

Weaving 'The Tree of Life'

By Ros Wilson

In April 2015 my husband and I spent a wonderful 22 days exploring Peru with Puchka Tours. The itinerary included two tapestry weaving workshops, each of four days, with Máximo Laura, who, even before the trip was my weaving hero. He was incredibly generous with his knowledge and skill. The techniques I learnt in the two workshops, combined with the amazing culture, history and geography of Peru filled me with inspiration and a renewed love of tapestry weaving.



Tree of Life Completed Work

Before the holiday I had warped up my 24" vertical tapestry loom with continuous warps in preparation for a piece to be called 'The Tree of Life', commissioned for a local exhibition. A major departure for me as I usually weave small format, detailed tapestries. I had already drawn the design - a rather pedestrian and very traditional interpretation of the subject. On returning from Peru, that design went in the bin. I had purchased a beautiful and much-treasured coffee-table book of Máximo's works and now studied this intently.

I started with a blank sheet of A4 paper, drew sweeping lines with a Sharpie pen and, hey presto, I had my tree. I then added the design elements - a sunrise to represent the start of a life and the moon to represent the end. As this was a church exhibition I added Christian symbolism - the three reeds for the Trinity, a serpent for sin kept in check by two fish representing the Christian life. Apples represented the knowledge of good and evil and, finally, two birds were added represented fellowship and marriage.

Next came the colour decisions. I laid out my stash of cones of yarn across the studio floor and selected a restricted palette with shades of red, blue, green and brown with gold as the accent colour. I coloured the drawing accordingly.

The full sized cartoon was a case of scaling up the line drawing using a grid. Máximo had recommended drawing the design onto the warps. With my continuous warp on the vertical loom, I decided to work with the cartoon behind the warps. This turned out to be a really bad decision. Even with masking tape holding the cartoon to the loom, it would come loose and I found myself weaving to a line which had slipped.

I spent half a day winding the butterflies of sequenced colour shades and laying them in rows. With Máximo's multiple thread colour-blended wefts, gradations of colour are easy without any tedious hatching. As long as the finished weft thickness is consistent across the piece, then anything goes - even the odd strand of acrylic, if the colour is right!

The weaving took four solid weeks of daily work from 10 am till 5 pm. It was easy to get into the routine as the first two weeks coincided with Norfolk and Norwich Open Studios. I enjoyed having a steady stream of visitors and explaining that medieval tapestries were not done on canvas with a needle! Some visitors returned several times to see the progress.

Decisions on texture followed some of the conventions I had learnt from the workshops. The 'background' is



Tree of Life Underway showing butterflies and colour design

usually plain weave, which provides a good contrast with the textures of the design elements. Reverse sumac is used effectively for filling many areas. I used a lattice technique on one of the reeds and one bird. This requires much patience. With the shed kept open, the lower warps are woven with the background colour to the required shape. Alternating pairs of upper warps are then wrapped with a contrast colour to create the lattice. The second bird provided an opportunity for more experimentation and I managed to combine a chevron technique with distorted wefts to represent bird feathers. The red cherries and the odd 'bobbles' were added during the weaving as I liked the way the reds 'zinged' in the design.

The woven lines are key to the structure. These are used extensively in Máximo's work and are a clever way of covering up vertical colour changes and avoiding gaps. I varied the thickness of weft used for the lines, so the base of the trees started as the full weft thickness and then tapered to half thickness as the trees 'grew'.

Using a continuous weft loom meant that I was not able to see the complete piece until it was cut off. There were times when I doubted my design decisions, but followed the plan, nevertheless. On seeing the completed piece I was chuffed that everything hung together well - structurally and design-wise. The 'wow' from my husband was vindication that I had got it right.

The exhibition was a great success and the tapestry was well received. I really enjoyed working in the larger format and will be approaching local galleries to explore the possibility of including tapestries in their collections.



Cutting off tapestry - photo by Simon Wilson

Ros Wilson is a painter, spinner, dyer, weaver and knitwear designer. From her studio in Norfolk she runs courses in textile techniques and art.

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Bibliography 'Máximo Laura Tapestry Collection/ Colección de Tapices', Published by Museo Máximo Laura S.A.C., October 2014, ISBN 978-612-46816-0-8. Website www.museomaximolaura.com

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