

Traditional Guatemalan garb makes its way onto the fashion runway

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A pair of wedges show toes designed by Karim Corzo with embroidered Guatemalan fabric sit on a shelf at a factory where the shoes are handmade in Guatemala City. Embroidered Mayan textiles known as huipiles are undergoing a revival in some of the country's finest boutiques as they become a haute couture fixture. Photo: AP Photo/Luis Soto

GUATEMALA CITY — For more than 1,000 years, the people of Guatemala have told stories and expressed their vision of the universe through their textiles.

In modern times, however, their traditional fabrics, called huipiles, have made them targets for discrimination, and marked them as part of the country's poor and indigeneous Mayan Indian civilization.

Now, embroidered Mayan textiles patterned with brightly colored animals and landscapes are being rediscovered in some of the country's finest boutiques. Young Guatemalan designers are using them for everything from evening gowns and purses to handmade shoes. They are sold as far away as Dubai in the Middle East.

For many here, the use of huipiles is part of a wider embrace of the country's roots in Mayan culture. Musicians, designers and even politicians are adopting Mayan languages and themes. This trend is also seen in other countries with strong native traditions, such as Bolivia and Mexico, where the clothing and culture of the traditional peoples are overcoming long-held prejudices.

Colors And Patterns That Dazzle

For Adela Qel, a 45-year-old indigenous Mayan woman wearing a huipil, the fashion world's acceptance reflects her own pride in the bright clothing.

"It doesn't bother me that they use the typical clothing because if they like it, I can't be mad about this," said Qel, who lives in rural Sacatepequez in northwestern Guatemala. "I am proud of my dress."

The fabrics come in dazzling colors. Woven in bands and geometric patterns, they are often worn as tunics or dresses. In Guatemala's design houses, the fabrics are fashioned into shoes, ties and purses that stand out from the usual sober colors displayed in high-end stores.

The Maria's Bags label has seen surprising success with its designs based on Mayan textiles. The label sells its purses in Bloomingdale's department stores around the world.

Fashion designer Eduardo Figueroa said modernizing the Mayan designs helps non-native people appreciate this ethnic fashion. Already, new creations based on Mayan textiles have been seen in the wardrobes of Guatemalan political figures and celebrities. And Guatemalans living in the United States and other countries have particularly embraced the designs, perhaps as a cure for their homesickness.

Figueroa, for one, won international recognition for the dress he designed for Guatemala's contestant at Miss World 2012, a bright orange gown with a spray of floral design at the shoulders. Fashion designer and Project Runway judge Nick Verreos rated the outfit as one of the contest's best.

"I am inspired by color and Guatemalan textiles are rich in color," Figueroa said. "There were people who would tell you that they thought that traditional textiles were just for cushions and tablecloths. But I tell them that these textiles can be used in a variety of creative ways."

Thousand-Year Roots To The Mayan Empire

Shoe designer Karim Corzo said the new trend gives the communities that have long made the fabrics an economic boost.

"They allow us to give work to the women who weave them and sell them," Corzo said.

Guatemalan rapper Tzutu Baktun Kan saw a larger cultural move toward his country's roots. These roots go back more than 1,000 years to a time when present-day Guatemala sat in the heart of the Mayan Empire.

"What we are trying to do is strengthen the Mayan languages that little by little are not being spoken," said Kan, who performs in the language of Tzutujil. "We want to open more spaces that break the ties of racism."

Not everyone, however, embraces that heritage.

Eduardo Ortiz, a high-fashion clothing designer, says he will not use traditional Guatemalan textiles. They aren't his style, and some Guatemalans won't accept them.

"Some people think they will look too indigenous with this type of clothing," the designer said.

From Colonial Control To Free Expression

Under Spanish colonial rule, native Guatemalans were forced to wear traditional outfits according to the region they lived in. This was so the authorities could better identify and control them. Over the years, their embroidery became a unique means for self-expression, said Alvaro Pop, a United Nations expert on indigenous cultures. The designs incorporated elements such as the Mayan calendar and images of magicians who people believed could take animal form.

"The Mayans took all their world views and their oral traditions, and expressed their thoughts and ideas on their outfits," Pop said.

In more recent decades, the fabrics have become more modern, with more colors mixed into the designs. This is so more Guatemalans would be willing to wear them, Corzo said.

That doesn't mean the new fashion comes cheap. A pair of high-fashion shoes runs from \$50 to \$150, and a gown can cost between \$300 and \$800. The price, according to the designers, is a result of the uniqueness of the designs and quality of the handmade products.

Eventually, Pop said, some of that money should go back to the communities, which are among the country's poorest and most ignored. One of their greatest remaining possessions, he said, is their ancient culture.

Ethnic fashion is trendy around the world, Pop said. But designers have to be very careful not to ignore the copyright of the creators. "Each textile they make is absolutely unique," he said. "They don't make it twice and that intellectual property should be paid for, too."

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from "Colors And Patterns That Dazzle" that provides a connection between Guatemalan textiles and ordinary inexpensive clothes.

- 2 All of the following are effects of Guatemalan textiles, EXCEPT:
 - (A) The products are boosting the economy where they are made.
 - (B) It is making the poor Guatemalan people wealthy.
 - (C) It is helping to reduce racism against the Mayan people.
 - (D) It is making non-native people appreciate ethnic fashion.

- 3 The article clarifies its claim that the Maria's Bags label has seen surprising success with its designs based on Mayan textiles by:
 - (A) providing a detailed vision
 - (B) providing an anecdote
 - (C) making a comparison
 - (D) stating a fact

- 4 The article makes the argument that for over 1,000 years the people of Guatemala have told stories and visions through their clothing by:
 - (A) comparing colorful Guatemalan designs of today to those of the past
 - (B) showing that prominent people are overcoming Guatemalan prejudices
 - (C) explaining how Guatemalan people expressed themselves under Spanish rule
 - (D) stating the uniqueness, quality and cost of each Guatemalan handmade product

Answer Key

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Paragraph 10:

"I am inspired by color and Guatemalan textiles are rich in color," Figueroa said. "There were people who would tell you that they thought that traditional textiles were just for cushions and tablecloths. But I tell them that these textiles can be used in a variety of creative ways."

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