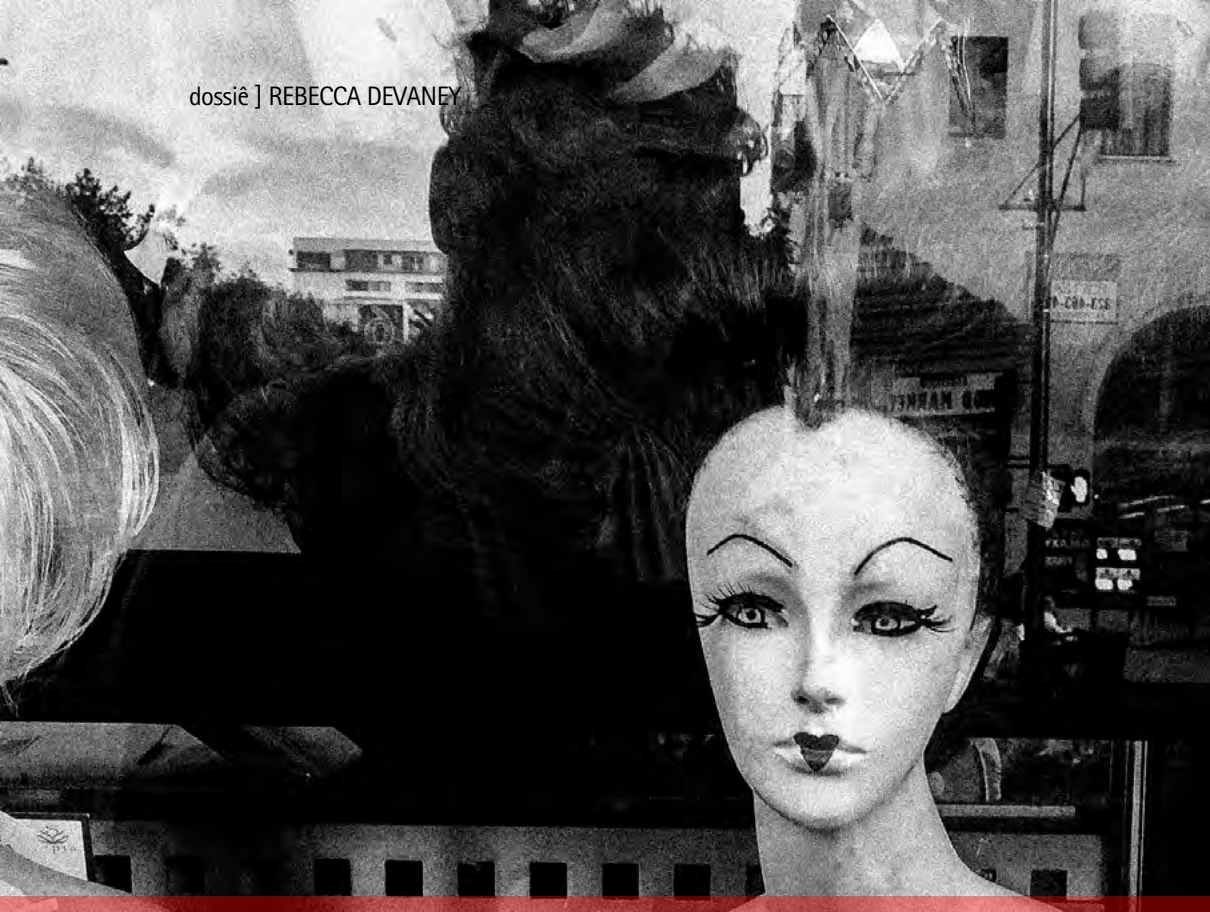

A Stitch in Time: Embroidered Textiles from Mexico

Um ponto no tempo: tecidos bordados do México

dObra[s] VOLUME 11 | NÚMERO 23 | MAIO 2018
https://dobras.emnuvens.com.br/dobras | e-ISSN 2358-0003

[REBECCA DEVANEY]
Pesquisadora, artista e facilitadora.
E-mail: rebecca.devaney@gmail.com

[abstract] This paper will describe the methodology of a research project undertaken to investigate the craft techniques, aesthetic styles and cultural significance of embroidered textiles in Mexico. It will outline the research proposal, preliminary research, the development of a framework for field research, the process of planning the itinerary, the criteria for purchasing the textiles, contextual research and the research journey. The dissemination of the research through public exhibition will be presented in conclusion.

[keywords]
embroidery; tradition; craft; exhibition; Mexico.

[resumo] Este artigo descreve a metodologia de um projeto de pesquisa que teve o objetivo de investigar técnicas, estilos e significado cultural dos bordados no México. Destaca-se a proposta da pesquisa, a pesquisa preliminar, o recorte da pesquisa, o processo de planejamento do itinerário, o critério para a compra dos tecidos, a pesquisa contextual e a jornada da pesquisa. A apresentação da pesquisa através de sua exibição pública é apresentada na conclusão.

[palavras-chave] bordado; tradição; artesanato; exibição; México.

Research Proposal and Preliminary Stages of Research

The theoretical framework for this project was developed during research into the use of embroidered costume to express cultural identity and fictional or personal narrative while studying a Master of Fine Art in Textile Art and Artefact at the National College of Art and Design, Ireland. The objective of this project was to assess the feasibility of undertaking a research trip to investigate the craft techniques, aesthetic styles and cultural significance of hand embroidered textiles in Mexico and exhibiting the findings in Ireland on return. Key centres of production were initially identified as Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo, Juchitán, Oaxaca and Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. The proposal outlined the intention to devise a framework for the dissemination of research findings through public exhibition of written, photographic and textile documentary material. The action research would mainly consist of informal interviews and conversations with craftspeople, textile scholars and ethnographers. This qualitative research was to be underpinned by study visits to relevant museums and universities to provide an academic, historical and sociological context. Funding was generously awarded by the *Thomas Dammann Junior Memorial Trust* and the research trip (Figure 1) was conducted over a relatively short five weeks period from the 1st of July to the 4th of August 2015. Over the course of the journey a general overview was gained into the current practices in hand embroidery amongst the communities that were visited and it was possible to present this in the ensuing exhibitions. Whilst the research is stimulating in the overview it provides, it indicates a wealth of investigative possibilities that would be interesting, and in some cases where the traditional practices are in danger, critical to document further.

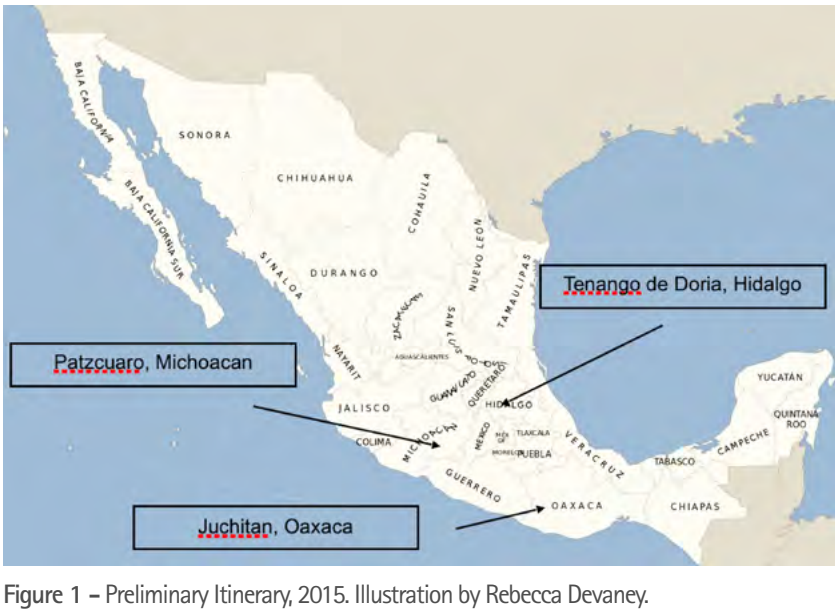

Figure 1 – Preliminary Itinerary, 2015. Illustration by Rebecca Devaney.

The idea for the project had emerged as a result of an evening spent sitting amongst three generations of a Mexican family. Under the watchful eye of their grandmother, work continued late into the night to complete the embroidery for a gala costume. Stories of romance, adventure and sorrow were shared by the women of the family and it was a glimpse of the intimacies that are often revealed by women when they embroider. This had been observed previously from the aspect of an embroidery teacher in Ireland (Figure 2) as students consistently share their personal stories, experiences and thoughts whilst engaged in the action of embroidery. It was hoped that the research project would provide the opportunity to document the private as well as public narratives that are expressed by the craftspeople who create traditional embroidered costumes in Mexico.

Figure 2 – Rebecca Devaney teaching at an embroidery workshop, Textile Workshop Dublin, 2010. **Source:** Rebecca Devaney personal archive.

The preliminary research involved finding examples of similar research projects, establishing contact with Mexican textile scholars and institutions as well as identifying the necessity for any safety precautions prior to departure. *Costumes of Mexico* (SAYER, 1985), *Embroidered Textiles: A World Guide to Traditional Patterns* (PAINE, 1990) and *Mexican Textiles* (FREUND, 2009) were consulted as references of research with similar objectives and facilitated the tentative outline for the approach to the field methodology that involved travel to communities and informal interviews to document the style, techniques and cultural significance of embroidered textiles. Robert Freund, the author of the latter and an independent textile researcher who has undertaken extensive

research and documentation of indigenous costume throughout Mexico over a fifteen years period was consulted in regards to the validity of the proposed itinerary in providing an overview of the diverse styles of embroidered costume in Mexico. Freund (2009) kindly suggested further areas that may be included in the itinerary but advised that given the time constraints the areas indicated would suffice to provide an overview of the variety of embroidered textiles currently produced in Mexico today.

The importance of establishing contact with a Mexican textile scholar was crucial to the preliminary research. At the textile symposium *Make 2: Remaking Tradition* hosted by the Crawford College of Art and Design and the Cork Institute of Technology (Ireland, 2015), the keynote address *The Role of the Traditional in the Crossings of Contemporary Art Practice* was presented by Yosi Anaya, researcher and teacher at the Instituto de Artes Plásticas at the Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, Mexico. Anaya kindly offered an invitation to use the library of the research institute at the Instituto de Artes Plásticas to finalise the itinerary and she strongly recommended that the trip be extended from two to five weeks if funding was awarded. There are several institutions dedicated to the restoration, conservation, collection and exhibition of textiles in Mexico. Contact was established with Señor Hector Manuel Meneses Lozario, director of the Museo Textil de Oaxaca which has an extensive programme dedicated to textiles from Oaxaca and beyond. Lozario kindly sent the programme for the summer of 2015, and strongly recommended that a visit to the Centro de Textiles del Mundo Maya, Chiapas, be incorporated in to the itinerary if possible.

The Mexican Ambassador to Ireland, His Excellency Carlos García de Alba kindly reviewed the itinerary in regards to safety and ease of travel. On his recommendation the Irish Ambassador to Mexico, Her Excellency Sylvia Hyland was informed of the dates and itinerary.

The research trip began at the Instituto de Arts Plásticas at the Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, Mexico where access was given to the library of the research institute as well as to the private library and textile collection of Yosi Anaya. At this stage the trip had been extended to five weeks and following the advice of Anaya, the itinerary was expanded to include Veracruz, Puebla and Chiapas. Practical factors such as time, distance and budget were the inevitable considerations in planning the itinerary and the advice of Anaya in this regard was invaluable due to her experience in conducting similar research projects.

In order to make logistical travel plans the advice of Maestro René García Hernández (Figure 3), the General Director of the Galería de Arte Popular de la Secretaría de Turismo de Veracruz was most helpful. Hernández is a specialist in the ethnographic study of textiles and costumes amongst the indigenous communities of Veracruz and has carried out extensive field research in documenting their textile heritage and traditions. Hernández emphasised that it was crucial to consider the remote location, inaccessibility and ex-

treme weather conditions of some of the centres of production and where possible to visit government funded centralised craft centres in towns and villages, rather than risking travel complications. He explained that in Mexico indigenous peoples are classified as those whose culture and language were in existence prior to the arrival of the Europeans in the 16th century. Today indigenous groups are identified by their linguistic family and the most numerous include the following; Nahua, Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, Otomí, Totonac, Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Mazahua, Huastec, Ch'ol, Chinantec, Purépecha, Mixe, Tlapanec and Tarahumara. Within these linguistic families there are numerous dialects and there are many more linguistic groups throughout the country. During a tour of the Galería de Arte Popular, Xalapa, Hernández was able to visually identify not only the indigenous group and geographical region, but also the village that each embroidered or woven textile was produced in from their idiosyncratic use of colour and motifs. He recommended a study visit to the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City to gain a visual understanding of the geographical location of the indigenous groups and their diverse aesthetic styles of embroidery in order to finalise the itinerary for the research trip.

Figure 3 – Maestro René García Hernandéz, Galería de Arte Popular, Xalapa, Veracruz, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

It was understood that the field research would be dependent on certain levels of chance as there were few opportunities to contact the craftspeople in advance to arrange interviews. Given the short timeframe of the journey, interviews would only be possible with the willingness of the craftspeople to participate in the project with very little notice. The feasibility of this methodology of field research was tested at this stage with two trips which are outlined below.

Nicolás Xochihua Gonzalez, El Tajín, Veracruz

Figure 4 – Veracruz, Mexico. Illustration by Rebecca Devaney.

The first trip was to the *El Centro de las Artes Indígenas de Papantla* which was established to preserve the traditions of the Totonac culture in the state of Veracruz (Figure 4) in 2007. The centre is recognised by UNESCO on their list of Intangible Cultural Heritage and includes sixteen *Casas Escuelas* where Totonac elders share their cultural knowledge and traditions with younger generations. The *Casa del Mundo del Algodón* is dedicated to teaching cotton cultivation, spinning, weaving, embroidery and natural dying techniques. Public transport was taken from Xalapa to Poza Rica and then on to Papantla along the Costa Esmeralda. A *colectivo* was taken to the UNESCO World Heritage site El Tajín to see the performance of the *Danza de los Voladores* (Figure 5) which is a Pre-Hispanic ceremony performed by Totonac men to appease the rain god Xipe Tótec. As part of their vocational training the performers must embroider their own costumes in the traditional Totonac style and this is one the reasons that the men of Papantla are renowned for their embroidery skills.

Figure 5 – *Danza de los Voladores* showing performers in their hand-embroidered costumes, El Tajín, Veracruz, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

From El Tajín a taxi was taken to the Parque Takilhsukut where the centre is located but, unfortunately, the Casa del Mundo del Algodón was closed due to preparations for an event. When the research project was explained to the staff at the centre they kindly arranged for a visit to the house of one of the teachers Señor Nicolás Xochihua Gonzalez (Figure 6). An interview was conducted with Gonzalez at his home and afterwards two embroidered textiles representing the Totonac style were purchased.

At the age of seven Gonzalez was sent into the jungle by his mother to find a rare yellow spider web. According to Totonac beliefs, if the cobweb was spun and worn as a bracelet it would make him successful and talented at whatever he endeavoured to do. Gonzalez chose embroidery and today he is considered a master of his craft.

Figure 6 – Señor Nicolás Xochihua Gonzalez and his mother, El Tajín, Veracruz, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Gonzalez described how the Totonac style of embroidery is infused with meaning from their cosmovision. The flowers and foliage rendered in the embroidered textiles reference visual depictions of *The Tree of Life* which is represented by the Ceiba tree in Mexico. The embroidered textiles are created using mainly *Punta Relleno* and *Pato de Gallo* stitches. The traditional *huipiles* are rendered in monochrome blues, reds or yellows and have been worn by Totonac women since Pre-Hispanic times. The *blusas* that were introduced to the indigenous traditional costume by the European colonisers also feature flowers and foliage from *The Tree of Life*. They are rendered in vibrant and cheerful colour schemes using mercerised and synthetically dyed cotton embroidery floss (Figure 7). The sleeves are adorned with colourful bands of ribbon and small pleating details. The *huipiles* and *blusas* reserved for family members are embroidered with yarns harvested from the cotton

plants cultivated in their garden and dyed with natural plant and insect dyes (Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11).

Figure 7 – Cotton embroidery floss cultivated and hand dyed using natural dyes by members of the Gonzalez family, El Tajín, Veracruz, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Gonzalez was passionate about his work at the Casa del Mundo del Algodón, where the elders and students meet to discuss the mythical and historical importance of cotton. This rich dialogue forms the backbone that sustains and nourishes the creative work. The workshops are held on Saturdays so that the young girls can go to school during the week in their nearby villages. There are ten teachers and approximately twenty to twenty-five students. When the students graduate they often continue as teachers in their own communities. The oral transmission of heritage using a system of informal education ensures the craft and tradition are preserved and continued amongst the community.

Figure 8 – Traditional Totonac huipil, Nicolás Xochihua Gonzalez, El Tajín, Veracruz, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Figure 9 – Detail of Traditional Totonac monochrome huipil with floral and foliage motifs from The Tree of Life. Needlework in Punta Relleno using synthetically dyed mercerised cotton on manta fabric, Nicolás Xochihua Gonzalez, El Tajín, Veracruz, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Figure 10 – Traditional Totonac blusa, Nicolás Xochihua Gonzalez, El Tajín, Veracruz, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Figure 11 – Detail of Traditional Totonac blusa with floral and foliage motifs from The Tree of Life. Needlework including Punta Relleno using synthetically dyed mercerised cotton, Nicolás Xochihua Gonzalez, El Tajín, Veracruz, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Señor Vicente Ezequiel José, San Nicolás, Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo

Figure 12 – Hidalgo, Mexico. Illustration by Rebecca Devaney.

The second trip was to Tenango de Doria in Hidalgo (Figure 12), a centre for a style of embroidery created by the Otomí indigenous group. Public transport was taken from Xalapa, Veracruz to Tulancingo, Hidalgo across the Sierra Madre Oriental. As the regular bus was full it was necessary to take a slower connection and overnight in Tulancingo. The following morning public transport was taken to Tenango de Doria (Figure 13) and when no commercial centres were found in the town, a visit to the local government office revealed that the embroidered textiles are only sold once a week on market day. The re-

search project was explained again and a helpful member of staff arranged for transport to a nearby village via *colectivo* to visit the house of Señor Vicente Ezequiel José. An interview was conducted with José in his home and an embroidered textile representative of the Otomí style of decoration was purchased.

Figure 13 – San Nicolás with the Cueva de las Pinturas in the background, Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

High above the clouds in the Sierras of Hidalgo a style of embroidery began in the Otomí village of San Nicolás in the 1960s when Doña Otilia Cruz was inspired by the zoomorphic motifs found in ancient cave paintings nearby. It is famed for its depiction of strange and fantastical animals that seem to dance or float in surreal compositions, surrounded by flowers and foliage. The original colour schemes were black and red and today they are monochrome, rainbow stripes or blocks of cheerful colour. They are rendered in *Punta Relleno* or *Pato de Gallo* stitches that are so neat the reverse of the embroideries is almost as beautiful as the front.

Figure 14 – Señor Vicente Ezequiel José, San Nicolás, Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

José asked Doña Otilia to teach him and so she took him to the nearby caves to see the paintings that inspired her. Whilst the original meaning of the zoomorphic motifs (Figure 14) was a mystery to them, they thought that they were perhaps an expression of the nature, beauty and cosmovision that their ancestors wished to record. José worked hard to perfect the techniques she showed him and his creative flair became famous. At the time the municipality of Tenango de Doria was experiencing an economic downturn and increased levels of emmigration. According to José, the employment generated by the commercial success of the embroidered textiles has regenerated the municipality in recent years. It is organised into a system whereby there are several people who design the patterns for the embroidered textiles and then distribute them to women in the community who complete the needlework in their homes. The embroidered textiles are created for interior products such as cushions, bedspreads and table-runners rather than costume (Figure 15).

Figure 15 – Detail of embroidered table runner with *Pato de Gallo* stitch in mercerised cotton, Vicente Ezequiel José, Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

José opened a little orange box to unfold a beautiful hot pink silk scarf with a parade of vibrant animal and foliage motifs, and in the centre was the famous Hermes logo (Figure 16). He proudly recounted how the Hermes design team had travelled all the way from France to find him with the help of the Museo de Arte Popular in Mexico City. They commissioned a series of designs for a limited edition of scarves called Din Tini yä Zuë which means 'man's encounter with nature' in the Otomí language. José emphasised that while the collaboration brought a certain amount of acclaim for his creative talents, what is of crucial importance to him is how his embroidered textiles have become a source of employment and regeneration amongst his community.

Figure 16 – Vicente Ezequiel José showing the Hermes scarf *Din Tini yä Zuë* featuring his designs, Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

The feasibility of conducting field research in this manner had been established as both viable and effective following these two trips. The fruitfulness of the research highlighted themes such as; the oral transmission of the craft of embroidery, embroidery as a traditional and intergenerational practice, initiatives to renew, preserve and develop the craft, the impact of colonisation on traditional costume, the cultural significance of symbols and motifs, communities that have organised the craft of embroidery to provide a means of subsistence and employment, the appropriation of indigenous costume by the fashion industry. These themes and several others were manifest throughout the journey and it was apparent that the research could be framed in various contexts such as sociological, historical, anthropological, gender studies, or material culture. Of most interest and value however, was the documentation of the narratives of both craftspeople. These provided an understanding and subsequent appreciation of the embroidered textiles from a personal and intimate perspective. The intention at this stage was to gather research that could be disseminated in a manner that would create a connection between the craftsperson, their embroidered textile and the audience member by exhibiting their narratives alongside their work.

Contextual Research

Given the qualitative nature of the field research and its focus, it was important to incorporate quantitate research to provide contextual information. Study visits were conducted throughout the research journey to identify areas of interest, inform the itinerary and to provide contextual understanding of the field research. As well as the Museo Nacional de Antropología, visits were conducted to the Museo Franz Mayer, Museo de Arte Popular and Museo Nacional de Historia in Mexico City, the Galería de Arte Popular in Veracruz, Museo Textil de Oaxaca in Oaxaca, Centro de Textiles Mundo Maya in Chiapas and Museo de Arte Popular Poblano in Puebla.

Figure 17 – Pueblos Indios De Hoy, Miguel Covarrubias, Mural Mapa de Mesoamérica, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, 2015.

The Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City is arranged over two floors with Pre-Hispanic anthropological displays in the ground floor halls and ethnographic displays of contemporary indigenous groups in the first floor halls. The study visit focused on the first floor where the exhibition begins with *Pueblos Indios de Hoy* (Figure 17), providing a comprehensive overview of the history, customs, cosmovisions and contemporary lifestyle of the current indigenous groups in Mexico. The outstanding displays continue across another ten halls and are organised by geographical area including Gran Nayar, Puréecherio, Otopame, Sierra de Puebla, Oaxaca, Pueblos Mayas de la Planicie y las Selvas, Pueblos Mayas de las Montañas, El Noroeste, Los Nahuas. As traditional indigenous costume is used by anthropologists and ethnographers as a means of identifying the cultural, social and ethnic origins of the indigenous people there was a hall dedicated to textiles.

Whilst the diversity of traditional costume in Mexico is astounding, women's dress generally consists of a *blusa* (blouse) or *huipil* (a loose, sleeveless tunic), a *quechquémitl* (a unique garment made of two rectangles of cloth that are joined in such a way that a distinctive triangle is formed front and back) or a *rebozo* (a shawl) and a *falda* (skirt). In Pre-Hispanic times these garments were traditionally made of hand-woven fabrics using natural fibres such as maguey, agave and cotton. The Europeans introduced sheep and silk-worms adding wool and silk to the available materials. Natural dyes came from bark, plants, flowers, seeds, insects and molluscs. The colours often express important meanings as blue and green signify fertility, abundance, life and water; yellow signifies the movements of the universe, corn and the death of vegetation; and red signified blood and life.

Figure 18 – Centro de Textiles Mundo Maya, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Textile crafts had significant cultural importance amongst the Pre-Hispanic people and spinning and weaving were integral parts of daily life for women. Baby girls were presented with the utensils for these crafts at three

to four months, they began learning the techniques at four years of age and the utensils were buried with women to take to the after-life. In the indigenous cosmovision textiles and the women who created them, were protected by goddesses.

The Aztecs revered Xochiquétzal, who was said to be the first to spin and weave thread on a backstrap loom and she was worshipped by women. The Mayas believed that the Moon Goddess Ixchel was the patron of spinning and her daughter, Ichebelyax was the patroness of embroidery (Figure 18). The study visit to the Museo Nacional de Antropología was invaluable as it facilitated a visual understanding of the geographical location of the indigenous groups and their diverse aesthetic styles of embroidery. This made it possible to devise an itinerary that was intended to enable the curation of a collection of embroidered textiles that were selected to represent the stylistic diversity amongst indigenous groups in regards to design, motifs, use of colour, needlework and fabrics.

The Museo Franz Mayer holds an extensive collection of decorative arts as well as temporary exhibitions such as the El rebozo. Made in Mexico exhibition (Museo Franz Mayer, Mexico City, 2015). The influence of European colonisation on the styles, techniques and materials used in the production of decorative arts, including embroidered textiles, was evident in the displays at the museum. The circulation and dissemination of European fashions to the New World was showcased at the Hilos de Historia exhibition which showcased fashion and accessories from the 18th to the 20th century (Museo Nacional de Historia, Mexico City, 2015). European influence was explored further at In Octacatl, in Machiyotl: Dechados de Virtud y Entereza (Museo Textil de Oaxaca, 2015), an exhibition of embroidery samplers that highlighted the juxtaposition of Pre-Hispanic culture and European techniques on the development of embroidery in Mexico in the 18th century (Figure 19). Spanish styles and techniques of embroidery were introduced in the convent schools established by the missionaries and these were already infused with Egyptian, Persian, Slavic and Oriental influences.

Figure 19 – Detail of 18th century embroidery sampler, *In Octacatl, in Machiuyotl: Dechados de Virtud y Entereza* Museo Textile de Oaxaca, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

The Bishop Vasco de Quiroga arrived in New Spain in the 16th century and was so inspired by Thomas More's Utopia (1516), he organised a system of training amongst the indigenous Purépecha artisans whereby each village specialised in an area of craft production. According to Señor Juan Ceja Juarez, the resident textile scholar at the Casa de las Artesanías, Morelia, Michoacán, this system is still in effect today and is one of the reasons the embroiderers of Michoacán are considered to be amongst the most skilled in Mexico today. The European Trade Routes brought Asian influences with imported textiles from China and the Philippines which was displayed in Xaba Luláa: Trajes, Tlacoyales y Tocados (Palacio Nacional Oaxaca, 2015) (Figure 20) an exhibition of the indigenous gala costumes worn during the Guelaguetza Festival in Oaxaca. In the outstanding exhibits of the Centro de Textiles del Mundo Maya, Chiapas, African influences introduced as a result of the slave trade were explored in the designs, motifs and colour schemes of some of the exhibits. It was decided to include examples of embroidered textiles that would illustrate this fusion of European, Asian, African, Persian and Oriental influences if possible.

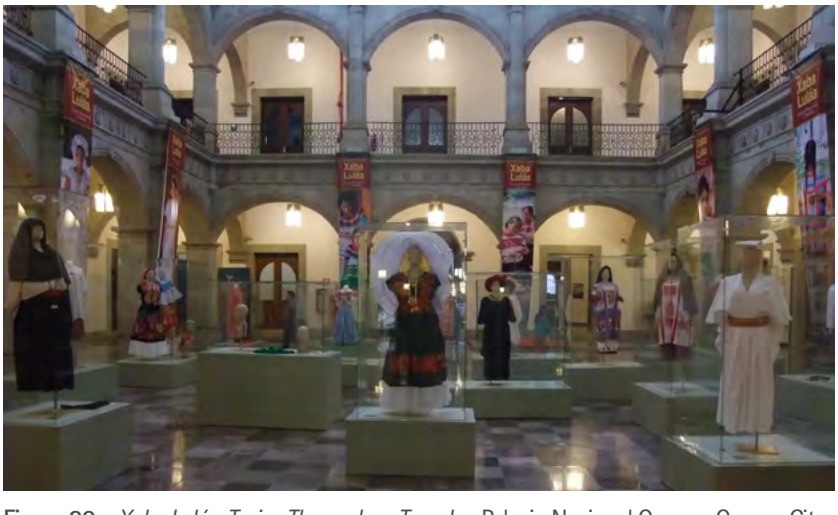

Figure 20 – *Xaba Luláa: Trajes, Tlacoyales y Tocados*, Palacio Nacional Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

The Museo de Arte Popular facilitated a greater understanding of contemporary craft practices in Mexico and it was apparent that embroidered textiles was thriving as the traditional work of master craftspeople were exhibited alongside the relatively new styles, designs and motifs that have been developed by younger generations. In the exhibition *El Delirio del Color: Oaxaca en los Años 1960* (Museo Textil de Oaxaca, 2015) (Figure 21), the impact, adaptation and innovation of new materials to the craft was explored. Traditional colour schemes in embroidered textiles had been revolutionised with the arrival of synthetically dyed mercerised cotton in the 1960s. The naturally dyed threads in muted and harmonious colours were eschewed as artisans enthusiastically embraced the new materials available with dazzling results as showcased. The rupture, renewal and revival of a textile tradition amongst an indigenous community was explored in the exhibition *Mirar por el Ojo de un Aguja* (Museo Textil de Oaxaca, 2015) (Figure 22).

Figure 21 – *El Delirio del Color: Oaxaca en los Anos 1960*, Museo Textile de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Figure 22 – *Mirar por el Ojo de un Aguja*, Museo Textile de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

The detrimental effects of societal change on the continued practice of traditional embroidered textiles was emphasised by Señor Jesús Vázquez Segura, an ethnographer at the Museo de Arte Popular Poblano, Puebla. In the course of his career documenting the festivals, customs and traditional costumes of indigenous communities in Puebla he has witnessed a rapid decrease in young women learning the textile techniques of their ancestors. In order to illustrate current practice of traditional techniques in embroidered textiles it was necessary to document creative developments and innovations, preservation and continuity as well as rupture and decline.

The criteria for forming the collection of embroidered textiles involved purchasing directly from the craftspeople where possible and the prices quoted

were not negotiated or bargained down. In order to gain an understanding of the support available to craftspeople it was recommended to include co-operatives and government initiatives in the development of the collection. The co-operatives visited included the La Casa de las Artesanías, Palacio Huitzimengari and La Casa de los Once Patios in Michoacán (Figure 23), the Casa de las Artesanías de Oaxaca in Oaxaca (Figure 24), Sna Jolobil and La Casa Escuela Tradiciones, Chiapas and Sitaltsin Women's Co-operative in Puebla.

Figure 23 – La Casa de los Once Patios, Patzcuaro, Michoacan, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

The Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías (FONART) was established by the Mexican government in 1974. Its mission is to support, promote and develop Mexican craft through a nationwide programme of financial funding, education and conferences. Commercial opportunities are provided for craftspeople at retail outlets and markets with prices that accurately reflect the time, cost of materials and levels craftsmanship involved in each piece. Standards of traditional craftsmanship are maintained through the organisation of competitions at state and national level. These competitions also serve to encourage artistic creativity and innovation amongst the craftspeople through categories of awards. There is great prestige amongst the craftspeople in winning these competitions and many of the embroidered textiles in the collection are prize-winning at state or national level.

Figure 24 – ARIPO Artesanías e Industrias Populares de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

The Artesanías e Industrias Populares de Oaxaca (ARIPO) is dedicated to supporting the traditional crafts of Oaxaca through an extensive programme of research, promotion and providing commercial opportunities for craftspeople of the region. María López López a researcher at ARIPO, emphasised that their policy is to speak to craftspeople directly in order to identify the day-to-day obstacles that prevent the continuing practice of traditional crafts. López described how the costs of travel to towns and cities was too expensive for people living in remote villages and so they are forced to sell their work at unethical prices to *revendedores* or middle-men. Those who can afford to reach the towns and cities find that the costs of renting a shop and the time involved in running one, takes away from their time in the studio. As a result of this research ARIPO organizes the annual craft fair *Encuentro Artesanal* to coincide with the *Guelaguetza Festival*. Craftspeople from across the state of Oaxaca are invited to apply for a stall and are selected based on the levels of their craftsmanship. If successful, ARIPO funds the costs of travel and stall-rental for the craftspeople thus alleviating some of the difficulties encountered in generating commercial opportunities.

The Research Journey

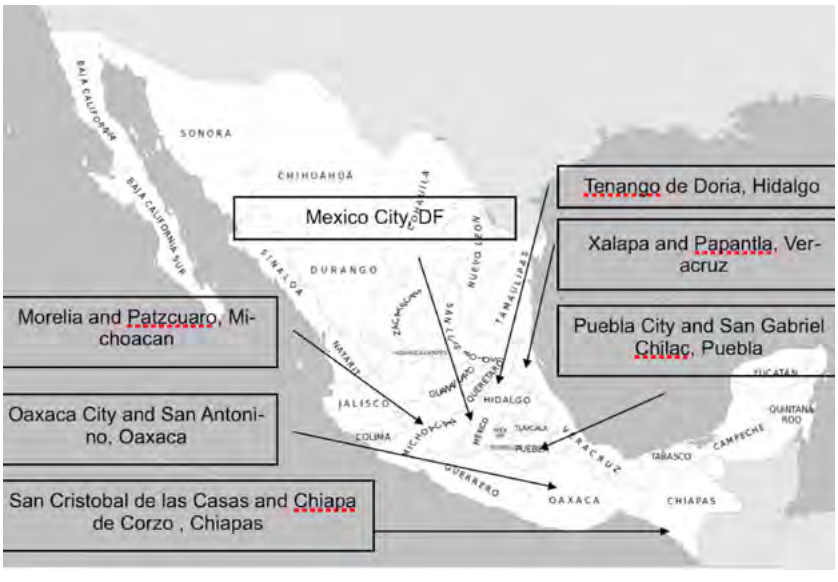

Figure 25 – The Research Journey, 2015. Illustration by Rebecca Devaney.

Due to the nature of the research, the journey was not always linear and involved a certain amount of retracing steps at times (Figure 25). As the interviews were held at the convenience and generosity of the craftspeople, stays were extended in some places to facilitate their schedules. At other times the research in certain areas proved unfruitful or impossible and so the itinerary was changed. For example, it was intended to visit the Zapoteca community in Juchitán by making the arduous journey to the Tehuantepec Isthmus of Oaxaca however, all of the craftspeople from that area had travelled to Oaxaca City to participate in the *Encuentro Artesanal* and so interviews were arranged and conducted at their stalls. In another instance, it was intended to travel to the Tzetzal community in Aguacatenango however following study visits to the Centro del Mundo Maya and Sna Jolobil co-operative in San Cristóbal de las Casas it transpired that the indigenous craftspeople refuse to sell their traditional embroidered *blusas* and instead sell a commercial version to tourists. When the nature of the research project was explained to craftspeople who were members of the co-operative an agreement was made to conduct an interview and purchase a traditional embroidered blusa under very strict conditions.

As mentioned, the journey began in Xalapa, Veracruz where it was possible to purchase an example of Huasteca embroidered textiles created by Señora Ana Bautista Delacruz from the Galería de Arte Popular. This style is famed for the large and colourful floral motifs created using cross-stitch needlework that feature on the square necklines and sleeves of *blusas*. As previously discussed, an example of traditional Totonac embroidery was purchased from Señor Nicolás Xochihua Gonzalez in Papantla, Veracruz and Otomí contemporary embroidery from Señor Vicente Ezequiel José in Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo.

The journey continued to Mexico City to conduct study visits over a period of three to four days and once the itinerary was finalised, travel continued west to Michoacán to investigate Purépecha traditional embroidery. An example was purchased from Señora Francisca Torres Hinojosa (Figure 26) in Morelia featuring a style that is famed for the rose blossoms that are often surrounded by an intricate geometric border in cross-stitch needlework. They are generally rendered in harmonious colour schemes that decorate the collars and sleeves of the traditional ungaro garment worn by women. In Pátzcuaro, several embroidered samplers were purchased from Señora Rosalia Barriga (Figure 27) depicting scenes of everyday life and celebrations that were traditionally created by Purépecha mothers as heirlooms for their daughters.

Figure 26 – Detail of embroidered rebozo, Francisca Hinojosa Torres, Morelia, Michoacan, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Figure 27 – Detail of embroidered historia, Roselia Barriga, Patzcuaro, Michoacan, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Oaxaca was next on the itinerary to coincide with the dates of the Guelaguetza Festival and it was possible to view embroidered textiles from throughout the state of Oaxaca at the *Encuentro Artesanal*. An embroidered traditional gala *huipil* was purchased from Señora Teresa Lopez Jiménez (Figure 28) from the Zapotec town Juchitán. The style is made famous in recent years by Frida Kahlo, is celebrated for the influence of Chinese silk embroidery and is renowned for the large colourful flowers embroidered in graduating colour tones using satin stitch in mercerised cotton embroidery floss on a velvet or satin background fabric.

Figure 28 – Detail of embroidered gala huipil, Teresa Lopez Jimenez, Juchitan, Oaxaca, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

An embroidered *huipil* (Figure 29) in the Tacuate style featuring tiny embroidered animals such as eagles and scorpions was purchased from Señora Efijenia García who had travelled from San Andrés, Oaxaca. The Baile de Piña from Tuxtepec is one of the most celebrated performances during the Guelaguetza and a costume featuring the bright bands of embroidered flowers and flounces of lace edging was purchased from Veronica Salazar. An embroidered long-sleeved *blusa* featuring the distinctive panels of geometric cross stitch patterns and *haz-me-si-puedes* needlework techniques associated with the Zapotec village of San Vicente Coatlán was purchased from Señora Dorothea Cruz Antonio. At La Casa de Artesanías de Oaxaca an embroidered *huipil* was purchased from Santa María Huazolotitlán, a Mixteco village in the Costa region of Oaxaca with a large population of African descendants which has influenced their idiosyncratic style featuring bold and bright colours in block geometric shapes around the collars and birds such as roosters in the centre.

Figure 29 – Detail of embroidered huipil, La Casa de las Artesanias de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

A trip was made to San Antonino, a nearby village that is renowned for their traditional embroidered *blusas* depicting pansies, butterflies and birds in satin embroidery floss with crochet detail on the sleeves. An emberoidered *blusa* was purchased from Señora Antonina Cornelio Sánchez (Figure 30), who is a recognised Grand Master of Craft in Oaxaca.

Figure 30 – Detail of embroidered blusa, Antonina Cornelio Sanchez, San Antonino, Oaxaca, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Travel continued to Chiapas to investigate traditional Tzotsil embroidery in San Juan Chamula and purchase an example from Señora María Patishtan Licanthon. The hand embroidery techniques are in decline amongst the Tzotsil community as the style of tight rows of chain stitch that feature on their *blusas* can be replicated by a sewing machine. At the Sna Jolobil co-operative in San Cristóbal de las Casas it was possible to purchase an example of Tzetzal embroidery from Aguacatenango. The satin *blusa* was created by Señora Andrea Méndez Méndez (Figure 31) and features floral motifs and decorative bands of stitches in cotton embroidery floss.

Figure 32 – Detail of embroidered quechquemitl, Beatriz Bello Martinez, Hueyapan, Puebla, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

And the last part of the journey was to San Gabriel Chilac in Puebla to research their renowned style of embroidery rendered completely in tiny beads. Whilst an interview was conducted with Señora Yolanda Camarillo Hidalgos, it was not possible to purchase an example because the tradition is in decline as no-one is learning the techniques today and the embroidered textiles have become heirlooms amongst the young women of the community.

Bordados: An Exhibition of Embroidered Textiles from Mexico

The research has been disseminated to date through exhibition, presentation and online publication. The embroidered textiles, photographs, interviews and contextual research gathered over the course of the research journey have been exhibited at the Paris Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi (Figure 33, Figure 34, Figure 35), the Sharjah University College of Art and Design (United Arab Emirates, 2017) and the Mexican Embassy to Ireland (Ireland, 2016). Extracts of the research have been presented at the International Committee of Museums and Collections of Costume annual meeting, *The Narrative Power of Clothes* (London College of Fashion, 2017), and the online research forum, *Dressing the New World* (THÉPAULT, 2017). It is due to be presented at upcoming seminars in the *Institut Français de la Mode* and the *Musée Quai Branly* in Paris, France.

Figure 33 – *Bordados: An Exhibition of Embroidered Textiles from Mexico*, Paris Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 2017. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Figure 34 – *Bordados: An Exhibition of Embroidered Textiles from Mexico*, Paris Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 2017. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Figure 35 – *Bordados: An Exhibition of Embroidered Textiles from Mexico*, Paris Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 2017. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

The exhibition includes eighteen embroidered textiles and gives a visual overview of the cultural significance, aesthetic styles and craft techniques of embroidered textiles in the regions of Mexico that were visited. The portraits and narratives of the craftspeople are displayed alongside the corresponding embroidered textile. The accompanying written material is illustrated throughout with photographs that provide a visual reference for the descriptions of the research journey, some memories and reflections of the researcher, contextual and cultural background as well as interviews with textile scholars, ethnographers, anthropologists, government officials and co-operative managers. A common sentiment shared by the craftspeople was that the threads of their embroidered textiles are infused with their emotions, thoughts and experiences and that the textiles document a specific period in their lives as expressed through their choice of stitches, colours and design. An object made by hand is embedded with a story, be it personal, cultural or historical, but that story is often obscured once it leaves the craftsperson's studio for consumption by a customer, curator, gallery visitor, student or scholar. To convey these stories is to create a connection between the craftsperson and the consumer by continuing the narrative thread.

Conclusion

Figure 36 – Detail of embroidered blusa, Antonina Cornelio Sanchez, San Antonino, Oaxaca, 2015. Photography by Rebecca Devaney.

Over the five weeks of the research journey twenty-four interviews were conducted with craftspeople, members of co-operatives, textile scholars and ethnographers and eighteen examples of embroidered textiles were purchased. The possibilities indicated for further areas of study and investigation are extensive; the oral transmission of the craft of embroidery, embroidery as a traditional and intergenerational practice, initiatives to renew, preserve and develop the craft, the impact of colonisation on traditional costume, the fusion of influences in aesthetic styles introduced during colonisation and the trade routes between Europe, Asia, Africa and America, the cultural significance of symbols and motifs, communities that have organised the craft of embroidery to provide a means of subsistence and employment, the role of embroidery in providing financial independence to women, the appropriation of indigenous costume by the fashion industry (Figure 36). The wealth of museums, cultural institutions and libraries throughout Mexico facilitated the

social, cultural, historical and economic research that provided a contextual reference for the field research.

The field methodology proved to be highly productive despite the complications and constraints encountered in regards to time, travel, budget, language, initiating contact and arranging meetings with craftspeople in advance. These considerations necessitated flexibility with planning and adaptability towards obstacles. It is recognised that the most valuable aspect of the research is the documentation of the narratives of the craftspeople. And while a certain amount of serendipity was involved in these rich encounters, the research was made possible by the generosity of time, hospitality and kindness I was honoured to receive from the craftspeople.

Recebido em: 02-12-2017
Aprovado em: 23-01-2018

BIBLIOGRAPHY

FREUND, Robert (Ed.). **Mexican Indigenous Textile Project**. Mexican Textiles, 2009. Available at: <www.mexicantextiles.com>. Accessed on: 18 Feb. 2015.

GARCÍA, Lourdes et al. **La magia de los hilos**: arte y tradición en el textil de Veracruz. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1995.

KARASIK, Carol; MORRIS, Walter. **Maya threads**: a woven history of Chiapas. Loveland, CO: Thrums Books, 2015.

MORRIS, Walter; KARASIK, Carol; SCHWARTZ, Janet. **Textile guide to the highlands of Chiapas.** Loveland, CO: Thrums Books, 2012.

PAINE, Sheila. **Embroidered textiles**: a world guide to traditional patterns. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.

SAYER, Chloe. **Costumes of Mexico**. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985.

THÉPAULT, Corinne. **"B" for Bordados**: an exhibition of embroidered textiles from Mexico. Blog post, 21 Sept. 2017. Available at: <http://dressworld.hypotheses.org/337>. Acessed on: 21 Sept. 2017.

VELA, Enrique (ed.). Textiles del México de ayer y hoy. In: **Arqueología Mexicana**, v. 19, Ciudad de México, 2005.

_____. Atlas de textiles indígenas. In: **Arqueología Mexicana**, v. 55, Ciudad de México, 2014.