

# Mexican embroidery

## **Introduction:**

Embroidery has been an important part of Mexican life for centuries with each region having their own specific style.

The embroidery is used to decorate traditional clothing which was worn by both men and women every day and not just for festivals.

In remote areas many women still wear the traditional dress but as the men have had to travel long distances and move to the towns and cities to find work they more usually wear jeans and a t-shirt.

Below are two examples of traditional Mexican clothes from different areas and a photograph of artist Frida Kahlo, who we looked at in the coasters project. She wore traditional dress as a political statement to reflect her own mixed-race heritage and her devotion to Mexico.



Traditional Huichol clothes



Traditional Tehuana clothes



Frida Kahlo photographed with her husband Diego Rivera.

We are going to look at how the Otomi women from a small town called Tenango in central Mexico modernised their cultural traditions to provide an income for their community.

The region was dependant on subsistence agriculture, they farmed the land in order to support themselves, producing all they needed but no extra for trade. During the 1960's severe drought caused the crops to fail, men lost their jobs and there was no income for the families.

The women adapted the traditional style of embroidery into a simpler form which was cheaper and quicker to produce and could be sold in the market to provide a new form of income for their community.

## Some facts about Otomi or Tenango embroidery:

- Originally developed by women to provide an income for their families but now also carried out by men and in prisons as a handicraft to sell.
- To begin with the idea was to make traditional blouses but the embroidery is now stitched onto all kinds of things including tablecloths, cushions, t-shirts and baseball caps.
- Initially the designs were worked in just two colours, usually black and red but now they are worked in any number of bright colours usually on a white background.
- The designs are inspired by everyday life in the region and ancient cave paintings so they can be traditional or modern.
- The design is the most important part of the embroidery and is drawn onto the cloth by the designer, this is then sold in the market where the embroiderer will buy the design and the threads to stitch it.
- The main stitch used is called herringbone, it looks like a satin stitch but uses less thread.
- It can take weeks, months or even years to complete a piece of Tenango embroidery but when it is finished it will be sold in the market.
- Co-operatives have also now been set up by women and their work is transported and sold all over the world.



Red and black from 1960s or 70s



Designs are now worked in bright multi-colour



## About this project

The first part of this project is **design**, you will create an Otomi style design and transfer it onto fabric. This is in four parts and there is no sewing!

At the end of the four workshops you will have a colourful design drawn in your A3 sketchbook and an outline drawn onto fabric.

If you like to stitch you can continue to the second part and learn how to stitch your own design in Otomi style. If you don't like sewing, you can use the stamped addressed envelope to post your fabric with your design drawn onto it back to High Peak Community Arts. It can then be passed onto someone else in the group to stitch, just like in the town of Tenango!

We have sent you most of the materials you need for this project but you will also need a few things from your previous kits.

### This is what you will need for the four-week design project:

From your new kit	From home
A3 large size sketchbook Felt tip pens Pencil, sharpener, eraser Thin paper for tracing 30cm x 30cm card template 35cm x 35cm fabric square Workshop instructions Stamped addressed envelope	You may also use your sketchbook from a previous project if you have space left in it.  Small amount of masking tape or similar

The designs we are looking at are a type of Mexican Folk Art, this is a term used to describe objects and paintings made by people with no formal training as artists.

Folk Art is steeped in tradition and provides an insight into the lives and communities of ordinary people around the world.

Later in the year we will be working on a collage project inspired by artist Mark Hearld and British Folk Art.

**Your large size A3 sketchbook will be used for this project but will also be used for the collage project in the spring/summer. If you have space in a previous sketchbook you can use this for trying out designs and colours.**

## Design week 1:

The designs are inspired by nature and made up of different animals and plants from the area where the Otomi people live.

They are drawn in a naïve or childlike way and sometimes it is hard to recognise the animal or plant. It may look like a combination of different parts of different animals or plants, or more like a mythical being.

So in our design process we don't have to make realistic drawings, the important things in this project will be pattern, colour and composition.

We will begin by looking at the individual motifs that make up the designs and how they are patterned ready for stitching.

**Some of the most popular images are of:**

**Birds.....Insects.....Rabbits.....Horses.....Dogs.....  
.....Flowers.....Leaves.....Trees.....Fish**

On pages 5-8 I have drawn out a selection of animals and plants from traditional Otomi embroideries. These are pages of individual motifs and are **not** finished designs.

Use these to get you started with your designs. Copy or trace some of the motifs into your sketchbook, if you want to trace them you can use the thin newsprint paper as tracing paper. If you want more of a challenge you could make some of your own motifs using the same style

Notice how any large areas are divided up into stripes, either with straight lines or scalloped lines. Later these will be filled with the bold colours in the designs and used by the embroiderer to follow with their stitches. It is these lines that give Otomi embroidery its distinct style.

The stripes should be about 1 to 1.5cm (quarter to half an inch) wide. But you don't need to keep measuring, get the idea of approximately how wide and draw them freehand.

Remember this is a type of Folk Art, it doesn't need to be precise and exact so no rulers or compasses for drawing the shapes, it should look hand made and natural.

Draw in pencil first and then outline the drawings with a felt tip pen. You don't need to colour them in yet - just work on the outlines.

You don't need to put a complete design together, we will look at that in week 2, for now just practice the style until you are happy with your drawings.

You should end up with a page or pages that look like the examples on pages 5 – 8.













