Andrea Velasco | Mexico | Apparel

Tzotzil craftswomen enter the world stage

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

The Highlands of Chiapas is a region of outstanding cultural richness, its indigenous communities preserving the heritage of their pre-Hispanic ancestors through the traditions of complex embroidery and the backstrap loom (in which the weaver herself is a tension point on one end of the loom). Women from these communities are taught textile arts from childhood–at one time their births even being welcomed with a ceremony in which weaving tools were placed in their tiny hands. NGO Impacto aims to dignify the lives of these indigenous Mayan Tzotzil women by celebrating their traditions and talents through an artisan-owned clothing line featuring their complex designs on contemporary silhouettes.

Technical weaving ability allows Tzotzil craftswomen to make complicated designs, known as brocade, with cotton or wool yarn added into the warp and weft of their backstrap looms. Their day-to-day garments are made in this manner, each community with different designs, the more elaborate dress (huipil) reserved for special occasions. The iconography of their designs represents the "cosmo-vision" of the Mayan people: diamond designs refer to the earth and sky, and undulating designs, such as the flower or snake, symbolize the earth, its holy plants, and animals.

NGO Impacto is a social innovation collective of over 350 Tzotzil artisans aiming to celebrate their culture and expertise through differentiated and innovative product designs. This alliance revolves around an ethical commercial scheme, paying fair living wages for a better quality of life as well as working to avoid misuse of collective heritage as a commodity–otherwise known as cultural appropriation.