

Mexican Folk Art

The Rhombuses of San Andrés Larrainzar and Magdalena Aldama: The World in a Diamond

Textiles are faithful examples of the connection between the woman weaver and her environment, the cosmos, the earth, fertility, and the blessings she obtains from it. To understand this close relationship, it is helpful to go into the tradition of San Andrés and Magdalena in the Altos de Chiapas.



Mexican Folk Art

We will comment on three types of textiles with the purpose of highlighting their similarities and the meaning of the symbols that have been transmitted over the years.

The symbolism of the textiles is fascinating; it allows us to unravel the meanings that have been expressed for years and that now are faithful witnesses of a tradition that is innate in the mind and expert hands of the women weavers who have a millennial of inheritance that continues in their delicate huipiles.

In pre-Hispanic times all garments were made of cotton. Wool was introduced with the arrival of the Spanish between 1523 and 1540. Today there are more than 128 different types of garments that are only made out of wool, including tangles (skirts), huipiles (dresses) and jorongos, among others. However, the majority of textiles from the Altos de Chiapas use both fibers; cotton in the warp and wool in the weft or vice versa.

These pieces can be divided into those for everyday use and those for ceremonial use. The latter are related to the festivities that are celebrated around the patron saint in each town of the Altos de Chiapas.

The most important piece that women use is the huipil. It consists of three sections. Its central part is known as “sme', its mother” and symbolically places the woman who carries it in the center of the universe. The sides are called “the arms”. When the three pieces are joined, they represent and describe the universe in which the fertile woman is in the center.

Mexican Folk Art

Around the neck of the huipil are sacred flowers, generally representing bromeliad and sedge (a kind of pine tree). These two flowers are only used to decorate sacred sites: the crosses, the church and the saints. In this way, the flowers that surround the neck of the women's huipiles place them in a sacred space, that is, at the same level as the church and the saints. It is interesting to identify how the design shared by the Tzeltales and Tzotziles with other Mesoamerican groups are rhombuses.

The rhombuses became a main theme in textiles and, in a way, they express different relationships with the universe.

The diamond-shaped rhombus symbolizes the universe, with the noonday sun in the center and four small rhombuses indicating the four cardinal points.

According to iconographic studies on textiles, it is possible to identify three variants of rhombuses in textiles in the Altos de Chiapas.

Mexican Folk Art

The rhombus as a representation of:

1. The four directions of the universe and the sky



The rhombus is the representation of the world with the four cardinal points or the four directions of the universe. Let us remember that, according to the different Mesoamerican traditions, there is the idea that there are four corners of the world that support the sky.

The central fabric symbolizes the square Maya world, with the sun in the center and a small diamond in each corner of the world.

Mexican Folk Art

2. The East-West opposition



In this variant, there are two figures that are replaced by large rhombuses equal to the central rhombus. They represent the two most important cardinal points; the east and the west that symbolize where the sun rises and sets. The upper and lower diamonds are connected to the central sun diamond and this union means the trajectory of the sun from east to west. The lateral weave also symbolizes the translation of the sun.

Mexican Folk Art

3. The model of the world



This model emphasizes the fertility of the soil. The four cardinal points and the center are also immersed, which are the supports or corners, as well as the existence of a great variety of plants around it.

Each huipil has essentially the same shape and distribution of patterns; however, the use of the symbols and how they appear in the embroidery will depend on each weaver. It could be identified as their own signature and identity.

Mexican Folk Art

One can go back in time to identify those elements that allow for a closer dialogue between the past and the present. As seen in a polychrome glass or a Maya stela from Yaxchilán.



Maya polychrome cup

Mexican Folk Art

The diamond has been kept alive for over a thousand years in the collective memory of the Maya.



Lintel No. 24 of Yaxchilán

In this lintel of Yaxchilán, we see Escudo Jaguar 1 and Lady K'abal Xook, his wife, who wears a huipil with the design of the diamond. This lintel is dated to 709 B.C.

Mexican Folk Art

Weavers and spinners are bearers not only of stories but also living memories that open and close the individual, historical and cosmic cycles. They are an invitation to participate in a dialogue full of frames, lines and rhombuses that speak to be discovered and carried with dignity and devotion.

I invite you to be part of this dialogue that seeks to follow the conversation, as well as to put the spotlight on the Tzeltal and Tzotzil women who are heirs to a tradition, rich in meanings and symbols that they carry in their textiles and are part of a world that we share.



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