

Feature



The Clothing of a Californio Don

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Californio” is a term for the Spanish-speaking Catholic people who lived in California before the gold rush of 1848. A historical re-enactor describes a recreation of a 1840 California Don's costume that echos the grandeur of the Spanish hidalgos.

In the wake of the Mexican War of Independence, an unusual confluence of culture, trade, and circumstance took place in the remote Mexican frontier of Alta California and triggered the development of a culture where men dressed like peacocks out of necessity; and in so doing created one of the most amazing balances of beauty and utility ever seen in the history of men's clothing: the costume of the Californio man. The epitome of this style was worn by the Rancho Dons – the royalty of the California frontier. In this essay, we will go over the historical circumstances that gave rise to this amazing clothing, the function this clothing had in their lives, as well as comments on the clothing's construction.

The Historic Circumstances

With the success of the Mexican War for Independence, the newly formed

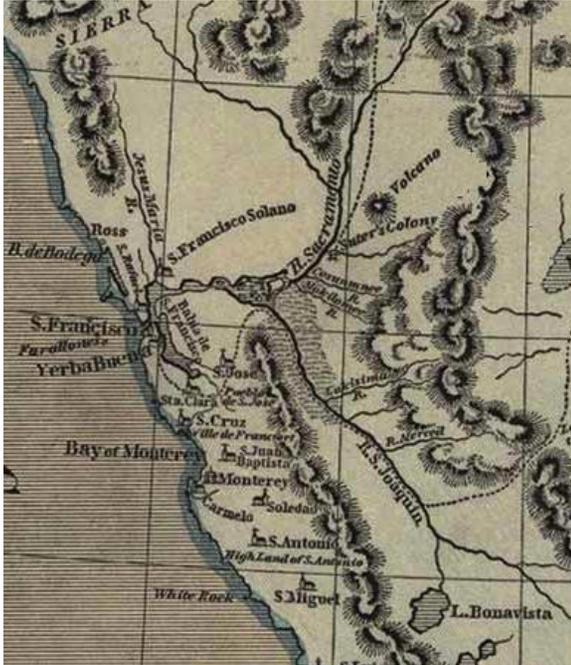


Mexican government made two immediate and radical changes for Alta California (the region of Mexico that later became the US state of California). The government opened the Alta California ports to foreign trade vessels, and also adopted liberal immigration policies in an attempt to create a California land rush.

Up to this point, Alta California's trade was completely controlled by Spain, and as a result, Alta California was often left critically undersupplied. It is written that the most common clothing that was worn in Alta California under the Spanish Empire was patched together rags. Additionally, Alta California's economy was almost entirely dominated by life on the Missions. The poverty of all involved was exceptional, even when compared to the conditions in the rest of the Mexico.

The other factor was California's tremendously small population. European diseases had ransacked the native populations, and there had been an almost complete lack of immigration up to the 1820s, resulting in a vast land seemingly void of people. And anywhere there is a lack of people, there is inherently a lack of government control. For example, the few military lawmen in Alta California at this time were often individually responsible for maintaining justice in regions larger than many Northeastern US states.

Given the poverty and population scarcity, the Mexican government needed to swiftly increase Alta California's population and wealth, if it were to both afford the cost of additional governmental control of the region and stave off any sort of rebellion by the financially destitute population.



1845 map of Alta California.

The first step to remedy this problem was the opening of Alta California ports to foreign trade ships – in particular, to US trade vessels. This created a market for California goods, the two most plentiful and important being cow hides and tallow for the United States factories on the other side of the continent.

The second step taken was the expansion of the Rancho system that had

been ineffectively implemented by the Spanish Empire. Mexico's Rancho system offered Mexican citizens the right to request land grants throughout California. The size of the land grant was based on one's wealth, which was used as an indicator of how much land an individual would be able to effectively control. This land grant could be of any size ranging from hundreds of acres to tens of thousands of acres (as such was the case with General Mariano Vallejo).

The expansion of the Rancho system did attract many families to move north to the remote frontier of Alta California – and in so doing, bring their wealth with them to support economic growth. But the Mexican government, knowing that the number of families with the wealth and desire to move to the frontier was quite limited, created one of the easiest immigrant naturalization processes in the world to draw in foreign immigration.

The greatest difficulty in the naturalization process was that one had to be Catholic before becoming a citizen, which often meant converting to Catholicism. This lenient immigration system also managed to attract some wealth and people to the frontier from beyond Mexico's borders, many of whom eagerly converted to

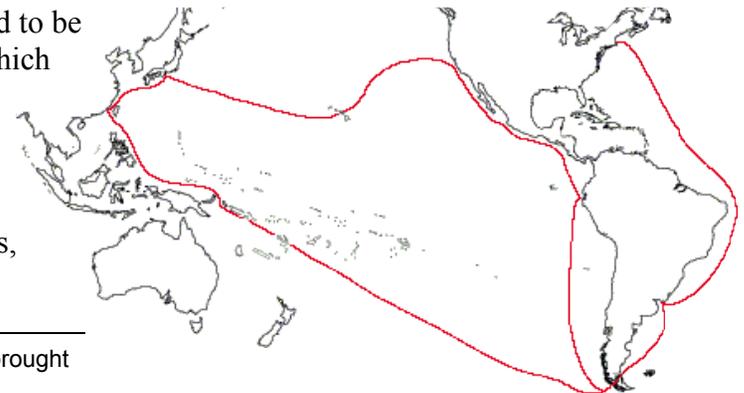


John Sutter, c. 1839.

Catholicism and became Mexican citizens to take advantage of the land grant system. People who did this included John Sutter of Switzerland (at left), John Gilroy from Scotland, and Captain William Goodwin Dana of Boston.

The stage was set for a new culture, and new clothing, to emerge in the wake of these major changes.

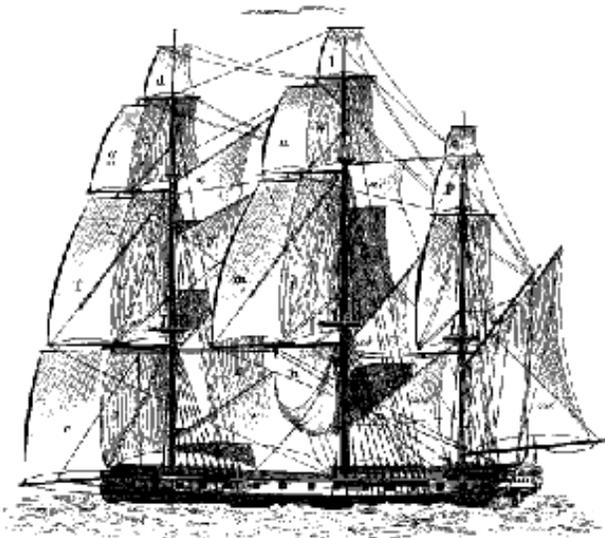
Spanish and European cultures and styles arrived and mixed as the Rancho system expanded. The distinctive shape of Californio clothing stemmed from demands of the Californian environment. The need to herd cattle and the vast distances between Ranchos with few, if any, roads triggered the development of a horse culture; a culture that so prioritized the equestrian lifestyle that the clothes of all men in the culture – from the most impoverished vaqueros to the most regal Dons – would soon be based around maximizing their clothing's utility for equestrian transport, with concerns for pedestrian locomotion being of secondary importance.



Well-established trade routes with the Orient brought gorgeous fabrics to Alta California.

In the 1820s the American trade ships already had a very well established, 50,000 mile round trip trade route to the Orient. Their route often started at Boston, traveled south around Cape Horn or through the Straits of Magellan, then west across the South Pacific to the Spice Islands, then north to East Asia, then east to the Kingdom of Hawai'i. Once the ports in Alta California were opened to foreign trade, the trade ships could now continue on from Hawai'i northeast to Alta California – carrying with them the gorgeous fabrics of the Orient!

When these trade ships arrived in Alta California, the traders were required to go to the Customs House in Monterey and pay a fee for the right to sell their goods in Alta California before engaging in trade. And in a traditional, American businessmen way, these traders quickly found ways to avoid



1820s trade ships plied the Oriental trade routes.

paying government fees – such as unloading most of their ship's cargo into sea caves along the coast, then going to Monterey to pay the Customs fees on a much reduced inventory, then return to pick up their cargo from the sea cave, customs papers in hand that would allow them to trade with the eager Californios.

Now, when a single Californio man had items, such as cow hide and tallow, to exchange with these traders, the question on their mind was “how can I stand out and impress the ladies?” To do this, they wanted fabrics that would set them apart from the crowd. What they would encounter among the traders' fabric stores would be two broad categories of cloth:

1. Cotton, wool and linen cloth from the eastern US seaboard textile mills that was frequently in neutral or unappealing colors (the more colorful cloth having been sold at earlier trading port stops) as well as being very expensive (the cloth would have traveled more than 30,000 miles by sea before it ever reached any Alta California port; and the further an item traveled in those days the greater the price).
2. Silk, cotton, velvet, satin, and woolen cloth from east Asia that was frequently hand woven, dyed in resplendent colors, and relatively inexpensive compared with the US cloth because it had traveled less than 8,000 miles before arriving at Alta California.

A Picture With Words

The following is a quote that captures the essence of Californio men's dress. The quote is from the 1929 book “Spanish Arcadia” by Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez.

“Here is the way in which a rich young man of Los Angeles was dressed on his wedding day, in 1842:

Yellow hat of vicuña wool, with a heavy string of glass beads around the crown; the under part of the brim nearly covered with silver lace. The jacket easy fitting, of green satin, with large flaps of the same material, its buttons being of Mexican pesetas with the eagle stamp on the outside. The waist-coat of yellow satin with the pocket flaps buttoned up with gold dollars. Wide breeches of red velvet to the knees, where they were fastened with silver buckles.

A buckskin legging of the natural color, tied around the knee where the breeches ended with green silk ribbons forming a flower, and with tassels from which depended little figures of cats, dogs, puppets, etc., made of seed-glass beads, interspersed with gold and silver thread. Where the deer-skin leggings ended began the shoe, which was sharp-pointed and turned upwards. The manga, or serape, was of sky-blue cloth of the finest quality, with red lining, the opening for the head faced with black velvet, and edged all around with fringed silver galloon. The long hair, braided in a queue, hung down upon the jacket, where the queue was tied with a large flower of green ribbon.”

The Californio men's response to the selection of fabric available from the trade ships was to overwhelmingly favor the selection of fabrics from the orient, all in the name of winning the attention of a woman.

As one can now see, the amazing confluence of factors in Mexican period Alta California that lead to the creation of this truly amazing costume included:

- The Mexican War for Independence
- The opening of Alta California ports to foreign trade ships
- The expansion of the Rancho system in Alta California
- The liberalizing of Mexican Immigration law
- The Horse Culture that developed in response to Alta California's geography
- The relative economic prosperity in Alta California under Mexican rule
- The scarcity of women and the need for men to compete for their attention
- The trade routes of the trade ships bringing East Asian fabrics to Alta California

These circumstances fostered a fierce competition among the Californio men, where each and every one, to the best of their abilities sought to out-dress one another. In the process, they created a culture whose style has produced some of the most gorgeous men's garments ever to have graced the Earth.



The rest of this article will highlight the major features of this costume, using as a guide Californio period clothing historian and costumer Shirley Jolliff's reproduction of an 1840's Californio Don's outfit.

The 1840's was the peak of the Californio culture, for the culture was fatally wounded in the wake of the Mexican-American war and California gold rush, and all but wiped out in the flood of American immigration after the completion of the Trans-Continental railroad in 1869. The Americans brought with them their austere and dour aesthetics, and scorned the beauty of the Californio men's dress, describing them scornfully as men who dress like "peacocks." Soon, the flamboyant Californio men's outfit was relegated into the dusty and forgotten pages of our own history to molder for more than a century before gaining a new life through California living history programs.

The Jacket, Vest and Crevat

The Californio men's jacket, the chaqueta, and vest were the merger of European suit fashions of the 1830's with the fine fabrics arriving in Alta California during the Mexican period.

In creating the vest and chaqueta, most any suit or vest from the period could be used as a basis for the design, so long as it was at least two years behind the fashions in America, and at least five years behind the fashions in Europe – this being due to the extensive time it takes to not just travel across the oceans, but for style to influence

people once knowledge of a new styles arrives. Though for the chaqueta's basic design, Californio men consistently favored the distinctive, short, tail-less jacket that was traditional in Spain.

Once a style was chosen for a chaqueta or a vest, the fabrics chosen by the Californios were as unique as the tastes of the man, and only limited by his wealth – in fact chaquetas, vests, manga serapes, as well as the Californio pants called calzoneras were all constructed with colorful fabrics whenever possible. Reds, blues, tans, browns, greens, blacks, oranges, yellows, grays, & purples existed throughout Alta California. These colors were supplemented by all manner of brocade and printed patterns and fabric designs. With the fabrics in hand, the Californio clothing would be constructed with an eye towards both utility and style.

An example of utility was that the arms of the chaqueta were always tailored for the purpose of freedom of arm movement, because when on horseback it would not be desirable to wear clothing that hinders arm movements. Similarly, the Californio chaqueta waist line was quite high compared with other European-styled jackets. This high waist line allowed for Californios to avoid the problem of sitting on the tails of their jackets while on horseback, which allowed for more freedom to twist the upper body while rounding up the cattle for the periodic cattle slaughters, known as matanzas. It also allowed for greater air flow



around the torso when riding, keeping the rider cooler in the summer heat than a typical European jacket would.

The chaqueta worn in the images in this article would be worn by a Californio in Northern Alta California. The further south in Alta California, the more the waist lines on the chaquetas would raise higher and higher, due to the generally higher summer temperatures in southern Alta California.

Cravats (and sometimes scarves) were worn around the neck of a Californio's shirt collar for both extra warmth in winter as well as a way to add style to ones ensemble. Cravats were often silk, featuring intricate designs of great beauty. Also, it should be mentioned that the shirts on which these cravats were worn were often simple, unornamented white cotton shirts worn purely for their utility. If the shirts were some color other than white, this could be attributed to using what cloth was available, as shirting fabric was not always obtainable.

For example, near San Luis Obispo there was a wealthy ranchero that had been waiting more than a year for a trade ship to come through with shirting cloth when his last shirt disintegrated from constant use. Fortunately, the ranchero immigrant Captain Dana heard of his neighbor's plight and gave him one of his own last remaining shirts out of generosity. As can be seen, for all Californios, no matter their wealth, a shirt was a purely a utilitarian item to be worn until it became rags.

The Hat, Sash and Knife

The hat of a Californio man was first and foremost a utility item. It kept the sun out of his eyes, and the sun off his face. And like many hats, it had a thin cord strung between each side of the hat, with a tightening clasp upon the cord. This cord was used to prevent the hat from falling off while riding, and because of the variable terrain in California, which included many low hanging branches and tall bushes, the Californios took to tightening this clasp not under the chin, but cinched underneath a pony tail (if they had long hair) or the knot of a head scarf on the back of the head (see photo). By affixing the hat to their head in this fashion, Californios could have their hat brushed off by a branch without being choked or pulled off their horse – which would be the case if they had the hat cord under their chin.

Additionally, notice the thick, circular roll around the crown of the hat. This is a Californio hatband, and was developed for defensive purposes, for they found that having a thick rope wound around the crown of their hats protected them from many of the most fatal blows to the head one could receive during a fight – whether that fight was with natives, foreigners, or other Californios.

This brings me to the weapons of the Californios, which could be quite varied. Handguns, rifles, tomahawks, and war clubs were all known in the period, but were infrequently used. The standard weapon was

a long knife - 12 to 22 inches in length - called a Californio fighting knife. The knife was usually kept in a holster on a waist sash.

The Californios used knives because they were important utility tools; for while the knives were sometimes used in self-defense against ruffians, their primary purpose was in matanzas. The use of the knife was an act of extreme skill, for the vaquero had to approach the cattle on



horseback, and while riding alongside a selected cow, he had to stab it once in the main neck artery, then wait for nature to take its course. And while there were more practical tools that were used extensively in matanzas, such as spears, the use of the knife in matanzas is a clear demonstration of the bravado of Californio culture.

Now draw your attention to the Californio waist sash for it not only acted as

a belt for the Californios' pants and knife holster, for when it was folded correctly the sash formed a 360 degree pocket around the waist. To create this pocket, the sash was folded in half longitudinally before being tied around the waist.

With all Californio clothing, style was of primary concern – and accordingly the hatbands, the sashes on their waist, and even the holsters for their knives, were all areas to ornament through using colorful fabrics and gold or silver trim. Leatherworking, such as with the knife holster, was also a common practice among Californio men, forever seeking to outshine one another in any way they could.

The Pants and Shoes

The Californio pants, known as calzoneras, are by most measures, the most unique feature to the Californio man's outfit. Their basic design, intended for frequent horseback riding, lends itself readily to both embellishment and being the Californio equivalent of a bank account (we will cover this momentarily).

The calzoneras are intended to be worn with light cotton or linen underpants, known as calzoncillos, and with a sock or stocking held in place by a garter, either practical or ornamental, depending on the occasion. The calzoneras were designed with button up sides so that in inclement or cold weather, a Californio rider could button his pants all the way to his ankles and stay warm. Conversely, if the weather was warm, a Californio rider could unbutton the sides of

his calzoneras, allowing his legs ventilation, with the calzoncillos underneath providing sun protection. Effectively, these pants were the Californio equestrian equivalent of a climate controlled vehicle cabin.

Additionally, the fabric front of the calzoneras was large enough to form a flap of fabric that covered the buttons on the sides of the legs so as to prevent the buttons from snagging on shrubbery. Underneath this flap was a strip of very colorful fabric which had the button holes through which the buttons could be fastened. In the images provided, this fabric strip is purple.

Frequently, the Californios would strap leather leggings called botas to their lower legs to thoroughly protect their pants from the tall chaparral brush of California. These botas were often highly ornamental, featuring extensive leather tooling and silver embellishments.

The inner thigh of the calzoneras could be either reinforced with leather, as is the case in the example costume, or made of a heavy fabric. This reinforcement was important in order to counter the cumulative effects of friction that take place on any clothing between the saddle and rider.

In the example costume, various gold braid and fringes creating a decorative patterns can be seen on both the calzoneras, the chaqueta, and the sash – this is real gold braid, just as the Californios would have used it. Before the California Gold Rush and the Nevada Silver Rush, all gold and silver in Alta California had to be imported by trade ships, and was extremely expensive to trade for – at any price. Thusly, the ultimate way to show off ones wealth, and in so doing attract the attention of the ladies, was to decorate one's clothes in gold or silver trim.



However, the practicality of this ornamentation went beyond just the purpose of attracting women, it had a fiscally prudent basis as well. Alta California had no banks. If someone had gold or silver, they would have had no safe place to put it! If they left it at home, it could be stolen from them while they were away. So the best place to keep one's wealth safe was on their person at all times. The Californios found that the easiest way to manage this was to simply wear their wealth wherever they went – that way if someone wanted to steal their gold or silver, they would at least have a fighting chance to keep it, especially if they were adept at using a Californio fighting knife!

Wearing one's wealth also included the use of gold and silver coins – which were rare in Alta California. If one received a coin in a financial transaction, they would aim to keep it near themselves at all times. Hence, the Californios took to making buttons out of coins and attaching these buttons to the sides of their calzoneras, vests, and jackets as replacements for standard buttons. In the Californio culture, if one was wealthy, it would show.

Walking around wearing one's wealth also allowed one to pay off debts from gambling or creditors immediately. All the wearer had to do was cut off a button or two, or a length of gold or silver trim to pay the debt. There were some drawbacks to all of this gold and silver trim and coin-buttons, for the clothing became increasingly heavy, and accordingly, difficult to walk in. This



increased weight also caused fabric to pull and wear oddly. But, as Californios lived on horseback, extra weight was seen as a tolerable inconvenience.

As for the feet, basic shoes were made in Alta California, using materials available on the ranchos. The one requirement of any shoe for a Californio was that it must be constructed so it could support spurs; beyond this factor, almost any shoe would do. If one was wealthy, one could afford to pay the exorbitant prices for a fine leather shoe made elsewhere - possibly in a factory in some distant industrialized nation - which would be another way of showing off one's status. The irony is that the leather shoes were frequently made with the same leather that the Californios had sold to the trade ships in previous years.

The Manga

The manga was the ultimate sign of wealth and status in Californio society. Where most Californios merely had a serape for inclement or cold weather, the ones that either came from wealth or had attained wealth would have a manga. They were sometimes family heirlooms brought over from Spain that could have been in the family a hundred years or more, or they might be made in Alta California for a successful ranchero.

Any manga ever constructed was easily identified and distinguished from a mere serape by its often extensive and intricate ornamentation. This ornamentation would often go beyond just the gold and



silver trim and up to 7 yards of luxuriant fabrics, but also include hand cut scalloping along edges and incredibly ornamental arrangements of any trim attached to the manga.

And, as with all Californio clothing, the practical nature of a manga is abundantly evident if one wears a manga in windy conditions or in temperatures in the 30s and 40s; for under such conditions the wearer will remain noticeably warmer than the

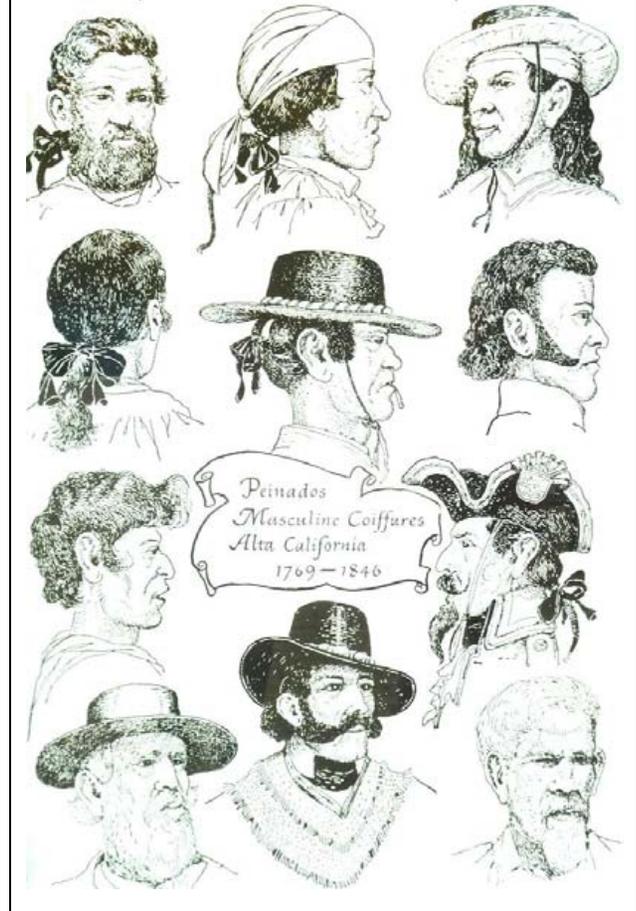
ambient temperature. In a California winter, this ornamented wearable blanket was both stylish and practical.

Conclusion

This concludes the overview of the history, purpose, and style of the Californio man's dress. In an area when the pioneers of style are looking to the past for fresh ideas, the clothing of the Californio Don sets a high standard and looks great doing so.

Californio Men's Hairstyles

This illustration from the Customs House in old Monterey, California illustrates men's hair styles of Alta California from 1769-1846.



Andrew M. Crockett is an avid early California living historian and a re-enactor in the [National Civil War Association](#), where he is the Treasurer of his unit: the Norfolk Light Artillery Blues. See his [LinkedIn page](#) for more information about his many interests.