

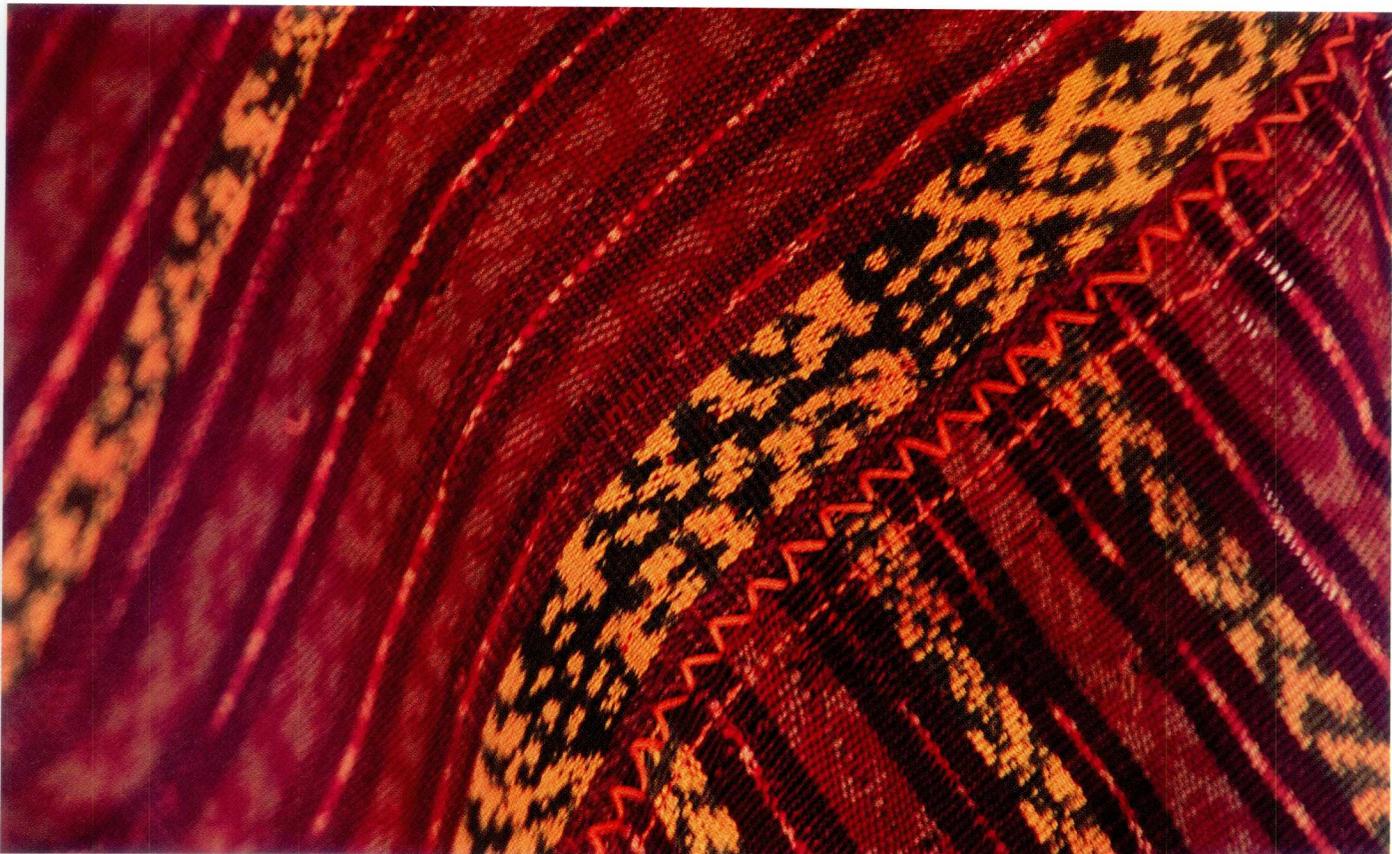
The death agony of indigenous Mexican textiles

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The ambiguity with which the term “handicrafts” is used to describe most hand-made objects has brought about a widespread indifference toward the infinity of traditional national products derived from this human activity. This attitude is understandable when we see stuffed animals, arrangements of artificial flowers, hand-

made home decorations, costume jewelry, etc., being presented by the mass media as if they had the same importance and cultural value as traditional pottery making, metalwork, basket weaving, lacquer ware or the creation of different textiles woven on backstrap or foot looms. The effect of this “generalization” of handicrafts could not be more disastrous, since the high price of this disloyal competition has been paid by the real artisans.

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Photos by Martín Vargas

Quechquemel woven with silk from Toliman, Querétaro.



Meztizo blouse from the coastal Mixtec region.

Stuffed animals may represent Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse and, however well made they may be, they can be produced in Mexico, Berlin or Hong Kong and we will find no substantial difference between them; but lacquer ware from Olinalá can only be made in that old town in the state of Guerrero. And what about any of our indigenous textiles or our mestizo serapes and shawls?

The prevailing indifference in Mexico regarding our extraordinary ethnological heritage is fundamentally due to the lack of adequate information, leading to the unfortunate consequences of today. While many other expressions of our culture have been protected and are proudly exhibited both domestically and internationally, this ethnological legacy, the direct descendant of pre-Hispanic cultures and of the cultural syncretism that originated in the 16th century, is dying out before our very eyes!

At the beginning of this century a cry of alarm was sounded by important personages such as Dr. Atl, Roberto Montenegro, Andrés Molina Enríquez, Manuel Gamio and Miguel Othón de Mendizábal. In the 1950s the voices of Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla and Alfonso Caso were added to the chorus. Yet all their timely observations failed to find the necessary

support. Today, more than ever before, we are forced to rely on foreign museums in order to appreciate what was produced in Mexico only a short time ago.

It is certainly true that some expressions of the misnamed "popular art" have not only managed to survive but even continue to be produced. They can easily be found in any handicraft business; the difference is in the quality of production. In contrast, the splendid heritage of ethnic textiles is going through the last years of its death agony.

There is an ancient tradition of cloth weaving within the cultural area known as Mesoamerica. Unfortunately, because of the climate, we have been left with only a few examples of ancient weaving. Textiles from the central highlands dating from the period between 900 and 500 B.C. clearly show that there was sufficient knowledge to permit the use of cotton fiber threads for weaving, as well as the development and use of the backstrap loom. This loom, however simple it may have been, could only be the result of a long period of technological experimentation.

After the arrival of Hernán Cortés in 1519, the development of textiles achieved by all of the conquered cultures was recorded in the "Historical Sources"



Purépecha sash from the Lacustre region of Michoacán.



Huipil from the High Mixtec region, San Andrés Chicahuaxtla, Oaxaca.

of the 16th century. The most explicit references are found in the writings of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Fray Diego Durán, Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Cortés himself, who, in his *Segunda Carta de Relación* (Second Narrative Letter) to Carlos V, described the admiration caused by the beauty and perfection of the articles of clothing and the many textile gifts that were given to him by the unfortunate captive Tlatoani Moctezuma II.

I have previously pointed out that: “we are quite familiar with the fate that befell documents and objects of every kind at the hands of the conquistadors, both administrators and priests. If it was viewed as necessary to disintegrate the unilaterally subjugated cultures in general, it was particularly imperative to destroy the various polytheistic systems they practiced. On this basis every sign of the former religions and everything derived therefrom was persecuted and punished to the point of cruelty.” Now, “since nearly all the codices were burnt and the majority of political and religious leaders were exterminated, it is possible that some woven clothing took on the role—at least partially— of preserving and transmitting the knowledge contained in the pictographic docu-

ments related to religion itself. It is likely that at least the *huipiles* and *quechquemel*, which because of their daily use were innocuous to the Spaniards, became important elements of resistance to the imposed religion and served as never before to strengthen the threatened view of the universe [held by the conquered peoples].”

How then do we explain the existence of indigenous clothing whose decoration contains the view of the universe held by its maker and wearer? While this question is controversial, I can only pose it here, since space limitations unfortunately do not permit a detailed explanation.

Regarding the symbolic value of colors, it is an accepted fact that some ethnic groups continue to associate the colors blue, yellow, red and black, respectively, with water deities, the sun gods and the gods of the underworld. A concrete example is the cape worn by a medicine man from the Otomí community in San Pablito, in Puebla’s northern mountain range, which because of its colors is associated with the underworld.

The indigenous textiles themselves form a spectacular world. Each ethnic group has its own type, and while there are similarities in the ways they are woven—since most are made with a backstrap loom, an instrument which may be simple or complex—their symbolism and the techniques of weaving, dyeing and decoration give each a special character.

It is little known that most of these garments are colored using natural dyes, almost all of plant origin, as well as snails or cochineal dye of animal origin, in which case the textile is particularly fine and almost always destined for ceremonial use. One example is the *pozahuanco*, a shawl worn by Mixtec women in some coastal towns. It is woven from hand-spun cotton, interwoven with silk threads and dyed with indigo, sea snails and cochineal. The production of the garment with these characteristics ended only 15 years ago.

For the weaver, the above-mentioned dyes represent additional work, not only in the acquisition but also in the preparation of the dyes; as a result, the cost

of the garment increases. Ignorance of these details leads the mestizo buyer to haggle unfairly over the price, which is ironic given that we don't question (and we even inflate) the prices of mass-produced garments.

131 years have passed since 1864, when Maximilian of Habsburg came to Mexico, beginning the "Second Empire," and 129 since the French intervention came to an end at the Cerro de las Campanas. It is interesting that over the course of more than a century, historians of Mexican ethnography continue to omit the fact that Maximilian's government was the first to become interested in building a collection of textiles for the Imperial Museum (today the National Museum of Anthropology), founded during Maximilian's reign. In 1902, 35 years after the intervention, Robert Evans, a Belgian diplomat, gathered a splendid collection of textiles. In particular, he collected *rebozos* (shawls) woven in the 18th and 19th centuries. Fortunately they were acquired by the Franz Mayer Museum in 1994, and these textile treasures were thereby rescued for Mexico.

It must have been around 1915 that Luis Márquez began his collection, containing items which were no longer being produced by the first quarter of this century. As far as I know he was the first Mexican to be interested in collecting indigenous textiles; this collection is now the property of the Cloister of Sor Juana. At the end of the 1930s Roberto Weitlaner and his daughter Irmgard began their textile collection (which remains in Irmgard's possession). During the same period Donald and Dorothy Cordry started their own collection (unfortunately destroyed in 1982), as did Teresa Pomar and Dr. Ruth Lechuga. Teresa Pomar's collection, extraordinary for its detailed

research and complete outfits of splendid quality, recently became part of Banca Serfin's Museum of Apparel. Lechuga's collection, made up of over 2,000 pieces, is without a doubt the most varied of all the private collections, and shows the changes undergone by some garments since 1939.

Despite the extensive holdings of the National Museum of Anthropology, it has unjustifiable gaps in its official collections. The collection belonging to the National Museum of Popular Industry and Art



Detail of embroidery with glass beads. Blouse from Chilac, Puebla.

also suffers from serious limitations. This collection was initiated by Caso and Rubín de la Borbolla and was later submitted to a complicated process of disinfection, restoration and classification after being rescued by the National Museum of Anthropology management. It was then left in the custody of that institution.

The Anthropology Institute of the University of Veracruz has its own collection, made up of many different garments and textiles exclusively from the state of Veracruz. The National University also has its own



Sash stitch (detail) from Tenejapa, Chiapas.

collection, which, when exhibited years ago, gave the public an idea of the importance of these holdings.

Despite the fact that most of these collections are open to the public, visitors are few. It is common to hear statements such as “Oh, it’s Indian clothing,” “People don’t wear these” or “What a shame you can’t buy these anywhere.” There is little information about the pieces on display and, to top it all off, not one of the museums has a publication to explain the fundamentals about the collections.

To complete the overview, the businesses which sell “popular art” or “handicrafts” and which have textile sections charge high prices because of the mark-ups they apply, thereby converting the textiles into prohibitively expensive merchandise, completely out of reach for the middle class. On the other hand, the well-to-do never buy these products; their tastes and economic possibilities lead them to buy imported fabrics.

Under these circumstances some indigenous communities are using synthetic materials like acrylic yarn in order to try to lower costs and be able to sell what they produce. The loss in quality is evident; the product eventually becomes marginal and ends up not being produced at all.

Society as a whole evolves, and of course this includes the Indian ethnic groups. The work of weaving is a special effort: it is much easier to buy a dress made of industrially produced fabric like the ones sold in small town markets than to spend long hours making your own. Not wearing homemade garments also provides a certain guarantee: that of not being exploited

—or at least that is what they hope. The young people in these communities are now the first to look down on their traditions: “That’s something from long ago,” “That belongs to the old people,” “We aren’t Indians anymore.” Such phrases are frequently heard in the countryside.

The problem which affects the production, understanding and study of indigenous Mexican textiles is very complex. It includes a series of very diverse factors which can be looked at from different angles. It is a fact that production of these textiles has decreased to such a degree that their rapid disappearance can be foreseen. With a few exceptions, male garments no longer exist, while those for women are used less and less, to the degree that it is unlikely that even one will remain in the first decade of the 21st century.

Facing this desolate horizon, from April 17 to July 12 of 1995, the authorities of the National University’s Institute of Anthropological Research, conscious of what the loss of this important part of cultural identity would mean, presented a splendid exhibit of many indigenous garments, most of which are no longer in use. The exhibit was made possible by the collaboration of Dr. Ruth Lechuga, who lent valuable pieces from her collection, which were shown to the university community with the hope of awakening interest in the study and rescue of this important facet of our ethnological heritage. The results of this exhibit are promising, since UNAM’s Institute of Biological Research has now become interested in the rescue of Mexican cotton, *coyuche* or *coyoichcatl* (*Gossypium mexicanum*), the raw material necessary for making some of these garments and whose production has been alarmingly reduced.

The student population has also been motivated. This is proven by the visitors’ book made available to the public for registration purposes. It is hoped that in the near future we may have access to professional theses on all levels which would formulate proposals on this subject, since each garment, each design, each dye and the infinity of techniques employed in the creation of indigenous textiles make this both possible and necessary. X