White fluffy feathers decorate a garment designed to be worn by a bride for her wedding in 2018. As appealingly “contemporary” as it may look to the public, the weaving conceals the fact that it has changed little in 500 years. Perhaps longer: documents dating soon after the fall of Mexico City in 1521 depict Doña Marina or Malintzin, Hernán Cortés’ translator and lover, wearing a similar huipil (a tunic of variable dimensions used by women, in this case falling below the knees). We know from eyewitness accounts, written a short time later, that a special breed of duck was raised to provide the soft down that embellished clothing for the rulers and wall hangings for the temples. Featherwork died out slowly in most of Mexico, but one Tzotzil Maya community in the far south has kept the art alive until today. John Fairey thought their cloth to be so beautiful that he acquired two of those huipiles.

This exhibit features a selection of textiles from an extensive collection put together over decades by John Gaston Fairey, who has travelled all over Mexico hunting for rare plants and looking for exceptional folk art. His findings are remarkable. The keen eye of the artist is evident in his choice of examples, but so is the character of a man who will not compromise when it comes to the quality of manufacturing and the originality of a composition. Collections reflect the personality and feelings of their creators: this particular show spells out in bold letters what would otherwise seem like a trite observation.

Take, for example, an embroidery sampler made by a Mazahua or Otomí woman in the highlands west of Mexico City about a hundred years ago, probably the oldest piece in John’s collection. Working with handspun wool dyed with indigo and other native plants, she fit into a narrow piece of muslin a good number of designs that she must have intended to save, in order to copy them later as border decorations for her underskirts, her food bags and her tortilla napkins. Among the patterns she chose are some motifs that originated in Europe and the Near East, where they bear deep symbolism: pomegranates embody fertility and abundance, while pelicans pecking their breast to draw blood to feed their young are a visual metaphor for the self-sacrifice of Christ. Two handsome deer looking behind their backs, with flowers in their mouths are tucked into one corner of the sampler. We have not found this particular figure in any of several Spanish, Dutch, German, English and North American samplers we have examined, but it crops up again and again in old embroidery from Mexico. Perhaps it originated in China or Japan, where a spotted deer with a mushroom or a flower in its muzzle is a frequent theme in folk literature. If so, it may have reached Mexico by way of the Manila galleon, which sailed regularly from the Philippines to Acapulco for almost three hundred years. We would like to see in this curious design of our talented embroiderer a reference to our country’s unique history, a memento of the time when it lay at the crossroads of the Orient and the West.

Feathered tunics and flower-eating deer seem like ingredients for an uplifting fairy tale, moreover, a story beyond history. Magic in a museum display is better left unspoken, and is up to the viewer to perceive. The imaginative looms of Mexico bear wondrous fabrics, indeed.

September 22 - November 25, 2018

"The John Gaston Fairey Collection of Mexican Folk Art," given in memory of his parents, Isabel and Philip Fairey, who introduced me to the wonders of Mexico. This exhibition is generously funded, in part, by an award from the Texas Commission on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, The City of Beaumont, the Woods W. Whidden Jr. and Lula D. Whidden Charitable Foundation, the Art Museum of Southeast Texas Endowment and East-Fairey Chambers Charitable Foundation.

To find out more about how National Endowment for the Arts grants impact individuals and communities, visit www.arts.gov.

September 22 - November 25, 2018

"The John Gaston Fairey Collection of Mexican Folk Art," given in memory of his parents, Isabel and Philip Fairey, who introduced me to the wonders of Mexico. This exhibition is generously funded, in part, by an award from the Texas Commission on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, The City of Beaumont, the Woods W. Whidden Jr. and Lula D. Whidden Charitable Foundation, the Art Museum of Southeast Texas Endowment and East-Fairey Chambers Charitable Foundation.