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Weaving Authenticity: Artesanías or the Art of the Textile in Chiapas, Mexico [poster]

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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Weaving Authenticity

Artesanías or the Art of the Textile in Chiapas, Mexico

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Introduction

Textiles are transient. They cross borders and change function or definition based on their social use. In order to understand the multifaceted role of textiles for the present-day Maya in Mexico, I looked into the social life of Mayan backstrap weaving through spaces from the market to the museum. I aim to unravel the ideologies around authenticity and reweave an argument in favor of viewing Mayan textiles as contemporary art.

Methods

Within my six months of fieldwork in Zinacantán (within the Mexican state of Chiapas), I pursued the following: working for Mujeres Sembrando la Vida (MSV); recording six formal interviews with weavers from five different municipalities; learning the tourist perspective as a resident of San Cristobal de las Casas; exploring the artisan market, volunteering for the main textile museum, Centro Textiles del Mundo Maya (CTMM); and learning how to weave on the backstrap loom in the styles of San Juan Cancuc and Zinacantán. These experiences fulfilled my objectives of

- 1) understanding the ideologies from the Mayan and tourist perspective and social life of textiles and
- 2) describing Mayan backstrap weaving as a contemporary art.

Definitions

- *Artesanía*: textiles as a commodity for the tourist
- *Arte popular (folk art)*: textiles as utilitarian objects of the past
- *Art*: can be the work of a designer in communities as contemporary practice

Observations and Analysis

Authenticity in Museums: The Case of the Wedding Huipil

- Museums often highlight ways in which textiles are traditional and relate to the past, ignoring current experiences and innovations by communities.
- CTMM taught a class on a feather brocade technique brocade technique from Zinacantán and claimed it was dying out with only four families knew how to do the special brocade.
- Yoli, the main organizer of Cooperativa Mujeres Sembrando la Vida, a Zinacantec cooperative told me that this isn't the case; anyone who can brocade can do the feather design. To her, the technique will not disappear.
- Museums neglect ways in which the contemporary culture is changing.

Right: Feathered wedding huipil remade by María Santiago González to replicate wedding huipiles of the past. Left: Doña Magdalena (the founder of MSV) shows her wedding huipil made in the 1970s. This took her about a month to make.

Production of Authenticity in Cooperatives

- Cooperatives must constantly authenticate their work according to the beliefs of tourist.
- Anthropologist, NGO's and designers become "middlemen" that assist with access to global markets.
- Relationships with middlemen range from collaborative to exploitative.
- In collaborative relationships, weavers have autonomy over their art.
- In exploitative relationships, particularly with designers, weavers may often face problems of artistic appropriation and language barriers.

Left: Pascuala, MSV member, works on a complicated brocade pattern. Right: MSV members meet and discuss details of their designs.

Analysis of Textiles as Art

- Textiles must be understood through visual *affect*.
- Affect may include changes in technologies and technique, but more importantly the deep phenomenological qualities.
- The ability to adapt to a constantly changing social world makes Mayan textiles a art.

Conclusions & Hopes for the Future

- Textiles as art must highlight the **lived experience** of makers.
- Global partnerships must foster a sense of **collaboration**.
- Museum spaces must create exhibitions of collaboration that highlight the **continued evolution of community textiles**, rather than holding onto the idea of preservation of the past through daily use.
- Finally, we must work towards the **intellectual property rights of communities**. When designs are protected legally, weavers will be taken seriously by all partners in this structural system on a national and international level. If textiles are protected legally as property of the communities, then this will begin to unravel the system of art categorization.