



Indian Clothing Before Cortes: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices (Civilization of the American Indian Series)

Patricia Rieff Anawalt

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In these pages, for the first time in any language, the author offers a comprehensive description and analysis of the clothing of the people pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. It is a highly productive approach to the culture—and the culture ties—of the Aztecs of Mexico, the Tlaxcalans, the Tarascans of Michoacan; the Mixtecs of Oaxaca, the mysterious “Borgia Group,” and the lowland Mayas of Yucatan. These were the “great high cultures” that flourished just before European contact.

In her book, Patricia Anawalt describes through text and more than 350 illustrations and charts what the Indians of Middle America were wearing when Cortés and his conquistadors arrived in the New World in 1519. The costumes reveal a great deal about those who wore them. To the peoples of Middle America, dress was identity; even a god had to don his proper attire. To the Aztecs and their neighbors, for example, the wearing of appropriate clothing was strictly controlled by both custom and law. An individual’s attire immediately identified not only culture affiliation but rank and status as well. Since each group dressed in a distinctive and characteristic manner, a great deal of ethnographic and historical information can be gleaned from a study of what those groups wore.

Of course, the costumes themselves have decayed into the earth from whose bounty they were created. Unlike Egypt, whose arid atmosphere helped assure centuries-long preservation, Middle America, with its moisture and cyclic climate, holds today little but the durable stone and mineral remains of its great civilizations.

We do, however, have vivid depictions of the costumes in the native codices and the conquistadors’ accounts. The codices are histories and calendric and religious documents, executed in pictographic writing and drawings, that recorded and guided the people’s lives. The conquistadors’ accounts were official and semi-official reports to their rulers and countrymen in Europe. Together these bodies of works constitute a priceless heritage of Mesoamerica. Many of the codices now repose in the great libraries and museums of Europe.

From twenty-four of these documents, as well as a very few extant wall murals, the author has compiled, analyzed, and compared hundreds of clothing examples. She has organized and grouped the costumes by type of construction and described their practical and ceremonial purposes. From the many illustrations, some here faithfully reproduced in the colors of the originals, we gain a vivid impression of the intimate, day-to-day lives of the men, women, and children, as well as the rituals and ceremonies around which their religious and political life centered.

From design and stylistic similarities the author has been able to identify many cross-cultural ties among the groups—in some instances providing new documentary evidence of relations between groups. We know that these native civilizations, far from evolving in isolation, had many enriching contacts with each other long before they were scattered and decimated by the armies of the Conquest.

The wealth of information in these pages makes it an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the Civilization of the American Indian of pre-Hispanic Times.

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