MASTER APPRENTICE

Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986 - 1990

Shirley Ortega
Luella Le Blanc
Colcha Embroidery

Luella Le Blanc

Luella learned the colcha stitch from Shirley, intrigued by the idea of being able to help preserve a dying art that she could relate to her own heritage.

After four years with the struggling organization, Shirley Ortega is now Director of Artistas del Valle, a co-operative effort to keep some of the San Luis Valley's beautiful traditional handicrafts alive, to educate people about them and to market them. Some nuns helped organize and fund this group's efforts to create a market and workplace in a lovely old church at La Garita, a little west of Highway 285 between Saguache and Monte Vista. Artes del Valle is open daily in the summer and weekends during the fall. A tourist looking at a *colcha*-embroidered skirt commented, "I could buy this cheaper at K-Mart." Shirley notes that this comment reveals a common lack of understanding of the difference in time, skills and materials between a fine handmade object and a mass-produced cheap imitation. This lack of appreciation is a common problem for artists attempting to sell handmade items.

Colcha embroidery by Luella Le Blanc.

Shirley taught Luella Le Blanc, a long-time member of Artistas del Valle, to do two styles of *colcha* embroidery: one in which scattered designs, usually of floral or animal subjects, are stitched onto a background material that remains visible in the finished product; and one in which the entire surface of the material is covered with embroidery. The stitch is easy, versatile, and fast to do, although a

Shirley Ortega and Luella Le Blanc.

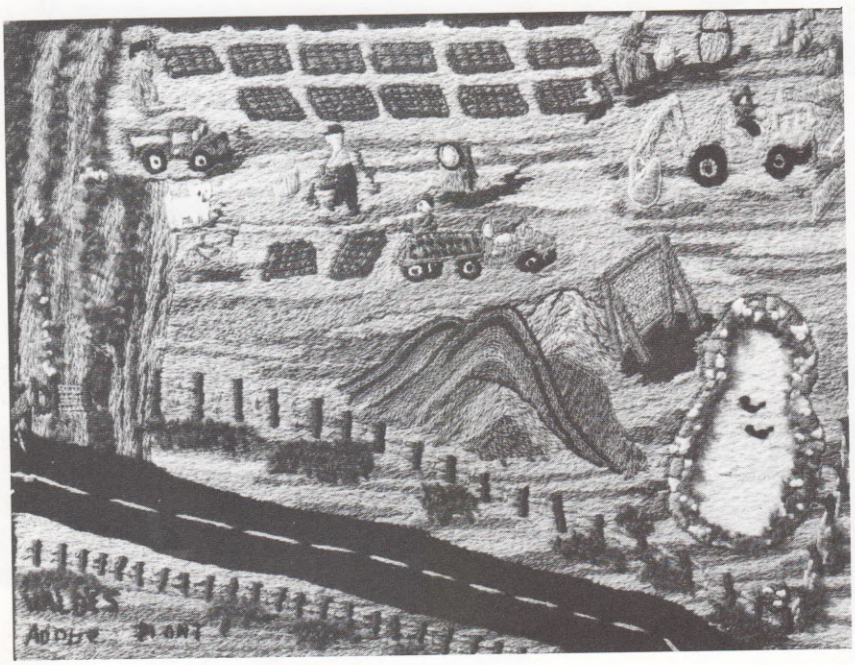
whole piece is very time-consuming. Shirley's *colcha* embroidery represents the things that she finds important in the Valley.

Luella Le Blanc was born in Del Norte in 1954. Her mother died when she was a child; Luella was raised by her grandmother, who speaks only Spanish. Luella is proud and grateful that she learned Spanish, but fears that it is not important to the younger generation. She now lives in Center with her 3-year-old son, her 90-year-old grandmother, and her husband, who teaches at Center's unified school. Luella learned the *colcha* stitch from Shirley, intrigued by the idea of being able to help preserve a dying art that she could relate to her own heritage. She found her apprenticeship extremely demanding and now appreciates how much work goes into *colcha* embroidery. At the same time, she recommends *colcha* to other embroiderers, as a simple, easy-to-do stitch. The designs in Luella's pieces are intentionally "crude," in keeping with Shirley's knowledge of the tradition.

Shirley observes, "It's sad that a lot of people lose their cultural roots and their own identity. Now some are going back and trying to revitalize the culture they grew up in, but they had to go to the cities to find work." Shirley herself is of Native American, Spanish and Mexican descent, raised in the Spanish culture of the San Luis Valley.

Gift-giving has become a major function of *colcha* embroidery. Even women who set out to make pieces for sale find that friends and relatives admire their work; they end up giving away much or all of what they make.

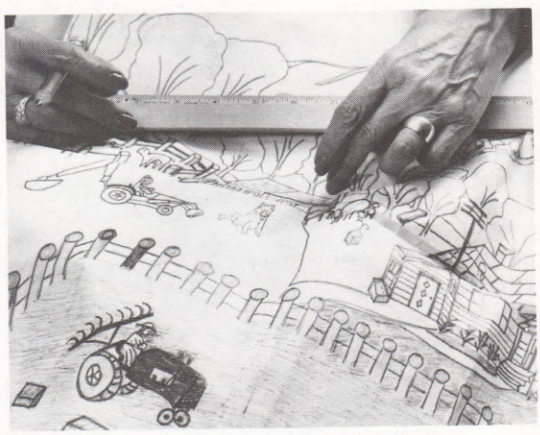
Sally Chávez
Paula Cunningham, Darlene Jácquez, Edicia Manzanares, Esther Romero, Eva Sánchez, and Julia Valdez
Colcha Stitchery



Adobe Plant by Julia Valdez.

"I cannot paint with a brush, but I can paint with a needle. I can use my needle as a medium to create a picture. I consider myself an artist, because I paint with a needle. It gives me a good feeling to see a finished product."

Sally Chávez was born at home in San Luis in 1932, the last of 12 children. She learned to crochet and embroider from her mother, who started her out edging tea towels and such. "It was one of the [few] times I felt really close to my mother, because she had so much to do." Sally worked at a local grocery store after school, beginning in the fourth grade, so summers were the only time she had time for needlework. "I never learned to use a thimble," she laughs, showing her needle-callused fingers.



Sketching design for *colcha* embroidery.

It wasn't until she retired from teaching that Sally had a chance to learn *colcha* embroidery. She took one of Carmen Orrego-Salas' workshops. "She was the one who had the most influence on me. I wanted to learn everything in the time that she was here. You never stop learning; there is always something else to learn. We learned all we could from her. I'm working on colors, and I'm getting better and better. I am so aware of color! I look out at the mountains, I look at the sky, the formation of the clouds. I used to take things for granted; not anymore."

Sally and Evangeline Salazar requested a different type of Master/Apprenticeship: they wanted to teach a group of women, rather than pick just one. There was hope that *colcha* embroidery could become an economic resource in the poorest county in the state. About nine women joined the weekly embroidery group--which continues to meet, although the grant period is over. "They all have families. As far as selling their pictures, family members want

Sally Chávez, Paula Cunningham and Julia Valdez

them. We meant this for them to create their pictures and sell them and to have extra money, but so far family members have reaped the benefits, and they're very proud. It's beginning to come to the point where some members have one or two that will be for sale." Sally and Evangeline also edit the San Luis Parish newsletter and include an article on "*colcha* art" in each issue, along with a photo of one *colcha* tapestry.

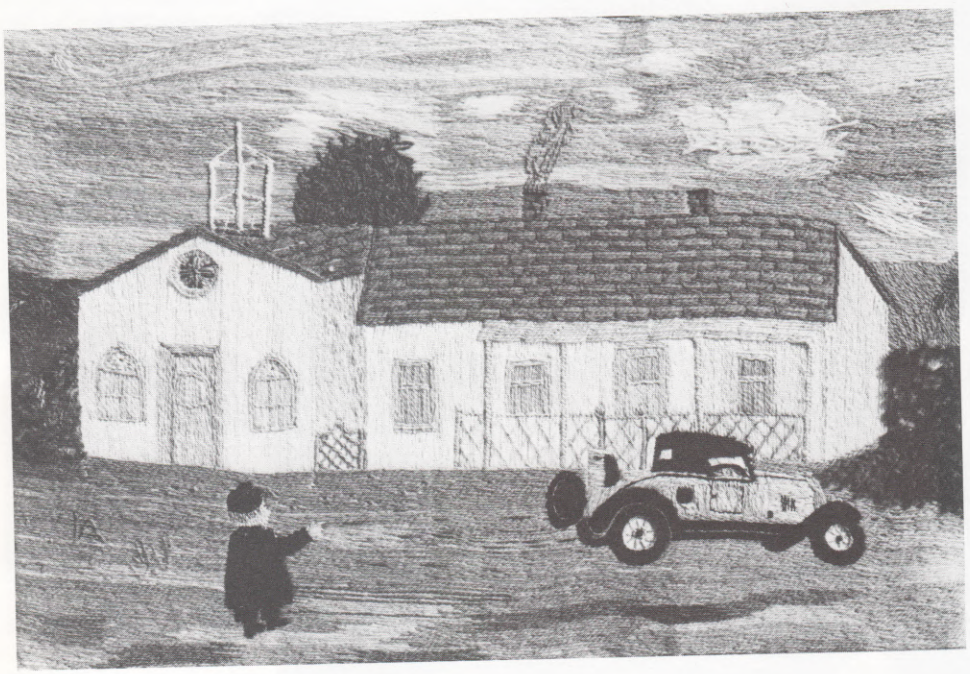
Apprentice Julia Valdez is one who has sold a few of her lovely pieces. She worked with the Virginia Neale Blue Foundation for two or three years when it attempted to revive the *colcha* tradition about ten years ago. She took Carmen's last workshop as well as both Evangeline and Sally's classes. She portrays the adobe plant which her family worked for five years or so at their rural home. Another apprentice, Edicia Manzanares, was retired and wanted something to fill her time. "I knew how to embroider, but I didn't know the names of the stitches."

This group met Wednesday afternoons, not a good time for working women, but the apprentices are housewives and retirees. Their tapestries range from still lives of favorite objects to scenes of local and historical places and events. Members of the group tend to have their tapestries framed at an Alamosa shop--not a traditional aspect of the art, but indicative of their desire to preserve their art and their perception that the high-quality framing they receive enhances their work. Folklorists are sometimes frustrated by non-traditional influences creeping into "pure" folk art, and it is sometimes difficult to determine what changes occur within a tradition and when changes carry the work outside the scope of traditional art.

Evangeline Salazar

Pacífica La Combe, Frances Martínez, Esther Romero, Tina Santistevan, and Cordy Valdez

Colcha Stitchery



Colcha embroidery by Esther Romero.

Evangeline Salazar was born in 1928 and has lived in San Luis all her life. Her great-grandfather settled there in the mid-1850s and started the oldest continuously operating grocery store in the area. When Evangeline was about six years old, she began learning *colcha*, and she feels that is an important element of her Spanish heritage. "This art has always been part of my life. I remember both my grandmother and mother working on their embroidery as I was growing up. Both of them made sure I learned to embroider, knit, and crochet." She remembers going out with her grandmother to gather wool the sheep had rubbed off on fences. The ladies then carded their own wool. This Evangeline did not learn how to do.

"The word *colcha* means bedspread. In all probability white or unbleached muslin was used to cover the beds. With time the ladies began to decorate this cloth; thus, *colcha* embroidery." This decoration transformed an everyday object into a work of artistic beauty. Today, these *colcha* stitches are applied to muslin to create pictures that reflect visions of the individual artist. Evangeline describes the process this way. "You take your unbleached muslin, wash it to insure shrinkage, if any, occurs before the work begins. In transferring the pattern it is important to use a pen with ink which will not run but will wash off when the picture is completed." Although most of the ladies do not use a thimble, with Evangeline this is a "must." "My grandmother used a thimble. My mother still uses a thimble.These two great ladies made sure that I learned to use one, and I can't work without mine." Evangeline proudly shows off her newest thimble brought to her from Spain by a friend.

A school teacher for 32 years, Evangeline has always wanted to share with others whatever knowledge and skills she could. The project she designed consisted of an intensive week-long *colcha* workshop. Thirteen apprentices with varying degrees of previous experience in different kinds of needlework gathered at the San Luis Community Center. With Evangeline's guidance, they designed individual projects that would help them learn and practice a variety of embroidery stitches, how to use colors and how to create designs. It was a time for them to work together as a group, a time to share skills and knowledge, to tell the stories of their lives and their community. Products varied from traditional historical and regional themes to pictures of animals and flowers. Many of the

Evangeline Salazar and apprentices, Frances Martínez and newcomer Celine Trujillo with Sally Chávez standing on the right.

women do not want to part with their work. They give the pictures to relatives or hang them in their homes. But they also see future *colchas* as a possible economic boost for the community if a market can be found for them.

Even though the project has been completed, weekly *colcha* workshops continue at the Community Center. New students learn the basics while experienced women refine their skills and help the newcomers. Evangeline sees preserving the knowledge and techniques of *colcha* as part of a broader movement to preserve cultural traditions in the Valley. Mothers are teaching their daughters not only the skills of *colcha* but also the importance of preserving their language and their cultural identity. But she worries that many people are losing their culture and their pride. "We don't want to do that. If there's any part of that culture that we can maintain and retain, I want it." She hopes to train home economics teachers in the craft so that they can pass it on to the next generation. "I think *colcha* is history in itself."

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