

THE CHINA POBLANA DRESS

The dress known as the “China Poblana” consists of a white blouse lavished with embroidery, beads and sequins and low cut enough to require a “modesty scarf” for attendance at church; a skirt called a “castor” that is beaded and sequined in geometric or floral patterns, and a white underskirt adorned with “enchilada stitching” (an intricate crisscrossing of lacework around the bottom edge), a belt of woven brocade called a “loop,” silk embroidered satin shoes and a shawl worn over the elbows long enough to sweep the floor on either side. The “China Poblana” dress is based on a legendary, some say fictional, character from the 17th century.

Many legends tell the tale that Portuguese pirates snatched a young girl from her home in India and sold her into slavery in the Philippines. Most of the legends agree that her name was Mirra and that, at a very young age, the pirates captured her and took her to Manila where she escaped to a Jesuit mission and where she was converted to Catholicism. A few years later, the same pirates recognized her and took her captive once again. The Viceroy of Mexico was looking for a young Asian (“China”) woman to serve as his personal servant. Mirra was taken to Acapulco where a man from the city of Puebla offered ten times the amount that the Viceroy was willing to pay. She was sold to Don Miguel de Sosa from Puebla. When he died in 1624, de Sosa set her free. She lived the rest of her days in the Jesuit convent in Puebla where she provided material and spiritual assistance to those in need. She was revered in the city. She died in 1688. One hundred years after her death, the “China Poblana” dress became the most popular style of dress for Mexican women.

The character of the “China Poblana” embodied great physical beauty, courage and religious devotion. However, her life story is complex. In Mexico there is a saying, “there is no place for a woman that is not a saint or prostitute.” The “China Poblana” embodied both. She was a slave, suggesting low morals. Yet, she entered a convent, had saintly visions, and served the poor. The “China Poblana” is thus, a symbol of the blending of life that was required on the frontier of New Spain.

DESCRIPTION

This “China Poblana” dress consists of:

- BLOUSE: beaded yoke, in blue and red motif forming a V-neck and with cap sleeves. Embroidery is present in a floral pattern on front, back and the sleeves.
- SKIRT: red sequined skirt with bird detail. Gold (possibly taffeta) trim at the top and bottom with a butterfly motif.
- DATE: experts believe it was created in the mid-20th century.