Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MEXICO - COSTUME DOLL G152



This doll is made of celluloid. It was manufactured in Japan, probably about 1930, and exported to Mexico. The doll was dressed in Mexico - the skirt, hat and baskets are all handmade.

Celluloid is highly flammable and also easily decomposes. It is no longer widely used. However, in the 1870s, when the brand-name Celluloid was registered, it offered manufacturers a cheap alternative to many natural products, especially expensive ivory.



Doll makers also quickly realised how useful it could be. In the 1870s, dolls were nearly all breakable and fragile - bisque and china dolls were easily shattered and papier mache and wax easily ruined. By the early 1900s, celluloid dolls were plentiful and they continued to be widely made until the 1940s.

Left: A Japanese celluloid doll from the 1930s, dressed as a soldier.

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It is not possible to be specific about the region of Mexico where the costume worn by this doll may come from. There are many different tribal peoples that are native to Mexico. The Mexican state recognises 62 indigenous languages as having the same validity as Spanish in the regions in which they are spoken. Some languages are used by only a small number of people, but others are thriving. About 1 ½ million people speak Nahuatl.

Even within language groups there is great variety. Costumes vary from village to village. The photographs on this page show just a few of the costumes that can still be seen, although many are no longer worn by young people.



Clockwise from top left: Otomi women in San Ildefonso Tultepec in the State of Queretaro; Nahua women from Acatapec near the municipal capital of Huautla, Hidalgo; two indigenous women from Chiapas; a Mazahua woman from Barrio Bombaro in the district of Temascalcingo, the State of Mexico.

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The clothes which the doll is wearing are similar to those worn by the Otomi woman, from the village of San Gregorio Macapexco, shown on the right. The most distinctively Mexican garment is the poncho-like garment worn around the shoulders. This is called a quechquemitl. The lady from San Gregorio Macapexco can be seen displaying her quechquemitl in the photograph below left.





The quechquemitl dates from before the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico. Women and priests wore this type of garment (below right) and goddesses were often depicted wearing them in statues and paintings. In the past it was the only garment worn on the upper body by women, but today it is used as an overgarment similar to a shawl.



Most quechquemitl are made from two rectangles of handwoven cloth stitched together so that the end of one rectangle is attached to the side of the other. Sometimes the points of the square hang in front and back, but other quechquemitl are intended to be worn with the points hanging to the sides, over the shoulders instead.



The doll's quechquemitl has been simplified into a simple strip of cloth, which means it doesn't hang properly at the front. A long rectangular shawl is known in Mexico as a rebozo. Rebozos vary in size from 1.5 to 3 metres. They can be made of cotton, wool or silk. They are often used by women to carry children (left) and to take products to the market.

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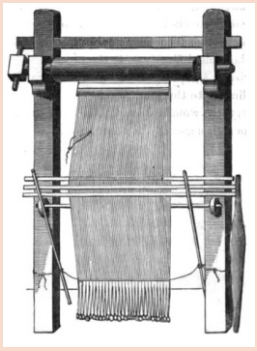
Mexican traditional clothing often features colourful and intricate patterns. The process of weaving such clothing is typically performed using a back strap loom (left). Such looms have been around for thousands of years. They are known around the world - the photograph right shows a lady from Indonesia using one. In South America they are used from Mexico down to Peru.



A loom is a piece of equipment that holds the threads tight while they are being woven together. One of the earliest looms was probably the kind known as a warp-weighted loom (right). With these looms the warp threads are suspended from a branch or piece of wood and each has a weight attached (often just a stone) so that they are held taut. The weft threads would be pushed into place by hand or a stick. This stick later became a device called a shuttle.

With a backstrap loom, instead of tying the warp threads to a branch and weighing them down with a stone, the threads are tied around the weaver's waist at one end and around a stationary object such as a tree, post, or door at the other. They are kept taut simply by leaning back. Backstrap looms are easily moveable, since they can simply be rolled up and used almost anywhere.



Back strap looms are time consuming to set up, but they allow the weaver to produce very long pieces of cloth. The width of the cloth produced is limited by the width of the weaver's reach. However, these narrower pieces can be laid side by side and then stitched together to form a single broad piece of cloth. Many brightly coloured quechquemitl are constructed in this way.



Right: Patterned belts, woven at San Marco Tlacalpan, Mexico. This town maintains a strong textile tradition with many weavers. The lady shown weaving at the top left is from this town, as is the quechquemitl shown above.