

Serapes

In 1942, the little town of Saltillo in Mexico was known for its serapes, if it was known for anything. I was there in Saltillo to improve my Spanish conversation abilities at a summer school six weeks course presented by Texas Woman's University. When I came across the serape factory in my afternoon explorations of the town, I was delighted that I had a chance to see how they managed the weaving of the bright serapes, as well as the heavier, less flamboyant serapes that I saw around the streets of Saltillo.

According to the dictionary, a serape is "a colorful woolen shawl worn over the shoulders, especially by Mexican men." The simple jacket was made from a narrow blanket, split up the middle of the front half to enable the wearer to put it over his shoulders -- a seamless garment with extraordinary protection, including the rain repellant nature of densely woven wool.

I had suspected that, like many symbols of other cultures, the bright woolen jackets supposedly worn by workers in Mexico were overstated and maybe even nonexistent, but I discovered that they were indeed real, everyday clothes, often the only bright spot visible in the mountainous landscape. Most of us perhaps know serapes only as the brightly colored woolen blankets worn as coats, or as stereotypical male Mexican wear used in an attempt to depict life South-of-the-Border, a symbol reinforced by the broad straw hat. I discovered in Saltillo that, although the simple style of the garment was always the same, there were many variations in the colors of the cloth.



Saltillo is a mile-high town, and it was easy to see that the ordinary serape, as I knew it, would not be sufficiently warm for the location. Most of the serapes we saw on the streets were quite heavy and, generally, less colorful. I really liked the more subtle blues, greens, and reds that I had seen around the town and at the serape weaving mill.

The air in the factory was saturated with fluff from the yarn being woven into serapes. It couldn't have been a healthy environment for the workers, mostly women. I didn't become indignant about this exploitation of workers until much later in my life. At the time I was fully occupied with the results of the weavers -- the serapes, especially when I discovered that I could order different

colors, sizes, and designs to take home for gifts. I was especially happy about the heaviness of the cloth promising the possibility of unusual gifts of throw rugs.

The rugged mountain area was ideal for the raising of sheep, and most of the raw wool for the mill was produced locally. The residents of the local haciendas spun and dyed the yarn for the factory. I did not see any of that cottage industry and perhaps missed some colorful activity -- or maybe I just missed seeing the extreme poverty of the area.

The storage area in the factory was colorful but not large, for the orders for serapes used the bulk of the prepared wool rather quickly. My Spanish got a full workout as the manager and I discussed designs and prices. He seemed to be amused, and maybe a bit pleased, at my determination *not* to use any English (his English was quite fluent), and I acquired a number of words and phrases of Spanish I would not otherwise have encountered. Of course, I've not had much use for them since then, but it was a heady experience. Just conducting a business transaction in Spanish was great conversational experience.

I had especially liked the possibility of designing my own patterns for serapes with a more subdued look. The gray and white background seemed to be the place to start. For half of the rugs, we kept the mottled gray background but substituted white for others. We widened the stripes near the end of the cloth, starting with a bright navy blue that shaded into successively lighter and brighter blues, ending with a turquoise stripe before beginning the central elongated diamond motif of blended red colors and blended blue colors. We redesigned the rest of the central motif, using a white background rather than the white and gray, and making only minor adjustments with the colors in the elongated diamond shape, repeating the white background and the stripes near the end of the cloth. I very much liked the revised pattern.

Changing the colors was more productive than changing the shapes of the design. The manager of the mill was as eager as I to try the changes on the large piece. Since I intended that to be mine, whereas the small ones I wanted to use as gifts, I chose colors that I thought I would like to use in decorating my future home. I could hardly wait until it was time to head north to home to see how our design adapted to Texas decor. The serapes were inexpensive but my graduate student status wouldn't support two of the large ones. That was destined to be a wall hanging or a floor covering but would have to wait for my approaching marriage and starting housekeeping in the Pacific Northwest.

Unfortunately, it has never fulfilled its original purpose, but every time we've moved, we've been surer that it would be wonderful on *some* floor or wall some time. A heavy sixty-six inch by one-hundred-two-inch wool weaving is too weighty for most rooms, most walls, and most amateur hangers. My use of browns, tans, and other earth tones could fit in most of our homes. Because our next home is smaller than any since our very first ones, future prospects do not look good for accommodating our beloved monster, either. Perhaps, but over the half century we've owned the Saltillo weavings, we have had a great deal of pleasure planning, waiting, and looking at it.

I understand that Saltillo has long since been discovered by vacationers, and while the serape mill may still be there, there are many other attractions in the town, now far larger than the small town I came to know.

The gifts were a success, but the hanging had to wait until we were settled somewhere. It's still waiting. We still enjoy the idea of owning the rug. Maybe it will survive our downsizing and make its home on the floor or even the wall of our new home. Whether I ever actually use it, I can say that, over the years, it has given me a great amount of pleasure.