



# FRIENDS OF THE IXCHEL MUSEUM

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# A WORLD OF COLOR

by Hideo Kojima

Natural dyes  
have a long  
history and  
[just maybe]  
a bright  
future.

The Maya had five basic colors—red, white, black, yellow and green—that were based on their cultural world view. Each of the four cardinal points of the compass was ruled by a different god, each of which had its own color: east was red, north was white, west was black and south was yellow, while the center of the earth was green. The various ceremonies or festivals, the painting of the temples or ancient writings, the murals, the colors of the pottery, the body painting, even the ceremonial robes of the ruler and priests—all of these had their own prescribed colors that were based on this world view.

The Maya world view was not limited to the center of the world and four directions, what could be described as a two-dimensional or horizontal world. It also incorporated thirteen layers of heaven that were situated above the world and nine layers of a subterranean world. In other words, the Maya believed in a three-dimensional world containing both horizontal and vertical worlds, all full of color.

Mesoamerica—the area of Mexico/Central America where the Maya flourished—is particularly rich in plants that can be used for food, medicine or dyeing. Combinations of altitude and geographical latitude

provided a huge range of varying environments which combined with the rhythm of rainy and dry seasons to give birth to a plethora of diverse plant life that was unknown in Europe. Over a long period of time, these valuable plants were cultivated and used by the native inhabitants. In this article, I will briefly look at four of the natural dyes that have been most highly prized since ancient times.

**Anil (Indigo):** Blue dye was obtained from a variety of indigo plant called Jiquilite. Proof of pre-Columbian use of anil can be found in the so-called “Maya Blue” that colors the remaining wall-paintings, pottery or illustrated writing, in fragments of cloth that have been discovered in caves or tombs and in the records of the conquistadors. The superiority of the dye obtained from this species of indigo was recognized very early in the colonial period. It was shipped to Spain where the king ordered it be developed on a commercial basis. The resulting industry that arose in Central America led to anil overtaking cacao production in the 17th century to become the main export.

Because the production of natural indigo continued in El Salvador until the 1970s, many people who

...continued inside.



# THE MUSEUM



## DONATIONS

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 payable to:  
Friends of the Ixchel  
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Our new exhibition, "Embroidery: Stitches that Unite Cultures," opened October 24th. Designed by David Ordoñez, it was mounted by Marilda del Pilar Cruz and curated by Barbara Knoke de Arathoon. Friends of the Ixchel Museum funded the installation as well as the research that informs the show. In total, the research team logged over 600 km. visited 11 communities and took 490 photographs to document the exhibit. All of which proves Barbara Arathoon's pithy dictum: "Research is the soul of our work."

The ever-popular Carmen Pettersen Room in the museum has been renovated. The artist's watercolors have been cleaned, photographed, reframed and rehung. Textiles featured in the paintings are now in pullout drawers, where they can be easily viewed. In the center of the room, children's costumed mannequins recreate one of the scenes Pettersen painted.

The afore mentioned Marilda del Pilar Cruz has joined the museum as exhibit designer and assistant to Barbara de Arathoon. Pilar has a degree in architecture from the Francisco Marroquín University in Guatemala City and a Masters degree in Preservation Studies from Tulane University in New Orleans.

Speaking of staff, our Education Director Fabiana de Saenz has won a scholarship from the Spanish Ministry of Culture to attend a month-long course, "Museums, Cultural Heritage and Tourism, at the Museo de América in Madrid. Before settling in the Spanish capital, she will spend a week in Barcelona where she will attend another course—"Preventive Conservation of a Textile Heritage"—at the Centro de Documentación of the Museo Textile

Smart shopping: The museum store now has the English version of the catalogue for the "Sown Symbols" exhibition (US\$8). The translation was funded by the Friends of the Ixchel Museum. Also available is the handsome 2008 Ixchel Museum Calendar, "Headdresses: Icons of Tradition" (US\$15). And soon the shop itself will be more accessible. Thanks to a generous award of US\$5,000 from U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, the museum store is being put on the web. You can do your shopping online after January 31, 2008.

An Ixchel Museum education project with about 50 fifth graders in Santiago Sacatepéquez has proved to be so popular that, instead of the usual 30 percent of the children choosing to learn to weave, 100 percent of them asked for instruction. To meet the unexpected demand, the kids have had to share looms, a potential problem that has proved to be the opposite. "It is phenomenal