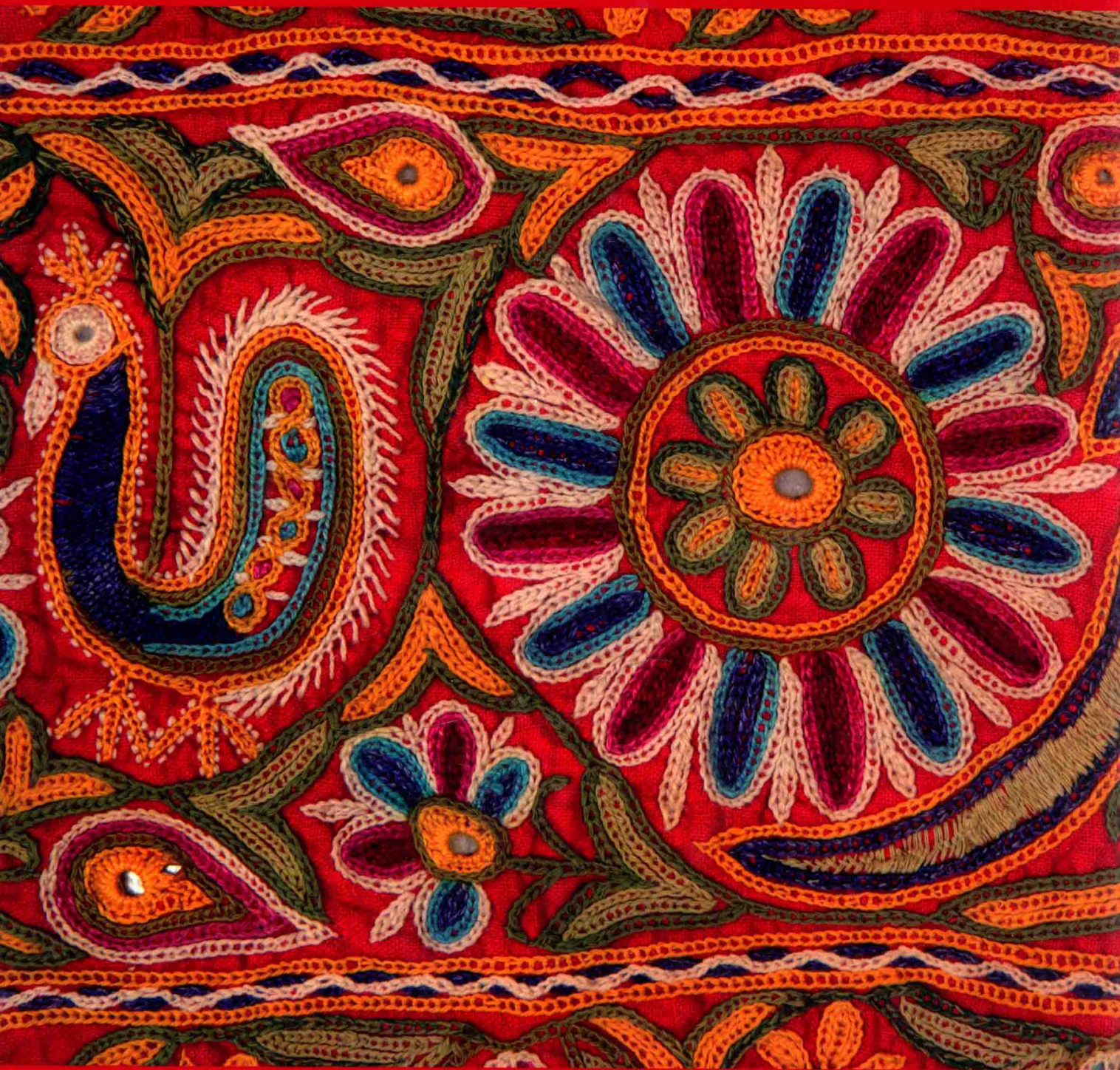
TEXTILES

COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF INTERNATIONAL FOLK ART



BOBBIE SUMBERG

TEXTILES

COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF INTERNATIONAL FOLK ART

BOBBIE SUMBERG

Photographs by Addison Doty

GIBBS SMITH
TO ENRICH AND INSPIRE HUMANKIND
Salt Lake City | Charleston | Santa Fe | Santa Barbara

First Edition
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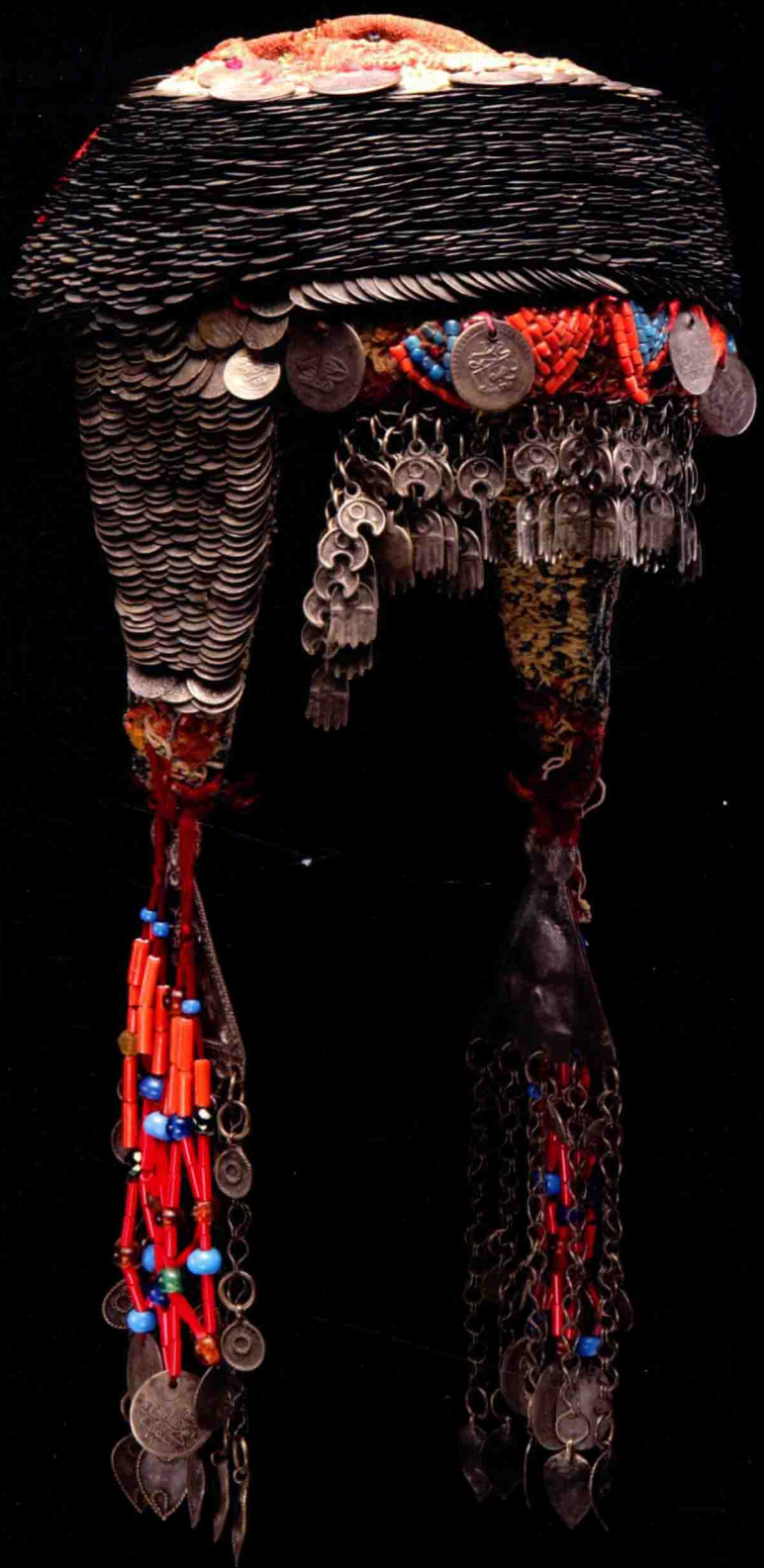

Contents

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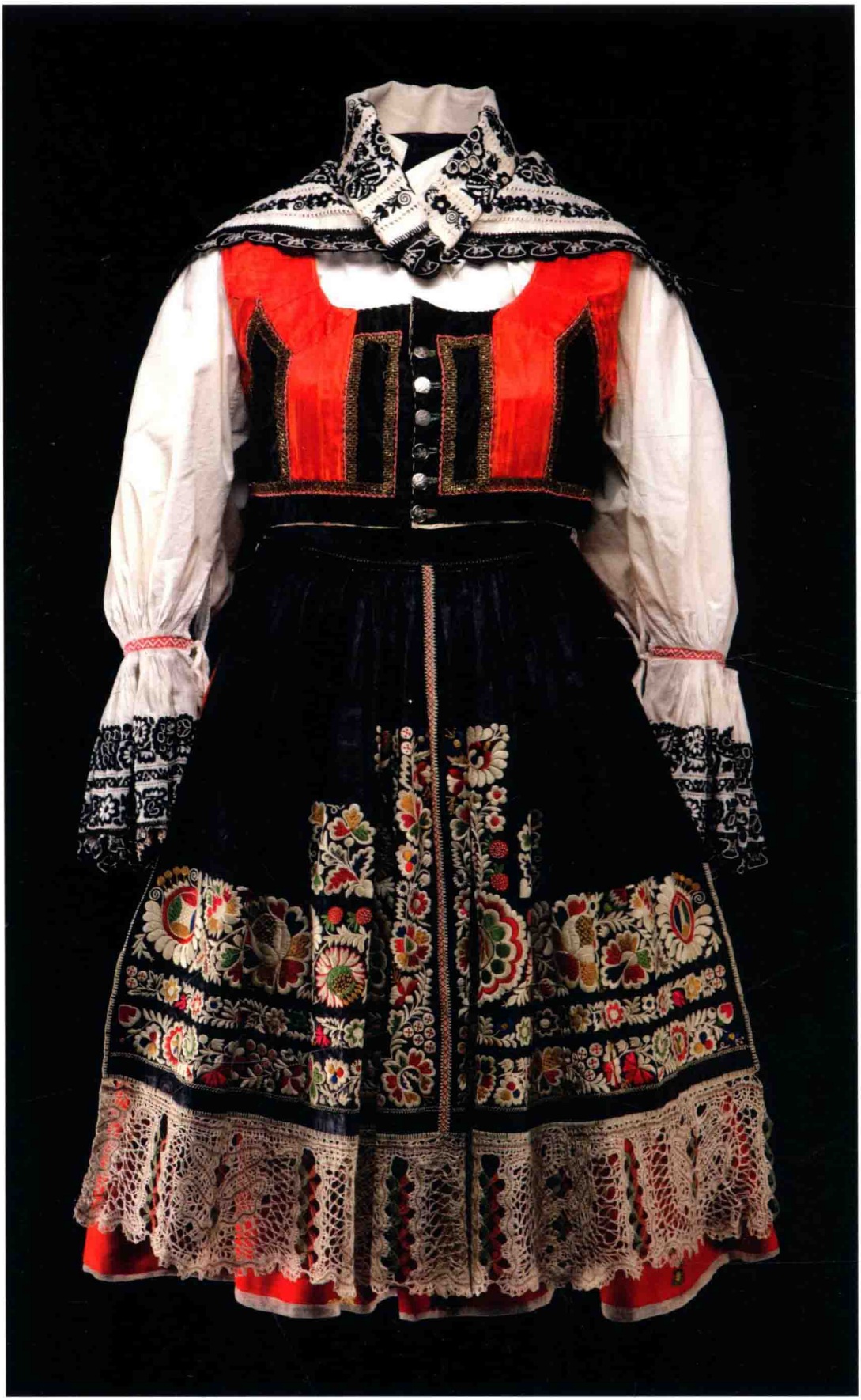

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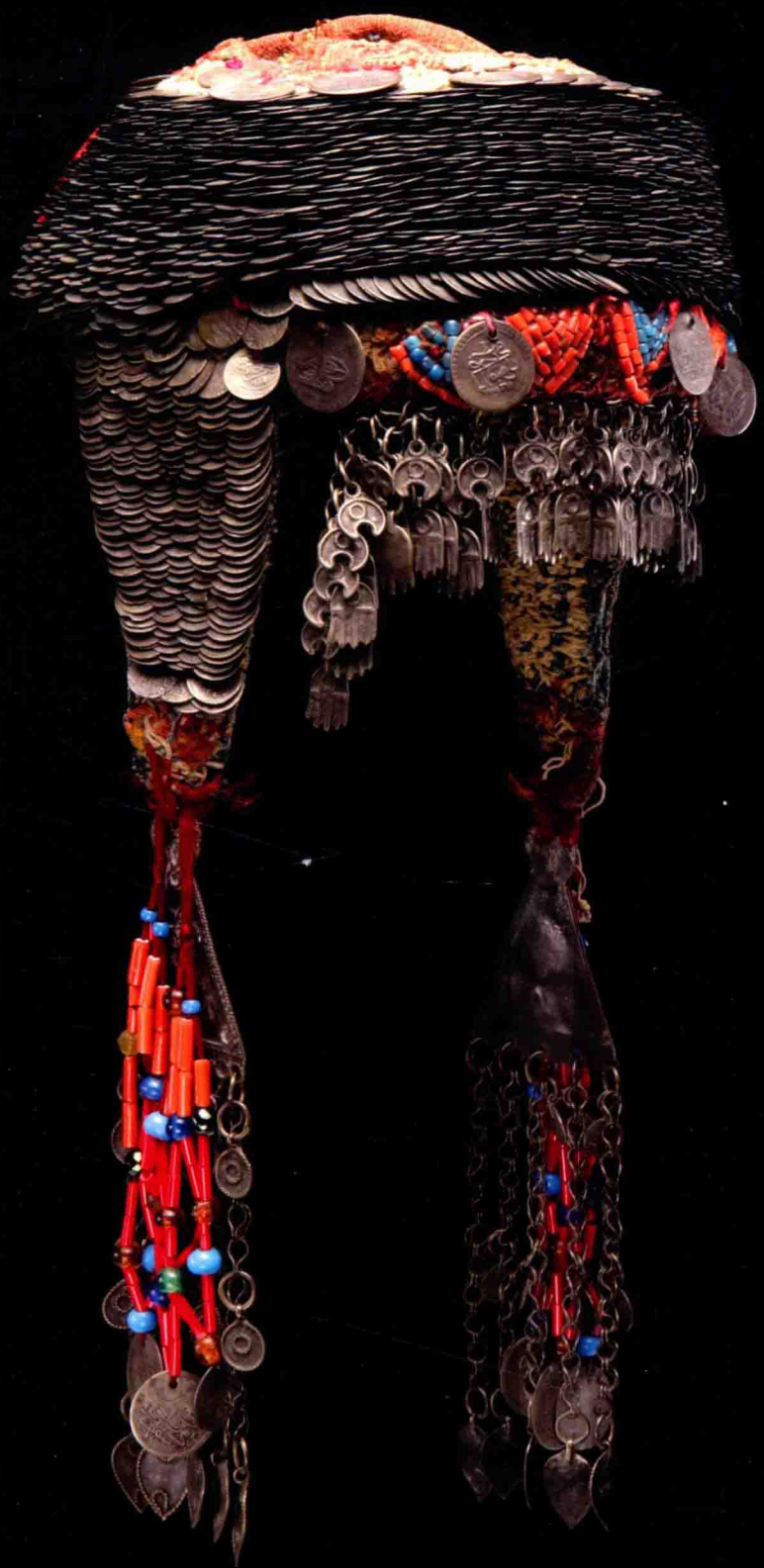

Contents

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Introduction

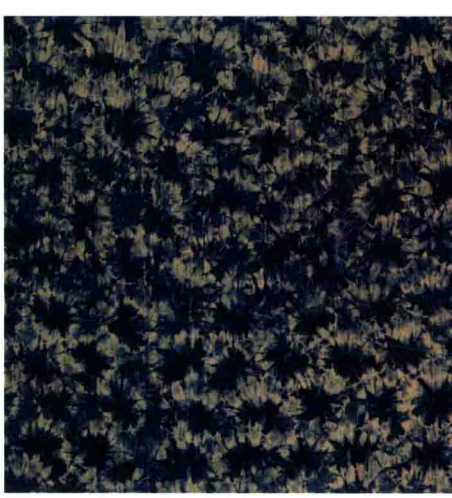
Textiles and Dress in the Museum of International Folk Art

The Museum of International Folk Art was founded and given to the state of New Mexico by Florence Dibell Bartlett and opened to the public in 1953. Over the door was engraved the motto "The art of the craftsman is a bond between the peoples of the world." What better art to demonstrate the universality and particularity of human culture than textile art? When Bartlett gave her personal collection of nearly three thousand pieces to New Mexico, approximately 75 percent of the collection was textiles and items of dress, including garments, hats, shoes, and jewelry.

Many museums collect textiles and dress, but these materials rarely take center stage. The Museum of International Folk Art prioritizes these materials, realizing they are the art of a people in a profound sense, making concrete a culture's values, aesthetics, and ideas about the cosmos as well as where humans, collectively and individually, fit in the world.

Numerous aspects of history and culture are studied through the production and use of textiles, one of the fascinating characteristics of this material. Gender roles within a family and within a society or culture are usually played out when cloth is made and worn, beginning with the planting of a seed or the raising of an animal. It's easy to look at a woman spinning or embroidering and think that textile production is exclusively women's work, but there is so much more to the topic of gender and the production of textiles than that. Each piece in the museum's collection tells a complex story of the people who made and used it.

Take, for instance, the tie-dyed cotton cloth from Côte d'Ivoire, at right as well as on page 122. It was collected in the mid-nineteenth century and provides an excellent example of pre-colonial gender roles related to textile production. In central Côte d'Ivoire, where this cloth might have been made, young men cleared the fields of brush; women then planted the cotton seeds among the other crops. When the cotton was ready, everyone harvested the white or naturally brown bolls. Then it was up to the females of the household to deseed, card, and spin the fiber into yarn and dye it if desired. The yarn was given to a male member of the family to weave into long strips that were sewn together to make a cloth. The size of the cloth was determined by the number and length of strips; cloths for men were bigger than cloths for women. The cloth was then



Tie-dyed cotton cloth from Côte d'Ivoire.

given back to the female head of the household. She decided who received it or if it was to be sold or used for a funeral gift. Men and women worked together and were expected to each do their parts of the process, which were equally important but not the same.[1]

Where women are secluded inside the household, the needle arts have often flourished. A needle, a hoop or frame, and a selection of colored threads are all that is needed to create something beautiful that not only demonstrates a woman's skill but also implies the correctness of her upbringing. Portable embroidery has often constituted a primary social activity for unmarried girls preparing their trousseaus and who are prohibited from contact with the world of men.

Making and embellishing textiles can be a powerful tool of socialization and a reflection of cultural values. The sight of men and women in the Andes spinning with a drop spindle while walking sends a strong message about being productive and not wasting a moment. Young girls learning to weave at a back strap loom in southern Mexico kneel quietly at the loom. They are not only learning a skill but are also learning that to be a woman is to be patient, still, and calm in comportment.

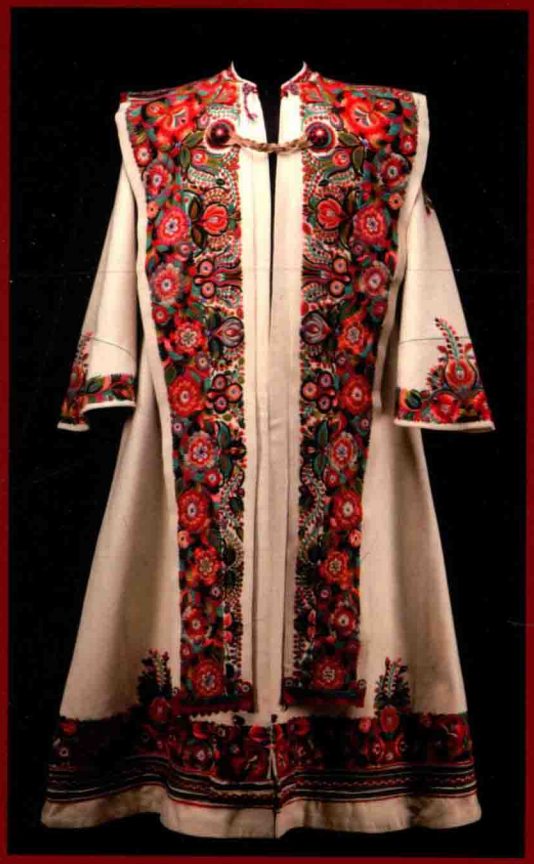
As with gender roles, economic roles are not always so straightforward. There is some—but only limited—truth to the assumption that women produced textiles in the home for use in the home while men labored in commercial workshops making textile products for sale. Like the chef/cook—male/female dichotomy, there is limited truth in this generalization. Female spinners, weavers, and needleworkers have always participated in the market economy, whether working inside or outside of the home. Young New England farm women, who had been weaving cotton cloth at home on contract, were recruited to work in the textile mills in Massachusetts at the start of the Industrial Revolution around 1815.[2] Even when the cultural ideal insists that women are isolated from the marketplace, their earning ability has helped sustain their families. What might be true for wealthy and upper-class women doesn't necessarily apply to families struggling to keep body and soul together.

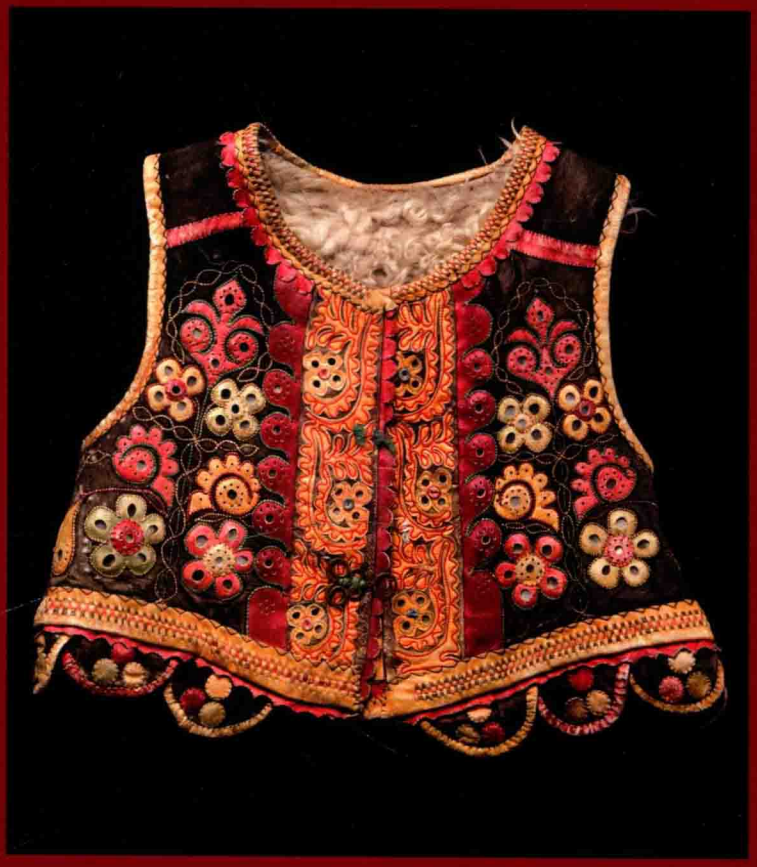
On the other hand, some types of textile work were considered too heavy or difficult for a woman to manage. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, embroidery on sheepskin, leather, and fulled wool garments, such as those at right as well as on pages 120, 178, and 179, was the domain of professional male embroiderers. These garments were produced entirely in a workshop or professional setting as the materials used required more technical skills and equipment than was found in the home. The irony is that the weight of the clothing worn by women in this part of Europe and the physicality and repetitiveness of the household chores and farming activities women were expected to do ensured that they were very strong!

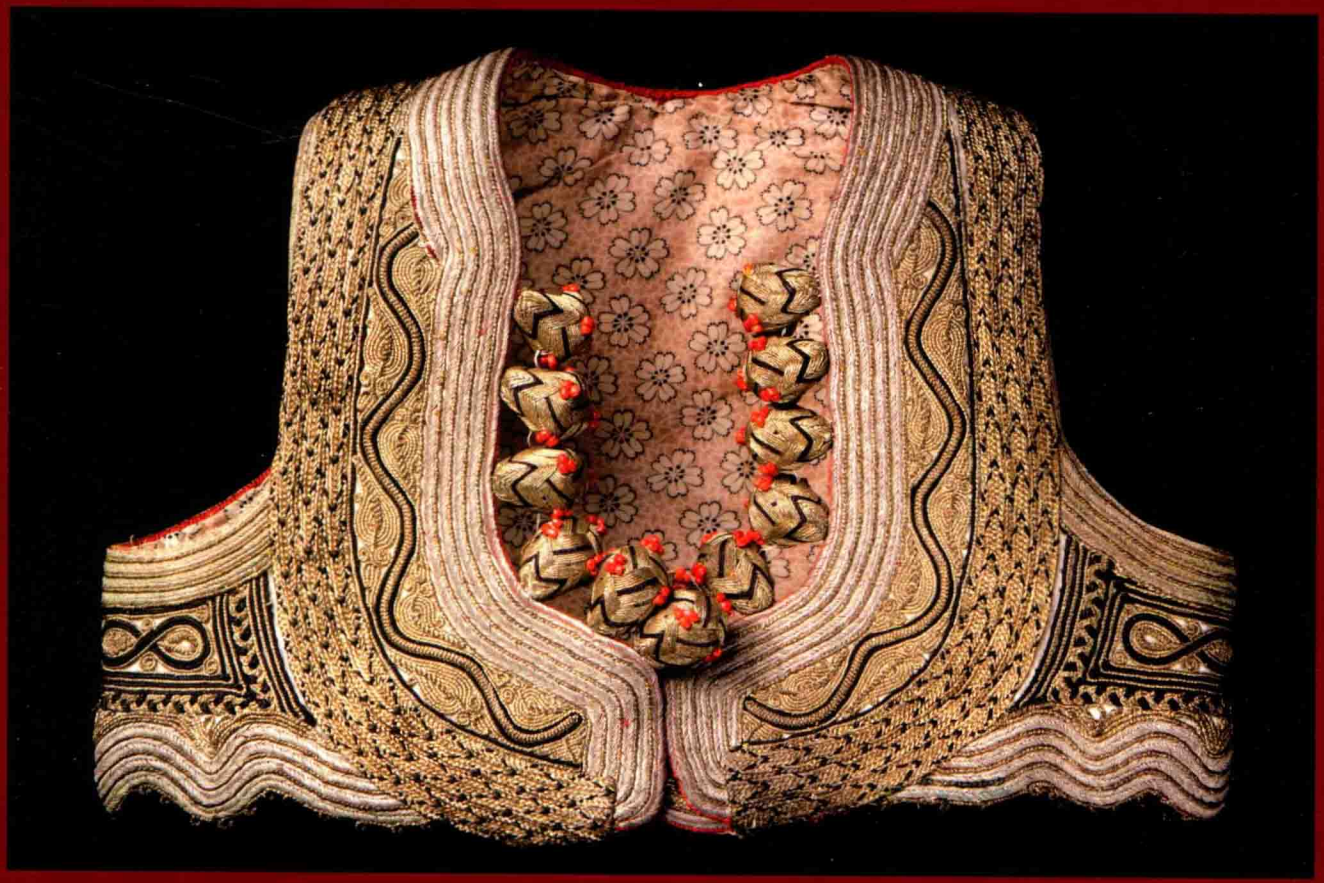
Different fibers originated in specific parts of the world—cotton in India, Africa, and Mesoamerica; silk in China; wool in the Eastern Mediterranean; and flax for linen in Northern Europe and Egypt. Trade in these fibers, in dyes, and in materials such as shells and feathers for decorating cloth and the body is perhaps the earliest example of global trade in history. Tomb paintings from the

Facing:

Embroidery on sheepskin, leather, and fulled wool garments was the domain of male embroiderers.







reign of Queen Hatshepsut (c. 1500 BCE) show Minoan traders from Crete carrying patterned textiles destined for the royal court,[3] while the Silk Road, popularly named for its most important trade good, brought textiles from China through Central Asia and into Europe beginning in the second century BCE.[4] Until textile manufacture was fully industrialized in Europe and North America, trade in cloth was limited to high-value luxury items like silk and cloth of gold. Everyday fabrics used by ordinary people were still made locally and in the home.

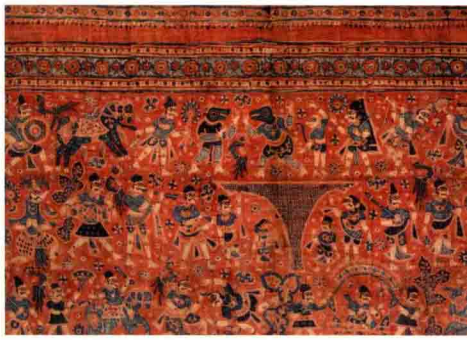
There was ancient trade in materials for decoration and jewelry as well. Cowry shells gathered on beaches on the east coast of Africa were carried thousands of miles along trade routes to West Africa, where they were highly valued both as currency and as jewelry. Cowries are still used today for symbolic transactions and jewelry, and as a motif on contemporary printed cloth. Parrot feathers used by the Hopi in ceremonial dance dress and on prayer sticks highlight the importance of prehistoric trade from Western Mexico to the mesas of Arizona.[5]

The majority, though not all, of the pieces in the museum were made by rural people around the world who intended to use them, people whose customs have been transformed drastically through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and into the present. Ethnic textiles and dress provide important evidence of how people's lives change with increasing globalization. Where locally produced materials once were the norm and imported materials signified access to rare and expensive things, a whole array of possibilities have opened up with increased access to information, such as through television and the Internet, and to goods produced elsewhere. These possibilities range from simple substitution to incorporation of new ideas, from major changes in patterns of production and use to abandonment of ethnic dress and textiles entirely.

Frequently, cheaper factory-woven cloth is substituted for handwoven cloth while the form and use of a garment remains the same. The same holds true for some embellishments; where coins were sewn onto a garment, buttons can be substituted, machine-made lace replaces handmade lace, and purchased ribbons take the place of embroidery or other labor-intensive trims. While traveling in southwest China in 2007, I saw for sale in the villages the heavily pleated skirts worn by some Miao women, pre-made and printed with patterns mimicking the batik work and embroidery normally done by the women themselves.

Access to new ideas and goods brought by trade can encourage new forms of dress or use of textiles. The Ijo people of the Niger Delta in Nigeria did not grow cotton or weave much cloth other than small amounts of raphia fiber for small things such as hats and bands. But when the Portuguese arrived in the area in the fifteenth century, they brought handwoven cotton cloth from India. This cloth was initially traded for ivory, pepper, and dye woods, and later for slaves and palm oil. Madras plaid, woven to the color preferences of various peoples on the coast of West Africa, was adopted and incorporated into ceremonial life, where it was used as dress for special occasions and given as a gift during life-cycle ceremonies marking significant moments such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Something that had been virtually unknown in the Niger Delta became essential over time.[6]

The painted cloth pictured at right as well as on page 66 is another example of how traded textiles are incorporated into a culture. It was made in India for trade to the outer islands of Indonesia, Sulawesi in this case, where it was kept and treasured, brought out to display for only the most important occasions. Trade and access to imported goods such as this cloth did not diminish the need or desire for ordinary people on Sulawesi to elaborate a local style of dress and to assign profound meaning to textiles incorporated into rites and ceremonies. The colonization of Africa, Latin America, and Asia by Europe, as well as the industrialization of the textile sector in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, wrought far more changes than the trade in luxury goods.



Another example of how traded textiles are incorporated into a culture.

When commercially produced cloth replaces a locally woven product, a cascade of economic effects may occur. Less handwoven cloth is generally needed for everyday purposes and fewer weavers are needed. What was a common household activity becomes a specialized professional activity. In some cases change may be rapid and radical—the purchase of ready-made garments may entirely supplant local production. In other cases, commercially made cloth or clothing may replace only some of the prior handmade products, making some occupations obsolete but leaving others intact. For instance, industrially woven fabric can be sewn into familiar garments by local tailors.

In still other instances, some part of the production process may be industrialized while others are not. An example of this can be found in the weaving of Harris Tweeds in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. Hand-spun wool from island sheep was woven for home use and local trade in the islands until the mid-nineteenth century. By recognizing the value of the original product at a point when it was likely to disappear, one woman promoted and developed the concept of a high-value fabric produced to rigorous standards and marketed to the world. Over almost 150 years, the industry has adapted new methods and definitions but has retained some aspects of hand production. Today, locally raised wool is sent to mills to be commercially spun and dyed and then returned to be woven on human-powered looms and marketed as the only product that can legally be called Harris Tweed.

Sometimes the highest-value types of cloth used in ceremonial situations are still made, supporting a specialized weaver group. Local styles of dress that are abandoned for everyday wear might remain in use for special occasions such as weddings and holidays. An individual might add a part of their ethnic dress to their everyday ensemble when traveling to a distant market. I saw this repeatedly in China in 2007, where local traditions are changing at a phenomenal rate—a woman wearing plain pants and a sweater with elaborately embroidered head gear that identified her as a member of a particular minority group.

When rural dwellers move to the city to pursue employment, they often change their dress to conform to city standards and look less "ethnic" if they want to succeed. Those who stay behind in the village, usually women and girls, maintain the dress traditions they grew up with and other important aspects of cultural tradition that the textile arts exemplify.

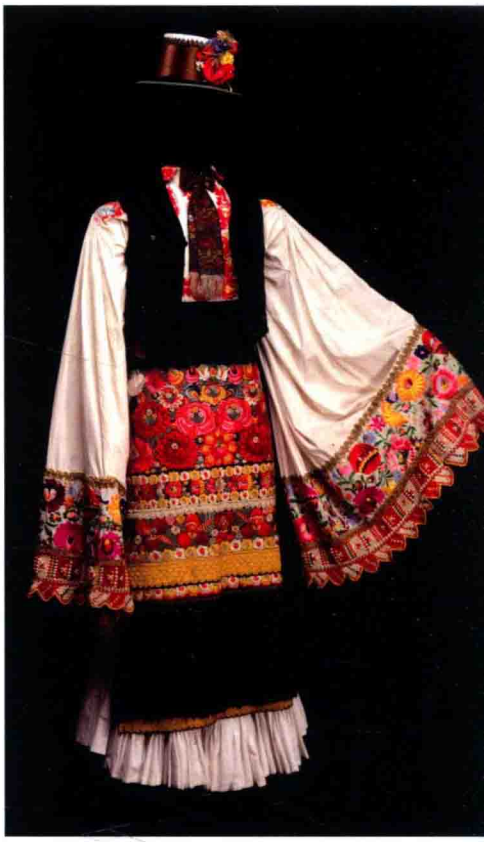
Social and economic change does not always ring the death knell of ethnic dress and textile production or use. Increased prosperity and participation in the money economy of the mid-nineteenth century by peasants in the Mesokovesd region of Hungary produced a florescence of elaborate embroidery on men's and women's garments, particularly aprons, as seen in the wedding outfit at right as well as on page 227. Earlier embroidery in this region was quite sedate, using only red and blue thread, compared to the pieces shown. The availability of yarns brightly colored with chemical dyes developed in the mid-nineteenth century was essential to this expression of artistry.

When commercially woven and printed fabrics were introduced to West Africa, the use of hand-spun and woven cloth dropped off drastically in some areas. This new cloth was lighter weight and thus more comfortable to wear and more easily washed than the locally produced fabrics. At first it was used in the same way as handwoven cloth; a piece of fabric was simply wrapped around the body. With the increased availability of sewing machines, tailored garments using these new fabrics appeared. Ultimately, a fashion system unique to West Africa developed, with recognizable variations in specific locales and replete with rapid change in styles and details. For the visitor to Abidjan, Lagos, or Accra, the exuberance of color and shape worn by urban Africans is immediately registered.

In other situations, weaving itself has developed into a money-making activity, but for a new clientele—international tourists. This kind of weaving may be a sideline for people who also weave for themselves, or it may be pursued only in the context of outside buyers. Often, pieces made for the tourist market are recognizable by their "quick and dirty" aspect—loose weaving, large embroidery stitches, simplified patterning. When potential customers value a product as a souvenir, they are not often willing to pay a high price for that product, inducing the maker to invest less time and effort into that piece. Development projects aimed at providing women with employment often focus on the textile arts, reasoning that it's efficient to develop existing skills, especially those that can be used at home while engaged in all the other aspects of family life women are responsible for.

Revival and romanticizing of rural or peasant handwork has been a feature of urban society for centuries. The art of piecing and quilting, originally highly utilitarian techniques used in the United States to make bedding, and secondarily seen as a canvas for a quilter's creativity, has enjoyed a tremendous growth in popularity since the late twentieth century. Recently a lace bureau scarf was donated to the museum. It was handmade in an Italian workshop established in the 1920s to help the urban poor and features a Renaissance style design. Revivals of this type do not usually last very long but have been instrumental in maintaining the knowledge and appreciation of textile techniques no longer widely used.

Immigrant communities also contribute to the continued use of ethnic dress and textiles, sometimes when that use has disappeared entirely from the home place. In the United States, folk dance ensembles representing countries and cultures from all over the world look to long-abandoned historic



A Hungarian wedding outfit with apron.

ethnic festival dress for their own performance costume. National and ethnic pride and political consciousness also play their part in the contemporary use of ethnic dress. Palestinian women living in the U.S. and Australia commission embroidered dresses based on historic village styles from Palestinian refugees living in camps in Syria and Lebanon to wear at their weddings. The reinvigoration of traditional non-Christian religion in Lithuania is accompanied by a companion revival of hand-weaving for use in religious practice.

Many people in the U.S. lament the loss of handwork, specifically the textile arts practiced in other places, equating this loss with the lack of cultural connection they feel in their own lives. Many complicated questions arise when this attitude is examined critically. Is it better for a girl to spend her childhood learning to embroider or going to school? How can we in the rich nations have any objections to the ways in which people try to better their lives? What are the human costs occurred in maintaining a particular way of life? Are we willing, when we travel to exotic places and want to bring something back, to pay the actual price to support the continuation of quality textile production by skilled artisans? Is it a bad thing when a rug-weaving project in Turkey is so successful that the children of the weavers have attended school and are no longer employed in what is considered menial labor, ensuring the disappearance of this particular rug-weaving tradition? Can we deny anyone their desire to participate in a larger world, demonstrated by how they dress and the work they do?

Coupled with these questions is the current revival of textile arts in the United States. The recent popularity of knitting, crocheting, needlework, and sewing among a younger crowd points to a renaissance of interest in the handmade garment. Personal aesthetic expression that is embedded in the culture and society of the times is a universal human impulse. In twenty-first century North America, the urge to make something flies in the face of the mainstream consumer culture, signaling a renewed understanding of the human connection wrought by the work of the hands—an outward manifestation of the soul.

Collections of dress and textiles, such as those in the Museum of International Folk Art, chronicle the results of cultural and social change by illustrating the solutions people have devised to address their changing circumstances and needs.

The museum has many one-of-a-kind pieces as well as significant groups of items that represent the depth of a textile tradition. The collection includes more than seventy-six embroidered dresses dating from 1840 to 1970 from Palestine. Veils, jackets, hats, and bags as well as more than 150 amulets and pieces of jewelry collected in about 1910 round out this extraordinary collection. We also hold the second-largest group of Swedish textiles from before 1850 in the United States. It's rare to even find quality like this outside of Sweden and a few private collections. Nearly five hundred samplers, with more than forty on permanent display, represent Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Latin America, and other Northern European countries, while only ten come from the United States. Other strong areas for both dress and textiles include Japan, Guatemala, Turkey, Mexico, India, and New Mexico.

The textile collection in the museum now numbers about twenty thousand