



FRIENDS OF THE IXCHEL MUSEUM

VOLUME THIRTY ONE • NUMBER ONE • JUNE 2020

IT IS ALL ABOUT THREADS AND DYESTUFFS

by Raymond E. Senuk

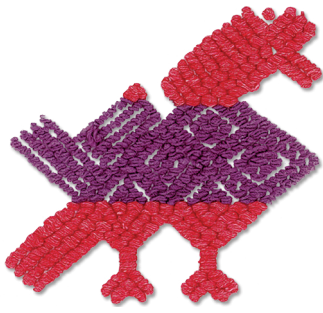


I have chosen a *Cofradía* mantel from Quetzaltenango as the subject textile to talk about dyestuffs. Why dyestuffs? Their identity and the time frame for their use are invaluable to dating textiles. There are a number of other characteristics – iconographic elements, including their size and placement, the size and proportions of the textile, the techniques employed for brocade, and a host of other components – but for the purposes of this article, we will limit our discussion to dyestuffs.

The *cofradía* mantel above dates to the 1920s. This example is as good as it gets. There are four different brocade threads – cochineal-dyed silk floss, pre-dyed gold silk floss, murex-dyed cotton, and white cotton. The base cloth was back-strap woven in two panels using white cotton and alizarin-dyed cotton. We will focus on three of the dyed threads:

MUREX is a dye derived from a large genus of sea snails that have a worldwide distribution. We know it from classical and medieval times when it was referred to as Royal purple, Tyrian purple, Phoenician purple, and Imperial purple. It was a highly prized dyestuff and reserved for the elite and for special garments. The source for murex-dyed thread in Guatemala is the Pacific coast west of Oaxaca. The botanical name for this specific snail is *Purpura Pansa*. The snail is harvested in the rocky tidal crevices and milked on the spot with a hank of white cotton thread in hand. The snail is returned to the ocean and lives on to produce more secretions. This is at best a tedious and time-consuming process. The clear secretion first turns the cotton yellow, then green, and finally to a rich variegated purple that is very fast and requires no mordant to set the dye. It has always been a highly prized dye in

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IN THE MUSEUM



by Maya Fledderjohn

Left: Fiesta Textil gala, 2019
Right: Collection storage room



✚ I write this piece as the museum prepares for a new era. We have shifted from bringing people IN to getting the museum OUT during these very difficult times. We share our virtual tour, images from our collection and field trips, and are preparing our very first virtual conference. The team is embracing technology as a new way to fulfill our mission.

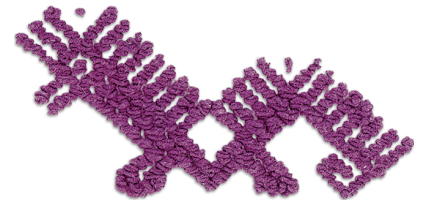
✚ Violeta has made huge progress in registering and cataloguing 190 perrajes (wraps) with Museum funds and over 1,000 pieces with the FOIM grant.

✚ Our academic program offering conferences continues to grow -- we've had two this year.

The first was on textile symbols and filled to capacity on the first day, so we had to offer it a second time the next day. Symbols and Barbara Arathoon always draw a crowd. The meaning of symbols in the Mayan textiles tradition draws the interest of students, academics, members of indigenous communities, anthropologists, and fashion designers. A very wide and varied audience indeed.

✚ The second conference was on the Rabin Ajaw, the Mayan princess/queen pageant. She is chosen among all the indigenous communities, each one sending a representative. It is a four-day event, with over 150 communities participating, and the winners sometimes go on to national participation in politics, justice and health activities. Of course, some of the most spectacular textiles are worn during this event so there was a great deal of interest from our followers.

✚ Last year our annual gala was a much more informal event. We changed the format to a more casual, colorful and fun setting so those attending would mingle and share. The photos speak for themselves!



CONTINUED FROM FRONT

IT IS ALL ABOUT THREAD



Mantel detail

Guatemala that is reserved for ceremonial textiles. In the Kaqchiquel villages in the departments of Sacatepéquez and Guatemala it disappeared from use in the mid-1920s. In the departments of Quetzaltenango and San Marcos its use persisted into the early 1940s. In Guatemala it is often called *morado de concha* or simply *púrpura*.

COCHINEAL is a dyestuff derived from an insect that lives on a certain genus of cacti with a wide distribution ranging from the subtropical and tropical regions of South America all the way to the southwestern part of the United States. The dried insects produce a red dye that can have many different hues depending on the mordant used. This is where we have to have a discussion about the bonding characteristics of dyes on plant versus animal fiber. In Guatemala, cochineal is never found on cotton (plant fiber) because dyers never had a mordant that allowed cochineal to be a fast dye on cotton. The story is completely different when silk and wool (animal fiber) are dyed with cochineal. The chemical bonding characteristics of animal fibers allowed for a fast dye that was used in Guatemala up until the late 1930s/early 1940s. There was never a red dye available for cotton

in Guatemala until the introduction of synthetic dyes, which takes us to our next dyestuff.

ALIZARIN is a synthetic dyestuff that produces a red that is a fast dye on cotton. Alizarin is the active ingredient in madder, a natural dye used as early as 1500 B.C. from Egypt through the Middle East to Central Asia. The BASF Company synthesized alizarin in 1869 and it was probably available to dyers in Guatemala shortly thereafter. Certain species of madder grow in Guatemala, but the process to produce a dyestuff was unknown to the local population and never grew in sufficient quantities to be commercially viable. If one were to do a spectrographic analysis of fabric dyed with alizarin or madder, there would be no difference. Alizarin disappeared in Guatemala by the early 1930s when cheaper dyestuffs and pre-dyed cotton threads became available.

I have included a detail of the mantel where one can see the characteristics of murex and cochineal on cotton and silk respectively. Hopefully, if you have textiles that you suspect are older, the presence or absence of these dyes will help date the piece.



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It is with great sadness that we report the death of Joe Borgatti, our most "senior" Board member.

through the years. Many of you may be personally familiar with Joe – those of us who had the privilege of working with him found him wise, knowledgeable and persistent. But in reading the full obituary* you will probably learn even more about his extraordinary career and interests. He was a great friend to Friends and we were delighted to be the recipient of his "in lieu of" donations. Please help us honor him by sharing this sad news with others who knew him, be it in Guatemala, Citibank, Bulgaria, or anywhere that felt his touch.

**online via the New York Times, or request it from foiminfo@gmail.com*

Joe's first wife Sue was one of the original Ixchel Museum founders and their textile research library was established in her name.

Joe was a director on the FOIM Board since its inception and provided wonderful counsel



Located on 6a Calle final, zona 10, on the grounds of the Universidad Francisco Marroquín in Guatemala City.

Open 9 am to 5 pm M-F | 9 am to 1 pm Saturday.
Admission is Q35 for adults, Q15 for students and Q8 for schoolchildren.

For further information on library access and holiday closings and more, please visit museoixchel.org
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FRIENDS OF THE IXCHEL MUSEUM

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