



Natural Dyes of Chincheros, Peru

Museum Textile Services
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All of the colors found on these alpaca and sheep's wool textiles from Chincheros, Peru, were dyed with a variety of plant and animal materials. From cleaning to dyeing to fixing, each phase of the coloring process relies on natural products that have been available for millennia.



Raw camelid or sheep's wool is cleaned prior to processing with a natural detergent made from the Jabonera plant (*saponaria officinalis*).



The jabonera root is grated into a bowl of water and produces a thick lather that removes soils and excess lanolin from the fiber.



When the fibers are dry they are combed into roving, or loose bundles. Before dyeing, the roving is spun into a single-ply yarn in the Z direction. This young woman has the roving wrapped around her left hand and can spin with the drop-spindle while doing other things such as walking.



Single-ply spun yarns are dyed in a wide variety of vibrant colors. The dyes are fixed with natural chemicals such as salt, lime, alum, acid, and urine.



Shades of gray come from the tara seed.



Ahuaypili

Purple tones come from the Ahuaypili leaf.



Turquoise dye comes from the leaves of the quinsauchu plant, also called “tres esquinas” for it’s triangular form. This dye is fixed with baby’s urine.



The Ilca leaf produces shades of green.



Yellow dye comes from the flower of the Quolla plant.



A moss called “barba de la roca” or “beard of the rock” produces orange tones.



This pink color comes from the motemote seed.



Eighteen different shades of red are produced from cochineal, also known as carmine.

Cochineal is obtained from the insect of the same name, which lives on cacti. When dried and ground, cochineal (the purplish powder seen in the bowl) is mixed with water and produces a potent liquid colorant that is also used for the lips.



Used alone,
cochineal
yields a
pinkish red
but with the
addition of
an acid,
such as lime
juice, the
color turns
to a brick
red.



After dying, yarns are rinsed until the water is clear and then hung to dry. The single-ply yarns are plied together in the S direction for weaving and knitting.



The warp-faced weavings of Chincheros are some of the most beautiful in all of Peru, and they take full advantage of this vibrant palate of naturally dyes.