

Mexican Indigenous Culture: Their Textiles and Flora

In the world, Mexico has one of the largest and most diverse Indigenous population. It was, however, until 1992 that the country officially recognized its population as pluri-cultural.¹ There are 12.7 million indigenous citizens that represent 13 percent of the Mexican population who speak 62 different languages and only 84% of this population speak Spanish. The majority of the indigenous population in Mexico is located in the southern and south-central part of the country.²

Mexican culture is representative of Indigenous culture. The most recognized Indigenous population in Mexico are the Maya and the Aztec. Their crafts contain traditional patterns recognized in the entire world. Since the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the Mexican government has tried to integrate indigenous people into Mexican society. Through their culture this is happening. In 1946, the Mexican Ministry of Education created a program of integration where indigenous arts and crafts were key to promote their culture as Mexican.

Sadly, indigenous women have been marginalized having no access to education as indigenous men. The illiteracy rate for indigenous women is 20 percent higher than

¹ World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Mexico: Indigenous peoples. The UN Refugee Agency. <https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=49749ce423&skip=0&query=Mexican%20Indigenous>.

² World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Mexico: Indigenous peoples. The UN Refugee Agency. <https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=49749ce423&skip=0&query=Mexican%20Indigenous>.

indigenous men. This has been one of the reasons that indigenous women remain at home performing domestic activities or doing crafts.³

Mexican indigenous women have their own distinct textile patterns according to the region they belong. Women's deep involvement in the textile production process in Mexican indigenous society shows how this activity is present in their daily activities and how it is representative of their culture. Since colonial times, indigenous men have focused on agricultural pursuits while women have spent their time creating textiles. Still today it is a very feminine activity. Mexican indigenous women use their textiles as a means of addressing personal identity and the value of their work. Their rebozos (shawls) emblemizes social, religious, ethnic, and cultural practices. A rebozo is universally associated with the feminine, and in my paintings, I also associate it with strength, courage, and resistance.

According to Margarita de Orellana, the sensibilities of indigenous people is manifested in popular art and these feelings are intimately related to the psychology of their society reflecting its customs⁴.

Quoting Dr. Atl, in his now classic *"Popular Arts in Mexico"* which was published nearly fifty years ago, *"Popular arts are those which spring spontaneously from a people as an immediate consequence of their family, civil or religious needs. When they are*

³ World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Mexico: Indigenous peoples. The UN Refugee Agency. <https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=49749ce423&skip=0&query=Mexican%20Indigenous>.

⁴ Orellana de, Margarita. 1979. *The Popular Arts in Mexico*. *Artes de México*, No. 196, EL ARTE POPULAR DE MEXICO, pp. 97-102.

cultivated under an artistic or commercial influence foreign to these needs, they cease to be true popular arts."

Indigenous textiles in Mexico are traditionally considered as part of the popular arts of the country which are present in the dresses, blouses, skirts, handbags, sashes, belts, and shawls of Mexican indigenous women. Indigenous women take pride in their choice of clothing which they use to pay tribute to their dead, when they gather with the living, when they go to church, to the market, or to any other place⁵.

Their bright colors and diverse forms of their textures reveal an extraordinary artistic sensitivity. Their patterns depict a great cultural legacy of Mexican pre-Hispanic artist that has been preserved even after the destruction of their culture. Their persistence represents a victory of the oppressed classes⁶.

Flowers are represented in many forms in indigenous Mexican textiles. Mexico is among the most flora rich country in the world. In Central Mexico, Teotihuacan artists depicted the flower world in their textiles since the Epiclastic period. They also included in their textiles butterflies and colorful birds that populate their region. These representations influenced later forms and patterns in textiles.⁷

An example of the use of flowers in textiles is a popular pattern of two intertwining and flowering branches surrounded by singing quetzals with spiders on one side and

⁵ Orellana de, Margarita. 1979. *The Popular Arts in Mexico*. *Artes de México*, No. 196, EL ARTE POPULAR DE MEXICO, pp. 97-102.

⁶ Orellana de, Margarita. 1979. *The Popular Arts in Mexico*. *Artes de México*, No. 196, EL ARTE POPULAR DE MEXICO, pp. 97-102.

⁷ Turner, Andrew D., 2021. *Beauty in Troubled Times The Flower World in Epiclastic Central Mexico, A.D. 600–900*

butterflies on the other. The butterflies represent deceased warriors and the spiders represent the female inhabitants of the flower world.⁸

Also, Mexican Indigenous textiles' patterns imitate not only nature but also depict stories found in monuments such as the Temple of Quetzalcoatl which was believed to be an artificial mountain created by flowers. An example that flowers are often represented in Mexican artisans' patterns.

Designs based on flowers have been found as well in Aztec territory where bright and colored flowers predominate. Bright flowers symbolize "ordinary people to glimpse the Spirit Land, and of dreams and visions of the beauty of the Spirit Land".⁹ Flowers were often represented in Aztec times, a period that is refer as "flower world". The Aztecs represented a cosmic order with flowers where they elaborated on the flower world concept when telling the birth of our world.

According to scholar Maria Jose Castañeda, their "miraculous hands convert their needs and fears in mystical spiritual patterns and popular arts that emerged from biodiversity that conforms their natural habitat." Mexican textiles represent centuries of history and creativity, especially when including flowers in their patterns. Thanks to their diverse patterns showing their traditions in their textiles, Mexico is known as the main country with a major artistic production in the textile world.

⁸ Turner, Andrew D., 2021. *Beauty in Troubled Times The Flower World in Epiclassic Central Mexico, A.D. 600–900*

⁹ Sandstrom, Alan R. 2021. *Flower World in the Religious Ideology of Contemporary Nahua of the Southern Huasteca, Mexico.*

In each corner of the country, artisans not only have immortalized their techniques and symbolisms of their ancestors in traditional clothing but also in true pieces of art. According to the Museo de Arte Popular from Mexico City the artisans' hands are miraculous and are considered to be the heart of the Mexican heritage.

When visiting the different regions in Mexico, it is almost impossible not to be amazed by the impactful variety of embroidery of the local small shops. With all this variety, how does one differentiate the textiles of each region and state? Even though the Mexican textiles have similarities, each region has its own characteristics. In the images below, we can tell some of these differences per region.¹⁰

There are many indigenous communities in Mexico that continue to produce their traditional textiles using ancestors' practices such as plant cultivation to produce their own threads and textiles as well as continue to use the same embroidery patterns since centuries ago. One similarity among all the different regions is the fabric used in their textiles. Cotton is a popular material.

The State of Oaxaca

Originally, the embroidery used to be made with the tip of a maguey or agave leaf, however, today their technique has evolved with the use of diverse metal instruments. Their patterns represent their dreams and aspirations of many Oaxacans, having nature as their source of inspiration.

The State of Yucatan

The textile art production in this state in the south of Mexico is the main principal artisan activity. In their textiles, the women are the most active. They include diverse techniques to

¹⁰ Castañeda, Maria Jose. Arte Textil y Bordados Indigenas de México: Una Guía para Distinguir los Distintos Tipos. Julio, 2016. <https://masdemx.com/2016/07/arte-textil-y-bordados-indigenas-de-mexico-una-guia-para-distinguir-los-distintos-tipos/>

produce their patterns. They get inspired mainly by their mountains and their natural habitats. Their designs also include magical symbolisms and religious stories going back to their ancestors.

There is evidence that in the preclassical period, the Mayan artisans used vegetal materials including agave fibers to produce their textiles.¹¹ Over time, they adapted their textile production to different techniques and materials. Now they include animal skins, feathers, cotton, among others. This evolution is thanks that Mayan women considered their textile work as a divine activity related to their Ixchel, goddess of the moon and wife of the sun, also consider their patron saint of yarn.

The state of Michoacan

From pre-colonial times, the embroidery in their textiles gets richer. Indigenous artisans in this area, known as the Purepecha region, still use a colonial era pedal loom to produce their textiles. They use cotton and feathers to create patterns that tell the story of their ancestors. The Purepecha artisans innovate constantly creating new patterns in their designs. An example of this is the Patakua rebozo which used to be wore as a belt.

The state of San Luis Potosí

The artisans in this region maintain the techniques that their ancestors tough them. They use in their patterns “punto cruz” to represent a cosmogony and a map representing their cosmologic town. Their embroidery represents a tree of life, animals, and crosses. In their blouses they depict a “quezquémitl” which is a pattern created from colorful rectangles.¹²

¹¹ Gil Corredor, Claudia Adelaida. Thesis Doctoral. Colegio Casa de Lamm. Mexico City. 2015

¹² Castañeda, Maria Jose. Arte Textil y Bordados Indigenas de México: Una Guía para Distinguir los Distintos Tipos. Julio, 2016. <https://masdemx.com/2016/07/arte-textil-y-bordados-indigenas-de-mexico-una-guia-para-distinguir-los-distintos-tipos/>

Examples of Mexican Indigenous Textiles with Flowers:

1. Mazateco Textile: We can see here a strong pattern of flowers in one color.

This textile is present in the southeast of Mexico (Oaxaca).



2. Otomí Textile: This textile represents Central Mexico. Flowers again are predominant in their patterns but clearly depicted with different designs.



3. Huasteco Textile: In these satchels created in La Huasteca in the state of San Luis Potosi we can see more flowers represented in Mexican Indigenous Textiles.



4. Textile Art Chinanteco. This pattern, representative of their flora, was embroidered on a cotton fabric. We can see in this pattern flowers and birds.



5. Mayan Textiles full of color and made of cotton.



Annotated Bibliography

1. World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Mexico

www.refworld.org

This website is part of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). I will use this website as a reference to see where Mexican Indigenous people place in the world. This site has several articles about Mexican Indigenous people and their living and social conditions.

For example, this article that informs statistics about their situation:

<https://www.refworld.org/cgi->

[bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=49749ce423&skip=0&query=Mexican%20Indigenous](https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=49749ce423&skip=0&query=Mexican%20Indigenous)

“Mexico has one of the largest and most diverse indigenous populations in Latin America. Although the country had recognized the existence of and contributions made by indigenous peoples in the construction of the country, it was only with the 1992 Constitution that the nation was deemed pluri-cultural. Mexico's indigenous population numbers 12.7 million people representing 13 per cent of the national population, speaking 62 languages between them.”

2. Telling the Entire Story of Mexico’s Indigenous People: A One Stop Resource for Information on Mexico’s Indigenous People

www.indigenoustmexico.org

This site identifies the different Indigenous groups located in the 32 Mexican states. It will help me to understand better their cultural differences and why they wear different textiles and their different designs in them.

3. Mathiowetz, Michael D. and Turner, Andrew D. 2021. *“Flower Worlds, Religion, Aesthetic, and Ideology in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest”*

This article researches the flowers present in certain Indigenous regions in Mexico and what each flower represents. Different areas use different flowers and plants in their textile. For some, flowers represent a spiritual path. They have used these textile patterns for centuries.

4. Sandstrom, Alan R. 2021. *Flower World in the Religious Ideology of Contemporary Nahua of the Southern Huasteca, Mexico.*

This article describes how flowers represent a spiritual domain in the study of Indigenous beliefs.

“Nearly three decades of scholarship devoted to this topic have demonstrated that while many of the cultures of both regions share in fundamental aspects of these beliefs, there are also key differences among a plurality of flower worlds.”

5. Turner, Andrew D., 2021. *Beauty in Troubled Times The Flower World in Epiclassic Central Mexico, A.D. 600–900.*

This article describes the differences in the flower worlds in the Mayans and the Aztecs from 100 B.C. to 1521. Having many similarities, their small differences are extremely contrasting marking different paths.

6. Gonzalez Dobado, Rafael, Galvarriato Gomez, Aurora, and Williamson Jeffrey G. 2008. *Mexican Exceptionalism: Globalization and De-Industrialization, 1750-1877. The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 68, No. 3, pp. 758-811.

This article explains how Mexico fought de-industrialization before 1870s. It decomposes the sources of de-industrialization and how globalization has changed certain patterns in the Indigenous culture today.

7. Orellana de, Margarita. 1979. *The Popular Arts in Mexico. Artes de México*, No. 196, EL ARTE POPULAR DE MEXICO, pp. 97-102.

This article is a research paper of popular artistic activities in Indigenous communities in Mexico. It is exclusively related to the decorative, but it reveals marginal aspects of their artistic practices. The author believes that artistic practices in the Indigenous communities reveals the psychology of their societies and their customs.