

Background Information for the Teacher, K-2

Composed of modern day northern Mexico and the southwestern United States, the North American Southwest is one of the most important centers of handwoven textile production in the world. Over the past 2,000 years, weavers in this region have created a wide variety of textiles that express, in both design and technique, the changing circumstances of their lives and the extensive flow of ideas across cultural frontiers. The weavings presented here, drawn from the extensive textile collections of the Smithsonian Institution, testify to the skill and creativity of these weavers and to the dynamism of their weaving traditions.



Saltillo Poncho

ca. 1850

Mexico

This textile is a poncho, a sarape with an opening in the center for the head. It features the hallmarks of the Saltillo design style. These include a central serrated diamond motif that shares colors and design elements with a border, which are distinct from those of the background.

Saltillo-style textiles are widely regarded as among the finest in the world. Tightly woven with finely spun yarns, they combine dramatic color schemes with intricate design patterns to create a pulsating effect and the illusion of three dimensions. Because of the technical skill required to produce these strikingly beautiful textiles, they are highly prized by collectors.

The creation of Saltillo-style textiles is attributed to the Tlaxcalans, indigenous people of central Mexico. Before Spanish contact in 1519, the Tlaxcalans wove sophisticated textiles on backstrap looms, relying on cotton and other plant fibers for their raw materials. Soon after contact, they began producing equally outstanding textiles using wool and treadle looms adopted from the Spanish.

In 1521, the Tlaxcalans and Spanish defeated their common enemy, the Aztecs. In return, the Spanish awarded the Tlaxcalans special rights and privileges, and the Tlaxcalans supported Spanish efforts to integrate Indians farther north into the colonial system. By the late 16th century, they had established colonies as far north as New Mexico.

Perhaps the most famous of these colonies was San Esteban de Nueva Tlaxcala, founded in 1591 near Saltillo, today's capital of the Mexican state of Coahuila. San Esteban soon became a major center of woolen textile production and, according to most scholars, the place where the Tlaxcalans developed the new weaving style known as Saltillo.

The development of the Saltillo style was influenced by Spanish textile traditions, which in turn were influenced by Middle Eastern and Asian traditions.

Most Saltillo-style textiles are sarapes. The Saltillo sarape was a practical garment because its fine weave shielded the wearer from both rain and cold.

Josiah Gregg, who visited New Mexico in the 1830s, describes the Saltillo sarape:

This peculiarly useful as well as ornamental garment is commonly carried dangling carelessly across the pommel of the saddle, except in bad weather, when it is drawn over the shoulders, after the manner of a Spanish cloak, or as is more frequently the case, the rider puts his head through a slit in the middle, and by letting it hang loosely from the neck, his whole person is thus effectually protected.

By the late 18th century, Saltillo sarapes had become popular garments worn by men of all classes in the North American Southwest. After Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, these sarapes became a symbol of Mexican culture. Their popularity waned in the second half of the 19th century, as clothing styles changed and manufactured cloth became less expensive and more widely available.





Mexican Rebozo

ca. 1891

Mexico

This textile is a rebozo, or wrap. Women in many parts of the world, including Europe, Asia, and Africa, have worn various types of wraps for centuries. Early use of wraps can be traced to the Middle East, where Muslim women used them to cover their heads and faces. During the period of Islamic rule in Spain (711–1492 AD), they became popular with Spanish women, who used them as veils, scarves, and shawls. They grew in popularity in the Americas during the Spanish colonial period when they were used as shawls, face and head coverings, and aprons. Rebozos are also used to carry babies and a variety of items. In many cultures in the Americas they are part of women's daily dress, although today they are most closely associated with Mexico.

The delicate stripes in this rebozo were created through a complicated method of dyeing called ikat. The striped design of the main body of the piece is complemented by a net-like section and fringe on either end. All rebozos are decorated with some sort of fringe, which ranges from simple to ornate.

Ignatius Pfefferkorn, a Jesuit missionary in northern Mexico during the mid-18th century, noted the wide range in rebozo designs and how design differences reflected social status:

Rebozos are worn by all Spanish women in Sonora and in New Spain generally. They serve both as a covering and as an adornment. These cloths are elaborately worked with all kinds of pretty vari-colored figures. Some rebozos are made of pure cotton, others of mixed cotton and silk and still others of pure silk. The most costly are made of the finest silk with beautiful flowers and other ornaments of gold and silver woven into them. On the ends of all rebozos are long fringes of cotton, silk or gold and silver, according to the quality of the rebozo itself. Cotton rebozos are worn by the common people, and the silk ones by the gentler folk and the wealthier.

Following the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century, rebozos were mass-produced on treadle looms in workshops across Mexico, most notably in San Luis Potosí. Many were embroidered. Women also wove their own rebozos on backstrap looms. Elegant embroidered rebozos, typically of silk, were imported from Asia.



Hispanic Blanket

1930

Chimayó, New Mexico

In the 1920s Hispanic weavers in northern New Mexico developed a distinctive style of weaving, which is now included under the more general label of Rio Grande weaving. This blanket has horizontal bands framing a central motif, typical of this weaving tradition. This basic design scheme is elaborated in the blanket with a complex central diamond and number of smaller motifs, including arrows and birds.



Mayo Sarape
ca. 1960
Sonora, Mexico

This style of blanket is called a sarape. The Mayos did not weave sarapes before the arrival of the Spanish in their northwestern Mexican homeland in the 16th century and may have not begun producing them until the 19th century. Their sarapes are clearly inspired by Saltillo-style sarapes made by weavers in other areas of the North American Southwest. The elements the Mayo sarape and Saltillo poncho have in common are the dominant diamond design, centered on a simple background, and the border around the edges.

Among the Mayos, most weaving is done by women. Usually a woman weaves by herself but sometimes several women will work together to produce a single piece.

Starting around 1950, the Mayo did less weaving, as inexpensive machine-made blankets became available. In the 1970s, however, the high prices of handwoven textiles made by Navajo and Hispanic weavers in the

United States created a demand for Mayo weavings. In response, the Mayos improved the quality of their sarapes and cobijas, introducing new designs or reviving old ones, and reintroducing the use of natural dyes.



Tarahumara Blanket
ca. 1982
Chihuahua, Mexico

This blanket is woven entirely from handspun wool yarn and colored with natural dyes. A band of geometric design motifs framed by stripes is found at each end. This style of Tarahumara blanket is still common today, and museum collections document its existence at least as far back as the 19th century.

This blanket is a good example of how textiles reflect the flow of ideas across cultural boundaries. When the Spanish arrived in northern Mexico in the sixteenth century, they discovered that the ancestors of the Tarahumaras did not use cotton for weaving like most of their neighbors. Instead, they relied on wild plant fibers like maguey and Indian hemp. With the arrival of the Spanish, sheep became available to the Tarahumaras who eagerly formed their own flocks and replaced these plant fibers with wool. Interestingly, however, they did not change their basic approach to textile production—weaving continued to be the responsibility of women, who worked on the traditional horizontal loom.