

REVIEWS

MADE IN MEXICO: THE REBOZO IN ART, CULTURE AND FASHION, 6 JUNE–31 AUGUST 2014

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The eye-catching orange, yellow and pink solid geometric *façade* of the Fashion and Textile Museum (FTM), located in Bermondsey, South London, with its interesting interplay of light and dark shapes, was designed in 2003 by the Mexican architect Ricardo Legoretta (1931–2011), winner of the International Union of Architects Gold Medal (1999) and the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal (2000). It is the first and only building designed by Legoretta in Europe, and therefore presents itself as an appropriate setting for the ‘first-ever exhibition on the Rebozo – the classic Mexican shawl made famous in twentieth century culture by artist Frida Kahlo’.

The enveloping *rebozo*, which is derived from the Spanish verb *rebozar* (to cover), is a long flat rectangular garment woven from cotton, silk, wool or, more recently, synthetic fibres. It is used interchangeably by Mexican women of all social classes as a scarf or shawl, wrapped or draped around the body and/or head. The *rebozo* has a multitude of uses and can be fashioned into a sling to carry infants or produce, worn formally or informally as an accessory, used as a shroud when entering church or during mourning, or simply as a shield from the sun, wind or rain. The exact origins of this capacious article of clothing are uncertain, although it is generally understood to have emerged in the early colonial period, as Mexican artisans began to reinterpret the embroidered mantillas and shawls worn by the Spanish. In the decades following the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the *rebozo* underwent a rehabilitation and became celebrated as part of a renewed patriotic national interest in *mexicanidad*, as many embraced Mexico’s *mestizo* and indigenous past. For the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo de Rivera (1907–1952), wearing the *rebozo* was a political gesture that demonstrated solidarity with the rural labourers of her country, but also claimed the beauty of these textiles, adorned as they were

with unique hand-knotted fringing and ikat weaving techniques, in defiance of the predominant Eurocentric fashions of the time.

'Made in Mexico: The Rebozo in Art, Culture and Fashion' traces such sartorial milestones in an extensive and historically informed account of the evolution of the *rebozo* from the seventeenth century to the present day, and opens with the exquisite collection of Belgian diplomat Robert Everts (1878–1942). Everts began acquiring and documenting Mexican textiles, ceramics, glass and silverware during his appointment to the Belgium legation in Mexico from 1902 to 1904. The exhibition also makes use of loans from the Franz Mayer Museum, Mexico City (its next destination in Spring 2015), the Museum of Textiles, Oaxaca, and the British Museum, London. The exhibition celebrates the indigenous craft skills and artistic excellence entailed in the production of the *rebozo*, which is still woven using long-established production techniques. In addition to the expected, and exceptional, *rebozos* displayed in glass vitrines or hung up throughout the gallery, the exhibition also features clothing, photographs, paintings, sculptures and installations. It includes contributions by contemporary Mexican and British fashion and textile designers, artists and photographers including Kaffe Fassett, Carla Fernandez, Francisco Toledo, Graciela Iturbide and, perhaps unsurprisingly, given that she is the founder of FTM (now operated by Newham College of Further Education) and still has an active role in its direction and development, Zandra Rhodes.

Rhodes travelled to Mexico in 1975 and on her return produced the brightly coloured and intricately patterned 'Mexican Collections' (1976–1978),



Figure 1: Eighteenth-century rebozo from the Franz Mayer Collection, Formerly Robert Everts Collection. Copyright: Museo Franz Mayer.

which drew inspiration from the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures that she had experienced in Mexican art, architecture and everyday life. The 'Mexican Collections' included the 'Mexican Sombrero' print, inspired by embroidered sombreros laid out on a market stall that Rhodes had photographed 'aerial-view' from a distance, and the diamond-shaped 'Mexican Turn-around' print, which featured pebble-like detailing influenced by the Aztec brickwork that she had observed close-to. As Rhodes recalls:

I went with a boyfriend in a Volkswagen camper around Mexico and actually hated it at the time. I mean Mexico is an amazing country but going there in about 1975-76 it wasn't really very equipped for campers. But anyway, I visited a lot of the Mayan sites and saw all of the brickwork. The bricks were cemented together with little stones, so I did drawings of the Aztec ruins with the little tiny stones all pressed in. I did drawings of women in the marketplace. All the time I must have been waiting for something to happen for me... so, that's how the Mexican collection was born.

<http://www.zandrarhodes.ucreative.ac.uk/2013/02/the-mexican-collections.html>

Rhodes' own cursory engagement with Mexican visual culture juxtaposes motifs, objects, silhouettes and decoration from Mexican history with little consideration of regional variation or historical significance. She reduces Mexico to an exotic spectacle that is understood only in terms of what its foreign allure can provide for her, namely in terms of stereotypical 'ethnic' inspiration for future collections.

My main concern, prior to attending the exhibition, was whether 'Made in Mexico: The Rebozo in Art, Culture and Fashion' might replicate Rhodes' own, seemingly rather limited, understanding of Mexico's rich visual and cultural history. On first glance, the title of the exhibition, with its unimaginative use of alliteration, puts forward a seductive generalization that suggests the monolithic nature of Mexico and stresses the separateness of Mexican cultural products such as the *rebozo*. It fails to take into account the extent of Mexico's cross-cultural interaction with the rest of the world, and within its own borders, throughout the colonial period and following independence from Spain in 1821. This is reinforced by the use of the well-known and extensively documented Frida Kahlo, described by the accompanying catalogue as 'the most famous proponent of the *rebozo*' – by now an all too familiar, perhaps even obligatory, reference in any European or North American discussion of Mexican art and fashion. A seated Kahlo adorns the front of the exhibition catalogue and main page of the website (<http://ftmlondon.org/ftm-exhibitions/made-in-mexico-the-rebozo-in-art-culture-fashion/>). She sports a deep pink *rebozo* and her own eclectic interpretation of Tehuana dress, the traditional clothing worn by women in the Tehuantepec region of Mexico. In this particular image, photographed by Nicholas Murray in 1941, Kahlo wears a white embroidered huipil blouse, a long sweeping skirt with embroidered ribbons in blue and green, a floral headdress, and gold and silver jewellery. The use of this image was no doubt a considered choice by the guest curator, Hillary Simon, a costume designer, artist and former head of the Costume department at GMTV breakfast television, who worked in collaboration on the exhibition with FTM in-house curator, Dennis Nothdurft. Kahlo is appropriated as an iconographic symbol of Mexican identity, an ethnic signifier and marketable

commodity, to promote the exhibition to a European audience and incite their interest in the *rebozo*. Unfortunately, the curators neglected to highlight that to many Mexicans, as Maria Claudia Andre has explained in detail (2005: 253), Kahlo's choice of dress represented an exaggerated Mexicanization of Mexico, which challenged the contemporary consensus concerning fashion, just as much as it challenged the 'traditional' conventions of Tehuana women's dress. My reservations about the exhibition were not easily assuaged by the weekly event, 'Thursday Nachos Night', advertised on the website as: 'Enjoy a taste of Mexico at the Museum... followed by a complimentary beer or soft drink with tortilla chips in the Museum café'.

However, on entering the museum space, I was pleasantly surprised, not least by the absence of much information concerning Kahlo, but by the interdisciplinary layout of the exhibition and the exhibits chosen for inclusion, all of which presented a far more nuanced grasp of Mexico, as an interrelated society that has undergone extensive miscegenation and creolization over many millennia. This widespread cultural interaction and exchange has had huge implications on Mexican visual and material culture, as the text panels point out, which now bears the imprint of Spanish, Indian, French and even Asian influence. The exhibition begins with an introduction to Mexican identity and textiles, describing the country as 'a rich tapestry in which many threads [local and international] are woven together', and demonstrates this through the objects exhibited, which include four reproductions of early lithographs from the Franz Mayer Museum Library, showing early uses of the *rebozo* in everyday life, and a *China Poblana* outfit from the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, Mexico City from c. 1950. This colourful outfit is a hybrid ensemble, comprised of a *rebozo*, an European petticoat, a colourfully embroidered Spanish-style blouse, a skirt in contrasting colours, white stockings, silk shoes, a neckerchief and an abundance of lace, sequins, and jewellery, which demonstrates the emergence of a self-aware and identity-conscious sartorial discourse in post-Revolutionary Mexico.

The exhibition moves on to demonstrate the extraordinary construction and high level of craftsmanship involved in the production of the *rebozo*. It provides detailed descriptions of traditional production methods, which differ depending on the indigenous community by which they are produced, and the contrasting environmental conditions of their habitations, whether hot, arid desert, high mountain peaks, tropical lowland forests, deep canyons or fertile valleys. The objects and text panels provide the viewer with a far more nuanced and complex interpretation of Mexico's geographical landscape than the cheerful inclusion of various-shaped cacti dotted throughout the exhibition space.

Heading upstairs towards the mezzanine floor of the exhibition space, a series of black and white photographs of indigenous Mexican women wearing the *rebozo*, produced by Mexican photographer Lourdes Almeida, are carefully mounted and framed in white. Posed against a pale flat background, the photographs (an example can be seen in Figure 2, which depicts Juanita Esquivel Masahua) bring into relief the generic profile of the subjects. They draw upon the aesthetic of Mexican ethnographic photography: a typological study of the figure, front-facing, positioned one by one in the frame, and isolated in a bright and evenly lit shallow space. The difference, however, is that this series of photographs were taken in 2000. Furthermore, rather than gloss over surface particularities in favour of generalised forms, the elevating angle and close-up details of silent faces peering straight back at the viewer, work to undermine a deterministic reading of the images. The *rebozo* is used to

indicate a range of social differences of the wearer; for example, when worn canopy-like over the head, it indicates that a woman is not married but open to finding a husband. The many different ways of wearing the *rebozo* are intricately documented by Almeida's camera and illuminate the self-fashioning of her subjects, who are neither fragile nor static in the face of her camera's lens, but inventive and resourceful. These images form part of a display that illustrates the many uses of the *rebozo* in contemporary life and, whilst there is no explicit acknowledgement of what many urban Mexicans are wearing, particularly those living in Mexico city (which has a population of twenty million and rising), the curators do demonstrate how the *rebozo* is being used and worn in new and varied ways amongst rural indigenous communities. This offers a dynamic counterpoint to the increased dismissal of many indigenous languages and sartorial practices by urban Mexicans in the twenty-first century, whose only experience of indigenous dress is via the colourful and vibrant advertisements used to promote indigenous Mexican tourism to foreigners.

The upstairs space of the exhibition delves further still into these pertinent issues, and explores the re-interpretation of the *rebozo* in contemporary art and fashion. Mexican designer Carla Fernández travels to collaborate with



Figure 2: Juanita Esquivel Masahua, 2000. Lourdes Almeida. Copyright: Lourdes Almeida.



Figure 3: *Juanita Esquivel Masahua*, 2000. Lourdes Almeida. Copyright: Lourdes Almeida.

indigenous weavers throughout Mexico, creating designs with an urban, sober re-interpretation of the *rebozo*. Such collaborations are not without their problems, since issues concerning the cultural appropriation of garments such as the *rebozo* for commercial gain inevitably arise, although Fernandez, amongst others, has worked to establish measures that promote self-sufficiency for weavers and sustainability in these small communities.

The interdisciplinary layout of 'Made in Mexico' encourages the viewer to move freely back and forth in time, forming visual, conceptual and cross-cultural links between past and present. In doing so, it evades an essentialized interpretation of Mexico and Mexican visual and material culture such as that put forward by the exhibition title. In many ways, the objects require no context to justify them or further enrich our understanding of them: rather they are entities that complete themselves with their exquisite craftsmanship, extraordinary construction, and relevance to contemporary problems faced by indigenous peoples in Mexico, whose cultural achievements are becoming increasingly overlooked with the country's rapid pace of economic prosperity.

REFERENCE

Andre, M. C. (2005), 'Frida and Evita: Latin American icons for export', in R. Root (ed.), *The Latin American Fashion Reader*, London: Berg, pp. 247–63.

ALTA MODA, DALLAS CONTEMPORARY

Reviewed by José Blanco F., Dominican University

Mario Testino is a world-renowned celebrity and fashion photographer. Mario Testino has photographed successful advertising campaigns for brands such as Burberry, Versace and Gucci. Mario Testino has created portraits for a number of celebrities, including Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Moss and even the British Royal family. Mario Testino's photography is a constant presence in fashion spreads and other editorial features in the top fashion magazines of the world. Mario Testino's work has been celebrated with a number of museum and gallery exhibits. Mario Testino makes an appearance on R. J. Cutler's documentary *The September Issue* (Cutler, 2009) about *Vogue* magazine. Mario Testino is Peruvian.

That last fact still comes as a surprise to many people. His work is – if you will – not what people expect from a Latin American photographer. This is a fact that, surprisingly, confuses people just as much as it confuses them to learn that the most famous pin-up artist of all time, Alberto Vargas – known as Varga – was also Peruvian. Therefore, to some, walking into a Mario Testino photography exhibit titled 'Alta Moda' and finding 30 large portraits featuring examples of traditional Peruvian costumes may come as a surprise – albeit a really good one. The images themselves are striking, the costumes intricately elaborate, colourful and, simply put, beautiful. The setting, the lighting, the focal point of the photographs, all show the masterful touch of an accomplished artist. The exhibit itself, as set at the Dallas Contemporary, was awe inspiring from the moment one set foot in the space.

Testino was born in Lima, the Peruvian capital, but moved as a young man to London, where he eventually became a world-famous photographer. In 2012, he founded MATE, the Museo Mario Testino, in Lima. The museum holds a permanent collection of his fashion photography and organizes temporary photography exhibits. Testino's contribution to the artistic landscape of Lima was welcomed as a sign of the photographer's desire to invest in his native country. He took this desire to revisit his roots a step further when, in 2007, he decided to photograph locals wearing traditional attire after discovering an archive of costumes from Cusco, the Peruvian Inca capital. Cusco is a region particularly known for the colourful dress worn by its people. The word 'traditional' is often used to refer to this type of clothing. Scholars argue that the term traditional may reflect the erroneous notion that clothing in areas other than Europe and the United States has not been exposed to change and alterations that may respond to the adopting of new trends or styles. In that sense, the traditional Peruvian attire seen in the images captured by Testino must be understood as a material culture product that has been in constant change. In the twenty-first century, what is described as traditional dress in Peru is a fusion of pre-Columbian clothing and Spanish peasant dress. These elements, along with colourful additions from a variety of influences, began appearing in the nineteenth century, when Peru became independent from Spain.

The images presented in Testino's exhibit indeed aim to highlight the idea of timelessness that is often associated with traditional dress. The photographer's process also reflects that approach, since Testino drew inspiration

from the work of another Peruvian photographer, Martin Chambi. Chambi is considered one of the first indigenous Latin American photographers, as he created portraits for a number of people in the Andes region from 1927 until his death in 1973. Testino's approach to Chambi's work was almost archival, as he aimed to emulate Chambi's images as closely as possible. For that purpose, Testino approached Chambi's grandchildren to obtain their support and even managed to unearth the original backdrops used by Chambi for the series of images that inspired Testino's collection.

'Alta Moda' was first exhibited in 2013 at MATE in Lima, with subsequent shows in Paris and New York. This review is based specifically on the showing at Dallas Contemporary, a non-collecting art museum presenting work from regional, national and international artists. Dallas Contemporary's vast space created a strong impression from the moment we walked into the space. I noticed immediately that there were very few partitions in the gallery space; thus, the setting allowed visitors to get a general glance at Testino's work immediately. The walls were painted black or in a deep shade of red, and the lights were perfectly positioned to highlight each one of the large images on display – almost giving them the aura of a religious painting on a massive dark cathedral. I became very anxious as the nice young man at the entrance was providing us with general information about the gallery and asking us to sign the registry book. Our host mentioned that we should start with the video that was playing in a room at the back of the gallery. From the very entrance, the show looked so enthralling and magnificent that I could barely contain myself, and I almost resented his idea of keeping us any longer from the immediate experience of enjoying the photographs. The video, however, was a crucial introduction to the exhibit, as it contextualized the images in the geographic and historic setting and narrated the story of how Testino was – in part – trying to recreate Chambi's work.

The main event, however, is the images themselves displayed in all their glory at Dallas Contemporary. The walls at Dallas Contemporary were painted black, pink and red to provide a more dramatic backdrop for the exhibit. The black walls worked perfectly to create emphasis on the images. The ghostly and dramatic lighting – without keeping the area in total darkness – emphasized the paintings themselves and sometimes even gave them an air of otherworldliness, which increased the exhibit's general impression of grandeur. The pink and red walls had a similar effect, while also enlivening the pictures by picking up a cue from the predominantly warm colours in the images. The theatricality in the images was astounding. Indeed, they resemble old theatre or movie posters; at the very least, they look like performance shots for a play with very elaborate costumes. To the eye unaccustomed to clothing as colourful as portrayed here, this theatrical setting may provide a distancing effect. In this way, Testino and the exhibit designers at Dallas Contemporary allow us to enjoy the images as those of 'the other'. As I realized this, I decided that this could actually be what Testino wanted: to highlight the beauty of Peruvian traditional costumes, but to present it as exotic and distant. The remoteness of the subjects is enhanced by their poses. They are clearly not moving or posing at their own will, but merely following the photographer's *mise-en-scène*. Like the models in fashion photography, they may be read merely as inanimate objects dressed and arranged in space to create the photographer's vision. Furthermore, in most cases we do not see the faces of the people wearing the clothes – some are not facing the camera, others are wearing masks. Obscuring or hiding their faces works as an additional tool to create

a distancing effect. However, the decision – whether Chambi’s or Testino’s – also sacrifices a part of the humanity of the pieces. This evidences a problematic issue with the common approach to traditional clothing from around the world. We seem to be able to enjoy these colourful ensembles primarily because we are reminded of their exoticism. The view from Testino’s camera privileges the costumes over the subjects wearing them. We learn more about the colour and design in these ensembles than we learn about the people and their culture. We miss many of the nuances of regional dress and lack information about the festivities and other special occasions where the pieces are worn. This is the only thing missing from some of the portraits, a true connection between the pieces being worn and those who wear them. The most enjoyable portraits are indeed those who show a human face. Somebody actively engaged with the costumes they are wearing, a body with agency and not a body-as-mannequin to display picturesque and elaborate textiles and garments. However, this is clearly not Testino’s approach. He is not looking at these objects with the eyes of an anthropologist or someone researching material culture. He is presenting these images as an alternative form of fashion photography. As that, Testino’s work, as usual, is brilliant, and the exhibit at Dallas Contemporary is a one-of-a-kind experience.

REFERENCE

Cutler, R.J. (2009), *The September Issue*, New York: A&E IndieFilms.