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Davis, Virginia, "Ancient Traditions, New Interpretations: Compression Resist Textiles in North and Mesoamerica" (2000). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 772.

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Ancient Traditions, New Interpretations: Compression Resist Textiles in North and Mesoamerica

Virginia Davis

Anasazi pieces from the Southwest USA, circa 1100 – 1300 AD, are known having compression resist patterning by tying or stitching. These may possibly show influence from further south. In Mexico, tie and stitch resist is seen in pre-Hispanic indigo dyed brown cotton fragments recovered in the region of Tehuacán, Puebla. The codices are rich in depiction suggesting tie-dye, in particular, the cloak of Nezahualpilli, Lord of Texcoco, Codex Ixtlilxóchitl, analyzed by Dr. Patricia Anawalt. Nezahualpilli, means in Nahuatl “blue knot,” linguistically reflecting the design in the legitimizing cloak. Codex Mendoza shows tribute to the Aztecs with tie design from an area where present day Otomi live. In the Otomi area of Hidalgo, Elsie MacDougall collected tie and stitch skirts in wool in 1935-36. Señora Romuala Olgún, created tie dye samples for MacDougall. Further fieldwork in Vizarrón, Queretaro by Irmgard W. Johnson in the early 1950s. also records the technique. In 1977, Dr. Ruth Lechuga, discovered one remaining practitioner of the technique, Sra. Delores Aguilar, near Vizarrón. These Otomi skirts exhibit certain European elements: floral motif, peasant style with a waistband, and the material, wool. This European influence and possible Asian elements may be syncretic with a technique that existed precontact. As the mestiza costume developed from the 18th century on, one form that evolved is the *china poblana* costume, now standardized in red, green and white. Perhaps the skirts described above are an earlier stage of this development, with the simpler form persisting in isolated villages into the 20th century.

Virginia Davis works with ikat weaving and other resist techniques, both as an internationally exhibited artist and from a technical, historical, and ethnographic point of view. Her awards include a Fulbright to India and four Visual Artist grants from the NEA and the New York State Council for the Arts. Her MA in Sociology/Anthropology is from the University of Illinois, Urbana. While a graduate student, she assisted Oscar Lewis on an anthropological field trip to Mexico. In 1991, she published “Resist Dyeing in Mexico: Comments on Its History, Significance, and Prevalence” in *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes*. As a recipient of a joint NEA/Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes award in 1995, she, with Irmgard W. Johnson, researched Mexican stitch-and-tie resist skirts.