

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 14
An Experiment in
Integration

c/o American Embassy
Quito
Ecuador
February 25, 1956

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

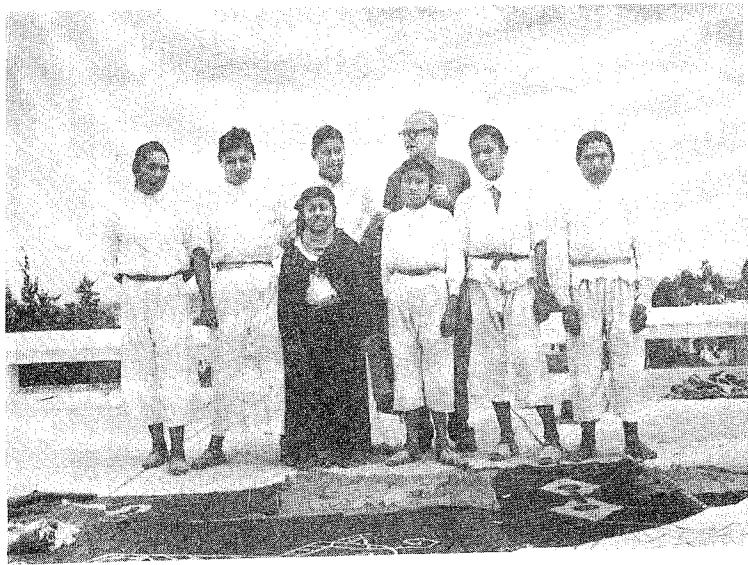
Dear Mr. Rogers:

The workshop of the Dutch painter, Jan Schreuder, in Quito, Ecuador, which produces a limited number of handsome textiles bearing motifs chosen from archeological ceramics, beads and other items as well as contemporary indian designs, is located on the top floor of the Casa de la Cultura (House of Culture), an Ecuadorian institution which is a combination of art museum, concert hall, radio station, printing press and educational center for the advancement and enrichment of the national cultural life.

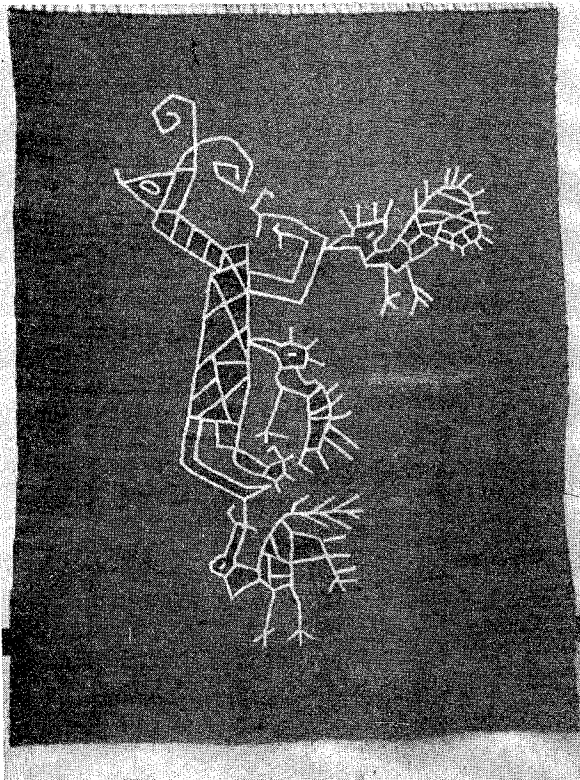
While falling within the goals of the Casa, the workshop is distinct in that it is staffed by rural indians brought to Quito to weave textiles, with the avowed purpose of "integrating them and their kind into the national life." Ordinarily, the personnel and persons who benefit from the Casa's support are considered to be part of the national life, and range from well established creative figures to struggling young men and women active in writing or painting. The indians, being thought of as once removed from something labeled Ecuadorian culture, travel, as it were, under different passports.

The first time I visited the workshop, Schreuder, a slight energetic man with a narrow cheerful face framed by long blond hair turning white, pointed out that the common local designation of it as his workshop is misleading. True he is the administrator, teacher, and general factotum for the indians working there, but to his way of thinking it is these indians who are the workshop, and it is essentially their creation and possession. "Of course," said Schreuder, peering over heavy black rimmed glasses, "some people would disagree with this: old habits die hard."

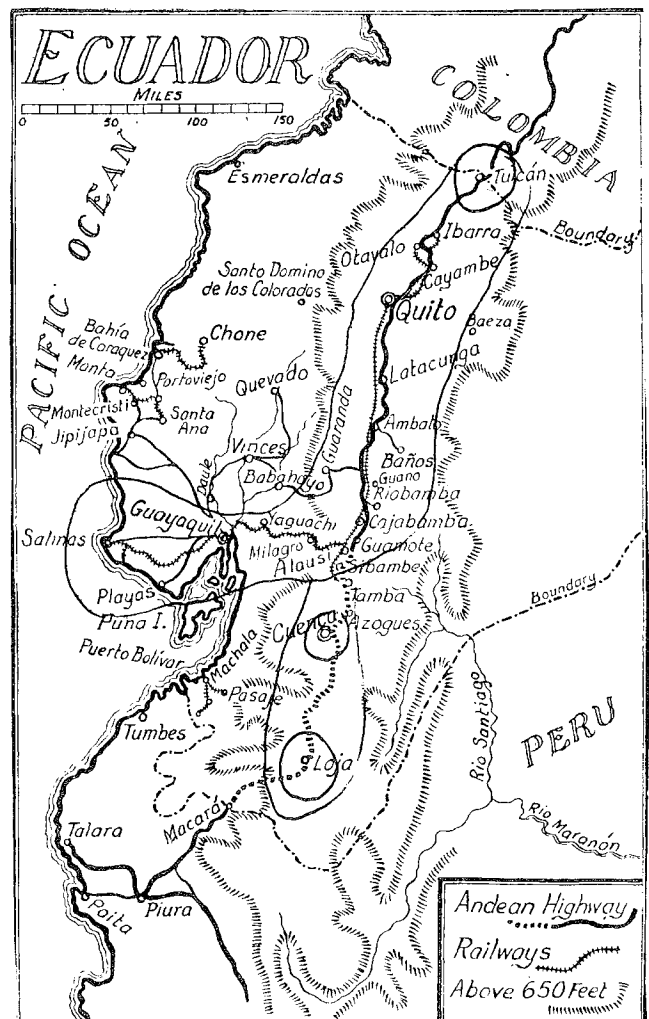
He went on to say that many Ecuadorians, as well as foreigners, simply cannot take as their point of reference the eight brown skinned men who operate as many looms.. Rather, the indians are thought of as some sort of exceptionally gifted pupil, although for some people even this is doubtful, enjoying the benefits of a higher education. The



The Workshop Group
with Schreuder.



Workshop Weaving.
Contemporary Sala-
saca Design.



intention of this higher education was stated in a speech made by President Velasco Ibarra to his Congress last year, which read, in part:

"It is necessary to integrate the indians into the Ecuadorian nation. It is necessary to integrate these peoples in order to make the indian a technical worker who spontaneously and gradually understands the advantages of ensuring the technical mastery of nature, step by step. Through technical advance in their daily life they will be able to comprehend little by little the general ideas which link them with the mystery of experience. This is a large task, it is a task of science, but it must be started if we wish to have a compact nation which contains millions of true and authentic inhabitants."

While few observers would disagree with the need to alter in some fashion the contemporary life of the indian, this speech provoked a great deal of discussion on the proper methods. The loudest objections referred to the complete reliance on technology as the major element in useful change. Some wondered what the magic is in technical advancement if it is thought to be a vehicle which elucidates personal and philosophical problems to the uneducated, culturall isolated indian. One Ecuadorian said, "If that's the answer to understanding myself and the world, I'll take up ceramics tomorrow." Another said, "I wish someone would define 'integration' for me."

Schreuder, and others, have pointed out that there is an even more debatable premise implicit in the President's approach, which is shared as well by some officials of various local and foreign agencies which deal with the uplift of the indian. Simply stated, this is that any man, primitive or otherwise, will take uncritical advantage of some situation clearly beneficial to him. The problem here is who decides what is beneficial. What may be in non-indian terms of great benefit to the indian does not necessarily strike the recipient as so, since he has long been locked out of the storeroom of premises and motives which lie behind the actions and drives of Western peoples. Being unable to comprehend these things, and, in fact, often unaware of their existence, tends to make th indian a difficult subject for the introduction of change.

One agency official sweeps this objection aside with the statement: "But this is to confuse a basically uncomplicated situation. After all, the indian is just a simple human being like you and me, and this is the chink in his armor through which we can get to him." But, to many people who have worked with the indian in the past, this simple soul is well concealed within a culture which is self consciously opposed to alien penetration. Schreuder, for one, with fifteen years of experience with the indian under a variety of circumstances, has

tried to treat his workshop employees under the inspiration of the idea that we are all men together, but has found that his pupils are by no means as tractable as one might expect. For them, the white man's blessings are as mysterious as the functions of an internal combustion engine, and often treated with a suspicion verging on hostility.

For one thing, the indian poses the question, in his resistance to change, of what value the "national life" has for him. His own culture, while scanty in content from a Western point of view, at least fulfills the minimum demands of the individual born into it in terms comprehensible to him. To this must be added the ill treatment he has received from the members of the culture offering him the national life with all its dubious advantages. This is admittedly a problem to which no easy solution can be found by even the most well meaning reformer, but, on the other hand, it cannot be underestimated, as it often is now, on the grounds that present goodwill automatically compensates for past injustice. Complicating the problem is the sorry but human fact that the majority of people with whom the indian has contact today are as conservative and traditional in their reactions to him as he is to them, which tends to nullify the efforts of the well intentioned whose words and deeds seem ineffectual when placed beside a blow in the face, long hours of hard labor and an apparently callous indifference to whether the indian lives or dies.

For another, the indian, like most people who take their own culture for granted, is not prepared to reject overnight habits and traditions which are as intimate a part of his being as the blood in his body. To be asked, as the social worker does, to give up these data of his existence in exchange for those of what amounts to a foreign culture, is a demand beyond the indian's immediate powers of comprehension. No amount of explanation of the "good" to be gotten from this transaction can be too effective since it must perforce be given in terms of Western culture. One wonders, for example, what a Maine farmer would say if a New Yorker came to him with a program of night clubs and sidewalk cafés intended to improve his way of life.

Some of the partisans of the workshop program enthusiastically point out the success of similar undertakings in other parts of the world, and feel justified in belittling the obstacles presented by the different conditions under which the culture of the Andean indian has been formed. Theirs is rather a "let's get at it now and hang the objections" attitude. To some extent, this position is eminently desirable in view of the extent of the problem dealt with and the lack of attempts to reckon with it in the past. "A beginning has to be made somewhere, even if it is only the building of a schoolhouse in a remote indian village, without the slightest hope that an ade-

quate teacher can be installed. The teacher will come later, and in the meantime the indian has a concrete sign of outside interest in him and his people, which may create a favorable climate of opinion for the work of interested groups." So one official stated his doctrine of expediency.

Schreuder, and those of his persuasion, would agree with the intention behind this statement, for it is a glaring fact that the indian does not enjoy a full life as we see it to be, and something ought to be done to awaken him to other possibilities of activity. Despite reservations, it was with this in mind that Schreuder undertook the management of the workshop.

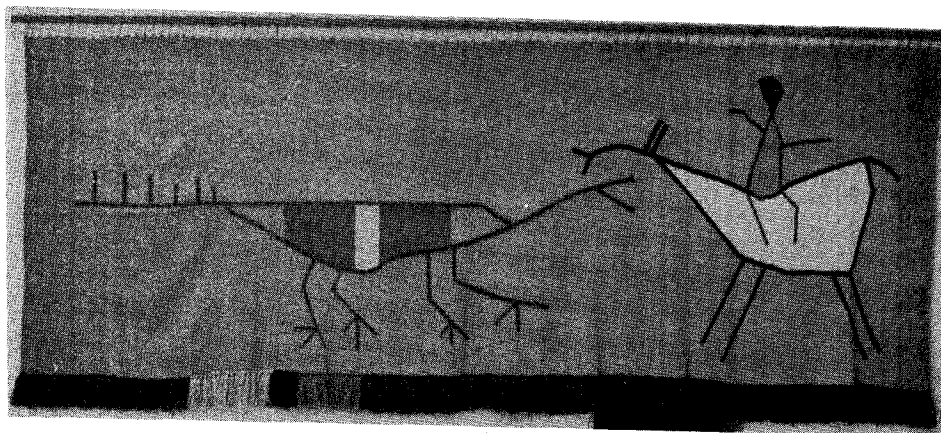
The weaving experiment is under the direct supervision of the International Labor Office (ILO) which is in turn responsible to four other international agencies. Schreuder's salary as director, and the outlays for equipment and materials, are guaranteed by ILO. The salaries of the indians come from two sources. Six of them (five Otavalo indians and one Natahuëla from the north) are paid by the Ministry of Social Welfare. The two master weavers receive 700 sucres (\$42.) a month, while the four apprentices are paid 550 sucres (\$33.) monthly. There are two scholarship students, Salasacas from near Ambato, whose wages of 500 sucres (\$30.) are provided by the Council of the Province of Tungurahua in whose territory they live. (These grants expired this month and the two Salasacas have since returned home.) As wages go in Ecuador, these are high: a primary school teacher receives about 750 sucres a month, a hotel porter 265 and a domestic servant 200. As it was, Schreuder had to fight for these wages, for, as a ministerial official put it, "An indian to receive such a salary? It's unheard of."

The workshop itself is a long high room, its white walls hung with examples of the indians' work: ponchos, rugs, blankets, shawls and scarves in bright yellows and reds, muted beiges and rusts, quiet grays and blacks. Cocks, fish, animals, birds and human stick like figures make up the motifs which are simple in outline and execution. The sparseness of the designs is sometimes enriched by controlled textural effects, and the whole suggests a collection of paintings in wool resembling the work of this century's moderns. Schreuder noted that any resemblance to Western art forms is purely coincidental as each of the motifs is taken with little or no alteration from an authentic native source.

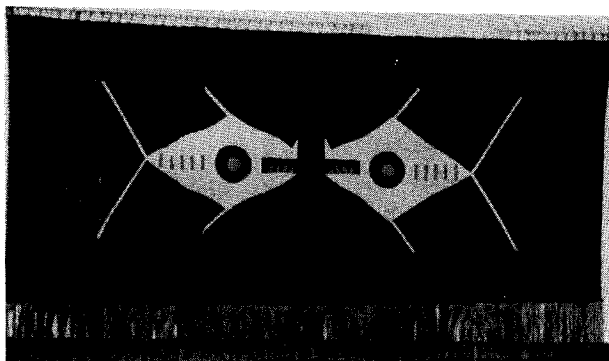
In the room, the only sounds heard are the thump-clack, thump-clack of the looms and the voices of the indians as they gossip, make



Workshop Weaver:
Alonzo Muenala
from Otavalo.



Workshop Weavings: Above
Contemporary Design from
Cayapa; Below, Pre-Colum-
bian design from Manabi.



jokes or comment (sometimes not too charitably) on Schreuder's visitors. All of the men wear not too clean white shirts and some sort of work trousers covering the typical flaring white pants of the indian male which end at mid calf. Most habitually keep a soft felt hat on their heads. The Otavalos wear their black hair in a thick single braid which reaches nearly to the waist, and which, for them, is as essential to their concept of maleness as the skirt is to the woman. Cutting the pigtail is a sort of emasculation process for the Otavalos. The two Salasacas used to wear their hair in a long dutch-boy bob but gave into short hair when it fell into their faces while weaving. The only woman in the workshop, aside from part time help who come in when spinning has to be done, is a tiny girl from Otavalo bearing the impressive name of Mercedes Cotacachi de Conejo.

As a visitor walks by the looms, with huge brown eyes staring through the weaving strings, it is quite another world which he enters. One's attention is quickly taken by the grace and decision of the dark hands as they glide over the taut warp, selecting and guiding the weft threads into the desired patterns. High skill blended with sure confidence gives a tone to these actions utterly unlike a line of production workers in a modern factory. Here, the man and the machine seem one, and there is little doubt as to who is the master. It is not hard to become partisan to the idea of the revival of handicraft industry among the Andean indian, no matter what difficulties are involved, as one watches the slow easy evolution of a poncho under the complex hand motions of these weavers.

The indians, whose ages range from 15 to 32, came to the workshop since they knew Schreuder personally. They were told at the time of hiring that they would be sent back to their villages after a short period of time to teach other men the techniques they had learned. Unfortunately, this phase of the experiment has been delayed, and they have begun to wonder if there is any truth in the day of return, and the eventual organization of cooperatives through which theirs and their contemporaries' work will be marketed. I gathered from several persons connected with the workshop project in one way or another that high ILO officials have first to be convinced of the success of the indians as weavers of marketable textiles before implementing the complete plan. For this reason, among others, there will be an exhibition of the textiles during an international labor festival in Geneva, Switzerland, this year.

In the meantime, the indian continues to put in his forty-five hour week, and to enjoy living in Quito. Most of the men have rented rooms in the city, although a few of them live with their parents, who, when their sons joined the workshop, decided to come to Quito too, where they also weave scarves and shawls, mostly sold to tourists.

Certain changes in the habits of the indians have occurred during the last year, many of which are dear to the hearts of the innovators in high places. Several, accustomed to going barefoot, have taken to wearing sandals in the city, and, even more striking, wear them when they return to visit their villages on the week-end. Their example has inspired emulation there, although at first some hostility to this introduction existed. Two of them have purchased beds for their rooms in Quito, on time payments, and have every intention of taking these with them when they return home for good, which, in a society that generally sleeps on the ground, will be something of a novelty.

In matters of cleanliness, the workshop indian has advanced considerably as these things go. The ideas of laundering and bathing with some frequency have been accepted by the majority, especially since Schreuder is obviously an adherent of the theory of personal hygiene. He has even managed to convince them that there is some connection between filth and disease - how far convinced he won't say - since the wife of one of the workers brought her sick baby to him. The child had a slight fever and was vomiting. Schreuder asked if the baby was allowed to play on the dirt floor of the parents' room. "Yes." "And does he pick things off the floor and put them in his mouth?" "Yes." "Then there's the trouble: a filthy dirt floor and objects on it which infect the child. You've got to keep your house clean if you expect your baby to stay healthy." This advice was followed, and the father proudly reported that the baby hasn't been ill for some months.

These changes are minor but in the right direction. Living in the capital as the indians do, Schreuder at first thought they would become familiar enough with such things as libraries and hospitals to utilize them advantageously. But he found that the indians believe such institutions are not for their use. The wife of a worker was ill, and he asked Schreuder to whom he should go for treatment. "Why to the hospital, of course." "Which hospital? Is there one for indians in Quito?" The man finally went to the city's best hospital and his wife was treated, but, to this day, he is still uncertain whether his wife was admitted because she was sick, or because of the influence of Schreuder with the whites.

The indians think of Schreuder as a link between themselves and the white world, a necessary intermediary without whom the white world would ignore them. This belief highlights another problem in the "integration of the indian": who is to be the representative of the forces of change before the indian communities? In the case of the workshop, Schreuder's previous activities among the indians and the confidence they finally gave to "Señor Jan" have been responsible to a great extent for the present success of the experiment. He has enough prestige to quiet the indians' doubts about the future

of the overall plan, and to encourage changes, although small, in their usual behavior. Even today, although he has explained the sources of the workshops's revenue many times, the indians think that he is the man who lays out the money, and regard him as a kind of super arbiter of conduct and guide to the mysteries of non-indian existence. One wonders how successful innovations will be without the intervention of this kind of person - unfortunately rare - in the programs planned by local and foreign agencies.

Fully aware of all these problems, Schreuder nonetheless continues the business of the workshop with determination and cheerfulness. He selects the designs to be employed from a shell necklace or stone bead, draws up a sketch of the design with any alterations he thinks will contribute to a better final effect, decides upon the colors to be used, repairs looms, supervises the spinning of threads and criticizes the work of the weavers. While in the midst of all this (and the administrative details connected with the official aspect of the workshop) he receives casual visitors and interested officials, responding to these interruptions with good humor. He also has to find time to answer the multitude of questions which the indians bring up each day. "Their curiosity is unbounded now that they have been in Quito for some time, and I have to deal with questions concerning God and gods to those having to do with the odd clothing some of my visitors wear."

Thursday of this week was marked as the day of an exhibition of the workshop's textiles, sponsored by the Casa and ILO. The show was to be officially opened by President Velasco Ibarra. The day before, I visited the Colonial Museum in the center of town where the show was to be held. The museum is an old building, with a handsome courtyard, filled with green shrubs and a fountain. Its lower and upper galleries are a series of white washed Romanesque arches, the upper being smaller in scale. The effect is one of lightness with strength (the latter comforting in an earthquake ridden region) and serves to break up the square regularity of the patio. On one side of the ground level, near a more than life size reclining nude in granite, a pair of flimsy red and gold doors lead into the exhibition hall.

I found Schreuder there, busily hanging his textiles, a cigarette hanging loosely from his mouth. He was assisted by two of the employees from the workshop, one of the master weavers and a part time spinner. "Well, what do you think of it?" he asked as I entered. "Not very much to work with, but we'll make it." He was referring to the walls of the huge room, which are covered from ceiling to midpoint by rough burlap, and from there down by powder blue draperies somewhat soiled by use. "Makes a hell of a mat for the textiles, but it's too late to do anything about it."

I offered cigarettes around, and the weaver thanked me in English. He knows several English phrases which he's learned from Schreuder, who suspects him of taking a secret delight in startling English speaking visitors with one or the other of the phrases. Cigarettes in hand, the hanging went on, the weaver holding the nails and hammer, the spinner supporting the textiles until Schreuder tacked them into place.

"If we hadn't found these in the Casa de la Cultura, this room would never do." Schreuder pointed to a line of joined panels supported by thick iron legs, which spread out like a multiple trip-tych down the center of the room. "They give the place some feeling of a gallery."

He took me into a large entrance hall off the main room which was also hung with weavings. Here their effect was enhanced by white walls rather than fabric as background. Then we went into a smaller room adjoining this, also covered with the textiles. The items made an impressive display despite the competition of the wall fabrics, and the poor lighting. I commented on this, and Schreuder said: "Doesn't really make any difference - there'll be so many people in here that no one will see the pieces very clearly."

When all the hangings were installed, Schreuder sprayed each of them with an anti-moth bomb. When he was finished, the weaver took the cannister and sprayed himself, including his face. "That takes care of you, too," said Schreuder, "and I hope you and the others will bathe and clean up your clothes and ponchos for the exhibition." The indian asked if that meant he and the others would be allowed to attend the showing. "It's your work, isn't it?" Turning to me, Schreuder said, "My God, it's their show and they won't believe that they can attend."

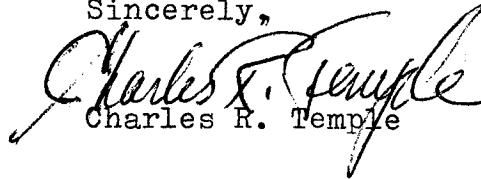
The day of the exhibition was gray, rainy and cold - a bone penetrating cold which defies the best efforts of layers of wool to keep out. In the morning paper EL COMERCIO a notice appeared on the front page that the showing had been cancelled for "reasons beyond the control" of the Casa and ILO. These reasons turned out to be the number of "undesirable" guests who had been invited to share the dedication with President Velasco Ibarra. Since the invitations had already been sent, telephones were busy all day withdrawing them.

Schreuder wasn't particularly upset - it was almost as if he had expected some sort of result like this - but his indians were disappointed, and again had reason to puzzle over the mysteries of the non-indian world. The two Salasacas, who had come from Ambato,

properly bathed and spruced up for the occasion, had to return home, but were insistent that Schreuder send them notice of the next date of the exhibition. The high officials of the UN and ILO who had flown in for the day left with some irritation, and the local people settled down to wonder if there would now be a showing at all.

"The thing to do now," said Schreuder, "is to keep out other unwanted guests," and with moth bomb in hand he went off to spray the textiles again. "Geneva will want them anyway."

Sincerely,


Charles R. Temple

Received New York 2/29/56.