



Shoulder bag, María Isabel Grañén Porrúa Collection.



## Weaving the World

# *The Oaxaca Textile Museum*

Salvador Maldonado\*

**F**or wearing, for hanging, for adorning, for dancing, for dressing rituals, for talking about the world in textures and colors, more than 7 000 pieces of textile art, embroidered on cotton broadcloth, silk, cotton, wool, and vegetable fibers make up the Oaxaca Textile Museum collection.

In the Mexican tradition, textile work has always been not only extremely rich because it puts a stamp of identity on the different cultures, but also of great beauty. Thanks to the codices, we know that from ancient times the pre-Hispanic civilizations practiced different techniques, such as knotting or manual weaving, loom weaving, and dyeing with natural dyes, which certain indigenous communities continue to use, par-

---

\* Communications coordinator, Oaxaca Textile Museum; [smaldonado@museotextil.org](mailto:smaldonado@museotextil.org).

ticularly in southern Mexico. Just as it is pleasant to imagine that in that era the gods guided hands toward magnificent embroidery,<sup>1</sup> today we are proud to see that those hands learned the way, and this millennium-old tradition has been passed down generation to generation to culminate in enormously rich textile art.

#### MUSEUM ON THE INSIDE, MUSEUM ON THE OUTSIDE

Like other Mexican museums, this museum's building is truly an architectural gem. It is located in the Historic Downtown of the city of Oaxaca, only two blocks from the cathedral in an eighteenth-century mansion restored in 2007.

The museum is on part of what was the orchard of the old Santo Domingo Soriano Monastery, the second Dominican establishment in the Americas, founded in 1529. In the early seventeenth century, a series of earthquakes seriously damaged the monastery, forcing the Dominicans to rent out and later sell part of their lands to pay for reconstruction.

The first private owner was Don Miguel de Bustamante, who built a simple, one-story adobe house. Later, between 1764 and 1771, the property was owned by the Spanish hacienda owner and merchant Ángel de Antelo y Bermúdez. Don Ángel demolished the adobe house to build a typical baroque two-story home with a green stone façade and a carved door. For the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the building was known as the Antelo House.

In 2006, the Alfredo Harp Helú Foundation purchased the house and spent almost two years restoring it as part of a larger project to recover the architecture of the city of Oaxaca's Historic Downtown.





*Quechquémitl* (poncho), Octavia  
Schoendube de Boehm Collection.

In Mexico, textile work has always been  
not only extremely rich because it puts a stamp  
of identity on the different cultures,  
but also of great beauty.



Cape, Humberto Arellano Garza Collection.

In the Mayan tradition, Ixchel, the goddess of the Moon, also called “the rainbow goddess,” bestowed on women the talent for knotting or weaving.

#### THE TEXTILES

From the start, the museum’s collections have included important textiles from Oaxaca, Mexico, and the world. Today, the collection includes more than 7 000 pieces, many of which have been treated and in some cases restored for exhibition. These collections are very important not only because of the pieces themselves, which display the world view, the daily lives, the flora and fauna, and other elements of the imaginary of different indigenous cultures of Mexico, but also because of the context and the era in which they were collected. The following is a description of some of the most outstanding.

#### THE MARÍA ISABEL GRAÑÉN PORRÚA COLLECTION

Isabel began to collect textiles in 1998, and today has more than 500 pieces. Most come from the collection of Don Crispín Morales, a store owner in Oaxaca’s 20 de Noviembre Market. Don Crispín started out in business selling shawls from Chilapa, Tenancingo, and Santa María del Río to Oaxacan women who traditionally wore them. Later, he also began to sell *huipiles* (typical square blouses without sleeves), blouses, and other indigenous textiles for tourists. For several decades, he put aside pieces he liked because of their quality and beauty; thus, between 1960 and 1990, he gathered a representative

collection of indigenous clothing from Oaxaca and neighboring communities of Guerrero state. In addition to Don Crispín's clothing, María Isabel Grañén acquired numerous pieces from the well-known gallery owner and textile promoter Remigio Mestas Revilla and also purchased noteworthy pieces directly from indigenous weavers in different communities. This collection documents the changes in the textile traditions in many Oaxacan communities in the second half of the twentieth century.

#### THE MADELINE HUMM DE MOLLET COLLECTION

In April 2005, Oaxacan artist Francisco Toledo acquired this important collection, which he donated to the Oaxaca Textile Museum. Swiss-born Madeline Humm lived in Mexico and

traveled throughout the country and Guatemala, where she collected textiles in different communities. She was self-trained as a photographer and ethnographer. In addition to the clothing she collected, she also documented the local architecture, markets, and fiestas of Mexico. Her collection includes one indigenous piece from the viceregal period, the *tlamachtentli*, a fragment of a *huipil* that allows us to recreate the use of feathers in textiles; and some pieces from the early twentieth century. However, the vast majority are from the period between 1950 and 2000.



Blouse, Alejandro de Ávila Collection.



From ancient times, the pre-Hispanic civilizations practiced different techniques, such as knotting or manual weaving, loom weaving, and dying with natural dyes, that certain indigenous communities continue to use.

Shoulder bag, Ernesto Cervantes Collection.

#### THE ERNESTO CERVANTES COLLECTION

Alejandro de Ávila donated this collection after inheriting it in 1986 from his great uncle Don Ernesto Cervantes Morales. Born in the city of Oaxaca around 1905, Don Ernesto migrated to Mexico City in the 1920s, where he was part of the same milieu as José Vasconcelos, Diego Rivera, Tina Modotti, and other artists. Encouraged by them, he began to sell serapes from Teotitlán del Valle in the intellectual circles of the time. Later, he created a workshop to make cotton table linens in Xochimilco. The House of Cervantes became one of the country's main promoters of traditional Mexican textiles. His collection includes more than 500 pieces from all over the country, including numerous nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century pieces. Examples are two *huipiles* from Santiago Choapan, a Zapotec community in northern Oaxaca, which

kept alive the technique of weft wrapping and two varieties of discontinuous weft. Despite their age, almost all the pieces have been beautifully preserved.

#### THE ALEJANDRO DE ÁVILA COLLECTION

In addition to the Cervantes Collection, when the museum was founded, Alejandro de Ávila donated almost 700 textiles that he had gathered between 1970 and 1980. He himself documented most of them in the field in two major regions: Mexico's Northeast (San Luis Potosí, southern Tamaulipas, and southern Nuevo León), and the Southern Sierra Madre in western Oaxaca and eastern Guerrero. This collection includes a few kinds of textiles that do not seem to exist in other museums and private collections. A large number of them date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They are also examples of techniques that had not been previously

logged in Mexico, such as the *urdimbre transpuesta* (transposed warp) weave. Several of the pieces are quite worn due to their long use in their communities of origin and have required extensive work by both the Manuel del Castillo Negrete National School of Conservation, Restoration, and Museography in Mexico City and the museum's own conservation laboratory.

#### THE HUMBERTO ARELLANO GARZA COLLECTION

A little before the museum opened its doors on April 19, 2008, the Alfredo Harp Helú Foundation acquired a collection gathered by Monterrey gallery owner Humberto Arellano Garza. Born in 1913, young Mr. Arellano participated in a cultural campaign in indigenous areas, sparking his lifelong interest in folk art. Although we do not know how he gathered his collection, apparently he purchased most of the textiles before 1960. In 1983, he sold it to Porfirio Sosa, an engineer, who in turn passed it to the foundation in 2008. It is made up of 700 pieces from all over Mexico, including a group of nineteenth-century samplers, quilts, and serapes. Several of them are the earliest known examples of textile traditions from some areas and provide fundamental data for clarifying the history of textile art in Mexico. They also include two weaving tech-



*Huipil blouse, Madeline Humm de Mollet Collection.*



**Museo Textil de Oaxaca**  
 (Oaxaca Textile Museum)  
 Callejón Hidalgo 917 Centro,  
 68000 Oaxaca, Mexico

Open to the Public:  
 Monday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.  
 Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.  
 Free Admission

niques not previously registered in Mexico. At least some of these pieces —even perhaps most of them— belonged to Fred Davis, a U.S. American merchant and designer who established himself in Mexico City around 1910 and created the first and perhaps largest collection of Mexican folk art known to date.

### THE OCTAVIA SHOENDUBE COLLECTION

This collection was created in the 1960s and the early 1970s by Octavia Schoendube de Boehm. In that same period, Doña Octavia opened the Dih-kan-dih Gallery at Mexico City’s San Ángel Saturday Bazaar, concentrating on Oaxacan indigenous arts, particularly textiles. Doña Octavia and her husband Don Federico traveled throughout the state, purchasing many of the collection’s pieces directly in the communities where they were woven. Other pieces were acquired from local merchants specializing in textiles, like Herminia Villafañe and Lucila Franco in Pinotepa de Don Luis; Francisco Ortega in Tehuantepec; and Federico Jiménez and Mr. Nicodemus in Oaxaca city, among others.

\* \* \*

The Oaxaca Textile Museum offers an ongoing program of temporary exhibitions dealing with subjects related to the art of textiles, including the materials, the techniques, the geographical areas, and contemporary proposals that dialogue with traditional textile art. These shows have spawned an exchange of experiences between researchers and artists of the loom and the needle, giving rise to new textile art proposals. Among them are the workshops in which artists from Oaxaca and other parts of the world share their knowledge, abilities, and experiences with the public and other textile artists. The museum, then, in addition to housing more than 7 000 pieces of textile art, is a meeting point for people, traditions, design, and contemporary art. **NMM**

---

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the Mayan tradition, for example, among other things, Ixchel, the goddess of the Moon, also called “the rainbow goddess,” bestowed on women the talent for knotting or weaving.