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Mr. Paul and Mrs. Kathleen Vitale

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ENDANGERED THREADS: DOCUMENTARIES AND THE MAYA TEXTILE TRADITION

Former journalist, photographer and publications editor Kathleen Mossman Vitale has produced art-related documentaries for the past 20 years. Kathleen lived in Latin America for 13 years, including two as a Peace Corps Volunteer. She is co-founder and CEO of the nonprofit Endangered Threads Documentaries (ETD).

Paul G. Vitale is a retired USAID Foreign Service Officer who served in Latin America and Washington, D.C., after an initial introduction to overseas work as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Educated as a City Planner, he worked with both USAID and the Peace Corps on urban programs, including low-income housing and related services. He is co-founder of ETD, treasurer of the nonprofit's Board of Directors, and logistics manager in the field.

The Vitales came to the DACOR Bacon House to discuss their work documenting the Maya textile tradition through ETD. In 1964 the Vitales were stationed in South America with the Peace Corps. Kathleen's parents joined them during a month's vacation through

the Andes. Kathleen's mother, Rachael Mossman, a textile collector and expert, loaded her son-in-law with purchases of indigenous textiles as they perused the markets. Staggering under the weight, he gently inquired why she was buying so many. Her simple reply was "to keep them weaving!"

When Rachael passed away, the Vitales inherited over 700 hand-woven textiles. They were located unmarked in every corner of the house. Her mother had known every textile by memory. Each piece was carefully documented with the help of relatives, Kathleen's father's extensive diaries and photos, her mother's lectures and articles, and memories of her mother waxing eloquently on the collection.

The textiles were donated to the Hearst Museum of Anthropology at UC/Berkeley. There Kathleen met an expert who encouraged the Vitales to document contemporary Maya weaving for a coming exhibit of Maya textiles. In 2004 they traveled to Guatemala with a hand-held video camera to investigate the feasibility of making such a documentary. The two-week trip took them to 15 cities, towns, and

villages where they met weavers not only willing but excited to participate in their project.

Coming back home they set up a nonprofit organization to handle funds. While their own travel would be self-funded, they needed help paying for interns and post-production expenses, such as translation, music, and DVD manufacturing. The first documentary, *Splendor in the Highlands*, was used to raise funds from foundations, supporters and friends. *A Century of Color* followed, and was premiered at the De Young Museum in San Francisco. Then came *Manuela & Esperanza*, and *Saving the Weavers*.

A fifth documentary is in production. Named *Sheer Elegance: Surviving Strands of Ancient Maya Weaving*, it addresses the ancient roots of translucent weaving still produced by less than 100 weavers in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, and about five weavers in Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas, Mexico. Translucent garments are depicted on Classic Maya murals, painted pottery and stone carvings. Fragments have been found at Classic Maya excavations and a

description appears in a chronicle. Museum collections in Europe, England, the U.S., Mexico and Guatemala attest to the continuity of the style.

ETD teams visited Alta Verapaz at least a dozen times between 2006 and 2014 to research, photograph and videotape for the project. Three visits were also made between 2010 and 2014 to Chiapas and Venustiano Carranza. Both in Alta Verapaz and in Venustiano Carranza the traditional translucent style was found to be a spaced white background weave with white brocade designs. In Alta Verapaz the traditional thread used for the past 75 years has been soft, white, unpolished, single-ply commercial cotton.

Individually approached weavers in Alta Verapaz were openly willing to be videotaped, and were rewarded with bags of beans, rice, salt and sugar, and photos when possible. Control in Chiapas of translucent weavers in Venustiano Carranza was held by two men – one an expatriate weaving expert and author, the other an indigenous manager linked to a weaving coop in San Cristóbal de las Casas. The men insisted on an agreement to pay the weavers before sharing how to find them. They also maintained that the thread used was hand spun from raw cotton, something that is *extremely* rare today.

A personal friend of the expatriate became the guide/driver to Venustiano Carranza where ETD was to film five women weaving translucent textiles and spinning thread from raw cotton. Due to a back injury, Kathleen put the camera on a tripod and just let it run at each home. In spite of prearrangements, the weavers didn't have any raw cotton available to

spin. The ETD team later noticed that there was no cotton growing anywhere in the Venustiano Carranza valley. Returning home to review the videotapes, they were stunned to hear the Chiapas guide whisper instructions to the weavers to *not* divulge where they got their thread.

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The following year the Vitales traveled to Chiapas and again interviewed both the expatriate weaving expert and the coop manager about translucent textiles. Both reiterated that the thread was hand spun. The couple revisited some of the same Venustiano Carranza weavers as the year before, this time insisting they demonstrate spinning. Two weavers tried, but were not adept at the process.

At a Venustiano Carranza festival Kathleen was approached by a young woman who wanted to talk about the documentary project. It turned out the woman's mother was yet another expert translucent weaver. Kathleen interviewed that weaver alone in her home and got a hint of what was going on.


In 2014, the Vitales returned to Venustiano Carranza with Liz Frey – a spinner, weaver, and art history professor – to address the thread issue. This time the weavers confessed they did not know how to spin. They said all their thread came from a vendor who used commercial thread from a cone, unwound it, split it, then re-spun each single ply thread onto an

ancient spindle. After selling such spindles to the weavers, the translucent textiles were made for the two men and sold at high prices to international collectors and museums.

Kathleen figured out that the person splitting the commercial thread was the only weaver she had met on her own at the festival. Once confronted with the facts, that woman walked through the entire process with the camera rolling, from the cone of size 30/2 ply mercerized cotton to the final translucent weaving on the loom. That video provided the final footage to contrast the revival craft in Chiapas, which enriches a few weavers and two men, with that of Alta Verapaz where dozens of weavers carrying on the weaving tradition of their ancestors and share it willingly with appreciative admirers.

Confronted separately by the facts, the two men in Chiapas had the same word-for-word response: "The thread is still hand spun onto ancient spindles!" And, *caveat emptor* still rules.

The Vitales prefer to leave textile selling to the artisans while they concentrate on preserving the Maya textile tradition through documentary work. They now share all their work on the YouTube Endangered Threads channel in hopes of educating a wider audience, including Maya children who are learning about their own cultural heritage.



If you missed this Newberry/DDD, listen to the audio on the Members-Only section of the DACOR website!