

Patterns From The Past: Mexican Samplers Of The 19th Century

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As stitchers, samplers of almost any type speak to us because of the designs, the colors, the techniques, and the materials they incorporate. However, beyond these purely mechanistic aspects samplers appeal to us subliminally, knowing that each was made by a fellow human and that their handiwork reflects the circumstances of the maker's life.

From a purely detached perspective the 2003 Workshop By Mail project, "Patterns From The Past: Patrones De La Historia", is pleasing to the eye, but the fact that it was inspired by a Mexican sampler of the 19th century raises some tantalizing questions: Who stitched these pieces? Why were they made? What makes them unique and interesting? The original sampler, stitched in 1846, is part of a larger collection at the Denver Art Museum. Although there is no historical record that would give us insights into the individuals who stitched these pieces, it is possible to synthesize an understanding of the world in which they lived. It's a story of ancient traditions, cultural blending, and social change.

A Melding of Cultures

When the Spaniards, led by Hernan Cortes, entered Mesoamerica in 1519 they found societies rich in visual tradition and artistic peoples that greatly valued textiles and their ornamentation. According to Bernal Dias del Castillo, a soldier of the expedition who chronicled the Conquest, the Aztec emperor Montezuma sent conciliatory gifts to Cortes that included fine cotton cloth. Aztec crafts, including spinning, weaving, and sewing, were highly developed and the province of women. Mothers taught daughters at a young age to use the whorl and spindle, from which they transitioned into weaving with a backstrap loom. The Aztecs were particularly skilled at weaving and embroidery using feathers and animal furs. Even the simplest of clothing and household items were decorated, and the degree of ornamentation was governed by rules based on social status and achievement.

New Spain, as it would come to be called, was a land profuse with imagery. The Mayans had already passed into history, leaving their hieroglyphs and stepped pyramids. The few remaining Aztec codices are remarkably detailed, revealing the pantheon of deities they worshipped - among them *Quetzalcoatl*, the creator god, *Huitzilopochtli*, the war god, *Tonatiuh*, god of the sun, *Xochiquetzal*, the goddess of weaving, and *Tezcatlipoca*, god of night. Each had numerous symbolic representations used to invoke their intervention or to work for their appeasement.

Catholic missionaries entered Mexico with the conquerors and immediately began to convert the natives to Christianity. Church influence became pervasive, encompassing life activities ranging

from hospitals, social services, and schools to public record-keeping and even banking. In effect the church functioned both as a conduit for Spanish culture, and as an arm of government, made legitimate by the Spanish crown who selected the clerics. By replacing Aztec temples with churches, deities with saints, and native festivals with holy days, the Church eased the natives' assimilation of a new religion.

The intermarriage of Spaniards and native women, as well as deaths due to European diseases such as smallpox and measles, resulted in a precipitous decline in the native population. By one estimate, in 1620 less than 5% of the population could claim to be purely indigenous. Over time, racial and cultural intermingling resulted in a Colonial society organized into a rigid hierarchy of classes based on race and national origin.

The top tier was occupied by the European-born Spanish, the *peninsulares*, who were appointed by the Crown to all of the highest government offices. The *criollos* were born in New Spain of Spanish ancestors but were shut out of powerful positions held by peninsulares, creating tension between the two groups. The third tier consisted of mixed-race peoples, including *mestizos* (mixed Spanish and Native) and *mulattos* (mixed African and Native). At the very bottom were Africans and native Indians.

The Colonial Economy, Trade, and Education

As Spain solidified its hold on the new colony, trade ties developed between New Spain and the rest of the world. In 1565, a maritime route that linked Acapulco with the Philippines became a highway of goods from China, Japan, and the rest of Asia. Spices, textiles, porcelain, and especially silks and embroideries found their way to New Spain. During the 17th century, trade between New Spain and the rest of the world continued to grow, with much of Mexico's silver going to buy goods from around the globe. The 18th century was the most stable of Mexico's colonial period. The merchant class grew wealthy with trade, and nobility built elaborate palaces and public buildings that still stand today.

Throughout the colonial period education was viewed as an activity appropriate for men, and not relevant for women of any class. Following the Conquest, nuns arrived in New Spain and established schools to train girls in domestic arts. These schools imprinted onto the new society the same gender codes of Spain, which gave women two career options: the convent or marriage. Domestic proficiency was paramount, and as part of the female curriculum, embroidery classes were offered.

Few municipalities had government-sponsored schools. Only families with sufficient resources could get primary education for their daughters at the predominantly urban church schools, which were not free. Private schools run by women provided a less expensive alternative, but still required financial resources. By the early 1800s there were a small number of free schools, but overall few girls attended school and the lower classes remained overwhelmingly illiterate. Notably, higher education in Mexico began early with the founding of University Mexico in 1551, although women were not allowed to attend.

Girls in the convent schools would have come from criollo, mestizo, or native families (wealthy families employed private tutors). The objective of schooling would have differed for each. Some criollo girls would be preparing for a religious life (girls of non-Spanish ancestry could not enter most orders). Criollo and well-off mestizo girls would be in training for marriage. The

convent schools offered arithmetic, reading, and domestic arts including embroidery. Samplers were learning pieces, and having mastered an appropriate skill level, students in convent schools would move on to stitch altar cloths and ecclesiastical vestments. In contrast, private and charitable schools could have trained both girls and women as servants for the elite, where their embroidery skills would be used for utilitarian marking of household goods or creating decorative pieces for an employer. All schools, convent or otherwise, included religious training as part of the curriculum.

19th Century Mexico

The 19th century was a turbulent follow-up to the 18th, driven by class unrest and energized by the American and French revolutions. The *criollos* had accumulated wealth in the prior century but were blocked by the Spanish crown from holding high political positions. The growth of Mexican industry was limited by royal decrees designed to protect Spain's industries. Inequities in land distribution, wealth, and employment opportunities were the source of growing resentment for disenfranchised natives and peasants.

The oppression of the Spanish crown and culture created a fertile environment for emancipation movements, and women were not left out. Social theorists of the time debated the role and capabilities of women, and the fight for independence gave women opportunities to take on more diverse roles - including the battleline. Following independence in 1821, however, there was little improvement in either the educational or legal status of women, although the number of convent and private schools for women increased and women of the elite class were active in establishing publicly financed schools for girls.

The next thirty years brought more turmoil, with corrupt leaders that advanced their own wealth at the expense of the country, and a war with the United States resulting in loss of half of Mexico's land. In 1857, a native Zapotec Indian, Benito Juarez, was named president. A reformist, one of his goals was to redistribute wealth and power, moving it from the *criollos* and the Church to the *mestizos*. Administrative and record-keeping responsibilities became the responsibility of the government and church property was distributed to people of all classes. A new constitution enacted educational reforms, including a requirement that primary schools for girls offer a complete curriculum: reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, and geography.

Following an unsuccessful war with France, Archduke Maximilian of Austria was made Emperor of Mexico in 1864. Under Maximilian, the reform movement suffered a major setback, and women suffered as a result. Public education did not continue to develop, and employment opportunities for women remained few.

Latin American writers and social theorists of the last half of the century, contemplating the transformation of Mexico to a more industrial economy, came to realize that education was a key enabling factor. Gradually, education came to be thought of as an innate ability of women, harmonious with their other nurturing roles as a mother and wife. Great emphasis was placed on training women to be teachers, and the enactment in 1888 under President Porfirio Diaz of free, secular, and mandatory primary education for all children created a demand for educators.

From this analysis, 19th century Mexican samplers can be viewed as the product of a transitional period: literacy and the education of women was slowly beginning to be seen as a societal asset, resulting in increasing numbers of women who attended schools through the 1800s. Changes in

curriculum and accessibility to education were to come at a slower pace. As women started to train for a broader range of careers, their instruction became more similar to those of males and embroidery was no longer seen as a mainstream requirement. Ironically, 19th century Mexican samplers are two-fold harbingers: they represent a fading society that limited women's role, but foreshadow an irreversible evolution to a 20th century society that would offer greater opportunities.

19th Century Sampler Characteristics

Mexican samplers of the 19th century reflect the cultural meld in which women lived. The techniques and designs that Spanish nuns taught were European, reflecting their own origins and training. As one would expect, these samplers bear great resemblance to Spanish samplers of the century and the decades preceding. Both are commonly worked on linen with silk, and they share a propensity for bright colors. Generally, Spanish samplers did not have alphabets, numbers, or text, although they were usually signed and dated. They were larger than those produced in other European countries, and were often square with a large central panel bearing a heraldic or pictorial motif. The surface was covered with border patterns of geometric or floral motifs. Bands were positioned above, below, and to the side of the central motif, and could be broken into segments with different stitched patterns. Although not strictly symmetric, the overall placement of elements created a sense of symmetry.

Mexican stitchers adopted some of the formalized style of the European sampler, but made it their own by not being bound by symmetry rules. Their samplers are generally oblong, sometimes constructed by sewing together the sides of separately stitched pieces. Generally there is no central motif. They are more likely than Spanish samplers to include alphabets and numbers. Frequently, bands are split into two or more patterns. The density of designs and bands in Mexican samplers makes them appear similar to English 17th century samplers, which were used largely as pattern sources.

Although satin stitch predominated in Spanish samplers, the surface treatments of Mexican samplers were more diverse, including long-armed cross, double running, and Florentine. Samplers of both countries include bands of needle weaving, pulled work such as fagotting, and cut work with wrapping and dove's eyes. When worked predominantly in cross stitch, Mexican samplers were done in a reversible manner with only short vertical stitches visible on the back, and the ends buried on the front.

19th Century Sampler Motifs

A number of factors make it difficult to unambiguously assign origin or meaning to the motifs in these samplers. Even now, Mexico is composed of numerous subcultures, each with its own customs and visual history. A motif with cultural significance in one region may mean something entirely different in another. Both indigenous and European motifs of the time were stylized, in some cases yielding abstract forms that are indecipherable to anyone outside the culture.

The European impact on 19th century Mexican samplers is evident in the use of geometric and floral designs that were most likely found in pattern books brought from Europe. The appearance of horses as a decorative motif is also traceable to post-Conquest life. Shaded floral motifs, such as chrysanthemums and peonies, are reminiscent of shawls and decorated textiles brought to

New Spain by trade from the Orient. Finally, in a land with such a rich visual heritage, it was inevitable that symbols of an animistic past would find their way into these works.

Although over-interpretation of the motifs is a risk, it is implausible that the 19th century Mexican stitcher saw the elements of her work as simply abstract design. These women lived in a less visually frenetic time than the present, and a great percentage of the images in their environment related to the mythology of the pre-Hispanic past, or the imagery of the Christian church. Many simple geometric forms common to European design were familiar to the Mexican stitcher and carried ancient meanings:

- Double cross or 8-pointed satin-stitched star - a simplified representation of the *Toto* flower that grows during the maize-producing season.
- Zigzag lines - a stylized representation of lightening and a symbol of rain and fertility;
- Serpentine vines - a very old motif representing the Feathered Serpent (*Quetzalcoatl*), the most important and benevolent of ancient Mexican gods
- Paired spirals (*ilhuitl*) - a pre-Hispanic solar symbol, but also recognized as a serpent symbol
- Step patterns - the combination of steps with a scroll or hook (the stepped fret or *xicalcolihqui*) is seen extensively in pre-Hispanic codices, buildings, and clothing. It may have been a stylized serpent representation.
- Diamonds - flat representations of earth. The corners represent the four cardinal points (north, south, east, and west) and also the four sides of the maize field (*milpa*).
- "S" shape - lying on its side or at an angle, it stands for the blue worm (*Xonecuilli*), the scepter of Quetzalcoatl and the bearer of good news.

While the content of some 19th century Mexican samplers is limited to pattern book motifs, others are more creative and reflect the sensibilities of the maker. The most interesting ones incorporate local motifs that imbue the piece with individuality. They were used as spot motifs separate from the bands themselves, or as elements in a patterned band. Local flowers and plants such as chili peppers, corn plants, and cactuses have been documented both as spot motifs and as repeating elements in a pattern. Notably, the tree of life seen frequently in European embroidery pre-dates the Hispanic era in Mexico, confirming that this motif is found throughout the world. Animals, birds, and insects (deer, squirrels, monkeys, rabbit, butterfly, scorpions, iguana, etc.) reflected the stitcher's local environment.

Mexican bird motifs include peacocks, quetzals (the national bird), and the eagle - part of Mexico's national emblem. According to myth eagle landed on a Nopal (prickly pear) cactus to signal the location of their new homeland, *Tenochtitlan*, to the ancient Aztecs. The double-headed eagle motif in Mexico predates the Conquest, but has been suggested to have a dual meaning since it is also the crest of Emperor Maximilian's family, the Hapsburgs.

The synthesis of ancient and modern continues

With a historically trained eye, we can take a fresh look at "[Patterns From the Past: Patrones De La Historia](http://www.mritter.com/products.html)" (www.mritter.com/products.html) and ask "How is it true to the genre that inspired it, and what about it reflects our current perceptions?"

The use of bands that span only a portion of the design width and the incorporation of spot motifs, floral and otherwise, is reminiscent of the earlier Mexican samplers. The patterns in many of the bands are identical to those seen in the 19th century works. The striking pseudo

symmetry of the piece is pleasing to our modern eye and imparts dynamism, but also pays homage to the earlier samplers not limited by this restraint.

Like the older works, Patterns From the Past is colorful, but its palette is softened by tones that would have been inaccessible from natural dye sources. The subtleties afforded by synthetic dyes make it possible to incorporate many different greens, lavenders, and blues.

The designer, Marnie Ritter, has selected the iris as one motif for her piece. Marnie has adopted the iris as a metaphor for her art, and its incorporation is a visual statement of individuality. When you work this project, I encourage each of you to select a motif that has meaning for you, and to think of this piece as one element of your own educational transition in stitching.

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This is a partial list of references; for a complete list contact the author at denise@beusen.net.