

MEXICAN INDIAN COSTUMES

NCSU SCHOOL OF DESIGN

BROOKS HALL

APRIL 3 THRU APRIL 15



The costumes shown in this exhibit belong to a group of Indians living in the mountains of central Chiapas, a state in southern Mexico. They are Mayan peoples, direct descendants of the Maya who built the temples of Palenque and Tikal. Their language, costumes, tool culture, belief systems, and structures of social organization are all the result of their Mayance heritage.

These highland Indians speak dialects of two languages, Tzotzil and Tzeltal. Subgroups are organized according to the particular dialect spoken, the patron saint worshiped, the land occupied, and the forms of proper behavior followed. There are more than forty of these groups living in the highlands of Chiapas. They each have as their name the name of the place in which they live. Among the Tzotzil there are groups living in Zinacantan, Chamula, Huistan, Larrainzar, Mitontic, and Chenalho; among the Tzeltal are groups living in Amatenango, Tenejapa, Oxchuc, and Cancuc.



The costumes of the highland Indians are the most distinguishing feature of each group. They are as unique as the group's name. Thus it is easy to tell a Chamula from a Zinacanteco or an Amatenangan from a Tenejapan, even at great distances. The Indian's costume can tell the name of his patron saint, where he lives, the language he speaks, the particular dialect of that language, the road he takes home, the mountain under which his alter ego spirit resides, and much more. In the highlands of Chiapas the costume is emblematic of an entire set of customs, which it at once integrates and proclaims. To give up the costume is to give up one's Indian culture, while to don it is the first step towards acquiring an identity as an Indian.

Womanhood and weaving are practically synonymous in the highland Indian's culture. The woman spins and starches the thread, weaves the cloth and assembles the costume. When wool is employed, she also raises and shears the sheep. Because the costumes are emblematic of group customs, and women are the creators of the costumes, they are the custodians of the customs and traditions which define the group. They encode and transmit these traditions through the motifs, through the shapes of individual garments, and through the combination of those garments into a costume. The patterns which result are passed from generation to generation, changing slightly through time as the customs of the group change.

The costume of each group bespeaks its home, its gods, its own mountains and rivers, its people, its world. People and costume, custom and world, are united together. To the women who weave these clothes there is no distinction. They are all one.