

The Textiles of Los Altos de Chiapas: Zinacantán

The textiles of the Altos de Chiapas seduce you from the first moment. Their colors, designs and variety make them irresistible to the visitor who, little by little, falls in love with the culture and the magic that each one of these pieces holds and their incomparable beauty. These garments have both an aesthetic and a historical value. To travel through the Altos de Chiapas is to travel through countless opportunities to find a great diversity of shapes, colors and designs of textiles.

A piece that takes shape over days, weeks and months is without a doubt a display of skill and extraordinary beauty. The magical hands of Tzotzil and Tzeltal women are intertwined with designs and techniques they have learned from their mothers and grandmothers through generations. It is possible to travel back in time and learn about the designs that are currently made in the Altos de Chiapas and that match the steles and lintels of archaeological sites such as Bonampak, Yaxchilan, Tonina and Palenque.

In San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas it is possible to admire the versatility of the textiles of the Altos de Chiapas thanks to four collections, in addition to visiting the galleries and local markets. These collections are:

1. The Pellizzi and Banamex collection located in the Museo de Los Altos de Chiapas. On the second floor of this building is the Center of Textiles of the Maya World.
2. The textile collection at the Jtatik Samuel Museum
3. The collection of Dr. Sergio Castro
4. Na Bolom's collection

Mexican Folk Art

In this article I will speak only of the first collection, found in the former convent of Santo Domingo de Guzmán. In 2012 the museum was reinaugurated, and a unique space was designed on the second floor: the Maya World Textile Center. It houses two collections of textiles: that of the National Bank of Mexico and the Francesco Pellizzi collection with more than 2,500 pieces. The Pellizzi collection is considered one of the best samples of textiles not only from Chiapas but also from Guatemala; visiting it is a great pleasure for the senses. The exhibition is extremely well cared for; its cataloguing makes it the best-preserved exhibition in any region of North and South America. The pieces of the collection are the best existing in each category and the way they are exhibited, besides being didactic, is visually very attractive.

This collection was built with pieces that were acquired from 1973 to 1979. Thanks to the support of the Sna Jolobil cooperative who have worked consistently for over 30 years in the recovery, conservation, and dissemination of the variety of textiles from the Altos de Chiapas with exemplary mastery.

The collection is truly amazing; it took a team effort to carry out the research, recovery of ancestral techniques and the organization of more than 700 weavers. At the entrance to the museum, there is a store that houses pieces for sale from this cooperative. All these pieces are of exquisite quality.

Mexican Folk Art

In the museum there is a unique piece, a wedding dress from Zinacantán. It is made with a white cotton waist loom and has woven chicken feathers. In Tzotzil this piece is known as kúkumal chilil.



This type of ceremonial huipil is very difficult to find. However, I happen to have two friends in Zinacantán, Juana and Antonia, who have a copy that was their mother's. In the tradition of Zinacantán, this piece is inherited by the daughters and granddaughters. Curiously, my friends are single and have firmly decided not to get married and to give up the possibility of wearing the dress they have inherited.

Mexican Folk Art



Feather art on Zinacantán wedding dress

Without a doubt, this is an exemplary piece. Feather art is extraordinary and the chicken feathers have an interesting meaning. My friends tell me that this ceremonial huipil is the symbol of a good marriage. The hen's feathers represent home because even though the hen has feathers, she cannot fly, and just like the married woman she must make her home. In addition, hens are always close to their homes because their food depends on

Mexican Folk Art

humans. The bachelorhood of a woman in a village like Zinacantán is not normal. The custom says that the presence of a man is necessary to face the challenges of daily life. However, Juana and Antonia show that tradition is changing and they are strong and self-sufficient women who are proving that they can excel with their own means.

Zinacantán is a Tzotzil town (meaning land of bats). It is 20 minutes away from the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas and it is a great producer of flowers, such as roses, chrysanthemums and carnations, that are grown in greenhouses and are of extraordinary quality. It is worth visiting Zinacantán during the festivities in honor of its patron saint: San Sebastián. The festivities take place days before January 20th. On that day, the altar is dressed with the best flowers and fruits, while the floor is bathed with sedge flowers, which allow the space to be purified and reinforces the idea that the place is sacred.

Mexican Folk Art



Celebration of Saint Sebastián's Day in Zinacantán

The San Sebastián festival is celebrated in two settings, the public and private. In the public sphere, the celebration takes place in the squares, the church, and the market. The Zinacantecos organize a fair and a horse race. There are several music bands and multicolored decorations with flowers in the church. While in private, each family decorates an altar and dresses their saints with the same type of textile they use for the

Mexican Folk Art

feast day. They also use ribbons of various colors, candles and incense to bless their patron saint.



I like to refer to textiles as texts. It is possible to read the symbols, shapes, and weaves to identify the area of origin as well as other characteristics.

The textiles give us at least three types of information that we can read as text:

1. Recognize the area where it was manufactured, i.e., the place of origin.
2. Identify whether the person using it is single or married.

Mexican Folk Art

3. The social position within the system of political-religious positions.

Walking through the streets of Zinacantán, it is possible to see women wearing colorful clothes. The most important is the skirt, known as a tangle. It is one or two rectangular panels woven on a waist loom and it can vary with either folds or creases, then the girdle is used. In addition to the tangles, there are blouses that have been adapted from the traditional huipil to the feminine garment. It has applied or embroidered adornments in the neckline and the sleeves can be added with ribbons. As a final touch, a cap or shawl is added, while men use a cotón (a kind of vest). Single men regularly use cotones full of flowers, while married men are more discreet. The pompoms with which they adorn their vests tell us if the wearer is married or single. Married men will wear the shorter pompoms and single men will wear them longer.



Group of Men in Zinacantán
Photo: Patrick Trujillo

Mexican Folk Art

Every year the color range of the garments changes; this motivates women to spin and produce new garments. The purpose is to have a new outfit for two important dates: the San Sebastián festival in January and the San Lorenzo festival in August. This dynamic allows for the development of a local economy and the creation and belief in a future that can be sustained by the tradition, love and cultural roots that each Zinacantán woman weaver holds.

These are the garments that are used in Zinacantán and other towns in the Altos de Chiapas.

Name of the piece	Common name
Enredo	This is a folded skirt
Faja	This piece is fundamental. It serves to hold the enredo; it can be made of fabric, cotton knit, wool or silk. It is given several turns to hold the enredo.
Calzonera	Pants used by men.

Mexican Folk Art

Tapado Shawl. This is a rectangular garment made of one single panel that is worn over the shoulders to cover the back and chest. It can have simple laces that end in tassels.

Cotón Male garment, smaller than a sarape and woven by hand or on a loom.

Huipil This is a female dress with a rectangular shape, made of one or three folded panels, sewn together, leaving openings for the arms and head to pass through.



Live this experience on your trip to Chiapas. [Book now.](#)



Mexican Folk Art
by Dr. Marina Aguirre
Available now at BucketlistMexico.com

Click on the eBook
to see the Table of Contents