

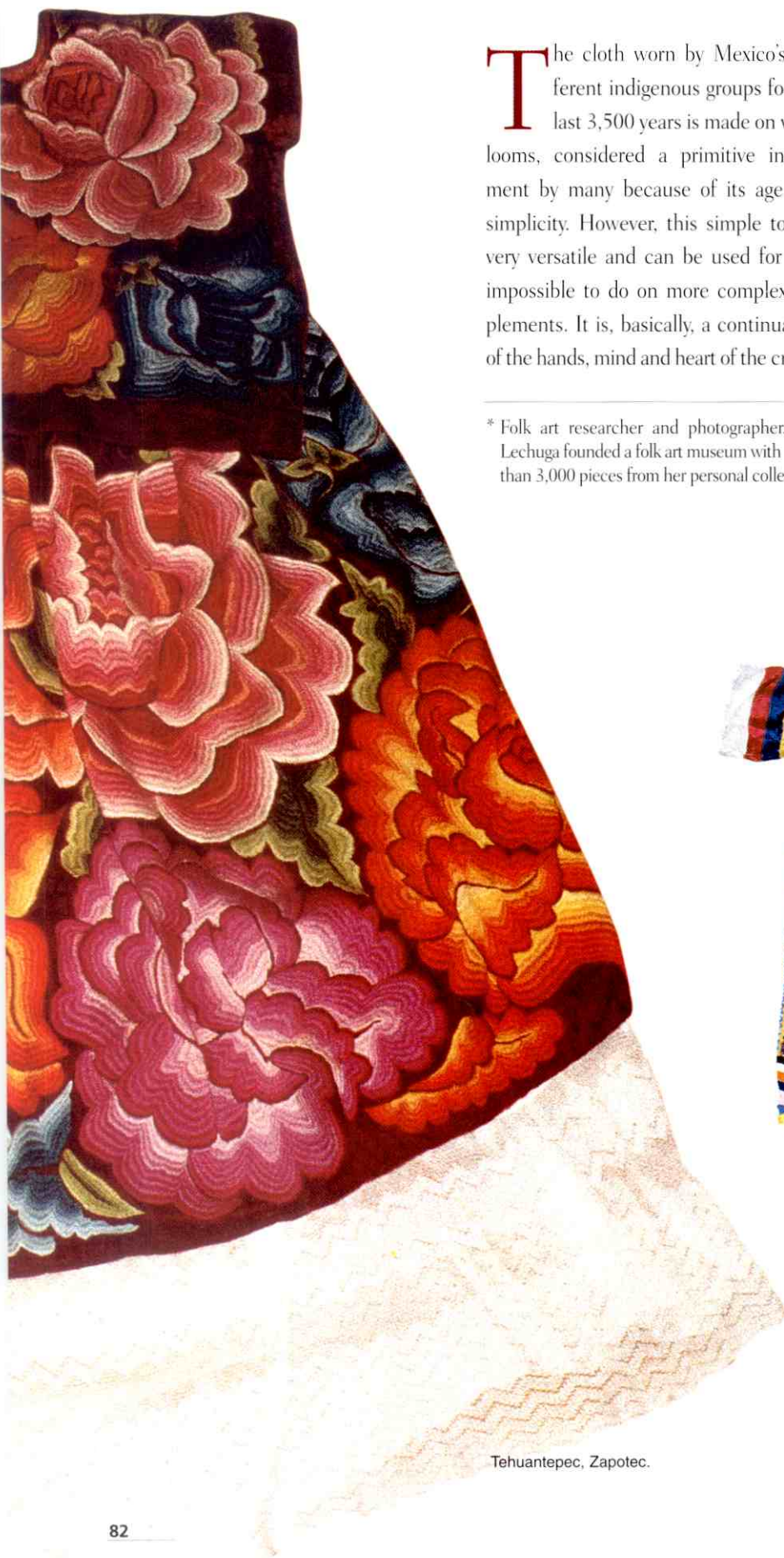


Photos by Daniele Barrera

San Martin Itunioso, Trique.

# Oaxaca's Dazzling Textiles

*Ruth Lechuga\**



The cloth worn by Mexico's different indigenous groups for the last 3,500 years is made on waist looms, considered a primitive instrument by many because of its age and simplicity. However, this simple tool is very versatile and can be used for jobs impossible to do on more complex implements. It is, basically, a continuation of the hands, mind and heart of the crafts-

\* Folk art researcher and photographer, Ms. Lechuga founded a folk art museum with more than 3,000 pieces from her personal collection.

women who use it to produce the enormous variety of fabrics and designs that flow from each people's tradition. From time immemorial, women have been responsible for clothing themselves and their families.

On the other hand, the colonial or pedal loom, introduced by the Spaniards, is operated by men. On it they make overcoats, serapes, blankets, fabric for tablecloths and other items of clothing, many of which are made with wool, also brought originally from Europe. This division of labor continues today.

The state of Oaxaca boasts the greatest number of ethnic groups in all of



Usila, Chinantec.

Mexico: 15 languages are spoken, with numerous dialects derived from them. A great many of these groups conserve their traditional dress, which varies from one town to another.

Some items of clothing which are still used are of pre-Hispanic origin. Women habitually wear a *huipil*, an *enredo* and a

Tehuantepec, Zapotec.

girdle. The *huipil* is a piece of fabric with an opening in the center for the head, which covers the torso. Usually it is sewn at the sides underneath the arm hole, making a sort of tunic differing in length according to the region. The *enredo* is a rectangle of cloth wound around the waist, kept in place with a girdle.

In some places, a blouse has substituted the *huipil* and a skirt, the *enredo*. A shawl or other length of cloth is often used as the finishing touch for the outfit.

The most widely known Oaxacan apparel is the dress of Zapotec women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Formal attire consists of an embroidered *huipil* that reaches to the waist and a wide skirt, decorated to match the *huipil*; the skirt has a white lace flounce along the bottom, pleated and heavily starched. When the railroad was completed in 1907, silk, velvet and other lavish imported fabrics began to arrive in the isthmus, and the women stopped using their waist looms, turning their hands to embroidering their clothing. At first, they imitated the way the *huipil* was made with three panels and two vertical embroidered bands. Soon another horizontal line was added, near the edge of the *huipil*. The embroidery on both *huipil* and skirt gradually enlarged until today, when they cover almost the entire garment. The designs are floral or geometric; the latter all have names and new ones are often invented. They are done by hand or on a sewing machine, and the women have become enormously skilled in this technique.

For large parties and going to church, the *huipil grande*, or "large *huipil*," made of lace, with a gathered flounce around the neckline and another at the hem, used to be worn. This was used to cover the

head in different ways, according to the occasion. This garment is almost unknown now, but an 1831 drawing shows a woman wearing a *huipil grande* whose neckline flounce frames her face and falls about her body. It also shows the woman wearing an *enredo*. This kind of *enredo* was still worn by older women in the 1960s and was woven on a pedal loom. Dress *enredos* were woven of cotton dyed blue with indigo for the warp and purple with sea snail for the woof.

Daily dress for *tehuanas*, or women from Tehuantepec, consists of the same kind of *huipil* and a long skirt with a flounce of the same machine-made fab-

ric with brightly colored prints, usually in a floral design.

Among the indigenous groups in Oaxaca, it is common to have a party dress and another for daily wear. Bartola Morales, an ethnolinguist of Chinantec origin, says that in her home town, San Lucas Ojitlán, women wear three kinds of *huipiles*: their best, most formal wear for gala occasions, woven exclusively with red fiber, brocaded and embroidered, is worn mainly for weddings. Their second best is worn to parties, almost always has red stripes on a white background and is profusely embroidered with traditional designs. Their daily wear is made out of the least expensive white cotton and covered with designs, many of which represent animals.

In other Chinantec towns, like Valle Nacional, we also find three different kinds of *huipiles*, while in others the women have at least two kinds. Of the Chinantec *huipiles*, special mention should be made of those from San Felipe Usila: after they are made, their beautiful brocade designs are partially hidden with a purple dye called fuchsine.

In the Mixtec region along the coast, women used to go naked above the waist while working in their homes or patios. Since about 1960, perhaps due to the building of the coastal highway and the way the women were mocked because travelers were unfamiliar with this tradition, little by little it has become usual to wear an apron covering the breasts. When they go to the market or any other far off place, they cover themselves with a square piece of cloth, sometimes made of simple broadcloth and, in some towns like Pinotepa Nacional, Pinotepa de Don Luis and Mechoacán, woven on a waist



Jamiltepec, mestizo.



Zacatepec, Mixtec tacuate.



loom and finely embroidered along the seams. This piece of clothing is called a *huipil de tapar*, or “covering huipil.” An *enredo*, in this region called a *posahuanco*, and a girdle, complete the outfit. The *posahuanco* is one of Mexico’s most extraordinary textiles: the design consists of horizontal blue, red and purple stripes, decorated with small diamonds and zigzag lines. For the finest *posahuancos*, the purple thread is dyed with sea snail, the blue with indigo, and the red is *hiladillo*, a silk fiber that used to be dyed with cochineal. Because cochineal is so scarce today, often the *hiladillo* is dyed with fuchsine.

Silk, introduced by the conquest, was enormously popular during the Viceroyalty, but for different reasons fell into disuse. Mixtec silk, known as *hiladillo*, was considered of a quality equal to Chinese silk, and it is still made in a few Mixtec and Zapotec towns in the mountains.

In the coastal Mixtec region, when a woman gets married, she wears a special *huipil*, completely different from her daily wear. Each town has its own traditional design for these special outfits, but all are extraordinarily beautiful. On her wedding day, the bride puts the *huipil* over her head, but it is only folded over her shoulders: she does not put her arms through the armholes. After

the ceremony, she puts it carefully away and never wears it again. On the day of her death, the same *huipil* is used as her shroud, and only then are her arms put through the armholes. During carnival, however, when a man plays a female character in the traditional dance, he wears the town’s best *posahuanco* and wedding *huipil*.

In this region, men’s dress has been the same for a long time: a wide straight shirt called a *cotón*, a kind of short *huipil* with sleeves, and ankle-length trousers. Both these items are made on a waist loom out of white cotton, although in some places they are made of *coyuchi*, a cotton native to the Americas that comes in different shades of brown without being dyed. Each town’s *cotones* boast some special detail, like thin lines differing in color according to their use. For ceremonies, they are decorated with stripes of a distinctive color, sometimes made of *caracol* cotton or *hiladillo*. In Santa María Zacatepec, men’s clothing consists of short trousers and a very long *cotón* open at the sides with many animals embroidered on the bodice. The



Huautla de Jiménez, Mazatec.

*cotón* is gathered over the girdle, so it looks like a sort of bag.

The Mixe people live in a large area that goes from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the cold highlands, and therefore their clothing varies noticeably from one town to another. However, much of the rich variety of this ethnic group's *huipiles* has disappeared and is about to be lost.

The Zapotecs of the Sierra de Juárez mountains, the Mazatecs, the Amuzgos, the Triquis and the inhabitants of the highland Mixtec region, also wear a wide variety of *huipiles* that, depending on their location, are made of thin cotton, cotton with wool brocade or pure wool. For example, in Santa María Cuquila and Ocotepéc, towns located in a cold region, women's daily wear is a wool *huipil*, but for parties, they wear cotton ones. The designs vary widely from one ethnic group to another. In the Sierra de Juárez mountains, clothing is mainly white, and sometimes the only touch of color is a girdle of silk made in San Pedro Cajonos and dyed with fuchsine. The Amuzgos and Mazatecs prefer floral designs, decorated with brocades in the first case and embroidered in the second. The Triquis and the inhabitants of some towns in the Mixtec highlands weave a series of horizontal stripes and a rich variety of figures into their long, wide *huipiles*.

Women from other regions have substituted blouses for the traditional *huipil*. In San Pablo Tlaltepec the blouses sport a gathered border under the bust, usually embroidered with animal figures. Other blouses have embroidery around the neckline and the sleeves. Special mention should be made of the Chatina women's blouses, embroidered in bright colors, and of the black and mestiza women of the

Mixtec coastal areas who decorate their party blouses with beadwork.

Lastly, we should emphasize the importance of dyes. The Huave women of San Mateo del Mar dye their yarn with mangrove bark and other plants and weave on their waist looms beautiful napkins with pictures depicting their lives and surroundings. The most important dyes are indigo, cochineal and sea snail, all native to the Americas.

Indigo also existed in Europe. However, a large variety is native to our lands and can be cultivated in tropical, sandy soil. After cutting, it is rusted and extracted in special tubs. The result is a sort of intense, stony blue. Artisans who use this dye in far off places never imagine that it comes from a plant.



Pinotepa de Don Luis, Mixtec.



Tehuantepec.

Cochineal, otherwise called cactus lice, is a parasite that nests in the nopal plant. It looks like little white balls that, when squashed, release an intensely red liquid. Only certain kinds of nopal are good for cultivating the cochineal, and they need special care, like protection from rain and wind. The dye is obtained by drying and grinding the insects, but a great many cochineal are needed for dyeing a single garment, making it very expensive and difficult to obtain. During the colonial period, cochineal exports were second only to silver. A large variety of hues can be made, from brick red to purple, depending on the fixer used.

The so-called "snail dye" is obtained from a mollusk that nests in rocks along the Pacific Coast. The dyers take the already spun cotton to the coast and when they find the right kind of snail, they remove it brusquely from the rocks and blow on it; the mollusk excretes a few drops of a colorless liquid that the workmen rub directly onto the yarn. When exposed to the sun, the thread turns yellow, then bright green and finally a very firm purple color. The snail is returned to its place so that the dyers, who travel up and down the coast can return and "milk" the same snails again. They work only from November to February, respecting the sea snail's reproductive cycle to guarantee the survival of the provider of this extraordinary dye.

Oaxacan textiles testify to the enormous creativity and industriousness of the state's artisans, based on deeply rooted ancient traditions. Continuing to wear distinctive clothing is a sign of the firm decision of their makers and wearers to keep their thousand-year-old identity alive. ■■■