

A History of Colcha Embroidery in Saguache County



Lydia Martinez, *San Juan Arts Center*, 1984. 23¼" × 19½". Collection of Lorraine Archuleta.

By Adrienne Garbini and Trent Segura of HEART of Saguache

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COLCHA EMBROIDERY became an important cultural tradition in Saguache County when a regional revival took place in the 1970's through attempts to develop a cottage industry for low income rural women. This was an integral part of a broader initiative to cultivate a style of Hispanic crafts specific to the San Luis Valley that could be marketed to a global audience. Through a serpentine path of joy and disillusionment, participating artists and families came to treasure these artworks as heirlooms and expressions of community identity. Local landscapes are a common motif in San Luis Valley colcha embroidery as women were encouraged to use their daily lives as the inspiration for their designs while they were being trained in the history of the art. The programs didn't result in sustainable economic prosperity, and in Saguache County, they became a touchstone in the complex history of the interplay between intentions and impacts in development initiatives.

San Luis Valley colcha embroidery is a textile art shaped by Spanish, Anglo, and Indigenous craft traditions. "Colcha" is a Spanish word for bed covering or quilt, but its usage in the American Southwest refers to the wool embroidery that was used to adorn blankets during Spanish settlement. Records testify to mid 18th-century pieces, though the artform is thought to originate earlier. Surviving examples of colcha embroidery from this period are defined by their abstract patterns, religious symbols, and ornamental designs of flora and fauna. These pieces were influenced by textiles from China, India, the Middle East, Europe, and Native and Hispanic weavings of the region.

Not long after the Mexican-American war, the prevalence of colcha embroidery diminished across the Southwest as commercially produced textiles and quilting traditions from the

East made their way out West. Throughout the 20th century there were efforts to revitalize the craft in the region through the Carson colcha embroidery cottage industry started by Frances Varos Graves, Arte Antiguo in the Espanola Valley, the Spanish Colonial Arts Society, and artworks produced for the Spanish Market in Santa Fe. In the 1930's the artist Rebecca Salsbury Strand James moved to the area from New York and was taught colcha embroidery in Taos by her neighbor Jesusita Acosta Peralta. She created traditional and pictorial works, which were exhibited in the 1960's at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. This exhibition was in a series of colcha embroidery shows throughout the decade. In 1972, the Museum of International Folk Art invited the Chilean artist Carmen Benavente Orrego-Salas to curate an exhibition of embroideries made by artists she worked with in Nihue, Chile. These works are pictorial and narrative depictions of everyday rural life. Carmen was then invited to teach workshops throughout Northern New Mexico.

In the 1960s in St. Louis, Missouri, nuns in the Congregation of Divine Providence order were compelled to serve disenfranchised Hispanic migrants through revisiting their founding doctrines after the Second Vatican Council. Their spiritual calling led them to the diocese of Bishop Buswell in Pueblo, Colorado who invited the sisters to set up a ministry in the San Luis Valley, if they would be completely self-sustained. In 1968, the sisters moved to Center, Colorado, and began working with community members to organize for Hispanic representation on boards, voting rights, child care, health care, and economic opportunities for people living in poverty. In 1973, Lois Lawler (formerly Sister Alice Lawler, CDP) and a group of women in Center established the Artes del Valle craft cooperative. Sister Alice was inspired by

Appalachian craft co-ops to create an economic development project to provide income to the families of farm workers. With a grant from the Presbyterian Church, Artes del Valle renovated the abandoned San Juan Church in La Garita, converting it into the San Juan Arts Center which served as a location to produce and sell traditional Hispanic crafts including colcha embroidery, weaving, crochet, carving, and pottery.

Through Artes del Valle Sister Alice met Marianne Stoller, a Colorado College anthropologist from San Luis who took her on a tour to visit craft practitioners in small towns across Northern New Mexico. They visited Villanueva, where Carmen Benavente Orrego-Salas was working with local artists on the creation of a 265 foot long tapestry to commemorate America's bicentennial from the perspective of Hispanic peoples in the Southwest. Carmen had a successful project in Chile teaching rural women to make pictorial embroideries and sold a large collection of them to the Museum of International Folk Art. Sales of this art enabled some artists to purchase homes. Sister Alice arranged for Carmen to teach a ten day workshop in Center. Sister Alice talked with the women about their knowledge of embroidery, and some had memories that as children they would gather wool stuck to barbed wire fences for their mothers to spin, using the yarn to adorn different cloths around the house. Their families couldn't afford full fleeces and didn't produce the traditional textiles. Artes de Valle took trips to Denver and Santa Fe to see examples in museum collections, as none owned colcha embroideries.

Colcha embroidery work in Center was focused on embroidering ornamentation of local flora and Hispanic motifs onto fabric that was then cut and sewn into skirts, vests, and handbags by a co-op seamstress. Participating Artes del Valle artists included Betsy Baca, Melissa Carter, Lucille Espinoza, Lupita Espinoza, Fran Jaramillo, Ora Jaramillo, Luella LeBlanc, Lucy Lovato, Emilia Lucero, Emilianita



Lujan, Lydia Martinez, Nora Martinez, Cleo Salas, Adeline Sanchez, Clorinda Sanchez, Elaine Sanchez, Sally Sanchez, Stella Sanchez, Margaret Sandoval, Jeanette Trujillo, Clara Valdez, Grace Vigil, Ursula Vigil, and Bertie Vargas. Sister Alice also oversaw the production of a large embroidery of the Virgin of Guadalupe for the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Alamosa. Designed by a single nun, Sister Angelo Lobato, and stitched by a group of parishioners, the colcha embroidery of the Virgin of Guadalupe is thought to be the largest example of contemporary colcha embroidery in the San Luis Valley.

The Artes del Valle co-op sustained itself through grants and the salaries the sisters made teaching and working at other jobs. All income generated by Artes de Valle sales went to the artists, but the money was insufficient for the women to afford their own supplies or contribute significantly to their families economic health. The project was maintained through the administrative labor of the nuns for many years, but eventually shut down after the Pueblo Diocese took over the La Garita Church and the sisters moved away from Center. A collectively made colcha embroidery altar cloth is displayed for special occasions at the La Garita Church today.



Above: Carmen Benavente Orrego Salas with Emilianita Lujan, Cleo Salas, Elaine Sanchez, Lucille Espinoza and Nora Martinez, 1976. Collection of Carmen Benavente Orrego-Salas.

Left: Mike Hallacy, *San Juan Arts Center, La Garita, Colorado, C. 1976*. Printed in Artes Del Valle brochure. Collection of University of Colorado, Boulder Library, Rare and Distinctive Collections.



Ira Gay Sealy, *Artes del Valle Potato Flower Skirt* modeled by Lily Russell, 1976.
Printed in June 27, 1976 Contemporary Section of the Sunday Denver Post.
Collection of Lois Lawler.

Marianne Stoller was hired in the early 1970's by the Virginia Neal Blue Resource Center for Colorado Women (VNB) to conduct research on Hispanic crafts in Northern New Mexico. The VNB was a Denver based nonprofit developed by the Colorado Commission on the Status of Women. Their mission was to provide resources and job training for low-income rural people with an emphasis on preserving traditions. VNB began The San Luis Valley Crafts Program through a feasibility study that occurred in 1974 in the town of San Luis. They hired Carmen Benavente Orrego-Salas to teach embroidery in San Luis and Saguache. Patsy Garcia, current Saguache resident aged 91 years old, organized the participants.

"This woman called me and said, 'a woman from Chile will be teaching embroidery, we need a lot of women and we need a lot of commitment for sure.' I was so excited I called everyone in town; I called every woman in town. We would meet once a week and sew all afternoon and visit. It was just really great... Well, I'll tell you, the experience with Carmen was a once in a lifetime thing for me. It was really fantastic."

—Patsy Garcia,
wall label in Arvada Center for Arts
and Humanities Archive



Kathryn Nelson, *La Costura de Saguache*, 1980. Collection of Kathryn Nelson.

Participants in Saguache Virginia Neal Blue group. From Left: Margie Gurule, Frances Russell, Nyla Thompson Orvis, Cathy Baxter, Nettie Quintana, Marcella Quintana, Mary Ann Gallegos, Brenda Lovato, Margaret "Mugs" Batchelder.



Tiva Trujillo, *Old San Acacio in 1925*, 1980. 29" × 40½". Collection of Hope Trujillo Hernandez.

In the 1970's, the Saguache economy was struggling and many residents were affected by a lack of well paid jobs. The colcha embroidery program brought together participating artists including Mary Baker, Cathy Baxter, Margaret 'Mugs' Batchelder, Mary Anne Gallegos, Patsy Garcia, Margie Gurule, Yvonne Halburian, Brenda Lovato, Sandra Lovato, Virginia 'Bena' Lovato, Mary Pacheco, Sadie Pacheco, Marcella Quintana, Nettie Quintana, Brenda Rowe Heckathorne, Francis Russell, Lupe Tafoya, Nyla Thompson Orvis, Evelyn Trujillo, Tiva Trujillo, and Delores Worley. Carmen Benavente Orrego-Salas was very influential in her teachings with the group, which chose to focus on making pictorial and narrative artworks, filling the entire surface of the fabric with embroidery.

"That's when we first met Carmen Salas, you know? She gave us a two weeks training on our embroidering and it was really exciting... Oh she said, 'well just do your own drawings. Do your own drawings...' what she said is, 'the picture is more important if you draw it your own way. It's a true picture because nobody else will be able to draw what you draw. You're not copying or anything, it's just what you see.' And she said, 'draw your past. Your present. What is really real.'"

—Tiva Trujillo, *Los Testamentos*, 1979



Marcella Quintana, *Old Friend's Home*, 1981. 11¼" × 8½".

Under the instruction of Carmen, artists that participated in the 1970's revival incorporated as many as 27 stitch techniques into their artworks, though traditional colcha embroideries employ only a long straight stitch secured to cloth with tacking stitches. Artists were paid a small wage for their hourly labor and provided materials. It is estimated that more than 400 artworks were produced Valleywide during this time, and the VNB organized a series of exhibitions and sales in Colorado and the Midwest. The proceeds of the sales of the artwork were retained by VNB to cover program costs. VNB was supported by grant funds and when the funds ran out, the program ended. Artists were not given information on where the artworks went, saw little economic gain from the program, and didn't retain many of their pieces, leading to lingering dissatisfaction mixed in with the love of the art they created and the time they spent together working on their embroideries.

Efforts began in the 1980's to track down where artworks made in Saguache went after they left the community. In 1993, the Saguache Public Library was the site of a homecoming celebration for a beloved quilt composed of 19 panels made by artists who participated in the local stitching group, *La Costura de Saguache*. Each panel depicted the historic buildings of town with architectural elements rendered in different stitches. Blanche Cowperthaite, the director of VBN, donated the quilt to the community at the request of Delores Worley. Delores worked persistently to bring it home and still lives in Saguache, turning 95 this April. Today the quilt hangs in the Colorado Room of the Saguache Public library.

In 2018 the grassroots community organization HEART of Saguache initiated the San Luis Valley Colcha Embroidery Project in partnership with The Range, an

art space in Downtown Saguache. This project supports exhibitions, workshops, scholarship, and colcha embroidery artists throughout the Valley. Local artists teach in Valley communities and gather frequently to celebrate and exhibit their artworks. Artists Adrienne Garbini and Trent Segura work with artists, family members, scholars, and institutions to research the history of San Luis Valley colcha embroidery and locate artworks made in the region. The mystery of where the art went makes it difficult to organize exhibitions, but in 2023, there was a major breakthrough with an exhibition at the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities that resulted in the return of nine artworks found in the City of Arvada Collection to artists and surviving family members.

Today colcha embroidery in the San Luis Valley is a beloved artform with many new practitioners drawn to its colorful and complex history. The artworks embody community storytelling and folklore, while pointing to a checkerboard history of exploitation and economic precarity dating back to colonization. The artworks exemplify the unique talents and memories of artists that have made Saguache County their home, and hold great promise for the continuation of the tradition, with a hope for more art to stay in the community for residents and visitors to experience in the place it was made.



Delores Worley, *Randy*, 1978. 15" × 19".



Patsy Garcia, *The Turtle Storyteller*, 2023. Wool on cotton. 10¼" diameter.