Mexican Indian Costumes

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46. A San Pedro Quiatoni, Oaxaca, girl, wearing a fiesta *huipil*, with old ribbon, and a necklace of old trade beads. Her earrings in the shape of stylized birds are typical of the village and are hammered out of silver coins. (Zapotec). 1964

9. Jewelry

In Mexico before the coming of the Spaniards beautiful jewelry was made by highly developed craftsmen. They used gold, silver, jade, shell, and various kinds of precious and semiprecious stones, to laboriously fashion their intricate creations.

The simpler marginal groups used seeds, berries, and feathers. We find groups today, such as the Seris, Huichols, Lacandóns, and Huaves, who use shells, seeds, and even fish vertebrae (Huave) as adornment—possibly because these natural objects have magical or symbolic significance. They usually wear glass beads also and these are highly prized, especially when the region is difficult of access. When the Spaniards came, they brought with them glass beads which they used for barter. The Indians were attracted to these glittering new things, and they passed from hand to hand, penetrating into the most remote areas of the country.

When we were with the Huichols in 1937–1938, they much preferred to exchange the things we wanted to buy for beads, yarn, mirrors, and salt, than to sell them for money. At that time they wore sections of sweet-smelling twigs—perforated and strung like necklaces. We were told that these were worn for the pleasant odor, but they may have had another significance. The Huichols also string buttons and thimbles into their necklaces along with shells and seeds. However, small beads are greatly valued; those of glass—blue and white—are strung and twisted into ropes for both men and women (pls. 164 & 165). The Huichols have a greater love of adornment than any other group we have encountered in Mexico. Among them one of the most startling things we saw were puppies with pierced ears, and small tufts of wool hanging from the perforations, like earrings (pl. 113). At a fiesta we also noted dogs with necklaces of seeds.

The Seris still adorn themselves with shell necklaces, although they also sell them to tourists. We saw one old woman in Punta Chueca with half a pair of scissors hanging on a cord about her neck. This doubtless served a dual purpose as, aside from its decorative value, it was a useful instrument in the making of baskets. On another occasion the keys to our jeep were lost in the sand; after much searching we finally spotted them on a string about a woman's neck. They were returned with good grace.

Necklaces, rings, and earrings seem to be preferred to bracelets. The patterened bead bracelets of the Huichol men are well known, but other bracelets are rare. An unusual form of woman's bracelet has been observed, to our knowledge, in only three investigations: by Frederick Starr (in 1899); Johnson, Johnson and

113. Even the Huichol dogs are decorated. This one has a small earring made of a tuft of wool. Rancho El Limón, Nayarit. 1938

Beardsley (in 1962); and by ourselves (in 1937–1938, and in 1965). The bracelet referred to is a long string of glass or coral beads which may measure up to 110 inches or more. Those observed by Starr (1899, pl. XCV) are pictured on two Mixe women from Coatlán, Oaxaca. Each woman wears two of these bracelets, one on each wrist. According to our informant in 1965 in Cuatlamayán, San Luis Potosí, it was the custom for a girl to be given by her mother-in-law two long strings of beads, which were wrapped around both wrists. The Cuatlamayán woman in Plate VII wears them. These are very small black glass beads, and each string measures 110 inches in length. In 1937 we saw Huichol women with long single strands of beads wrapped about the wrists, but no special information was gathered about them.

Johnson, Johnson, and Beardsley (1962, p. 162) observed bracelets like the above, fashioned of highly polished coral beads interspersed with a few silver and glass beads. The beads were much larger than those of Cuatlamayán, and the strands measured 70–100 centimeters, making 6–10 revolutions about the wrist. These authors had the coral examined, and found that it was probably imported from the Philippines. These bracelets, according to photographs, were worn on one wrist only—the left or the right.

Probably a great deal of coral came into Mexico on the Manila galleons. It has always been highly valued in Indian Mexico. In Pinotepa Nacional in 1961 we found that one string of coral beads, about 23 inches long and of moderate size, was of value equal to one good native skirt with *caracol* stripes.

The long glass beads from San Pedro Quiatoni, Oaxaca, are interspersed with half-inch handmade polychrome beads with raised designs (pl. 46). These are pictured by William Orchard (1929, pl. XIII), and he says about them (pp. 89–90), that they are all of Venetian origin, and were not made in a factory, but were fashioned by families in their homes; this fact accounts for the great range in shape and decorative patterns. These beads, he says, have been collected from the Crows of Montana, the Blackfeet, the Comanche, and the Sioux Indians.

The necklaces from San Pedro Quiatoni were prized by the Indians in 1941–1942, and they usually did not wish to part with them. There is still no car or bus road to this village, but—isolated as they are—they have in recent years almost completely abandoned their old costume. Because of this, these necklaces are now more frequently found for sale in Mitla and Oaxaca City.

Another type of glass bead pictured by Orchard (1929, p. 87, fig. 84) is found especially in Oaxaca, and is described by him as also of Venetian origin. The bead is known to the trade as "Cornaline d'Aleppo," and is found widely distributed throughout the North American continent. According to Orchard these beads were received by the Indians through the Hudson Bay Company's trading posts. Orchard goes on to say that a more recent variety of the same general kind was the bead having yellow or white centers of opaque glass, with an outside covering of red transparent glass. These are of particular interest to us because they are widely found today in Mexico, especially in Oaxaca. They are strung with small birds, combs, and other small objects—all made of silver.

In the two Mixe villages of Mixistlán and Yacochi, women until recently wore 3½ pounds of beads (pl. 37). These had obviously been treasured, and handed down

from one member of the family to another, although, in some cases, the women had been buried in them.

Such beads range from large to small, and many are extremely old; especially a type of crude opaque blue glass bead, that may date from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. In these strings are many white opaque glass beads which may have come from China on the Manila galleons. These necklaces are usually composed of twenty or more strands.

The fashion in beads varies as do other fashions. In Usila, Oaxaca (Chinantec), in 1964 many strings of capsule-shaped modern red glass beads were worn with medals or with small gold crosses (pl. 114). In San José Miahuatlán, when they can afford them, women now wear strings of black glass beads—imitating the black jet beads formerly worn with silver medals.

On our last trip to San Mateo del Mar, Oaxaca (Huave), in 1963, we observed that most women wore only a single string of small glass beads. Women of Acatlán and Zitlala, Guerrero (Nahua), neighboring villages, wear the same costume, but may be distinguished by their beads. Acatlán women (1964) wear a single string of imitation yellow amber (pl. 115), and in Zitlala they wear a single string of red beads.

Silver was worked for decorative church objects as soon as the Spaniards came to Mexico and brought silversmiths. The imported craftsmen taught the Indians their own techniques. However, ancient traditions inherited by the Indians from their ancestors were apparent in designs executed for the many churches founded by religious orders. The following three districts of Oaxaca formerly had silver mines: the district of Ixtlán de Juárez; the district of Villa Alta; and the district of Choapan. These mines contributed to the production and popularity of silver objects, jewelry, and crosses in this region.

In Colonial times silver objects were supposed to be marked, and to contain a certain silver content; but in workshops in remote mountain villages sometimes a low grade of silver was used, and as far as we have seen there were no markings on small pieces—especially jewelry.

One of the important large centers which worked silver was the Sierra Juárez in Oaxaca, and from this region came the so-called Yalalag crosses. Julio de la Fuente (1949, p. 74, and footnote 17) gives three names for the crosses: (1) *Krus Yun* (Zapotec); (2) "Three Marys"; and (3) "Of Choapan"; the latter implying that the crosses were made in Choapan. These crosses have been well described (Davis and Pack, 1963, pp. 103–106), but we add some additional notes. In our opinion, the crosses were made in many centers. One of the most important was in and around the Zapotec villages of Choapan, Latani, and Comaltepec (all in Oaxaca)—in the Sierra Madre del Sur.

114. A Chinantec girl of Usila, Oaxaca, showing the striking hairdress and jewelry. 1964

When we were in Yalalag in 1938, the triple silver crosses (pls. 116 & 117) were seldom worn. Already small gilt crosses had superseded them. It was not difficult, however, to find or purchase old crosses; today they are practically nonexistent. At the Oaxaca Indian State Fair of 1941, only one Yalalag girl in a delegation