



The Saltillo Sarape

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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History

During the colonial period of Spain's New World empire, unique textiles referred to as Saltillo sarapes were woven in the area now known as Mexico. In this region, wearing blankets were produced of such exceptional beauty that their fame became truly international in scope.

The precise history of Saltillo sarapes is not known. Even the most basic information – origin of design elements, identities of artisans and owners, exact places and conditions of manufacture – remains subject to speculation. Although private journals, government reports and general histories of the region mention these garments, very few of them include much detail, and often the data that can be gleaned from such sources are contradictory. In this essay, a brief summary of some of what is known about Saltillo sarapes is presented. Further facts about the origin, development and eventual decline of these garments must await more extensive research into primary sources such as trade records, hacienda inventories, wills, dowries and industrial and labor legislation of the colonial era.

The sarapes that are the central focus of this discussion are known by the generic term "Saltillo" after the town of Saltillo, in the present state of Coahuila. In actuality, many sarapes were not produced in Saltillo; rather, there were weaving centers throughout Mexico, including mining communities, sprawling cattle and sheep ranches and vast agricultural settlements. Because Saltillo gained fame as a center of trading, the term "Saltillo" gradually came to be associated with any finely woven sarape of that time. Besides Saltillo, San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Puebla, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas and other cities are among those mentioned as having produced fine sarapes of similar quality and design.

Sources of Design

Tracing the development of the Saltillo sarape is complicated at the very outset by controversy over the origin of the sarape itself. It is generally accepted that this type of wearing blanket was not indigenous to Mexico, but represents, as so many other Mexican arts do, a unique blend of native and Spanish elements.

While the exact evolution of the sarape is far from explicit, the pattern of development of the sarape called Saltillo is somewhat clearer. In its classic form, the Saltillo sarape manifests certain design elements that help to explain its history.

The skillful use of colored yarns to achieve a mosaic effect may be singled out as the most obvious feature of these wearing blankets. Saltillos usually have three principal



Saltillo Sarape, 1750-1825, wool on cotton, 94" x 55", courtesy private collection, St. Louis, Mo.



Saltillo Sarape, 1800-1860, wool on wool, 99" x 50", collection Mark and Lerin Winter, Santa Fe, N.M.

design elements: the outermost is a frame or border enclosing the second element, a "background" field of often contrasting design. A large, central lozenge or circular medallion formed the third element (often similar in design and color to the border). While there were countless variations on these design themes, these three elements are recognizable in most Saltillo sarapes. Usually, the sarape had a neck-slit (*bocamanga*) permitting it to be worn as a poncho. The central design then formed a colorful yoke around the wearer's shoulders.

Each of the principal design zones was composed of a myriad of small, multi-colored motifs, such as triangles, hourglasses, lozenges, ovals and rhomboids, which were used in various combinations to achieve multi-hued patterns that often seem to vibrate because of the sharp angles of the designs and the sudden shifts in color. Rows of similar-colored motifs, giving the appearance of stripes in Saltillos, undoubtedly prompted the native Nahuatl name for these sarapes: *acocemalotíc-tilmatlí*, "rainbow mantle."

Weaving and Dyeing

Curiously, many extant Saltillo sarapes are in surprisingly good condition, having retained both the suppleness and integrity of the cloth and the vibrancy of the dyes. It is known that Saltillos were greatly treasured and that they commanded high prices from the very beginning. For these reasons, it seems that special care must have been exercised in weaving and storing them.

In an examination of the Saltillo sarapes that have survived the passage of time, certain consistencies of structure, as well as design, are noticeable. The classic Saltillo sarape was woven in a weft-faced tapestry weave, in which the weft yarns are so tightly packed together that the warp yarns are no longer visible.

The materials used to weave Saltillo sarapes were fairly limited. Wefts were almost always wool, although later examples made some use of cotton, silk, rayon or metallic yarns. Hand-plied warps were either cotton or wool. Both weft and warp were characteristically very finely spun.

The rich colors so characteristic of the Saltillo sarapes were obtained from a variety of natural dyes, the most prominent being cochineal (*grana*) and indigo (*añil*). By the time harsher aniline dyes were introduced into Mexico, during the last quarter of the 19th century, the era of the classic Saltillo was over.

Saltillo sarapes were woven on European-style horizontal frame looms, and due to the intricacy of designs it was most practical to weave a panel approximately two feet in width. As a result, the majority of sarapes were woven in two separate panels and

seamed together. The skill required to duplicate the intricate pattern on each panel so that the designs of the two halves, when joined, matched and appeared as a unified whole is clearly phenomenal.

The Weaving Industry in Mexico

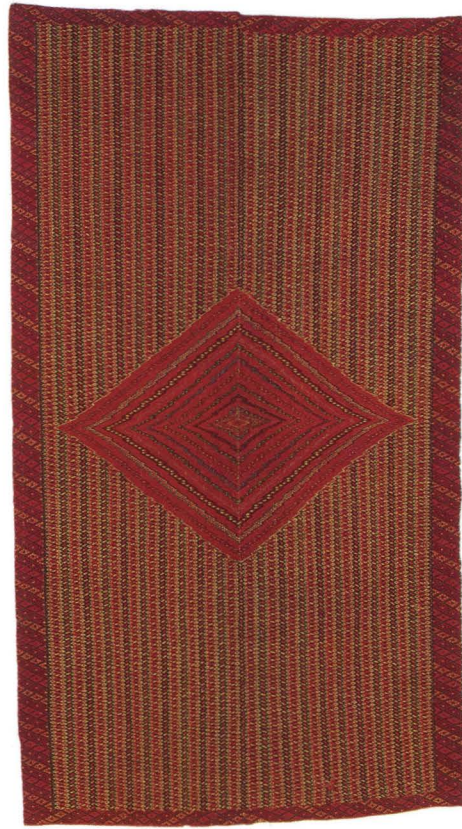
The identity of individual saraperos is rarely known, although the beauty of the garments they wove attests to their mastery of the art of weaving. To arrive at a reasonable idea of who they might have been, it is necessary to understand how the production of sarapes belongs to the larger pattern of development of the Mexican textile industry. Two entirely different systems of weaving technology met and merged with the arrival of Spaniards in the New World. Inasmuch as a highly productive indigenous industry already existed, the Spanish system can be regarded as a mere overlay. But in at least two respects, the introduction of wool and the dependence on male weavers, profound changes were made.

In pre-Hispanic times, cotton and ixtle were the principal textile fibers in Mexico. Cotton, a native plant, was of some antiquity, carbon-dating to approximately 5800 B.C. By 5000 B.C., cotton was a cultivated crop. Ixtle is derived from the fibrous leaves of the maguey, or agave, plant. Although ixtle is a strong, serviceable fiber, the smoothness and sheerness of cotton made it much more esteemed for use in clothing. As a result, cotton garments were worn by native priests and nobility, while commoners had to content themselves with clothes of ixtle.

Weaving, spinning and embroidery were all performed by women in pre-Cortesian Mexico. Some individuals achieved such a high level of proficiency that they were regarded as a separate class or group of professionals. These women wove especially detailed patterns, such as those which decorated the borders of garments. Luxury materials – including feathers and dyed rabbit hair – were frequently employed in these design zones.

The advent of sheep to the New World followed hard on the heels of the Spanish Conquest. The first breed to be introduced was the “churro,” initially valued for meat rather than wool. By the end of the 16th century, huge herds of sheep were not uncommon.

Besides the introduction of sheep and wool for weaving, the Spaniards created, in effect, a new type of artisan: the male Indian weaver. It may never have occurred to the Spaniards to teach native women weavers the use of the mechanical loom. Like so many other conquering peoples, they imposed their own way of doing things on the conquered. Sixteenth-century textile production in Spain was a highly structured, guild-controlled industry in which men were



Saltillo Sarape, 1750-1825, wool on cotton, 99" x 56", collection Jim Collins, Aspen, Colo.



Saltillo Sarape, 1800-1860, wool on cotton, 92" x 51", collection Mark and Lerin Winter, Santa Fe, N.M.

occupationally classified as shearers, wool cleaners, combers, dyers, spinners, warpers, weavers and fullers. As a result, the Spanish-influenced textile industry in Mexico also reflected this same division of labor. Women continued to weave on backstrap looms, producing native garments for home consumption, and to spin strong cotton yarns needed to warp the European-style looms on which the men wove. The success of the new industry was immense and immediate. Within the space of only 50 years, looms in Mexico could duplicate the quality of any woolen goods produced in Spain.

Trade Fairs

Commerce in Mexico, like industry, was greatly affected by policies generated in Spain. Trade with the Orient placed Mexico squarely in the middle of a thriving international market. The so-called Manila Galleons sailed from the Orient to and from the western port of Acapulco, bringing spices, silks, ceramics and other trade goods. The Spanish treasure fleets, leaving from the eastern port of Veracruz, returned to Spain laden with Oriental goods as well as silver, cotton, cochineal, textiles, chocolate, coffee, tobacco, sugar and other products of New Spain. A network of roads connected the two ports by way of Puebla. In an effort to control commerce as much as possible, the Spanish government, to the benefit of Puebla merchants, decreed that Veracruz and Acapulco were the only ports through which international trade might be conducted.

The result of this restrictive trade was a system of fairs, which distributed imported and domestic goods throughout Mexico. Since the fairs were held at different times of the year in different places, a regular route for participants developed, with merchants leaving one fair and traveling toward another. Trade fairs established in the northern provinces were critical factors in the economic life of several towns, including Saltillo, San Juan de los Lagos, Chihuahua and Taos, in New Mexico. While commerce in these regions was not limited to the annual fairs, they did represent a major financial, as well as social, event.

Most important of the northern trade fairs was that held every September and the first part of October in Saltillo. The Saltillo fair was established in the early 17th century and continued until the advent of the railroads at the turn of the 20th century.

Although domestically produced, the Saltillo sarape was one of the costliest commodities for sale at the Saltillo fair. Merchants would obtain as many Saltillo sarapes as they could, later trading them at other trade fairs along the circuit. Continued demand for sarapes apparently stimulated increased production of these garments.

The end of the colonial period was the

beginning of the end of the classic Saltillo sarape. Political unrest in Mexico, which began in the first decade of the 19th century and continued almost unabated for over a century, had an adverse effect on most aspects of commerce and industry.

Influence of the Saltillo Sarape

Saltillo sarapes, worn by affluent Mexicans and widely traded throughout Mexico, made a lasting impression on a number of other textiles. The Saltillo style was incorporated into sarapes woven throughout Mexico, Central America and into the present-day southwestern United States. It is especially apparent in the wearing blankets from the Rio Grande Valley in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Here the design system was adapted to heavier textiles more suited to the colder climate of this region. Examples of the better-known Navajo weaving tradition, notably the Sarape and Eye-dazzler styles, also show their kinship with Saltillo sarapes. The Navajos adopted the use of the upright loom and certain decorative conventions, such as simple stripes on a broad horizontal field, from their more sedentary neighbors, the Pueblo Indians. From the Hispanic settlers in the American Southwest, the Navajos acquired sheep and a new array of design elements, including a vertical design format, and perhaps an emphasis on tapestry weave as well.

Beginning in 1864, the Navajos were confined in captivity at Fort Sumner (also known as Bosque Redondo), where they experienced deprivation and hardship for four long years. At one point, in an attempt to ameliorate the situation, the United States government authorized the delivery of 4,000 blankets, to be purchased in the Rio Grande Valley, for the captives. Of the 1,000 blankets that probably arrived at the fort, many must have utilized the Saltillo design system, such as concentric diamonds and serrated zigzags, for the Navajo women were soon incorporating them into their own weaving.

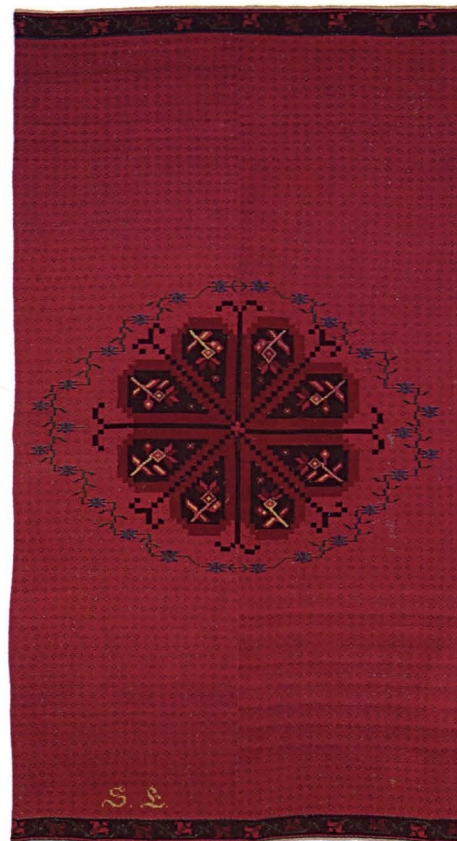
Modern derivatives of the Saltillo design system can even be discerned in sarapes, dyed in bright aniline colors, offered for sale in shops from Oaxaca to Tijuana.

The Sarape as Symbol

Among the materials woven into later sarapes were aniline-dyed yarns, which added an entirely new palette of hues. Silk, gold and silver metallic threads and variegated wool yarns were used to create subtle shadings of color, a substitute for the same effect formerly achieved by the dexterous manipulation of separate color zones. The simplification and commercialization of sarapes was partly prompted by requests from merchants who frequented fairs and sought to buy in large quantities. One other factor, however, is undoubtedly significant in the increased



Saltillo Sarape, 1800-1860, wool on cotton, 92" x 47", collection Mark and Lerin Winter, Santa Fe, N.M.



Saltillo Sarape, 1800-1860, wool on cotton, 96" x 52", courtesy private collection, St. Louis, Mo.

production of sarapes during the 19th century – a growing sense of Mexican patriotism, especially after the Mexican Independence in 1821, which adopted the sarape, a uniquely Mexican garment, as its symbol.

Closely allied with this nationalistic fervor were the aficionados of charrería, a brand of Mexican equestrianism. In the first decades after the Conquest, Spaniards had enforced laws that prohibited anyone of non-European descent from riding a horse. As a result, horses quickly came to be associated with a privileged upper class. Even the word “caballero” incorporated both the ideas of “gentleman” and “horseman” in a single term, while the word for common laborer, “peón,” implied a “man on foot.” Skill in riding was a prime requisite of the colonial gentleman and equestrian showmanship was an integral part of celebrations held by the aristocracy of New Spain.

With the opening of the mining districts and the establishment of huge sheep and cattle ranches in the northern provinces, the prohibition against non-Spaniards riding horses was no longer practical. Vaqueros and muleteers, regardless of descent, logged thousands of miles in the saddle. Their skill in riding soon became prodigious and the Spanish hegemony over horsemanship was challenged and abolished. Before long, a hardy, independent and highly mobile class of these horsemen had developed. Besides evolving new types of saddles, spurs and other equipment that suited their special needs, they also gave rise to a distinctive mode of dress, which included leather chaps, wide-brimmed hats and sarapes. Perfectly suited for life on horseback, the sarape served as all-weather cloak, bedroll and colorful saddle trapping. Those who could afford them bought the luxurious and highly prized sarapes. Perhaps more than a few were won from gamblers who invested in quality sarapes before leaving the Saltillo fair in October.

In its own time, the Saltillo sarape was widely acclaimed for the brilliance of its colors, harmony of design and excellence of weave. A number of questions remain to be answered concerning the history of these colonial garments and the textiles that influenced them and were, in turn, influenced by them. It is hoped that the sarapes included in this exhibit will lead not only to a fuller appreciation of a truly extraordinary example of the weaver's art, but to a better understanding of the processes affecting individual creativity and the nature of a changing art form in a particular social setting.

Essay excerpted and edited from The Saltillo Sarape, Paula Marie Juelke, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1978, (courtesy New World Arts and Mark Winter)

Cover: *Saltillo Sarape*, 1800-1860, wool on cotton, 79" x 54", collection Mark and Lerin Winter, Santa Fe, N.M.