

**Artisans | Indigenous**  
Andean communities are combining old skills with new techniques to preserve their heritage. By Jonathan Foyle

Chile's northernmost region, Arica y Parinacota, is a wide-open landscape of mountains populated by an average of only 11.2 people per square km. This is the country's newest region, but its scattered souls nonetheless represent the largest concentration of indigenous people. They include the Quechua, whose best-known branch were the Incas, the great builders of monuments in "pillow-faced" masonry. These interlocking stones of jigsaw precision are renowned at Machu Picchu, Peru. They are barely less impressive at the fortress of Sacsayhuaman near Cuzco, and Ollantaytambo, a town built on terraces in Peru's Sacred Valley.

Once subject to Inca rule, the Aymara people still live on the high plains and mountains of the Andes. Raimundo Choque, 66, comes from Pachama, a village in Arica y Parinacota whose pattern of traditional building was drawn from shakier stuff than solid Inca stonework. "Our village never had a high standard of living," he says. "We always fought for subsistence, to maintain our territory." He grew up in a community that continued a centuries-old tradition of creating and taking care of its own buildings, assembled from plant-based materials as much as earth, brick or stone.

"The roofs of the houses and the temple in Pachama were made of straw, especially the church. The entire community assisted to change the straw roof of the whole church every three, four years. And everyone contributed their amount of straw. That was the way of conserving our heritage."

He describes the village economy as "agropastoralist", gleaned from the land. Yet the world was changing in the late 20th century and he needed to find employment, so headed for the city of Arica to gain a technical certificate. He describes his trade as "an electric mechanic, [though] I have worked all my life in different jobs". Some of those jobs were agricultural, while he also learnt to turn his hand to routine piecework that kept the table laden and the lights on.



Raimundo Choque grew up in a community that continued a centuries-old tradition of creating and taking care of its buildings — Pictures: Fundacion Altiplano

## Conserving Chile

The modern world's emphasis on individual careers tends to deskill rural communities, which in turn threatens the survival of the rural-built environment. This concern is addressed by the Fundación Altiplano, which trains students in both traditional building tech-



Choque shares his skills locally

niques and up-to-date methods of specialist conservation. To date it has funded 32 conservation projects, supported artisanal craft production and hosted a film festival about this area. During 2015, the foundation ran a programme of training in restoration of Andean cultural property, financed by the regional government of Arica y Parinacota. The scheme offered opportunities to local people who might want to develop a career as conservators, and it caught Choque's eye.

"I found out there was a call for applications for training and I applied. I learnt not only to restore images and polychromy, but also to carve wood, carve stone, I did a serigraphy [silk-screen] course to work with fabric... I realised that I had the ability to undertake restoration work."

The foundation's co-founders are Cristian Heinsen and Magdalena Periera. Heinsen still remembers being struck by Choque's ability, as "he surprised every one of us as an amazing artist". Choque recalls that the experience was beyond practical; it inspired a



Choque uses diverse techniques

passion to conserve the finite resources of his heritage. "In the workshop," he says, "we had good teachers who taught us diverse techniques of local crafts, conservation and restoration. They injected me with that energy that maybe needed awakening, to say 'this is important, this is a part of me, a part of our culture, our identity.'"

Fundación Altiplano employs trained apprentices in its site projects so that their growing skills and knowledge are reinvested locally. In January 2016, Choque was recruited as a part of the cultural properties team of a restoration project conserving the 18th-century Baroque temple of San Andrés de Pachama. He is directed by Liliam Aubert, the foundation's professional art restorer, whom Heinsen regards as "a rock star of conservation, from Cuzco,

Peru. She could be working in the best labs in Europe but she loves to work in these old abandoned villages, restoring forgotten treasures, training humble people to become reborn as artists."

Aubert assigned the teams within the temple, and gave Choque the responsibility of working on the dilapidated main altar, detaching all the ornaments and rebuilding it in its original form. "I have had to first work on removing contemporary repainting, get to the originality of the altarpiece, carve pieces that are missing and work also on an altar frontal that was made of wood and had four panels."

Finding decent carving wood is difficult in these mountains, particularly aged timber that might match the surviving parts of the altarpiece. But a solution lay overhead. "We found hardwood in the temple's roof, because some



San Andrés de Pachama church

beams were replaced, for example, a *tijera* [rafter from a gabled roof], as we call it, and since it is wood that doesn't have a lot of internal bark, it is not difficult to carve and it is fine. With that [wood], I have replaced many pieces."

As his enthusiasm suggests, he finds the work sustaining. "I feel something strange when I enter this temple. It changes many things, it could be energies that are accumulated between the walls," he says. "My chest swells; I feel proud. Today we have another vision and I feel happy and think that I have [contributed] to what my father and grandfather did here."

Choque's ambitions go beyond the personal. He hopes to re-establish communities through reinstating the beauty of a focal building that might once again be prized and contributed to by all. "The work in the church is not only a material job, but also a spiritual job," he says. "Our villages are depopulating, so a way to captivate people is to make them feel how families were before, and it is the church that moved that community."

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