

Culture

Krystyna DEUSS, *Indian Costumes from Guatemala*, Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, Winnipeg, September 18 through November 30, 1986

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By Robin Etherington

The first impression that you receive upon approaching and entering the exhibition "Indian Costumes from Guatemala", is one of colour. Each regional costume from Guatemala is a sophisticated weave of colours. A myriad of vibrant colours radiate from the seventy Guatemala costumes displayed in the exhibition.

The costumes are arranged on mannequins in sixteen dioramas. The scenes represented range from markets to festivals, to weavers and their preparation of the materials, to religious events. In addition, there are seven wall displays which emphasize the colour and style of the costumes or textiles exhibited.

The dioramas afford the visitor a sense of the context in which one would find these costumes in Guatemala. The design of the bases of the dioramas is good as the sloping of the sides prevents the public from touching the textiles, yet psychologically allows them to feel close to the costumes and a part of the event being depicted.

The exhibition text deals with the technical aspects of the costumes, such as the weaving materials and techniques, design motifs and the way to wear the costumes, as well as the geographical, historical and socio-cultural background of Guatemala and its peoples. In many instances, the text panels mirror the catalogue essay.

There is an attempt to place these elements within the current economic and political situation. However, there is a paucity of temporal and spatial data to back the political statements in the introductory panel and sprinkled throughout the exhibition.

Is the objective of the exhibition to display the current situation in Guatemala historically and politically, using regional costumes as the vehicle? The visitor is never quite sure.

A comprehensive political summary could have been integrated with the costumes by quoting the people who weave and wear the garments. Quotations about the meaning of the designs, why each region has its own costume, how the weavers can express their individualism within the cultural boundaries in the textile tradition, how they are discriminated against when they wear their costumes to the cities, how they are identified by their costumes and in turn hunted by the death squads and army if their villages happen to be under siege, and their political views and social or personal dreams for their future would

give a new sense of meaning to the politics of life in Guatemala.

There has been a long history of violence and disruptive change in Guatemala since the arrival of the Spanish. The current political events and atrocities, highlighted in the introductory panel, have counterparts throughout the colonial and independence periods of Guatemalan history. Today, what the people of Guatemala are experiencing is the most brutal period of an often brutal history since pre-Columbian times.

Concomitant with the upheavals in Guatemala's history, there have been changes in styles, designs and material of clothing and textile technology since the arrival of Europeans. What is seen today in Guatemalan costumes is a combination of these changes over time coupled with design elements and style that have persisted since pre-Columbian times.

Accompanying the changes in style and floral designs due to European fashion, Maya cosmology and ideology remains strong and vibrant in the textile form of visual expression for Maya culture. Recent exciting studies of the motifs/designs suggest that not only regional, community and social identity continue to be woven into the fabric, but also complex cosmology symbols. Maya culture has always been exceptionally abundant in symbolic imagery, whether by means of hieroglyphic writing of the iconography carved in stone or depicted on garments of personages painted on ceramic vessels.

The costumes in Guatemala, as seen in the exhibition, are rich in colour and texture, as well as tradition of weaving and social-cultural identification. In addition, the costumes are a valuable source of information about the histories of the people, that, when read, will add a profound time dimension to the woven fabric and an insight into the peoples' concept of cosmology, philosophy and mythology.

By means of its display of varied costumes, the exhibition affords the opportunity to appreciate the colour, the vibrancy, the beauty and the complexity of contemporary Maya textiles, but does not expand into their meaning and significance for their contemporary Maya weavers/wearers. It offers some statements about the current political situation in Guatemala. However, there are photographs of smiling Maya people attired in beautiful costumes and none of the army raids on villages, massacres, or refugee camps. There are general statements about violence, but there is no in depth discussion about the people not being able to consistently maintain their textile tradition due to genocide and ethnocide. There are few remaining elders to pass on the folk knowledge, including the textile tradition, and several of the young have fled to Mexico or to the rest of North America.

The exhibition is the private collection of Krystyna Deuss. How did the people feel about her buying their clothing? Did they understand it as “urgent ethnology” or feel that they had to sell to her as they do to all tourists or commercial collectors in order to physically survive; i.e. to eat and feed their families, and not be identified with the communities by means of their regional costumes.

The exhibition is worth *seeing*. Yet it is torn between two very different and extremely complicated goals. It tries to address the issue of the current

political situation, as well as encouraging us to recognize the beauty and sophistication of the weave employed in the costumes. It whets our appetite but does not fully satisfy our need for more information and in depth comprehension of the complexities of the situation, historically and contemporarily. Nor does it discuss the weavers/wearers of these incredible costumes vis-a-vis *their* concerns for the preservation and growth of their knowledge, beliefs, textile tradition, culture and political views.