PERU RESIN & FISH SCALE BUTTONS

by Joy Jarnagin

Have you had the pleasure of seeing the brown buttons made in Peru of tree resin and fish scales? These buttons were made by local artisans after a request from Carol Hondorp, who was doing missionary work in Peru. Joyce McGrath of the West Michigan Buttoners saw some of their jewelry and asked Carol if she could make buttons. (Joyce now lives in Ohio.) Their usual wares included canes, knife handles, sword sheathes, and key chain ornaments.

That request initiated the making of very unique and beautiful buttons. The West Michigan Buttoners club sold these beautiful buttons and all monies were used for missions in Peru. The club received from 15 to 50 buttons of each design.

Deep in the Amazon rainforest, tree resin is harvested from local trees, much the same as it is harvested in the U.S. for maple syrup. It is used as a caulik, adhesive, incense, and by craftsmen. A chevron is sliced in the bark and the resin is captured as it seeps out. This resin is boiled down into a thick concentrate, and hardens into a lump as it cools. Craftsmen soften the lump, called copal, with heat when they are ready to begin work.

To make the buttons, a small ball of tree resin is shaped by hand. The men coat their hands in petroleum jelly to keep the resin from sticking to their flesh. After the mass if formed into the intended shape, details are added using a pinza tool, much like our tweezers. Buttons must be completed in 10-20 minutes as the resin hardens quickly. The resin dries

Several of the resin buttons are mounted on the scale of a Pirarucu fish (Arapaima gigas), locally known as the paiche. The paiche is one of the world’s largest freshwater fish and is fascinating in its own right.

Specimens over ten feet long were once common, but over-fishing has led to smaller individuals. The one pictured here is about ten feet long.

They are "living fossils" belonging to the Osteoglossidae ("bony tongue") family of fishes, to which our local catfish also belong. The "tongue" is about five inches long and bony. Its rough surface is used by natives as a rasp to smooth wood.

When water levels drop and oxygen diminishes, this fish guips air. As the river dries out completely, it curls up in a ball and rests in a burrow (aestivate) until the river floods again.

The fish’s scales have been marketed for a long time as finger nail files. They are large and hard. The example on the next page is 3½ inches long. The dark diamond-shaped portion is thick and tough—effective armor
against caiman, freshwater dolphin and predatory fish. On the living fish, the pale colored part is covered by other scales. This scale comes from the back part of the fish near the tail, where scales are the largest.

Four of the button designs incorporate the fish scale. These include the Indian Jibaro and the Boro faces. Resin is used to form the head designs & feathers on the button fronts, as well as the shanks and signature plate on the back. The village name, Iquitos Peru, appears on this plate.

The Shimaco Indian face actually has piranha teeth embellishment: and not just the teeth, but the fish's entire mouth parts. Legend has it that the Shimaco tribe live deep in the jungle and file their teeth into points using special instruments. These sharp teeth are used as weapons against their enemies, tearing the flesh of their opponents. It's possible that these Indians still live in the region, but they are so deep in the jungle they are rarely seen.

The dark area at the top of the button is part of the fish scale showing. The parrot and toucan also appear on a fish scale. In addition to the three faces and two birds already mentioned, the following designs were also imported: two fishing ducks, a wild duck, dolphin, small & large toucan, small & large parrot, and an iguana.

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Contributing pictures and/or text for this article were Joyce McGrath, Christine Shrove, & Jose Howells

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