

Bordados

An Exhibition of Embroidered Textiles from Mexico

Rebecca Devaney MFA
Independent Textile Artist and Researcher, Ireland

Abstract:

In the summer of 2015, I embarked on a research trip that aimed to investigate the cultural significance, craft and aesthetic of Mexican embroidery. Fascinating and diverse narratives were gathered as I travelled over 3,600kms across the vast and beautiful country of Mexico. I decided to only purchase textiles directly from the craftspeople or co-operatives that supported them, and on my return I had collected eighteen samples of beautifully embroidered textiles. These were exhibited at *Bordados: An Exhibition of Embroidered Textiles from Mexico* held at the Paris Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, the University of Sharjah College of Fine Art and Design, United Arab Emirates (2017) and the Mexican Embassy to Ireland, Ireland (2016). Each exquisite *blusa*, *huipil*, *quechquemiti* and *chaleco* was accompanied by the enthralling narrative of the craftsperson who created it and a selection of their stories will be presented in this paper.

Content:

Introduction / Learned by Heart: Francisca Torres Hinojosa / The Magical Spiderweb: Nicolas Xochihua Gonzalez / They Say We are like Peacocks: Teresa Lopez Jimenez / Caravans and Trade Routes: Cecilia Mundo Rincon / Rebellious Weaving: Maria Patishtan Licanchiton / Cosmvision and Haute Couture: Ezequiel Vicente Jose / Chasing Butterflies: Antonina Cornelio Sanchez / Bordados: An Exhibition of Embroidered Textiles from Mexico / References

Introduction

A few years previously I had spent a night sitting quietly amongst three generations of a Mexican family and under the watchful eye of their grandmother we worked late into the night to complete the embroidery for a gala costume. Stories of romance, adventure and sorrow were shared by the women of the family and it was a glimpse of the intimacies that are often revealed by women when they embroider. While studying for an MFA in Textile Art and Artefact at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, I was generously granted funding from the Thomas Demmann Junior Memorial Trust Award to research the private as well as public narratives that are expressed in traditional embroidered costumes from Mexico.

The journey began at the Research Institute of Visual Arts at the Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, Veracruz. I was invited by Yosi Anaya, Research Docent and Textile Artist, to use their library and resources, as well as her expertise, to plan my itinerary, identifying the key locations and most representative centres of production. Along the way I met craftspeople who were remarkably generous of their time and kindly recounted their marvellous stories about tradition, crafts and customs that are embedded in their embroidered textiles. Whilst speaking to anthropologists and scholars, the importance of textiles to the identity of indigenous groups in Mexico was consistently emphasised. Traditional costumes may distinguish the origins, culture, ethnicity, social status, and marital status of the indigenous people and by the end of my journey I could tentatively identify the distinctive costumes of many groups and regions. I visited several co-operatives, where the passion and dedication of the staff in regards to improving the conditions of the craftspeople and supporting the traditional crafts that have become synonymous with Mexican heritage and culture was inspiring.

Throughout the journey I was overwhelmed by the generosity, hospitality and warmth that the people of Mexico are famous for and it was because of this that I had the good fortune to meet the craftspeople in person and hear their stories. I went to Veracruz, Hidalgo, Mexico City, Michoacan, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Puebla where I met Totonaco, Zapoteco, Purepecha, Otomi, Mazahua, Tzotzil and Nahuatl indigenous people. I arrived in towns and villages hav-

ing travelled by bus, colectivo, taxi, and rickshaw to find the most revered embroiderers by enquiring at craft centres, haberdasheries or municipal offices. Strangers invited me into their houses and gave of their time without hesitation. I was shown precious family heirlooms and samplers, treasured newspaper clippings and cherished certificates. I received impromptu lectures and lessons from people that were brimming with pride about their ancient and magnificent culture.

These narratives were shared over long afternoons of chatting and when it was time for me to leave, I would purchase an embroidered textile recommended by the artisan that best represented the style of their community and several items in the collection are prize-winning at state or national competitions. The communal and everyday nature of embroidery in Mexico is enthralling and of particular interest was its role amongst women. Many of the women had been taught by their mothers and grandmothers from the ages of five or six. The most intricate designs were learned by heart and followed intuitively without patterns. The income that their craft generates gives the women financial independence and autonomy, and there were several stories of grandmother's supporting whole families with their embroidered textiles or women uniting to form co-operatives despite resistance from their communities. Each woman described her work with great pride, especially the hours invested as well as the significance of the colours, motifs and designs to their culture, heritage and tradition (fig. 1). However, the most touching sentiment that was shared by most of the women was that the embroideries inherently expressed their emotions and feelings and embodied aspects of their personalities, lives and experiences.

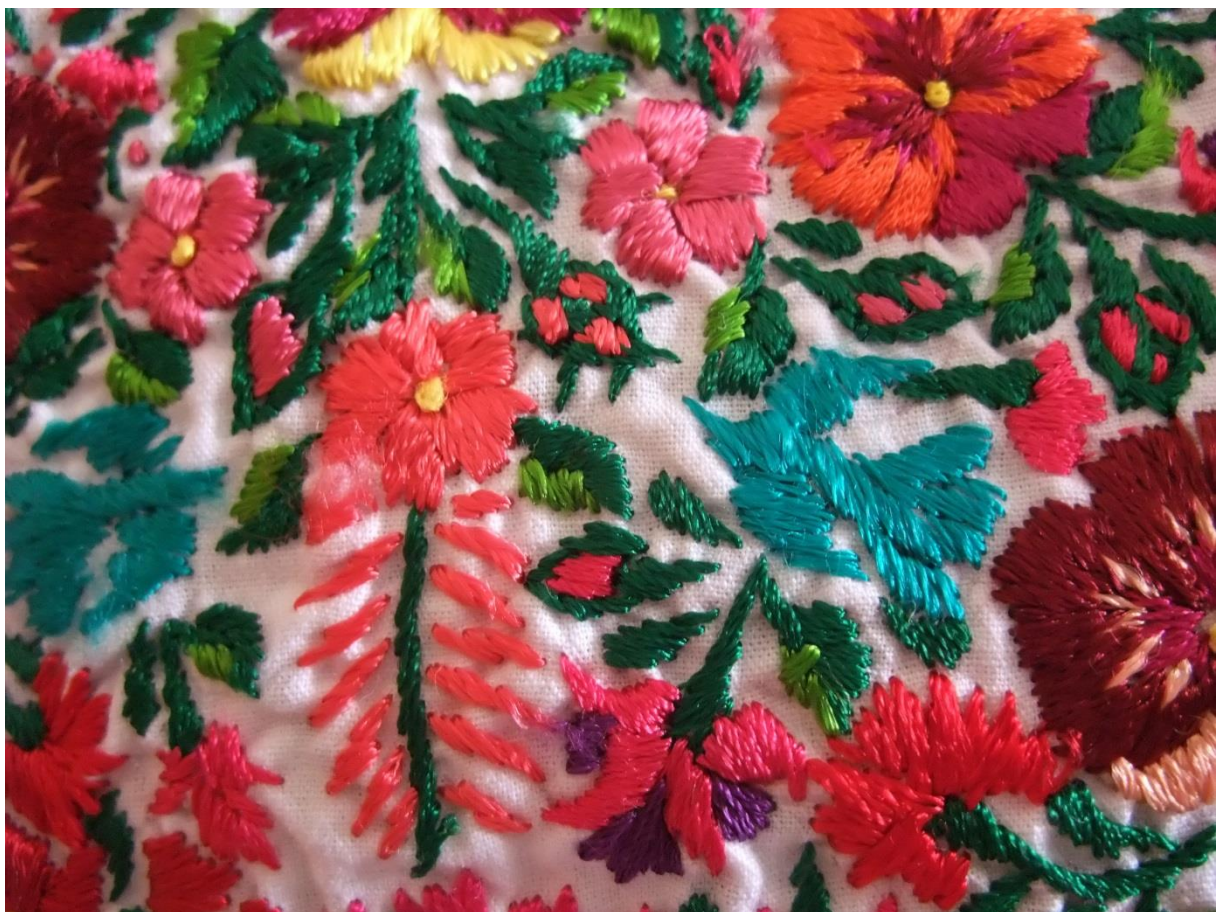


Fig. 1:
Detail of embroidered *blusa* by Antonina Cornelia Sanchez, San Antonino, Oaxaca.

Learned by Heart: Francisca Torres Hinojosa

Señora Francisca spread her exquisite cross-stitch embroideries across her workbench and explained that a *blusa* takes fifteen days to complete, a dress one month, and more detailed work takes longer as it is harder on the eyes. The colour schemes were mostly harmonious, with pastel pinks and greens, depicting large rose blossoms surrounded by foliage which were offset by perfectly symmetrical geometric borders called *Greca*s.



Fig. 2:
Detail of Purepecha embroidery, Francisca Torres Hinojosa, Morelia, Michoacan.

Francisca was taught embroidery when she was seven years old by her mother and the designs are now embedded in her memory. She knows them by heart and instinctively counts and arranges the tiny stitches into intricate and precise designs without using a pattern (fig. 2). One day a curious tourist asked her, “Why do what an industrial machine could?” and Francisca replied, “It’s the difference between Art and Industry”.

Francisca laughed as she retrieved a dusty old box from beneath her workbench that was filled with countless certificates, newspaper articles and photos of prize-winning ceremonies. Francisca was more interested in showing me the photographs of her embroidering side-by-side with her mother. She was extremely grateful that her mother had given her the skills she needed to earn an income and continue the ancient traditions of her ancestors.

The Magical Spiderweb: Nicolas Xochihua Gonzalez

At the age of seven Nicolas was sent into the jungle by his mother to find a rare yellow spider web. According to Totonac beliefs, it would make him successful and talented at whatever he endeavoured to do if it was spun and worn as a bracelet. Nicolas chose embroidery and today he is considered a master of his craft. I was kindly invited to spend an afternoon with Nicolas and his mother and as we chatted on their porch they continued their embroideries in

the traditional Totonac style using Rooster's Foot stitch (*Pato de Gallo*). Nicolas showed me *blusas* that featured beautiful flowers and foliage from 'The Tree of Life' in vibrant and cheerful colour schemes (fig. 3). The *huipiles* embroidered in monochrome blues, reds or yellows have been worn by Totonac women since Pre-Hispanic times. The garments reserved for family members were breath-taking, embroidered with harmonious threads harvested from the cotton plants growing in their garden and dyed with natural plant and insect dyes. Nicolas was passionate about his work at the nearby House of the World of Cotton (*Casa del Mundo del Algodon*), where he teaches young Totonac women these ancient traditions.



Fig. 3:
Detail of embroidered Totonaco *blusa* by Nicolas Xochihua Gonzalez, El Tajin, Veracruz.

They Say We are like Peacocks: Teresa Lopez Jimenez

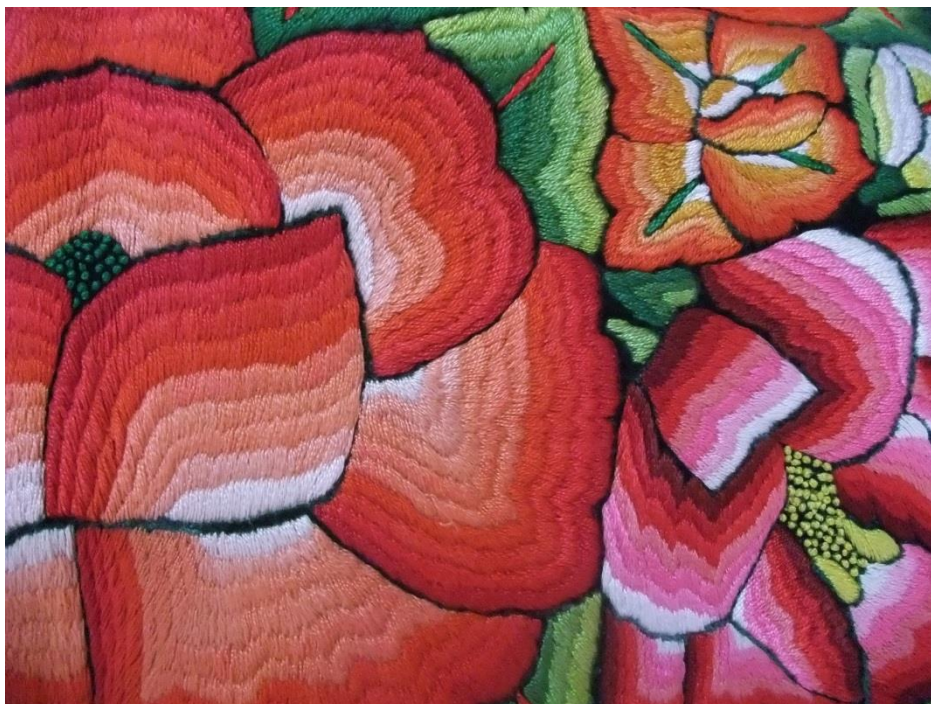


Fig. 4:
Detail of embroidered gala *huipil*, Teresa Lopez Jimenez, Juchitan, Oaxaca.

“They say we are like peacocks”, laughed Senora Teresa of the formidable Zapoteca women from the Tehuentepec Isthmus, “because we have gorgeous ribboned hairstyles, glittering

gold filigree jewellery, breathtakingly embroidered traditional costumes and yet we walk barefoot!” Influenced by Spanish *Mantillas*, Arabic goldthread work, Chinese silk embroidery and Catholic veils introduced during Colonial times, their gala costumes were made famous by Frida Kahlo.

“Today they are worn with pride by the young women of Juchitan”, explained Teresa, as her granddaughter modelled their traditional head-dresses for us. She was taught to embroider when she was twelve by her mother and is inspired by the abundance of tropical flowers in her town. Teresa embroiders her designs onto satin or velvet and the fabrics are stretched tightly across a wooden frame to create the tension needed to embroider the thousands of stitches in cotton thread involved in each piece. Shading is rendered with bands of graduated tones of coloured thread in each petal and leaf and the centres of the flowers are detailed with tiny French knots (fig. 4). Teresa is a recognised Grandmaster of Craft in Oaxaca and her work is in great demand, she works eight hours a day to complete her commissions. She has learned to embed her emotions into her work; when her son died, she expressed all her terrible sadness through her embroidery.

Caravans and Trade Routes: Cecilia Mundo Rincon

Senora Cecilia laughed as she told the story of how the costume of Chiapa De Corzo was inspired by a caravan of travelling performers from Spain who dazzled the people of the village in the eighteenth century, she shrugged because at that time there was a melting pot of cultures in Mexico with the Trade Routes bringing influences from far-flung places, so who knows where it originated. Both the costume and the technique of embroidering the pattern upside-down are unique to Chiapa de Corzo. Cecilia still remembers her mother teaching her how to embroider by the light of an oil lamp after a long day’s work on their small ranch when she was eight years old. It took many years to learn the technique of embroidering beautiful and brightly coloured Castilian Roses onto endless flounces of black tulle using long needles (fig. 5). She would make costumes for the little dolls that her uncle sent from Mexico City and when she got married she decided to make a living from her embroidery. Cecilia began teaching local women and a few years later opened the Matohue studio with ten of her best students. Today she sells her beautifully embroidered costumes to local customers as well as clients from China, Japan, the USA and Europe.



Fig. 5:
Detail of embroidered flounce for gala costume, Cecilia Mundo Roncon, Chiapas de Corzo, Chiapas.

Rebellious Weaving: Maria Patishtan Licanchiton

As I approached Dona Maria's house I saw her sitting in the grass outside surrounded by balls of wool with her legs tucked under and a waist-loom attached. She continued her weaving as we chatted and her family who were spinning yarn beside us kindly helped to translate as she spoke little Spanish. Maria is famous for establishing a women's co-operative in San Juan Chamula and the surrounding Tzotzil municipalities despite strong resistance from the community. She persevered as she needed to earn an income for her family. She was taught by her mother to spin first when she was seven, then to weave when she was eight, and finally to embroider when she was ten or eleven years old. Maria described their traditional costume; men wear a heavy robe of white or black fleece over cotton suits and women wear a heavy black fleece skirt that is tied at the waist with a belt and accessorised by beautifully embroidered blouses. She explained that the old ways are passing as the young women choose synthetic fabrics; it is more practical, women have much to do and need to move around easily without the restrictive weight of their traditional fleece skirts. Felted waistcoats were worn by young boys and her son laughed as he remembered wearing his on the way to school during the cold winter months (fig. 6).



Fig. 6:
Embroidered boys waistcoat, Maria Patishtan Licanchiton, San Juan Chamula, Chiapas.

Cosmovision and Haute Couture: Ezequiel Vicente Jose

High above the clouds in the Sierras of Hidalgo, a style of embroidery began in the Otomi village of San Nicolas in the 1960s when Dona Otilia Cruz was inspired by the zoomorphic motifs found in ancient cave paintings nearby. It is famed for its depiction of strange and fantastical animals that seem to dance or float in surreal compositions, surrounded by flowers and foliage. The original colour schemes were black and red and today they are monochrome, rainbow stripes or blocks of cheerful colour (fig. 7). They are rendered in *Punta Relleno* or *Pato de Gallo* stitches that are so neat that the reverse of the embroidery is almost as beautiful as the front. Ezequiel asked Dona Otilia to teach him and so she took him to the nearby caves. He worked hard to perfect the techniques she showed him and his creative flair became famous. Ezequiel opened a little box to unfold a beautiful hot pink silk scarf with a parade of vibrant animal and foliage motifs, and in the centre was the famous *Hermes* logo. He proudly recounted how they had travelled all the way from France to find him.



Fig. 7:
Detail of Otomi embroidery, Ezequiel Vicente Jose, San Nicolas, Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo.

Chasing Butterflies: Antonina Cornelio Sanchez

“All I wanted to do was chase butterflies”, remembers Senora Antonina, of her childhood spent helping her mother embroider. Antonina and her four sisters had been taught embroidery and crochet from the age of five, which they did every morning before school and until bedtime; she often woke up with a jolt from a forgotten crochet hook hidden in her blankets! Her mother’s fame stretched as far as the US and Europe and she was able to buy each daughter a house with the proceeds from her embroidery. Antonina was extremely grateful that her mother gave her the skills to earn an income and develop her own career and today she is recognised as a Grandmaster of Craft in Oaxaca.

Antonina was embroidering a beautiful *blusa* in the floral style that San Antonino is famous for with colourful roses, pansies, birds, butterflies and hummingbirds surrounded by foliage (fig. 8), she said they are fascinated and inspired by the abundance of nature and beauty that

surrounds them. Each of Antonina's embroideries are made with love she said; she can tell what mood she was in when she made them by looking at the design, stitches and choice of colour. They all have a little bit of her heart and soul in them.



Fig. 8:
Detail of embroidered *blusa*, Antonina Cornelio Sanchez, San Antonino, Oaxaca.

Bordados: An Exhibition of Embroidered Textiles from Mexico

By the end of the journey I had purchased eighteen exquisite embroideries that showcase a selection of the colour, craft and diverse styles of embroidered textiles in Mexico. Each textile is accompanied by an enthralling narrative that reveals the traditions, cultural significance, and personal experiences of the artisans who created them. When exhibited side by side the textiles are enriched by the narratives and rather than invoking appreciation from a solely material aspect, they serve as illustrations for the fascinating stories that are embroidered into the fabric. The exhibition has been shown at the Paris Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, the University of Sharjah College of Fine Art and Design, United Arab Emirates (2017) and the Mexican Embassy to Ireland, Ireland (2016).



Fig. 9:
Bordados: An Exhibition of Embroidered Textiles from Mexico, Paris Sorbonne – University Abu Dhabi (2017).

References

There are further details of the research trip, exhibition and craftspeople available at the following links:

<http://www.rebeccadevaney.ie/bordados-embroidered-textiles-from-mexico/>

<http://www.rebeccadevaney.ie/mexican-embroidery/>

<http://www.rebeccadevaney.ie/artisans/>