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# ÑANDUTÍ

## The Flower in the Spider's Web

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“Come on, lady, buy a ñandutí from me.”  
“How much is that doily?”

“Five hundred guarani, ma'am, that's all.”

“Too expensive.”

“For you, honey, I am going to let you have it for four hundred and fifty.”

“I'll take it for four hundred.”

“But I can't, lady, the price of thread has gone up, you know.”

And back and forth they haggle about the price of a piece of ñandutí lace, one of the most beautiful and typical of the folk arts of the women of Paraguay.

At first sight, it looks like fine Tenerife or Brussels lace. But there is something about ñandutí that makes it unique in the varied range of needlework. The native vitality in its threads impregnates its texture with richly representative symbols of Paraguayan rural life. It has given it a breath of life all its own; it has also given it its own name.

What does ñandutí mean? In Guaraní, the vernacular language of the country, the term means “spider's web.” And as a matter of fact, just as in its delicate web the spider traps the insects it eats, the fine weft of ñandutí imprisons the objects that give it life—flowers, leaves, insects. We find ourselves captured by the enchantment of its delicate threads and, without wishing it, we find ourselves unwinding the skein of distant memories and unraveling the symbols imprisoned in its filigree.

We recall the legend of the servant girl who, having destroyed the old mantilla her Spanish mistress had given her to wash, was severely punished until she succeeded in weaving another exactly like it. Not remember-

ing what the original looked like, she turned in her isolation and desperation to her only companion in misfortune, another prisoner of its own destiny, the spider, who generously provided her with the model of its patient labor. Like her teachers, the lace the girl wove was studded with jasmines and other flowers. The first ñandutí had been born.

And going back even farther in time, we put together the pieces of that other legend, which tells of the brave and elegant young Indian who, on the eve of his wedding, wished to bestow upon his beloved the coveted jaguar's skin. One morning he left for the hunt, the days went by, but he did not return. The Indian bride set out to find him, and searched the forests and the mountains until at last she found his motionless body. It was covered with a fragile spider's web whose white and perfect weft shone out resplendent in the thin rays of the sun. Helpless in the face of death, the young girl sought to save something of that lost love. Vainly she looked around her; everything was dead or condemned to die. Only the spider worked tirelessly and unceasingly, reconstructing what nature itself destroyed: its fragile web. Inspired by that extraordinary example, the young girl worked day in and day out with zeal and patience, trying to reproduce that delicate shroud which, no sooner destroyed, again emerged as beautiful as ever. At that time she was unaware that she was creating the object that, as time went on, would become the distinguishing mark of the land in which it was born.

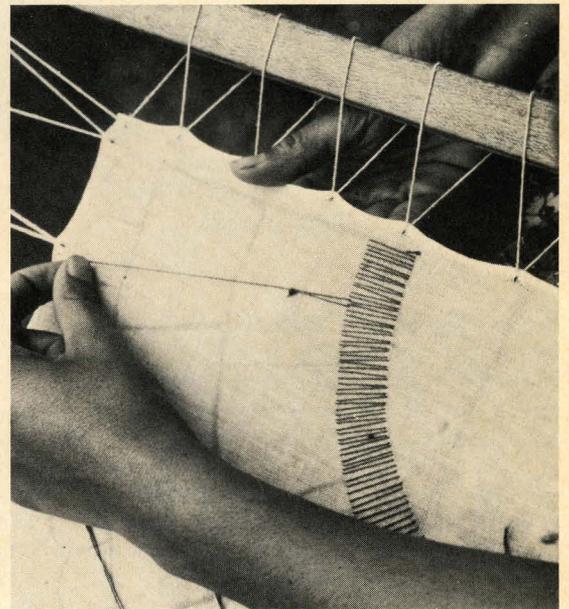
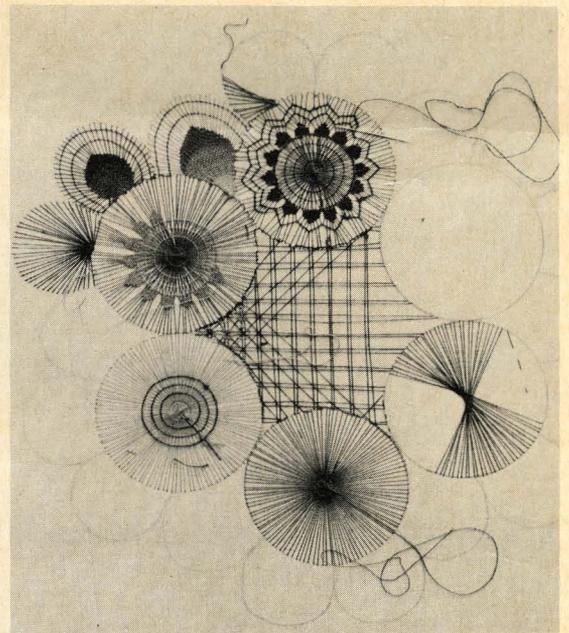
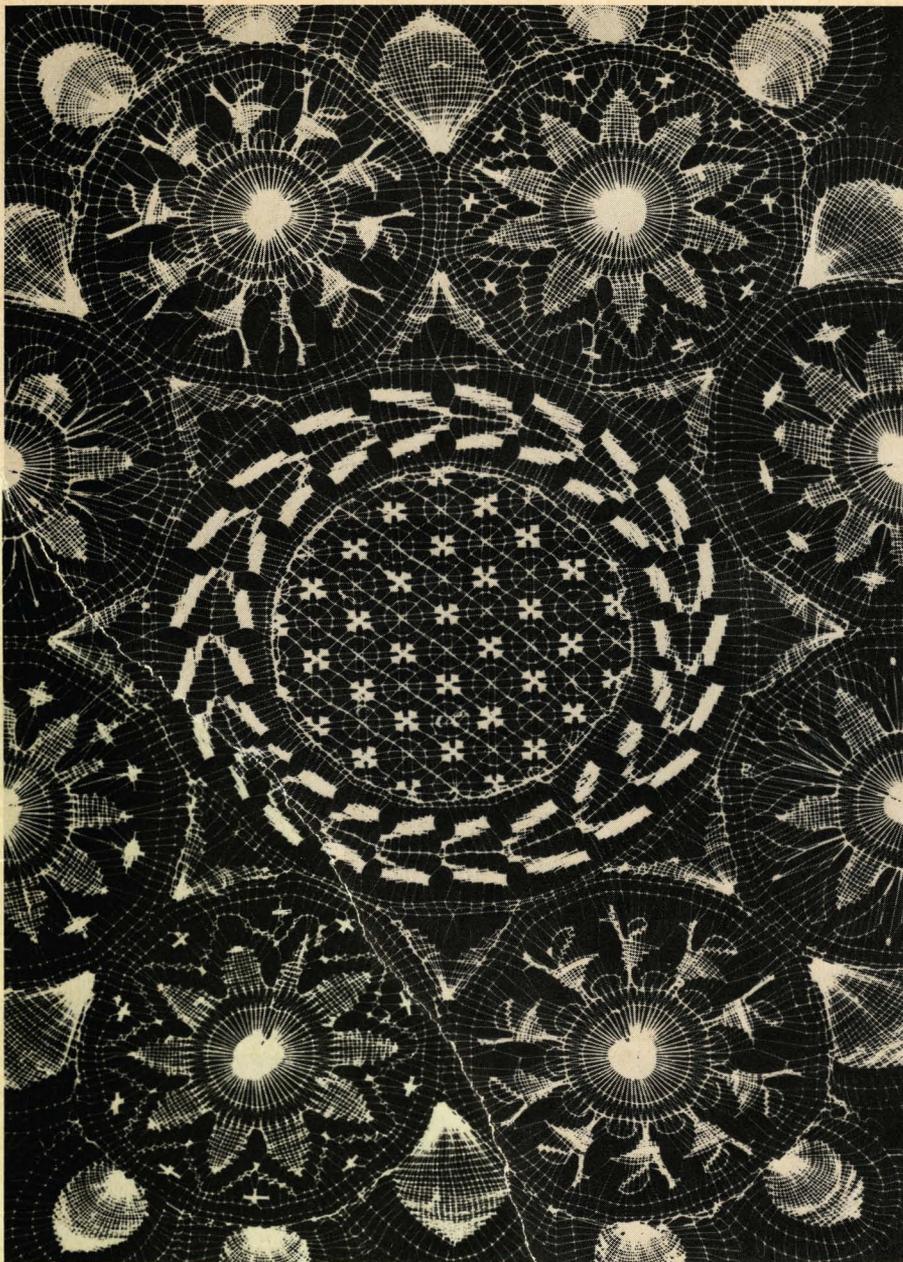
There are many variants of this legend which, according to some scholars, is of relatively recent date. Well then, how and when did ñandutí arise? According to the references that have come down to us, the Indians did not

know it. The chronicles of the conquistadors do not mention it, nor do the documents of the Jesuits, the historians, or the writers of the colonial era. Because of the similarity of its general form and by the logic of history it is assumed that the “ancestors” of this spider's web, the suns and wheels of Salamanca lace, or perhaps the Tenerife lace mentioned earlier, reached Paraguay with the first women sent by royal command as brides for the Spaniards of the colony. What is certain is that the first mention of this lace by the name ñandutí appears in *Letters on Paraguay* published in London in 1838, by the brothers J. and P. Robertson. This implies that this weave had earlier led a nameless life and that it was not until the dawn of the nineteenth century that, like the country that saw its birth, it acquired a life of its own, independent of its progenitors.

In this folk art there is a special enchantment. To begin with, we are attracted by the lace itself, the perfection of its weft, the beauty of its sinuous arabesques. But as soon as we learn the names of its designs, those graceful interpretations of the environment, our interest is captivated by the complicated mystery of its threads.

A typical piece of ñandutí lace is round or oval, with many “spider's webs,” also round, forming its interior. Because of its circular design, spaces remain between these spider's webs that are filled with decorations so delicate that it is indeed these spaces that give ñandutí the subtleness of fragile foam.

The round forms are not the only ones, but at present they are the most common. Less common than in the past are square pieces, in the interior of which there are many small spider's



*Nanduti patterns include guayabo blossoms enwreathed by arapahos in center, flying birds in triangles, circles with birds or anthills, setting suns around outside. Top right: Sampler shows steps from pencil drawing to finished pattern. Above right: Each piece is held taut on a wooden frame as work progresses*

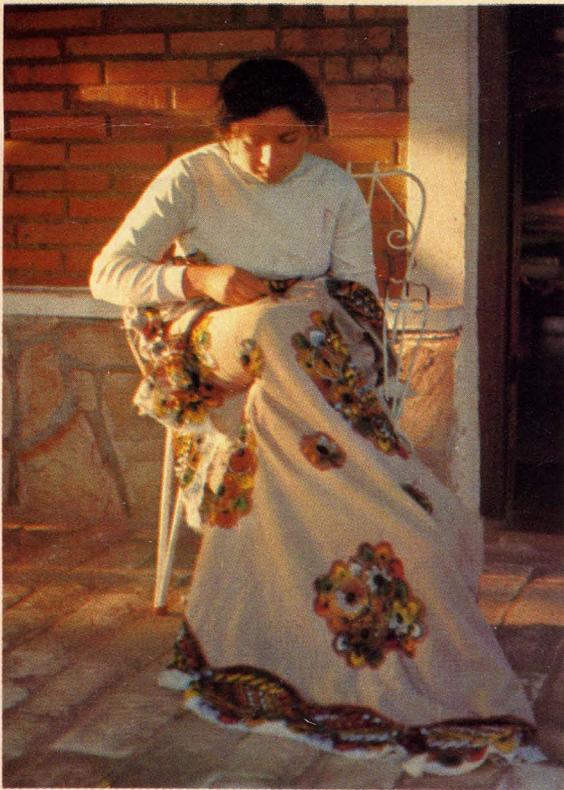
webs, also square, or sometimes round. Straight or curved lines form intermediate spaces suggestive of the same delicacy. Each of these spider's webs is made up of threads that run straight across the circle or square, and join in the center to form a radiate warp. Each individual web depicts a small rural scene consisting of one or more objects of the environment. The weaver calls each one of these motifs a *dechado*, or pattern.

Sometimes flowers, starting at the center of the radii, stretch out their

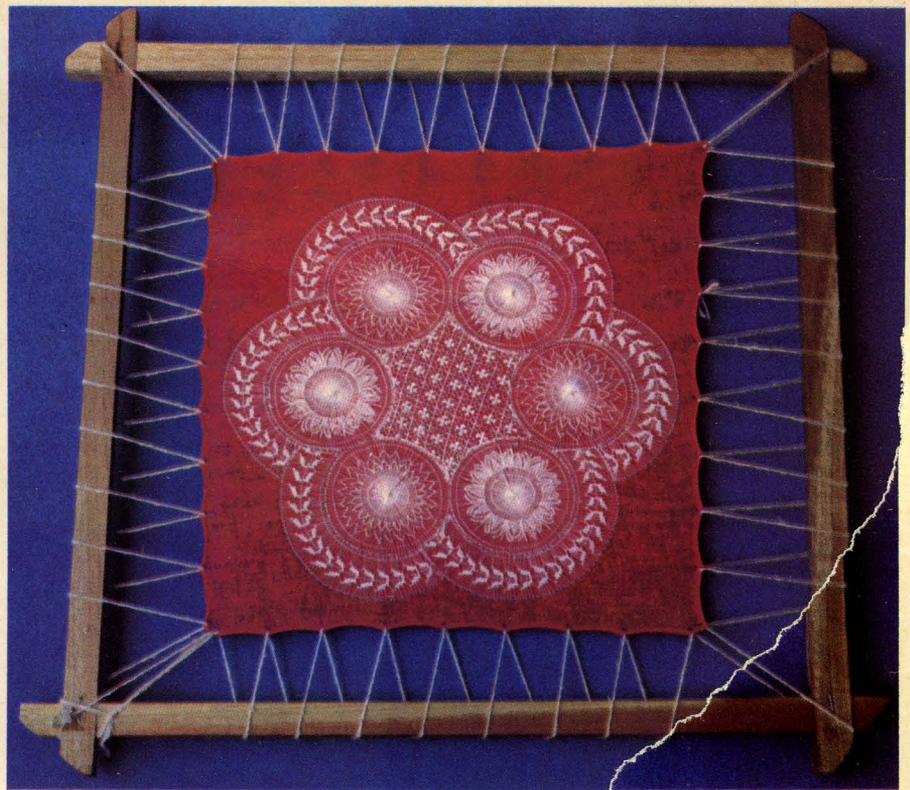
petals to the border of the circle and completely fill it with their corollas. Thus we see the *mburukuja poty*, or passion flower, the national flower of Paraguay; the jasmine, with its four petals ending in a point; the pansy that gracefully opens four petals as well, but this time ending in a wide border.

But most of the scenes depict landscapes, if we may use the term, which could never be still lifes because the very essence of life throbs in their basic design. Unlike the flower motifs already mentioned, in the center of each

spider's web, where the threads of the warp meet, is a radiant sun whose rays are cut by two or three concentric circles. If that is all the circle contains, the motif is called a *kuarahy*, or sun. But usually the rays of that sun, which extend beyond those concentric circles, become the earth itself, pregnant with some natural product, populated by groups of animals, or simply heavy with objects of daily use. It is here, in this ring that forms the earth's surface, that the weaver fashions the representations of her world. The geometrical



A lacemaker at work in Itaguá—  
the village that prides itself on being  
the birthplace of ñandutí



A ñandutí doily, still stretched on its frame, before being carefully  
snipped from the canvas that served as support for the lace while it  
was woven. Washing and starching will complete the laborious process

symmetry of the patterns and their repetitive circular succession suggest movement, as in primitive designs. In this case, it revolves around its own axis, the sun, the source of life's energy.

If we analyze a few ñandutí pieces, we immediately note that the crown of a solar disc is encircled by a ring of *karãu*, a kind of longlegged bird, which appears to be peacefully resting on the banks of a stream. In another circle are the scorpions with their threatening tails held high, ready to thrust in their stings. Further on is the rice spike, with its slender stalk gently bending under the weight of its ripe grains. To the side is a field covered with corn flowers, which will become the basic grain of the daily diet. They are followed by the flowers of the coconut palm, which herald the hot December and fill the air with their unforgettable scent. In the middle, one can clearly see the *takuru*, the ant hills shaped like enormous mounds of red earth. There, the solar disc is enlivened by a ring of children, the *ta'u nde ra'y*, a forgotten game of children wearing pointed bonnets. Farther on, baskets are waiting for their owner to use them as a bag, a pocket book, or a table on which to

display some produce she has for sale. Nor is there a lack of "crosses," "niches," and "altars," or of the "ribbons that adorn Sunday clothes." Present too is the whimsy, always latent in this seemingly staid people, which is manifested here in motifs like "the squatting woman."

Arranged in rows or in a succession of circles these miniature landscapes form the outline of the lace. In the center and between the discs are the intermediate spaces mentioned earlier. Within them the base, not radial but in a grid pattern, is adorned with special motifs that are used exclusively for this purpose. These are the "wastelands" of ñandutí, the barren land of forest vegetation where, among other trees, the guayabo proliferates. Its flower, the *arasa poty*, is the one that usually adorns these clearings in the lace. The delicately beautiful *arasapé* is the motif most characteristic of ñandutí. There is hardly a piece of lace in which this flower is not captured.

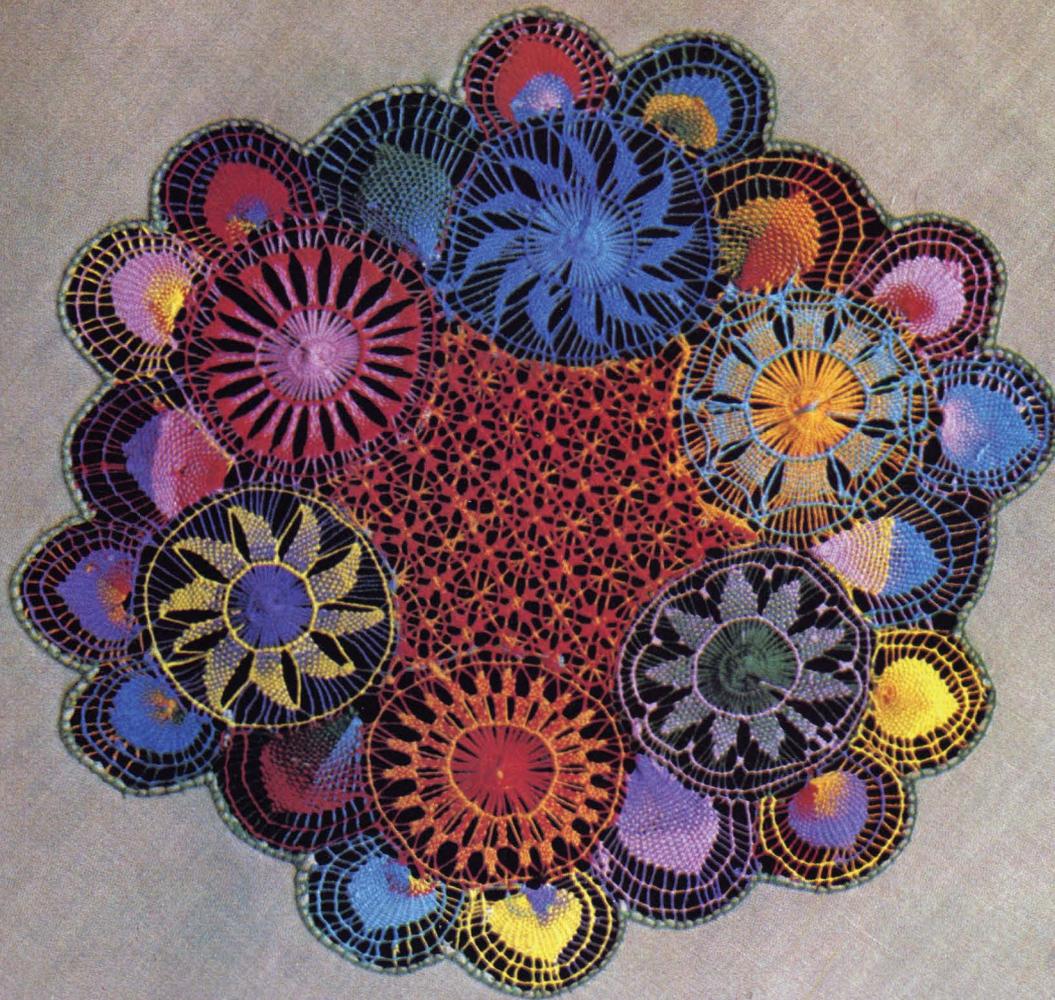
Although only a few motifs are used in these spaces, they are all extremely delicate in texture. The filigree, although not directly copied from nature, does represent another traditional

form of folk art, silversmithing, undoubtedly a heritage of the colonial era. Sometimes there are "birds in flight" that fill a triangular clearing or, if a rhombus with concave walls has been left, a jasmine flower.

As a matter of fact, even if the design of a piece of lace is very elaborate, its symmetry always borders on perfection: squares are set in circles, diamonds in squares, rows of circles shelter other five-sided figures, ovals are crossed by parallel lines to form an insertion filled with the fruits of the forest *guavirá* or the now forgotten *arapaho*, a kind of macaroon made of manioc starch, milk, and sugar cane honey.

But no matter what the design or the form of the piece, an activity—the material, emotional, and spiritual life of that society—is always depicted within the solar discs: its crops, its utensils, its objects, animals, or plants, some mood, some children's game, some religious feeling, even some star that shines in the cloudless firmament.

This we learn from about sixty motifs, each identified with a name. Depending on the creativity of the weaver, they can be combined into



*Although traditionally white or ochre, vibrantly colored ñanduti pieces are gaining in popularity*

innumerable forms within the same disc. Apparently, no pre-established rules for the distribution of these motifs are recognized. However, some are clearly never combined with others within the same solar disc, while others appear to be inseparable.

The variety is immense, but the lace keeps a basic unity of design. It recreates an entire universe in which there lives and moves around the sun a clearly agrarian world that gives the lace its forms. And as if to reaffirm this concept, most of the articles end with one or two ornamental borders of suns, half hidden on the horizon, which bear the name of "setting suns." They are the ones that frame the groups of rural scenes or solar discs that make up the piece, just as sunrise and sunset frame life in the country each day, each year, throughout life.

The delicacy that other weavers who

*"Setting suns" in many colors edge a border of rainbow-hued ñanduti on a white tablecloth. Four-petaled flowers in blue and yellow are jasmines*



depict nature do not capture in their cloth is caught by the imagination, creativity, and skill of the Paraguayan lacemaker. It is she who, lacking a paintbrush, takes up her needle to interweave images with minute figures, fragments of some animal, or abstract designs that cannot always be easily identified. Instead of working with pigments to create her picture, she uses threads traditionally made by hand, of vegetable fibers. Authentic ñandutí is ochre or white, although at present fine or coarse cotton thread, and occasionally silk thread, is used in many color combinations and is well received. Instead of an easel she weaves on a frame made of four square wooden poles of different sizes. In it, she ties a tautly stretched piece of canvas that serves as support for the lace.

There are three stages in the making of this tissue, each one identified by the weaver with the object she uses for it: the pencil, the needle, and the scissors. With the pencil she draws on the canvas the design she has previously traced on a piece of paper. This design is nothing but the groups of discs distributed according to the form of the article she wishes to make.

With the needle, she fastens the thread to the cloth and constructs the warp or framework of the first "spider's web." Following the outline of the circle and moving in a clockwise direction she makes a stitch above and another below, forming a diameter. There are some 100 to 150 rays per disc. From this time onward she will no longer stitch the cloth. It is on this base that she will weave the motifs, using only two kinds of stitches: the "darning stitch" and the "netting stitch." First she ties the threads tightly in the center of the disc, or *apyte*, then on this base she weaves the petals of a flower or the luminous rays of the "morning star," if these are the motifs she intends to use in that disc. If not, she weaves the concentric circles that will form the sun, or *kuarahy*, in the corona of which she will distribute whatever motifs she wants. When she has finished the first circle she will similarly construct the others. The intermediate spaces are built up in the same way except that instead of drawing the threads diametrically she will arrange them quadrangularly.

When the needle stage is completed she turns the frame over so that the tissue is reversed. With the scissors she

cuts the canvas that served as support for the rays of the disc except on the border of the article. How skillfully she does this! With the point of the scissors she follows the outline of each circle, removing the cloth under the tissue, making sure not to cut any of the threads of the lace.

This is the end of the work of the weaver. The subsequent work, which is only concerned with the presentation and preservation of the article, is often done by someone else; washing and starching are essential steps in this laborious process, if we bear in mind that it may take weeks and months and even one whole year to make a ñandutí.

Still supported by the canvas border stretched on the frame, the ñandutí is washed in soap and water, even with a fine brush if need be, and then blanched in the sun. There is no way of washing a piece of ñandutí when the weather is cloudy. "It won't turn white," the experts tell us.

Once it is dry, it is soaked again, this time in manioc starch water, and then carefully wiped with a dry cloth to remove any starch that has remained caught in the threads. Again it is put in the sun to dry. Starching is also an essential step in the process, since a ñandutí must never be ironed. Finally, again with the scissors' point, it is separated completely from the canvas backing, and then the piece is finished.

For many rural households this handicraft is the sole support. In some cases, all the women of the village are engaged in it, especially in Itaguá, which prides itself on being the birthplace of this lace. Its school is the only one in the country where this craft is taught. This village, which borders the road that links it to Asunción, the capital, some twenty miles away, is a marvelous place to visit. The shops that sell ñandutí are strung out along the road one after another. Its sidewalks, the trees that border them, and the façades of the houses are literally covered with huge spider's webs made of coarse thread, with enormous frames hung with tablecloths, doilies, and handkerchiefs, a veritable symphony of joyous colors that, in the sunshine, take on even greater splendor. And on the colonial porches of the village houses women of all ages are gathered, each with her frame on her lap, arms and hands deftly weaving, above to pull the thread, below to interweave it in the weft, as they weave out their lives.

Unfortunately, this handicraft has developed to such a point that, ironically, the market is being flooded. Entire families are engaged in this work, from six-year-old children to grandmothers who are not old until they lose their sight. However, the weavers are not fairly paid for the time and energy they spend on their work. We believe that it can still be said that real ñandutí lace continues to exist only because of the love the village women shower on this traditional craft whose secrets they jealously try to guard. The logical consequence of this state of affairs is that the rich symbology of this lace is being lost. The easiest motifs prevail in its ever coarser threads and its increasingly open weft. The young have forgotten or no longer want to learn the intricate arabesques of the beautiful designs of old. What is worse, the young are increasingly abandoning this ill-paid craft.

Even today, however, this white foam still adorns large tablecloths, small doilies, sets of place mats, delicate mantillas, original hats, sumptuous bridal dresses, appliqués, skirts, blouses, and even dresses whose classic simplicity only further sets off the richness of their finely woven patterns. In the old days, and it is a pity they are no longer to be seen, parasols and fans, cuffs and ruffs of this lace were used as articles of luxurious feminine elegance.

To make up for this, ñandutí as a national symbol has passed beyond geographical frontiers and is known and appreciated both inside and outside Paraguay. It has also transcended the limits of its narrow craft field and become the theme of poetry, of zarzuelas, and of popular song. Today we find it in the stage setting and decor of the theater, the logo of a commercial firm, or the design of balcony and window guards.

Descendant of the wheels and suns of ancient Spain or perhaps of the fine lace of Tenerife, as the mestizo child of the New World, its shape, the weft of its tissue, its motifs, and even its name have become native to America. ■

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*Art critic Annick Sanjurjo de Casciero, formerly a professor of Latin American literature in her native Paraguay, now lives in the United States. She has recently paid several long visits to her homeland to produce a documentary film on ñandutí and those who make it. The article was translated from the Spanish.*