



# FRIENDS OF THE IXCHEL MUSEUM



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## MASKS FROM ALTA VERAPAZ

*A mask has a strange power of suggestion over the imagination. It is a magic instrument to establish contact between spirits and humans...."* --Miguel Covarrubias

One day back in 1932, when Florence Hempstead was growing up in Cobán, her mother was called away to Guatemala City and left her, as oldest child, in charge of the family's food money. Shortly thereafter, a man came by selling masks of devils and monkeys. Florence was so smitten by their simple beauty and power that she bought them all. The family might have gone hungry for a few days, but we are the gainers, for they are now being exhibited at the Ixchel Museum.

Masks have been used in dances and ceremonies in Guatemala for thousands of years. Examples, dating back to pre-Columbian times and made of fired clay, can be seen in various collections. The tradition endures to this day; in

the Alta Verapaz, 21 different mask dances are performed in 12 of the 14 municipalities.

The unique masks on display are from the early 20th century and were probably made in the *morería* of Ricardo Ibarra in Cobán. A *morería* is a rental shop for dance costumes, masks, scripts and other dance-related material. Ibarra created a quantity of large devil masks, with ears and tongues made of leather and horns of twisted wood, plus other smaller devil figures. The devil masks are grotesque, much larger than other dance masks, and they are clearly meant to be frightening.

In contrast, the masks of the monkeys are small, realistic and lively. Black, with touches of white, they match the costumes which usually are

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*María Soledad Icu Peren 1965 - 2002*

*Sole's death, in its suddenness, took us all by surprise even though we knew she was very ill. Soledad first came to the museum as a 20 year old from Comalapa and began as assistant to the technical department in 1985. In 1993 she became the Collection Registrar. When the museum weaving project, Pro-Teje, needed her, she worked with the weavers, teaching them how to maintain quality and weave with the native brown cotton. Her dream was to improve the lives of Maya women, particularly the weavers. We miss her.*



## IN THE MUSEUM

[www.museoixchel.org](http://www.museoixchel.org) [alopez@museoixchel.org](mailto:alopez@museoixchel.org)

**FLORA AND FAUNA IN TEXTILES**, the 2003 Ixchel Museum calendar, is now on sale.

**THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT BANK** gave a grant to the Ixchel Museum to revitalize the art of back-strap weaving in 4 rural communities. About 500 children take part--125 fourth and fifth graders from each community school. First, the museum educators visit the villages to give an intercultural education to the children, showing them maps and explaining their location in the weaving tradition of Guatemala.

A month later, the children come to the museum where they spend the day, weaving, seeing the exhibits, and being shown collection pieces from their own villages. They are given specific information on their community and shown variations in color, motifs, and technique in village weavings. Each child is given an activity book and they leave with looms, thread, warpers and krills. For three months the weaving classes continue in the schools--with an experienced, bilingual Pro-Teje weaver of the community--and, at the end of the project, the children will exhibit their

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Left:  
Dancing  
mannequins

Right:  
Lucía Olivero,  
Patricia Shelton,  
Leslie  
Hempstead de  
Fairhurst,  
Rosario de  
Polanco, and  
Barbara de  
Arathoon



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black with long tails. A monkey participates in the "Dance of the Devils" and is silly and amusing, trying to make the spectators laugh.

Most of the other dances we know were introduced in the colonial era---"Dance of the Christians and Moors," "Dance of the Conquest," "Dance of the Bull." The "Dance of the Devils" is presented before the feast day of the *Virgin de Concepción*, the 8th of December, and has been performed for years in the atrium of the Cathedral of Cobán. There exists an old illustration of the dance in a French magazine dated 1865.

In the Ixchel exhibit, the dancing mannequins wear simple, black and red costumes--quite different from the highly ornamented ones worn for the dances of the conquest and the moors.

Nowadays the large bamboo framework on the back of one of the dancers--on which a devil figure sits--would hold firecrackers for the festival.

These wonderful masks, like the "Dance of the Devils" for which they were created, are an important expression of indigenous culture not as well known as the textiles. We are grateful to Patricia Shelton who donated the masks to the museum in honor of her farsighted mother.



# FRIENDS OF THE IXCHEL MUSEUM

[www.ixchelfriends.org](http://www.ixchelfriends.org) [foim@ixchelfriends.org](mailto:foim@ixchelfriends.org)

**BENEFACTORS 2002** were honored at the Masks Exhibit opening.  
**BANCAFE, CITIBANK, FUNDACION PANTALEON, and FRIENDS OF THE IXCHEL MUSEUM.**

**ALTA VERAPAZ MASKS** from the collection of Florence Hempstead Shelton have been mounted with funding from Friends of the Ixchel Museum. The mounting was a team effort with Barbara de Arathoon in charge: David Ordoñez and Lucía Pérez made the mannequins dance; Alfredo MacKenney loaned his large bamboo framework; at the opening, Samuel Franco showed a video of the dance performed in Cobán. The Hempstead-Shelton family was there in full force.

**PHOTO ARCHIVE** enrichment is vital. Friends voted to fund photographic field trips to weaving villages not well documented in the archive. Since May, Anne Girard de Marroquín, Director of the Photo Archive, and members of the museum technical staff, have visited three towns on their festival days: Santo Domingo Xenacoj, Sacatepéquez; San Pedro Carchá, Alta Verapaz; and Jocotán, Chiquimula. See the photographs below.



Center:  
Feria in  
Jocotán and  
San Pedro  
Carchá.

Left and right:  
Women at the  
Feria of Santo  
Domingo  
Xenacoj.  
Photos by  
Anne Girard.

## 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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*The IDB weaving project, in the schools of Palín and Santo Domingo Xenacoj and in the Museo Ixchel.*

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weavings at the museum. The communities which have accepted the project are: San Pedro Cutzán, Chicacao (Tz'utujil); Palín, Escuintla (Poqomam); Santo Domingo Xenacoj, Sacatepéquez (Kaqchikel); and Chillaní, a hamlet of San Pedro Sacatepéquez, Guatemala (Kaqchikel).

"This project is beautiful--for me a dream become reality," says Ixchel Museum Education Director, Fabiana de Saenz. "The children get very excited for it shows them the history, the importance and the value of what they have around them. It is wonderful--just what the museum should be doing."