Hello and welcome to the latest Culture in Crisis audio recording in the series of Preservation by Design; ‘Weaving in Practice: Preserving Textile Crafts in Guatemala’. My name is Ana Baeza Ruiz and I am the research assistant on the exhibition ‘Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up’ at the Victoria & Albert Museum. I’m delighted to be joined today by Hellen Ascoli who is a Guatemalan artist, weaver and educator who has worked extensively with indigenous groups in Guatemala to advance the protection of textile heritage and weaving practices. Welcome to London Hellen.

Hellen Ascoli

Thank you for having me.

Let’s begin with your own practice of weaving. How would you articulate this from a design perspective and how does this relate to the wider task you’ve set out to do to preserve these textile Guatemalan craft traditions?

Yeah, I think it’s interesting that you choose to use the word ‘design’ because design is one of those tricky words that has been disintegrated from a lot of things; to say that when as a designer it really is something that is born after the industrial revolution - really before that it was kind of the artist or the craftsperson that did all of it - and this is an idea that I’m quite interested in. And I would call myself now just a weaver because I think it encompasses the word artist, designer and educator. All of these things are areas that I’m interested in and they come together both in my practice as an artist and my practice that we’ll be talking about today in terms of the work that I did for Museo Ixchel, indigenous trust in Guatemala.

Right, so, that is very interesting, thinking about weaving in a more holistic sense that’s not the segmentation that maybe has been done in terms of design, art, sort of weaving and that you’re thinking about these terms. And in a way we can also - from your work - think of weaving as a daily practice for many women in Guatemala, it’s a lengthy process, it constitutes forms of knowledge that are transmitted across many generations, not one, however, that is always recognised or valorised - and this is something that your work touches on very directly.

How would you say that certain forms of knowledge and labour in Guatemala are being legitimised as part of national heritage while others are not and how this links to your work and the work of other women in Guatemala?

Yeah, I would say certainly one of the things I’m interested in is all of the knowledge that weavers carry and to separate out what they have from the history of the Mayan people and the landscape and the landscape that they live in, I think it’s a very dangerous thing right? And so in Guatemala a lot of times Mayan people are portrayed as kind of a tourist symbol or an aesthetic value given to the textiles. But when we only value through their aesthetics or for how they may be consumed to international public, let’s say, coming to visit, that’s a very dangerous thing to do.

And I think one of the things that my work entrusts is how from the onset we value the knowledge of the weaver. I think it’s important to think of the weaver as a holistic person and the context where she lives in and how that knowledge is transmitted, not just as an aesthetic set of qualities.

I think one of the dangers in reading the work just aesthetically is that we’re separating it from the context that gives it life. I wanted to bring up an example of an artist named Margarita Azurdia from...
Guatemala and she worked in painting, she didn’t work in textiles. But one of the things that happened was when her paintings became well known, instead of it being put in the context of the textile tradition in Guatemala, it was reinterpreted as geometric abstraction or hard edged painting that happened in the United States.

And one of the projects I had for example at Museo Ixchel was doing a guided tour where, as a group, we were looking at the textiles and seeing how they influenced Margarita Azurdia - so very much putting her back in the tradition and in the context of Guatemala. So I think similar things happen with weavers, when we only look at them as the production that they have or what can be consumed or these utilitarian objects that they create, then we’re not understanding that the huipil holds (the huipil is a Mayan blouse that is woven, that is hand woven - so I’ll be referencing that word). We forget to say or give all the value of the huipil, of its symbols of how its connected to the land, of how its connected to the Cosmo-vision and the daily life of the weaver.

I want to connect that to something that you said which is you’ve mentioned the work within Museo Ixchel and just to introduce what that institution is, because you started working there 2014 if that’s correct, yes?

Yes.

And you became the Director or Education. Now this is a museum that’s dedicated to indigenous dress and it holds a collection close to 10,000 textiles from close to 150 municipalities, 34 villages so about 180 communities are represented across its collections. How did this work with the collections inform your understanding of weaving and how would you describe your work in those years because it’s really interesting what you’re referencing now about the idea of the weaver in a holistic sense but how does the work in the museum inform that?

Yeah, that’s a really interesting and complicated question because it interweaves with some of my own personal experience. My background is in art and now I don’t separate that word but let’s say I was kind of ‘traditionally’ trained and I was always interested in soft materials and I started weaving on the backstrap loom in 2014 or I would say weaving again because I had done it initially as a child.

I was about eight or nine when I started, and I kind of put it aside, and it was very difficult for me to come back to it because of my identity. I’m not a Mayan woman and so I was hesitant to call it my own and to use this tool that - for me - holds so much of the Mayan identity as part of my own. When I started working at Museo Ixchel I realised that if I was approaching it through respect and through knowledge and not disintegrating myself, that I could do it in a successful way, both in education in my own artistic practice, in my own daily practice when I sit down to weave. So I think going into Ixchel really gave me a place to stand on and I felt like learning so much about it and really treating it with respect, let me get closer to the material.

I would also have to say that I don’t use traditional symbols in my design, to me that’s not something that I appropriate. So although I’m using the backstrap loom as a tool, I’m not using the designs as a source if that makes sense. Yeah, so going through the history and understanding it really led me to embody it and to be able to teach it.

So in a way, it’s really interesting what you’re saying, because it links, we were discussing just a minute ago about the reverse process that’s happening when it’s just the aesthetics and not the process. In a way your work actually turns it on its head and you’re thinking about the processes of making but actually then distancing yourself from some of the more geometric or maybe a kind of graphical programmes of the pieces.

Now that’s really interesting and I wonder you’re a practitioner but also the museum is serving a wider public and it’s in charge - or is charged with - the preservation of these objects or these textile
traditions through how it communicates to wider audiences. Now, how did you feel the collections were being presented? There is a question here about not just a presentation but the self-representation of indigenous groups and communities, how are these ideas about design, about tradition communicated through the museum and how did you seek to intervene as a director of education in the work that the museum did?

HA I think I have to say also that Museo Ixchel identifies as an anthropological museum and that in and of itself is already a particular form of viewing, at least traditionally so. I think recent anthropological text and material culture kind of are questioning that. But it’s very much a looking at the Mayan culture from far away and it presents its exhibitions in that way as well. It’s very linear, it goes through the history of the textiles and the changes in the garments. But it’s not always the best in representing the groups that they’re supposed to represent and I think that that’s where education plays an important role because, for example, the very building of Museo Ixchel is located at a private university within the city.

So to access this private university you have to do so by car, you’re already limiting a group of people from not coming into the collection. Let’s call that one of the physical barriers and certainly there’s many more barriers of how to access the collection. And so that’s where the conflict let’s say or the tension between conservation comes into play with a living culture because this is not a dead culture, it’s a living one and the collection, you may have to exercise precautions and how you take care of it but it is for use of the very culture it represents and I think Museo Ixchel is not always the best at communicating that or accomplishing that in a way. And so I think education there played a strong role and it definitely led some good discussions or encounters with the technical department. And I think this is not unlike other museums with an education department kind of coming into, let’s say battle with the conservation or technical department. So yeah and in a moment I think we’ll go more into how I thought about co-production.

ABR Yeah, well that’s something I did want to ask you about. As we were saying, there are memories that become attached to objects, museums are active in producing meanings and sustaining ideas about heritage. And in that respect they also have a role in giving legitimacy to certain types of knowledge and how these are produced. So in thinking about your role as Director of Education the project that you instigated called ‘Story of the Thread’ which is a very interesting one and that we’ll hear about in a second, this was a sort of long running initiative to develop and implement a pedagogical resource for teachers to assist students in the learning of Mayan textile traditions and specifically think about the backstrap loom. So I wonder if you could sort of guide us through this methodology, also maybe explaining a bit more about what the backstrap loom is because some of our listeners might not be so familiar with these techniques and how you really worked very hard to incorporate this into the national curriculum in Guatemala and this was a project I understand that involved many stakeholders; weavers, teachers, families, education specialists. So how did these conversations develop and how did the project shape itself?

HA So let me go kind of step by step because I think lots of things come into play and sometimes it’s difficult to turn a non-linear process into a narrative but I’ll try my best. So the first thing is the backstrap loom is a traditional loom of Guatemala, the Mayans were using it much before the conquest and it’s a simple loom made up of several sticks. So the work which are the vertical threads are wrapped around these sticks and then you’re passing a weft through, which are the horizontal threads. Now any weaving is essentially a problem of tension which means that the loom, the warp threads has to be taut in tension right? So you’re either placing them in a horizontal position and tightening them or a vertical position and tightening them. And in the case of the backstrap loom you are attaching your body to a surrounding architecture and kind of dancing with the loom to create that tension of the warp.
So on one hand it’s a very complex loom and sometimes it’s also a very simple loom or a kind of ‘primitive’ loom in terms of it’s using very little resources to create itself. So I was always fascinated by this loom because of its relationship to the body, one that I suspect the weavers in Guatemala always were drawn to as well. It’s not a very efficient loom, in a way you can say it should have died off long ago if we’re only measuring worth in terms of production. But it was something that was kept alive and I think it’s because it’s a small domestic tool, it’s easy to use, it’s easy to kind of strap into and strap out of so a woman can be, for example, cooking for a moment or doing her daily activities and weave for a little bit and set it aside. And I think it was a very direct source of recording their belief system, you know before writing and all of these things. And so I was always quite compelled by this and I wanted to make sure that the education system I was designing... well I guess I didn’t think I was designing that when I came in as my job position. I thought I was executing but it actually first entailed kind of designing a structure so people could understand how complex weaving was and how it brought together several aspects of education in day to day life.

So the story of a thread is a methodology that starts with sensory exploration or sensory perception and you have...you can think of it as our first interaction with material, it has a lot to do with touch. We form our perception through our sensory interaction with this material. To understand something we must feel it first. The second kind of line or thread is thinking through making which sometimes is called ‘embodied cognition’, and what this means is that a lot of the way that we learn is not necessarily through language, it’s through the way our body is moving in the world, the way...let’s say our muscle memory is reacting to things, the way we’re gathering sensory information and then transforming that material into something else so then the threads that we started to interact with start to take shape and are transformed through the act of weaving.

And then you can think about how this woven panel is used to construct a garment so two or three woven panels stitched together make the huipil and that says something about who I am or at least it says something about who I am in Guatemalan culture. So again the huipil is a blouse, a Mayan blouse and I use the blouse kind of loosely because it’s not tailored to the body. So you can think about western way of dress as tailoring to the body so the garment shapes the body. In non-western way of dress, the body shapes the garment. So a lot of the shapes of Mayan costume, of Mayan dress are long rectangles and squares and it’s almost like we’re inhabiting them, where they’re kind of our houses, you know, we live in them and the body gives shape to them.

So that’s a huipil and whether you feel comfortable or not in them, that says something about your standing in Guatemala and of course this is a very complex subject that has a lot to do with the Guatemalan history, the history of racism in our country and social and economical factors. But I wanted to talk about forming identity as the way that we dress ourselves, the way that we put ourselves together and formed that second skin when we go out into the world and how those decisions are made. And I think this is what initially brought me into the Frida Kahlo exhibition and to speak in the Frida Kahlo conference.

ABR Yeah absolutely, I mean I think we can see that this idea of dress as a form of performance, as a form of a set of sartorial choices that speak about who we are and who we want to be, or to become, is definitely crucial to the thinking about the Frida Kahlo exhibition; the title being ‘Frida Kahlo: Making Herself Up’, right? So it’s that agency that’s asserted through dress that’s critical. But there was something else I wanted to ask you about because it really got me thinking; this idea of the threads and the making processes recording a belief system which is maybe not always tangible and what you were saying also at the end about how the body shapes the garment rather than the other way round. So are there other things that you could say about these belief systems that are almost imbricated in
the making of these garments in the patterns so something that really stands out in terms of thinking about them as part of this wider heritage, cultural heritage from Guatemala.

HA  Certainly, so in Guatemala it’s not just that we have all of these different communities and municipalities that are dressing in the traditional garment, the huipil or the corte which is a wraparound skirt and these are to name a few of the garments - like certainly there’s men’s garments and children’s garments and you know ceremonial and such. But the main ones being the huipil and the corte, each of them holds a particular design that identifies a community and so of course these shift over time but are recognisable, for example, in Nevache the traditional colours are green with some red. They tend to tell the story of a Mayan princess and so you can see in it these kind of figures depicted in the brocades whereas, for example, in San Juan Sacatepéquez their main symbol is a turkey which is used for ceremonial purposes and food coming together ceremony, the same as in Comalapa, the main symbol is called pamplatem which is a plate, a ceremonial plate.

So we can talk about the designs for a very long time but it’s not just the designs, it’s also how they’re worn. So how you’re wrapping your corte, how you’re tucking your huipil, is it inside your corte or displayed outside, what sort of head dress are you wearing and how all of this gets combined and why that holds meaning within a particular community. So they’re very distinct in their clothing, each community is very distinct.

ABR  Well I think that brings us to the next point I wanted to raise which is about one of your collaborators actually, Negma who is a poet, artist, teacher and weaver from Comalapa that you’ve just mentioned but she also writes poems about, you know, a range of different themes. One of them is there’s experience of wearing the dress and in particular the huipil and we have one poem that we’re going to play that now.

[Poem playing]

HA  The translation of it reads ‘Cloth of inheritance. A huipil doesn’t speak to you, it recites to your soul. A huipil doesn’t cover you, it hugs your heart. A huipil doesn’t tighten you, it caresses your chest, a huipil doesn’t stain you, it is tattooed on your skin. A huipil speaks to you, it tells you about the resurfacing of our ancestors, its colours shine and dim the contempt and racism. It preserves the body of mother nature. The huipil is a poem written by our ancestors to be embraced of cloth coming together, of the weaving of life, of the weaving of knowledge, braiding voices, braiding songs. We fall in love with their batchon, with the bahon, with the gaheen, with the comatseen, with the bahopteen from where the huipil is born under the arms of the apricot trees as the important part of love and respect and as my grandmother would say “miha, say thank you to your huipil and ask your huipil to keep you safe”.

I have to mention that some of these words are without translation, the bahon, gaheen, comatseen and bahopteen are all techniques within the making of them. The comatseen for example is a symbol within these techniques and it represents...sometimes it can be a mountain or it can be a serpent but it is basically kind of a zig zag that talks about the highs of lows of the life of a woman.

ABR  And the original poem is of course in Kaqchikel, one of the many indigenous languages in Guatemala and Negma Coy as I understand performs this in different parts of Guatemala, has also performed in Columbia. But I wanted to ask you Hellen if there is anything that you want to say more about this poem, there are themes that emerge from it about this act of weaving knowledge as an intergenerational practice that is also communication across different groups of women. And this idea of falling in love with the huipil, of how huipil is born. I didn’t know if you want to say something more before we keep discussing.
Yeah, I think it’s so important to mention my collaborator Negma because without her this project would just not be possible and she is one of those women that comes to your life that is certainly interwoven with my life. And as we started the project it was really lovely to see how she was having some of the same questions I was but from a different perspective. And so Negma is a mother, a mother of two, and as we were developing the project, Lupita, her daughter was turning seven - and seven is the good age to start weaving. And so it wasn’t just that we were developing the project but as we were going Lupita too was learning how to weave and Negma was going through the questions of how do I preserve my culture with my daughter, how do I pass it onto her?

And so Lupita was playing with us and touching the threads with us and hearing us tell stories and it was quite a lovely, lovely experience to see her grow as we were figuring out how to talk about that growth or that process of learning within, let’s say, a domestic apprenticeship and trying to match that into a more structured system that was developed by the Ministry of Education for schools right. And so we had kind of this perfect one on one example and playmate full of creativity to inspire us.

And that makes me think of one of the other things that we haven’t talked about which is the relationship between the mind and the body. I mean you have alluded to this but I think this idea of Lupita and the playfulness that comes into this learning of the backstrap loom really is pertinent for thinking about the divisions that we sometimes witness between intellectual versus a more physical embodied kind of labour. So how do you see this distinction and how does your work address the way that this mind body split is maybe something that we need to overcome when we’re thinking about a practice of weaving?

Yes, certainly when you sit down to weave it’s not that you’re just sitting down to produce mindlessly, you know? Sometimes weaving gets talked about as kind of a zoning out or a meditation but actually as a weaver I don’t quite feel that. I think it’s very much...I mean I’m not zoning out, maybe we can talk about meditation in a different form. That might be a different podcast. But I’m not zoning out, I’m very aware of the things that are going on and the way that my fingers are feeling the fabric and making decisions as I go and weavers are going through the same process you know. There’s a certain amount of pre-planning and then there’s a certain amount of reacting to the material at that moment and kind of minutia decision making.

So you’re definitely thinking while you’re doing this, it’s just a different type of thinking and so I’ll go back to this role of the designer right because the designer, when the designer comes in as kind of just a planner and the crafts person is the person who is just the executor of the plan, that’s not quite how this works. And I think it’s a dangerous thing for some designers to say this is my design and someone else is executing it. I think in essence there are all kind of these collaborations or co-productions of things and so what has happened in Guatemala is that there has been kind of a fashion to use the textiles as a kind of detailing from maybe making a purse or an accessory and so a lot of designers come in and either are cutting up the textiles to produce other purses and such and calling that their design or they are having crafts people execute their ideas.

And I think this touches on a lot of issues and a lot of points of tension that are occurring in Guatemala so I’ll kind of share a couple of stories of how one day in coming upon a designer who I was quite enjoying some of the products and I asked him “well, you know, how is the process, how is the design process occurring here?” and I left the question kind of particularly open when I asked him. And he said “well I design, you know and then somebody else executes” and I asked “oh, so then you weave?” and his answer was “no, I don’t, why would I weave?” and I said “oh your weavers are also designing?” “oh no no, they’re not contemporary enough”.

So I think that that’s a hard answer to have heard to assume that a traditional culture is not contemporary or that the Mayan culture is not contemporary. And of course another example that I
can name which has been kind of the most significant example and what I would call the ‘last drop that filled up the glass of water’ or I think in English you say ‘the straw the broke the camel’s back’ is the case of Maria’s bags which cut the traditional huipil, which - by the way - kind of symbolically and energetically you’re not supposed to cut something made on the backstrap loom because it releases energy in, you know, kind of the body’s energy.

And so what she does is she gathers huipils and cuts them up to make purses and I have a photo here that I showed in the presentation and it’s of a purse made out of a huipil, traditionally from San Juan Sacatepéquez which is emblematic because it uses yellow and purple, very bright yellow and purple stripes. It’s brocaded with turkeys as we talked about and has some flowers embroidered on it. And so she cuts it up and lines it, lines the edges with leather, fine leather and on top of it sits a metal logo, kind of hanging in front of the huipil, kind of like an over-scaled pendant, almost as if to say I’m validating this thing and it’s now kind of open for consumption and I think it produces a visceral effect to see a purse like that.

ABR Yeah, I was very struck when you mentioned this example at the Frida Kahlo Conference that we held at the V&A just about a week ago and the way that some brands are appropriating these traditional Mayan huipils and other designs and rebranding them as designer luxury items. Now this has all sorts of consequences in terms of the livelihood of the makers but also the consumption of these items. Because these items are costly to produce but I think this is a question more of how expensive, there is a distinction to be made between something that’s costly and something that is branded as expensive in the market. And if you could expand on this, maybe thinking more, is there something positive that might be coming out of some of the incorporation of these Mayan textiles in fashion? I don’t mean these particular examples you have mentioned but is there a way in which we can have a socially responsible way of incorporating artisans into the design process and into the fashion industry. I don’t know if you have some thoughts about that.

HA Certainly, I think there are some examples that are positive. I was very fortunate to hear at the Frida Kahlo Conference a designer from Mexico speak, named Carla Fernández, and so what she’s doing I think certainly has a different tone and visual effects and of course respect kind of embedded throughout the whole process and so she’s working closely with craftswomen and craftsmen. But I think she names them as collaborators in her design process and so to do so she’s understanding that they have their own process. Sometimes it’s slow, sometimes it takes her years to work with certain artisans that she wants to.

She puts herself through the task of learning the process as well, and when she’s using some of these details or techniques or symbols in her designs, she’s always referencing where they’re coming from, I mean she’s not trying to appropriate for the sake of her own named brand but rather I think she’s addressing the ideas of how fashion exists in Mexico, that it’s not something that is exclusive to western culture and Paris and New York or something but that it is existing in the local culture or the Mayan culture in Mexico.

And I think that’s a great example to look up to, I think designers in general would do themselves very good service of learning the technique to see how the minutia of it unfolds, you know, how you’re making decisions as you’re working with the tool, and allowing for that input of the craftsman in the design process and saying, you know, it’s better to do something this size or this shape because it is what best fits the tool which is what Carla Fernández does instead of trying to cut the cloth she’s using rectangular fabric because that’s what comes easiest to a backstrap loom and to woven fabric, right?

ABR Yeah and I suppose we could say that the kind of work that Carla Fernández is doing is part of a wider set of initiatives in Mexico, but also in Guatemala, that seek to protect certain textile traditions and I
just have a question about that really because there seems to be a sticking point in that respect, in terms of the legal system and in a sense that the indigenous Juridical system is distinct. It doesn’t have written law or documents, it is based on traditions of indigenous people and this has consequences for how we think about the preservation and protection of textile heritage, particularly craft design. Often the preservation becomes linked to property law and I think Hellen in the conference you rightly pointed out the limitations of this outlook in the sense that intellectual property tends to be from the rooted in notions of individual creativity as opposed to more community based production. So how do you see a way around this and of negotiating these issues in terms of the law in Guatemala and elsewhere?

HA So to kind of give a context of discussion because quite a lot has happened since I’d say 2014, 2015 as I was starting my position at Museo Ixchel - and this is an initiative that was started by Mayan weavers to look for the protection of their textiles through intellectual property law. And this is something I quite applaud, like certainly there’s so many reasons to look for this in particular because their wages are very low so how is it that they’re working within a system that they’re the main producers of the fabric and the material and yet they’re getting paid extremely low wages so they’re not being valued economically.

So that was kind of one of the reasons to start this law or this initiative in looking for intellectual property. So an example like Maria’s handbag comes in and it certainly sets off when weavers are looking at their prices of being, you know, somewhere between 500 to 1,000 dollars for a bag and they were getting paid something like 50 dollars per huipil which the economics of it doesn’t add up. However, it’s kind of two trains working on different tracks. On one hand we have intellectual property which is made to protect individual creativity but Mayan creativity is a communal form of creativity. That is to say no one person came up with these symbols right, it’s kind of the community working together and slowly developing a way of dress or an emblematic way of dressing and how fashion comes into play or the materials at hand come into play or whether it’s ceremonial use or daily use, you know, all of these things are affecting the garment making.

And so when you say let’s protect this garment or these symbols through intellectual property, that’s complicated. It brings up questions of who would get the royalties, who in the community would get the royalties right? It brings up questions of what exactly does it mean to have a huipil from Comalapa, does that mean that it has the red shoulders, is that what makes it a huipil from Comalapa, or is it the symbol of rupan plantos or are you looking at the symbols individually or the construction of the huipil?

And of course as we know from fashion slight changes occur all the time, what does it mean for one of the ways of expressing that fashion is that in ‘Pan-Maya times’ which is now, kind of contemporary Mayan times, a fashion has been set that is monocolour and that means that instead of wearing a dress of different colours, you know, you’re going to now make the same symbols but all in yellow and then the sash is yellow and then the corte is yellow and you’ll wear yellow shoes. So how do you protect or how do you kind of say this is what it means to be from this community so you’re both kind of closing in the thing that you want to protect in limiting its growth and at the same time using a system that is not really going to benefit the community but rather that has to be negotiated.

So yeah it’s a complex way of trying to protect something through a legal system in a country where its legal system doesn’t recognise an indigenous mind-set.

ABR And through the work that you’re doing, educational initiatives might be one of the ways forward in creating more awareness both within and outside of these indigenous communities and perhaps activate space in which they will have more leverage to influence the legal system in Guatemala. I wondered if you could speak about some of the positive effects of the existing initiatives, especially in
how women’s livelihoods have been affected or impacted and how we need to think about a gendered dimension of how weaving has been changing as a practice in Guatemala.

Certainly, I think the group that started the initiative or this protection of the textile through intellectual property, I have to say it hasn’t come to a conclusion. I think it’s something that is more calling attention to it, it’s a political action, it’s saying look at this thing that’s happening and if anything it’s raised awareness. So I don’t know if it will get resolved through the legal system, it seems pretty complicated and long term if it does get resolved. However, what I do think is interesting is to see how these groups are being formed between the communities so I’ll say this is one of the main ones from Santo Domingo Shanaco and there’s a couple of other being born from San Juan Sacatepéquez, how they’re using education now.

So, for example, the one in San Juan Sacatepéquez is now undergoing a process of kind of ‘extended study’ in weaving and so they’re meeting with groups of women every Saturday or Sunday I believe to go through the history of weaving in the community and they’re trying to systematise the knowledge. What that means is that they’re trying to record all of the huipils, how the symbols have changed, the techniques that have kind of slightly shifted and they’re teaching the younger women.

You asked me before, I want to make sure to mention these groups of women coming together are not all Mayan, although most of them are. I would say a good amount are Mayan and a smaller group is kind of mixed or not identifying as Mayan but they’re open to having other people come to the groups. And that speaks very highly to me about the culture, the Mayan culture which has traditionally operated in that way, that it’s open to folding other ideas in. And when it’s done through education it offers up the opportunity to do so, whereas when you do it kind of through a legal fashion it’s a system that’s going to close in on itself because you need definitions to be able to regulate it and so on.

So I would say that’s definitely a positive aspect. I think several women are taking this moment to kind of organise and you’re seeing women leaders coming forth and I think that’s always very exciting when you’re seeing women taking kind of the lead in a political action. And even within the communities, you’re seeing more awareness of women in their purchasing habits so they’re looking at huipils that are made through a technique called sublimala which is kind of a screen printed technique that doesn’t last very long and they’re actually produced in China and women that were fashionably buying these huipils three years ago, today are saying no, I don’t want to...I don’t want to buy this, I prefer going handmade, I want to go back into wearing a huipil that will last 20 years even though it’s more costly, I’ll save up for it.

So you’re already starting to see positive changes, certainly they’re slow and there could be more, but I think that’s exactly what we’re here to talk about, right?

I think that’s a great place to leave it on that note of positive optimism and thinking about the role of women as leaders in these initiatives to protect our heritage and to be producers as much as consumers. Hellen, it’s been a pleasure to have you and hear about the important work that you are doing and hopefully inspire our listeners to consider and reflect on the different circuits and networks of production when they acquire textiles from Guatemala and further afield. I have to say a huge thank you from the V&A and the Culture in Crisis Programme.

Thank you for having me.