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El rebozo

Rebozo... "not the heavy blue, red or green striped silk shawl which complements the picturesque china poblana dress, nor the elegant rebozo worn by the village belles at the Sunday promenade in the park... Ours is the humble and coarse woven dark blue rebozo which even the poorest Indian woman will not do without and in which she daily wraps her shoulders and the burden of her troubles. How many children have cuddled in sleep secure in their mother's rebozos... perhaps dreaming of things we can never know..."



Photo by Jose Pablo Fernández Cueto

In the early hours of the morning and late evening, Oaxaca is often caressed by cool gentle winds. While acting as a shield from uncomfortable weather conditions, the rebozo also creates an atmosphere of elegance and grace. Born of necessity and from the blending of several cultures, the history of the rebozo speaks of both practicality and tradition as it is woven on an Indian loom of native cotton, Chinese silk and European wool, and trimmed with a fringe from a Spanish shawl.

Primarily mestiza women wore rebozos. They could not afford to dress like the Spanish women. In addition, they were forbidden to wear traditional Indian dress. Differences in dress created clear divisions between races. These divisions were greatly responsible for the preservation

of the beautiful Indian costumes and mestiza fashions in which the rebozo played an important role.

Cloth for rebozos were woven on both strap and foot looms. Today, most rebozos are made with the strap loom. One end of the loom is tied to a post while the other end is worn around the waist of the weaver. Preparation of materials including washing and dyeing of threads lasts anywhere from thirty to sixty days. The weaving process comes next. Its duration depends on the intricacy of the design and competency of the weaver. The last step involves a special weave: the fringes.

Rebozos were made of cotton and others of cotton mixed with silk. Some had stripes of gold and silver threads. The most elab-

orate were embroidered with additional metals and coloured silks. Accordingly, prices increased with the quality of thread, weave, workmanship, materials, and embroidery.

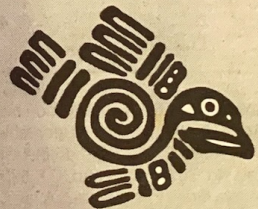
Rebozos were embroidered with rural scenes, bullfights, processions and even the coat of arms of a particular region. For example, one rebozo embroidered with a picnic scene, depicts an Indian girl drawing honey water from a maguey plant to make "pulque", a traditional drink. Another famous rebozo included the tarasca, a sort of winged dragon whose

image was used in processions.

The rebozo has been depicted in engravings, lithographs, and oil paintings by Mexican and foreign artists alike. It is also frequently referred to in Latin American literature and music. The rebozo even has its own patron saint, the Senor del Rebozo. It is also used in many indigenous dances. In San Luis

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Enjoy learning Spanish !



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El rebozo

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Poossi men wearing rebozos perform a ceremonial dance. In Veracruz, women tie knots in rebozos with their feet while stretched out on the floor writhing like serpents.

Eventually rebozos became indispensable. Women wore them without exception, nuns, the privileged and rich as well as the poor. They used them as shawls, cloaks, for carrying babies on their backs, in public places, in processions and even at home. As protection against the cold, women wrapped themselves in their rebozos. And when the sun came out, they were tied around their waists.

Henry Hawks, an English trader who was in Mexico from 1568-72, described the rebozos worn by the Indian women as a "fine mantle which covered them



Photo by Jose Pablo Fernández Cueto

its practicality or aesthetic beauty, the rebozo is not only a shawl. Rather, it is intriguing piece of Mexican culture with its own vital history.

"Rebozo, humble rebozo, for the joy you share, for all the pain and despair you hide beneath your folds, for the daily torment which you relieve in part and ennoble yourself in the doing, for the primitive grace which you bestow on women, may you be forever blessed, Mexican rebozo".

Eds. Note: If you've recently purchased a rebozo or two, you'll appreciate the following washing instructions.

from the top of the head to the knee". Clearly, the great popularity of the rebozo was due to the fact that it was both beautiful and functional. And over time, the rebozo came to represent a synthesis of cultures. Whether worn for

tions. Follow these simple steps and your rebozo will enjoy a long and beautiful life. First, add a handful of salt to warm water, wash rebozo and then rinse. The salt prevents colour bleeding. After a thorough rinse, rebozos should lie flat to dry, but ironed while slightly damp. Untangle fringes with fingertips. On an interesting note, in the country, rebozos are scented with rosemary. Or to give them a sweet smell, rebozos are stored in chests with apples.

Source: El Rebozo. Artes de Mexico, Año XVIII No. 142, 1971.

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A walkers paradise

With a snap of cloth a shoeshine boy began working on black leather boots in the plaza of Oaxaca. His customer had taken a seat with a smile and a nod before opening a newspaper and disappearing behind it.

The Mexican school children spiffy in blue and white uniforms began to stream around a corner of the cathedral, chattering like little birds. Vendors of silver balloons and woven rugs and sarapes drifted out from the shadows of Spanish colonial archways. In a singsong they offered their wares to passers-by. It was another quiet morning in this historic town, only a 45 minute flight southeast of Mexico city.

I had arrived before 7 a.m., catching the earliest jet from the capital. After settling into a 16th century convent that is now the Hotel Camino Real, I set out to explore the neighbourhood. It was my first visit. Oaxaca is a walker's dream. Narrow streets are squared off in a simple grid, and the opulent churches, distinctive museums and lively Indian markets are all within easy reach. A cobbled cross-road called Macedonio Alcalá is littered with shops and restaurants which cater to each and every traveller.

My first destination on that spring-like morning was the central plaza, or Zocalo. I wanted to wake up with the city. More shoeshine boys arrived to set up shop. Two nuns perched on a white wrought-iron park bench and trad-

ed parcels of books. I stared at the giant umbrellas of laurel trees, heavy with glossy green leaves, and shimmering purple lace of jacarandas. Crews with push brooms began sweeping up fallen blossoms and crumpled candy wrappers. One of the workmen hummed the folk tune "La paloma", another was whistling "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's Ninth.

Music is a constant in Oaxaca, as ever present as the soft breeze that fans the mountain-ringed valley. Guitars play in cafes and churches. Each evening the Zocalo resonates with band concerts or marimbas. As I sat near a plaza fountain, my foot was suddenly bumped by a rubber ball. I picked it up and looked into the wide, dark eyes of a toddler with outstretched arms. She had been chasing the ball, but now seemed too shy to reclaim it.

"Buenos dias", I said as I rolled the ball toward her. "Gracias", called her mother.

For five days in Oaxaca I felt wrapped in such kindness, gently welcomed into an unhurried world where there was always time. While paused on a corner, I scanned a map for the location of the Rufino Tamayo museum, and an Indian woman appeared and asked, "Tamayo?" "Si," I replied. She smiled and pointed the way. It was within a block, but set back around a courtyard of scarlet roses.

When I stepped into a small grocery store to buy a coke, the

gray-haired proprietress counted the change and urged me to come back and try her specialty: freshly squeezed orange juice. On the streets of Oaxaca, there is a multitude of handi-crafts to choose from. I reluctantly turned down beautiful large baskets, as well as waist-high ollas; the region's famed unglazed black pottery. And there was no plea or haggle.

I did not turn down food. Oaxacan cuisine is earthy, a mix of Spanish and Indian tastes. Tamales are wrapped in banana leaves. Chicken is served in a lusty mole sauce; a blend of roast chili, peppers, dark chocolate, cinnamon, and garlic. For breakfast I had a tortilla and cheese concoction called chilaquiles, cooled with sliced papaya and mango.

I had gone to Oaxaca because I was curious about its ancient ruins, villages, crafts, and historic colonial heart.

I found all that and more. In Oaxaca I found Mexico.

Written by: Carolyn Kortge ■

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