

# Oaxaca Times

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Free

## Cochineal

To say that Mexico is a colorful place is not a novel statement, but nevertheless a very valid one. Its textiles, clothing, hand crafts and popular architecture are governed by color. An explosion of shades and tones - which at first sight would appear only to follow a decorative code - often has special meaning.

In Chiapas, for example, many ethnic groups distinguish themselves from their neighbors precisely by the color of their clothes. Moreover, recent research has shown that pre-Hispanic códices not only hide meanings in the lines and distribution of their cartography, but the colors too are of symbolic nature.

Now, just where did pre-Hispanic peoples obtain the colors to dye textiles, or to tint ceramics and even painted surfaces? To clear up any doubt, a liable source of knowledge about the daily life of pre-Columbian times is the *Historia general de las Indias de la Nueva España* General History of Things in New Spain, written between 1530 and 1590 and pub-



*Nopal de Castilla*

lished in 1830. In it, Friar Bernardino de Sahagún states:

"They call the color obtained from the cochineal *nocheztili*, which means prickly-pear blood. And this is because this scarlet-blooded insect breeds among the leaves of a certain kind of prickly-pear. This is the pure or fine quality cochineal. It is well-known in this land and abroad, and the source of much trading; it has reached China, even Turkey and other parts of the world, and is greatly valued."

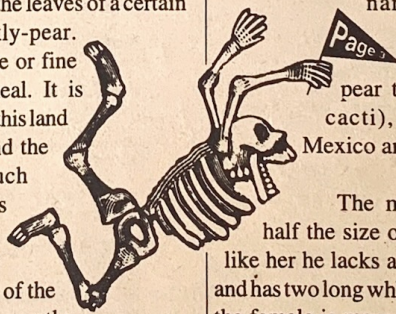
Sahagún does not exaggerate. The humble insect, ground into powder, went to every capital city in the world, acquiring such importance that, after silver and gold, it was Mexico's

third most exported commodity from the time of the Conquest (1519-1521) until 1850.

But the precious dye did not come from just any type of cochineal bug, but only from the *Coccus cacti*, thus named because it feeds on the nopal or prickly-pear tree (*Dactylopius cacti*), that grows in Mexico and Peru.

The male cochineal is half the size of the female; unlike her he lacks a digestive system and has two long white wings. It seems the female is more resistant than the male for they outnumber the males by 200 to 1. Another fact about the customs of this insect is that the body of a dead mother protects the eggs of her young during the incubation period.

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# Cochineal

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Throughout the seven month season, cochineals are harvested three times by a slow, tedious process: they are brushed off the cactus branches into a sort of bag which is later dipped in hot water, placed in ovens or exposed to the sun or steam. Such radically different methods are not dictated by whims but by the color tone required.

The best harvest is the first, which is when there are plenty of pregnant females responsible for producing a vivid scarlet shade. Subsequent harvests yield a mixture of the new offspring whose color concentration is considerably less. About 140 thousand insects are needed to obtain one kilo of dye. The color itself is due to the presence of carminic acid. Incidentally, although the dye has been around for centuries, its formula ( $C_{22}H_{20}O_{13}$ ) was not elucidated until 1920 by chemist Edward Dimeoth.

Without such knowledge, the Mixtecs and Zapotecs were the first to use it in Meso-America. Those people, like other communities in tropical regions, wore cotton clothing delicately dyed in shades of ochre, red and blue, which the Aztecs flatteringly referred to as "cloth of four hundred colors." French ethnologist and politician Jacques Soustelle recorded in 1955 that upon their arrival in the altiplano "the Aztecs were originally dressed in animal skins... (and) woven cactus fiber." Soustelle adds, however, that as they became more powerful "cotton, originally from hot climates... became a coveted commodity for the Aztecs." So much so, that it even determined alliances, as in the case of the Aztec king Huitzilihuitl who married the daughter of Ozomatinteuctli, king of Cuauhnahuac (today Cuernavaca), purely to gain access to the multicolored cotton.

In the colonial era, the cochineal bug became such a sought after item in trade that several means of adul-

terating it were soon developed in the regions of Michoacán and Oaxaca. On the subject of such tricks, we again refer to Sahagun:

"There is another low grade or adulterated bug they call tlapalnxtli; it means ashen bug... because they mix it with clay or flour. There is also a false bug, ixquimiluhqui, which... breeds in the leaves of the tuna or prickly pear fruit; it harms the finer cochineals and dries up the tuna leaves it settles on; they also gather this species to mix with the good bug and

sell, which is deceitful."

A part from these tricks of the trade, one curious feature is the cochineal's name itself, for if, as different authors claim, it came to the western world from pre-Hispanic Mexico, we cannot help wonder why unlike other American products, it did not conserve its original name.

According to German linguist George Friederici, in 1653, the Nahuatl term *nocheztli* was still used.

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## Oaxaca's Lending Library

While visiting Oaxaca, come visit with us at the Oaxaca Lending Library. We are on the "corredor turístico", 307 Macedonio Alcalá Street.

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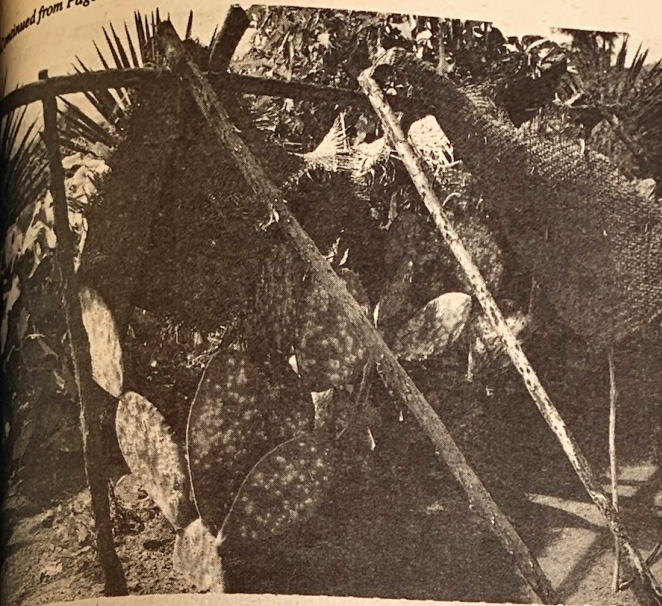
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**CAMINO REAL**



# Cochineal

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Tapexco de petate

prefer to the cochineal insect. It would seem that the colonists gradually resorted to a derivation of the old word coccinus, meaning "scarlet colored." Other writers like Spanish botanist Andrés Laguna (1499-1560) informed that, even before the discovery of America, the Aztec in Spain had a production center for this coloring. Except that this dye, of Aztec origin, was obtained from the kermes insect, similar to a cochineal, which lives in a small type of tree prolific in the region of La Mancha, in Badajoz, especially in Sesimbra in Portugal. Although as of last century synthetic dyes replaced the pre-Hispanic coloring, modern cochineal

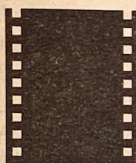
farms have now been installed, since the insect's beautiful shades and their proven durability over the centuries have again given it preference with

specialists and the general public. Moreover, the tiny cochineal from the nopal also contributes to popular Mexican art: the fat in its

body when used as a varnish gives an impeccable finish to the gourd bowls made in Michoacán. In turn, it

has aroused the interest of cosmetologists around the world: the natural origin of the coloring eliminates possible allergy problems.

Written by Margarita González Arredondo. Translated by Carole B. Castelli.



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