

Endnotes

On the Cloth Road

MARILYN MURPHY

“Wow. What a dream job, combining travel and textiles.” We hear this often. And in many ways, Cloth Roads is just that.

The collective “we” is a group of women who worked closely together at Interweave for many years. After “retiring,” we believed it was important to support the larger world of weavers and artisan makers and their focus on traditional textiles. But determining what that meant took us down many a path.

We began by funding projects, including the publication of books on the textiles of the Peruvian Highlands, Guatemala, and Chiapas, and buying spinning wheels and looms for a group in Kenya. We met interesting, talented artisans as well as entire villages of weavers, spinners, dyers, knitters, and embroiderers. As we talked with these artisans, the message voiced again and again was the need for markets in which to sell their best quality work. Without access to consumers who appreciate fine traditional textiles, many talented artisans have to produce commodities for the tourist trade, creating false perceptions of their skills. If the artisans can’t support themselves and their families by their handwork, they turn to other means of employment, and traditions die out.

Over time, our discussion about women weavers and, particularly, women’s cooperatives took on greater importance. We found that in the villages where a healthy cooperative is working, the health, education, and well-being of the women and their families is vastly improved. A mission emerged: to create new market opportunities for these people, supporting their culture of making with a fair, sustainable commerce model. We could use our publishing experience to present high-quality information about textile cultures, techniques, and processes, providing artisans with much-needed exposure by creating an educational experience as well as a shopping experience.

Our online textile marketplace (www.clothroads.com) is the fruit of this vision. It is more than just a place to shop for beautiful cloth. It’s a place to meet remarkable artisans, learn about different techniques, connect with other textile enthusiasts, or just do a little armchair traveling along the cloth road. In addition to our online marketplace, we host trunk shows around the United States because there’s no better way to appreciate these textiles than by seeing and touching them.

So we travel when we can because it’s only by meeting the



Mone from Laos with her beaded cloth.
PHOTO COURTESY OF CLOTH ROADS

artisans that we can truly understand what is sustainable for them, the challenges they face, and what this opportunity means to them. For example, in a small village in the Bhuj area of Gujarat, India, we were the second group of “white-faced” people that had ever visited their community. They proudly showed a water system and the first-ever workshop being built in their community, projects made possible by the sale of their handstitched quilts. Then there was the young Muslim woman whose embroidery is so fine and exquisite that even though she was in mourning, she was given special permission to see us. Most days, her husband does not approve of her taking time to stitch. But when she visited with us, she said, “This day was a very, very good day.” As I watched a young Lao woman weave her special beaded cloth, she turned to me and asked, if her English improves, would she be able to come to the United States. She couldn’t believe that anyone here would want to learn her traditional weaving.

Our “dream job” has helped us gain a deeper knowledge of what it means for artisans to live and work sustainably. Sourcing handmade textiles from around the world involves dealing with a confusing array of cooperatives, NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), and family businesses, but we’ve met amazing people who have shared their experience of working in a global community. While we still find roadblocks along the way, we carry on. The cloth road is not an easy road, but it leads to a better life. 