

Textiles of mesoamericanos



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The many cultural and artistic differences between the Pre Columbian societies made the Americas a breeding ground of beauty and fashion. The three famous societies; Aztecs, Mayans and Incans; each had an individual style that reflected their environment, morals and overall way of life. Though these civilizations inhabited the western hemisphere and were able to communicate to each other, no fashions within any two civilizations shared any important similarities when it came down to it. In fact, fashions within each society varied depending on their locations. Due to limited resources, these civilizations were forced to have some similarities when it came to dyes used on the fabric or fabric composition, but each was unique nonetheless. Before the conquistadors, the ancient Mesoamerican world was full of cultural fashion and textile differences and similarities that range from the type of cloth used to the way patterns were stitched.

Though these three very distinct civilizations, they did in fact share some very interesting similarities. These would include the substance the clothing was made of, the type of stitching used and even the dyes used to color the clothing. In each society, one could find some sort of cloth made from either white or brown cotton. For many people, cotton was readily available, though the Aztecs received the majority of theirs through trade (Ancient Aztec Clothing). Seeing that many of the societies made their textiles on backstrap looms, examples of similar weaving methods could be seen throughout the societies. The types of weaving techniques used by all the societies included supplementary warp, supplementary weft, complementary warp, gauze and tapestry, all of which can be seen on the attached sheet (Cloth & Clay).

Unlike modern methods, the people used many different types of earth-

friendly materials in order dye their fabrics. For example, in ancient Mexico, the color purple was obtained from mollusks secretions, and Incans created yellow with the use of certain trees in the coastal region (Cloth & Clay). Even with the similar make up, the three civilizations were still able to create a style of their own.

In the ancient Aztec society, men's clothing usually consisted of a loincloth known as a maxtlatl held together with either a string or belt, and a cloak or cape called a tilmatli that was worn knotted around one shoulder (6. Aztec Clothing). The type of tilmatli worn by a person would determine their status in society. Traditional women's clothing usually consisted of a blouse, the huipilli, and a skirt, the cueitl (6. Aztec Clothing). Similar to the tilmatli cape, sandals would determine one's place in society, as well, seeing as the majority of the population went barefoot. Men of nobility usually were the only ones with footwear, though even they were required to go barefoot when entering temples. Feathers were an important decoration in this society, mostly found adorning headdresses. In addition to feathers, jewelry was another important decoration. They used stones such as turquoise, emerald and jade as well as metals like copper, silver and gold to decorate their fabrics (5. Aztec Clothing). Some say that the Aztecs " wore a large amount of gold as a testament to the power and strength of their empire" (6. Aztec Clothing).

Traditional Mayan dress depended on the gender and class of the person. Men were usually seen wearing a type of colorfully decorated loincloth while women's clothing usually consisted of a colorful shirt (called a traje) and a long wrap around skirt (or a huipi) (Cultural Dress of the Maya). Single men's

clothing tended to be more colorful than that of married men. As for decorations, women tended to have long colorful ribbons called cintas braided into their hair, hoop earrings of silver or gold and sometimes even necklaces with glass beads (Cultural Dress of the Maya). As for the men, they carried a type of bag called a moral instead of wearing jewelry. The Mayan's natural dyes were used to produce colors such as orange, red, blue, purple, black and brown. In this culture the patterns created with these colors could be used as an indication of where the person is from.

The Incans were well known for their tunics. In addition to cotton, the Incans were known for making their textiles out of llama, alpaca, and vicuña wools, as well (Incans: Lords of Gold and Glory). In fact the type of fabric used in this society could be well used as an indicator of the status of that person. For example, the most basic type of fabric was known as the Awaska with a thread count of about 120 usually made from llama wool. The next class of fabric was known as qunpi, made from alpaca wool by men, and was used to be given as gifts. The last class was called acllahuasi, made out of vicuña wool by the virgin females of the sun god temple (Incans: Lords of Gold and Glory). Fabrics of this kind were used solely for religious or royal purposes. Interestingly, they had a thread count of over 600 which had not even been challenged until the industrial revolution. Unlike weavers of other civilizations, the Incans prized complexity over efficiency when it came to their weaving. They used techniques such as discontinuous warp or weft and cross-knit looping, which both are found only in this area (Cloth & Clay). The discontinuous style could have easily been achieved by using simpler methods. It is believed that the Incans associated more time with their

textiles because it was used as a method of communication (Cloth & Clay). This can be seen with the use of the quipu, a device that depended on the arrangement of a series of colors, knots and cords to be read back later (Cloth & Clay).

Pre-Colombian Mesoamerican fashion may be described as simple, yet colorful. The textiles of the Aztec, Mayan and Incan societies have many similarities, like the type of cloth and weaving techniques used. In contrast, these societies share many differences, too. For example, the purpose of textiles in Aztec culture was used to indicate status, while in Mayan culture it was used to determine where one came from, and in Incan culture it was used as a form of writing. In conclusion, the Ancient Mesoamericans produced a variety of textiles from different materials using similar techniques to serve many different functions.

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