



EMPOWERING THREADS

TEXTILES OF JOLOM MAYAETIK

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Self-Guided Tour and Supplemental Teaching Materials for K-12 Teachers

Thank you for visiting our exhibition, *Empowering Threads: Textiles of Jolom Mayaetik*. This PDF provides you with a guide to tour students through the exhibition or to use as a teaching guide in the classroom and is comprised of four major parts.

Introduction

A unique and dedicated community of Mayan artisans are weaving brilliantly colored textiles in Los Altos de Chiapas, Mexico. Working on backstrap looms, these weavers are utilizing methods passed down through generations to combine old-world symbolism with new colors and designs. Their most striking textiles are the huipiles woven as ceremonial garments and women's attire. Huipiles are traditional, loose-fitting women's blouses, handwoven by panel and sewn together flat. Mayan huipiles vary in style throughout the culturally distinct regions of Chiapas and distinguish the wearer by their locale. Blouses in the blusa Maya style are modern adaptations, with traditional symbols rendered in bright colors never envisioned by their makers' ancestors.

Many symbols and patterns woven into the textiles of Los Altos adapt designs from ancient Mayan civilizations. The universe design is a diamond-shaped motif that illustrates the edges of the Mayan cosmos by each of its four sides. The sapo, or toad, is a symbol of fertility that

springs to life at the start of each rainy season, when singing toads proliferate in cornfields and call for another bountiful harvest. Mayan symbolism may change with each weaver and their interpretation of designs. Meanings of certain older symbols are lost to the ages, with others altered by time and their respective places and cultures. Today, a multitude of contemporary designs are being created by the weavers of Chiapas as personal expressions of their skill and craft.

Traditional Mayan weaving is produced on the backstrap loom, a simple and portable device used for centuries that creates complex work in the hands of a skilled artisan. Textiles may be decorated with intricate brocade, a technique that introduces designs directly into the weaving process using colored thread. In the past, weavers made woven items for themselves, for family members, and to trade. Now they are also produced for sale, and backstrap weaving has become a primary means for indigenous women to earn supplementary income. With recessions,

Introduction continued

globalization, and privatization of communal farming lands, weaving is increasingly crucial for many families in Chiapas.

The best prices for handwoven textiles are realized through cooperatives. Jolom Mayaetik, which translates to “Women Who Weave” from Mayan Tzotzil, was founded in 1996 and is one of the most progressive weaving cooperatives in Chiapas. The organization promotes sustainable economic development for indigenous women, in a democratic structure run collectively by

general assemblies and a popular vote. Unlike more traditional cooperatives in Mexico, the weavers of Jolom Mayaetik are also advancing human rights through educational programs, cultural empowerment, and political mobilization. Committed to improving the lives of indigenous women, members of the Jolom Mayaetik are weaving with a powerful, collective voice. This exhibition features textiles woven by Jolom Mayaetik artisans from the municipalities of San Andrés Larráinzar, Pantelhó, and Oxchuc.

Maria Gómez López and her mother Margarita López Gómez on backstrap looms, Oxchuc 2016
Courtesy of Jolom Mayaetik SCS
R2017.0302.023



Muestrario Weaving

Weavers keep sample textiles known as *muestras* as a reference to symbols and designs. *Muestras* vary in size and shape and may be passed down through generations. More extensive *muestrario* textiles are sometimes woven to document an entire range of design. Magdalena López López, a master artisan from the village of Bayalemó in San Andrés Larráinzar, has woven a series of long and exquisite *muestrario* textiles. The first was completed in 2000 with her sister, María López López, following inspirational dreams by both women. Titled *Sueño del Manto de la Virgen*, it contained many of the traditional symbols and new designs Magdalena and María López were

capable of creating. The *muestrario* on display in this exhibit was woven and embroidered as an updated, visual catalog by Magdalena López López from 2014–16. This larger tapestry contains more than 134 bands of pattern, from newly envisioned symbols to contemporary designs and ancient Mayan symbols from antiquity.

Muestrario Extragrande 2014–16
Magdalena López López
Bayalemó, San Andrés Larráinzar
woven, brocaded, and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of K'inál Antsetik A.C.
L2017.0302.010



Backstrap Loom Weaving

Women from Chiapas have woven on backstrap looms for centuries. The backstrap loom is a simple device capable of producing exquisite textiles in the hands of a skilled weaver. These portable looms are easily installed in the home, either outside or indoors, allowing the weaver to tend to other duties and relocate when needed. With one end anchored to a tree or post and the other connected by a backstrap around the weaver's waist, long warp threads are suspended between two wooden end-posts and a series of

rods. Weft thread is woven horizontally between the long warp threads, with alternating, multi-colored thread added when weaving designs in brocade. Leaning forward or backward controls tension of the loom, and a wooden sword sets each line of weaving.

Backstrap loom c. 2000
Magdalena López López
Bayalemó, San Andrés Larráinzar
ocote pine, nispero wood, dogwood, cotton thread, belt webbing, plastic rope
Courtesy of Jolom Mayaetik SC5
L2017.0302.002



San Andrés Larráinzar

Located north of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Los Altos de Chiapas, San Andrés Larráinzar is home to a vibrant community of weavers. For centuries, Tzotzil-speaking women in San Andrés have woven huipiles on backstrap looms in a similar manner to their ancestors of the Classic Maya Period (300–900CE). The art of Mayan backstrap weaving and its associated symbols and designs are traditionally passed down through generations of women in Chiapas. This transfer of knowledge does not always occur from mother to daughter. Some artisans, including Magdalena López López,

learned their craft from grandmothers and other women in their community. Like many weavers, she keeps small *muestra* weaving samples to reference designs and symbols.

Ceremonial huipil [traditional blouse] c. 2005
Magdalena López López
Bayalemó, San Andrés Larráinzar
woven, brocaded, and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.029



Ceremonial Huipiles

Ceremonial huipiles are among the most elaborate Mayan textiles. The finest garments are woven for the saints of fiestas and include extensive brocade and embroidery. Ceremonial textile weaving often fulfills sociocultural roles performed outside of the household known as cargos. These important roles include positions as shamans, midwives, leaders of cooperatives or fiestas, and weavers of sacred garments. Ceremonial weaving is a major undertaking, requiring months of dedicated work and financial resources that are rarely available. In addition to the thread and materials needed, expenses are incurred on the journey from the

weaver's village to the church if there is a formal procession. Religious festivities are financed by the weaver's family, with food, beverage, incense, and fireworks purchased as necessary to properly offer a saint their new garment. Ceremonial textiles are also made to wear on special occasions, represented by this ceremonial huipil from the town of Magdalenas in Aldama, north of San Andrés.

Ceremonial huipil [traditional blouse] c. 2010
maker unidentified
Magdalenas, Aldama
woven, brocaded, and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.023



Oxchuc

Oxchuc is both a city and larger municipality, located to the east of San Andrés in Los Altos de Chiapas. The indigenous Mayan citizens of Oxchuc speak Tzeltal, a close linguistic cousin to the Mayan dialect spoken by their Tzotzil neighbors. Artisans from San Andrés and Oxchuc also share a rich history in textile weaving on the backstrap loom. Traditional women's huipiles from Oxchuc feature alternating red or purple and white woven stripes with multicolored rays embroidered around the neckline and blocks of contrasting color below. Contemporary huipil design in Oxchuc includes more complex

embroidery, with additional detail added to vertical woven stripes and around the sleeves. More experimental, modern *blusas* substitute traditional, white backgrounds for base colors in bright reds and purple hues.

Huipil [traditional blouse] c. 2008
Petrona Sántiz Gómez
Yochib, Oxchuc
woven and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.018



Empowerment

Autonomous craft organizations provide artisans with a market for their goods and offer strength in numbers to their collective membership. In Chiapas, the more progressive weaving cooperatives also promote solidarity by creating a space for members of different communities to socialize and discuss current problems and issues. In 1996, the founding members of Jolom Mayaetik fought to form their new cooperative for pressing reasons, including declining wages, rising costs of living, and mismanagement of government-run cooperatives they previously worked for.

Frustrated with exclusion from local government and marginal political representation outside of their communities, Jolom weavers also sought sociopolitical empowerment. Today, Jolom Mayaetik holds educational courses, lobbies for political inclusion, and lectures locally and internationally to promote the rights of women and indigenous people in Mexico.

Blusa [blouse] 2013
María Sántiz Gómez
Yochib, Oxchuc
woven and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.021



Los Altos Women's Attire

Traditional Mayan women's attire worn throughout Los Altos de Chiapas includes a decorated, flat-sewn blouse and a long skirt cinched with a sash, often made by the wearer or another local weaver. Styles of dress and decoration vary by community and identify the unique and culturally distinct populations of Los Altos. In the eastern highlands, Tzeltal-speaking women of Oxchuc wear handwoven blouses with wide, alternating stripes, and embroidered ray designs around the neck. Tzotzil women in northern Pantelhó are identified by blouses of narrow, intricately woven stripes

accentuated with columns of embroidered or woven symbols. To the west, San Andrés women wear blouses with extensive decoration at the neck and sleeves. Their traditional huipiles feature designs in brocade and embroidery on a white, woven background, while the more recent *blusa* Maya style exhibits bold, bright colors made possible by modern thread.

Blusa Maya [contemporary blouse] 2013
María Hernández Ruiz
Bayalemó, San Andrés Larráinzar
woven, brocaded, and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.007



“In the past the weaving process was very arduous. My grandmother told me that they used cotton; they didn’t buy yarn as we do now; they had to prepare everything. I don’t know where they got it; only that they had a place where they prepared the cotton and then they wove the blouses and the men’s clothing. We no longer have to do all that. Now we buy the thread in the stores; it is ready to use and we only have to make balls and can weave it quickly. We cannot compare the work of our grand-mothers with the work we do today. Life has changed, but I don’t know if it has improved or worsened.”

—Magdalena López López
Weaver, Jolom Mayaetik
Weaving Chiapas: Maya Women’s Lives in a Changing World

Blusa Maya [contemporary blouse] 2010
Magdalena López López
Bayalemó, San Andrés Larráinzar
woven, brocaded, and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.005



Early Maya of Chiapas

Mayan people have inhabited the region that is now southern Mexico for more than 2,000 years. Initially sedentary agricultural farmers, they evolved into a complex civilization linked to their neighbors in modern-day Guatemala and Honduras. Much of the early Mayan history of Chiapas is shrouded by mystery and time. Expansive urban growth characterized the Pre-Classic Era (100 BCE–200 CE), when a perfected calendar and hieroglyphic writing were introduced. The Classic Era (300–900 CE) was organized by independent states and kingdoms ruled without a political center. Murals and

stone carvings in temples constructed at Palenque and Bonampak from 600–800 CE illustrate the Maya of Chiapas as a powerful group driven by war, ritual, and mythology. When the Spanish arrived in 1522, these great Mayan cities had been abandoned for centuries, replaced by thousands of small villages and towns inhabited by subsistence farmers of communal lands.

Tapete [tapestry] 2015
Magdalena Díaz López
Bayalemó, San Andrés Larráinzar
woven, brocaded, and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.081



The Universe and the *Sapo*

The universe is central to Mayan mythology and often appears symbolically in traditional weaving. Illustrated by a diamond motif sometimes referred to as the “Grand Design,” its four sides represent the boundaries of space and time. Smaller diamonds at the points of the symbol mark cardinal directions, with curl motifs that extend from the central diamond to recreate movement of the sun across the sky. Implemented in rows, the universe design shows the continuation of time through its repetition. The toad, or *sapo*, is another important and commonly interpreted symbol

in Mayan weaving. Its design has roots in the ancient architecture of Bonampak, where it decorates the huipiles of queen K’ab’al Xook. The *sapo* symbolizes fertility and life in Mayan culture and comes to life at the start of each rainy season, when fields planted with new crops are filled with toads mating and singing in the rain, calling for another successful harvest.

Tapete [tapestry] 2010
María López Gómez
Oventic Grande, San Andrés Larráinzar
woven, brocaded, and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.080



Pantelhó

On the northern edge of Los Altos is the municipality of Pantelhó. Like much of the highlands, it is an agrarian region of communal ejido farms and private ranches that produce coffee, corn, and cattle. With cities and villages situated in the valleys of tropical, mountainous terrain, Pantelhó is also home to communities of Tzotzil-speaking Mayan artisans who weave distinctive, backstrap-loomed textiles. Their traditional huipil design features narrow, alternating stripes of red and white, decorated by multicolored bands of embroidery around the neckline and embroidered chevrons at the

sleeves. Toads, stars, and other symbols are either woven or embroidered onto the stripes in vertical columns. Weavers of contemporary Pantelhó *blusas* incorporate vibrant pinks, greens, purples, and other colors made possible by modern threads, creating some of the most distinctive textiles in Chiapas.

Girls' blusa [blouse] 2008
Martha Pérez Gómez
Santa Cruz, Pantelhó
woven and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.016



“To be an artisan, to be a weaver signifies tradition, the culture. We wear our dress. I never have taken it off....In many municipalities, they no longer wear their dress or know how it was. If it is lost, the tradition is not known anymore... It is very important to learn to weave because it signifies not losing our culture. Because if we do not do our weaving, the culture is lost.”

—Celia Sántiz Ruíz
Past President, Jolom Mayaetik

Blusa [blouse] 2015
Martha Gómez López
Los Naranjos, Pantelhó
woven and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of Charlene M. Woodcock
L2017.0301.024



Discussion Questions

1. Where is Chiapas located?
2. What is a *muestrario* weaving and why is it important?
3. What is a *huipil*? Identify an example from San Andrés, Oxchuc, and Pantelhó.
4. Why do women in Chiapas weave textiles?

Suggested Reading

K'inál Antsetik AC, Yolanda Castro Apreza, and Charlene M. Woodcock, eds. *Weaving Chiapas: Maya Women's Lives in a Changing World*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017.

Check www.flysfo.com/museum/programs/education-programs for future programs.

1. Magdalena López López, Bayalemó c. 2016
Courtesy of Jolom Mayaetik SCS
R2017.0302.016



2. Detail of Magdalena López López weaving on a backstrap loom, Bayalemó 2016
Courtesy of Jolom Mayaetik SCS
R2017.0302.017



3. *Muestrario* Extragrande 2014–16
Magdalena López López
Bayalemó, San Andrés Larráinzar
woven, brocaded, and embroidered cotton
Courtesy of K'inál Antsetik A.C.
L2017.0302.010



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