

“Woven Voices of Guatemala”

Lesley Miles

My exhibition at the Granary, “Woven Voices of Guatemala,” focuses on *huipiles* (blouses) and other *traje* (indigenous clothing) from the North Western region of Guatemala that I collected when I lived in Centro Uno, Ixcán, for two years 40 years ago as a volunteer with the Direct Relief Foundation. The 15 families of my town wove all of their own clothing. I became very interested in the *traje* of these Mayan people and began collecting *huipiles* from across Guatemala. I also learned how to weave in exchange for teaching vegetable gardening.



Learning to weave

To honor the people of my village, I chose to open the exhibit on November 1st in celebration of the Día de los Santos, Day of the Saints. This is both a day of sadness but also one of joy to celebrate the lives of those who have passed. Traditional festivities include 24 hours of solid marimba music, drinks of the local *cusha* at the graveyard, and a horse race that even took place in my small village.

The groups that I have focused on in the exhibit are from the Mam, Ixil, and the Kiche language groups, located in the North Western region. I visited all of the villages and purchased the 25+ *huipiles* directly from the weavers. All but one were woven with backstrap looms. The oldest is a wool and cotton *huipile* from Chichicastenango made from handspun and hand dyed yarn. The red *huipiles* from Chajul were woven while standing using the backstrap loom. Usually the weavers kneel, which was the most difficult part of the process for me to learn.



Huipiles from the Ixil area

The people of my village had moved to the Ixcán jungle from the town of Todos Santos Cuchumatán ten years before I arrived and spoke the Mam language, although the men also spoke Spanish.

The North Western region was deeply affected by the civil war that lasted from 1976 to the mid 80's. Many of the villages in these areas were wiped out by the Guatemalan army, including my village. It was a scorched earth campaign that focused on remote villages that the government felt could become strongholds of guerrilla activity. These communities, however, were much more focused on survival and had no political agenda but were well located for eventual oil, forest, and mineral harvesting.

My daughter, Alicia (Weston Miles) Carlson wrote her senior thesis on my experience "Gardening in the Ixcán." Kathryn Waggoner helped me to sort through, curate, and hang the exhibition.

I hope that you will have an opportunity to visit the exhibit to experience and appreciate the centuries of Mayan culture and heritage that are the threads that make up the "Woven Voices of Guatemala."



Kathryn, Lesley, and Alicia

The exhibit is open during business hours for The Granary offices and Odeum Restaurant through December 31, 2015.