

FIG. 1

DETAIL. TWO PUMAS. WOOL TAPESTRY. SOUTHERN COASTAL (EARLY NAZCA) CULTURE, ABOUT 500 A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

SOME PERUVIAN TEXTILE MOTIVES BASED ON LIFE FORMS

DECORATIONS found on Peruvian textiles are always striking in design and frequently bizarre. They are based principally on life forms: man, puma, bird, and fish.¹ Although these motives were occasionally treated naturalistically, they were generally represented in a more or less conventionalized manner. When conventionalization was carried to a great extent—and such was frequently the case—the motives are recognized only with great difficulty. Due to variations caused by the constant repetition of a pattern over a long period of time, the textile motives are often but summary indications of the original models. They are sometimes weird jumbles of strange shapes and colors, and their seeming incoherency, like *L'art pour L'art* expressed in Cubism, becomes an irritation.

Let us, then, inquire into the nature of these motives, often so difficult to understand. It is important in the appreciation of Peruvian textiles to know that a motive is a conventionalized puma, not an Andean landscape,

¹While other life forms were used, these are the most frequently found. A few designs, evidently of geometric origin, were perhaps originally created by the angular expediency of warp and weft. Plant forms seldom occurred.

for such knowledge gives us a groundwork of actuality upon which an aesthetic reaction can be based. For example, a certain Peruvian textile in the Metropolitan Museum of Art was studied during the period of a year, and no trace of design was apparent. As a result the textile was classified as a colorful but utterly decadent piece, and of little interest. By accident the writer discovered the design, a series of masked men,² thus enabling the textile to be observed as was originally intended, and showed it to be a valuable document in Peruvian archaeology, not without interest from the standpoint of design.

Although motives generally can be recognized with study, it is far more difficult to explain their esoteric meanings, or, indeed, to prove the existence of such qualities. An exact explanation of the motives is impossible, and an attempt in that direction would be fanciful. When such questions of fact arise, Peruvian archaeology is surrounded by an especially thick cloud of pervasive vagueness.³ In its generalizations it is a subject sufficiently vague.

Some generalizations, however, can be made. The predominance of animal figures immediately suggests an animal cult. Together with the primitive peoples of all races, the early Peruvians felt a spiritual kinship with the animal world. One of the types of decoration most frequently found is a motive that may be either an anthropomorphized animal, or a man in animal disguise. It is significant that the most renowned single monument in Peruvian antiquity, the Monolithic Gateway at Tiahuanaco, consists of rows of such figures sculptured in relief. The Peruvians apparently found in animals certain admirable qualities with which they attempted to endow themselves. This conception of animal qualities exists among primitive peoples even now. To-day in parts of Africa the lion is venerated, and the elephant still has his sycophants in Asia. Nor is our present highly civilized man without survivals of this idea of animal qualities. We think of the fox as foxy, crafty, and the dog as dogged, faithful. Walter Muir has pointed out in a recent number of the *New Freeman* that the qualities we most admire in men of action are the so-called animal

²A detail of this textile is described and illustrated in Figure 10.

³The Peruvians left no written records that might assist the archaeologist, who has been forced to rely on other sources, namely traditions and excavations. But the traditions are at best vague, and the excavations, with a few notable exceptions, have been the work of fortune-hunting grave-robbers.

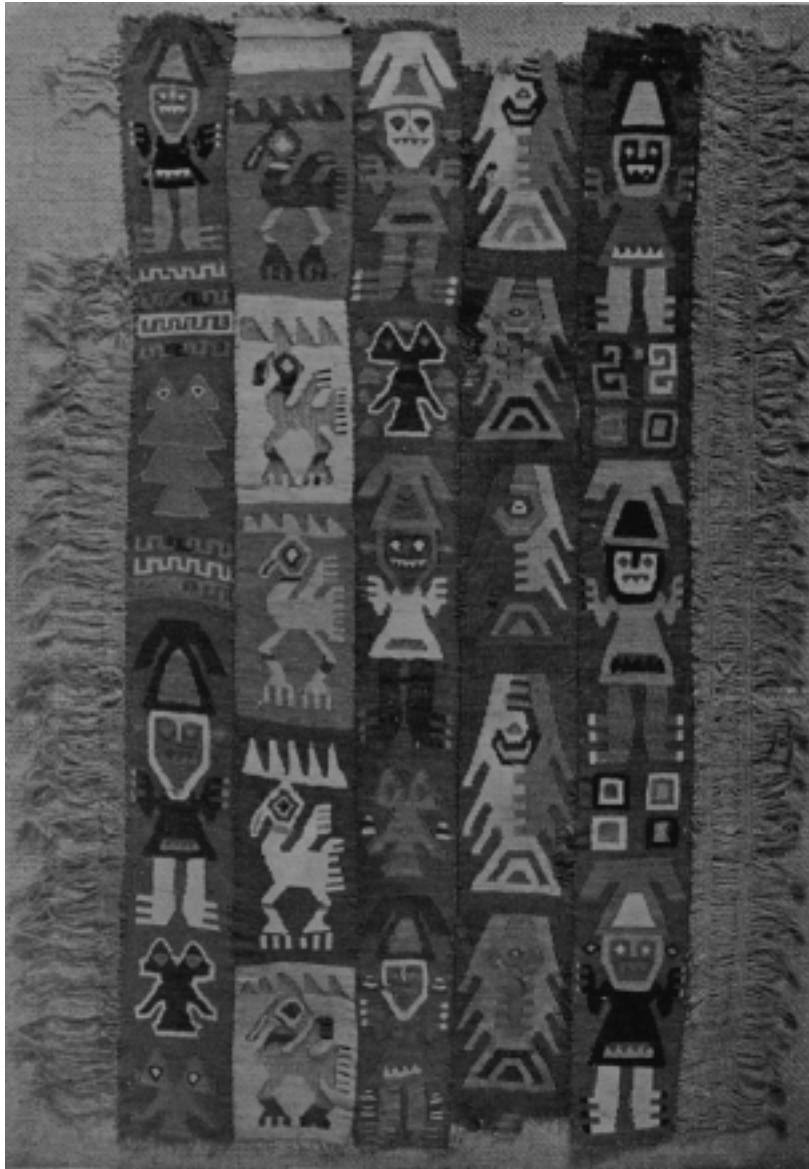


FIG. 2

HUMAN FIGURE, FISH AND BIRD. WOOL TAPESTRY. NORTHERN COASTAL (LATE CHIMU) CULTURE, ABOUT 1000 A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

qualities, such as the cunning of Richelieu and the amorousness of Cleopatra.

In addition to these distinctive animal qualities, animals were important to the Peruvians for other, more pragmatic, reasons. Birds, beasts, and fishes were of vital consequence in the lives of the Andean peoples, for they supplied in a measure food, clothing, decoration, and, last but not least, companionship upon this mysterious earth. It is altogether probable, then, that the animals represented upon these cloths are not insignificant decorations, designed merely to please the eye, but the mind-exciting and meaningful expressions of a primitive culture.

At the end of this article will be found analyses of the motives found upon a few selected textiles. Therein the writer has attempted to clarify some of the confusing elements of the decoration's structure. The examples chosen are from the collection of textiles in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Many of these textiles are the recent gift of George D. Pratt. They are part of the artistic tradition of the great Tiahuanaco Empire,⁴ which flourished both on the Coast and in the Highlands of ancient Peru from the years 500 to 900 A. D., and whose artistic expression represents the apex of Peruvian culture. Supreme in craftsmanship, decisive in design, these textiles are monuments to a mighty period in the history of the art of the New World.

The specimens here illustrated have been divided into two groups: the more naturalistic and the more conventionalized. This arrangement, however, is quite arbitrary, and does not illustrate a tendency in Peruvian art towards conventionalization. On the contrary, naturalistic motives are frequently later in period than the more conventionalized. The differences in rendering are due to causes too complicated for explanation in this short article. The illustrations serve to show some of the different manifestations of motives occurring in textile design, regardless of period.

Description of Textiles Illustrated (More Naturalistic Representation)

Figure 1

Puma. The animal has a well defined head and body. The feline whiskers

⁴A Chronology of Peruvian Cultures by Philip Ainsworth Means, helpful in distinguishing the various artistic phases, appears in *Peruvian Textiles*, by P. A. Means and Joseph Breck, New York, 1930.

around his mouth are accentuated, and his tongue protrudes. This is a good example of design of the early Coastal type. It is from Nazca, and dates about the year 500 A. D. It is tapestry woven in wool and brightly colored. (Accession no. 29.146.2, detail)

Figure 2

Human Figure. In the first vertical row from the right is a man dressed in what appears to be a sleeved shirt. Although simply rendered, the essential elements of the human figure are present.

Fish. In the next row is the fish motive. The fins, mouth, and eyes may be recognized.

Bird. In the fourth row from the right is the bird motive; the wing, tail, and head-feathers may be seen. This textile is of the northern Coastal (Late Chimú) culture and dates from about the year 1000 A. D. It is tapestry woven in wool, in several colors. (Accession no. 28.171.8)



FIG. 3

DETAIL. FISH. WOOL TAPESTRY. TIAHUANACO STYLE, ABOUT IX CENTURY A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

(More Conventionalized Representation)

Figure 3

Fish. This highly conventionalized motive bears little resemblance to the fish examined in Figure 2. Exaggerated eyes remain, but the tail and the fins of the fish are gone, or else resolved into angular appendages. A

highly decorative motive, this conventionalized fish is tapestry woven in wool in dark colors. It is apparently a late manifestation of the Tiahuanaco culture, probably of the ninth century. (Accession no. 30.13.6, detail). Another conventionalized fish motive occurs in Figure 2 in the fifth row from the right. Less conventionalized than the motive in Figure 3, it is, however, far different from the naturalistic fish found in the same textile.



FIG. 4

DOUBLE-HEADED BIRD. WOOL TAPESTRY.
COASTAL, TIAHUANACO STYLE, ABOUT IX
CENTURY A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
OF ART, NEW YORK.

Figure 4

Bird. This double headed bird motive, except for the beaks and wings, has little connection with the bird form. Degenerate and crude, this is, nevertheless, a good example of high conventionalization. The textile, tapestry woven in wool, is of the Tiahuanaco period of the Coast. It was possibly done in the ninth century. (Accession no. 28.64.14)

Figure 5

Puma. The head of this otherwise entirely human figure is that of a puma, and it is moderately conventionalized. It is interesting here to note that the creature is playing the "pipes of Pan" and a bell-like instrument. Pipes of this type are frequently found in Peruvian graves. This fragment is tapestry woven in wool, and of the northern Coastal (Late Chimú) culture, about the year 1000 A. D. (Accession no. 82.1.5, detail)

Figure 6

Human Figure. This figure, a winged man, rushes to the right, holding in front of him, with one hand, a staff. His head is thrown back ecstatically, so that the nose and open mouth showing two rows of teeth look straight up to the sky. A headdress, together with a wing attached at the back, is decorated with two conventionalized animal faces, probably pumas (note the eye and the long "L" shaped mouth), and two tree-shaped forms. The rear foot is much larger than the forward one, due possibly to a primitive *horror vacui*. This desire for covering all the surface with decoration is seen in the lower section of the face and in parts of the wing, where unrecognizable decorations fill vacant areas. The motive seen upon this textile, which incidentally is an important monument in Peruvian archaeology, is quite similar to the figures found upon the Monolithic Gateway at Tiahuanaco, and although somewhat later in period, is inspired by the same tradition. Like most of the Peruvian textiles, it is tapestry woven in wool on a cotton warp. Its date is about the year 800 A. D. (Accession no. 30.16.10, detail)

Figure 7

Human Figure. This motive is similar in conception to the one illustrated in Figure 6. A masked and winged human figure is running to the left and bearing a staff before him. Upon his wing is a conventionalized face, apparently that of a puma, with an eyeball of two colors. This textile is embroidered in wool on a cotton cloth that is similar to modern canvas or petit-point and other embroidery. It is in the Tiahuanaco tradition, and was probably worked upon the Coast about the year 600 A. D. (Accession no. 30.16.9, detail). This motive and the preceding one are excellent illustrations of the type of human figure which is characteristic of the great Tiahuanaco culture. Fabrics of this kind are rare, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art is fortunate in possessing a series of textiles showing the

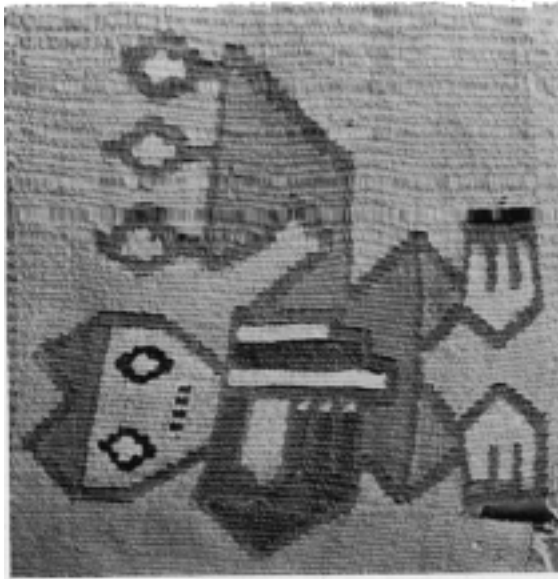


FIG. 5

DETAIL. PUMA FACE. WOOL TAPESTRY. NORTHERN COASTAL (LATE CHIMU) CULTURE, ABOUT 1000 A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

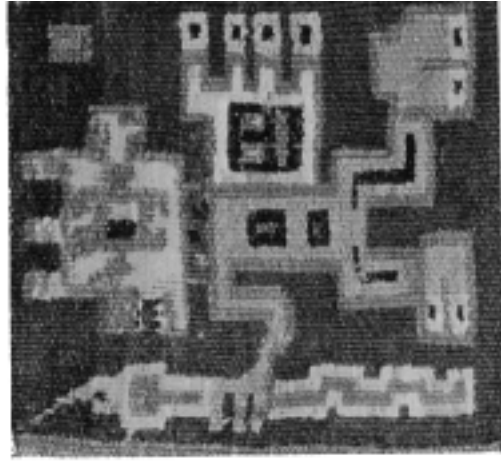


FIG. 7

DETAIL. WINGED AND MASKED HUMAN FIGURE. COTTON EMBROIDERED IN WOOL. TIAHUANACO STYLE, ABOUT 600 A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

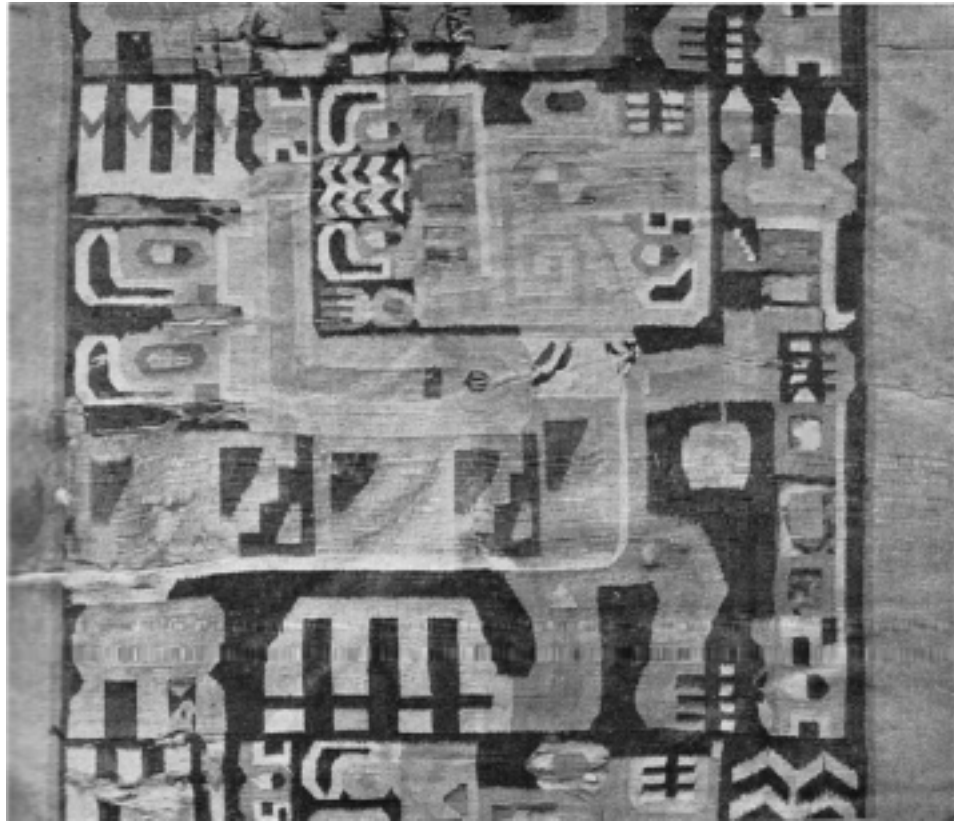


FIG. 6

DETAIL. WINGED HUMAN FIGURE. WOOL TAPESTRY. TIAHUANACO STYLE, ABOUT 800
A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

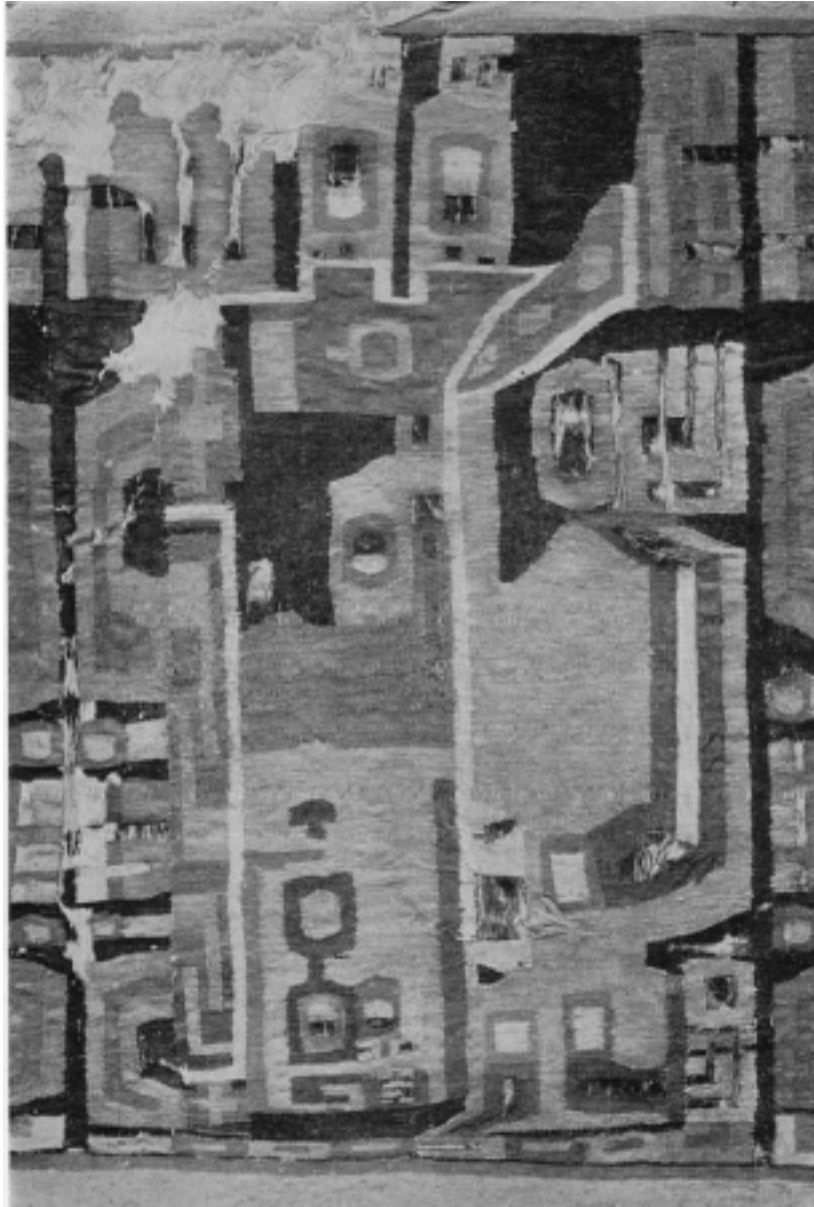


FIG. 8

DETAIL. WINGED HUMAN FIGURE. WOOL TAPESTRY. TIAHUANACO STYLE, ABOUT
900 A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

various manifestations of this motive. The following three plates are later and more chaotic representations of the same design.

Figure 8

Human Figure. A winged human figure lacking an animal mask, and represented as running to the left, holds in one hand a thin staff, which may be a spear or a spear-thrower. The face, surmounted by a headdress, is in profile and looks towards the left. Teeth may be seen beneath a nose in the form of a curved fret, at the right of which is an eye adorned with the "tear" ornament, a strange motive, but characteristic of human eye decoration. This "tear" ornament is well illustrated and described more fully in Figure 9. At the right extremity is a wing (badly worn away) upon which are found two bird heads, facing the right, recognized by their eyes and beaks. The rear foot is larger than the front foot. This example, tapestry woven in wool, is of the late Tiahuanaco period, probably made about the year 900 A. D. (Accession no. 30.16.3, detail)

Figure 9

Human Figure. This amazing decoration consists of a human figure, which is neither winged nor masked, facing the right. He holds a staff in his right hand and also one in his left. The lower part of the right staff is in the form of a child or a miniature man, with the head, one arm, and both feet delineated; the upper part of the staff may be a hand motive. The staff at the left (held in his right hand which is clearly visible), is decorated with puma faces. These animal faces also form important units in the decoration of the headdress. The man's dark-colored face is chiefly notable for a large tear ornament. It is composed of a two-colored eyeball from which is pendant a right angular ornament, representing a tear streak. At the left of the eyeball is an oval object, which in less incoherent motives has been distinguished as a wing. A girdle of triangular patterns is wrapped around the waist. Above the girdle is what appears to be a shirt decorated with animal heads, and a skirt decorated in similar fashion is below. At each side of the girdle are pendants which may be bags for carrying cocoa leaves, or merely ornaments. The textile is tapestry woven in wool, of the Tiahuanaco type, dating from about the year 900 A. D. (Accession no. 30.16.1, detail)

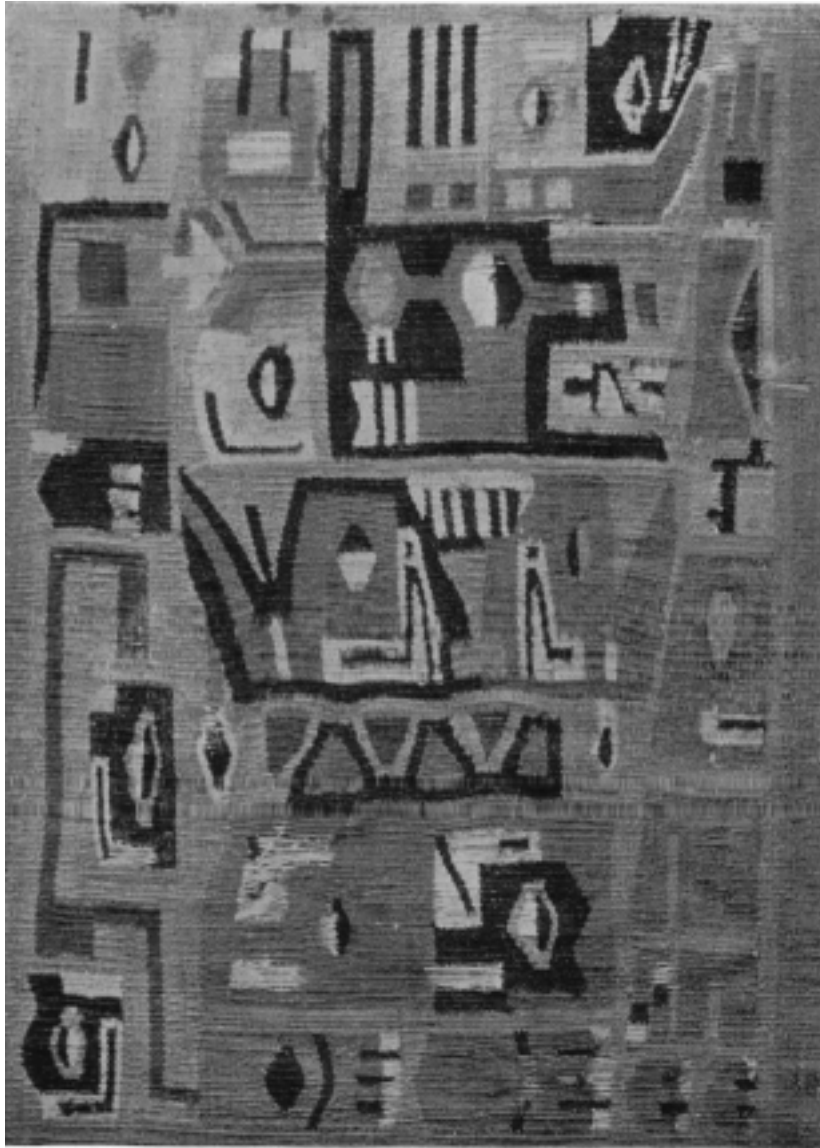


FIG. 9

DETAIL. HUMAN FIGURE. WOOL TAPESTRY. TIAHUANACO STYLE, ABOUT 900 A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

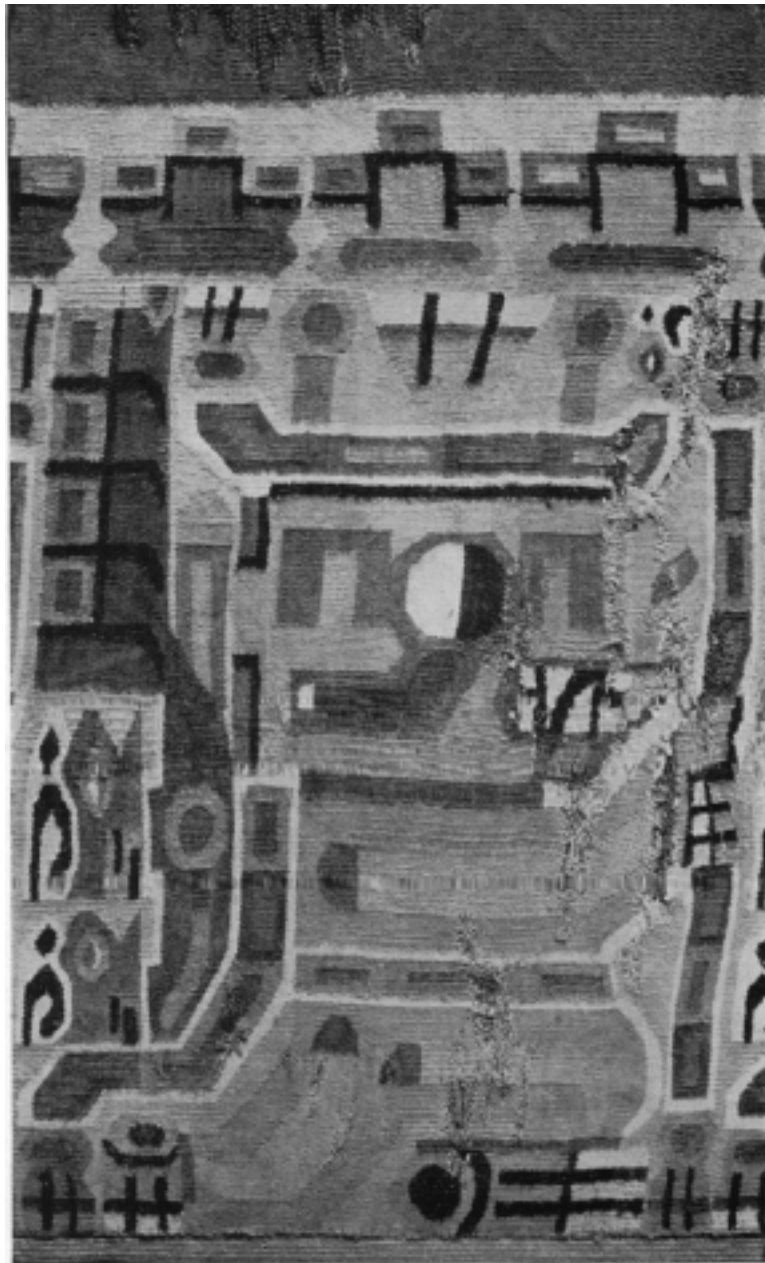


FIG. 10

DETAIL. WINGED HUMAN FIGURE. WOOL TAPESTRY. TIAHUANACO
STYLE, ABOUT IX CENTURY, A. D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART,
NEW YORK.

Figure 10

Human Figure. This figure marches to the right, carrying before him a staff. He has a human face with a "tear" decoration under the eye. An arm is indicated by a stripe across his body, and his legs are similarly represented. The wing upon his back apparently is in the form of a scaled serpent in whose mouth, open at the lower end of the wing, are two puma heads. The figure appears to have a girdle. This textile is tapestry woven in wool, of the Tiahuanacō type, and dates from the ninth century. (Accession no. 30.16.4, detail)

JOHN GOLDSMITH PHILLIPS.



SAMPLER, WORKED BY MISS MARY WILLIAMS (MEMBER NEEDLE AND BOBBIN CLUB) DESIGNED BY MRS. GEORGIANA BROWN HARBESOM FOR THE WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION FOR NATIONAL PROHIBITION REFORM.