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Carson Colcha Embroideries: From Ersatz to Orthodox

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In the 5th century BCE Heraclitus wrote, “Everything in time begets its opposite.” The history of Carson colcha embroideries in New Mexico appears to follow that axiom. Under a range of epithets from “fake” to “authentic,” these embroideries evolved from the 1930s as marketable (alternately enigmatic) replications or copies of 19th century Spanish colonial textiles to finally emerge as a distinctly recognized and legitimate genre of traditional Hispanic needlework in the late 20th century. In the 1930s these pieces were originally associated with the Carson, New Mexico, community dominated by a clan of Mormon brothers married to Hispanic sisters, which created a complex intermingling of Anglo Mormon entrepreneurial guidance with Hispano and Anglo artistic collaboration.

The following discussion traces the evolution of the Carson colcha legacy as the calculated invention of Elmer Shupe, a Mormon trader, who saw an opportunity to create historically “authentic” embroideries from the remnants of genuine Spanish colonial textiles. In the process, Shupe’s various Hispanic sisters-in-law appropriated everything from reused yarn and patches of original foundation fabrics (*sabanilla*) to borrowing iconography while simulating a particular aesthetic system associated with Spanish colonialism. Carson designers and stitchers then acculturated neo-traditional imagery (Catholic saints and rituals) and ethnic emblems (e.g., Hispanic and Native American) to create eclectic embroideries with immediate visual impact and identifiable symbolic content that met tourist demands for exotic yet culturally representative textiles.

This paper explores the consequences of the circulation of a cultural artifact predicated on an interpretation of authenticity, created from invention and artifice, and subject to the scholarly skepticism of museum curators and collectors. As Carson colchas evolved, they were eventually transformed over time to become the basis of an independent artistic trend, or at least a viable colcha embroidery subgroup.

Originally, Carson colcha manufacture was a salvage operation spearheaded by Elmer Shupe, a blanket trader and son of Mormon Judge W. K. Shupe, who founded the northern New Mexico community of Carson in 1909. Elmer Shupe started to collect old Rio Grande weavings and colchas during the early years of the twentieth century. For some time, the area of the San Luis Valley around Alamosa in south central Colorado was a major site of his collecting operations as well as the place where he lived. At the beginning of his trading career, Shupe moved throughout the region gathering antique textiles on his bicycle. Stories still circulate telling of his arrival in small villages like Capulin, Colorado, armed with persuasive arguments that convinced people to exchange their old and “worn” colcha bedcovers for the more up-to-date bedspreads he offered in trade. These tales always end with the image of Shupe peddling down yet another dusty back road in search of more textiles and treasures (figs. 1 and 2).



*Fig. 1 (left) A nineteenth-century wool-on-wool colcha embroidery (86"x54").
Courtesy Taylor Museum, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center; TM 3775.*

*Fig. 2 (right) 19th century wool colcha embroidery (76"x37.5").
Courtesy Colorado Historical Society.
El Pueblo Museum Collection, Pueblo, Colorado E1943.1a.*

According to Harry H. Garnett, (a writer and collector for the Taylor Museum in Colorado Springs during this era), in the 1930s when rare traditional colchas were selling from five hundred to eight hundred dollars and few could be found, Elmer Shupe and his brother-in-law, John Graves, amassed as much *sabanilla* (hand woven woolen ground fabric) or fragments of it as they could find. These were then pieced together to form the backing for the embroidered patterns, later identified or categorized as “Carson colchas.” In fact, evidence of this piecing technique on older colchas today signals their origin as Carson colchas and distinguishes them from traditional 19th century Spanish colonial pieces or other versions of revival embroideries. Consistent with their resourceful and expedient application of reused materials, Carson residents also stitched their colcha designs with handspun and naturally dyed wool yarn unraveled from frayed Rio Grande blankets that were beyond repair. Many of these old textiles were ideal for recycling since they were so worn that they had lost their value as trade objects. H. H. Garnett reported, “Shupe told me that the colchas cost him eighty-five dollars to make. They were so near perfect that only an expert could tell they were reproductions.” Mixing narrative with opinion, he goes on to describe how colchas were created from re-cycled materials and ends by simply calling them “fakes.” A few curators and collectors still use this term.

During an interview before her death, Frances Varos Graves, one of the original Carson embroiderers and Shupe's sister-in-law, mentioned that the real catalyst for the Carson “revival” was the speculative leap that she made one day from repairing a traditional geometric style colcha to being inspired to copy it. Her reconstruction techniques based on the original embroidery with its dominant grid-pattern design became the hallmark of the Carson colcha style: parallel rows of uni-directional stitches (some stitches spanning several inches with anchoring stitches crossing over the single thread at regular intervals), recycled materials, large scale foundation fabrics pieced together from fragments of old wool *sabanilla*, and fringe added along the outer borders.

Instead of the curving and undulating stitches which follow the formal dictates of floral patterns found in various Spanish colonial examples (e.g., fig. 2), Carson colchas are distinguished from traditional and other revival embroideries by the presence of solid lines of stitches moving vertically or horizontally throughout the composition. The result

of these patterns is, of course, quite “grid-determined” characterized by even and regular rhythms.

Frances Graves also believed that the old colchas that she and her sisters mended were originally from Spain, “...they claim the originals came from Spain,” which she stressed over and over again in her interview. Combining an interpretation of Frances' honest belief in the historical authenticity of these textiles with inferences from H. H. Garnett's statements about Shupe's intentions to create genuine embroideries which could “pass” as originals, one detects a core of sincerity and commitment (on the part of the stitchers) overlaid with a marketing strategy intent on triggering similar associations with antique colonial pieces (as espoused by Frances Graves), but targeting future buyers.

Tourists and collectors visiting the Santa Fe and Taos areas, were most attracted to authentic and local cultural expressiveness. Spending a lot of money on what they believed to be traditional Spanish or Spanish colonial textiles, allowed tourists and some collectors to represent themselves as knowledgeable about the history of the area, to own an exotic object identified with the aristocratic Spanish society of colonial times, and (in their eyes) to belong to a discriminating ‘taste culture.’



*Fig. 3 1930s "Carson Colcha" attributed to Wayne Graves (78"x44.5").
Courtesy Millicent Rogers Museum Collection, Taos, NM; MRM-1978-6.*

A Carson colcha in the Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, New Mexico (fig. 3), is attributed to Wayne Graves, Frances Graves' and Elmer Shupe's brother-in-law in common. It was created before his death in 1935. Old accession records note erroneously that it belongs to a group of “old Navajo textiles.” This judgement is probably based on Graves' monochromatic color scheme and repetitive geometric format. Graves' colcha is a study in the subtle manipulations of tan and brown. It is framed on top and bottom by a series of dark brown scalloped meanders reminiscent of ornate lambrequin arches associated with Hispano-Mauresque architecture. These are shadowed by symmetrical rows of gradated arches receding into the background. The overall configuration is punctuated at regular intervals with lines of carefully positioned flowers along its lateral axes.

I was reminded of how successful Wayne Graves was in representing “traditional” motifs, during my slide presentation at a workshop held in the San Luis Valley on the history and techniques of colcha embroidery. When audience members saw a slide of Graves' colcha they remarked how much it reminded them of decorations on Spanish tiles or more accurately, those found in New Mexico. Tile decoration and technique is mostly

Hispano-Mauresque in origin and was transmitted to the colonies during the Spanish occupation.



*Fig. 4 19th century colcha embroidery (68"x54").
Courtesy Taylor Museum, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, TM 3776.*

Wayne Graves' design arrangement is also suggestive of the rippling diamonds and serrated borders inspired by Saltillo-style Rio Grande blankets also replicated in the colonial geometric style colcha from the Taylor Museum (fig. 4). While the composition of the traditional colonial embroidery is slightly asymmetrical and irregular, it is enlivened by an organic sense of interlocked and recurring designs. Graves' piece with its strictly delineated design elements, however, is characterized by precise placement, symmetry, and meticulous planning without anomalous nor variable patterns. The tenor of Graves' work in general is deliberately conditioned by an overriding sense of Anglo-American taste and sensibility.

His choice of iconography and style is also quite sophisticated. By utilizing Hispano-Mauresque (*mudejar*) designs, Graves draws from a Spanish colonial stylistic vocabulary redolent with symbolic allusions to Iberian heritage and historic Spanish domination. This iconographic program shows his ability to tap into the significant roots of the colonial New Mexico cultural system, and to muster the 'signs' of that culture as the real thing.



*Fig. 5 "Carson Colcha" attributed to Wayne Graves (75"x45").
Courtesy Taylor Museum, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.*

Another Carson colcha, which I believe was created by Wayne Graves in the 1930s, is in the Taylor Museum collection (fig. 5) where old notes on extant accession records originally list it as a late nineteenth century piece. Nevertheless, this colcha conforms to all the Carson colcha criteria. It is entirely covered with uni-directional couching stitches

made of recycled yet carefully color-coordinated native yarns on patched *sabanilla*. The red accents within the composition were created from unraveled commercial yarn – either from blankets or turn-of-the-century *colcha* embroideries.

The *colcha*'s large-scale pattern of twisted morning glory vines, a type of classical *rincaux*, is symmetrically arranged on a neutral background. The presence of a meandering ivy border is typical of Carson *colchas* which characteristically employ some kind of repetitive framing device, e.g., undulating vines or pyramidal color blocks. The edges of Wayne Graves' work were usually hemmed. In contrast, other Carson pieces were ordinarily surrounded by colorful fringe made of complementary colors which accentuated the customary geometrical or curvilinear borders framing the design field.

In 1974 Graves' *colcha* was featured in a traveling exhibit mounted by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. According to the dates listed in the exhibition catalogue, *The Spanish Southwest*, the *colcha* on exhibit was supposedly created sometime between 1860-70. This estimate was supported by writer, Roland Dickey, in the commentary accompanying the photograph of Graves' *colcha*. Dickey credited the rather innovative artistic format to the correct source of influence, but the wrong century, “While embroidered with the traditional New Mexican long couched stitch, this *colcha* is more sophisticated in design and color than earlier examples, indicating the influence of eastern settlers.”

In retrospect, elements that Dickey attributed to nineteenth century Anglo influence, were actually the results of the twentieth century Carson Anglo Mormon synthesis of Hispanic traditional stylistic techniques tempered by European aesthetics. Since the Carson group was also at the center of an active textile trading network, the European cast of the Carson *colchas* was probably the product of an eclectic mix, which was the outcome of exposure to Spanish colonial *colchas*, embroidered fabrics from New England, and Anglo objects found in local Mormon households.

Before the Boston exhibition, the ivy *colcha* with its balanced and restful composition inspired another visual incarnation as a colonial artifact. An undated photographic advertisement from the Taylor Museum collection (probably 1940s), uses Wayne Graves' *colcha* as a backdrop for a portable *niche* which enshrined a carved statue of Job. The inclusion of the ivy *colcha* as a prop in this promotional photograph signals its putative authenticity as a Spanish colonial artifact consonant with the way in which it was regarded by museum personnel at the time.

Along with Spanish colonial imagery, the Carson artists introduced simply rendered pictorial themes inspired by their expectations of tourists' and collectors' popular perceptions of the Southwest: herds of buffalo, wild horses, wagon trains, and Indian chiefs on horseback (figs. 6 and 7). Some *colchas* even featured scenes inspired by the secretive practices associated with the lay Catholic Brotherhood, known commonly as the *Penitentes*. Frances Varos Graves maintained that she was inspired to create western scenes because her husband, Richard, was a “cowpuncher.” Both she and her sister, Sophie, had also grown up listening to their grandfather, Jose Manuel Varos, tell stories of buffalo hunts and other tales of exploits on the New Mexico frontier.



Fig. 6 (left) 1970s “Carson Colcha” acrylic yarn (60"x50"). Private collection.

Fig. 7 (right) 1930s “Carson Colcha” embroidery (70"x36").

Courtesy Taylor Museum, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, TM 1999.4.28 T403.

Sophie Graves created a colcha during the 1930s, in which she embroidered a wagon train under siege encircled by mounted Indians. Despite the dramatic action portrayed in such scenes, they have a certain static quality which seems subject to the constraints of medium, composition and style. These rather stationary pictorial arrangements could have been partly conditioned by the enduring tone of the geometrical colcha designs that Frances Graves originally copied. Perhaps the sisters relied on the underlying grid structure of the foundation fabric to orient and control the motifs and set the position of their imagery relative to the entire composition?

There are other cases where the perception persists that Carson pictorial embroideries were linked to antique Spanish colonial examples. Evidently long after the 1930s and 40s marketing heyday, interpreters of colcha embroidery remained susceptible to the lure of authenticity and tradition as promoted by Elmer Shupe and his clan of traders and embroidering relatives. In the 1960s an anonymous article appeared in the *Denver Post* in which the Graves family’s pictorial colchas were described as colonial pieces, “Many of the flowers and leaf designs are of Spanish and Moorish origin, but the early colcha-makers [implying nineteenth century but actually referring to mid-twentieth century] were also pictorial journalists. In their needlework they told of Penitente marches and attacks on wagon trains and pictured the buffalo and deer of the area. But, the saints were probably their favorite subjects.”

In the early 1990s Frances Graves still embroidered images of saints. These were borrowed from painted retablos and traditional bultos (sculpted figures of saints). The sacred imagery of one of her embroideries showing a series of santos in niches is copied from a book of carvings of saints published by the Taylor Museum in 1943. The stance and attributes of the embroidered figures are identical to the images in the photographs. Since Elmer Shupe traded and sold antique santos and knew Taylor Museum staff, it is possible that he owned a copy of this book and showed it to Frances Graves. Typical of this type of work is a colcha by Maria Fernandez Graves, Frances’ niece, which depicts the “Queen of Heaven” (fig. 8).



Fig. 8 “Queen of Heaven” “Carson Colcha” by Maria Fernandez Graves, 1993 (14"x12").
Private collection.

Although Frances was raised a Catholic, she “didn't like it.” Neither her move to Carson nor subsequent marriage into a Mormon family had an acknowledged impact on her religiosity. She claims that she has no religious affiliation. “I didn't become a Mormon. When I was young I went to the Catholic Church ... but I didn't like it. I couldn't understand their priest ... so ... I'm still that way. I was the one who started doing religious imagery ... because the old colchas never had anything like that. It was only flowers and ...[checkerboard]... something like that. But there were no images. But I think the santos are really beautiful, you know. So, I started making some ... then everybody wanted those.”

The secularization of religious imagery and ritual practice was also apparent in the thematic colchas that depicted Penitente observances. The Anglo Mormon men who designed the Carson penitente pieces, tended to create these colchas to appeal to external notions of the sensational aspects of the mysterious penitential rites of the Brotherhood such as flagellation and enactments of the crucifixion. In H. H. Garnett's confidential report (quoted earlier), he implied that the choice of penitente themes by Carson artists was based on opportunism stimulated by competitive market forces. Garnett wrote that Elmer Shupe's business partner, John “Shorty” Shumate, was encouraged by Shupe's success, but wanted to create a different type of colcha, so “he put the Graves clan to work making penitente colchas. These colchas were embroidered with the figures of the Penitentes whipping and carrying crosses.” In Garnett's opinion this development was bad for business and connoisseurship. He wrote, “Shumate killed the sale of fake colchas by making penitente colchas. Anyone who is familiar with the Penitentes, knows that they would never make a bulto or colcha showing the brothers whipping or carrying

crosses. The late Dr. H. P. Mera of Santa Fe was going to do a booklet on Colchas [sic], but as he told me, he found so many fakes he gave it up.”

In their narrative power and imagery Carson pictorial colchas, including the genre, “Penitente colchas,” were intended to impart as much visual drama and novelty as possible for commercial purposes; i.e., saleability. One Carson colcha in the collection of Santa Fe’s Museum of International Folk Art resembles a “sacred” text dense with iconic motifs associated with patriotism, religious mysteries, and Native American belief systems - all embedded in an array of pan-Southwestern themes. The red and blue color scheme and stylized eagles are Anglo-American emblems extracted from a collection of Americana. The penitente themes, the Holy Week image of the Crucifixion repeated on all sides, plus the intertwined diamond-backed serpents arranged around a central Saltillo-style diamond rendered as a “god's-eye,” intensify the symbolic program of this piece. This collection of disparate elements appears to be designed in terms of a calculated concession to a collective notion of tourist taste. Moreover, it was assumed that the marketability and commodification of colchas embroidered with visual references to the reclusive Penitente Brotherhood was certain to titillate outsider's beliefs concerning these mysteries. Writing of legitimacy and reproduction, Walter Benjamin states that authenticity of an art work “has its basis in ritual” and in traditional use. At about the same time in the 1930s, the Carson enterprise was reproducing textiles that appropriated the trappings of ritual allusion thus capitalizing on expectations of authentic experience yet transforming authenticity into the subject of art not the source of tradition.

Carson colcha-making in the 1930s was a complex intermingling of Anglo Mormon entrepreneurial guidance with Hispanic and Anglo artistic collaboration. Carson colchas were conditioned by commercialism with a conscious sense of historicity and choice of picturesque imagery. Elmer Shupe, his partners and brothers-in-law, promoted an art form geared for tourists and collectors that drew upon the symbolic resources of local indigenous groups. Their intent was to reduce these neo-traditional images or contrived assemblages of ethnic emblems to uncomplicated forms with immediate visual impact and considerable semantic access. In this manner Carson colchas operated as a type of tourist or collector's art characterized by a simplified visual system whose meaning is accessible to the greatest number of people.

As Frances Graves said, “Everyone in Carson worked on those colchas!” The Carson enterprise leaves an afterimage of a mixed Anglo-Hispanic community integrated by familial and kin relationships as well as living arrangements, engaged in craftsmanship (mending, designing, stitching), all superimposed on a landscape affected by degrees of geographical isolation and the circumstances of the 1930s Depression. However, Carson colchas transcended the temporal constraints of a [re]vitalization movement to become the foundation of a bona fide independent artistic trend. The aesthetic results of this movement not only hang on museum walls but also endure through the pride, skill and enthusiasm inherent in the work of the Graves’ family legacy.

Recommended Reading

Fisher, Nora. "Colcha Embroidery." In *Spanish Textile Tradition of New Mexico and Colorado*, ed. Nora Fisher, 153-67. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1979. Reprinted as, *Rio Grande Textiles*, 1994.

MacAulay, Suzanne P. *Stitching Rites: Colcha Embroidery Along the Northern Rio Grande*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2000.