

# NILDA CALLAÑAUPA

*Director of the Centre for Traditional Textiles in Cusco, Peru*

**A master indigenous Quechuan artist** who spins, weaves and knits in traditional styles, Nilda Callañaupa is also a scholar and the director and president of one of the most influential textile organisations in Peru. Born into the millennia-old Inca traditions of weaving in the Sacred Valley, Callañaupa discovered her gift for weaving as a young girl. Having honed her craft and travelled the world to speak at universities and museums about the disappearing art of Inca weaving, establishing the Centre for Traditional Textiles of Cusco (El Centro de Textiles Tradicionales de Cusco or CTTC) seemed like a natural progression.

The centre was designed in order to inspire poor Quechuan women to improve their economic circumstances and to save cultural traditions from being lost to future generations: “Traditional weaving practices on ancient-style backstrap looms were left in the hands of the elders... Young people were not learning to weave.” Techniques and patterns from 2,000 years ago were disappearing as weavers turned to more easily accessible and colourfast day-glow coloured chemical dyes. So in the early 1990s, using connections in Chinchero that dated back to her childhood, Callañaupa brought women together into a cooperative to share skills and techniques.

Callañaupa knows well the plight of the local Quechuan Native Americans, descendents of the Inca. She herself grew up in a small village and, like all the other local children, began tending a big flock of sheep when she was 6 years old. Her mother, Guadalupe Alvarez, taught her to spin

yarn and weave not only sheep’s wool but also that of llamas and alpacas. “Weaving was in my blood,” she said. By the time she was in her early teens, she was hooked. She financed her college education in Cusco by selling textiles, and her skills soon brought her world-wide recognition.

Callañaupa’s vision of revitalizing Inca weaving was, however, met with resistance in the early 1990s. “The elders were totally against it then,” she said, “but now they’re embracing it. They’re gaining respect [from this].” Still, to begin with she had to find land or a location for a weaving centre, legal advice and help establishing bylaws and a non-profit organisation. And, perhaps most importantly, she had to decide whether she just wanted to help her village of Chinchero, which is near enough to Cusco to get some tourist traffic, or to “dream bigger”. After two years of sorting through all of this, she took the plunge and began to include other communities and named her organisation the Centre for Traditional Textiles of Cusco in order to encompass the surrounding area. She wanted the works from weavers throughout Cusco and the Sacred Valley to reach a larger pool of potential buyers – which also meant tourists.

The National Geographic Society gave her seed money from an Expeditions Council grant to help start the CTTC in 1996. Over the past 18 years the centre has expanded to include a shop for top quality local weavings, a textile museum, a gallery, an area for weaving demonstrations and a hub for training in both textile and business skills.

In addition to preserving this historic craft and helping struggling Quechuan families, Callañaupa also wanted to inspire better quality textiles. She dreamed of a competition to inspire weavers to not only do their best work, but to continue to improve. In 2005 she teamed up with Jim Kane, founder of Culture Xplorers, a company dedicated to sustainable travel and to building relationships to help communities. Together they created the annual Weavers Awards. Around 600 weavers from 9 communities now compete for up to \$3,000 in prize money; and women, men and children all enter the competition. “Jim has been a big supporter of the awards,” she said. Over the past 10 years Culture Xplorers has not only made direct donations, it has also emphasized the importance of the awards on its website and brought in visitors who appreciate the high quality weavings, tapestries, hats and purses etc.

Just as Callañaupa and Kane had hoped, the contest has indeed proved motivational. While some entries are individual projects like hats or bags, large panels are made communally by many members of each village. These communal projects not only encourage everyone to do her (or his) best; they also foster the sharing of techniques among community members, helping to ensure that those skills will continue to be passed along rather than be lost for eternity.

The results have been impressive. At the 10th anniversary award ceremony in August, 2014, ▶









weavers talked about the economic incentive of the awards themselves as well as about the status and recognition the honours convey. That public recognition allows the weavers to charge more for their works when they sell their crafts to shops. And the award money and increased profits have allowed some of them to improve their living conditions, have surgery or send their children to school in Cusco. "The awards encourage them to continue producing high quality textiles with old, re-introduced techniques which are not practised anymore. The awards are so appreciated and are shared with their families. Their self-esteem goes up. Weavers feel recognized, which in turn inspires them to continue with more intricate techniques."

"If there were to be a Nobel Prize for Culture" said Wade Davis, of the National Geographic Society, "Nilda Callañaupa would deserve to have it. She has done more to revitalize traditional textiles in the southern Andes than anyone. Because of her, the quality of weaving being done [in Peru] today surpasses anything woven since the early days of the Conquest, when Spanish invaders took over the area in the 16th century."

Asked how the CTC and her experiences with the weavers have changed her own life, Callañaupa explains: "I feel privileged around the master weavers. I like to see the improvement in their weavings. I am proud of my culture and the weavers and how much talent they have." ●●● **April Orcutt Centre for Traditional Textiles of Cusco Avenida, Sol 603, Cusco, Peru** [www.textilescusco.org/eng](http://www.textilescusco.org/eng)

Although the portrait artist Jo Fraser has always been interested in textiles, it was a small photograph of a group of Peruvian weavers that set her on track to formally explore her relationship with textiles through paint. "In that photograph, I saw women who I felt were relating to and crafting textiles in the same way and with the same symbolic gravitas as I understood myself." Though professional success has come to Fraser as a painter she is a prolific maker and a range of materials influence her creative process, "textiles are the instruments with which I obsessively work and play."

About a year after she first saw that photograph, Fraser exhibited in the National Portrait Gallery's 2011 BP portraiture prize and subsequently applied for the BP travel award. Fraser pitched to leave her North London studio and live in a remote, impoverished Peruvian weaving community, alone, with no translator – for a month. Although apparently "nervous and excited in equal measure," they went for it and with the help of Awamaki Fraser's plan became a dream adventure.

Whilst there Fraser would spend every day with the women of the community, mindfully watching them weave from a distance. The results of her project are, as well as touching and tactile, a beautiful meditation on shared yet remote community values and rituals. ●●● [www.jofraser.co.uk](http://www.jofraser.co.uk)

