



MARVELOUS SIGNS, MYSTERIOUS SYMBOLS

Consider the typical museum-quality *huipil*. Besides being a useful piece of clothing, it is a beautiful object full of color, pattern and texture. What makes it special, however, is its life; the piece clearly draws on silent, complex languages of signs and symbols that go back to pre-Hispanic times. These represent a world view, a part of the collective memory of indigenous weavers. To plumb the riches of these signs and symbols, the Ixchel Museum is focusing on them in its new exhibition that will open in January 2005.

Signs are images used by weavers for the sheer joy of it. Some that have been used for many years include borders whose only function is to separate various symbols, brocaded floral motifs and designs identified by weavers as "combs," "scissors," and "candies." More recently, motifs such as flowers, fruits and birds have appeared. In the town of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, we know that they were copied from cross-stitch magazines. The technical difficulty in weaving them and the weavers' mastery of color have lent them so much prestige that weavers from other towns imitate them.

Such signs can be perceived by the untrained eye, but many others are usually not noticed. Look, for example, into the gorgeous feast of colors that is woven into *huipiles* for everyday use in Santa María de Jesús, a small town famous for its textiles and see if you can spy the sign called *kotz'tj* or "flower." Symbols are more elusive. Many are hundreds of years old and difficult to decipher. We know that most are concerned with religion, myth and ritual.

continued on page 4



Tecpán procession. Ixchel Museum Archive. Anne Girard. 2002.
The zigzag design of the ceremonial over-huipil represents the serpent or *kumatz'in*.

IN THE MUSEUM

www.museoixchel.org amparolopez@museoixchel.org

"My visit to your museum January of this year was thrilling. I was accompanied by the registrar of the Fowler Museum at UCLA and others and we were all very impressed by the excellence of the exhibitions. Also I was heartened by the vitality and quality of the backstrap weaving that was evident in the villages that we visited."

Caroline West, author of "Threads of Identity: Maya Costume of the 1960s in Highland Guatemala"

ROSARIO MIRALBES DE POLANCO, Ixchel Museum Curator, has retired after 21 years with the museum. She will continue as a consultant and will work on special museum projects. Barbara Knoke de Arathoon is Acting Curator.

A SMALL GOURD painted with a wedding scene by Andrés Curruchich and an oil painting also by Curruchich were donated to the museum by Caroline West.

A CD of Guatemala's linguistic communities is being developed with the French Embassy and the Liceo Jules Verne. It will show art works that children can make from the materials available in each area and will be recorded in Spanish, French and two Maya languages.

A CHILDREN'S BOOK is being written with Fundación Guacamaya and will be used in the museum's rural weaving projects to incorporate more of the Maya heritage.

A CHRISTMAS EXTRAVAGANZA with the participation of Guatemalan artists was held November 9th as a fundraiser; the annual Christmas posada will be December 14th.



Girls from Santa Avelina, Quiché
Ixchel Museum Archive. Anne Girard. 2004.

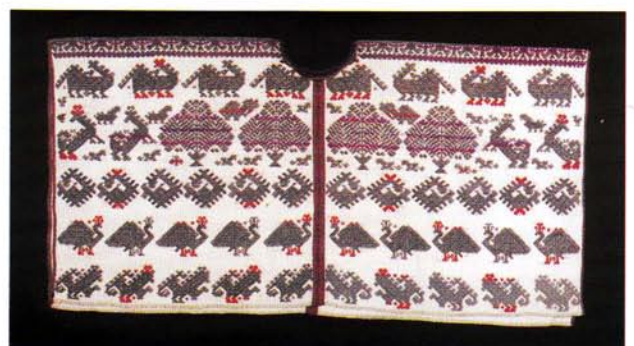
A CHILDREN'S WEAVING PROJECT is being funded by Helps International in Santa Avelina, Quiché. This brings the museum's rural weaving projects to six.

LA PLAZA DE LA LIBERTAD now joins the Ixchel Museum and the auditorium of the Francisco Marroquin University. It is a large, beautiful plaza with a roof of glass skylights; it was inaugurated November 21st at the convention of Latin American Bankers.

AN EXHIBIT OF HUIPILES worn in the communities where the host bank, Banco Agromercantil, has agencies was created for the event. Pro-Teje wove 500 bookmarks for them with their logo.



Tecpán huipil, 1975. Ixchel Museum Collection.
A much earlier huipil, but note the same kumatz'in symbol.



San Pedro Sacatepéquez huipil, 1945. Ixchel Museum Collection.
Note the symbols for the tree of life, the dead turkey and the living turkey.

FRIENDS OF THE IXCHEL MUSEUM

www.museoixchel.org amparolopez@museoixchel.org

A PRO-TEJE WEAVER, Adriana Angélica Carmona Martínez from San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Sacatepéquez, travelled to Washington, D.C., to weave for the National Geographic "All Roads Film Project." TACA Airlines donated the weaver's plane ticket and Friends of the Ixchel Museum sponsored her stay in Washington. Afterwards, she went to Philadelphia under the auspices of Raices Culturales to participate in the "Maya Studies Program" of 5 schools and universities.

BARBARA DE ARATHOON, Ixchel Museum Acting Curator, spoke on Guatemalan textiles at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. in early November.

A SUMMER WEAVING TRIP to Guatemala, led by Vivian Harvey and staff of the Ixchel Museum, is being planned for August and will include a trip to Copán.

THE ANNUAL MEETING of Friends of the Ixchel Museum will be held in Guatemala, March 5th and 6th.



Woman from Palín, 1900. Alfredo Valdeavellano. Peabody Museum Collection.
The Palín headdress, like the tupuy of Cobán, represents the snake or kumatz'in.



A modern huipil from San Antonio Aguas Calientes.
Anne Girard. 2004.
The beautiful and intricately woven flowers and birds and fish are simply signs.

DONATIONS TO FRIENDS OF THE IXCHEL MUSEUM

Please help Friends of the Ixchel Museum sponsor weaving projects, fund traveling textile exhibits, translate textile research, and support projects to enrich the Ixchel Museum.

Friends of the Ixchel Museum is an American foundation and donations are deductible by the donor for U.S. general income tax purposes. Checks drawn to the name of Friends of the Ixchel Museum, Inc., may be mailed to:

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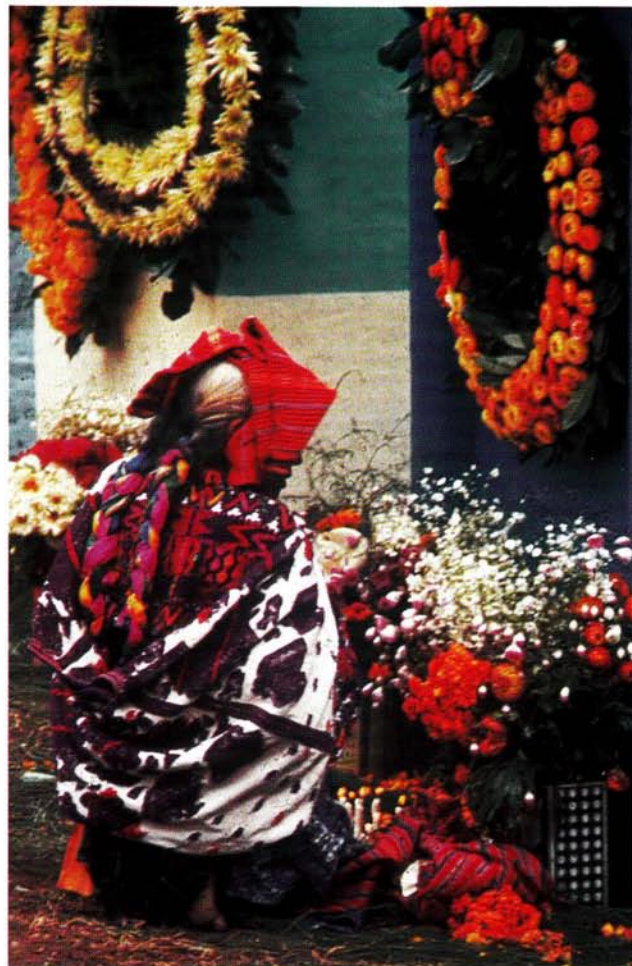
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continued from page 1

The "dead turkey" refers to the turkey eaten to celebrate a wedding. Visitors to the Ixchel Museum's show will learn to see--especially in *huipiles*, ceremonial over-*huipiles* and *sut's*--the "tree of life," the "center of the town," the "serpent," and the "double-headed eagle." To make the decoding process even more difficult, each town treats the various symbols differently, according to its specific textile language. For instance, in most towns woven zig-zag lines mean "serpent." But in Santa María de Jesús, we have learned they can also stand for "thorns."

The Ixchel Museum is documenting the rich patrimony of signs and symbols for three reasons. One is to rescue them from approaching oblivion; only a few weavers and members of *cofradías* still know the meaning of symbols. We also want to pay tribute to the artisans working at their looms who, over the centuries, filled their weavings with the memories of their people. And finally, we think visitors will enjoy the many challenges inherent in the masterful signs and subtle symbols.



Woman from San Pedro Sacatepéquez at the cemetery on All Saints Day.
Photo by John Willemsen. 1984. Ixchel Museum Collection.
Her over-huipil has symbols of the eagle and the peacock.