

FRIENDS OF THE IXCHEL MUSEUM

VOLUME SIXTEEN • NUMBER TWO • DECEMBER 2005



"I filled filing cabinets with muslin ...and brought old armoires from my parents' farm [to store the textiles]"



THE BIRTH OF THE IXCHEL: DOÑA SYLVIA PETTERSEN LEONOWENS LOOKS BACK

Left: Sylvia and Louis Leonowens.
2005.

Right: Church Confraternity.
*Sololá Watercolor by Carmen
Pettersen, 1972.*

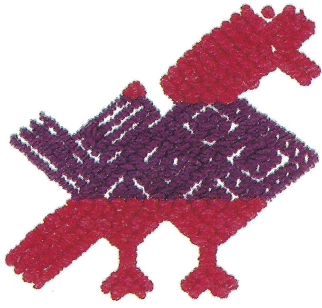
The founders of the Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena are a legendary lot, but like so many legends, their work has never been properly documented. That's why we recently interviewed Doña Sylvia Pettersen Leonowens. A compact, lively, humorous woman who looks much younger than her 78 years, she consented to share her memories of how the museum came to be.

It all began in the middle of the last century because of a fascination with the archaeological work being done in the great Mayan city of Tikal. A group of Guatemalan women formed the Tikal Association to study the art treasures that were being discovered—

wooden lintels, huge stone stelae and altars and painted polychrome pots—and to raise funds to put watchmen at the Mayan sites to prevent looting.

A splinter group including Doña Sylvia saw Mayan textiles as an equal aesthetic contribution, albeit one that was largely overlooked. True, Guatemala's National Museum of Archeology had an enviable collection of modern weavings (amassed when the government required Mayan towns to send in costumes in the 1930's), but those pieces had minimal conservation and virtually no display space. Sylvia Leonowens and a few of her contemporaries decided to do something to create an awareness of Guatemala's

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President Chen Shue-Bian of Taiwan visited the Museum on September 22, his only day in Guatemala.

The Museo Ixchel web site has had a redesign. Please visit at www.museoixchel.org.

The 2006 museum calendar, with photographs of traditional indigenous dances, is now available and can be ordered by e-mail "amparolopez@museoixchel.org."

Watercolors by Carmen Pettersen of indigenous costumes are now in the process of being conserved, preserved and reframed by conservator Kennis Kim and curator Emeritus Rosario Miralbes de Polanco.

Photos of a collection huipiles, taken with funding from the John Paul Getty Foundation Grant, are being digitalized by Anne Girard.

Embroidery will be the subject of the next museum exhibit. The field investigation, funded by Friends, will begin in San Cristobal Totonicapán, Zunil, and Quetzaltenango.

Donald Hodgson, a long time supporter of the museum, has made a generous bequest to the Ixchel Museum.

A collection of woven belts and hair ribbons were donated to the museum.

President Chen Shue-Bian of Taiwan visited the Ixchel Museum September 22, his only day in Guatemala.



The visit of the President of Taiwan, 2005. L to R: Curator, Barbara Arathoon, Evelyn Robles, Thelma Wilmsen, Virginia Pfister, Isabel Smith, President Chen Shue-Bian of Taiwan, Holly Nottebohm, Susan Riojas, and Giancarlo Ibarguín, Rector of the Francisco Marroquin University.



San Mateo Ixtatán
Watercolor by
Carmen Pettersen, 1972.

THE BIRTH OF IXCHEL

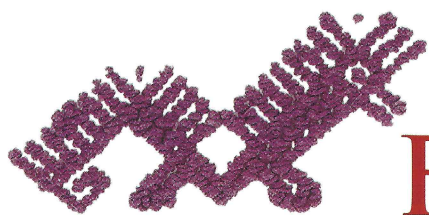
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textile tradition and its beauty. The result was the Textile Committee of the Tikal Association.

Besides Doña Sylvia, other textile enthusiasts included Julia Plocharski and Olga Miron who traveled together collecting costumes in the Guatemalan highlands, expeditions that continued through the 1960's and early 70's. "They sometimes even bought clothes off people's backs," recalls Leonowens with a smile. And then there was Sylvia's mother, Doña Carmen de Pettersen, who at about the same time was embarking on an ambitious project to paint watercolors of the Maya in their native costumes. Julia and Olga would loan pieces when the artist needed them, and Sylvia would send her mother sketches of how the costumes were worn.

"My mother and Julia Plocharski had the idea that we should make a textile museum," recalls Sylvia, "but it was really Baysis Hempstead who was the moving force and got us together. We met in her house with enthusiasm and ideas but no money."

"We needed a collection, of course, so I started to buy. The word got around, and I was inundated at



FRIENDS OF IXCHEL

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.

Checks drawn to the name of Friends of the Ixchel Museum, Inc., may be mailed to:
Friends of the Ixchel Museum, Inc.
8 Christian Hill Rd.
Higgenum, CT 06441

**** As we go to press, we ask that you consider an additional contribution to a special fund for aid to the villages of the Pro-Teje weavers who have been devastated by Hurricane Stan. Please so indicate on your check. ****

A new bulletin design has been created for the Friends of the Ixchel and will be printed in California.

The weaving tour of highland villages led by Vivian Harvey in July was such a great success it will be repeated next year. WATCH FOR NEWS!

Baysis Hempstead was recognized by Friends of the Ixchel Museum for her lifelong dedication to the museum and as founder of Friends. The endow-



A hand-embroidered huipil from Santa María Chiquimula.

ment fund of Friends of the Ixchel Museum has been named the Lucie Hempstead Endowment Fund and she was presented with a framed recognition.

Ongoing museum projects funded by Friends are the digitalization of huipil photographs, the field research for the embroidery exhibit, and an educational project in Tecpán.

A mid-year board meeting of Friends was held in New York on October 23rd.



Hand-embroidered tiger from a San Andrés Xecul huipil.

THE BIRTH OF IXCHEL

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all hours with people wanting to sell. I didn't have much knowledge of textiles. I was deluged with these pieces and as I was trying to form whole costumes, I discovered how difficult it was—finding daily and ceremonial huipiles and even those worn while mourning. Then you have to consider different epochs—some towns haven't changed their weaving at all over the years and others, totally."

"I would wash the textiles or dry clean the ones with silk thread, then I'd tag them with numbers. I designed a card file with the basic facts. We worked in the old house that my grandparents left me. I filled filing cabinets with muslin and brought old armoires in from my parents' farm. As we created the museum, I'd spend my own money buying. When I needed more, my best bet was to go to Don Carlos Elmenhorst, an early supporter, and he would generously write me a check. I didn't do too badly. Eventually I donated 2,000 pieces."



Carmen and Pete Pettersen. 1975.

"We had our first exhibit at the Parque de Industrial in 1975. The artist David Ordoñez designed it. When the earthquake of 1976 struck, devastating whole villages, we worried that it would discourage weavers. How wrong we were! They set up their looms in the ruins of their houses. They kept their traditions."

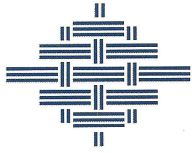
"My mother began exhibiting her painting. As a way of making her work more accessible, she wrote a book about the Maya. My father had her book, *Maya of Guatemala*, published in Germany and, in 1976, gave 20,000 volumes to the still unformed museum. We threw a big party at the Club de Oficiales and presented the book. Money began to come in."

"In 1977 we became legally El Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena and I put into the agreement that income from the book would be put into a savings account for a future building."

The most beautiful textiles came from the collection of Julia Plocharski, who was killed in a tragic accident in 1972, and two years later her family loaned the museum her collection. The Plocharski Collection, now formally donated, has always been kept separate and forms the heart of the museum.

"We rented a building in a residential district and set up our museum and store in 1976. Thirty years later

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8 Christian Hill Road
Higginum, CT 06441

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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

THE BIRTH OF IXCHEL

Main article continued....

Museo Ixchel is a professional institution with the best collection of Guatemalan textiles in the world."

The museum was awarded Guatemala's highest honor, the Orden del Quetzal, in 1999 and won a John Paul Getty Foundation grant for conservation in 2000. Linda Barrios, our second curator, won a Wenner-Gren fellowship, an Interamerican Grant and a Fulbright Fellowship for her doctoral work. Our curator of 20 years, Rosario Polanco, won a Fulbright to study at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Under the leadership of former president Evelyn Robles, the museum has put out eight technical publications—seven of which, with funding from Friends of the Ixchel Museum, have been translated into English—plus three catalogs, three children's books, and a guide to the museum. It has developed an education program that reaches children throughout the capital city and in rural areas; and through "Pro-Teje," the museum has a natural cotton weaving project with 125 weavers.

Doña Sylvia is proud of the museum's success and still marvels that such a remarkable institution could have grown out of those improbable beginnings.



Girls from Zunil,
Quetzaltenango, wearing
machine-embroidered huipiles.
Photo, Anne Girard 2005.

