

OPINION // OUTLOOK

Guatemalan textiles make great gifts. Is it ethical for Americans to buy them? (Opinion)

The bright, beautiful fabrics woven by Maya women make great holiday gifts. But does any money make it back to the weavers?

By **Joyce Bennett**

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For many Guatemalan weavers, money made by selling their work covers family necessities such as education and medical care.

Kryssia Campos/Getty Images

I have spent almost two decades researching and working with Maya women weavers in Guatemala, and I just spent the last year living there. People often ask me if it's worth buying Maya textiles as a means of supporting Maya women, especially if you're buying from a third-party vendor in the U.S. Does any of that money actually get back to the weavers, who are often some of the most marginalized and impoverished women in the Western hemisphere?

My answer is yes, and here's why.

Shopping businesses that sell Maya textiles does bring at least some economic benefit to Maya women weavers. Over the many years I've done research in Guatemala, I've learned that for many, selling their goods to third-party vendors that you and I can access here in the United States is one of few ways that they can earn money. Some artists use that money to pay their daily bills, put food on the table, or pay for medicine for their children. Often, women sell some of their most prized artistic woven pieces in times of dire need to make ends meet.

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For example, Maya women can access public hospitals, but only if the hospital admits them — and even then, they're required to purchase everything, from medicine to supplies, before receiving treatment. Public education ends after middle school, leaving families, especially young women, struggling to afford high school tuition, along with expenses like supplies and uniforms. Maya women artists often use their meager earnings from producing their distinctive textiles to cover these costs.

Shopping Mayan textiles also supports a more inclusive art market, one that values Indigenous women and Indigenous design production. Consumer demand is an important factor in shaping how economies run. While the color schemes are often bright and vivacious for a U.S. audience, some retailers tailor their designs to be

more attuned to U.S. consumers' needs. By choosing and using Indigenous designs, we create more inclusive markets.

Sometimes the products cost more than easily accessible factory-made alternatives, but so too will the quality be higher, the design more unique, and the item more meaningful. It's far more rewarding to buy something for myself or a gift for a friend that is a handmade, unique item like those I invariably find when shopping Maya textiles.

When I purchase a Maya textile and use it, I always think about the values those textiles represent to me. I know that talented human hands made that item, and they did it using techniques that their grandmothers and mothers passed down to them. I think about my own values of putting family first, of valuing time spent together with and through beloved knowledge from generations past. And I know that when I buy a Maya textile, I'm supporting other women spending intergenerational time together, supporting their kids, and making it through a world that sometimes doesn't make sense.

For me, the biggest sticking point is that buying Maya products takes time and energy to investigate, compare products, and decide. How do you know which company is most ethical? In my research, I found most companies doing good work. To be sure, not all of the money gets back to the original artist. But having recently interviewed many business owners who sell Maya textiles in the U.S., most pay good wages to their artists in Guatemala. Most started their businesses precisely because they wanted to support Indigenous women weavers and artists in Guatemala.

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Even harder: How do you find just the right design in a world of unique textiles? I set myself time limits: At the end of 20 minutes of browsing, I have to make a decision. Otherwise, I'll keep ogling the beautiful, seemingly endless options.

So is it worth buying Indigenous textiles here in the U.S., even if they're produced elsewhere? Does the time and energy it takes actually matter? The system isn't perfect. I wish we could connect more directly and easily with weavers and their artistry, but yes, it's worth it because making some difference is better than none.

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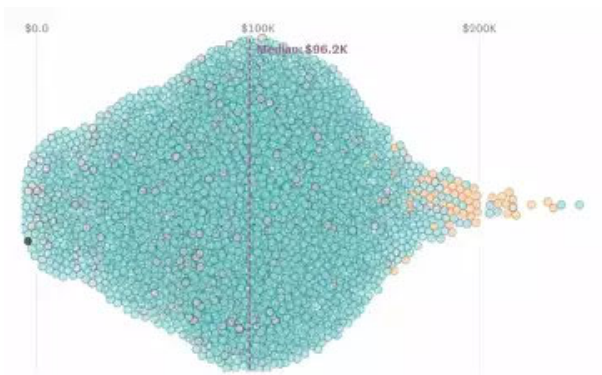
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