

## APRONS: SYMBOLS OF DOMESTICITY

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It's Saturday morning and the garage sale is in full swing; men, women and smart-ass kids shove each other as I push my way through an assortment of boxes and plastic bags. I'm about to leave when I spot an old-fashioned apron atop a card table. Pink, with flowered pockets, it's a bit faded, but costs only 50 cents.

Why an apron? I don't even wear those stashed in my kitchen drawer. The thing is, I like aprons. They remind me of home: my mother's kitchen (and later mine), hot food, and familia. To me, aprons are symbolic of hearth, home. Y amor.

Aprons are universal. Russian peasant women who till the wheat fields wear aprons over their thick coats. At Indian fiestas honoring patron saints, Hopi, Navajo, and Zuni women don aprons over traditional wear. Don Panfilo, the elderly baker at a nearby bakery (where the best Mexican pan was made) wore an apron wound twice round his gaunt frame; it hung from his skinny shoulders to his flour-dusted shoes. In a small pocket was a tiny pencil used to take orders. A meticulous man, before waiting on customers he wiped his hands on the apron. Each time el panadero placed bread on the baker's racks at the rear of the store, he left a track of white dust on the floor.

When working outdoors my friend Nora wraps her wide bulk in a tattered apron left to her by her mama. A pregnant neighbor sews aprons that allow for an extending belly. A pretty New Mexican ceramic artist I know wears a western-type apron trimmed with fringe above her cowboy boots. She looks hot!

My friend Peter - a carpenter by trade - wears an snazzy leather apron, a

gift from his wife, in gratitude for the kitchen cabinets he installed. In it he carries hammer, nails, and now and then, a warm taco. When done with a job, Peter hangs his apron on a peg next to jars of nails and screws.

For ages, aprons were an important part of a homemaker's wardrobe. A housewife caught without one was not worth her salt. My mother, and most of our neighbors, *senoras* who washed on Monday, ironed on Tuesday, and cleaned house with a vengeance (so as not to be called "dirty Mexicans"), made their own aprons. Of bleached sackcloth and trimmed with rickrack, they were worn once, then laundered.

My sisters and I grew up wearing aprons, or *mandiles*, as our mothers called them. We were not allowed in the kitchen without a clean apron. It was with a certain amount of pride that I wound my mother's starched apron around my waist to peel potatoes. Angry at having to wash dishes I scrubbed minus el *mandil*; I splashed soapsuds on the kitchen floor.

My children's paternal grandmother once made an apron out of men's pants. Of blue denim, she wore it when picking cotton in the Delano fields. She was very short; the apron hung to the floor! But when making wheat flour tortillas for *los hijos*, it was time for the apron trimmed in rick-rack with the wide pockets where she kept gumdrops for the grandkids.

In the 1940s, aprons were sold at J.C. Penneys and through the Sears catalog. Most were of cotton with a pocket in front and two larger ones below the waist. Others were fancy, with round, square, or heart-shaped bibs. The "sweetheart neckline" was muy popular

At 50s wedding showers, gifts of sexy, aprons made of lace and taffeta with ruffles, were *de rigueur*. Blushing brides wore them when serving meals, but for everyday wear stuck to serviceable cotton; ruffles took too long to iron. Once, when I gave a dinner party, I donned a pink chiffon apron with a heart-

shaped pocket trimmed in lace. I swished with pride till I got too close to the stove.

In the 70s, plastic aprons became popular. While impractical when near an open flame *los de plastico* required little care, unlike those of cotton that had to be starched and ironed. Once dunked in soapy water and rubbed dry, they were ready to wear.

When I graduated from college with a BA, I nearly cried when I saw the gift my kids gave me: a red and white checked apron. On it was written: FOR THIS I WENT TO COLLEGE FOUR YEARS.