

Mexican Indian Belts as Design Sources

BY NELLIE SARGENT JOHNSON

SIMPLE primitive Mexican belts offer rich sources for designs which may be used in many ways," said Miss Helen Allen, Assistant Professor of Related Arts, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

"This belt," she continued as she picked up a wide belt three yards long, "is the first belt of my large collection. It may interest you to know where I found it, and how it was made.

"A small village in Mexico, on the side of a mountain, is the setting," she said. "The houses are made of stones set one on top of another without mortar. In a doorway squats a woman, on a rush mat, weaving a belt. Her warp-threads are attached to a nail in the post of the door-frame, and the other end is fastened to a belt around her waist. This is her loom.

"The threads on this loom," continued Miss Allen, "are manipulated by an intricate system of strings and sticks put in the warp. The weaver picks out her patterns surely and swiftly, not from any picture or paper, but from designs she keeps in her head. These designs were taught her by her mother and grandmother, handed down to them for generations with but little variation.

"I asked her if she had a belt she would sell me. She replied that she had none.

"But what about that belt out there on the bush?" asked Miss Allen.

"That was hers, but it was still wet. She could make herself another, and it would dry as well for me as it would on the bush, and so I attained the first belt of my collection," said Miss Allen smiling.

"Examples of these belts are found all over Mexico, but are seldom alike in two places. Patterns, coloring, even weaves and materials differ in different localities, and each region has a specialty of its own found nowhere else."

As she talked, she ran the belt through her hands displaying the many different designs which were worked out on it, here a little figure of a woman, a fountain, some queer birds and flowers, and no two alike all along the center of the belt. Even the side border of blue stopped near the center of one side, and changed entirely in design as it finished the other half of the length. There was no deadly monotony about that belt, it was just alive with the imagination of the simple woman who wove it.

"These long belts," continued Miss Allen as she took up another one from the table on which they were piled, "are wound in layers around the waists of the women, and serve as support, and to hold up their skirts.

"Here is another one which is most unusual with its queer animals and dancing women. One day at market, I saw this on a woman who was wearing it. I pointed to her belt, and asked if she had any for sale. She replied that her belt had come from a town much further south, and nearer the

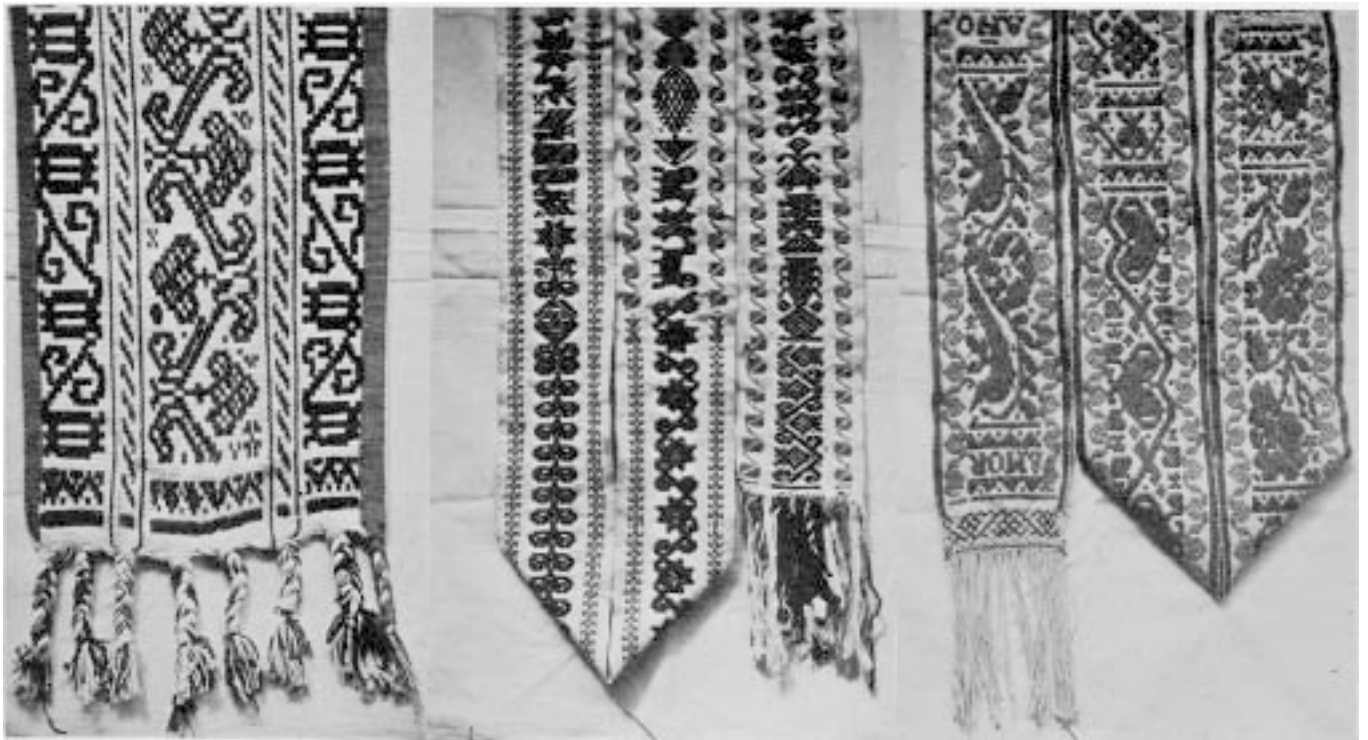
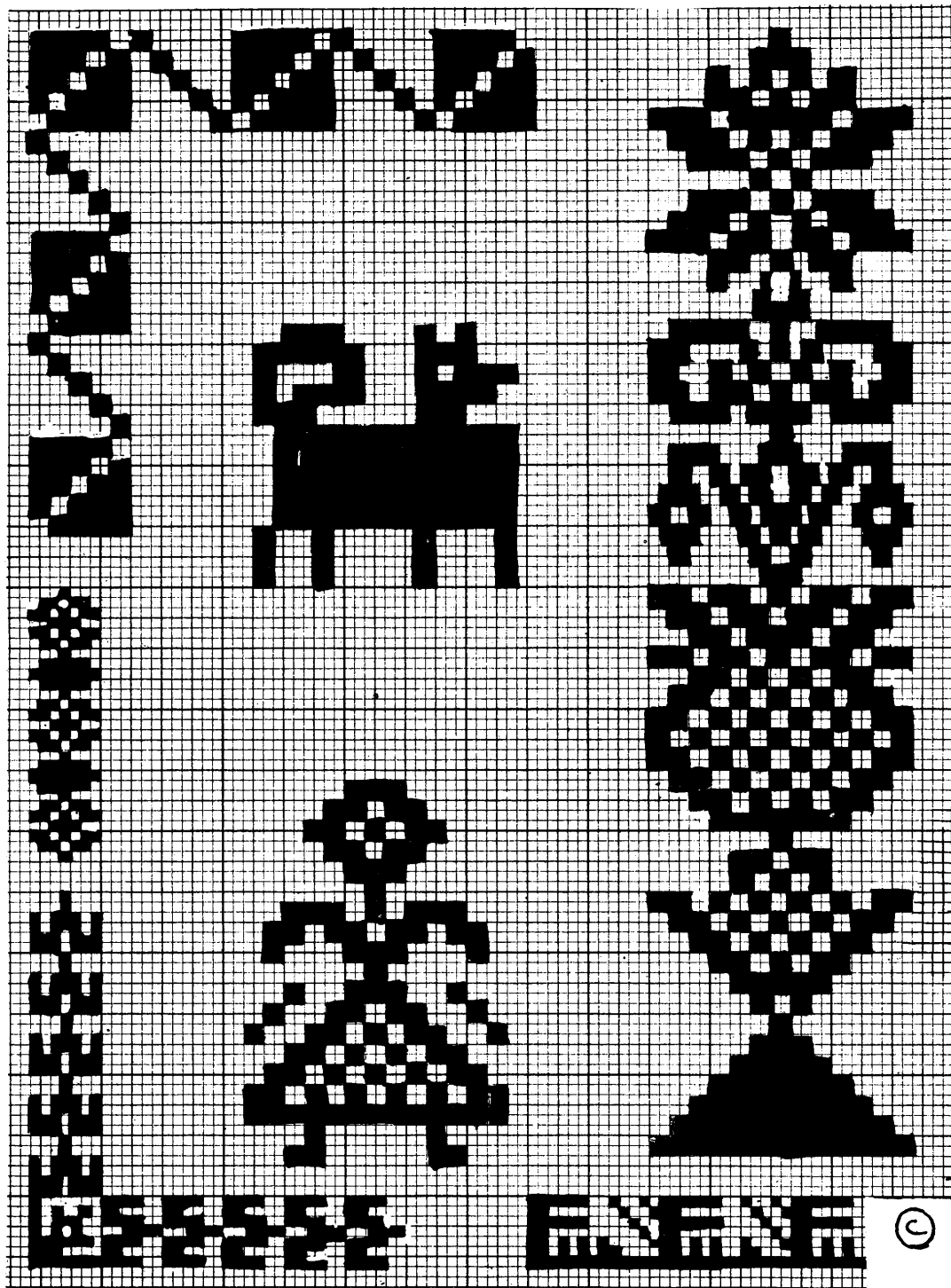


Illustration No. 1. Mexican Indian belts used as Sources of Design



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Nellie Sargent Johnson.

Pacific, and that she was the only woman in the village who had one like it. I asked her if I might see it. She laughingly slipped behind a wall, and in some way managed to fasten up her very full skirt, and brought back her belt for me to examine. After some bargaining she sold me her belt, and was soon going toward her home at a dog trot, the money in one hand, and her fast slipping skirt bunched up in the other."

These simple primitive textile designs have many different uses in weaving. They can be used as patterns for embroidery

weaving for luncheon sets, table runners, or towels. Some of the smaller figures such as that of the little woman, or the small animal figure, could easily be adapted to children's bibs. The large design would make a good motif for a chair-back set. It is also possible to use them for the simple drawloom weaving technique, such as was described in a recent number of *THE WEAVER*. In these ways, and many others, these interesting designs, which are an expression of the lives of our Mexican neighbors, can be adapted to our own woven fabrics.