



WRAPPED IN COLOR: LEGACIES OF THE MEXICAN SARAPE

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

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Today, Zapotec weavers integrate a variety of design details from the ancient walls at Mitla into their textile designs.

Mitla, Oaxaca, Mexico

Alana Coghlan, photographer, 2013

HISTORY

For thousands of years, Indigenous people of the Americas have woven textiles on backstrap looms using local materials, including cotton, plant fibers, and animal hair. In Mexico, as in other parts of the Americas, weaving practices were further shaped by Spanish colonization, which introduced sheep and the treadle loom. The distinctive Saltillo sarape design developed out of this early colonial period.

The original source of the sarape's patterns is still debated and remains a bit of a mystery. The central diamond and intricate stepped-fret designs were prominent designs on ancient Zapotec architecture, seen on the monumental buildings of Mitla dating to 1,500 years ago, and are still used on Saltillo sarapes. Today, Indigenous and Hispanic weavers in Mexico and the southwestern United States continue to interpret the Saltillo sarape's designs.

A sarape is a woolen blanket woven longer than it is wide. Historically, sarapes were worn wrapped or draped like a shawl, over one shoulder, or as poncho. Named for the town of Saltillo, where they were popular trade items from the 1600s to the 1800s, these sarapes are distinguished by a central diamond design or a circular medallion on a contrasting background enclosed by a border design.

DRESS AS IDENTITY

How people dress and adorn themselves has long served as a form of identity, signaling culture and status. During the time of the Aztec empire (1345–1521 CE), both custom and law controlled what people could wear according to their class. The influence of the Spaniards on Indigenous lifeways, including their clothing, can be seen through illustrations in codices produced under Spanish rule. Depicted are Aztec people of high status, priests, and rulers wearing *tilmàtli*, decorated cloaks woven of cotton or *ixtle* on a backstrap loom. The motifs and materials of the *tilmàtli* indicated the wearer's class and rank. It is possible that the Saltillo sarape's designs and how it was worn were influenced by the *tilmàtli*.



Codex Mendoza, Folio 65r, c. 1541–1542

Viceroyalty of Spain

Bodleian Library, Oxford University

In Spanish Colonial times, the sarape was mainly worn in northern Mexico by *hacendados*, or ranch owners. The sarape's loose fit made it a practical garment when riding a horse. Later, it became a status symbol worn by wealthy "city folk." These textiles were masterfully woven with incredible tightness and complex designs.



Rancheros, 1836

Carl Nebel

German, 1805–1855

Lithograph

Voyage pittoresque et archéologique dans la partie la plus intéressante du Mexique

Album, Alamy Stock Photo



Classic period Saltillo sarape

C. 1720–1860

Mexico

Wool, cotton, and cochineal, indigo, and other natural dyes

Gift of Katherine and Alexandrine McEwen

E-1642



Classic period Saltillo sarape

C. 1720–1860

Mexico

Wool, cotton, and indigo dye

On loan from Tom Kieft

AT-2020-13-1

CLASSIC PERIOD SARAPES (1720–1860)

Researchers refer to the earliest examples of Saltillo sarapes as the Classic period. Sarapes of this era were meticulously woven using hand-spun wool, which was naturally dyed, often with cochineal and indigo. The use of the red dye from cochineal signified wealth and prestige. Sarape designs strictly adhered to the three-part system of a central diamond or circular medallion, on an often-intricate background, with a distinctive border.

THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD (1860–1900)

By the mid-1800s, the Saltillo sarape had gained fame internationally. Perhaps in response to the global market, weavers started to slightly alter their designs. Technological and chemical advances brought commercially produced yarns and dyes to the weavers' workshops, resulting in the use of brighter colors and an expansion in design motifs, including a multi-diamond pattern and motifs from France and other European countries. Flowers, animals, motifs from classical architecture, portraits, and other representational elements appear in sarapes, often combined in unusual ways with traditional patterns. Yet some sarapes still harkened back to older designs; these are referred to as Post-Classic.



Post-Classic period sarape with four concentric diamonds, c. 1870

Mexico

Wool, cotton, and natural and synthetic dyes

Gift of Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society, 1933

19766



Post-Classic period sarape, c. 1880

Mexico

Wool, cotton, velvet, silver, and synthetic dyes

On loan from Arizona History Museum, 86.60.19

AT-2020-15-2



left to right:
Oaxacan sarape, c. 1900–1920
 Mexico
 Wool, natural and synthetic dyes
 On loan from Tom Kieft
 AT-2020-13-2
Rio Grande blanket, c. 1890
 New Mexico
 Wool, cotton, and synthetic dyes
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Serat, 1976
 1976-11-1

REGIONAL STYLES

By the 1900s, many weavers in Mexico and New Mexico had developed a style unique to their region or workshop. Regional weaving centers were established in the cities of Saltillo, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Texcoco, San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, and, of course, Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca, among others. The textiles were woven on treadle looms using both natural and synthetic-dyed yarn.

Oaxacan sarapes of the late 1800s and early 1900s feature either a central diamond or a circular center design. They have patterned and plain backgrounds, as well as borders. Banded stripes are often woven along the ends. Oaxacan sarapes usually have warps and wefts made of wool. In comparison, sarapes woven in other areas of Mexico usually have warp threads of finely spun cotton that are completely covered by tightly packed woolen weft threads.

Early settlers to the far northern reaches of the Spanish colony, in what is now New Mexico, brought along the treadle loom and Churro sheep. By the 1630s, European-style treadle looms were made locally and Spanish-style *obrajes* (workshops) were established. New Mexican weavers adopted the Saltillo design system but enlarged the pattern. The Northern Rio Grande Valley has become famous for its textiles. Many of the area's designs show the influence of the Mexican Saltillo sarape.



Chimayo blanket, c. 1920–1950
 New Mexico
 Wool, cotton, and synthetic dyes
 Gift of Mrs. Robert Schuman Steinert, 1964
 E-6102



Mexican saddle, c. 1890–1900
 On loan from Michael D. Higgins
 AT-2020-14-1
 Rolled and placed on back of saddle:
Post-Classic period Saltillo sarape, c. 1870
 Wool, cotton, and indigo and possibly synthetic dyes
 12504

SALTILLO INFLUENCE AMONG INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Looms used by Indigenous communities in northwest Mexico and the southwestern United States are different from those used by weavers elsewhere in Mexico. Instead of backstrap or treadle looms, they use horizontal looms made of hand-hewn logs. The weavings of the Rarámuri (Tarahumara) Indians in Chihuahua, and Mayo Indians in Sonora and Sinaloa, show the influence of Saltillo sarape designs, as do some Diné (Navajo) textiles.



left to right:
Mayo sarape with unusually large central diamond superimposed on a typical Saltillo sarape design layout, c. 1920
 Mexico
 Wool and indigo dye
 Gift of the University of Arizona Foundation
 1980-29-1
Rarámuri sarape with a diamond motif and a Saltillo sarape design layout, c. 1920
 Mexico
 Hand-spun wool, natural and synthetic dyes
 Collected by E. B. "Ted" Sayles
 Gift of Jack Sayles and Harriet Mothershead, 1978
 1978-1-2



Diné sarape with Saltillo influence, c. 1850
 Arizona/New Mexico
 Wool, cotton, and cochineal and indigo dyes
 Collected by Lieutenant John Sanford Mason, c. 1870
 Purchase from Major Enalls Waggaman, 1954
 E-2724



Diné poncho sarape, 2015
 Kathy Marianito
 Arizona
 Churro wool, cotton, and cochineal and indigo dyes
 Purchased by ASM Friends of Collections
 2020-337-1

In the mid-1800s, Diné weavings begin to show influences from Mexican sarapes, including a longer-than-wide orientation and inclusion of serrate-edged diamonds and vertical zigzags. Textiles from this period also feature stepped and terraced motifs, reflective of early Diné basketry but also similar to Saltillo design elements. Navajo weavers may have seen Mexican and New Mexican Saltillo-style weavings while imprisoned at Bosque Redondo, in New Mexico, from 1864 to 1868, or even via trading. During that period, Diné women were encouraged to weave and were supplied with dyed yarns from Germantown, Pennsylvania. Saltillo design elements are still used by Diné weavers today.

TOURISM AND THE SALTILLO

The Mexican nationalist movement of the early 1900s appropriated the country's Spanish and Indigenous identities to create a hybrid "Mexican" identity. The Saltillo sarape turned out to be one of the country's most enduring symbols. This period saw the rise of the rainbow-striped blanket, which became synonymous with Mexico through its use in films, posters, and advertising.

As tourism to Mexico increased, many visitors purchased these colorful sarapes as souvenirs. With demand on the rise, sarape-manufacturing plants were established. Through the use of electric-powered looms, synthetic dyes, and acrylic yarns, production time was shortened and the number of textiles increased. As a result, by the 1930s, there was a drastic decline in handwoven sarapes and the use of natural dyed yarns.



This poster promoting Mexican tourism has iconic symbols of Mexico: a saguaro, a sombrero, a guitar, pyramids, and a colorful striped Saltillo sarape. Color lithograph, 1945
José Espert Arcos, graphic designer
Asociación Mexicana de Turismo, Mexico
Harry Ransom Center
The University of Texas at Austin
Texas War Records Travel Posters Collection
85.185.50A



Rainbow-striped Saltillo sarape, c. 1900
Mexico
Wool, cotton, and synthetic dyes
ASM purchase from Nelle A. Dermont, 1919
8425

A WEAVING FAMILY PRESERVING ANCIENT TRADITIONS

My parents are the third generation of dyers and weavers in our family, which makes my siblings and me the fourth generation of weavers. As newlyweds, the first things your parents usually give you are a loom, a spinning wheel, and enough materials to start a studio, so you can feed your family.

My parents have always worked collaboratively to create each piece—from cleaning wool, spinning it, collecting the plants for dyeing, dyeing the wool, to weaving. To execute a piece, my mom does the carding and spinning, and my dad weaves. They loved working at night because night brings calmness and concentration. This is how they raised eleven kids.

About nineteen years ago, I started my own studio involving my family and community. Our mission is to preserve and uplift our historically significant natural-dye practices. Our parents' humble beginnings have grown into what is now Porfirio Gutiérrez Studio, with a team of thirty-five people who are mostly women. In addition, we work closely with cochineal and indigo farmers, spinners, and others who help with various essentials. About eighty people benefit from each textile that we sell. What started with two people working late to feed their family is now a large creative team trying to preserve our ancient traditions.



Porfirio Gutiérrez with basket full of *pericón* (Mexican tarragon) to use for making a yellow dye.
Keith Recker, photographer, 2018



Gutiérrez family
Javier Lazo Gutiérrez, photographer, 2015

We always pay respect to Mother Earth by only taking what we need. Before we collect the plants, we give thanks to the greater being. To us, these plants are as important as food or medicine. Natural dye is not a trend for us; it is our way of life and our legacy.

SHEEP AND CLEANING THE WOOL

Sheep's wool comes in a variety of colors, ranging from white and light creams to tans, browns, and black. For dyeing yarn, white wool is the most desirable. Blending two or more colors of wool when carding gives a textured look to a yarn. Before we have wool to dye, though, the sheep must be sheared and their wool must be washed, carded (combed), and spun.

Separating, cleaning, and washing raw wool are labor intensive. The first step is to open up and separate the matted fibers. Larger pieces of foreign matter are picked out by hand, and compacted wool is "fluffed" to make washing more effective. After this preliminary cleaning process, the wool is loaded into reed baskets and taken to the river to be washed.



Churro sheep were introduced to the northern reaches of New Spain by Spanish colonizer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in 1521. Weavers quickly adopted Churro wool and continue to prize it today.

Three male Navajo Churro sheep, Spin Dance Acres, Boise, ID.
Bonnie Barcus, photographer, 2018

Often, my mother says that water is alive with tremendous force; in her healing process, she works in harmony with this force. This makes me realize that the process of washing raw wool is also a ceremony.

CARDING AND SPINNING WOOL

When the wool is dry, it is combed with carding paddles, which are like large hairbrushes with metal bristles. This helps to further clean, as well as align, the fibers for spinning into yarn.



Andrea Contreras preparing cleaned wool for spinning.
Nikhol Esterás, photographer, 2017

The art of spinning wool takes years to master. Wool's width, texture, and tensile strength can vary greatly. When weaving a piece, all the different colors of yarn usually need to be made to the same specifications. We use a manually powered wooden spinning wheel to transform the wool into yarn. It is then naturally dyed before using the spinning wheel to roll yarn from a ball into a large loop to be placed over the *biilieelii*, a rotating device used to feed the yarn onto a bobbin. Other materials used in our studio include *ixtle* (agave fiber), palm leaves, recycled copper thread, and machine-spun wool yarn.

I work with natural dyes because I discovered my gift and calling within our traditional practice and developed a profound connection with Mother Earth. I inherited the deep artistic traditions and our rich cultural identity from our ancestors, the Zapotec civilization. In my family, we learned our weaving practices at a very early age and forged our identities within that artistic expression. Our lives are shaped by our values, which are inherently linked to our practice of working with natural dyes and weaving.



Porfirio Gutiérrez with dyed skeins of yarn.
Javier Lazo Gutiérrez, photographer, 2019

NATURAL DYEING

The natural-dye practice involves chemistry, spiritual beliefs, and a deep understanding of the forces of nature. The shades of color a plant gives can vary greatly depending on where it was grown and whether the plant received enough water for the season—which makes the hue a living imprint of that particular season. This is how we know that nature is divine and that the plants are alive, just like us. It can take a lifetime to understand the depth of this practice.

The Zapotec have been coloring yarns with natural dyes for thousands of years. However, this practice was threatened by the introduction of synthetic dyes, which enabled weavers to produce textiles more quickly for a growing commercial market. Over time, many Zapotec villages abandoned the more labor-intensive tradition of working with plants, minerals, and insects. While less expensive and easier to use than natural dyes, chemical dyes can also be highly toxic, particularly in large amounts. They present a threat to the health of the dyers who use them and to the environment when they are disposed of in the ground or in water systems.

Today, only a few families in Teotitlán del Valle continue the ancient tradition of producing and using natural dyes. I am working to preserve this knowledge through my studio's work and by teaching others. By reviving this tradition, my family and I are helping to preserve Zapotec identity and the environment.

COCHINEAL

Cochineal dye has been widely used in Saltillo sarapes to create brilliant red weavings, in many different hues, that are considered some of the finest textiles in the world. The dye is derived from the dried bodies of tiny female cochineal (*Dactylopius coccus*) insects that live and feed on the nopal (prickly pear cactus). When they die, they will be scraped off, dried, and then ground into a rich, purple-red powder to be used as a dye. About 1,000 nopal pads are required to harvest about two pounds of cochineal to use for dye.

Cochineal has been cultivated in Mexico, Central America, and South America for thousands of years. In ancient Mexico, it was used not only in the arts but also in medicine and ceremonies, especially in burial rites. The Aztecs demanded cochineal as tribute from the many areas they ruled over. Spaniards first encountered it in Aztec markets, compressed into bars, either pure or mixed with chalk.

The export of cochineal from Mexico became a huge economic enterprise for the Spaniards. They established cochineal-production farms, called nopalries, and this native insect dye became the second most valuable export from the Americas. Oaxaca was one of the most important centers for its production. The success of Spain's cochineal market aroused intense jealousy among other European countries, which sent spies to discover the dye's source. Eventually the cactus pads, with cochineal insects attached, were smuggled out of Mexico.

By the time of Mexico's war for independence (1810–1821), the country had lost its monopoly on the cochineal trade. However, it remained a part of Mexico's economy until the 1860s, when new synthetic dyes became available.



Front and back views of male and female cochineal insects. José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez *Memoria sobre la naturaleza, cultivo, y beneficio de la grana*, Mexico City, 1777 Edward E. Ayer Manuscript Collection, Ayer Ms. 1031, plate 1 Newberry Library, Chicago

This art form is a deep part of my culture and is my life. It is like my native language or our ceremonies. The cochineal produces a color just like the color of our blood; the weft and the warp are like the tissue in our body. Textiles are our second skin as well as a means of expression.



Andrea Contreras, Porfirio's mom, plucking tree moss for dyeing. Hanging behind her are nopal pads on which the cochineal insects feast. Javier Lazo Gutiérrez, photographer, 2016



Juana Gutiérrez Contreras pulling yarn from the dye pot. Joe Coca, photographer, 2019



Juana Gutiérrez Contreras grinds indigo into a powder to make the dye. Joe Coca, photographer, 2019

INDIGO

Blue dye hues are made from the indigo plant (*Indigofera tinctoria*), also called *añil* in Spanish. It is one of the more complicated dyes to prepare. For the Porfirio Gutiérrez studio, we usually buy dehydrated indigo cake from the last few families in Oaxaca who grow and process the indigo plants. We grind the indigo and put it in a clay pot with water and various ingredients. For indigo to produce the blue color, it needs a high-based pH, which is achieved by adding wood ash. We also add *muicle* (*Justiciar spicigera*), a reduction agent. This liquid is left to ferment for at least five days before it is ready to dye the yarn various shades of blue.

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SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

For me, natural dyeing is a spiritual process. We must be mindful that Mother Earth is a living being with a tremendous force. All elements used for natural dyes, traditional medicine, and foods are grown, thanks to the rain, soil, and other important sources provided by a greater being. All of these elements are alive, and without them, there would simply not be the hues you see in our textiles.

The colors that come from plants go beyond beauty; they are connected to a living source and work in harmony with the wisdom of the practitioner. These dye materials are sacred and precious. They connect me and my family to the great master dyers and weavers of the past, who started these practices thousands of years ago.

Our exposure to traditional knowledge gives us an understanding of about ten different color hues. We are continuously researching and experimenting with a diverse array of plants and fibers to create more hues. We have now developed over two hundred different colors, all from natural sources. As a result, we have tremendous respect and connection to Mother Earth, understanding her limitations and the limitations of the materials.



Porfirio Gutiérrez working with his wife and son at his studio in Ventura, CA. Kate Kunath, photographer, 2021



Lisa Falk, photographer, 2021

MASTER TEXTILE ARTIST PORFIRIO GUTIÉRREZ, EXHIBIT CO-CURATOR

Porfirio Gutiérrez was born and raised in the Zapotec textile community of Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca, Mexico. As a young boy, he learned the ancient traditions of weaving and natural dyeing from his parents. Today, he lives and works in both Oaxaca and Ventura, California.

His artistic practice is guided by a profound spiritual belief that nature is a living being, which is sacred and to be honored. He is inspired by cultural objects such as palm-leaf mats used in ceremonies, traditional textiles, Saltillo sarape designs, and the architecture of ancient buildings at Mitla, one of the most sacred Zapotec sites. Within the urban landscape, he sees direct parallels between Zapotec architecture and the modern lines of mid-century aesthetics. In his pieces, these influences merge in a new and expanding dialogue.

My ongoing *Fragment* series is my interpretation of one of the most remarkable weaving traditions created by the blending of Native American and European traditions. These pieces reflect how the merger created new forms of expression in the art of weaving. This style of weaving became part of our Mexican cultural identity and remains part of my personal expression. My *Fragment* series pays homage to our ancestral weavers, who, in many cases, were slaves yet they contributed their unique design sensibilities and left an artistic legacy we can still appreciate and respect today.

FRAGMENT SERIES BY PORFIRIO GUTIÉRREZ



left to right:

Naturally dyed. Dye colors made from tree moss, Mexican tarragon, indigo, and cochineal.
AT-2020-16-6

Naturally dyed. Dye colors made from Mexican tarragon, black sapote, indigo, and cochineal.
AT-2020-16-7

Naturally dyed. Dye colors made from indigo.
AT-2020-16-5

Cover photo credits, left to right from top:

Craig Holmes, photographer, 2018 | Nikhol Esterás, photographer, 2017 | *Codex Ixtlilxochitl*, Folio 108r, c. 1580–1584, Bibliothèque Nationale de France | **Classic period Saltillo sarape**, c. 1720–1860, Mexico, on loan from Arizona History Museum, 92.28, AT-2020, Michelle Dillon, photographer, 2020 | Javier Lazo Gutiérrez, photographer, 2019 | Joe Coca, photographer, 2019 | Alana Coghlan, photographer, 2016