

fabric *folios*

textiles from

mexico

Chloë Sayer

CHLOË SAYER

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mexico

THE BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS



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First published in 2002 by The British Museum Press

A division of The British Museum Company Ltd

46 Bloomsbury Street, London WC1B 3QQ

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-7141-2562-8

Commissioning Editor: Suzannah Dick

Designer: Paul Welti

Editor: Caroline Brooke Johnson

Photographer: Mike Rowe

Cartographer: Olive Pearson

Origination in Hong Kong by AGP

Printing and binding in Hong Kong by C & C Offset



COVER: Detail of *huipil*; the Mixtec, San Miguel Metlatonoc, Guerrero. (See pp.62–3)

INSIDE COVER: Detail of Aguascalientes-style *sarape*. (See pp.60–1)

PAGE ONE: Detail of wrap-around skirt, the Nahuatl, Acatlán, Guerrero. (See pp.42–5)

PREVIOUS PAGE: Detail of *huipil*; the Tzotzil Maya, San Andrés Larrainzar, Chiapas.

THESE PAGES: Detail of ikat-dyed *rebozo*; Santa María del Río, San Luis Potosí. (See pp.46–7)

textiles from mexico


Mexican textiles have a vitality that is unsurpassed elsewhere in the Americas. The arts of spinning, dyeing, weaving and embroidery are practised in hundreds of rural communities where indigenous people retain distinctive clothing styles. Their sense of design and colour is dazzling and in many cases native traditions, such as Mayan or Mixtec, are coupled with post-Colonial influences to fabulous effect. Over twenty such pieces from the British Museum's vast collections have been photographed and explored in detail for this book. These range from a nineteenth-century *rebozo*, or shawl, made for a wealthy owner to everyday pieces such as *huipiles* from Oaxaca. Anyone interested in textiles and design alike will find a wealth of inspiration in this book and the detailed photographs should open their eyes to unexpected nuances of pattern-making.

Drawing on her extensive travels in Mexico, Chloë Sayer provides a living context for these varied textiles. Techniques and clothing styles are explained and brief commentaries highlight the key features that make the designs so eye-catching and uniquely Mexican.

With over 100 colour illustrations

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Chloë Sayer has been researching Mexican textile traditions since 1973. She lectures for museums and art colleges, and has made ethnographic collections for The British Museum. Her many books include *Mexican Textiles*, and *Arts and Crafts of Mexico*. In addition, she has organized numerous exhibitions and worked on a number of television documentaries.

Other titles in this series:

Embroidery from India and Pakistan: Sheila Paine

Miao Textiles from China: Gina Corrigan

Printed and Dyed Textiles from Africa: John Gillow

Silk in Africa: Julie Hudson & Chris Spring

Textiles from Guatemala: Ann Hecht

'Lovers of textiles are sure to find a place for these reasonably priced books on their shelves ... turning each page is a surprise and a pleasure.'

Joss Graham, *THE WORLD OF INTERIORS*

'*Fabric Folios* are gorgeous designer sourcebooks exploring the variety of colour and pattern in textiles worldwide. Each book is a treasure trove of design and information.'

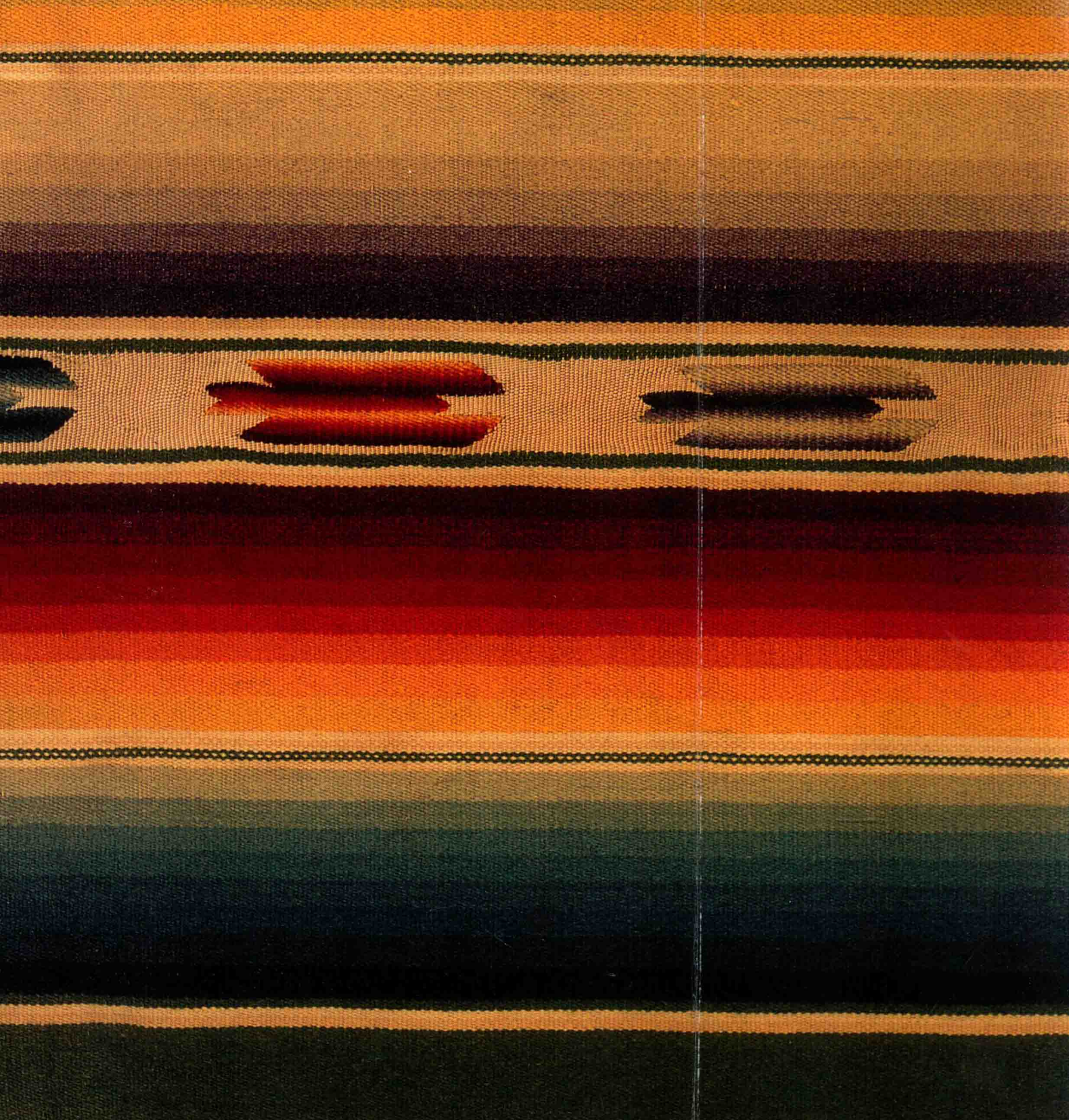
TRAVELLER magazine

The British Museum Press

46 Bloomsbury Street

London WC1B 3QQ

www.britishmuseum.co.uk



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Opposite are details from a selection of textiles

TOP: Embroidered wrap-around skirt; the Nahua, Acatlán, Guerrero.

(See pp. 42–3)

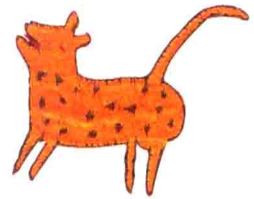
LEFT: Brocaded white cotton bedspread; the Otomí, San Miguel

Ameyalco, State of Mexico. (See pp.26–7)

RIGHT: Densely embroidered *quechquemiltl*; the Huichol, Jalisco. (See pp.50–1)

BELOW: Cloth embroidered with satin stitch; the Otomí, Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo. (See pp.34–5)

introduction



Few countries have such extreme variations of climate and vegetation as Mexico. Landscapes include arid deserts, fertile valleys, tropical lowland forests, deep canyons and high mountain peaks. Bordered by the USA in the north, and by Guatemala and Belize in the south-east, Mexico covers a vast area of almost 2 million square km (760,000 square miles).

These contrasting environmental conditions have influenced the evolution of costume throughout Mexico's long history. Stone carvings, terracotta figurines, murals





and painted manuscripts reflect this evolution, and show that ancient civilizations developed many different clothing styles. Today distinctive costumes are still worn in rural areas where indigenous cultures are strong. It is hard to establish reliable census figures in remote regions, but current estimates put Mexico's indigenous population – divided into fifty-six language groups – at around ten million.

The origins of the Maya go back more than 4,000 years. During their greatest period (AD 300–900), they excelled as architects, sculptors and astronomers. Maya civilization, based on a loose federation of city states, stretched across the Yucatán Peninsula and Chiapas in Mexico; it also took in Belize, Guatemala and parts of Honduras. Like their ancestors, the modern Maya speak many languages. In the highlands of central Chiapas, for example, there are over 133,000 speakers of Tzotzil.

To the west of the Maya zone, important cultures were forged after AD 300 by the Zapotec and the Mixtec. The present-day state of Oaxaca is home not just to their descendants, but to several other groups including the Trique, the Mazatec and the Chinantec. In Oaxaca, as in Chiapas, complex spinning, dyeing and weaving methods are still in use, passed down from generation to generation.

Huichol territory, high in the western Sierra Madre. The Huichol live in one of the most remote and rugged parts of Mexico. During the rainy season, the terrain becomes virtually impassable.

The most widely spoken indigenous languages in central Mexico are Otomí and Náhuatl. Náhuatl was the language of the Aztecs, who settled in the Valley of Mexico in the thirteenth century and built up a mighty empire. Today there are approximately 1,318,000 Nahuas, as speakers of Náhuatl are now termed. They live in a number of states including Puebla, Veracruz, Hidalgo, Guerrero and San Luis Potosí. Natural surroundings provide basic building materials. Most families depend for their survival upon agriculture: the staple diet, as in ancient times, is made up of beans, squash, chilli peppers and maize.

Indigenous groups living in accessible areas have managed to retain many of their own traditions while adapting to Mexico's national culture. Other groups, in remote regions, continue to lead a surprisingly marginal existence. The Huichols survive high in the Sierra Madre, where the states of Jalisco and Nayarit meet. They have proved more resistant to outside pressure than most other groups, and the population now stands at around 50,000.

For the Huichols and for other indigenous peoples, textile skills centre chiefly on the creation of clothing. Contemporary textiles owe much of their richness to Mexico's ancient civilizations, but the European legacy should not be overlooked. After the Spanish Conquest of 1521, settlers introduced new materials, techniques and clothing styles. This fusion, over nearly five centuries, has given

rise in Mexico to a wide range of garments and design motifs. In urban centres, boutiques and department stores provide city-dwellers with mass-produced factory clothing similar to that sold in London, Paris and New York. In outlying areas, however, indigenous people continue to take pride in home-produced clothing that reflects their cultural heritage while combining durability with beauty.

WOMEN'S COSTUME

In many regions, women's costume has changed very little since pre-Conquest times. Elaborately woven or embroidered clothing is worn every day, not just on ceremonial occasions. Wrap-around skirts are still widely used. Some are rectangular, but others are seamed to form a tube. Each morning, when the wearer puts on her skirt, she arranges the cloth in a series of folds or pleats. These are held in place by a waist-sash.

Also of pre-Conquest origin are the *huipil* and the *quechquemiltl*. The *huipil* resembles a sleeveless, rectangular tunic made from one, two or three panels. Short garments may be tucked inside the skirt, but longer ones hang freely. The *quechquemiltl* is best described as a closed shoulder-cape. Construction methods and styles of wearing vary from place to place. In ancient Mexico, the *huipil* and the *quechquemiltl* coexisted in some regions and were occasionally worn together. Now each is found in separate areas.

Several European garments have found favour with indigenous women. These include



skirts on waistbands, aprons and blouses. Many blouses display large areas of embroidery. This is especially true in the Puebla highlands, where blouses are assembled from straight panels of bought cloth by the Nahua and the Otomí (see p.31 and p.38). So popular have blouses become that women in some *huipil*-wearing regions now give these ancient garments sleeve-like trimmings (see p.76).

Heads may be covered in strong sunshine with a specially woven cloth, a second *quechquemill*, or, more rarely, a palm hat.

Tzotzil women in Oxchuc, Chiapas, wearing *huipiles* over indigo-dyed wrap-around skirts. In the foreground are two Tzeltal weavers from Tenejapa; both wear predominantly red *huipiles* patterned with brocade. All belong to a weaving co-operative.

The *rebozo* is a rectangular shawl, which offers protection and can double as a cloth used for carrying a load or a baby. Used in cities as well as rural areas, the *rebozo* evolved during the colonial period to become a national symbol of womanhood. Costly examples were, and still are, woven from ikat-dyed silk thread in Santa María del Río in the state of San Luis Potosí.