

An Endangered People and Their Art

By DOROTHY BRYANT
Special to the Planet

More than two years ago (April 25, 2006) the Daily Planet published my profile of Margot Blum Schevill. In that piece I emphasized Margot's successful, even smooth, transition from one creative phase to another. A well-known singer when I first knew her over thirty years ago, Margot had completed a degree in anthropology and had become an authority on the Maya textiles of Guatemala, both as art and as history of a culture.

TRAJE DE LA VIDA: MAYA TEXTILES OF GUATEMALA

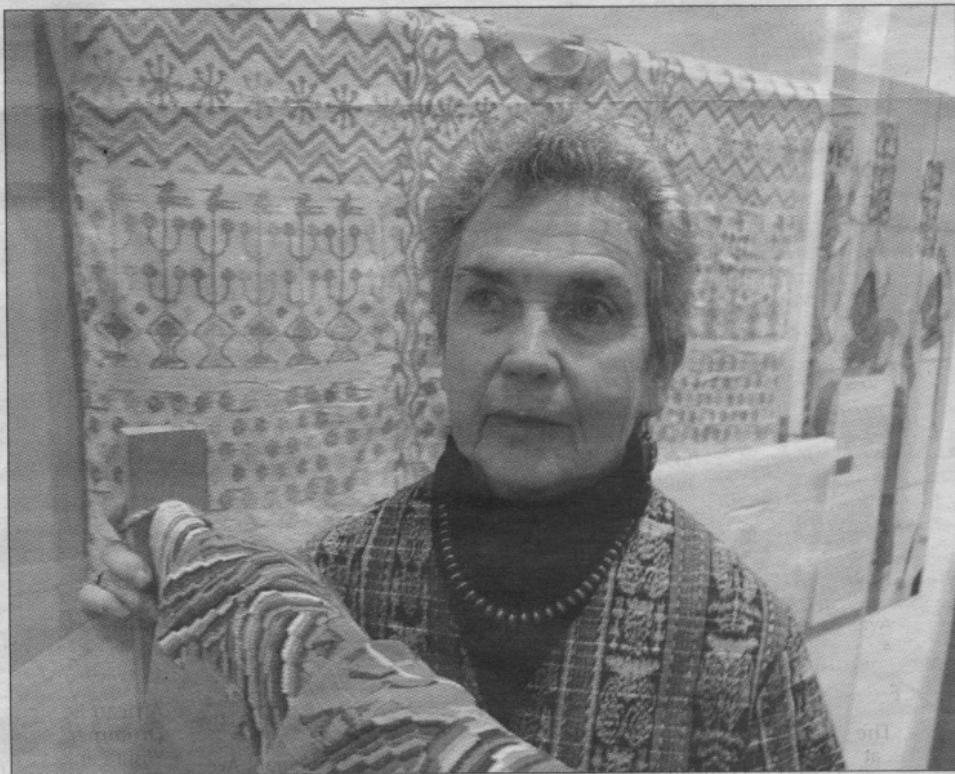
10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday;
noon-4 p.m. Sunday, at the Phoebe A.
Hearst Museum, 103 Kroeber Hall, UC
Berkeley (Bancroft at College). Free
admission.

At that time she had completed two books about Maya textiles: *Maya Textiles of Guatemala* and *The Maya Textile Tradition* (with photos by Jeffrey Jay Foxx). In addition, she had just narrated and coauthored *Splendor in the Highlands*, a half-hour documentary DVD with videographer Kathleen Mossman Vitale, introducing the weaving styles and techniques of 22 Maya weavers of Guatemala. As soon as they could get funding, Margot and Kathleen planned make an hour-long documentary, covering a longer time period. It would start with the 1902 collection gathered by Dr. Gustavus A. Eisen, during an expedition financed by Phoebe Hearst, and continuing up to the present (*A Century of Color: Maya Weaving & Textiles* now available from Endangered Threads Documentaries, 1530 Tuolumne St., Vallejo, CA 94590).

As if that were not enough to keep her busy, Margot had been asked to curate an exhibition of Guatemalan/Maya textiles at—appropriately enough—the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum at Kroeber Hall on the UC campus. The exhibition, titled “Traje De La Vida: Maya Textiles of Guatemala,” opened on Sept. 25 and will run through most of next year, with rotating exhibits, in the tidy space reached by going through the Museum Bookstore.

For an ignorant layperson like myself (as well as for the better-informed who know what to look for!), Margot and the PAHMA staff have made impressive, yet welcoming, use of this space. On the walls of a far corner in the back of the hall, facing each other, are ongoing, silent films of Guatemala in the early 20th century and today, giving images of historical context.

If you can visit the museum by Jan. 9, you might catch Martina Jimenez weaving a piece using the traditional “backstrap loom.” (Ms. Jimenez speaks not only her native Mayan language, Mam, but Spanish



Michael Howerton

Margot Schevill, curator of the exhibit of Mayan textiles at the Hearst Museum, stands in front of the display of a white and red Mayan ceremonial blouse from the 1930s.

too, if you want to ask her a question about her ongoing demonstration.)

Among the displays of glass-enclosed garments, well lit and hung to show their intricate design, there are videos by Kathleen Vitale of other Guatemalan Maya, each speaking one of the 22 Mayan languages, then translating their remarks into Spanish, with English subtitles. There are family scenes too, but, says Kathleen, “I never photograph a child unless he or she is enrolled in school—their best chance for a good life in these times—otherwise I would be exploiting child labor!”

Which brings up the ways in which the tortured history of Guatemalan oppression and civil wars (as Margot explains) are woven into these textiles—in the very fabrics used, the materials available, the dyeing processes, the uses of the clothing. Margot points out that most of the Maya men “wear jeans and T-shirts now, and speak Spanish, lest they be targeted for ‘execution’ in the still ongoing violence.” Yet the beauty of the displayed clothing seems to triumph over the dangers that threaten these people and their traditional art.

But this is not an overtly political exhibit. It has a lighter side. We are invited to try on some colorful shirts, pantalones, or exquisite and elaborate blouses or huipiles, and then admire ourselves in a conveniently placed full-length mirror. We can laugh (as the Maya obviously succeeded in doing) at the silly ferocity of a spangled, life-sized figure of a conquistador. And we

may even hope for good luck emanating from a life-sized image of Marimón—a saint? a god?—even the Maya aren’t sure.

This is a classy exhibit, worth visiting several times as it changes through the next year, displaying other examples of clothing that is art. Or just to take a second look at some of the intricate, decorative complexities of what is hanging there now.

Of course, the danger is that you might not be able to leave through that gift shop without buying a unique huipil, a documentary DVD, a book, or, at least, a woven handbag. So relax, already, and do it. The money will go to a good cause, helping the Maya artists and these “endangered threads” to survive.

Teachers: There are one-hour docent tours that meet California State Content Standards in Social Studies, Visual Arts, and Language Arts. Call 643-7649 or contact pahmaeducation@berkeley.edu.