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**Woven Images of the Others:
Traditional Ayuuk Indigenous Textiles
(Mixes) of San Juan Cotzocón, State of
Oaxaca, and Their Insertion
in Contemporary Mexico**

Abstract: The Mexican State has maintained a complex relationship with the artistic creations of the Indigenous Mexicans. On the one hand, Indigenous artistic creations are shown as activities that don't require "professional", academic and "scientific" preparation. On the other hand, the same activity is associated with a millennial artistic legacy. Indigenous artistic creations, specifically the textile arts, have gone through different evaluative processes that compared them, in the first years after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, with European artistic manifestations; such evaluation has since then taken a different path, interpreting them as craft objects for tourist consumption.

Keywords: Indigenism; Indigenous Textiles; Popular Art; Traditional Art; Ayuuk Imaginary.

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At the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, demonstrations were held in various parts of Mexico due to reforms to the General Health Law by the federal government. The main reason was that nursing would no longer be considered as a professional activity in the new health law. Various media channels covered demonstrations by the community of nurses in various regions of the country.¹ One of the slogans was against the President of the Republic, Enrique Peña Nieto, for having considered nursing as a craft activity.

The slogans used in the demonstrations, the accusations that were proffered, and the statements that were made in the press on behalf of the nurses were to emphasize the scientific nature of nursing, which involves undergraduate studies, specialties, masters, and doctorates. Under the slogan "we do study, we are not artisans" or "only in Mexico is being a nurse a crafting job, while being an actress is a professional job", the nurses blamed the federal

government for considering their profession as a trade service.

At the same time, widely referred to in print and electronic media, an exhibition was inaugurated at the National Museum of Popular Cultures of Mexico, called *Manos y Almas de Oaxaca, esplendor de muchos pueblos*.² It was disseminated in the official media, and the press chronicles stated that in this exhibition one could observe “the continuity of more than 2500 years of Oaxacan art and culture”.³

Also, the government of the state of Oaxaca congratulated its creators for this exhibition, which involved “290 artisans, 70 agroindustrial and traditional cooks, 10 poets, writers and singer-songwriters, as well as 85 musicians and 20 workshops artists.” In this exhibition, you can see “the vast works of art of great quality made by the hands of women and men of the state”, as stated by the media.⁴

Regardless of the differences and implications of the notes reviewed thus far, the ways artisanal activities are conceived stand out. On the one hand, craftsmanship is seen as an activity that does not require “professional”, academic and “scientific” preparation, it is even demeaning. On the other hand, the same activity, in the context of a “cultural” exhibition, is associated with a millennial artistic legacy. Artisans are creators of “vast works of art” made with “hands and soul”.

The ambiguities mentioned here have been the subject of constant discussion among those who fight to dignify the artisanal work, as opposed to professional “academic” activities, including artistic activities. The title itself of the exhibition makes reference to *hands* and *soul*, terms commonly associated with both artistic expression and its origin.

Today, almost no one questions that art or, in this case, craftsmanship, has aesthetic “pleasure”, the “pure” admiration of the work itself, as one of its main objectives, or that to be able to carry out a work with artistic qualities, one requires “inspiration”, understood as a deep metaphysical state to which only some elect ones have access.

This text postulates that these valuations and notions of indigenous art and, specifically, textile art have been the object of different evaluative processes. They were compared, in the years after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, with European artistic manifestations. However, Mexican intellectuals have proposed, throughout the history of Mexico, different ways of seeing and giving value to indigenous art.

This text proposes that the uses, production processes and imaginary representations of indigenous textile art are in solidarity with the ideas posited by the Traditionalist School, mainly with the ideas of A.K. Coomaraswamy and T. Burckhardt. Therefore, indigenous art is conceived as a “true art”, performed “well and faithfully” for religious rites, which establish a link with the transcendent.

Therefore, in this work a brief survey is made of the valuations of indigenous art by the Mexican state and its intellectuals, showing how these assessments were framed within the value scales of the European art system. In the second part, some general notions of the Euro-American modern art system are offered for understanding how this system emerges and is applied to the colonized peoples of America. The third section presents some general characteristics of the textiles that are created in the Mixe community of San Juan

Cotzocón, the relationship they have with other indigenous textile manifestations and the link they establish with the sacred. This will allow verifying how the indigenous textile art is in solidarity with the thought of the Traditionalist School, mainly with the aforementioned authors.

The Values of Indigenous Art in the Post-Revolutionary Mexican State

Before the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the ruling elite, the middle and upper classes, and foreign visitors had rejected indigenous art. It was seen with shame and as a sign of backwardness.⁵ The Creole elites, already independent of Spain, sought to build a national spirit that included only the mestizos. The popular classes, including the Indigenous classes, were excluded from this vision and, in the best of the cases, were seen as agents subject to civilizational processes. Therefore, they were not considered as subjects with rights to demand their expansion or to ensure their identity within the nation.⁶

After the armed revolutionary conflict that began in 1910, the intellectuals fought for a movement of national integration. Even though marred by deep ideological differences, the efforts carried out by personalities such as Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), Manuel Gamio, Alberto Pani, Jorge Enciso, José Vasconcelos, Moisés Sáenz, Adolfo Best Maugard and Miguel Galindo were highlighted. The cause of the Revolution was attributed to the fact that Mexico was not being integrated as a nation.

The popular traditions, underestimated and undervalued after independence and during the Porfiriato, were an important

basis for achieving this integration. They were now considered as elements that could be used to build the Mexican nation. The indigenous was seen as the essence of the national and the “basis for the unification of a fragmented population.”⁷

Manuel Gamio suggested that the “indigenous civilization” should be one of the fundamental pillars on which the contemporary Mexican homeland should “forge” itself. Gamio advocated for the development of an indigenous “aesthetic,” because for him the “European” artistic criteria were inadequate for assessing and judging the art of indigenous peoples. In addition, indigenous roots should be a source of inspiration for contemporary Mexican art.

The influence of *Las Artes Populares en México*

In 1921 Roberto Montenegro, Jorge Enciso, Dr. Atl, Adolfo Best Maugard, Anna Pavlova, Maria Pereda and Armando Pereda promoted popular traditions as part of the centennial celebration of Mexico's Independence. In the program, an exhibition of popular art was organized at the initiative of Montenegro and Enciso, which included the preparation of a catalog that was the first edition of *Las Artes Populares en México*, directed by Dr. Atl. For Dr. Atl, this show constituted “the official tribute of the Government of the Republic to the ingenuity and skill of the people of Mexico.”⁸

Las Artes Populares en México gave this name not only to the exhibition and the catalog, but also to the official recognition by the Mexican government of the “indigenous ingenuity and ability”, refused until

then. According to Dr. Atl, this exhibition motivated not only a greater recognition and understanding of indigenous artistic creations, but also allowed its commercial bloom in several regions of the country.

In the field of academic art, it also motivated different artists to be “inspired” by the motives of popular art. As an example, Atl mentions Roberto Montenegro and Jorge Enciso (the promoters of the Centennial exhibition) as well as Adolfo Best Maugard, who developed a theory and method of drawing based on Mexican popular art.⁹

However, after the exhibition of 1921, there was no clear policy regarding popular art, despite the success of *Las Artes Populares en México*. Towards the end of the 1940s, public officials in charge of cultural policies engaged in a debate: deciding whether to consider handicrafts as a “bastion” of national identity, or as products subject to their industrialization, to encourage the economic growth of the country.

In addition, within the institutions themselves there were differences of perception about how this problem had to be addressed. For example, Moisés Sáenz, Sub-secretary of public education during the presidency of Emilio Portes Gil (1928-1930), considered that an artisan center should be created to link rural production and the urban market, thus encouraging the creation of autonomous cooperatives. This went against the ideas of Dr. Atl. He thought that artisanal production should be identified and protected from “corruption” and the influence of the market and of “cultural contamination.”

In 1933, Mexico had a successful participation in an exhibition of popular art organized in Madrid, Spain. The success

was due, in part, to the fact that there was now a clearer definition of “national aesthetic canons”, in addition to the fact that intellectuals had greater knowledge of Mexican artisanal production. This allowed them to reflect and give details about the aesthetics of “Mexicanness”.¹⁰ Another success achieved at the Spanish exhibition was that the Museo de Artes Populares (Museum of Popular Arts) (MAP), which had just been founded, won an exhibition space within the maximum art precinct in Mexico: the Palacio de Bellas Artes.

During the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), there was also no clear and consistent policy regarding popular art. During his time in office, a peasant economy was promoted along with the consolidation of state power under agrarian reform. However, the Cardenista government encouraged private investment, the production of handicrafts through production lines and actions aimed at reducing prices. The Cardenista administration tried to convert rural artisans into industrialized workers. According to these, it would be possible to remove the artisanal sector from its isolation, helping to improve the country’s economy, with an emphasis on exports and the attraction of foreign capital.

The Indianist Congress of Patzcuaro

This congress, held in Pátzcuaro, in the Mexican state of Michoacán in 1940, gave rise to the creation not only of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano (III), but also promoted the formation of national Indigenous institutes, such as the Mexican Institute (INI). In this congress,

Manuel Gamio stressed that the indigenous institutes of each country, as well as the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano as governing body, should formulate the most appropriate methods to “investigate the nature and functioning as well as formulate the methods to promote their development [of Indigenous peoples]”. The Bellas Artes institute should have as one of its tasks to ensure the proper environment for the emergence of “national art”. Gamio proposed carrying out “scientific” research to determine “the normal work capacity of Mexican workers.”¹¹

In the Pátzcuaro Congress, general ideas of indigenous art were formed. In the minutes of the *Primer Congreso Indigenista Interamericano* (1940), the agreements and resolutions made in this regard can be read. It was suggested that specialized national organizations should be created for the protection and development of popular arts. In addition, it was considered that any action that “influenced” the production of folk art should be verified by the body created for such purposes. Finally, the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano should gather information on the experiences that had arisen in each country.¹²

Also in the Pátzcuaro Congress, Alfonso Caso proposed the creation of a *Consejo de artes populares* (Popular Arts Council) composed of specialists, under the tutelage of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). This council was to carry out studies on “the current conditions of popular art and the methods that must be followed to achieve their protection”, as well as to promote necessary laws. This advice was to be taken up in the final resolution of the proceedings of the inter-American congress.¹³

Caso also proposed the creation of regional museums of popular art, where they exposed, on the one hand, the “original” creations and, on the other, “the degenerated creations of popular art”, so that people could appreciate the differences between them. This measure would not only help to better recognize popular arts, but also to safeguard them.

Years later, in 1959, Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla pointed out the deficiencies of the organisms created up to that moment in relation to indigenous art. For him, the institutions lacked permanent programs and sufficient funds to give them continuity, as well as the necessary and trained personnel to carry out their work. There were few institutions in America “dedicated to the study and improvement of the life and culture of the Indian,” said Rubín de la Borbolla. Among them, was the Inter-American Indian Institute, the governments and some public and private institutions.¹⁴

In conjunction with INAH and the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenous Institute), a new version of the old MAP was created, now under the name of the Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Populares de México (National Museum of Arts and Popular Industries of Mexico), founded in 1951 and formed by a Board of Trustees. This new organization had as tasks “the study, conservation, protection and promotion of all popular art and crafts of the country.”¹⁵

General Notions of the Modern Art System

Rick Lopez highlights the skepticism that must be shown when elites consider popular artistic manifestations “as

timeless manifestations of nationality.”¹⁶ The indigenist action contradicted, in different occasions, the pretended protection that tried to achieve. The interventions allowed, at least in the discourse, should be exclusively technical, and these should improve the previous stages of production.

The indigenous popular art as conceived by post-revolutionary intellectuals and artists was equated with that of the rest of the world and was deemed to be ready to take its place in the history of world art. It was struggling for a “break” with foreign art, translated into a preference for “Mexican” artistic manifestations. However, the elaboration of concepts, categories, and institutions that were based on those of the European artistic system ignored the deep meaning of the indigenous arts.¹⁷

Even though the intellectual discourse of the time did not seem to agree with a stable denomination to refer to indigenous artistic manifestations, it is possible to notice that these Indigenous arts were assigned values traditionally associated with European art. Alfonso Caso talked about the “inspiration of the indigenous artist according to his daily experiences”.¹⁸ Dr. Atl mentioned “the ingenuity and skill of the people of Mexico” and specified that the creations of popular art were characterized by “purely” artistic features. In addition, Atl underlined that in the pieces presented in *Las Artes Populares en Mexico*, the “great artistic feeling and manual skill of the people of Mexico” could be observed.¹⁹

The intellectuals pointed out that, in pre-Hispanic times, there was a type of art. Apparently, one of its main functions was that of the aforementioned “aesthetic pleasure”. The indigenous artists displayed “ingenuity”, “skill” and “great artistic feeling”

and their creations were “purely artistic”.²⁰ For Gamio, indigenous culture possessed “beautiful and epic traditions”, “high ethical and aesthetic manifestations”.

Paul Oskar Kristeller, Larry Shiner and, to a lesser extent, Moshe Barasch, agree that these notions associated with art, as well as the theories and currents that sustain them, emerged during the eighteenth century. Aesthetics, as an independent science of philosophy, was coined and systematized in this century by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and the philosophy of art also emerged in that period.

In this way, the concepts that are common today in art and aesthetics (taste, feeling, genius, originality and creative imagination) find their modern meaning also from the eighteenth century. Therefore, the Fine Arts were formed as a body in the eighteenth century, in the known group of the five great arts: painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry. These constitute the central nucleus of the “Arts”, adding, according to the contexts, authors and interests, gardening, engraving, the decorative arts, dance, theater, opera, eloquence and literature.

This basic set of “major arts” has been little questioned. They are joined, apparently, by common characteristics that separate them from other types of artistic manifestations, such as trades, sciences or crafts. Used by critics of art and also accepted by the general public, “that spell ‘Art’ with a capital A [defines] that increasingly narrow space of modern life that is not occupied by science, religion or every day tasks”.²¹

Art and its concepts have their point of comparison in Greco-Roman antiquity. But even in that context, as Barasch

emphasizes, the Greeks did not have a term for art, as it is conceived today.²² The closest term is *technē* and its Latin equivalent *ars*. However, it did not refer to the “fine arts” but to different human activities, mainly what we would today know as trades and sciences. In any case, the *technē* or *ars* was understood as all human activity performed with skill and grace.

Shiner emphasizes that the elaborate idea of art after the eighteenth century has constructed the false idea that the current state of art has followed an evolutionary process, and that cultures possessed something called art, but in a previous state (“primitive art”).²³ In addition to developing an idea of “immovable” art, this has led to the idea that the role of what is now considered as art has always fulfilled the same function, mainly aesthetic enjoyment.

Beauty, another of the attributes commonly associated with art, was not conceived in the same way as today. The Latin term *pulchrum* does not refer directly to art but to the moral good, to the physical beauty of people, to the beautiful habits of the soul, to beautiful knowledge.²⁴

In the early Middle Ages, the seven liberal arts were inherited as a way of classifying knowledge. The *Trivium* (rhetoric, dialectics, and grammar) and the *Quadrivium* (music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy) were becoming inadequate from the twelfth and thirteenth century on, thanks to new impulses in human knowledge. Hugo de San Víctor proposed at that time a new subdivision: seven Mechanical Arts in correspondence to the liberal ones. In this new division, the Fine Arts were not contemplated either.

With the Renaissance, the emancipation of the visual arts (painting, sculpture

and architecture) from the rest of the manual trades took place. At that time, the comparison between painting and poetry was much more emphasized. The interest of the public grew and the new group of the arts decided to pay more attention to this growing interest than to the needs of the artists themselves. Finally, in the sixteenth century the visual arts – painting, sculpture and architecture – managed to separate themselves from the rest of the trades.

The most significant change was the creation of the *Accademia del disegno* in 1563, by Giorgio Vasari. This institution meant a definitive rupture from painting, sculpture, and architecture with artisan guilds, and served as a model for the emergence of similar institutions in the rest of Italy and Europe.

The model of the literary academies was also emulated by the visual arts. Then emerged the first art academies that replaced the teachings in the workshop by a set of “scientific” knowledge, such as geography and anatomy. There arose, among the writers, an “amateur” tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which consisted of practice and the “cultivation of poetry, music and painting”. These activities “appear together as tasks belonging to the courtier, the gentleman or the prince”.²⁵

The European cultural baton passed from Italy to France in the seventeenth century. The ideas that emerged in the Italian Renaissance continued and were transformed into classicism and Enlightenment in France “before becoming part of the later thought and culture of Europe”.²⁶ During the first half of the eighteenth century one can speak of a consolidated system of fine arts, among other things, by the emergence

and proliferation of writings on art by fans, writers and philosophers, “written by and for profane.”²⁷

The author who gave the name to the modern system of the fine arts was Charles Batteux and his work *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* of 1746. Kristeller says that, although Batteux derived his postulates based on other authors, he was the first to formulate the system of fine arts in a treatise, which gave it originality and popularity in France and other European countries. The *Encyclopédie* resumed the division of Batteux and consolidated the system of fine arts not only in France but in the rest of Europe as well.²⁸

In this context, there was the definitive split that separated the crafts and popular arts understood as crafts (shoes making, embroidering, storytelling, singing popular songs), and the “fine arts”. These were associated with “inspiration”, artist “genius”, the work of art as an object of refined aesthetic contemplation. Handicrafts and popular arts were associated with manual skills and with operative rules in the elaboration of objects intended for popular use or entertainment.

General Characteristics of San Juan Cotzocón Weavings

The community where research is carried out about the symbolic content of indigenous textiles is San Juan Cotzocón,²⁹ located in the Mixe district, in the Sierra Norte region of the state of Oaxaca.³⁰ The Mixe region has been divided geographically and linguistically into three zones: High, Medium and Low. This division obeys, according to Wichmann, divisions established for

geographical and ethnographic reasons.³¹ Cotzocón is located in the middle zone, both geographically and linguistically.

The Mixe language of San Juan Cotzocón is located within the Mixes languages of Oaxaca, specifically in the Mixe Medium-North language. Søren Wichmann, also proposed the linguistic classification of High-Mixe (North and South), Medium or Central Mixe, and Low Mixe.³² For the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (National Institute of Indigenous Languages),³³ the denomination chosen by speakers for the linguistic variant of San Juan Cotzocón is the Mixe word *Ayuuk*. The Mixe people have, therefore, two denominations, one with which the speakers themselves recognize and identify, *Ayuuk*, and the other is with the name “Mixes”, which is used by the “outsiders” of the group.

In the ethnographic literature, there are different interpretations about the meaning of the term *Ayuuk*. For example, the one that translates to “People of the sacred word”.³⁴ Sagi-Vela and Thieme-Sachse mention that authors like Laureano Reyes prefer the term “people of the flowery language like the jungle”.³⁵

According to Lipp³⁶, the word *Ayuk*, means “word” or “language”, and would be related, at the same time, with the word *ba yyu: k*, that is, “people of the mountains.” For Martínez Pérez,³⁷ the term *ayuuk ja’ay* is the right one to identify the group. “*Ayuuk ja’ay*, we would literally represent it as: *ayuuk* (language or voice emission) and *ja’ay* (group or person), consequently, it means ethnic group that is identified through its own language”.

In the community of San Juan Cotzocón, textiles are woven with the



Image 1. Weaving girl from San Juan Cotzocón working on her backstrap loom.

Source: own elaboration (July 2017)

backstrap loom. Ethnographic records mention the use of this loom since colonial times. However, the oldest physical records date back to the 1940s. Today, the youngest weavers of San Juan Cotzocón are carrying out a rich process of experimentation with yarns, techniques and woven forms. Motivated both by the demand of the internal and external market, but also by a genuine process of experimentation, with the use of information technologies, such as the Internet. But “outsiders”, public and private institutions, and even the researchers who are interested in indigenous textile art have played a relevant role.

The costume that is considered traditional of San Juan Cotzocón consists of a white *huipil* that is woven in three pieces,³⁸ which I have documented with the Mixe name of *jtsëëkj*. This huipil is woven in white with brocaded figures in red.³⁹ In addition to a red skirt, *jsüümkj*, or “nagua de chapaneço” (skirt) with stripes in black or white that was previously elaborated with cloth woven on a pedal loom in the city of Oaxaca or probably in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, specifically in the City of Juchitán, Oaxaca. Nowadays, before the

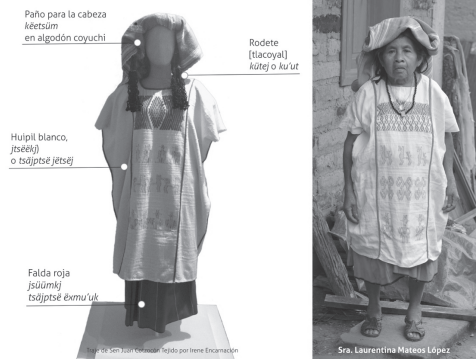


Image 2. Clothing of San Juan Cotzocón.

Source: own elaboration (2017)

disappearance of the production of these fabrics, the women of Cotzocón weave the skirts using a backstrap loom, imitating the old underskirts (*enaguas*). The costume is complemented by a head cloth, woven in *coyuchi* cotton (*Gossypium mexicanum*),⁴⁰ as well as *tlacoyales*⁴¹ for hair.

It is important to mention that nowadays it is rare to see the women of San Juan Cotzocón wearing this attire. In the visits made to the center of this community, I have only observed young people wearing this clothing for the celebration of religious holidays, some adult women, and women that I have interviewed and dressed in this way for the interview.

The Backstrap Loom

The backstrap loom has elements and tools that are common in various regions and communities. There are, however, certain characteristics that make them distinctive. The names used for academic reference and the ones used by the weavers in their communities also present differences.

The Sacred Aspect of Textile Art

It should be noted that the Mixe people establish a close relationship with sacred places, mainly hills, stones, rivers and springs that constitute geographical points where sacred ceremonies are carried out. Some physical spaces of the Mixes are sacred places inhabited by their “owners”. They are asked for favorable conditions, whether to have rain and good harvests, or to restore the health or balance of the community when there are problems.⁴²

The weaving process, the preparation of the loom, and the weaving of a textile are complex processes for those of us who are not familiar with this particular form of weaving. The weaving is associated with a symbolic complex of images that make a whole. Ropes and threads are essential elements in the process of weaving, and are part of that symbolic complex process. An invisible cord or thread, for example, expresses the “ligament” that “unites” men and women with the “supramundane” regions. This union with transcendence expresses an exemplary human situation, the “communion” that occurs between men, heaven and divinities.

The most archaic images in human culture are those of the “thread of life”, or the “thread of destiny”, supposed to be woven by spinner goddesses and gods. Also present are the images of threads or strings that “bind” different cosmological levels. These symbols express “exemplary human situations”. In this way, being a weaver implies an initiation, a rite of passage away from being *profane* to a *consecrated life*, in such a way that the act of weaving is valued on a religious level.⁴³

The textiles made with the backstrap loom, being elaborated under mythical

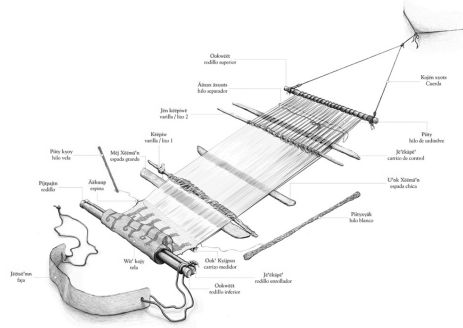


Image 3. Mixe loom (*Ayuuk*) of San Juan Cotzocón. Source: Prepared by the author (2015), based on drawings provided by the Primo Encarnación family

models, are an expression of a modality of the sacred, they are *hierophanies*, that is, *something* that manifests the sacred.⁴⁴ There are several examples in the Mesoamerican area where it can be verified that the costumes have a ceremonial character and, for this reason, they are considered as a manifestation of the sacred. Example of attires with such character are the *huipiles* of the Chinantec linguistic community of San Lucas Ojitlán, and San Felipe Usila; the Zapotec *huipil* of Santiago Choapan; the ceremonial clothing of Pinotepa Nacional and Pinotepa de Don Luis, as well as the complex *huipil* of the Triqui Indians – all of them from the state of Oaxaca.

In the community of San Juan Cotzocón, different forms are woven in their *huipiles*. The “cosmological” figures stand out, such as stars, figures of animals such as birds and dogs, as well as vegetables representations. In the oldest *huipiles* so far documented, complex woven forms are observed in the chest and back area. Some weavers of this community have reported that said representations refer to spaces to which women tend to go, such as hills

where they perform ritual ceremonies, farming fields (which are also considered ceremonial spaces).⁴⁵ Also woven are the representations of beings considered as mythological (two-headed birds).

An association that also has a close relationship with the “cosmic rhythm” of the weavings are the lunar phases, mentioned by Mircea Eliade. This relationship can be summed up in the fact that life “rhythmically repeats”, as happens with lunar cycles and weavings. In various traditions appear divinities or lunar animals that “weave” the cosmic veil and the destinies of men.

In the Mayan world, the goddess classified with the letter “O” in the Madrid Codex is related to spinning. On page 30 of the Codex Madrid she has spindles with thread on her head.⁴⁶ The goddess “O” can also be seen at a table with spinning instruments, and with the backstrap loom.

Cordry and Cordry, Johnson and Morales mention that the goddess “O” has been identified as the goddess *Ix Chel*, “lunar deity, elder woman”, who is also a giver of life, rain and, precisely, spinning and weaving. It has also been associated with the goddess *Ix Chebel Yax*, patron saint of painters and scribes.⁴⁷ Also, Morales mentions that in *el Ritual de los Bacabes* she is called as “The White Lady of the World” or the “White Celestial Lady”.⁴⁸ *Sac* is white in Yucatec Maya, but also refers to the tissue under the term *Sacal*. Therefore, another deity associated with this activity is *Ix Sacal Uoh*, in reference to the weaving tarantula, “the white Luna patrona del tejido”.⁴⁹

Stacy Schaefer, a scholar of weaving and Huichol culture, specifically of San Andrés Cohamiata, Jalisco, narrates that she worked closely as a woman healer, or

mara'akame. Schaefer, in addition, highlights the coincidence of some words that are used in the instruments of the loom and their association with the “cosmos”. For example, he relates that the rods “pepenadoras”, the term huichol is *teuxume*, the root *teu* is “sun”. Rain and year have, apparently the same root: year is *wii*, while rain is *witári*, a root that is shared with the singular word for thread and warp, which is *wita*.⁵⁰

In the weaving process, the weavers of San Andrés Cohamiata recreate various actions related to sowing. By placing a stick in the open shed and pulling the warp threads down, the weaver causes the rain. When some rods are used, precisely, to elaborate the designs, what is done is digging holes with the hoe for sowing. To pass the weft thread, *müari*, through the warp is to sow the seeds, which receive, by coincidence, the name of *imüari*. The *machete* repeats the action of hitting the ground so that the seeds are covered by the earth. As the *milpa* grows, so does the weaving.

Another model of time related to the loom is the representation of this object as the life of an individual. Schaefer quotes a Huichol weaver: “Each person’s life is like the loom. When one is born, it is like starting the weaving. The path of an individual’s life follows the same as the weaving; and when the person dies, it’s like finishing the mantle.”⁵¹

In this way, the life of a person is associated with the process of weaving, “the weaving of life.” The infantile life is the beginning of the weaving by the inferior part. Growth implies “climbing” on the loom rods. In the Huichol world, this process of growth is also associated with the life of plants, which involve the process of

regeneration of vegetation, waters, and lunar rhythms.

Conclusion: Traditional Art and Its Relationship with Mexican Indigenous Art

What can be perceived in this journey is the problematic understanding and conceptualization of indigenous artistic creations. The paradigm changes in political, social, and economic systems have apparently contributed to a better comprehension of and reflection on these artistic practices.

“Symbols of Mexicanness”, functional, ritual or decorative objects, legacies of a diffuse tradition, are now framed under the discourse of “modernization”, the “development” and the recognition of a pluricultural and multi-linguistic Mexico. At present, there is an eagerness to “transform and update them” beyond their “original” functions to promote their commercialization and “competitiveness.”⁵²

Cultural managers, anthropologists, designers, public officials, “specialists” and academics keep asking the same questions. Should actions be implemented for the promotion of indigenous artistic creations and how should they be taken in order to not to modify this “historical tradition”? The creation of groups of “experts” to analyze and implement actions for the evaluation of artisanal work has also been a constant.

Even when an attempt was made to equate indigenous art as the basis of Mexican art, it failed discursively, being finally described as “minor art” or crafts. Indigenous art has been the object of study, protection, and dissemination by the

specialized institutions and professionals in charge of them.

In the best of cases, indigenous artistic manifestations are considered as individual creations, motivating the creators to have their works bear the “authorial signature” of their creator. The utilitarian and ritual (sacred) character of these manifestations is often forgotten. The (aesthetic) pleasure that they provoke has a secondary character, it is not an end in itself, they are elaborated to “satisfy a specific human need.”⁵³

In his allusion to Asian art, Coomaraswamy has noted the profound differences between “beautiful art” (and “useless”) and applied art (and useful). Art in traditional societies, such as indigenous communities, is not for decorative purposes, but there is a predominance of spiritual values. Contrarily, in art whose goal is aesthetic enjoyment, physical values predominate.⁵⁴

For Coomaraswamy, artistic activity in a traditional setting can be practiced by anyone. However, being an artist in these societies requires a “transcendental” vocation. The process of artistic learning in a traditional society takes place through generational relays. This implies that the beginning of their artistic education begins at a very early age. In addition, to acquire the “mysteries of the trade”, it is required to go through initiatory and ritual processes, elements that can be verified in indigenous textile art.

Therefore, learning is not only technical. This is not only a trade to earn a living, but in “a manifestation ordered by the inner spiritual faculties of the person in question,” it is a more transcendent internal order, a kind of destiny.⁵⁵

One of the primordial differences between “modern art” (contemporary) and

traditional art is the relationship established by the latter with the sacred. As a sacred art, says Lavaniegos,⁵⁶ we will understand the “complex spectrum of an artistic genesis essentially linked to the religious dimension of cultures”. It will not be possible, therefore, to separate the religious from the artistic production, both elements will be interrelated.

Under this framework of the sacred, says Lavaniegos, traditional art is also intimately linked to “*sacer*’ (to do the sacred, sacrifice, link with God)”. Therefore, art is also *sacer*, since “brings presence” through:

perceptible figures (words, gestures, plastic images or musical modes) anchored in the immanence of space/time, echoes, tatters, nooks and crannies or questions that come from the non-dimensions of the holy or the divine transcendent: from Eternity, Infinitude, Origin, Gods, Death or Emptiness.⁵⁷

For Coomaraswamy “only in the modern West can the needs of the soul and the intellect abandon themselves ‘without risk’ to the sensibility of the amateur.”⁵⁸ In the context of traditional art, the individual does not “consciously exploit his personality”, this is nuanced by the social configurations.

The artistic “style” can appear as the same for long periods of time. It is an art that “returns” to itself. It has to be reconfigured again, to be elaborated as it was done in the beginning of time. “The style is always, then, the accident and not the art form,” says Coomaraswamy.

Walter Benjamin contributed a reflection on the fact that “*the ‘authentic’ work of*

art always has its foundation in ritual. This can be as mediated as much as you want but it is recognizable as a secularized ritual even in the most secular forms of service to beauty.”⁵⁹ And if any contemporary cultural manifestation has shown an intimate relationship with ritual and, in general, with what sacred, these are the indigenous creations, whose cult value is still in force, as can be verified in indigenous textile art.

However, the classification mechanisms of the Mexican state, organizations and people involved with its distribution and consumption, have placed such creations as commercial products. In the best of cases, they occupy the galleries of popular art that began to take shape from the post-revolutionary period.

In the elaboration of value tools, in their study and “protection”, creators are rarely seen. Apparently, their status as “non-academic” artists deny them the possibility of participating in a classification and assessment that involves and affects them. Apparently, when it comes to the creations of indigenous communities, they must go through a standard that unifies them unjustly. Based on arbitrary mechanisms and scales, works of the highest quality are homogenized and underestimated.

And if these manifestations try to compete with the considered original “works of art”, they remain in the diffuse scope of the “interventions”. That is to say, an item acquires the validity of an artistic work if a designer or “renowned” artist intervenes in that “handcrafted” piece. But if an “artisan” tries to carry out a genuine process of experimentation with new techniques, tools and materials in order to enrich his work, if he explores the fields of

“fine arts”, such as drawing, photography, painting or the sculpture, the latent risk will be that their attempts will be disqualified. This, instead of fostering their creative processes, can affect a repetition lacking any sacred meaning.

That is why this brief text does not intend to change the paradigms under which the art and handicrafts system is currently governed in the Mexican context, but it does attempt to generate a discussion that helps to foster a new dialogue that gives voice to the indigenous creators. The Traditional indigenous textiles may be able to

reveal the hidden part of this fragmented world. It is time:

that our torn collective consciousness... be amplified and opened to that “otherness”, assuming and recovering the fragments of man’s spiritual history that have been captured and condensed in the symbols. These symbols thus appear as documents endowed with human dignity and philosophical significance, which are capable of revealing certain dimensions of human life forgotten and disfigured in modern societies.⁶⁰

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NOTES

1. See Héctor Briseño, “Marchan para exigir la profesionalización de la enfermería en Guerrero” in *La Jornada en línea* [en línea], México, 2014, available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/ultimas/2014/12/13/marchan-para-exigir-la-profesionalizacion-de-la-enfermeria-en-guerrero-1687.html>; Redacción, “Desaparece la enfermería como profesión en la Ley de Salud” in *Diario El Independiente de Baja California Sur* [en línea] México, 2015, available at: <http://diarioelindependiente.mx/2015/01/desaparece-la-enfermeria-como-profesion-en-la-ley-de-salud/>; Daniel Santos Díaz & Juan C. Medrano, “Considerar enfermería como oficio, denigrante” en *Tiempo de Oaxaca* [en línea] México, 2015, available at: <http://tiempoenlinea.com.mx/index.php/oaxaca/31268-considerar-enfermeria-como-oficio-denigrante>.
2. Oaxaca State is one of the 32 states that make up the Mexican Republic. It borders four states and the Pacific Ocean: to the North, the state of Puebla and Veracruz de Ignacio de la Llave; to the East, Chiapas; to the South, the Pacific Ocean; and to the West, Guerrero. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, *Conociendo a Oaxaca*, p. 4.
3. Notimex, “Manos y Alma de Oaxaca llegan al Museo de las Culturas Populares” in *La Jornada en línea* [on line] México, 2016, available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/ultimas/2016/04/16/201cmanos-y-alma-de-oaxaca201d-llegan-a-coyoacan>.
4. Comunicación Social del Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, “Cautiva Exposición Artesanal ‘Manos y Alma de Oaxaca’ a cientos de visitantes de México y el mundo” in *Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca* [on line] México, 2016, available at: <http://www.oaxaca.gob.mx/cautiva-exposicion-artesanal-manos-y-alma-de-oaxaca-a-cientos-de-visitantes-de-mexico-y-el-mundo/>.
5. Rick López mentions that the Criollos of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had developed an American patriotic consciousness. At this time, they had claimed the pre-Hispanic, mainly Aztec, past as part of their own past, but they did not include the surviving indigenous groups in this framework. López, *Crafting Mexico*, p. 2.
6. To understand the concept of the indigenous people, mainly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Francisco Pimentel, *Memoria sobre las cosas que han originado la situación actual de la raza indígena y medios de remediarla*, p. 148-178.
7. Rick A. López, “Olinalá y la indigenización transnacional de la cultura nacional mexicana” in Daniela Gleizer & Paula López Caballero (Coord.), *Nación y alteridad. Mestizos, indígenas y extranjeros en el proceso de formación nacional*, México, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Cuajimalpa, Ediciones EyC, 2015, p. 290-291.
8. This exhibition was inaugurated by the President of Mexico, Álvaro Obregón, September 19, 1921. See Dr. Atl [Gerardo Murillo], *Las artes populares en México*, México, 1922, p. 7.
9. See Adolfo Best Maugard, *Método de dibujo: Tradición, resurgimiento y evolución del arte mexicano*, México, Ediciones La Rana.
10. Rick A. López, *Op. Cit.*, 2010, p. 160.
11. Manuel Gamio, “Consideraciones sobre el Problema Indígena en América”, in *América Indígena*, Volumen 2, Número 2, 1942, p. 23.
12. *Actas del Primer Congreso Indigenista Interamericano*, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, México, 1940.
13. Alfonso Caso, “Ponencia sobre protección de las artes populares”, in *Actas del Primer Congreso Indigenistas Interamericano*, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, México, 1940, p. 111.
14. Daniel F. Rubín de la Borbolla, “Las artes populares indígenas de América, supervivencia y fomento”, in *América Indígena*. Volumen XIX, número 1, enero, 1959, p. 5-42.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
16. Rick A. López, *Op. Cit.*, 2015, p. 289.
17. Rick A. López points out that, in fact, many of the artists who were in charge of building an indigenized identity had received their artistic education abroad, in the main centres of European international art. López, *Op. Cit.*, 2015, p. 297.
18. Caso, *Op. Cit.*, 1940, p. 106.

19. Dr. Atl, *Op. Cit.*, 1922, p. 11-12.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
21. Paul Oskar Kristeller, *El pensamiento renacentista y las artes*, Madrid, España, Taurus Ediciones, 1986, p. 181.
22. Moshe Barasch, *Teorías del arte. De Platón a Winckelmann*, Madrid, España, Alianza Editorial, 1991, p. 16.
23. Larry Shiner, *La invención del arte. Una historia cultural*, Barcelona, España, Paidós, 2004, p. 22.
24. Kristeller, *Op. Cit.*, p. 182-183.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 198- 200.
26. In seventeenth-century France, the visual arts were gaining more and more popularity, supported by the emergence of institutions created to protect them and also supported by the state. The *Académie Française* emerged in 1635 thanks to Richelieu “for the cultivation of French language, poetry and literature according to the model of the *Accademia della Crusca*.” And thirteen years later, in 1648, the *Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture* was created thanks to the support of Mazarino. Kristeller, *Op. Cit.*, p. 204-205.
27. Kristeller, *Op. Cit.*, p. 210-211.
28. Kristeller, *Op. Cit.*, p. 214 and Shiner, *Op. Cit.*
29. San Juan Cotzocón is located between parallels 17°01' and 17°37' N and meridians 95°07' and 95°51' W. Its altitude varies between 0 and 1,200 m. It borders, to the north, the municipality of Santiago Yaveo and the state of Veracruz de Ignacio de la Llave; to the east, the municipality of Matías Romero Avendaño; to the south, the municipalities of San Juan Mazatlán and San Miguel Quetzaltepec; to the west, the municipalities of Santa María Alotepec, Santiago Zacatepec and Santiago Yaveo. It occupies 1.49% of the state's surface and has 153 towns for a total population of 22,478 inhabitants. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, “México en cifras”, in *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [en línea]* México, 2010, available at: <http://www.beta.inegi.org.mx/app/areasgeograficas/?ag=20>.
30. The current composition of the Mixe district is 17 municipalities, one of which is San Juan Cotzocón. This district was created in 1838, with 18 municipalities. However, the Mixe territory is linguistically integrated by 19 municipalities. Currently, the state of Oaxaca consists of 30 districts in which 570 municipalities are distributed. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, *Anuario estadístico y geográfico de Oaxaca 2016*, México, INEGI, 2016.
31. Wichmann, “Mixe-Zoquean linguistics a status report”, 1994; Maldonado & Cortés, “La gente de la palabra sagrada. El grupo etnolingüístico ayuuk ja'ay (mixe)”, 1999; and Pardo Brüggmann & Acevedo, *La dinámica sociolingüística en Oaxaca*, 2013.
32. The Mixean languages of Oaxaca are inserted in the Mixean subdivision, which in turn belongs to the Mixe-Zoque trunk. In each main subdivision there are two languages called Popoluca. In the Mixeana branch there are ‘Oluta Popoluca’ and ‘Sayula Popoluca’ and in the Zoquean division, ‘Sierra Popoluca’ and ‘Texistepec Popoluca’. The Mixean division also includes a language called Tapachulteco, now extinct. Wichmann, *Op. Cit.*, p. 194.
33. Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, *Catálogo de lenguas indígenas nacionales. Variantes lingüísticas de México con sus denominaciones y referencias estadísticas*, México, INALI, 2009, p. 292.
34. Maldonado & Cortés, *Op. Cit.*, p. 100, n. 18.
35. Laureano Reyes, cited in Ana Sagi-Vela González & Ursula Thiemer-Sachse, “Nombres entre los ayuuk (ayuuk ja'ay) o mixes, Oaxaca, México”, in *Anthropos*, Vol. 100, No. 1, 2005, p. 152.
36. Frank J. Lipp, *The Mixe of Oaxaca. Religion, Ritual, and Healing*, Austin, University Texas Press, 1998, p. 1.
37. Martínez Pérez, cited in Sagi-Vela & Thiemer-Sachse, *Op. Cit.*, p. 153.
38. *Huipil* is a sleeveless rectangular women's garment, usually made from three canvases joined by sewing. It consists of three holes: a central hole, through which the head is inserted, and two lateral holes that function as sleeves.
39. Although there are older examples where the entire garment is completely white, with brocades that are also white.

40. This type of cotton, known as *coyuchi* or “coyote color”, includes a range of cotton of brown tones. Chloë Sayer, *Mexican Textile Techniques*, U.K., Shire Publications LTD, 1988, p. 17-18.
41. Tlacoyales consist of ribbons that were previously made from wool and are used to braid the hair. Currently, they have been replaced by commercial yarn.
42. Maldonado & Cortés, *Op. Cit.*, p. 105.
43. A weaver from Cotzocón told me that a meal is organized when the girls begin their learning. In addition, the space where the loom is installed must be respected: it must not be passed over or underneath the loom when it is attached to the weaving, doing so may cause the fabric never to be finished (field notes, 2015).
44. Mircea Eliade, *Tratado de historia de las religiones*, México, Ediciones Era, 1972, p. 21.
45. Lipp, *Op. Cit.*
46. Manuel Alberto Morales Damián, “Tejer en el árbol florido. Análisis comparativo de la lámina de Atamalualiztli, Primeros Memoriales y las imágenes de las deidades tejedoras en el Códice Madrid”, 2009, p. 98.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
48. Arzápalo, cited in Morales, *Op. Cit.*, p. 99.
49. Montoliú, cited in Morales, *Op. Cit.*, p. 99.
50. Stacy Schaefer, “El telar y el tiempo en el mundo huichol”, 2012, p. 258.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 273.
52. Recently, there has been active participation and reflection of the different design disciplines, which based on “training” mechanisms, have been directed to the idea of using “artisan work” to create new objects and products for “modern life”, tests that have been put into practice since the 1930s. See Rick A. López, *Op. Cit.*, 2010 and Victoria Novelo, *La capacitación de artesanos en México, una revisión*, México, Plaza y Valdés, 2003, p. 11.
53. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *Sobre la doctrina tradicional del arte*, Barcelona, Ediciones de la Tradición Unánime, 1983, p. 18.
54. For Lavaniegos, sacred art would comprise all types of traditional art. It would include the art of Prehistory, but also that of the “high ancient civilizations”, the art of the Middle Ages in Europe, the art considered as “primitive” by ethnology, but also the “popular arts linked to their handmade matrices” (and, rather, their sacred matrices) present in the “pre-modern cultures” extinct or in the process of extinction. Manuel Lavaniegos, “El arte y lo sagrado”, 2010, p. 55.
55. Coomaraswamy, *Op. Cit.*, p. 20.
56. Lavaniegos, *Op. Cit.*, p. 54.
57. *Ibid.*, p 55-56.
58. Coomaraswamy, *Op. Cit.*, p. 20.
59. In addition, this author has pointed out how the “authentic” work of art withered when it entered the era of its technical reproducibility. See Walter Benjamin, *La obra de arte en la época de su reproductibilidad técnica*, México, Editorial Itaca, 2003, p. 49-50.
60. Luis Garagalza, *La interpretación de los símbolos: Hermenéutica y lenguaje en la filosofía actual*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 1990, p. 18.