

# Mexican apparel

**W**eaving the theme of traditional and regional dress in Mexico is like drawing out threads whose many colors and materials cross, separate and seemingly have no end.

According to official data, 10 per cent of Mexico's population is Indian, made up of 56 different ethnic groups. They wear traditional clothing which corresponds to the climate, available materials and above all the customs maintained in each region.

Although traditional dress is different from regional dress, their history and origins are interwoven. Traditional dress reveals a chain of current customs, while regional dress is the symbol of a region's highest aesthetics.

The regional dress of Mexico is the clothing used for celebrations. It is often an integral part of a dance, ceremony or tradition. Some costumes are famous for their elaborate workmanship, beauty and showiness, for example the Jarocho of Veracruz and the Tehuana of Oaxaca. Others are equally fine but dominated by simplicity, such as the Tarasco of Michoacán and the Tarahumara of Chihuahua.

The woman who wears regional apparel is dressed meticulously from head to toe. Headdresses, jewelry, makeup and shoes are worn and used differently in each state. Some headgear projects from the head and is part of a hairdo, like the braids woven with ribbons—the *petob* of

the Huastecs, the *rodete* of the Zapotecs and the Nahuas' *maxtahuatl*— or the crowns, combs, hats and shawls used by others.

Jarocho dress is made from three different kinds of white cloth. The lining

is satin, followed by a layer of net and another of lace. This is complemented with a short-sleeved blouse, a small white lace scarf, a velvet or embroidered black satin apron, an elegant hand-painted black fan and dainty white shoes



Julio Galán, *Tehuana of the Tehuantepec Isthmus*, 1987.

with small heels whose tapping can be heard when people dance. The men wear white pants and white guayaberas with a bandanna at the neck and black shoes and white hat.

In some cities, like Mérida in the Yucatan, women of all ages and classes wear regional dress daily without distinction of social status or age. The Yucatecan dress is cotton, simply cut with a square yoke embroidered with large colorful flowers. Lightweight fabric is used because of the extreme heat in the region. The clothing worn by the men is similar to the Jarocho.

Tehuana clothing shows off a headdress of black lace; the dress is

made of black satin and its main features are the enormous flowers embroidered in red and orange silk, whose stitches become smaller in the center of the flower.

#### Dyes and materials

In the small towns and ranches of the Mexican republic the tradition of cultivating fibers like tree cotton or *quauhixtacle*, cotton plants or *ixcatle* and colored cotton or *coyohixcatle*,<sup>1</sup> is still followed according to the region.

Another material used is wool, which was unknown to the ancient Mexicans. After the Spaniards brought their flocks from Europe the Mexicans learned to work with wool, using their own weaving instruments. Because the Chiapas mountains and the states of Chihuahua, Sonora and Mexico all

suffer from harsh weather conditions, wool material was well received by the Indians of those areas. In the process of wool-dyeing it was discovered that the dark colors of natural dyes like black and red provided the most intensity and definition.

The *ixtle* is a fiber made from the fleshy leaf of the maguey plant, which has long, tough filaments that can be woven in different thicknesses. In ancient times, Otomí women from the state of Mexico dressed completely in woven *ixtle*. The *quesquémil*<sup>2</sup> and skirt were handwoven from this fiber. Wool was later substituted; sadly, today 80 to 90 percent of clothing is made using synthetic fibers.

<sup>1</sup> Cotton is said to be native to the Americas and was taken to Europe in Colonial times. Cotton fibers which date from 7000 B.C. have been found in Tehuacán, Puebla.

<sup>2</sup> A short, triangular-shaped cape.



Indian women of the Sierra and view of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, 1820  
F. Lenhart (lithograph)  
C. Nebel (drawing).

## Tradition and *couture*

The second day of February is traditionally celebrated in Mexico as *Candelaria*. On that day, you awaken, get dressed and sing lullabies to the holy child Jesus; the tradition also includes eating tamales on that day.

Dressing the holy child of Atocha represents a moral pledge and the beginning of a familial relationship, since the person chosen for this delicate devotional task is named the godmother. Tradition and dress become one in this religious act.

The world of clothing, like any other means of expression, can take quite singular turns when popular tradition is united with the ideas of contemporary fashion designers.

This combination came together on February 2 of this year thanks to the idea of bringing together twelve of Mexico's most famous designers in order to make clothing for the holy child of Atocha.

Favián Vergara, one of the youngest designers in Mexico, held an exhibition of the works of Armando Mafud, Enrique Martínez, Esteban, Gene Matouk, Gerardo Rebollo, Gloria Smith, Nathalie Prevout, Manuel Méndez, Ricardo Reyes, Mitzi, Keko and Favián himself, among others.

This exhibition went beyond traditional borders, not only because of the originality of the godparents, but since many of them had the opportunity to demonstrate their concerns for the problems that afflict the world as a whole.

Among the many "children," one was dressed in a white robe decorated with red ribbons, as a denunciation of the growth in the number of children born with AIDS.

Favián dressed the "prince of princes, conqueror of hearts," as he called him, in a snug black velvet jacket covered with small heart medallions and a black crown, symbolizing the sorrows of the times in which we live.

The traditional "children" were the majority, such as the barefoot *Huichol* baby with a *quesquemetl* bordered in colored glass beads and a small woolen sash. There are the classics, like the figure wearing a velvet overcoat and white satin—the symbol of purity, according to its designer. Standing out from the rest were the ultramodern "children," among them "Elvis Presley," with a condom in one hand and a guitar in the other; or the one made out of beer cans with a cigarette in his mouth. The designers of these last two think that if Jesus Christ were alive today, he would be speaking about the problems of drugs, violence and the illnesses of our times.

Lace, velvet, wings and crowns set the scene for the holy children of Atocha, in an interesting and artistic renovation of tradition.



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The process of dyeing materials is one of the most surprising steps. The knowledge of nature and the ancestral heritage of the techniques used to extract the colors, as well as the patience needed to apply them, are a mixture of art and wisdom.

The snails found along the coasts of Chiapas and Oaxaca have a color which is extracted by dyers during spring nights. The dyer provokes the snail into releasing its dye, which is then absorbed by fiber skeins which the dyer has ready.

The cochineal tint is produced from a small insect that lives off the leaves of *nopal* (cactus) plants, mostly on those which have no thorns. Pregnant females produce the greatest quantity of dye, which is collected using tweezers and a plate. The cochineal is dried, pulverized and the powder is used as a coloring.

Indigo, of plant origin, is the result of a long process using the *xiuhquellitl* plant. Over 1000 pounds of this plant and many hours of work are required to produce only two pounds of dye.

### Claudio Linati

Any discussion of Mexican apparel would be incomplete without mentioning a European artist who described—in both a pictorial and literary sense—the daily life of independent Mexico, and who left one of the most valuable and realistic testimonies existing today.

Claudio Linati de Prevost, the son of Count Filippo Linati de Parma, was born in Carbonera in 1790. He studied lithography in Paris and later, against his wishes, carried out a military

career. After innumerable vicissitudes—including being sentenced to death for political reasons, a sentence he escaped—he succeeded in obtaining all the necessary facilities from the Mexican government that he needed to establish a lithography shop in the nation's capital. He landed in Veracruz on September 22, 1825.

Linati had two great merits: that in Mexico he introduced and taught the art of lithography, and that he familiarized Europe with Mexican customs through the series of articles and lithographs that made up the book *Costumes Civils, Militaires et Religieux de Mexique* (Mexican Civilian, Military and Religious Costumes, Brussels, 1828).<sup>3</sup>

Linati's academic training was in the classic European school of that time. For that reason he was unable to express the authentic personalities of the different "castes"—the result of

<sup>3</sup> A Spanish facsimile of this book was published in 1956 by the National University of Mexico's Institute of Aesthetic Research.



Miguel Covarrubias, *Tehuana*, 1940.



*People of Tierradentro, with the Plaza of Santo Domingo in the background*, 1840  
F. Lehnert (lithograph).

mixture between the various races—and the many characters who made up post-Independence Mexico, characters like the night watchman, the candyman, beggar, tortilla maker or water carrier. While his European style carried over to his portrayal of these characters, he did faithfully reproduce the styles of their clothing.

Linati's attention was caught by every character he found on the street: military officers, soldiers and religious figures. He was also interested in portraying the staggering numbers of the poor who included a wide variety of beggars, alms-seekers and mendicants.

His work is known for the accompanying texts as well as the lithographs. Each drawing is complemented by a free-flowing description similar to a diary, manifesting his great power of observation and sharp curiosity regarding customs. It is likely that the drawings were a mere pretext to accompany his writings, using clothing to make all sort of connections, even political ones. Some examples: *A leper*, "...shirtless, without a jacket, a piece of leather and



Patricio Robles Gil.

Oaxaca dresses up in colors.



Claudio Linati, *Young woman of Tehuantepec*, 1828.

a woolen blanket make up his dress..."; *A water-carrier*, "...he is the only person in Mexico who wears a cap..."; *A scribe*, "...his half European suit shows his Spanish origins..."; *The young working woman*, "... her dress is made from percale clumsily printed in this country..." In a description less critical of Mexico one reads of his special admiration for typical regional clothing: "...The dresses of women from Palenque...are reminiscent of the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians..."

Mexico's independence was strongly influenced by Europe, in this case France and Spain. Linati left a clear vision of the new fashion tendencies of high society, as well as the changes in military uniforms of soldiers, military officers and functionaries, in an epoch when Mexico's Liberal regime was determined to have a European-style army M