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## Manila Galleon Trade Textiles: Cross-Cultural Influences on New World Dress

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Spanning a 250 year period from 1565-1815, the Manila Galleon Trade is a fascinating period in history which is addressed far too infrequently by textile scholars. The cross-cultural contact resulting from the Spanish conquest of America expanded to include Asia with the start of the trans-Pacific trade in 1565. Spanish trade ships sailed between Manila in the Philippines and Acapulco in New Spain, becoming the most enduring trade route in history. Three continents were involved: Asia, the Americas, and Europe, and consequently three entirely different cultures with their corresponding customs, belief systems and art styles. The steady contact between these distant lands enriched their histories forever by establishing traces of foreign influence.

The New World was utilized as a land bridge between the trans-Pacific and trans-Atlantic trade routes established by the Spaniards. Westbound cargos from New Spain to the Philippines consisted primarily of gold and silver while the cargos returning to Acapulco were laden with luxury items.

Manila, under Spanish dominance, had been an entrepot for all the rich commodities of Asia: porcelain, laquerware, and ivory from China; textiles such as gauzes, velvets, cantonese crepes, heavy brocades, flowered silks, taffeta, fine damask, grograins and specific items such as silk bed coverings, silk stockings, silk shawls, cloaks, kimonos, tapestries, hankerchiefs, tablecloths, napkins and chinese rugs; pearls, semi-precious stones and cotton cloth from the Coasts of Coromandel and Malabar in India; diamonds and spices from Ceylon, pepper from Sumatra and Java; wool carpets from Persia and from the Philippines, gold, hardwood, spices, iron, beeswax, and oils.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>William L. Schurtz, Manila Galleon, New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1939.

Asian products were shipped to Spanish colonists in the New World and eventually on to Spain. The first stop heading east was Acapulco, where a huge fair was held to distribute a portion of the cargo. The remaining commodities (supposedly 80%) were transported overland to Mexico City by mule train and then on to Vera Cruz on the gulf coast where annual flotas traveling trans-Atlantic carried the cargo on the last leg of its voyage to Cadiz, Spain.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that the influx of foreign trade items into New Spain had an influence on dress styles during the 16th-18th centuries with residual effects evident in the traditional Mexican Indian clothing of the 20th century.

Many studies have concluded that continuous contact between autonomous cultures causes clothing to be adapted and changed. Certain elements of dress are retained while other elements are modified through the diffusion and assimilation of new traits.<sup>3</sup> The result over time is the amalgamation of foreign traits with native dress styles, or in this case, a 3-fold amalgam would result from the blending of European, Asian and indigenous traits.

Utilizing trade as a vehicle of diffusion, my research deals with not only the exchange of material culture, but also of technologies, art designs and concepts.

The history of the Galleon Trade is very complex. During the 250 year trade route there were 13 rulers of Spain. The trade was characterized by a series of laws and edicts which continually restricted and altered the nature of the commerce.

Surprisingly enough, the Spaniards were not very good merchants. They were often accused of lacking an understanding of commercial enterprise and economic sense which was quite a contrast to the Chinese, Dutch, Danish and English who were known for their expertise in matters of commerce. Apparently the Spaniards were better conquerors than traders, and thus excluded from much of the activities that went on around them in the Philippines. The Spanish

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<sup>2</sup>ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher, eds. Dress Adornment and the Social Order. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)1965, and Abby Sue Fisher, "European Influences on Clothing Traditions in Highland Guatemala" (MA Thesis, California State University, 1983).

aristocracy looked down on mercantile activity, an ethic that may account for some of the inadequacies of the Spanish in this capacity.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, after a period of time, the prosperous galleon trade acted independently from Spain as huge amounts of aggregate silver from the mines in New Spain were drained from the Crown coffers on its way to Asia in exchange for luxury goods to supply the extravagant colonists.

The Spanish colonists living in Manila, known as Manileños were dependent on the galleon cargos for contact with the mother country. It was a three year turn around for correspondence between Manila and Spain which could easily be jeopardized if a galleon was lost.

It took 3 months sailing west across the equator from Acapulco to Manila. The return route to New Spain utilized northerly Pacific ocean currents and was kept secret for many years. The return route was very difficult and took three to four months. There were no islands along the way to replenish supplies and fresh water. A schedule of yearly voyages was set up after 1565, at first between one and four galleons sailed each year but after 1593 a decree limited the round trip voyages to one ship a year. The galleon actually sighted land at northern California but due to strict regulations, could not port until reaching Acapulco. Even though the ships sailed under the Spanish flag, the merchandise and crews they transported were Mexican and Philippine. It took 300-400 regular crew, aside from the commanders and officials to sail the large ships. Before 1650 it was not uncommon for 3/4 of the crew to be Asians.<sup>5</sup> If unfavorable weather prevailed, as much as 50% of the crew could be lost. Scurvy and malnutrition were frequent causes of death.

The enormous merchant ships which could hold up to 300 tons of cargo were built first in Mexico and then later in Manila. Resources such as teak wood for the ship's frame and Manila hemp for the cordage and ropes were readily available

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<sup>4</sup>Schurtz, Manila Galleon, 388.

<sup>5</sup>Marco A. Almazán, "The Manila Galleon," Artes de Mexico vol. 18, no. 143 (1971): 20-44.

in Asia. In the 250 years of sea trade, 30 of the great ships were lost, either to extreme weather or to French, Dutch, or English mariners.

A world of contrasts distinguished the Manila Galleon trade with a cast of characters as diverse and varied as both ports on either side of the Pacific. Filipinos, East Indians, Chinese, Indonesians, Mexicans, Spaniards and Peruvians made up the cast of powerful officials, men and women, saints and sinners, pirates and smugglers, honest traders and opportunists who were all involved in one way or another.

Considering the flow of influences between Asia and New Spain, it should be noted that the agents of influence were very different in both cases. On the route westward to the Philippines, cargos consisted of few material objects from the New World aside from gold and silver and agricultural plants. There were, however, large numbers of emigrants including Spanish officials, missionaries, soldiers, traders and their families. On the eastward route to New Spain, material goods predominated over a relatively small number of Asian emigrants. Aside from the luxury items and large quantities of textiles traveling east to New Spain, agricultural plants included fruits, cereals, nuts and flower seeds such as peonies, chrysanthemums and orchids.<sup>6</sup>

For close to three centuries New Spain was the recipient of continuous influence from the Far East. It was not an influence that was imposed, but one that was welcomed and even promoted. As a result, New Spain received ideas, customs, and material goods which are now a part of their own culture. The majority of Asian commodities imported to New Spain were readily consumed by the Spanish, Creoles, and wealthy Mestizos.

As work-in-progress, the questions raised about the effects of continuous culture contact on dress styles is one that addressed socio-economic, and political concerns. Understanding the diffusion of trade textiles can shed light on the structural aspects of society and its receptivity or resistance to change. It is believed that the quantity and quality of merchandise that entered New Spain

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<sup>6</sup>P. Guzman-Rivas, "Reciprocal Geographical Influences of the Trans-Pacific Galleon Trade" (PhD diss., University of Texas, 1960).

was substantial enough to effect society on all levels. Did the diffusion of trade textiles and accessories percolate down from the upper classes in New Spain? How did the galleon trade affect the indigenous populations? Was there movement of textile knowledge and design elements between New Spain and Asia? Can isolated sources of new ideas for textiles and dress styles which appear in colonial Mexico be traced to Asia? Answers to these questions lay hidden in archival repositories in Spain, Mexico and the Philippines. Extant textiles and costumes in museum collections as well as period iconographic materials also provide rich primary sources on trade and dress in New Spain.

I have been asked to be a textile consultant for a marine archaeologist who has recently discovered a sunken galleon in Drake's Bay, north of San Francisco. The ship went down in a storm while anchored in 1595. Bob Marx, the archaeologist believes there are textile fragments on board as they were traditionally packed for the voyage in lead lined boxes sealed in wax. The opportunity to examine textile fragments from a sixteenth century galleon would broaden the scope of this research by bringing it into historical context.

I realize the questions posed here constitute a lifetime of study. I hope my study will act as a catalyst for future scholars as the topic of the Manila Galleon trade is one that warrants more attention by textile specialists.