



"IFAM is many people gathered together for one purpose, to recognize artistic achievement and improve livelihoods."

– MULTICOLORES'
MAYA WOMEN'S
RUG HOOKING
COOPERATIVE

A Tale of Two Rosmerys: IFAM Participation Transforms the Women of Multicolores

September provides the International Folk Art Market (IFAM) community the opportunity for reflection. The infrastructure of the International Folk Art Market Santa Fe has been stowed for its winter hibernation, and the artists have returned to their homes enriched by camaraderie, their new learnings, and the proceeds of their artistry and industry. Our Market memories continue to resonate even as we embark anew with artists for our fall activities and the 2020 cycle. There is much to celebrate.

But we also use this time to ask ourselves "What have we accomplished?" To do so, we look beyond Market-related metrics of numbers of attendees, booth statistics, and sales figures to examine the partnership between IFAM supporters and the artists we serve.

Our companions on today's exploration are the women comprising the **Multicolores' Maya Women's Rug Hooking Cooperative**, 39 rug hookers and 27 embroiderers from the highlands of Guatemala. In simple terms, these creators recycle cast-off clothing into the multi-colored rugs, pillows, and other home goods denoted by their name. More significantly, they are creating new lives for themselves as powerful interpreters of centuries-old Mayan designs, as economic and community leaders, and as self-actualized artists.

Multicolores' origin story is told beautifully by founders Mary Anne Wise and Cheryl Conway-Daly in their 2018 book *Rug Money: How a Group of Maya Women Changed their Lives through Art and Innovation* (available from [Thrum's Books](#)).

The group made its first appearance at the 2014 International Folk Art Market Santa Fe and has participated every year since. To learn more about these fascinating women, we

Gracing the cover of the 2019 International Folk Art Market Santa Fe Magazine, Multicolores artist Petronila Jorge Zet invites us to explore the intersection of the group's creativity and story-telling.

Photo by Joe Coca for Thrums Books.



"Many women in my group and in my community share the same story: leaving school at a young age to help support our families, then marrying young, sometimes to escape an abusive parent. Without an education, it is difficult to find well paid work. Being an IFAM artist works around our lives as wives and mothers and enables us to earn a sustainable income.

Since I started rug hooking our quality of life has greatly improved. My children are in school, the eldest wants to go to University. We are able to go to the doctor more frequently and buy medicine. With income from my first rug I bought a sink so now I can do the family's laundry at home rather than carrying heavy loads to the communal sink. We have made improvements to our home, and now have a concrete floor and windows. My children see me as a role model, they see that without education and just a few opportunities, I have achieved much and have had new experiences. This makes me happy because they know that with an education, they will be able to reach further than I could."

—Glendy Muj, Patanatic, Guatemala.
Photo by Joe Coca.

sought out the artists, Mary Anne and Cheryl, and the group's Creative Director, Madeline Kreider Carlson.

The income earned by Cooperative members directly impacts the more than 200 immediate members of their families. These earnings pay for food, clothing, school supplies, and medical and dental care. These families improve their homes. And, the women report, they are now able to make independent spending decisions.

Recent successes have enabled Multicolores to launch a new health insurance plan with broad community impact: it provides coverage for the artist plus ten family members or closely -connected people. For \$6.25 monthly, they are now eligible for bi-monthly medical checks, follow-up treatment and health education. To celebrate the Health Insurance Program, the artists are working on a special collection of rugs with the theme of "well-being."

Other health benefits are forthcoming. A nutrition program has assisted with family meal planning for healthy, balanced diets. All artists and their families have received vitamins and anti-parasite medications. The artists have received eye tests and training to prevent repetitive strain injuries and 30 have co-invested in new rug hooking frames adjustable by height and with swivel capabilities that will prevent occupational stress injuries.

Multicolores is also running workshops to help them build leadership skills and to focus on empowerment and self-esteem. This Program has resulted in eight artists holding positions of responsibility on school boards, community development councils, local committees for improving water and other services, women's forums, and church boards.

Year three of the Leadership Program starts next month with a focus on becoming actively involved in a community development project with a focus on nutrition, education, the environment, or justice. One goal is to help these women become "promoters of justice" within their districts and serve as reference points for their neighbors on issues related to human rights, crime, and domestic violence. Attendees can follow the example of Nicolasa Baran who was invited to join the Patanatic Community Development Council after successfully challenging the Mayor's decision to site a garbage dump close to the village.

A strong concern for the environment is integrally woven into the core of Multicolores' art. Rather than investing in expensive wool and cotton, the women recast large bundles known as "pacas" containing used T-shirts, sweatshirts and other discarded apparel sent from the United States and sold by local vendors. **This year alone, more than 5,000 garments have been re-used to make Multicolores' products and more than 150 pounds of plastic have been recovered from the streets by the artists and their families to be used as stuffing for their embroidered products.**



"I used to be a low person for that is how people see you if you don't speak much Spanish and have never been to school. But now that I've learned rug hooking and I'm selling my rugs I see the world differently. I am not a low person anymore."

—Carmen Maldonado, Chiriquiac, Guatemala.
Photo by Joe Coca, courtesy Thrums Books.



One of Micaela's vibrant creations.
 Photo by Joe Coca, courtesy Thrums Books.

The group's true artistry is in transforming these materials into stunning pieces of art that embody Guatemalan traditions, the natural environment, and stories from their own histories.

As Micaela Churunel Ajú of Chuacruz, Guatemala shared, "Mothers have been teaching their daughters to weave for hundreds of years so the colors, patterns and symbols which decorate our blouses called 'huipils,' have historic significance and meaning. When I draw these designs onto my rugs, I am transmitting the legacies left to us by our ancestors."

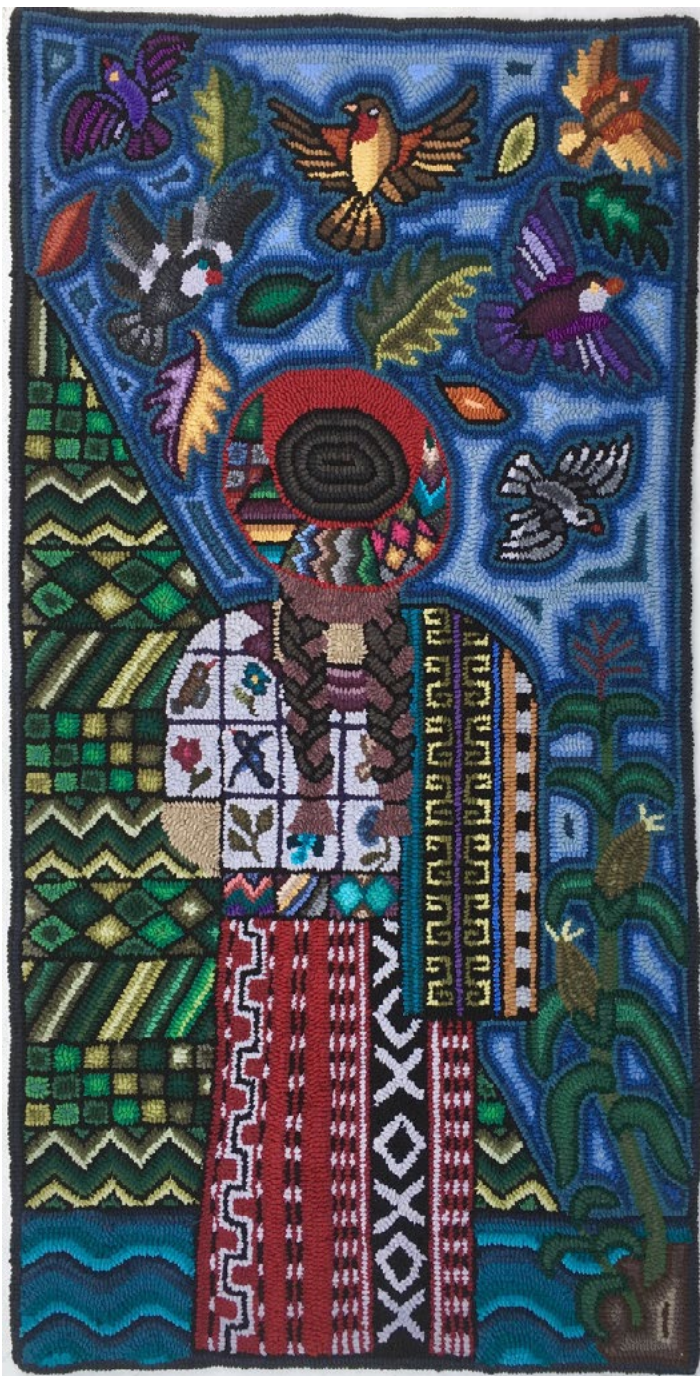
The Cooperative reports that husbands are now more actively involved in going to the used clothing stores and cutting and winding strips of cloth - and even taking over some household tasks so that the women have more time to hook rugs and embroider. **But the women are the artistic force behind these works, typically spending four to eight hours a day on the creation process. This includes developing and drawing the designs as well as bringing them to life in cloth and thread.**

Multicolores advises that they typically start preparing for the International Folk Art Market Santa Fe about six months in advance to ensure that they have a sufficient and varied inventory. The artists typically work on their pieces at home - this flexibility allows them to combine working from home with child-tending - and meet with their rug hooking groups once to twice a week. This year, the leaders of the five rug hooking groups joined in the process of preparing the shipment to New Mexico. In these sessions, they

"There are two Rosmerys. The one before the rug hooking project was timid and lived in a dark box. She cleaned houses, barely scraping by. This was all I thought my life would be. I didn't believe that I had the strength or the skills to overcome my situation. But then I learned to rug hook and it opened my mind. I discovered a talent I never knew I had. I lost the fear of expressing myself. I became more confident. You are looking at a different Rosmery now, the world has many more possibilities. I want to travel and accomplish many things."

-Rosmery Pacheco, Chiyax, Guatemala.
 Photo by Multicolores.





The Women of Santiago Atitlán by Yolanda Churunel Ajú, Chuacruz, Guatemala

learned about IFAM and the Market, watched videos of IFAM events and helped with the final quality control, documentation, tagging, and organization. Appropriately, each piece includes a hang tag providing information about the artist and her design inspirations.

The pieces exhibited and sold at the 2019 International Folk Art Market Santa Fe included several special pieces created following a “Storytelling through Design” workshop in which artists learned about the traditions of story cloths and story rugs from around the world. Expanding on this knowledge, they explored techniques for telling their own stories in their rug designs.

Multicolores graced us with the background to one of the pieces created as a result of this round table, the story of the Women of Santiago Atitlán. This history derives from the time when Spaniards arrived in the Americas: “In these times, the women of Santiago Atitlán were threatened with great violence. Together they looked for a solution that would give them peace, but the only way was to flee to the tops of the volcanoes. There some of them were killed, where they had fled to find calm amongst all the conflict. Their souls or spirits flew like birds, full of freedom at last.

This is one of the reasons why women of Santiago Atitlán wear huipiles embroidered with birds, which represent peace and remind us of the history of these women. On her head, she wears a large cinta (woven headdress) wound around her hair. The cinta symbolizes the continuity of life and tradition, handed down from generation to generation, moving in circles as in the Maya calendar.”

As artist Yessika Calgua Morales from Quejuel, Guatemala observes, “It’s not only about the rugs themselves, it’s about the story behind the rugs. How did these women have the opportunity to learn, how did they succeed in making the rugs, what obstacles did they have to overcome? Each rug brings with it a story about the woman who made it.”

In July 2019, Multicolores was honored as a recipient of the prestigious IFAM Community Impact Award, a recognition given in honor of strength and humanity in the vital work of creating positive and lasting change through folk art.

From first to last, Multicolores believes in the creative power of its members and places artistry at the forefront of everything it does. This artful vision, paired with its significant focus on community, education, and personal improvement, means that women’s lives are changed for the better – and the language of Guatemalan textiles is extended with beauty and innovation.



“When I hear you use the word artist about me, it elevates me. When people look at my rug, I want them to see the happiness, the emotion, the time that I have dedicated to it. They will also see something from Guatemala. I seek inspiration in things that make me happy, like birds, flowers and nature. The past has left many scars, but I keep moving forward, continuing to grow as an artist, mother and wife. My life has changed, I discovered a talent I never knew I had, I feel positive and self-confident. I no longer have to conform to my father’s view of me.”

–Bartola Morales Tol, San Jorge La Laguna, Guatemala.

Photo by Joe Coca from *Rug Money: How a Group of Maya Women Changed Their Lives through Art and Innovation*.

IFAM thanks the artists and management of Multicolores for sharing their stories with us.

Women’s Empowerment – Cultural Preservation – Creativity – Sustainability – Entrepreneurship

The International Folk Art Market brings these objectives fully to life by creating opportunities for and with folk artists worldwide.

IFAM supporters and donors share a vision of a world that values human dignity and recognizes the value of the hand-made and its link to cultural relevancy.

Please join us as part of the IFAM family and in broadening our reach.

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