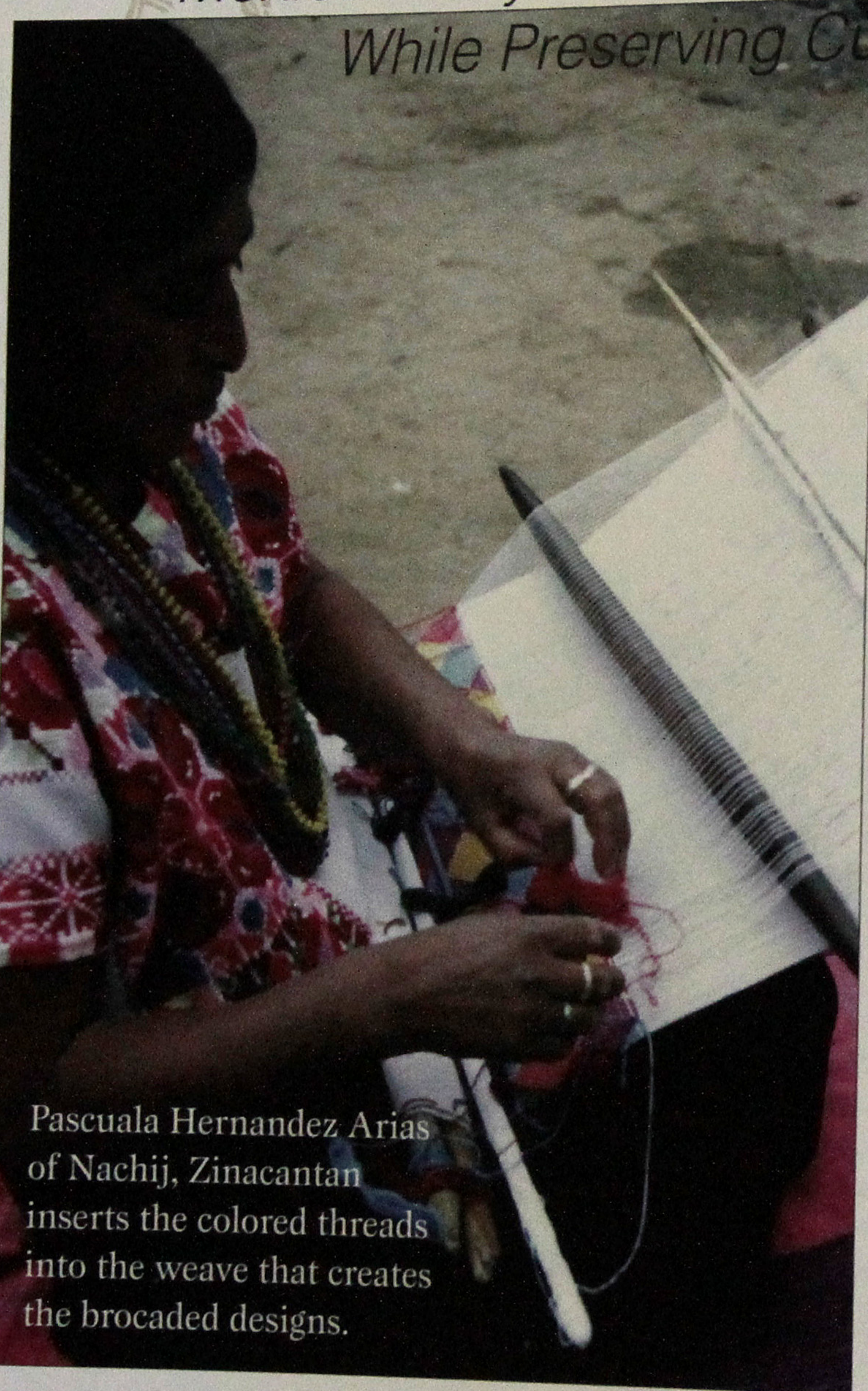


Sna Jolobil

Mexican Mayas Weave Craft Into Art
While Preserving Culture



Pascuala Hernandez Arias of Nachij, Zinacantan inserts the colored threads into the weave that creates the brocaded designs.

BY JANET SCHWARTZ AND
WALTER F. MORRIS, JR.
PHOTOS BY JANET SCHWARTZ

Sna Jolobil (pronounced "snah holobeel") is a Maya women's weaving cooperative which utilizes tradition, art and commerce in Chiapas, Mexico. It does this despite a condition of war existing between Zapatista forces and the government of Mexico. (See Winds of Change, Summer, 1998, p. 70). For over 20 years Sna Jolobil has blended the issues of indigenous economics and Maya feminism with political neutrality. As co-author Walter F. Morris, Jr. puts it, "Maintaining an organization that includes a wide spectrum of beliefs in a politically charged situation requires extraordinary diplomacy and public humility." Winds of Change presents the story of Sna Jolobil as part of its coverage of the struggle and the vision of Chiapas.



Each piece is carefully inspected before it is sent to the store in San Cristóbal, where it is again inspected before being presented for sale.

In today's world, most small businesses fail within the first year. Sna Jolobil, by contrast, has survived for over two decades. This 1,000-member Indian weaver's cooperative initiated the women's indigenous movement and has persisted despite the current clashes between pro-government and anti-government Indians as well as Zapatistas and the Mexican government. The mostly women membership insists on dedicated hard work leading to the artistic harmonious perfection which they believe paves the way to community healing, stabilization, equality and opportunity in the long term.

The secret to Sna Jolobil's success is a policy of non-discrimination regarding political affiliation and religious preference, combined with preservation of culture and education of both the public and the Maya.

Sna Jolobil means "House of Weavers" among the highland Maya. Present manager Pedro Meza, a Tzeltal Indian, explains that the co-op is no ordinary business. He says, "It has

had an economic impact on indigenous women because Sna Jolobil was the first institution where they could make money through the preservation of their traditional art." Sitting on a bench sketching ancient Maya designs and making suggestions to the women about reproducing them, he went on to explain an important policy. "We ignore whether the members are evangelists or Catholic traditionalists, pro-government or Zapatistas. In the midst of war, life goes on. We don't ask, we don't want to know. We only discuss business and the traditions of women. The truth is life goes on and Indian success stories continue."

Maya Business and Art

Sna Jolobil began 20 years ago with 50 members and \$100 in capital. Few tourists bought weavings in those days and communities were virtually inaccessible. But when roads were built, spreading out like spider webs in a geometric progression, a steady flow of tourists, intellectuals, artists and professionals began to arrive during the winter and summer months.

By the 1980s, Sna Jolobil's income stabilized at about \$100,000 annually and weathered the economic crisis late in the decade.

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