

All Roads Lead to Home: A Radiography of the Peruvian Fashion Industry

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On the banks of the Seine, fashion designer Isabel Marant lined the walls of her menswear Spring/Summer collection's presentation with ever so playful chicha posters. Characterized by their fluorescent palettes and playful rounded letterforms, this artistic expression marked a generation: created by Pedro Tolomeo "Monky" Rojas Meza during Peru's "Lost Decade," these posters advertised events associated with Andean tropical music. 40 years after its heyday and 10,248 kilometers away from its home, Peruvian contemporary folklore was finally recognized.

Or was it really?

No credit was given to the artist, genre, or country.

With the South American country often reduced to archaeological sites and cuisine, how can its designers and textiles make their way into New York, London, Milan, or Paris and, through that, independently reclaim their copious cultural heritage?

Textiles are woven into Peruvian history with Pre-Columbian civilizations, for example, using them not only as clothing and status of living but as sacred fabrics to bury the dead. In that sense, textiles became the predominant art form for Chilcas, Paracas, and Incas civilizations. This heritage would go on to transcend the social and physical barriers imposed by conquest and ever-growing disparity, giving birth to a cluster of weavers that were to develop original styles, designs, and techniques regardless of the intensity of labor or excessive amounts of fabrics involved in its production. In a country so rich in natural resources and textile heritage – Peru is, for instance, the world's largest exporters of Alpaca wool and the home to Pima cotton – one would expect to find a burgeoning legion of designers and a consolidated fashion industry able to compete with its Brazilian and Mexican counterparts.

Textile entrepreneur Ines Menacho argues that it is "an issue of desire." Her philosophy is shared by fashion designer Sitka Semsch. "Little collective effort has been made," mentions the Rhode Island School of Design graduate and former Micheal Kors apprentice from Miami.

Although she established her namesake brand in the early 2000s, Sitka has started to pursue growth rather recently. In 2020, she opened her first store in Miami's Shops at Merrick Park. "I have been running 20 years on a treadmill," she discloses disheartenedly.

Treadmill, indeed. Sitka's Peruvian target market consists of affluent individuals who value high-quality, logoless luxury. In 2019, the country's leading socioeconomic class – those making over 62 USD a day – made up about 2% of the total population per multinational market research firm IPSOS report. Evidently, only a minority of these are able to afford a high price tag – especially for an ivory gauze dress embroidered with beads and sequins and a mid-length hem.

In a country so bound by disparity and political crises, social mobility and, simultaneously, maintenance is almost impossible. In fact, according to the Peruvian Institute of Economics, the upper class fell for the third consecutive year to 1.6% of the population in 2020.

In that sense, Peruvian luxury design relies on a narrow legion of loyal customers to make ends meet.

Lucia Cuba, the Donna Karan Director of the MFA Fashion Design and Society at Parsons School of Design, reminisces about the late 2000s when asked about her country's fashion industry. She calls this period "the heyday of local design": design collectives – targeting individuals across the socioeconomic spectrum – emerging beyond the centralized Lima: in Trujillo, Arequipa, Loreto, amongst others.

This unexpected emergence of design collectives produced the establishment of fashion schools, the inclusion of design-related career paths in leading universities, and a regained sense of national pride over its copious cultural heritage. It was perhaps the sporadic nature of this emergence, met with little-to-non collective effort from the private and public sector to establish social structures and regulating institutions, that led to the eventual demise of local design. One further precipitated by Zara's store opening in Peru's largest mall in early 2011.

"At the end of the day, the worst enemy of a Peruvian is another Peruvian," propounds Menacho.

What should this "collective effort" look like? The Italian government, for example, allocated €35 million to the Italian Trade Agency (ITA) to promote its fashion industry abroad in 2017; to mitigate the ramification of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the French Haute Couture and Fashion Federation (FHCM) set up an aid fund and a specific digital showroom for emerging labels; similar efforts were made by the British Fashion Council and Italian Fashion Chamber (CNMI); for exports of fashion and luxury products, on the other hand, French businesses do not pay any customs duties or other taxes.

Menacho's fatalism prevails in the minds and hearts of fashion insiders and government officials. A congressman speaking on the condition of anonymity argues that efforts like the ones mentioned above are "inconceivable to voters." This is problematic considering that the country's capital houses the largest clothing and textile market — if not the largest informal market — in Latin America: Gamarra. 20,000 textile shops, manufacturers, contractors, and retailers. 100,000 people employees. Profits of \$1.4 billion a year. 100,000 daily visitors. 24 square blocks.

The size of Peru's informal economy is estimated to be 42.2%, representing over \$275 billion in GDP terms. The establishment of guilds through this overarching informality proves problematic: to lawfully attempt to influence the actions, policies, or decisions of government officials, one must be lawful in the first place. In 2016, over 40% of the number of productive units in Gamarra were informal. Informality, to many fashion insiders and government officials, is the barrier between passivity and reform.

"When there is collective effort – which there rarely is – we always end up gouging our eyes out," states Sergio Corvacho, Peruvian photographer and make-up artist residing for over 25 years between France and Italy. "We never agree with one another; that is why, perhaps, I never saw my country as a place to work, to create."

D.N.I., a Paris-based Peruvian brand created by twin brothers Paulo and Roberto Ruiz Muñoz, defies the aforementioned. Through popular motifs – think Isabel Marant’s chicha posters on steroids – at the hem of shirts, sweatshirts, and shorts, they subvert the wearer’s relationship with the country’s early 2000’s zeitgeist. Paulo and Roberto encourage the wearer to find beauty in the ignored: 50 cent coins, bottle caps, and liquorice candy.

This rejection of the fatalism that characterizes the country transcends the creative nature of their work. Although their first collections were produced in Portugal and France, they aspire to produce their Fall/Winter 2023 collection entirely in Peru. “We want to vindicate the workforce, the pattern makers and seamstresses.”

“At the end of the day, we always come back” reveals Sitka on a similar note.

When reviewing Ines, Sitka, Paulo and Roberto’s work, there is an undeniable “Peruvianness” from the garment’s construction as inspired by pre-Columbian civilizations’ sacred textiles to the Shipibo Conibo art that adorn its packaging.

To transform that “Peruvianness” into socio economic reform, Luis Antonio Aspillaga argues for the establishment of a garment-producing industrial park. As CEO at World Textile Sourcing, he supervises the export of over a million garments per month to the United States’ largest retailers: J. Crew, Costco, Rag and Bone, among others. His proposal would amalgamate and formalize the various economic actors – including design collectives – involved in the national industry, ensuring the creation of jobs, increased government revenue, and the establishment of much-needed social structures and regulating institutions.

This, however, demands compromising short-term profits and the prioritization of the collective. Although sociologists claim that Peruvians tend to be highly collectivistic and share a sense of solidarity, this is nowhere to be found within this sector of the economy according to fashion insiders and government officials.

Where does this discrepancy emerge from?

To be Peruvian is to grow comfortable with ever-growing deficiencies: corruption scandals involving the latest political messiah and Andean communities wrecked by bleak weather, chart-topping illiteracy rates and demoralizing COVID-19-related deaths per 100,000 individuals. Most disheartening, nevertheless, is that these deficiencies lie in the background of a regained sense of pride over our copious cultural heritage – as demonstrated by Ines, Sitka, Paulo and Roberto’s work – and cosmic canyons. To be Peruvian, in that sense, is to come to terms with – and fail to see beyond – the antagonisms that make up our identity, to ignore any prospective progress, to breathe a sigh of resignation when faced with any deficiency in our streets and valleys, and to find solace in the possibility of the next one being *less* bad.

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design emerges as an attempt to alleviate the strain created, an encouragement to find beauty in the ignored. In a country so rich in natural resources and textile heritage, the lack of collective effort has dynamited the establishment of social structures and regulating institutions that ensure long term stability, profit, and growth.

At the end of the day, all roads lead to home.

In our valleys rich with natural resources and our hands informed by copious heritage shall we find refuge from the ever-growing deficiencies that characterize our living.

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