

*This farm scene was embroidered by Sostena Cleven using traditional colcha stitches and is entitled El Arador del Rancho.*

## Stitchery in Colcha

This ancient form of embroidery from the Spanish Southwest is being artistically revived by the women of Colorado's San Luis Valley

When a merchant named Dario Gallegos moved to Colorado's San Luis Valley in the 1850's, the women of his family brought with them an ancient embroidery form called colcha. Economical and quick to work, colcha was used for generations in the Spanish Southwest to decorate bedspreads and other everyday articles. (The word, in fact, means bedspread, perhaps because Hispanic seamstresses have long covered hand-woven wool or cotton coverlets with that particular stitch.)

Over the years, as women turned to store-bought goods, the craft of colcha died out in the San Luis Valley. Only a handful of women living there today even remember their mothers and



grandmothers engaging in it. One of them is Joyce Gallegos Romero, the great-granddaughter of Dario Gallegos. Not only does Ms. Romero remember colcha, but she has learned to produce it herself. Today she is one of a group of women who are reviving colcha embroidery in the San Luis Valley as a colorful form of folk art prized

for its fine workmanship and strong, primitive design. Appropriately, her first piece was a tapestry of the old adobe home Dario Gallegos built for his family in the town of San Luis in 1888.

Joyce Romero and her associates stitch a variety of southern Colorado scenes, ranging from high mountain peaks with glittering fall aspen trees to

by Sandra Dallas





*Encouraged by her teachers to use local scenes as inspiration, Lita Lobato poses at left in front of the courthouse that served as a model for the completed tapestry she is holding. Shown above are details of the building along with a covered wagon.*

illustrations of legends that they heard as children. Most of their work is in the form of tapestries, which are sold through museum shops and at special shows. Colcha is also showing up as decoration on skirts and handbags, and one group of stitchers has made colcha vestments and altar cloths for a local Catholic church.

The San Luis Valley program is under the sponsorship of the Virginia Neal Blue Resource Centers for Colorado Women (VNB), a nonprofit organization named for the state's first female treasurer and originated by Blanche Cowperthwaite, who now heads the board of directors. Begun in 1976 with a grant from the multistate Four Corners Regional Commission, the colcha project is designed to help the women of the valley economically. "It's art with a profit motive," says George DeNardo, the VNB's marketing director.

Unemployment is high in the

valley, especially among women. Still, like their counterparts in Appalachia, the Hispanic people of the valley have a rich heritage. Both peoples have rediscovered the beauty and utility of traditional crafts—quiltmaking and colcha.

The village of San Luis, founded in 1851, is Colorado's oldest town, and Dario Gallegos, according to legend, was the state's first merchant. For numerous descendants of the original settlers, life has changed little in the past one hundred twenty-five years. They tend to be more comfortable with Spanish than English. Some live, as their great-grandparents did, in houses built of adobe bricks. Visually and verbally, history is close at hand. San Luis, at the foot of the valley, still has its common, a town square ringed by Spanish colonial buildings. Many of the older residents were raised on Spanish folk tales.

The VNB deliberately drew on

that heritage in reviving colcha embroidery. Because the organization was unable to find a qualified practitioner in the valley, it brought in Carmen de Orrego-Salas, an expert needlewoman from Chile. Training sessions were scheduled in several valley towns, with students ranging in age from the early twenties to eighty; in one town, three generations of a single family participated. After their initial instruction, the women stitched at home, meeting weekly to criticize each other's work. They were given yarn and muslin, and their tapestries were sold to the VNB, which found outlets.

Beginning in 1979, the VNB, using funds from the federal Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA), paid trainees a minimum wage for joining a six-month, five-day-a-week program. Some twenty women have participated in the CETA embroidery program, and more are



entering. (In keeping with Reagan administration policy, the VNB's CETA funding has been severely cut. The VNB, therefore, can no longer pay a regular wage, but project officers expect to make up much of the lost funding through an accelerated marketing program aimed at increasing colcha sales.)

Because most of the women already knew how to sew, and many had crocheted or embroidered with silk floss, the simple colcha stitch was readily mastered. It resembles a Romanian stitch popular in crewel embroidery, as well as other universally popular couching stitches, and depending on the space to be filled, it can extend up to a couple of inches in length. Several parallel stitches, like satin stitches, are taken. Then the threads are tacked down—at random or in a pattern.

If the colcha stitch is simple and fast, however, it is also dull, and the women insisted almost from the beginning that Ms. Orrego-Salas teach them additional techniques. Today they use a variety of stitches, which often lend a *trompe l'oeil* effect to their work. The favorites are the Turkey stitch,

which produces a clipped, plush texture and is used for animals; the detached chain, an oblong method favored for tree leaves; and the French knot, good for flowers and lambs' wool.

A strong and suitable sense of design was, not surprisingly, more difficult to impart. In order to encourage spontaneity and primitiveness, Ms. Orrego-Salas did not teach her students to draw. For a while, however, it seemed that drawing lessons might be in order. "The first pictures looked as though they had been taken from coloring books," recalls Patricia Martinez, the VNB's crafts production coordinator.

The women entertained no artistic delusions, however: "We are not good artists," says Nyla Orvis, an early VNB participant who replaced Carmen de Orrego-Salas as instructor. In fact, design was originally a source of amusement. "I thought Nyla's house was a horse," says Cheryl Thibodeau, a trainee. The women gave nicknames—such as the patchwork rocks—to each other's tapestries.

Stitchers were told to concentrate on local scenes—no Statues

of Liberty or palm trees. Patsy Garcia remembers her first scene, a sheep camp: "I put my dog in, but he didn't look good, so I copied a dog out of a magazine. Carmen said to take it out, so I put my own dog back. He's bigger than the tree."

After some initial timidity, the women developed a feeling for their subjects. "I could hardly wait to finish a piece because I always had the next one in mind," says Delores Worley, who completed thirty-eight works in her first thirty months in the program.

Ms. Worley has become an expert needlewoman, and more important, she has developed into a fine folk artist whose work finds a ready market. Her pieces range in subject from portraits of valley residents to fiery sunsets on the Sangre de Cristo (Blood of Christ) Mountains, which tower over the valley. Her best-known work is a thirty-by-thirty-six-inch farm scene showing chickens, sheep, a bull, cows, and magpies roaming among farm buildings and a windmill. There is a vegetable garden, an orchard, and an outsize pickup truck. Standing by is a



The altarpiece above depicts a Biblical scene and was embroidered by the Artistes de Valle group. The other colcha tapestries at left reflect the accompanying photographs. The golden 1886 church is located in the village of San Luis, and the landscape and detail show different aspects of the lush surrounding valley.



farmer in a big straw hat.

In a typical tapestry by a valley woman, lack of perspective is one of the most appealing ingredients. For example, a pickup truck dwarfs a barn, and trees seem to float in the sky. A particularly charming piece depicts Fort Garland from above, with the buildings drawn so that the viewer can see the fronts of all of them.

The *Sangre de Cristos*, which encircle and isolate the valley, are a favorite subject. Local buildings are also popular, and many valley residents have asked the women to stitch pictures of their houses. Joyce Romero's tapestry of her

Completed colcha tapestries range in size from 10 by 10 to 36 by 48 inches. They are sold unmatted and unframed and cost anywhere from \$25 to \$400. For more information about individual pieces or special orders, contact the Virginia Neal Blue Center, San Luis Valley Crafts, 1001 East 62nd Avenue, Denver, Colorado 80216, or call (303) 289-5677.

County Courthouse.

Doing colcha has made the women more aware of their surroundings. "I never realized that winter was pretty," says Delores Worley. Adds Patsy Garcia: "Now

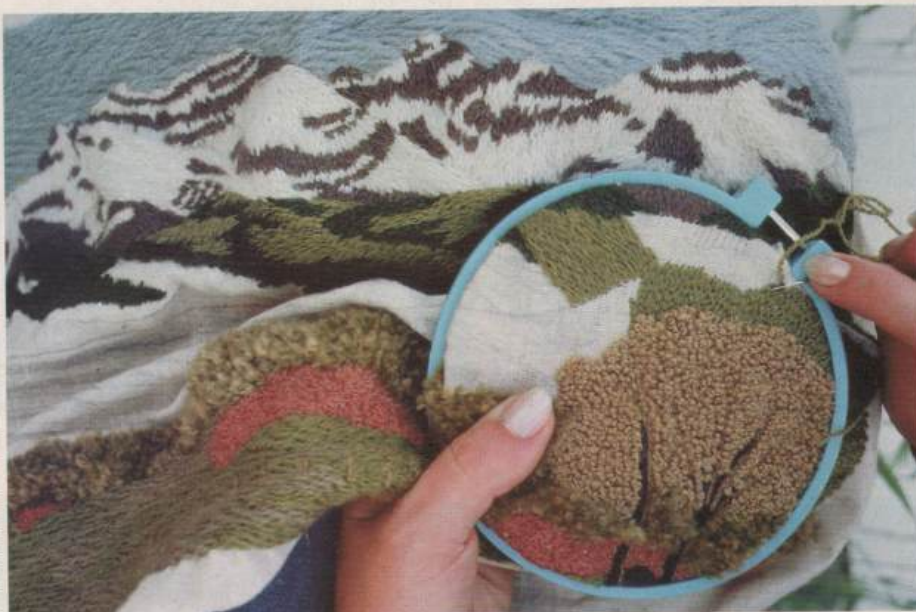
brings \$50 to \$100. Yet work by "name" embroiderers such as Delores Worley, who does special orders, can sell for hundreds of dollars. And embroideries by Tiva Trujillo have already become collector's items.

Tiva Trujillo, who died in 1980, has attained the status of folk artist for her depiction of Hispanic life and legend in works emphasizing action and movement. "She was stitching her own story," says Nyla Orvis. "Tiva remembered from her childhood."

One scene by Tiva Trujillo shows a family at prayer, the children distracted by a spider.



The basic colcha stitches (shown above) resemble traditional embroidery couching stitches and are worked on muslin with yarn.



Different textures, seen above in the sky, mountains, and trees, are achieved by combining colcha with other embroidery stitches.

great-grandfather's house is part of a 10-piece wall hanging displayed in the San Luis Museum. The pieces were made by the students of Workshop 29—so called because the women learned twenty-nine different embroidery stitches in one week. Because each student selected a building in San Luis for a subject, the completed tapestry comprises a folk document of the town's architecture. One shows a gold church with its date of construction, 1886, embroidered on the front. Others include the Hotel Don Carlos, which has a hardware store and supermarket on the first floor; the 1909 Barela store; and the 1883 Costilla

I love the winter because of the trees. And the fall, with all the colors, makes me want to do everything I see." Says beginning stitcher Vivian De Herrera, "I see something and think, *Boy, that would look good in French knots.*"

At first the women attached little economic importance to their work; one nearly sold a tapestry for \$25. Now, however, each of the 10 pieces in the San Luis hanging, which was donated to the town, is insured for \$1,000. To be sure, most colcha tapestries sell for far less—the average piece for about 35 cents per square inch, which means that a finished work by a competent embroiderer

Another depicts the potato harvest, with the potatoes and the tents where the harvesters live spread out on the ground. She even embroidered the legend of a woman who drowned her children and was told by God that she would never live in peace. For the rest of her life the woman and her neighbors heard her children moaning at night.

Most of the women in the VNB project hope to achieve what Tiva Trujillo achieved, financially as well as artistically. Even if they do not, they will still have the satisfaction of bringing an old craft—and a new sense of pride—to the San Luis Valley. ❧