



THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO

Traditional Dress in Michoacán In the Face of Modernity

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Since it began 26 years ago, Uruapan's annual Traditional Clothing Pageant has offered us the opportunity to observe the inevitable merger of the traditional with the modern in everyday and fancy-dress wear in this part of Mexico. It also is a chance to note the vitality with which indigenous clothing has adapted to the onslaught of modernity, holding its own and staying alive.

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TODAY'S EXPRESSION OF INDIGENOUS,
POPULAR CULTURE

Uruapan has been a strategic regional center for trade since before the conquest. Barter, one of the main forms of trade practiced by pre-Hispanic indigenous peoples, was common here given the population density and the variety of products to be found. Its continued use in modern times has become a way to foster and preserve the region's cultural heritage since every year one of Latin America's largest craft markets

is held here. This meet of craftspeople not only includes a myriad of products, but also a sampling of versatile gastronomic customs, specificities of language and differences in clothing among Michoacán's indigenous communities. Traditional dress, in particular, has been a special attraction since the pageant of traditional outfits became part of the craft market held during Easter Week and the following week.

Encountering the peasants and indigenous people from around Uruapan who come to the market,

the occasional visitor will note the daring combination of colors in women's clothing, the exquisite embroidery on blouses, sashes and aprons, and perhaps the different pieces of clothing that make up the outfits as a whole. What he will never be able to even imagine is the multiplicity of small differences that distinguish, for example, the daytime outfit of a Santa Clara del Cobre woman from that of another from Pátzcuaro, or San Juan Nuevo, or Tzintzuntzan or even Uruapan. It may be the fabric used for the



Costume for the "Los Kurpites" dance.



Adult ceremonial dress.



Ceremonial dress.

A meeting of colors that we never would have imagined could go well together is the first impression we get of all these outfits seen together.



Offering.



Daily wear.

skirt; whether the apron is embroidered or trimmed with lace; if the blouse is made of shiny material or embroidered cotton; if the shawl is one color or another; the way they wear their hair; the accessories they hang around their necks; plus an infinite combination of all of the above. Things may seem simpler in the case of men, since cotton broadcloth continues to be the most common among those who wear traditional clothing. But we would have to review their overcoats, their kerchiefs, their hats, the colors and the kind of embroidery on their undershirts, pants and sashes. And, as it turns out, there are subtle variations, not only according to the communities they come from, but according to whether they are adults, children or teenagers. And this is only taking into account everyday dress. The matter becomes a serious topic for anthropological research when we add outfits for fiestas and ceremonies, many of whose histories we can trace back to the social and religious syncretism that took place during the colonial period, but which, in their modern versions, incorporate modifications that prove that no culture is immune to globalization.

APPRECIATING TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS DRESS

The arrival of the Spanish violently transformed indigenous customs and traditions in every possible way. Their dress was no exception: the recent arrivals, imbued with the Puritanism characteristic of Catholic societies, found the scanty clothing worn by both indigenous men and women offensive and hastened to fight it. Nevertheless, the wrap-around skirt held up by a sash, as well as the *huipil* or the *quechquemil*, are some of the pieces of clothing that managed to survive the cultural clash and endure until our day. Men began to cover their bodies in the Spanish manner, giving rise to cotton shirts and trousers with a belt tied at the waist. People's being trained as tailors contributed to adding elements to the outfits as well as varying the materials, including woven woolen cloth, still widely used today.

With variations, some pieces of clothing remained to differentiate the mestizo and Creole population, particularly among women. Women's daily wear



Outfit for the "La Maringúa" dance.

in indigenous communities today is made up of five basic pieces of clothing: an underskirt, a skirt, an apron, a blouse (*guanengo*) and a shawl, and it is the combination of materials, colors and ornaments in the entire outfit that distinguish a woman from one community from one from another.

Although women, particularly adult women, have continued to use certain traditional items of clothing, it is interesting to observe that young women add modern details to their outfits and personal grooming: fashionably cut, high-heeled shoes, cosmetics and sometimes, dyed hair. Men now generally wear industrially manufactured pants and shirts, and only the traditional woven palm hats and sometimes sandals and overcoats survive.

In 1982, when the first contest of traditional dress was held, the intention was to foster pride among participants in their clothing in order to preserve it. The response was unexpected: more than 200 people signed up in the five categories, 1) daily wear; 2) ceremonies; 3) weddings; 4) traditional fiestas; and 5) dances. Later on, the ceremonial and fiesta categories were combined into one.



Head ornaments and masks are a monument to syncretism, combining cardboard, little mirrors, lengths of tinsel and everything that might catch the eye.



The contest, held on Palm Sunday, begins with registration, which can take one or two full days. Organizers make a detailed list of contestants by age group (children, teenagers and adults) and categories, as well as the outfits themselves, so the judges can do their work. On Sunday just after noon, contestants parade before the public in a place called the *Huatápera*, which usually draws a big crowd and creates a lot of excitement. The prizes are given out in the afternoon.

A plethora of colors, unusual combinations of purples with greens, yellows or pinks, happily joined to every imaginable tone of blue, red and orange, splashed here and there with black, that is, a meeting of colors that we never would have imagined could go well together, is the first impression we

get of all these outfits seen together. Later, there is time to note the diversity of textures and forms, the different fabrics following one after the other to breathe life into the underskirts, the skirts, the apron and the shawl; fabrics that, again, we would never imagine together in our cosmopolitan cities. Finally, amidst the whirlwind assaulting the senses, appear the accessories: sashes, shining bead necklaces, hats woven of palm leaves, masks, bunches of fresh fruit, colored ribbons, mirrors and even lengths of tinsel (yes, the kind used to decorate Christmas trees) happily join together with kerchiefs and transparent colored fabrics.

Over the years, interest in the contest has varied. Some communities repeat their entries year after year, while others stay away a few years or even



The apron is one of the main ways to identify the wearer's community of origin.



indefinitely if their contestants do not win. Some participants have won on several occasions because of the care they take with their clothing and this has sparked protests. In their enthusiasm for introducing new elements in their dress, others add things that have no basis in tradition but that make the outfits, particularly for fiestas and ceremonies, more attention-grabbing. And complete inventions, or individuals who have loaned a winning outfit to someone else to wear, or participants who re-register an outfit from several years before are not unknown since the number of outfits registered every year make it impossible to keep a precise record.

The use of modern materials helps in making an outfit faster than it would take if it were made in the old way. For example, sometimes instead of being

sewn on, sequins are glued on with silicon; necklaces are bought wholesale; head ornaments are a monument to syncretism, combining cardboard, little mirrors, lengths of tinsel and everything that might catch the eye. As you can imagine, all these elements put pressure on the judges who have to struggle to define the terms authenticity and tradition.

On the other hand, the continuing presence of details like the exquisite embroidery on blouses, aprons, shawls, sashes, undershirts, offerings, walking sticks, carved masks representing white men (held up by dark-colored hands) to perform dances like The Moors or the Maringuía remind us that this region has many traditions that must be recovered and preserved before they succumb to the ravages of time. **MM**