

# New Mexican Colchas Embroidery

Jillian Dellit November 2017

## 1. History

### 1.1. From Spain to the Americas

1521 Colchas were embroidered blankets taken to South America from Spain, first with Columbus, then, in 1521 with Cortes to what became Mexico City and, in 1533 to Peru with Pizarro. They were mostly wool, but also silk. Looms were taken as well.

1598 In 1598, after an unsuccessful and destructive expedition in 1540-42 by the conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado y Luján, Juan de Oñate accepted a commission from Spain to lead an expedition of Spanish settlers from Santa Barbara north to look for minerals (notably gold) and found a new settlement. Textiles, looms and churro sheep (brought from the arid lands of Spain) were amongst the list of goods transported with the expedition of 500 settlers and soldiers and 7000 livestock. They stopped at what became the first settlement of New Mexico, on the Rio Grande at the Indian Pueblo of Ohkay Owingeh. Oñate named the settlement San Juan after his patron saint. Although they were initially cautiously welcomed by the Pueblo, relations became strained and Oñate moved his settlement across the river from the Pueblo and named the second settlement Santa Gabriel. He became governor of the new province of Santa Fe de Nuevo Mexico.

The settlers did not find gold and struggled to survive and keep their community together. There were heavy penalties for abandoning Spanish settlement projects and this is all that kept many there. Eventually Spain supported the settlement with agricultural materials and stipends, largely because it was a missionary endeavor. Spain paid allowances to the religious who established the missions, as well as to Oñate as governor.



There were trade links between Spanish settlements in Santa Fe, Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara and Manilla which brought both Spanish and Chinese items to New Mexico, including embroidery. While they incorporated Chinese designs and silks, the New Mexican community preserved their Spanish culture, blending it with the local Pueblo Indian culture in designs and techniques. Wool from the churro sheep was, and still is, highly valued for Pueblo weaving.

### 1.2 Early Colcha embroidery in New Mexico

Colchas were worked on a background fabric of *sabanilla* – wool from churro sheep loosely woven into even-weave fabric with between 13 and 22 threads per inch. The embroidery filled the whole ground of the fabric, using what came to be known as *colchas stitch* – a form of Bokhara stitch that had originated in the Ottoman Empire. It seems logical that the stitch and transferred to Spain and New Spain. Benson suggests a pathway (Benson, p51). Macauley (2000, p64) claims, however, that the stitch does not appear in Spanish and Mexican work:

*By extension, the complete absence of the colcha stitch in Spanish and Mexican embroideries also confounds scholarly expectations of artefactual connection between Rio Grande Southwestern colchas and what should be their immediate stylistic antecedence, textiles of Spain and Mexico.*

As a self-couching stitch, it had the advantage of adding a layer of wool to both the upper and lower side of the fabric, thus giving three layers of wool for warmth. It was also a very easy and quick stitch that could fill spaces and adapt to individual designs.

Macauley argues, largely from designs, especially the vines and flowers (important symbols for agricultural societies), that New Mexico Colcha embroidery is influenced more by Portuguese Castelo Branco embroidered coverlets and Indian Chintz fabric than Spanish. These designs reached India through the spread of Islam, the trade networks and the Indo-Portuguese workshops on the Iberian Peninsula. Between 1565-1815 Galleons went from Manilla to what became Mexico, bringing Chinese, Spanish/Portuguese/Indian motifs. These, she argues, were taken back to Spain and on to New Mexico.

The blankets were highly valued in New Mexico. Records in the late seventeenth century New Mexico indicate a colcha was valued at eight sheep and two cows.

By 1742 the term 'colcha' appears outside the context of bedding and by 1779 is being used for carpets and hangings. By 1830s it is used for bedspreads made with commercial yarn and associated with artists.

The New Mexico settlement relied for its survival on agriculture, stock-raising supplemented by hunting. It was a meagre and precarious existence. Settlers were subject to smallpox, floods, snakebite and Indian hostilities.

1777 In 1777, in the San Luis Valley of what is now Southern Colorado, Father Morfi successfully argued that the church's tithe should be used locally to support local industries in weaving, carpentry, hat-making, beginning a women's group to support colcha embroidery.

### 1.3 End of Spanish Rule and US-Mexican Wars

1821 In 1821 New Spain threw off Spanish rule. Mexico emerged with fewer trade restrictions and the Santa Fe trail opened up as a trade route. This brought cotton and twill to New Mexico. As a ground fabric, twill did not need to be entirely filled with stitches as did sabanilla. This created new design possibilities. The Santa Fe Trail also opened up a market for colchas to be traded. By the mid-1830s New Mexico was acting as a default trading hub between the US, Mexico and Mexican California.

1846 In 1846 Santa Fe was occupied by US forces as part of the war with Mexico. New Mexico was ceded to the United States as a part of the settlement of those wars under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. It was known as the Territory of New Mexico.

### 1.4 Impact of trade along the Santa Fe Trail.

1900 By 1900 local weaving and embroidery had largely been replaced with manufactured trade goods. Colchas embroidery did not die, probably because the New Mexicans maintained some of their traditions and language until the 1940s. New Mexico only became a State in 1912. Cotton twill became the background of choice for colcha embroidery, which no longer needed to fill the whole piece of fabric. The need for warmth continued and wool was still the thread of choice. The three layers of wool in a colcha made them warmer than many manufactured goods so the sabanilla-based colcha still found a market amongst those who could afford the extra time or money for locally spun sabanilla.

### 1.5 The Great Depression - Government Funding for Trade Schools

1930s

During the 1930s Depression New Mexico took advantage of Federal Government funding to set up trade training schools focused on local crafts – including embroidery. These schools produced manuals of traditional designs that were used in pottery making as well as embroidery. The Native Market Store was also set up to sell the products of the training.

### 1.6 Colcha Revivals

#### Arte Antiguo

1934

In 1934 Teofila Ortiz Lujan and Regina Cata formed Arte Antiguo, a club for preserving and rejuvenating traditional Colchas embroidery in the Española Valley of New Mexico. The group was restricted to 12 members at any one time. As with a traditional European Guild, to belong a candidate was selected on the merit of their work and had to submit a significant initial project for scrutiny. The group met monthly to study and embroider. They collected and shared patterns and supplies and worked on projects. They often visited churches, museums and private collections to study Colchas. They saw themselves as “guardians of a sacred tradition”.

In the 1940s government funds were shifted from the employment programs to the War effort. The Native Market Store closed and the training schools wound down. Arte Antiguo, however, continued to meet and thrive. It was disbanded only in 1995.

**Teofila Ortiz Lujan** was born in 1895 on the West bank of the Rio Grande, just outside the site of San Gabriel del Yunque. She was amongst the fourth generation of her family to be baptized in her local church. She married Pedro Lujan whose family had farmed in the area since 1598. Teofila’s father instilled a love of learning in his family of six children, girls as well as boys. On his deathbed, when Teofila was 16, her father, Amado Ortiz, made his wife promise to educate all their children. The family moved to Santa Fe and, with the help of family, Teofila, the eldest, managed to complete her schooling at Loretto Academy, get a job in a mercantile store and support her mother and siblings. From here she trained and graduated as a teacher, working at the store at the end of each school year. She married in 1920 and went to live on Pedro Lujan’s farm, continuing to teach until her first child was born. After the birth of her second child she returned to teaching at the local school. She also helped with outdoor farm chores as well as cooking and preserving food. She and Pedro had four children and raised two children of her younger sister who was killed in a fire. Pedro was often away for months at a time, selling their produce as far away as Texas.

Teofila  
Ortiz  
Lujan

In 1945 she went to work as a housekeeper in a dormitory for the scientists working at the newly established Atomic Energy Commission in Los Alamos. Locals had little idea of the work done at the facility which brought significant employment opportunity to the area.

Teofila still managed her household, helped on the farm and attended the monthly meetings of Arte Antiguo while holding down her job at Los Alamos. When her husband died in 1956 she continued, only retiring from Los Alamos in 1965. As soon as she retired she began teaching as a voluntary instructor in embroidery and crochet and exhibiting her work. She won prizes and museums bought her work. She stopped embroidering when almost blind at the age of 87 after which she lived with her daughter Esther Vigil in Albuquerque where she died four months before her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Teofila's daughter **Esther Vigil** has continued her mother's work. She produces colchas for her grandchildren, for Museums, Churches and the Spanish Market. She teaches Colcha embroidery and has written two books on the subject. She and her siblings were brought up bilingual. While they spoke Spanish as their first language, Teofila insisted on speaking to them in English to ensure they were bilingual. The coming of Los Alamos, Esther recognizes, changed their world, bringing employment outside the farms which enabled the installation of heating, pumps, sewage and machinery to improve their lives. There is a video of Esther discussing her memories of Los Alamos and colcha embroidery at <https://www.manhattanprojectvoices.org/oral-histories/esther-vigils-interview>. Her two books on Colcha Embroidery are informative and beautiful. She was also a driving force behind the book *New Mexico Colcha Club*. Her encouragement of this South Australian study has been invaluable.

Arte Antiguo is the only one of the revival movements that has been motivated and managed entirely out of a desire to preserve and continue a heritage and culture. It had no government funding nor commercial drive.

### **Georgia O'Keefe and Rebecca James**

The artist Rebecca James came to New Mexico with Georgia O'Keefe in the 1940s, learned colchas embroidery, studied the patterns that had been collected in the 1930s. In 1963 the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe held an exhibition of her work which was important in establishing the reputation of and interest in the art form.

### **The Carson Colcha Revival**

1930s

In Carson New Mexico in the 1930s, Elmer Schupe, an Anglo-Mormon entrepreneur, began buying old, worn colchas from local families. Most of these were late 19<sup>th</sup> century, although their owners often believed they were older and came from Spain. With the help of his extended Mormon family, some of whom were of Hispanic descent, he developed a business creating and selling colchas to tourists and collectors. Some of these were scraps of sabanilla pieced together with colcha stitch embroidery, others used synthetic threads and told traditional stories from an 'outside' perspective. Many Carson pieces used geometric designs (reminiscent of Spanish tile patterns but also of Navaho designs) and 'lazy stitch' – a long form of the colcha stitch that worked for straight lines. Whereas most colchas are flowing and fluid, as stitchers mould their stitch to curves, vines and stems, Carson colchas tend to be designed around straight lines and geometric patterns.

The Carson Revival used stories and rites from the Hispanic Catholic community, including some controversial practices of *Los Penitentes* (in particular, flagellation) that had, by the 1930s, been largely rejected and discontinued. The Carson community designed and stitched depictions of these rites without the conflict, but not necessarily the offence, they created for Catholic stitchers and designers. There was a tourist and collector demand for them, as there was for the symbols tourists expected of the South West – cactus, serpents, eagles and religious figures. Pueblo and Navajo communities had similar issues.

*Carson colcha-making in the 1930s was a complex intermingling of Anglo Mormon entrepreneurial guidance with Hispanic and Anglo artistic collaboration. Carson colchas were conditioned by commercialism with a conscious sense of historicity and choice of picturesque imagery. Elmer Shupe, his partners and brothers-in-law, promoted an art form geared for tourists and collectors that drew upon the symbolic resources of local*

*indigenous groups. Their intent was to reduce these neo-traditional images or contrived assemblages of ethnic emblems to uncomplicated forms with immediate visual impact and considerable semantic access. In this manner Carson colchas operated as a type of tourist or collector's art characterized by a simplified visual system whose meaning is accessible to the greatest number of people. Suzanne Macauley 2004 p377*

There are clearly a number of ethical issues raised by the Carson Revival. These are similar to issues arising from the use of Indigenous stories, symbols, and art styles in Australia (and elsewhere).

1965

**The Spanish Colonial Arts Society** was formed in 1925 and established the Spanish Market in 1929 to generate income from the work being produced in the Trade Colleges. When funding evaporated after the 1930's Depression the Market lapsed. It was revived in 1965 and continues as a major event.

*In 1965, there were 18 exhibitors: 5 woodcarvers, 5 embroiderers, 5 tinsmiths, 2 weavers, and 1 jeweler. Today, some 200 adult artists and 100 youth artists participate in the Market, and 34 first-place awards are given for artistic excellence, originality, and revival of historic art forms, among others. Over the years, the Spanish Colonial Arts Society has helped to not only create a market for the artists' work, but to educate the public and youth artists about the importance of these traditions and their role in shaping the unique cultural environment of New Mexico*

<http://collections.spanishcolonial.org/exhibits/show/artofspanishmarket/artofspanishmarket>

1970s

**Villanueva Tapestry** was the result of workshops sponsored by the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe in the 1970s. The women of Villanueva conceived a Bicentennial project with an emphasis on creative design as it related to daily lives of participants. Carmen Orego-Salas from Chile was engaged by the program to work with the local women. A tapestry was conceived by Father Luis Hassenfus as part of the bicentennial project for Villanueva, encouraging the women to draw on their own experience. Carmen Orega-Salas got the stitchers to trust that work based in familiarity and experience is of interest to others. She taught 'a way to paint with wool'.

The project, centred at the Villanueva Catholic Church, involved 36 women and ended up 267 foot long. It was 21 inches wide for most of its length and was mounted in the church. The section in the choir was 13 inches wide. It was mounted on a cactus wood frame and dedicated on 24 July 1976.

1985

**San Luis Sewing Circle.** In 1985, Father Pat at the Sangre de Christo Church and its satellite churches in San Luis, developed an economic plan, based on colcha embroidery. This followed on from the Villanueva project and used the same teacher and mentor, Carmen Orega-Salas, who was Spanish speaking but culturally and socially different. She introduced crewel work techniques. Under her guidance the project involved:

- A range of stitches
- Embroidery designed to be hung
- Covering the fabric
- A pictorial narrative
- Muslin

They linked up with Apprenticeship Grants – applied for the first time to a group, rather than an individual, raising the question of dependence or independence of the group.

They argued about the back – did it matter? Should the fabric be completely covered with embroidery? Should they frame them? Put them under glass? Women looked at the landscape differently. Should they meet outsiders’ expectations or let the artist choose?

They discovered that one of the Anglo women, Paula Cunningham, could draw the designs on the fabric and had a good sense of colour. They employed her to draw their designs and help them. This led to more uniformity than there might otherwise have been. Women also got help from their grandchildren and sometimes used children’s drawings. Some women invested so much in them that they didn’t want to sell them, but keep them as heirlooms.

## **2. Components of Colcha Embroidery**

### **2.1 Churro Sheep**

Churro sheep were small, wiry sheep from the arid lands of Spain – the only sheep the Spanish would allow the early expeditions to export. They proved invaluable in both Mexico and New Mexico. They provided milk, wool and meat. They are horned – sometimes four, or even five horns. Ewes sometimes have horns or nubs. Their fleece has an under-layer and a protective over-layer and they come in a range of natural colours from white, through greys and browns to black. Their wool is tough and hard-wearing. It is spun and woven. The woven form provided the sabanilla cloth that could be embroidered for blankets, rugs, altar-cloths and clothing.

Churro sheep were the first domesticated sheep introduced into North America. Herds were acquired through trade by the Navajo for their blankets and rugs and were also shipped to California to feed the population during the Gold Rushes. In 1863 the US army decimated the Navajo herds in retribution as part of the on-going wars. Further stock reductions were enforced in the 1900s. In the 1970s efforts were made to preserve the breed overseen by the Southwestern Range and Sheep Breeding Laboratory at Fort Wingate, New Mexico. Now they are bred in the American Southwest and further north – into Canada. They are now often referred to as Navajo Churro Sheep. Their meat is prized, especially by Slow Cooking aficionados. Their wool is more often used for weaving than embroidery and it is difficult to buy sabanilla cloth. I bought my churro wool from Weaving Southwest <https://www.weavingsouthwest.com/collections/x-medium-weight-churro-yarn>

### **2.2 Fabric**

Prior to the 1830s, New Mexico colchas were worked on sabanilla cloth, an even-weave wool between 13 and 22 threads per inch, woven from churro sheep wool. By 1900 commercial cotton brought down the Santa Fe Trail from the East Coast was mostly used. Today woven cotton is the preferred background. Esther Vigil finds twill too closely woven and works on two layers of cotton. Sabanilla is hard to find, and expensive. The project published in Piecework magazine in March/April 2017 gave an option of wool blanketing or twill woven cotton backed with flannel. I chose the latter, which is recommended for washing. <https://www.textilereproductions.com/collections/needlework-kits/products/materials-for-colcha-baby-blanket-project>

### 2.3 Looms

The original looms, brought from Spain and transported with the original New Mexico settlers were 30 inches wide. Diagrams for looms used in the 1930s can be found in *Weaving and Colcha in the Hispanic Southwest* pages 81-87.

### 2.4 Thread and Dye

Wool spun from the churro sheep was the original thread used and wool has continued to be preferred. Textile reproductions sell a range of vegetable-dyed worsted yarn for colcha embroidery <https://www.textilereproductions.com/collections/repair-materials>.

Instructions for original dyes for colcha embroidery can be found in *Weaving and Colcha from the Hispanic Southwest* pages 69-77. The yarn is washed only after it is spun, using amole root. Alum is the recommended mordant. Yellow is obtained from chamiso, canaigre, dahlia, peach, apple or grey stone lichen. Indigo is obtained from *Indigofera tinctoria*. In addition to cochineal, red is obtained from Brazilwood and Wild Cherry roots. Brown and black are obtained from Mountain Alder bark, light brown from Juniper, golden brown from Black Walnut and jet black from Sumac.

### 2.5 Design

There is considerable discussion about the influences on traditional Colcha designs (see Section 1 above) Spanish, Portuguese, Indian, Chinese and Navajo can all be argued. Early Colchas were completely covered in embroidery – for warmth and to cover the loosely woven sabanilla cloth – usually featuring stylized floral or geometric figures. Stylised birds soon appeared. While motifs are popular and repeated, the colcha stitch and form encourage and enable individual arrangement of motifs into a personalized overall design.

Once commercial cloth takes hold there are more examples of designs that leave much of the background cloth showing. There are also many examples of religious figures, including icons and figures framed in the local tinwork.

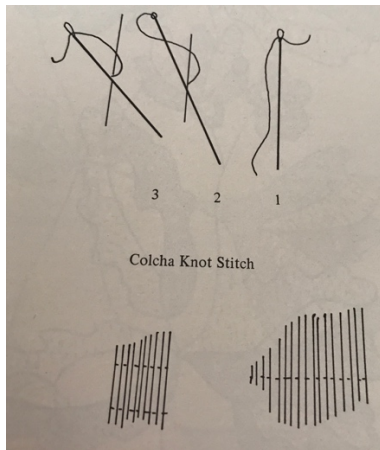
Motifs recorded from historic pieces extant in the 1930s can be found in *Weaving and Colcha from the Hispanic Southwest* pages 12-68.

In the San Luis valley especially, narrative embroidery has taken a hold in colcha work. Colcha stitch is well suited to the narrative form, returning to the early tradition of filling the whole fabric piece with embroidery. Although colcha stitch (especially in the long form referred to as 'lazy stitch') can be applied successfully to straight lines, it is most suited to curving, flowing designs that are enjoyable to work and encourage innovation.

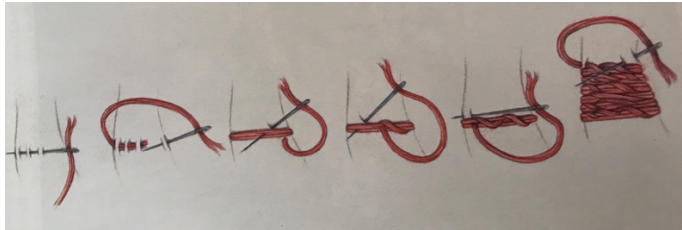
### 2.6 Colcha Stitch

There are two ways of doing colcha stitch shown in the instructions I have found. One is identical to instructions for Bokhara stitch. This is how it is shown in *Weaving and Colcha from the Hispanic South West*. This is consistent with Esther Vigil's instructions.





The other instructions leave more couching tread on top of the fabric, creating a longer couching stitch. This is how the stitch is shown in Marie Risbeck's Colcha Baby Blanket project, in Beverley Johnson-Davis's article and *Una Linda Raza* p79.



These, are, of course, standard variations between stitchers, inevitable and desirable in a tradition that leaves so much to the individual.

Suzanne Macauley points out the universality of stitches in this particular family (*Stitching Rites* p63):

*The colcha stitch itself is a type of self-couching stitch that is anchored to the ground fabric by a smaller stitch running almost perpendicular to it. Consequently, when a series of these crossover stitches are repeated in rows or clusters, they produce an interesting secondary aesthetic effect, subsidiary to the dominant design. The sequences of consecutive anchoring stitches actually create an internal textural pattern distinct from the larger visual patterns of the total composition (see figure 2).*

*Since the same stage has been disseminated through time and space under a variety of names (Romanian couching, Oriental stitch, convent stitch, figure stitch, Deerfield stitch, Bokhara couching, the lazy stitch), it's universality attests to its adaptability and to the numerous advantages associated with it. Among these are: efficiency, variable length of stitches depending on the type of thread or yarn used (cotton silk wool), its ability to cover large areas thus economising on yarn, its ability to move in any direction, curving and undulating in concert with the aesthetic demands of certain patterns, plus the striking subtle shading and texture effects that are the hallmark of culture embroidered tapestries*

### 3. Summary

I was hooked into researching Colcha Embroidery by a diagram in *Piecedwork* magazine March/April 2017. I recognized at once the similarity of a Colcha stitch diagram to Bokhara stitch. Bokhara stitch figured heavily in the Turkish embroidery I was studying with the Ethnic Embroidery Study Group at the Embroiderers' Guild of South Australia. I read everything I could find about Colcha Embroidery and hunted for authentic fabric, threads and designs.



It is rare to have an opportunity to learn about a very specific, living stitching tradition in a bounded geographic area and trace its spread, adaptation, heritage and growth. It proved to be fascinating on many fronts – its beauty, variations, links, and heroines all hold wonderful stories.

It has also proved to be a microcosm for issues embroiderers and artists in general face everywhere. Do we preserve or adapt? Can we do both? Is art better for being pursued without grants? Is commercialization good or bad for art? Who owns traditional designs, stories and rituals? Is beauty truth and truth beauty – and is that all we need to know?

I am grateful that generations of New Mexican women, through thick and thin, herded their sheep, spun their thread, picked up their needles and stitched what they knew and valued. Because of them, and the women who recorded their work, I can know their stories, ponder these questions and share the knowledge with my fellow embroiderers in South Australia. Our embroidery is richer for the experience.

Julia Valdez “You express and you remember”

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