

Gallery Spotlight: Shawls of Mexico (*Rebozos de Tenancingo*)

From May 4 – June 15, visitors to the Textile Center’s Joan Mondale Gallery, will get a rare glimpse of an “endangered” Mexican textile tradition: the centuries-old custom of weaving “rebozos” or shawls. The rebozo is a rectangular woven cloth typically made large enough to cover a woman’s body and head. Each shawl is made by hand and features an ikat-dyed weave and intricate tied fringe. Symbolic and personal, rebozos enfold their wearers in the cultural values of motherhood, family and home.

During the exhibit, Senor Erasto Garces, a historian, will share his family’s collection of these highly cherished garments. The shawls in the exhibit span five generations of women in the Garces family. Worn for daily use as well as special occasions and celebrations, the shawls have cradled babies, provided warmth, adorned brides and served as social costumes for meetings with important people such as the president of Mexico.

A beautiful garment – and so much more

Norma Garces, one of Senor Erasto’s four daughters, says that the rebozos are considered much more than just another item of clothing. “Each shawl was specially handmade for a woman in my family by artisans in my village of Tenancingo, Mexico. They represent our family history and become a vital part of the memories of our individual lives, reminding us of the day-to-day moments and bigger milestones. As a young girl, I have fond memories of walking through my village and seeing the newly dyed cotton thread hanging from post to post. The fabric and the craftspeople who made it were highly valued by all of us.”

While the practice of “babywearing,” the custom of wrapping your baby close to your body with cloth so you can freely move around while snugly and securely carrying your baby, is part of many cultures around the world, the rebozo tradition is unique to Mexico. Each rebozo has a unique design directly connected to the community in which it was made.

The distinctive designs are often composed of flowers or animals in the weaving or knot work. Customarily, the men wove the ikat-dyed portion of the rebozo (ikat is a dyeing technique that allows the warp to be selectively colored before it is woven.), while the empuntaduras or “the ones who do the end” were typically women who finished the shawl with intricate fringe and knot work.

A uniquely Mexican tradition

Today, rebozos range in value from quite inexpensive to thousands of dollars. They are typically made of cotton, wool or silk. Color, design and fringe patterns vary by shawl.

Senor Garces, who is working diligently to ensure that the rebozo tradition does not fade away, says that each shawl is a complicated piece of artwork totally handmade by one or more specially trained artisans. "Currently, there are about 38 shops in Mexico that are still making rebozos. Each has about four to five looms and is staffed by one or a few artisans. It takes several weeks to make each shawl. Every step in the process is complex and demands skill and artistry. It is a labor of love from the dying of the thread to the weaving of the intricate designs to the painstaking creation of the fringe pattern."

Preserving handcrafted history

Senor Garces is concerned that the rebozo craft may be lost to future generations. Demand for the shawls has declined as Mexican women have adopted modern clothing styles and mass-produced cloth has replaced handmade fabric. "Each rebozo is a loyal witness to how things have changed," he says. "It is no big deal to have a factory-produced sweater while a rebozo is a highly prized garment. My family hopes to pass on this tradition to the next generation and show the immense pride and dignity associated with wearing these priceless garments."

We invite you to join us for the Opening Reception on Friday, May 4, 2007 from 5-8 p.m. The festivities include music, food and an opportunity to experience, through the words of Senor Garces and his daughters, the story of this timeless tradition.