

Semiotics of the Manila Shawl (*mantón de Manila*): From Historical Transformations to its Present Identity Function

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Abstract: This article examines the Manila shawl (*mantón de Manila*) as a semiotic object in motion, whose trajectory—from Chinese silk to contemporary Spanish fashion—offers insights into processes of cultural hybridization, early globalization, and identity re-signification. Through a historical and semiotic analysis, it highlights how the material transformations of the shawl (embroidery, colors, fringes, uses) correspond to shifts in its symbolic value: from colonial exoticism to national myth, from festive accessory to costumbrista emblem, and from traditional garment to a key resource within the cultural and fashion industries. The study also includes contemporary examples (Juana Martín, Palomo Spain, Rosalía, Queen Letizia), showing how the shawl articulates tradition and modernity, authenticity and market, nationalism and cosmopolitanism. In conclusion, the Manila shawl is not only a hybrid object but also a sign in constant re-signification, a cultural “super-iconeme” that condenses collective imaginaries while maintaining its relevance in the 21st century.

Keywords: Manila shawl, mantón de Manila, manton, fashion semiotics, identity, cultural hybridization, globalization

1. Introduction

Textile objects, beyond their utilitarian function, constitute first-order semiotic devices, as they weave together social, political, and cultural meanings within their very fabric. The Manila shawl is a privileged example: a garment whose historical trajectory—from the embroidery

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workshops of Canton, through Manila and Acapulco, to its establishment in Spain— transforms it into a sign in motion, full of ambiguity and layered meanings.

Far from being a mere ornamental accessory, the shawl has functioned as a space of cultural translation and identity hybridization: first, as an exotic luxury for colonial elites; later, as a costumbrista and popular sign within the Spanish imaginary; and today, as a creative resource in contemporary fashion. This trajectory allows us to think of the shawl not only as a hybrid object, but as a super-iconeme (Paz Gago, 2025)—a complex sign that articulates tradition and modernity, the local and the global, the popular and the cosmopolitan.



Figure 1. Two women with Manila shawls (*Café-concert*). *Note.* Reprinted from *Café-concert* (1901–1902) by Ramon Casas. Public domain digital reproduction via Wikimedia Commons.

This article offers a historical and semiotic analysis of the Manila shawl with the aim of tracing the transformations of its signification and understanding how it has become a vector of identity. Drawing from historical, critical, and visual sources, it examines its journey from Chinese silk to today's runways, showing how each material transformation—colors, embroidery, fringes, and uses—also entails a shift in its symbolic value. Finally, it explores its re-signification in contemporary Spanish fashion, where designers, artisans, and artists reactivate the shawl as both a sign of collective memory and an instrument of global projection.

The nation is not a natural entity but a symbolic construction that requires continuous production of meaning. Anderson (1983) defines it as an imagined community, sustained through systems of signs—rituals, emblems, languages, and objects—that create the illusion of unity and belonging. From a semiotic perspective, Eco (1979) conceives the nation as a cultural text composed of socially legitimized signs that function as naturalized ideological codes. Elements such as anthems, flags, and regional costumes operate as semiotic artifacts that condense historical and political values, establishing narratives of identity.

Building on this perspective, Bhabha (1990) emphasizes the performative dimension of national identity: the nation is not a fixed essence but a repeated act of enunciation materialized in discourses, gestures, and objects. Traditional attire and its accessories—such as the Manila shawl—thus gain relevance as signs that not only represent the nation but perform and reaffirm it in ritual, festive, and cultural contexts. Adami (2025) expands this framework by applying social semiotics, highlighting that nationalist processes involve multimodal meaning-making practices where visibility, materiality, and movement are as central as verbal discourse. From

this viewpoint, the Manila shawl ceases to be a decorative accessory and becomes a performative resource articulating nation, gender, and tradition.

At the same time, fashion operates as a socially coded language. Barthes (1990), in *The Fashion System*, argues that clothing is organized into three levels: the real garment (the physical piece), the represented garment (its image), and the described garment (the discourse surrounding it). This triad reveals that the meaning of fashion does not reside solely in materiality but in the discursive network that accompanies it. Bourdieu (1984) adds a sociological dimension by interpreting fashion as a device of symbolic distinction that expresses habitus and cultural capital, reinforcing social hierarchies. Davis (1992) situates fashion within the realm of semiotics, defining it as a visual discourse that articulates latent cultural tensions. The Manila shawl exemplifies this: it embodies the interplay between the exotic and the local, the popular and the aristocratic, the functional and the spectacular.



Figure 2. Flamenco and manila shawls in the artwork *Un café cantante* (c. 1850) by José Alarcón Suárez. *Note.* Reprinted from *Un café cantante* (c. 1850) by José Alarcón Suárez. Public domain digital reproduction via Wikimedia Commons.

Lipovetsky (1987) complements this perspective by suggesting that fashion operates as a mechanism linking tradition and modernity. The Manila shawl, originally imported from Asia and later resemanticized as an essential element of flamenco costume, illustrates this process of cultural transformation in which a foreign object is absorbed and reinvented as a national emblem. In this sense, regional costumes and their accessories should not be understood merely as traditional attire but as semiotic devices laden with historicity. Following Barthes (1957), they can be regarded as modern myths: particular objects (embroidery, fringes, fabrics) elevated to the universal (nation, authenticity).

The symbolic power of folk dress intensifies in performative contexts—festivals, rituals, fairs—where it becomes a visible sign of belonging and cohesion (Sedakova & Vlaskina, 2016). Within this framework, the Manila shawl acquires an emblematic dimension: it evokes

femininity, elegance, tradition, and exoticism while actively participating in the staging of national identity. The process is the nationalization of folklore, whereby traditional elements are institutionalized as official national symbols. The incorporation of the Manila shawl into flamenco dress and Andalusian iconography exemplifies how the local is transformed into a national emblem and, simultaneously, into an aesthetic object for global consumption.

This re-signification unfolds within an ambivalent logic: on one hand, the shawl is framed as a guarantor of cultural authenticity; on the other, it is aestheticized and commodified within tourism and global fashion markets (Hansen, 2004; Horton & Jordan-Smith, 2004). As a result, the Manila shawl (*el mantón*) functions as what Paz Gago (2025) calls a super-iconeme: a complex cultural sign that condenses colonial histories, national myths, and contemporary fashion discourses. Far from being a static emblem, it is a semiotic object in motion—at once ornament and discourse, commodity and identity, performance and memory.

2. Tracing the Thread of the Manila Shawl: how is identity woven?

In the work *España: tipos y trajes* (1933), Ortega y Gasset refers to the Esquilache Riots (1766) as the only popular revolution in Spain, something that further accentuates the peculiarity of the motive behind the conflict: the defense of identity, materialized in a hat.

Charles III, with the intention of modernizing the appearance of the people of Madrid, forced them to shorten their long cloaks and wide-brimmed hats. Although the Spanish commoners were usually docile, as Ortega y Gasset points out, this measure was felt as an attack on their deepest identity, since the hat was considered an essential part of their *castizo* personality. The enforcement of the edict by the Walloon Guard —foreign soldiers already poorly regarded— reinforced the sense of anti-national grievance and provoked the uprising.

If the people's revolt in defense of their identity is an act to which one might attribute value and bravery, this reading is heightened and complicated when the roots of that identity are traced and, with them, its volatility revealed: “that most *castizo* hat, so consubstantial with the Madrid race, was called *chambergo*. The word reeks overwhelmingly of foreignness. *Chambergo* comes from Schomberg” (Ortega y Gasset et al., 1933:7).

In the Catalan War (1640–1652), the French troops under Marshal Charles de Schomberg wore a type of wide-brimmed hat that would later be included in the attire of the regiment (*coronela*) created by Mariana of Austria in 1669, during the minority of her son Charles II. Popularly known as *La Chamberga*, this regiment inherited, through the hat, the marshal's name, which over time came to be applied almost exclusively to the hat.

Through this example, Ortega highlights the paradox of the people's identity, which today they violently defend embodied in an object that yesterday they branded as foreign.

This fact invites us to rethink the way we delight in traditional costume. Its charm does not lie in its actual antiquity, but rather in the prodigious illusion of venerability, or even of timelessness, that the people confer on whatever they adopt, even if it dates from yesterday. This is their peculiar and brilliant irony (Ortega y Gasset et al., 1933:8).

This paradox is neither an isolated nor a strange phenomenon; it is present in countless objects to which we turn in search of identity, in which we believe we find our roots.



Figure 3. Manila shawl (without floral embroidery) in the painting *La verbena* (c. 1905) by Cecilio Plá y Gallardo. *Note.* Reprinted from *La verbena* (c. 1905) by Cecilio Plá y Gallardo. Public domain digital reproduction via Wikimedia Commons.

Tara Zanardi discusses the contradictory nature of a garment deeply embedded in the imaginary of Spanish identity: the *mantón de Manila* (Manila shawl). Through 19th-century *costumbrista* illustration, she points to the *cursi* character of the shawl, defining it as an “aestheticized embodiment of disparate things” since, like the *chambergó*, it incorporates both the foreign and the native; it is, at once, local and global, traditional and modern, popular and luxurious, everyday and exotic, *castizo* and cosmopolitan (2018:211).

The *mantón de Manila* thus becomes an object of great interest for semiotic analysis. As a signifier, it incorporates (like words) “the aroma of the context and of the contexts in which it has lived its life intensely from the social point of view” (Bakhtin, 1989:110). It is not only a reflection of the cultures that have crossed it; it is inhabited by the intentions that led it to be shaped across different cultures, whose uses of the shawl remain crystallized in fabrics, forms, embroideries, colors, drapes, flourishes, and knots. From its Asian origins to today’s Spanish fashion runways, the history of the *mantón*—its production, consumption, and uses—allows us to understand the complexity of this garment, as well as its role in identity, which goes beyond hybridity (Zanardi, 2018).

Despite its name, the shawl’s origin is not Filipino, but Chinese. Silk, whether as fabric or embroidery, began to be worked in ancient China. Items found in the tombs of the Shan dynasty (1500 B.C.) demonstrate the millennia-old mastery of the Chinese people in weaving and dyeing silk (Arbués Fandos et al., 2008). From the late 16th century, these products began to be exported to the West via the Silk Road and trade relations with the Italian republics (Muñoz Cárdenas & Díaz Caro, 2024). European presence expanded thereafter with the great trading corporations known as the East India Companies and with settlements such as the Portuguese

colony in Macao from 1553, the Dutch in Formosa (present-day Taiwan) from 1624, and the Spanish in the Philippines from 1564.

In 1571, Miguel López de Legazpi founded Manila, the city that would become the Spanish crown's main commercial hub with China (Muñoz Cárdenas & Díaz Caro, 2024). A year later, Chinese markets were opened to Spanish trade, which enjoyed a lack of restrictions until 1593, when a Royal decree by Philip II limited exchanges to twice a year (Ollé, 2002; Schurtz, W.L.; Cabrero Fernández, L., 1992; Arbués Fandos, 2015).

For the operation of trade routes, safe ports and settlements were needed “in order to transfer products, distribute them and to stock up on supplies” (Arbués Fandos et al., 2008:13). Silk, coming especially from the main embroidery centers of Canton and Macao (Llarch, 1993; Gómez Muriel, 1998; Arbués Fandos, 2015), reached Manila through Chinese merchants who circumvented the Ming dynasty's trade restrictions, so these exchanges skirted “the limits of legality” (Díaz de Seabra, 2003, as cited in Situ Chang, 2019:69).

The difficulties of maritime trade also meant that the commercial calendar was determined by the seasonality of navigation. Thus, Chinese merchants stayed “for several months in the ports of the southern seas,” encouraging “the conversion of commercial flows into migratory flows” (Situ Chang, 2019).

Throughout the 16th century, Chinese presence grew rapidly: from a few dozen merchants and slaves at the beginning, the Chinese community reached 30,000 members compared to the colony of 2,000 Spaniards residing in the capital. In the *Parián*—the silk market and nucleus of this population—the Chinese supplied the city with food, artisanal trades, and services, even adapting to produce goods foreign to their tradition to meet Spanish demand (Situ Chang, 2019). Among these products was the *mantón de Manila*.

The city of Manila is present in the shawls, beyond their name, due to its crucial relevance in the export of silk from East Asia to Europe, passing through the Spanish colonies in the “New World,” newly incorporated into Western maps. And just as Chinese merchants had to adjust their routes to seasonal conditions, Spanish galleons (built mostly in Cavite, in Manila Bay) adapted their travel schedules to minimize the adversities they would encounter along the way (Arbués Fandos et al., 2008).

The voyage began around June from Cavite, followed the Kuro-Shivo current, and ended in December on the Mexican coast. As Situ Chang (2019) notes, the route was not the shortest, but it was the safest. After unloading goods at the port of Acapulco, the ships set sail back to Manila, at the latest in March, to arrive in July at the Philippine capital and avoid worse weather conditions (Arbués Fandos et al., 2008; Díez Baladrón, 2017; Knoll, 2025).

The vessels, which sailed this route until 1815, carried different cargo on the outbound and return journeys. In Acapulco, the heavy loads of silk, porcelain, and wood were unloaded, while the return cargo to the eastern islands consisted mainly of silver and men, since the Chinese “did not long for the products that the West could offer,” thereby dismantling “the system of product exchanges that prevailed in Western business” and forcing, unusually, that transactions be carried out in currency (Antquetil, 2002, as cited in Arbués Fandos, 2015:16).

Once in the markets of Acapulco and Veracruz, another major Mexican port, Chinese products spread overland throughout Mexico, crossing borders to reach Guatemala, Peru, and even Argentina. On the other hand, the arrival of goods on Spanish shores could occur in two ways: either from Mexico in a transatlantic voyage, or by rounding the Cape of Good Hope.

Once in the ports of Seville or Cádiz, Asian products were distributed throughout Spain and parts of Europe (Arbués Fandos et al., 2008; Zanardi, 2018).

These routes transformed embroidered silk into the *mantón*, a garment that was not only a precursor of globalization (Knoll, 2025) through its long intercultural journeys, but also one that materially incorporated globalization into its fabric, its design, and its function.

In their origin, the silks imported from Canton and Macao did not serve as garments, but as decorative elements such as bedspreads or furniture coverings (Arbués Fandos, 2015). As Zanardi (2018:201) states, Spaniards “assuredly employed the *mantón* for sartorial and ornamental purposes that the Chinese may not have considered or intended when they produced the garments.” Herranz (1999) points to the tradition of wearing cloaks and the Spanish taste for silk as key factors in the transition and expansion of the *mantón* as clothing rather than as a decorative object (Pairet Viñas, 2023).

This change in the use of the textile marks a first phase of hybridization present in the *mantón*. According to Canciani’s definition (2005), it is a sociocultural process in which “discrete structures or practices, which existed separately, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices.”

Each hybridization can be treated as a valuable trace of a moment of crossing traditions and creating something new, of accepting the foreign within the native, of distorting both the native and the foreign in a production perhaps alien to both, but one that makes possible a necessary experience (Peñamarín, 2000:45).

While hybridity is appropriate to express the cultural crossing implied by the *mantón*’s change of use, Zanardi (2018) recovers the work of Daniela Bleichmar and Meredith Martin to highlight the complexity of this object, since it not only changed place and use, but these exchanges also resulted in transformations of the material itself and, consequently, of its production process and industry.

Bleichmar and Martin problematize the term “hybridity” in part because they view “mobility not just as a by-product of cultural exchange but as central to an object’s form and meaning.” The objects they consider “were always already hybrid, always in the process of transforming or being transformed.” (Zanardi, 2018:202).

In the case of the *mantón*, production localized on one side of the world was modified to adapt to the diversity of demand located on other continents, in a true example of proto-globalization.

The Chinese marvelled at the use of their products by Westerners, and consequently adapted them to the tastes of their buyers. To meet Western tastes, they changed the size of their embroidered fabrics and made all the required modifications, although these modifications had no future in their own country (Arbués Fandos et al., 2008:138).



Figure 4. The Manila Shawl with the fringe, a Spanish addition in the painting *Cordobesa* by Ramón Casas. *Note.* Reprinted from *Cordobesa* by Ramón Casas. Public domain digital reproduction via Wikimedia Commons.

In addition to the increased size of the *mantón*, Chinese manufacturers introduced other changes in the textiles, such as fabric colors and types of embroidery, which developed according to the markets (Arbués Fandos et al., 2008; Arbués Fandos, 2015).

Eastern shawl colors and motifs may be classified by regions and work techniques (Bertin-Guest, 2003), as well as dynasties. Styles such as Su, Xiang, Shun, Yue, Shidao, or Guizhou corresponded to different regions with distinct techniques and tastes applied to embroidery; likewise, the commercialization of *mantones* coincided with the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), from the north, whose style was more direct and less refined than that of the previous Yuan dynasty (Arbués Fandos et al., 2008).

The embroidery on the shawls was characterized by small floral motifs which depicted great symbolism and iconography, an unavoidable feature of religious and reflective people. Indeed, each motif on the fabrics had a purpose and was a metaphor. This symbolism will be lost in time as it has been completely removed by Western tastes. (Arbués Fandos et al., 2008:138).

The iconography of Eastern embroidery included a multitude of animals and mythical beings (bats, imperial dragons, phoenixes, peacocks, mandarin ducks, small insects...), vegetation (peonies, pomegranates, lotuses, orchids, chrysanthemums, bamboos, willows, and various fruits), and diverse scenes and representations with human or divine figures (Taoist gods and symbols, Buddhist figures, theatrical scenes with dancers or samurai, scenes of everyday life...). In contrast, both the Spanish and colonial markets modified embroidery toward native iconography, less narrative and more ornamental, focused mainly on floral motifs (Arbués Fandos, 2015).

In Mexico, embroidery was modified both in content and form: it featured native flora and birds such as roses and macaws, but also increased in scale—the floral motifs, fewer in number, grew larger and came to occupy much of the piece. The fascination of Indigenous American

peoples with the colors and embroidery of the *mantón*, along with colonial influence on the use of this garment, was fundamental to its adoption as part of the decoration of their costumes, until it became an element still present today (Arbués Fandos, 2015; Díez Baladrón, 2017).

Finally, the embroideries adapted to Spanish and European tastes reflect a simpler and more popular interpretation of nature and everyday life, with some symbolism imported from Christian religion. The immense Ibero-American flora was largely reduced to roses and carnations, and the fauna, less present, comprised lions, fish, doves, horses, dogs, deer, and lambs. At times, countryside scenes, buildings, and exotic motifs such as peacocks, pineapples, and large flowers appeared, following the creativity of embroiderers and the fashions of each period (Arbués Fandos, 2015).

Zanardi (2018) refers to Mary Roberts and Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones, who state that “when iconography shifts across” “cultural borders” and “the edges of empire,” “some surprising connections and cross-fertilizations are revealed.” Moreover, beyond these adaptations to local customs and imagery, the confluence of cultures materializes in yet another transformation.



Figure 5. Women with Manila shawls with and without fringes in the painting *Two Gypsies* (1901) by Francisco Iturrino. *Note.* Reprinted from *Two Gypsies* (1901) by Francisco Iturrino. Public domain digital reproduction via Wikimedia Commons.

Originally, the embroidered silks imported from Canton and Macao had no fringes (Ziani, 2014). These were incorporated under Spanish demand and by Arab influence (Knoll, 2025), further complicating the intercultural fabric embodied by the *mantón*. The fringe began short but grew longer throughout the 19th century (Zanardi, 2018), eventually reaching 50 centimeters. Díez Baladrón (2017:7) identifies two reasons: “demand and profit, since the heavier the *mantón*, the greater the earnings.”

Although the incorporation of fringes occurred through the Spanish market, there is no clear consensus as to when and where in the production process mantones were finished with them. Some sources suggest that Chinese manufacturers already knew the macramé technique, so it was not difficult for them to adapt to Western demand and add fringes to the product (Wilson, 1986; Arbués Fandos, 2015). Others, however, claim that the fringes were generally added once the *mantón* had already left China (Zanardi, 2018).

This is another reason why the *mantón* transcends the idea of hybridity and aligns more closely with what Zanardi (2018), following Daniela Bleichmar and Meredith Martin (2015), calls “objects in motion,” which not only traverse diverse regions and cultures, acquiring new meanings, but are themselves traversed by them in their material and form during the production process, in which different cultures—and even their territories—participate.

As style evolved throughout the Hispanic world and as the *mantón* was worn by women of all social strata, Chinese producers had to adjust to these fluctuating demands at the same time as local women altered certain elements of the shawls to make them more appealing or to function in a particular context (Zanardi, 2018:202).

It was not a matter of Eastern production and Western consumption, nor even of Eastern production merely adjusted and determined by Western consumption; the *mantón* evolved over time into a joint and dynamic production in which multiple cultural influences became interwoven—almost literally—into large pieces of colorful fabric laden with meanings and uses. A single *mantón* became a canvas where diverse hands, located on different continents, inscribed and honored their heritages.

In other words: industrial production landed in Spanish ports. Although the date is uncertain, the first native productions of the *mantón* are estimated to have begun after the loss of the Philippine colony in 1898 “and the decline of a highly demanded trade” (Arbués Fandos, 2015:186).

Aguilar Criado (1998:92) points to the 1929 Universal Exposition as the exact moment “when a Sevillian company made a *mantón de Manila* in Spain,” while Pairet Viñas (2023) traces it back two years earlier, to 1927, the first recorded year of mechanized production of mantones at the Jaume Giró factory in Badalona.

Nonetheless, various sources agree on the likelihood that the first silkworm imports occurred at the end of the 19th century in Seville, where the different stages of the production process were distributed across small towns such as Cantillana, specialized in fringe-making, and Villaquemado, with embroidery workshops (Aguilar Criado, 1998; Arbués Fandos, 2015; Muñoz Cárdenas & Díaz Caro, 2024).

Knoll (2025), in line with Martínez Cárdenas and Díaz Caro (2024) and Aguilar Criado (1998), acknowledges the work of the women who, throughout history, “joined their hands and knowledge to preserve the tradition and pass it on from generation to generation” (2024). They highlight, on the one hand, “the drawing of the design on the fabric” by the master; on the other, “the execution of the embroidery by the embroiderers; and finally, the fringing, carried out by the so-called *flequeras*” (Knoll, 2025:176).

The importance of Andalusian ports in maritime routes between the 16th and 19th centuries was essential for the establishment of the industry in the south of the peninsula, and in turn, both factors determined the settlement and integration of the *mantón de Manila* into the daily and social life of these populations.

In 1717, Cádiz, with its new role as a naval sea-port, replaced Seville as the commercial center. Once Seville reopened its ports to trading ships in 1821, the importation of Chinese shawls tripled,

making the city and its province a crucial site in the popularization and, after 1898, in the production of mantones (Zanardi, 2018:204).

This is one of the reasons why today the *mantón* is understood as Andalusian heritage, even though it has also been produced and used popularly and historically outside Andalusia—for example, in the festivals of Vilanova i la Geltrú studied by Pairet Viñas (2023) or in the everyday life of Madrid as depicted in *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887) by Benito Pérez Galdós (Llarch, 2002).

To understand the role the *mantón de Manila* has played in shaping both Andalusian and Spanish identity, and how these relate, it is useful to trace the evolution of its use within Spanish communities. The first imports of *mantones* de Manila, being novel, exotic, scarce, and therefore valuable products, remained in the hands of high society from the 17th century onward. They were luxury items, accessible only to the very wealthy, who displayed their power by flaunting them at important events and ceremonies (Muñoz Cárdenas & Díaz Caro, 2024). In the 18th century, products known as *Chinoiserie* flourished in Europe, popularized by influential figures such as Madame Pompadour, “who set this Oriental taste in fashion, partly due to her involvement as a shareholder in the East India Company” (Arbués Fandos, 2015:16).

With the development of industry, commerce, and consumption trends, the *mantón* expanded both symbolically and geographically. As Muñoz Cárdenas and Díaz Caro highlight:

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the *mantón de Manila* spread to the Spanish colonies, consolidating itself as an essential part of women’s attire in social events. In Spain and Latin America, women proudly wore it at weddings, dances, and other important celebrations. Its presence at these events not only highlighted elegance but also symbolized the connection between the colonies and the motherland (2024:113).

This expansion can be seen in several ways. First, the European aristocracy shared Spain’s fashion and, with it, introduced the *mantón* into their attire (Muñoz Cárdenas & Díaz Caro, 2024). Ortega y Gasset emphasizes that “within Europe, the upper social classes have always maintained a common format of dress, though modulated differently. Radical differences, on the other hand, were a popular attribute.” Second, as its production increased, the *mantón* became more accessible and desirable to the Spanish bourgeoisie and middle classes, who “wore it in theaters, street fairs, and carnivals” (Pairet Viñas, 2023:153).

In the last third of the 19th century, the *mantón de Manila* became one of the most coveted garments, and its use spread across all social classes, becoming the main accessory for ladies of the time at events and important celebrations. Owning a Manila shawl suggested worldliness and a connection with powerful men linked to China’s wealth and the “glorious” past of the Spanish empire (Pairet Viñas, 2023; Muñoz Cárdenas & Díaz Caro, 2024).

As it gained popularity among all social classes, the upper class abandoned it in favor of European style, while the working classes continued to use it at street fairs, promenades, bullfights, and other public spectacles. Pérez Galdós reflects this in *Fortunata y Jacinta*, set between 1869 and 1876:

...This beautiful garment is being banished, and only the people preserve it with admirable instinct. They take it out of the chests at the great moments of life—baptisms and weddings—like a hymn of joy set to the wind, in which there is a stanza for the homeland... (B. Pérez Galdós, 1887).

It was this adaptation to European fashion between the late 19th and early 20th centuries—especially from the perspective of the Spanish upper class, increasingly homogenized with the European—that created the framework through which clothing for popular festivals and events became “regional costumes.” This shift was not material but ideological: rather than being understood from the perspective of their users, who had historically worn them as “festive clothing,” these garments came to be seen as distinctive, typical of a given context, place, and celebration date, in which part of the ritual was the peculiar costume. Ortega y Gasset (1933) notes this external romanticization of popular authenticity when he speaks of traditional dress:

The people, who—if they are peculiar in anything—are precisely spontaneous life and unaware of themselves, appear here as surprised at being who and what they are, as if representing, playfully, a role that some erudite poet has composed for them; that is, living the definition of them given by someone who is not the people (1933:7).

Zanardi (2018) makes a similar reading of 19th-century *costumbrista* painting, in which the everyday reality of its protagonists—represented with naturalist intent by the hand that wields the brush—is contemplated with romanticism by foreign spectators, who find in the scenes, the characters, and their colorful garments something truly exotic. However, Andalusian women adopted the *mantón* when it was still in universal use among the upper classes, “in Madrid as in Versailles. Therefore, at a time of uniformism, when the people did not wish to appear heteroclit, picturesque, or *castizo*” (Ortega y Gasset, 1933:8).

Costumbrismo, in its aspiration to inherit Murillo’s legacy, depicts the reality of the Andalusian people while simultaneously reproducing and performing it in what ultimately became configured as Andalusian identity. The presence of the *mantón* in *costumbrista* images—logical if we consider the evolution of this garment, naturally integrated into daily attire in Andalusia, where women not only habitually wore it but also participated in its production—helps to consolidate the garment as part of identity itself, for it “solidified the association of the object with traditional Spanish practices and everyday life” (Zanardi, 2018:201).

The Andalusian identification of the *mantón* is due in part to its sustained use over time by local people, and especially by the Roma, who suffered “internal colonization” in Spain and saw their identity “collapsed” into the Andalusian one (Zanardi, 2018:207). Within this continued use, its role in flamenco dance stands out, “where the *mantón* is an accessory that provides great visual play through the colors of the embroidery and the fringes” (Díez Baladrón, 2017:8). Unlike in other contexts, such as the *manolas* of Madrid, Aragonese costumes, or *comparsas* (Pairet Viñas, 2023), the exoticization of Andalusian customs was exploited as a market opportunity, following the success of *costumbrista* painting and allowing the *mantón* to remain closer to daily life, where Andalusian identity was forged.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Andalusian and Spanish identities and the role played by the *mantón* within them is complex. As Zanardi (2018) suggests:

Costumbrismo fueled the tourist market and popularized Spain as a destination for pleasure and study, and alternatively could be viewed as problematic in the repetition of certain stereotypes, fulfilling preconceived ideas of Spain, particularly the equation of Andalusia with the Spanish nation as a whole—despite pronounced regional distinctions (Zanardi, 2018:211).

This complexity is compounded by 20th-century efforts to reinforce the idea of the nation, using the *mantón* as a tool to portray a unified Spanish identity. In the 1920s, alongside a resurgence of the *mantón*'s popularity in major European capitals, there emerged a push to domesticate and relocate the garment within Spain. Pairet Viñas perceives these intentions in the changes in terminology: “the appellation *pañolón de Manila* fell out of use. People began to speak of *mantón de flecos* and *chal español*” (Pairet Viñas, 2023:155).

In contrast to the rejection that bourgeois magazines had expressed toward the *mantón* after the loss of the colonies—urging it to be consigned to oblivion—the press of the 1920s sought to reclaim it as Spanish, modern, and cosmopolitan (Pairet Viñas, 2023). Once again, just like words, the *mantón* is a signifier laden with intentions that become visible when tracing its etymology, since all the fragrances and meanings of the contexts in which it has lived are revealed (Bakhtin, 1989:110).

As we have seen, meanings coexist in permanent tension: like the *chambergo*, the *mantón* embodies the foreign and the native; the exotic and the autochthonous. It exists as a product of colonial globalization and, at the same time, endures thanks to its incorporation into popular dress, an expression of locality and tradition.



Figure 6. The Manila shawl identifies the nation. A warning against the syphilis (and an association between poverty, femininity and marginalization with the shawl) (1900) by Ramón Casas. *Note.* Reprinted from *Sífilis* (1900) by Ramón Casas. Public domain digital reproduction via Wikimedia Commons (Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya).

As a traditional manifestation, it tends to be associated with the past, even with a lack of progress; yet the *mantón* is pure modernity when one considers its role in the development of what we might call an “identity industry,” as Ortega y Gasset exemplified:

In deciding upon the repristination of old garments, this people engage in the most curious form of modernism. What is modern is industry and exploitation. Thus, the people of Lagartera, who had nearly abandoned their traditional attire, preserved the tradition of their embroidery. Some refined enthusiasts set these works in fashion, so fitting for the decoration of homes, and Lagarteran embroidery became an industry, exploited above all for tourism (Ortega y Gasset, 1933:7).

In this modern industry of identity production and commercialization, the local, popular, *costumbrista*, and traditional character of the *mantón* is essential for its re-exoticization. Exoticism, in turn, by drawing upon the popular and the local, bestows the qualities of novelty and luxury proper to global cosmopolitanism. And between the autochthonous, popular, and traditional, and the global, exotic, luxurious, and modern, the *mantón* is embroidered as an “object in motion,” fluctuating between uses, meanings, and intentions.

This fluctuation, cyclical and tied to consumption, is fueled by the upper classes, who seek novel products both to differentiate themselves from the lower classes and to satisfy their drive for self-illusory hedonism, the pleasure derived from experiencing the strange (Campbell, 2007). They find novelty in what appears exotic yet remains accessible and exploitable: in that which hovers at the boundaries of the system, in the cultures they colonize but do not recognize, in the peoples they marginalize—whether the Chinese in Manila or the Roma in Seville.

Once assimilated by the upper classes, fashion is reproduced by industry under the euphemism of the democratization of consumption, while the elites move on to new exotic stimuli. Thus, the *mantón* was not only novel in the 17th century for embodying the Orient, but it once again received bourgeois admiration when, after a long process of incorporation and ossification within Spanish popular culture, it had been relegated to the most popular forms of *otherness*—largely Andalusian and Roma—identities whose everydayness was easily digested by the exoticizing gaze.

In reality, popular costumes are no more nor less “fashion” than those worn by the aristocracy. The only difference lies in the rhythm of change, which is much slower among the people. This slowness causes the origins of the garments to be forgotten and makes them appear to have been born spontaneously, from a profound and latent ethnic inspiration. Hence the romantic cult of *casticismo* in peasant dress (Ortega y Gasset, 1933:7).

3. The *mantón* of Manila in today’s fashion scene: uses and resignification of the traditional accessory.

In a recent exhibition at the Casa de América in Madrid, *La ruta del Mantón. La feliz unión entre Asia, Hispanoamérica y España*, the director of the institute, León de la Torre Kraiss, explained how the *mantón* of Manila is an accessory mainly known for being worn by Spanish women on their most special and traditional occasions. Yet, Verónica Durán, author of the book *La ruta del mantón de Manila* and curator of the exhibition, also insisted that it is as much known as unknown, full of history, power and a diverse identity: “it is a garment with an Asian body, Hispanic American color and exuberance, and a Spanish soul” (Franco, 2024). On behalf of the item, Durán insisted that the beauty of the item was its capability to transcend borders

and manage to inspire women all over the world: “Nowadays there is so much that divides us, that it feels magical to find a garment that symbolises unity for everyone.” (Franco, 2024). Mostly known for its Asian origins and Spanish identity, the exhibition also brought into perspective Mexico's fascination with the item, deepening its influence around the globe, which continues today. At the same time, it showcased the hybridity of the accessory. Instead of reclaiming only one identity, it spoke in favour of its multiculturalism, thereby avoiding any possible accusations of cultural appropriation.

Today, the *mantón* of Manila continues to transcend borders, showcasing its multiculturalism. At the same time, and beyond geographical borders, the mantón has surpassed its traditional role as part of a popular costume's appearance and entered the fashion system. This is, and as Patrizia Calefato (1997, p. 70) explained when writing about the language of fashion in the first issue of *Fashion Theory* in 1997 where Valerie Steele defined fashions as the “cultural construction of the embodied identity”, the mantón, in this analysis, has been able to transition from a “dress” that is “articulated by a sort of sociocultural syntax, which could be called ‘costume’ in the context of traditional societies and ritual functions” to “fashion” in the context of modernity and esthetic functions.” So, “if clothing is a language, then fashion is a system of verbal and nonverbal signs through which this language expresses itself in the context of modernity”. Therefore, “fashion” is as Calefato (1997) explains by following Georg Simmel's seminal study *Die Mode* (1895) “the effective, or potential, mass dimension of the system”. And, of course, a sign of modernity and Western societies and fashion (Wilson, 2013).

The *mantón* is one of the most popular symbols of Spanish identity. Therefore, exploring the evolution of the *mantón* de Manila in Spanish fashion history and finally focusing on why it is still used today and what it represents, through notions of national identity in contemporary fashion and by analysing Spanish designers and their work over the last 25 years—is both relevant and contributes to a better understanding of not only the item's identity and link with nationalism, also the Spanish fashion one. Because, even though many authors and writers discuss Spanish traditional garments such as the mantilla (Corujo Martín, 2021) and the own mantón (Muñoz Cárdenas & Díaz Caro, 2024), a focus on its new significance(s), particularly in its contemporary context, felt important and relevant, as well as a semiotic perspective.

From a semiotic perspective, this analysis diverges from a specific vision of semiotics that has been necessary for this study. In addition to Calefato's work, José María Paz Gago's has also served as a foundation for this paper. In the latest issue of *Epistémè* published on June 2025 on the state of the art of fashion semiotics, he explained how after the “failure of classical fashion Semiotics” or the “disappointment of meaning” from the sixties to the 80s, from the moment until the 2000s, the “great fashion designers and marketing strategists began a new period, that of the “Pragmatics of Fashion (1980s-2000)”, committed to resemiotizing or redefinition the system by resorting to prestigious referents for their collections”. For example, supporting their designs with references to the history of art and culture. The same applied to the brands, now defined as “a hypericonema loaded with powerful literal, imaginary and psycho-emotional meanings”. A “stage” in fashion semiotics, he explains, after Floch and Calefato, from a marketing and Greimasian semiotics perspective, in which there is a transition from the linguistic stage of the discipline to the more visual one (the “visual semiotics or plastic semiotics”). It is the importance of connecting reality and image of fashion as “semiotics needs the object, the reference, insofar as it is a phenomenological (ohaneroscopic) philosophy that is

more encompassing and totalizing than a theory of verbal language”. Following the semiotics of the new millennium or “Neosemiotics of fashion (2000-2020)” appeared, which are those linked to or the result of the relationship between fashion and the latest digital technologies and which are specially relevante in this article, and the “Machinaion”, which is the denomination Paz Gago (2025) gives to the semiotics in the era of Artificial Intelligence.

In this aspect, this last section analyses semiotically the *mantón* of Manila in today’s century, from 2000 to 2025 -the year this paper is being written-, with a focus on its fashion context: in its relevance and cultural signification within an industry and in particular, with the designers who chose to use it in their fashion collections. First, to continue the natural legacy and evolution of the item, and also to see the influence it has had on fashion designers and the industry. As Muñoz Cardeñas and Díaz Caro (2024) pointed out: “the *mantón* de Manila has transcended its historical origin to become a true source of inspiration for numerous fashion designers, both within and beyond Spain, influencing and enriching creativity in the field of fashion at an international level”, for example, with Rosalía wearing a red leather *mantón* turns dress designed by Rich Owens for the Met Gala edition of 2021.

In the case of the Spanish fashion designers, far from limiting the use of the *mantón* by itself, as a complement or accessory, they have used it as a reference in different ways, reinterpreting its shape and even deconstructing the garment which has also come with controversy: transformed into another garment such as a skirt, and as a pure inspiration, adding one of the elements into another garment or accessory. For example, adding fringes to a hat. As Muñoz Cardeñas and Díaz Caro (2024) also highlighted, “it is worth noting that the adaptation to modern culture is not limited exclusively to embroidery designs; likewise, the use of the *mantón* has undergone significant expansion. In contrast to the former association of this garment with specific events, there is now a shift in the social perception of the *mantón*, which is increasingly integrated into more versatile ways for diverse occasions and everyday contexts. This phenomenon suggests a contemporary reinterpretation of its functionality and relevance in current fashion. Thus, the *mantón* emerges as an enduring and meaningful garment within the landscape of contemporary fashion and culture”.

This transcendence also reveals the media's and the public's perception of the item, which has been key to the development of this article. It is worth mentioning that in this last section of the paper draws evidence from a visual analysis of the work of Spanish designers and a textual analysis of published reports and interviews related to the selection of these designers. The selection has been only chronological as the main element or focus has been that they had used in some shape or form the *mantón*, and that the reports are various and from different natures. For the reports, we have considered those interviews or reports that seemed relevant to the notion of the *mantón*, even acknowledging that not all the media outlets are of an academic or formal nature. For example, in one case, we had declarations from Spanish fashion designer Luis de Javier to *HOLA!* on the occasion of his appearance on the popular fashion TV program, “Maestros de la Costura”. Even though *HOLA!* is a Spanish weekly magazine focused on celebrities and lifestyle, specialising in the coverage of royalty, aristocracy, and entertainment figures, it is an essential part of many Spanish families and is considered a part of the popular culture.

As we were mentioning earlier on, from the 1980s fashion designers started to produce fashion with “artistic and powerful meanings” (Paz Gago, 2025) and brands, led by marketing

strategies, also passed under a re-semiotization strategy, which made them “super-iconemes of powerful visual identity that express a semantic, pragmatic, and also commercial complex of extraordinary impact on receivers-consumers” (Paz Gagó 2020, p. 24). Fashion brands then conveyed “denotative and connotative messages that produce very powerful and addictive psycho-emotional effects on their followers.” (Paz Gagó 2025, p.4).

From this approach, we uncover the zeitgeist situation of the *mantón* de Manila, one that should be analysed in its semiotic entirety: the object itself, its visual aspects, what is written about it, and how this entire identity has been treated and utilised in Spanish fashion, through its designers. In this sense, we highlight how the *mantón* has been used to convey or portray, in a significant or more superficial way, a connection to national identity, Andalusian identity, and/or historical and cultural significance (luto) in their work. We view the mantilla as a system of signs, used with nationalist goals.

The *mantón* has often helped Spanish fashion designers, particularly those who typically don't incorporate national or folklore elements into their collections, to lend this symbolic value to their brand. Suddenly, and perhaps when a lack of creativity strikes, they utilise these elements to elevate their name or brand, not necessarily having a deep connection with the item or to nationalist symbols. In this aspect, it is interesting to see Patrizia Calefato's views of the fashion brand from a semiotic perspective (in Paz Gago's 2025, p.5): “the proper names of fashion designers, loaded with meaning and symbolic value, are not simply trademarks but represent the complete style of a clothed body (2002, p. 79)”. For Calefato, the signature (the brand of a designer) confers three types of value on a fashion garment: market value, aesthetic value, and paradoxical value, in addition to the consideration of a garment as “unique” because it is signed, even if it is physically reproduced.

In this case, the mantilla is a brand in itself, which can give a designer a symbolic power that represents an icon and a nationality. As Paz Gago (2020, p.24) writes, “post-contemporary fashion has transmuted into brand, super-iconemes of powerful visual identity that express a complex semantic, pragmatic, and also commercial dimension of extraordinary impact on receivers-consumers”.

Chritine Tsui also wrote on the evolution of conceptions of national identity in contemporary Chinese fashion through their most distinctive symbols in her influential and inspirational article *From Symbols to Spirit: Changing Conceptions of National Identity in Chinese Fashion* (2013), where she states that the international recognition and use of garments like the qipao (or the *mantón*) illustrate how fashion items can function as powerful symbols of national identity. As Tsui (2013) notes, the widespread adoption of such garments signals their cultural significance, with designers in China (and Spain) using traditional symbols and fabrics to convey modern, subtle forms of national identity. In China, this evolution—from explicit, traditional representations to more spiritual, indirect expressions—reflected the interplay of modernization, hybridization, and international competition, while also being shaped by politics, state influence, and designer agency. National identity, encompassing both cultural and political dimensions, can serve as a source of recognition and legitimacy, yet it may also constrain globalization by limiting the interpretation of “Chineseness” (or “Spanishness”). Thus, while patriotic or national elements can enhance visibility and prestige, they also pose a tension between nationalism and global integration, a challenge faced by designers in both China and Spain.

In the contemporary Spanish fashion landscape, there are multiple examples of the use of the *mantón* de Manila. One of the most illustrative cases, which also aligns well with what was explained about Tsui's article (2013), is that of the Chinese-Spanish designer Ya Yi Chen Zhou, whose career exemplifies the hybrid identity embedded in this garment, extending beyond a single cultural framework. Born in Pozuelo de Alarcón (Madrid), Chen Zhou has lived in Spain, China, New York, and London, where she studied at Parsons School of Design and Central Saint Martins. She currently lives in China, where she paradoxically feels more Spanish, just as she felt more Chinese in Madrid—a dichotomy experienced by many children of immigrants. This complex negotiation of identity has formed the basis of her creative discourse since her first collection, *Intrasient*. In an interview with *Vogue Spain*, she explained: “when I began to search for inspiration for my designs, I always turned to my family album. I looked at what my parents wore when they were at the Chinese restaurant they ran and also at the space itself, because these places are a very good reflection of our entire aesthetic culture: the type of tablecloths and latticework we used, the wallpaper, the fringes, the lanterns we hung, and even the *qipao*, the uniform we wore. All these elements are something I continue to revisit to explore my roots, to understand what it means to be Chinese in the West, and the contrast that this entails when living in Spain” (Moreno Vallejo, 2024).

This connection between cultures materialised in her collection *El Jaleo*, where the *mantón* de Manila was used as one of the main references. While researching she discovered that originally it was produced in Canton (China), then the shawl reached Manila (Philippines), where fringes were added, and subsequently arrived in Spain through colonial trade routes. As she explained: “sometimes, when I do research, I discover that these cultures are even more interconnected than I had imagined. While looking for information on flamenco costumes, I discovered that the Manila Shawl originates from Guangdong. Today, many of the figures and flowers embroidered on the shawls come from important symbols in Chinese culture, reinterpreted through a Spanish perspective” (Moreno Vallejo, 2024).

For this reason Chen Zhou, refuses to let a passport define her identity. Her approach is very conceptual, defined by the designer as a “poetic language” (Moreno Vallejo, 2024), yet, not limited to aesthetics as it also extends to the production process: with her brand present in 15 Asian retailers, she sources materials from Spain and Japan, produces accessories in New York, and manufactures garments in China, where she can personally oversee production. As she states: “being Chinese and Spanish means that I inhabit multiple *cultural skins*, in which I live and between which I move” (Moreno Vallejo, 2024). Furthermore, in her engagement with the *mantón* de Manila, Chen Zhou emphasises not only Asian and Spanish cultures but also the vital contributions of the Roma community to Spanish identity: “when we look at history through the lens of multiculturalism, we find that we are, in fact, speaking the same language” (Moreno Vallejo, 2024).

In the Spanish fashion scene, the Roma cultural heritage is also powerfully represented by Juana Martín, the first Spanish woman to present a collection at Paris Haute Couture Week (2022), supported by the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode. In 2025, she received the National Fashion Design Award, both for her contribution to the international recognition of Spanish fashion and for being the first Roma woman to achieve such recognition in the industry. The award coincided with the commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the Roma people's arrival in Spain, a history marked by individual and collective resilience. As the jury

explained: “in a sector that has traditionally remained distant from Roma communities, her success represents an act of visibility, a rupture with stereotypes, and an affirmation of a cultural identity that has been historically marginalised” (Moreno Vallejo 2025).

Self-described as a “revolutionary of flamenco fashion” (Ruiz Mantilla y Mora, 2005), Martín began presenting her collections in 2005 at Cibeles Madrid Fashion Week and continued until 2018, when she shifted her focus to Paris. Her work frequently incorporates the mantón of Manila and other elements of traditional Andalusian and Roma dress. The most remarkable was *Oda a Andalucía* (AW 2022/2023), her first show in the Haute Couture week in Paris where the large flowers of the Manila shawls were revived in the form of oversized earrings and dress ornaments made of metalwork, created by the Cordoban silversmiths of Plata Pura. Another example of the use of this influence could be seen in an earlier collection: *Cristales Rotos*, an homage to the gypsy culture of Triana through a primarily flamenco collection, which was also combined with street-wear and more casual clothes. The *mantón's* influence is evident in the work embroidery, which closely resembles the style of the *mantón*.

The jury of the National Fashion Design Award also emphasised her close collaboration with Andalusian artisans and workshops, as well as her commitment to recovering traditional textile techniques (embroidery, lace, local fabrics). This strategy not only enriches her creations but also demonstrates a commitment to cultural and economic sustainability by strengthening local industries and preserving endangered crafts. As various media outlets have highlighted, her brand is “legitimate haute couture from Andalusia” (Objetivo Corduba, 2017) and “Juana Martín, the history of Spain in Parisian haute couture” (Moreno, 2022).

Other designers have implied the use of the *mantón* for this specific significance, as an homage to Andalusian fashion, traditions and craftsmanship. Jorge Vázquez did so for the iconic brand Pertegaz, for whom he created a dress version showcased in the SS2021 collection, or Juan Vidal, for his own brand, making the patterns of his dress out of the embroideries in the *mantón*, mainly inspired by flowers. As he explained, the *mantón* and the different flowers that typically decorate it “evoke Romani fortune-telling, an image reformulated through the technique of pleating” (Scofield, 2022). The result, he indicates, is “a mystical, esoteric, and somewhat folk representation, with one foot straddling the line between tradition and contemporaneity.” (Scofield, 2022).

Tradition also plays a key role in the work of Palomo Spain (Alejandro Gómez Palomo), who has also received the National Fashion Design Award. He has employed the *mantón* of Manila -and many other elements of the traditional female costume-, as a marker of identity and as a connection to his Cordoban roots, as well as a medium to liberate them from a unique gender use. His merit is making them more inclusive, as he also wishes for his designs to serve as a “trampoline” to create new visions for these traditions. As he expressed: “that a guy like me, wearing heels and a mantón de Manila, is on Spanish Television delivering such a groundbreaking message is significant.” (Primo, 2021). In this particular context, he refers to the national program he works on as a presenter and jury, “Maestros de la costura”.

In his collection *Córdoba* (AW 2021/2022), presented at Madrid’s Paseo del Prado, he reinterpreted the mantón de Manila within the setting of an “Andalusian patio,” evoking the cultural diversity of his native province. His designs merge the austere elegance of the Cordoban man with the contemporaneity of the *Palomo boy*, fusing references to bullfighting, flamenco, and equestrian culture with avant-garde aesthetics.

Fellow Andalusian, is Leandro Cano (Jaén, 1984). Cano made a collection in honour of his late grandmother, who had always wanted a *mantón* but never had one (Ruiz de la Prada, 2017). From that starting point, the designer, who is also a trained photographer and graphic designer, is known for embracing his Andalusian roots in significant, original and outstanding garments. He said about the Andalusian accessory: “the mantón becomes trivialised when it is made with poor quality and poorly executed embroidery. When it is well embroidered and crafted from high-quality or even noble fabrics, its mere presence elevates any outfit you wear.” (Vázquez, 2024)

From a more radical and disruptive approach, designer Dominnico (Domingo Rodríguez) explored the potential of the mantón in his *Idolatría* collection (AW 2020/2021). Founded in Barcelona in 2016, his genderless brand combines meticulous pattern-making, research into innovative materials, and sustainability with a futuristic vision of fashion. *Idolatría* was conceived as an ode to Spain, flamenco, and contemporary Spanish art, referencing figures such as Picasso, Buñuel, Almodóvar, Penélope Cruz, Rossy de Palma, and Rosalía. Within this framework, the mantón was incorporated alongside embroidered tulle, silk jacquards, laminated leather, and bold color palettes, reinforcing Dominnico’s daring reinterpretation of national cultural heritage.

Another striking case is Luis de Javier, often described as the *enfant terrible* of Spanish fashion. Trained in London and having worked with Vivienne Westwood and Gareth Pugh, he combines the influences of British avant-garde design with Spanish folklore and more recent cultural movements such as the *Ruta del Bakalao*. In his debut at *Paris Fashion Week* (September 2024), he presented a punk reinterpretation of the mantilla, using unconventional materials such as latex. As he explained: “my work is a mixture of two realities: respect for traditional craftsmanship and the freedom of the present. It is my way of saying: ‘This is also Spain.’” (Serna Box, 2025).

More closely to the idea of the traditional garment and in a pursuit to broaden flamenco fashion, there are brands such as Lina, which create this type of garment as they are very “close” to their own culture: “A partir de nuestros mantones hacemos faldas, blusas, cinturones, bolsos...” (Ponce, 2021), Ana Canalejo, Sevillian designer and founder of Room 717, began her brand by transforming one of her mother’s *mantones* into a skirt, which became the foundation of her creative project. Since then, she has developed garments that reinterpret the shawl in different colors and embroidered designs, demonstrating its adaptability to contemporary fashion narratives.

Even though the majority of the occasions the *mantón* has had a great response from the fashion audience and the general public, there have also been moments of rejection, revealing once again the importance in terms of perception of the garment and the symbolic value. One of those occasions was the skirt worn by Queen Letizia of Spain, designed by the brand Duyos led by Juan Duyos (Sisí Sánchez, 2021). The look is a two-piece ensemble consisting of an ivory silk blouse and a pencil skirt. The skirt was crafted from a deep blue Manila shawl with floral motifs in the same shade as the blouse.

This was not the first time the Queen used a design that implied the use of the *mantón*: in 2004, at one of her first engagements as a royal, she wore a similar design signed by Lorenzo Caprile: a long black skirt embroidered in white that had been used on many other occasions.

In 2017, she once again entrusted Juan Duyos to transform another antique Manila shawl—this time in a vanilla tone—into a pencil dress she debuted in Palma.

This redesign led to a significant rejection, as she was accused of destroying the garment. In a news published by *elmundo.es*, the digital version of the traditional newspaper, they covered the disappointment of the creator of the Manila shawl from which it was made, Ángeles Espinar, a 60-year-old artisan who said that the *mantón* was “troceado” (García Romero, 2021), that is, cut to pieces. The Queen had preserved this latter shawl since her wedding in 2004 as a gift from the atelier of Ángeles Espinar in Villamanrique de la Condesa in Sevilla, where the Palace of los Infantes de Orleans y Borbón is located. As it had been for many years, the residence of Esperanza de Borbón, sister of María de las Mercedes and therefore aunt of Juan Carlos, father of Felipe VI. The close connection between the family and the location was the reason why the Queen received the *mantón*, as it was a traditional gesture from the atelier.

After 12 years of not being used, when finally worn, the *mantón* was reconstructed and turned into a skirt, a collar, and two cuffs. Ángeles Espinar expressed her opinion to the royal house, which alleged that they didn’t know it was a unique piece. The reality is that, even though the Queen had customised her *mantones* of Manila before and her main intention was to support Spanish fashion and present herself as the “Queen of Spain”, by wearing a physical symbol of the identity and tradition of the country, it hadn’t been reconstructed before as she did this last time and therefore it represent a destruction of that symbology rather than a contribution to it. The difference is that, in this design, an exclusive piece had been used: entirely hand-embroidered over more than four months, crafted in Italian silk, and featuring a personalised design, as it also included rings at the centre with the date of her wedding and her name alongside that of King Felipe. It is worth mentioning that Ángeles Espinar also collaborated with Maria Grazia Chiuri on the 2023 Dior cruise show in Seville and is the only embroiderer to have received the Gold Medal of Merit in the Fine Arts.

In this sense, there is a significant difference between designers who acquire a Manila shawl, redesign it, or reinterpret it, and those who create a garment based on the material and embroidered fabric of the original shawl. This last option provides the opportunity to create that bond without destroying a garment of symbolic significance. As one of the fashion houses mentioned before, Lina and Rocío Peralta explain: “we make bespoke gowns with fabrics that have been previously embroidered for a specific purpose (...) It simulates a Manila shawl, but it is an embroidered and fringed fabric prepared for those exact measurements and that particular design.” (Sisí Sánchez, 2021).

The relevance of the *mantón* is also evident among younger designers, such as @paobarrod, whose final degree project (shared on TikTok) reimagines the traditional *manto y saya* of La Palma (Canary Islands). One of her designs features a jacket inspired by the *mantón*, embroidered with grape motifs that reference both the island’s culture and her family’s occupation in viticulture.

In conclusion, the *mantón* de Manila remains a central feature in contemporary Spanish fashion. As demonstrated by established and emerging designers, it remains a powerful source of inspiration and a vehicle for cultural dialogue, connecting tradition and modernity while contributing to ongoing debates on identity, heritage, and representation.

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