Mérida, Venezuela. Photo by authors*

There are several popular festivities related to the Catholic religious calendar, on these occasions the people from the páramos “come down” from the most remote villages to celebrate and share in community. The fiesta of San Isidro Labrador takes place during May in all the communities of Mérida in order to celebrate the cultivation of land. The farmers and their oxen that parade decorated with fruits, vegetables and work tools attend it. It is a great opportunity to enjoy the simple pleasures of life.



*San Isidro Festivity. Mucuchíes, Mérida, Venezuela. Photo by authors*



*San Isidro Festivity, La Pedregosa Alta, Mérida, Venezuela. Photo by authors*

The celebration of San Benito has a special relevance too. San Benito is a saint particularly venerated throughout the Andean region and his festival is a blend of color, history, religion, organization and encounter. With profound admiration the devotees try to emulate their saint by painting their faces with black ink, they dress with different attire and dances according to the group to which they belong and in some cases their organization is very rigid.



*San Benito Festivity. Mucuchíes, Mérida, Venezuela. Photo by authors*



*San Benito Festivity. Mucuchíes, Mérida, Venezuela. Photo by authors*



*San Benito Festivity. Mucuchíes, Mérida, Venezuela. Photo by authors*



*San Benito Festivity. Mucuchíes, Mérida, Venezuela. Photo by authors*

In the midst of extreme contrasts, heat and coldness, loneliness and encounters, long distances and the bustle of the people in the villages, wool weaving still survives in the Páramos. Even today, due to the precarious conditions and scarcity that the Andean páramo has had for centuries the material culture in some areas is related to what is necessary to live. The heating of the

houses revolves around the wood stove, most of the activities are carried out in the kitchen to allow proximity to the heat source.



*Florinda de Castillo Rondón. Photo Barbara Brandli. Collection Carolina & Fernando Eseverri.*

After the structural change on the means and forms of production and land ownership during the Colony period, the horizontal frame looms and sheep breeding were introduced by the Spaniards in order to process wool to weave simple cloths for the making of ruanas, blankets and rugs, it was probably done with just very basic knowledge by weavers recently initiated in the craft. The ruana is a dressing garment to keep warm, it is made of two rectangular woven cloth sewn together leaving a hole in the middle to pass the head, blankets and rugs also has the same principle of narrow bands that are sewn together according to the width intended. The weaving know-how is transferred from one generation to another, especially those on dyeing with natural plants that require awareness of the places where to collect the stuff to be use in that process.

The woven pieces are based on open warp, generally raw cotton is used for the warp and single-stranded hand-spun wool for the weft that covers it and gives the weft-side appearance to the fabric. In some cases wool is also used as warp. Infinite variations are obtained with the use of colored stripes, small square drawings and columns are built by alternating contrasting colors. Tapestry technique is another resource used to create geometric figures.



*Wool Ruana, detail. Cecilio Santiago. Photo by authors*



*Ruana, detail. Estefanía Rivas. Photo Carlos Uzcátegui*



*Wool Blankets, Dora Sánchez and María Ageda Dávila. Collection Carolina & Fernando Eseverri. Photo Carlos Uzcátegui*



The intrinsic textile geometry is enhanced by the wool thickness, creating weaves with a graphic imprint. Great contrasts are observed using natural light and dark wool (without dyeing), as well as subtleties in the use of natural grays and browns. Sometimes different natural shades are also used along with dyed wool.

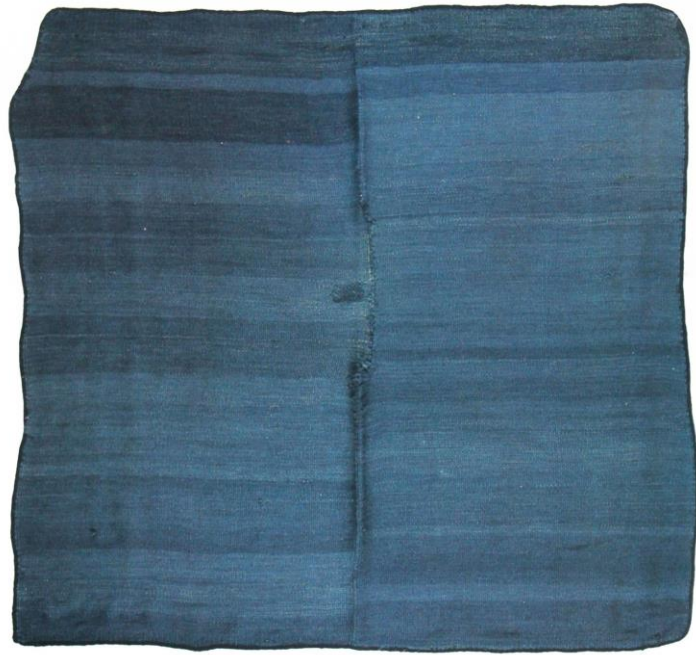


Wool blanket, Margarita Mora. Jimmy & Carolina Alcock Collection. Photo Nelson Garrido

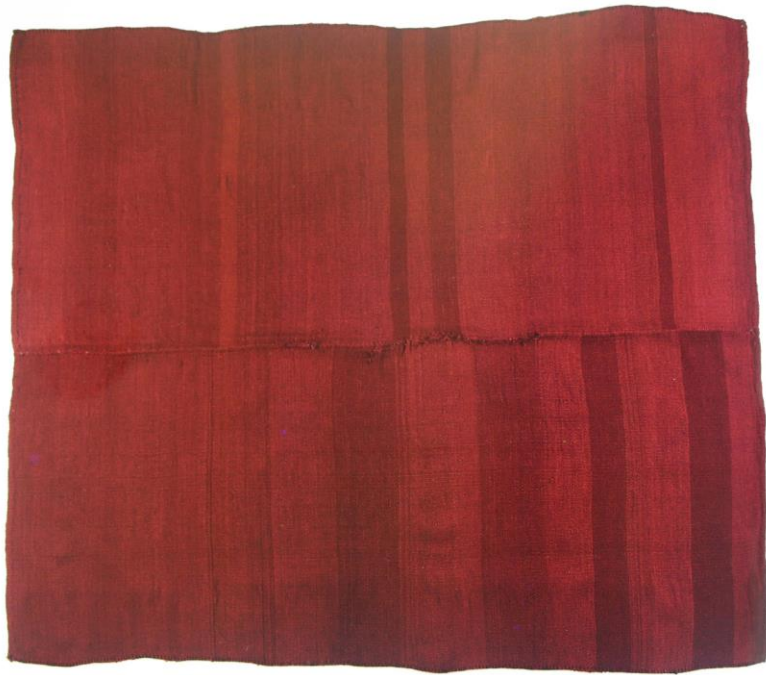
Natural dyes are used, for reds the “raicita” or little root (*Relburnium hypocarpium*), for yellows the “ojito” or little eye (*Miconia theaezans*), for the blues the indigo (*Indigosfera tinctoria*), oranges and browns of the “barba de piedra” or stone beard, (*Usnea spp*). Expressive pieces of a single color were also woven with an infinite number of shades that come from the wool variations.



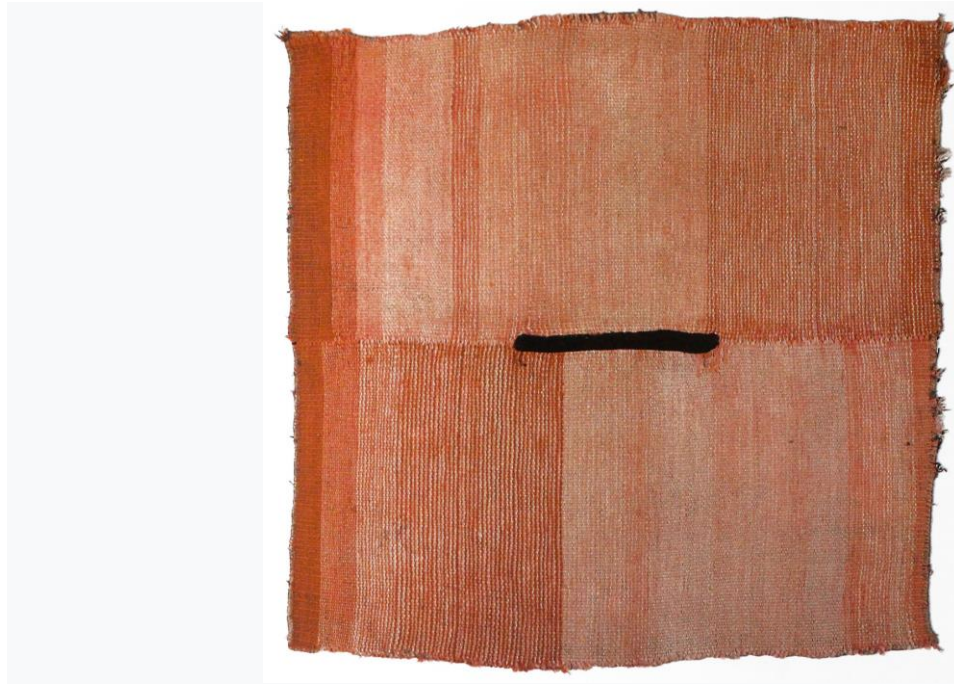
Wool blanket, unknown weaver. Jimmy & Carolina Alcock Collection. Photo Nelson Garrido



*Wool blanket, unknown weaver. Jimmy & Carolina Alcock Collection. Photo Nelson Garrido*

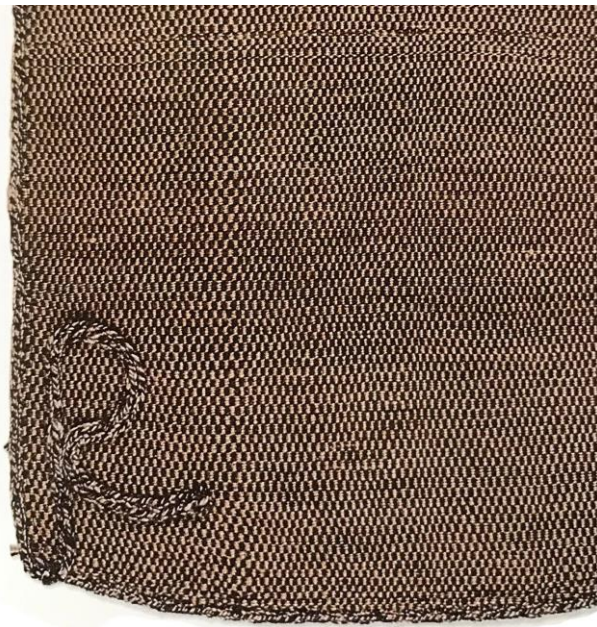


*Wool blanket, unknown weaver. Jimmy & Carolina Alcock Collection. Photo Nelson Garrido*



*Wool ruana, unknown weaver. Jimmy & Carolina Alcock Collection. Photo Nelson Garrido*

There are several finishing techniques, using a braiding that surrounds the edges and ensures the stability of the weave, also it can be done collecting the warp threads and inserting them into the weave border, some times by knotting the warp threads and leaving them as decoration. The weavers themselves with the embroidered initials of their future owners customize some commissioned pieces.



*Wool blanket, unknown weaver. Jimmy & Carolina Alcock Collection. Photo Nelson Garrido*

Great weavers left their mark, specially mention to María Ageda Dávila, Margarita Mora, Dora Sánchez, Guillermo Sánchez, Estefanía Rivas, Enedina Sánchez, Cecilio Santiago and among them Juan Félix Sánchez stands out in a special way.



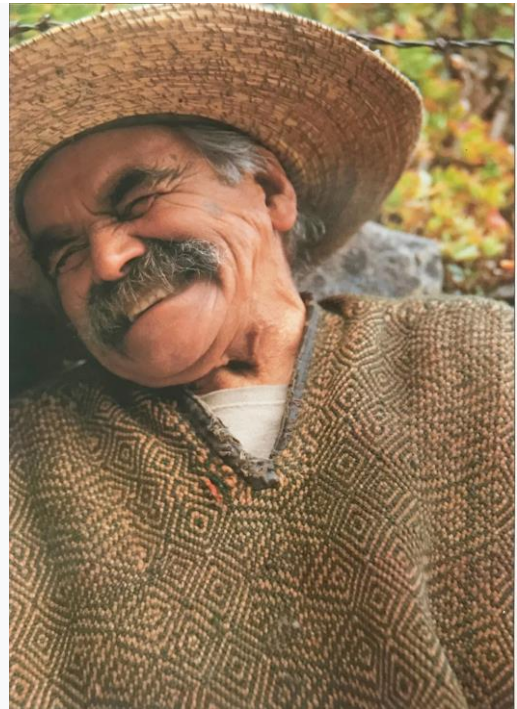
*Margarita Mora. Photo by authors*



*María Ageda Dávila, Photo Barbara Brandli*



*Estefanía Sánchez. Photo by authors and Juan Félix Sánchez. Photo María Carrillo, José López, José Moreno*



In 1943 Juan Félix Sánchez and Epifania Gil moved to the Páramo del Tisure, one of the most remote places in the Cordillera de Mérida. In this isolated valley Juan Félix Sánchez developed an extensive work that ranges from architecture, woodcarving, narrative and weaving. In this medium he made one of his most important contributions after observing a four shaft loom and understanding the possibilities that are open up by adding one more frame, he introduced a third shaft to his two shaft traditional loom, he began to weave diamonds and zig-zags alternating two-colored yarns, which became an aesthetic and technical innovation. In Juan Félix Sánchez work we can observe the purpose of what is necessary, what is indispensable for life and according to his words with the aesthetics of the ugly that becomes beautiful in the hands of the artist.

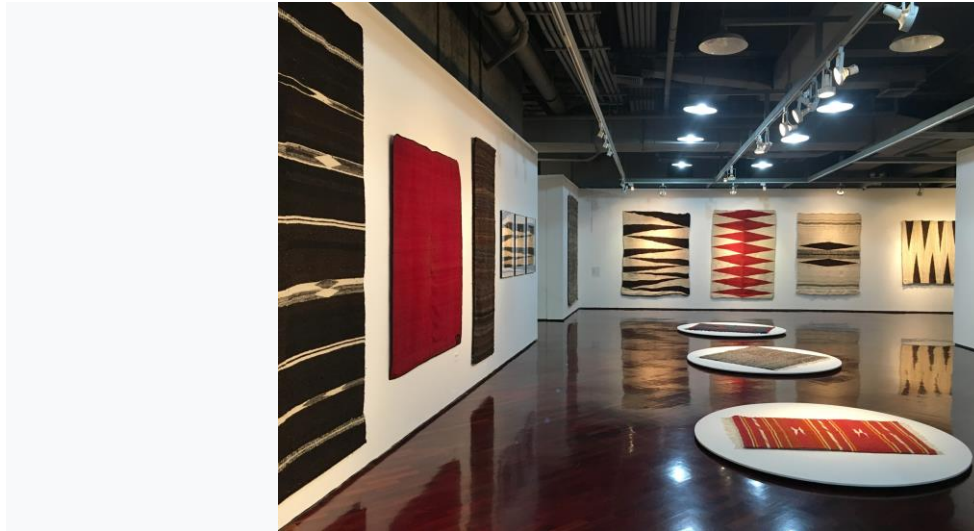


*El Tisure's chapel. Photo María Carrillo, José López, José Moreno*

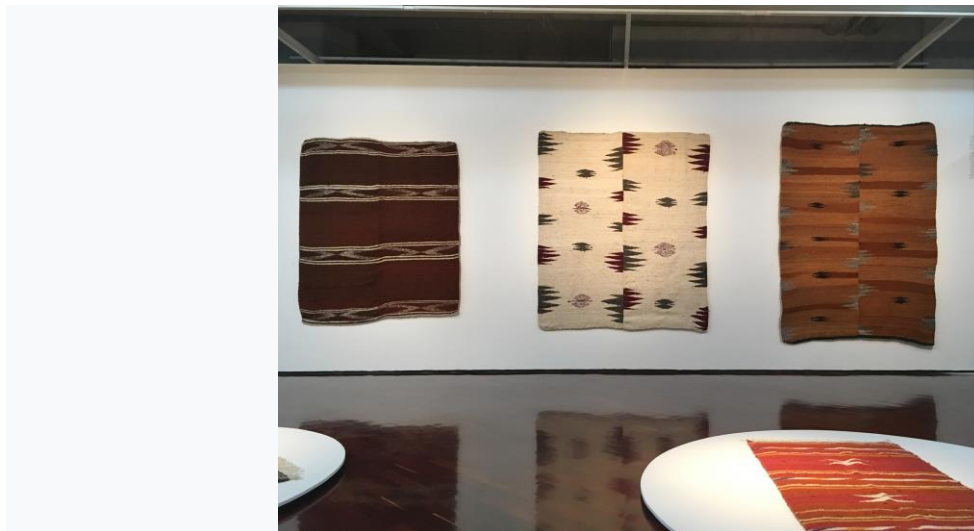


*Wool blanket. Juan Félix Sánchez. Photo by authors*

With the introduction of modern and industrial clothes and blankets, wool weaves have another destination, they obtained a high appreciation and have been recognized and collected. There are some private collections in the country that treasure them. There are still many open questions and a lot of room for research on wool weaving at the Venezuelan Andes.



*Tramas Andinas exhibition, Sala TAC, Caracas. Photo Yuri Liscano*



*Tramas Andinas exhibition, Sala TAC, Caracas. Photo Yuri Liscano*

The purity of the materials and the honesty using them, the simplicity of their drawings and the silent beauty of the blankets and ruanas of the Páramo are a physical expression of the environment and living conditions. Venezuelan Andean weaves tell us about the experiences of the Páramo peoples, their searches and needs, their relationship with the environment and the responses to their challenges, its existence evidence that there are many ways of living and many ways to weave.

## Bibliography

Dávila, María and Portillo, Eduardo, interviews with Enedina Sánchez, Nelson Garrido and Elías González Sanavia, August-October 2020.

Cinco, Grupo, *Juan Félix Sánchez*, Caracas: Grupo Cinco, 1982.

Eduardo, Planchart Licea, *Juan Félix Sánchez. El Gigante del Tisure*, Caracas: Armitano Editores, 1992.

Sala TAC. “Mitivivó y otros páramos. Sillas, bancos, tures y tejidos en la colección de Jimmy y Carolina Alcock,” *Catálogo* No 39. Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Exlibris 2008.

Sala TAC. “Tramas Andinas. Tradición e innovación en la colección de textiles de Bárbara Brandli”, Exposición 93, Caracas, Venezuela: Gráficas Lauki, 2018.