



Latin American dress and fashion refers to the dress, body, and culture of a large and heterogeneous world culture region that includes Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. Given that the nature of dress in Latin America is highly diversified, one can look to overlapping socio-historical influences that have shaped the pursuit of elegance and transformed the dynamics of everyday life to elucidate some general characteristics.

Ancient Latin America

When Christopher Columbus claimed the islands of Cuba as well as the Dominican Republic and Haiti for Spain in 1492, he initiated the conquest of the indigenous populations living in the region that came to be known as Latin America and the Caribbean. The first images and accounts of American natives that circulated throughout Europe reveal much about a sense of awe experienced by the first colonizers. They view the natives' nakedness with bewilderment and marvel at the presence of material goods such as cotton cloth, intricate feather work, and weavings. This "New World" would provide Europe with material goods as varied as silver, gold, sugar, chocolate, textiles, and dye. Portugal, involved in its own push for colonial power, would successfully challenge Spain for the region that makes up the country of Brazil. As Spain and Portugal quickly established colonial governments, the native populations suffered the effects of brutal conquest, incurable disease, and forced conversion to Christianity. Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas harshly condemned the exploitative practices of conquistadors and settlers who had turned to slavery and other forms of systematic violence to establish ranches, mines, and textile industries.

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To maintain a sense of hierarchy and respond to increasing *mestizaje*, or racial mixing, a caste system was established throughout the region. Prior to colonization, dress and textiles had often served as indicators of social and religious identity and as a medium of exchange. The caste system forced natives and African slaves to wear Western styles of dress, thereby reinforcing the authority of the Spanish and Portuguese, and over time, their Creole descendants. Some indigenous communities gave voice to their history and religious beliefs with the help of intricate color-coding systems, as found in woven textiles or compilations of strings. In this way, the *huipil* of Guatemala and the highlands of Mexico placed deities of the sun and the underworld in dialogue with the Christian faith. Still worn today, this traditional blouse component of the Mayan *traje*, or dress, reveals information about a woman's village, status, heritage, and personal beliefs. Recent excavations in Argentina and Brazil point to the African as well as Islamic origins of some pieces of jewelry found near the sites of plantations and urban mansions, suggesting that accessories may not have been censored by colonial authorities in the same way as dress. As court records indicate, one could wear almost any design provided that it was gender specific. The selection of fabric, however, was a highly serious matter. Depending on her social status, a Mexican woman of the eighteenth century would have purchased either a silk or cotton *rebozo*, or scarf. Decrees prohibited the use of certain textiles by those who the caste system deemed as inferiors, thus leading to the prohibition of velvet or taffeta for specially fashioned Incan *unkus*, or tunics, in the Andean region.

Independence and Dress Style



Argentine peinetón

By the early nineteenth century, the region experienced several calls for independence from Spain and Portugal that deeply affected the way people consumed fashion. For Cuba and Puerto Rico, this struggle for independence would not materialize until the end of the nineteenth century, although the description of fashion and dance in several literary works began to plot the demise of Spanish rule and to construct alternate political identities. In the visual imaginary of this period, Creole leaders such as Simón Bolívar (Venezuela) and José de San Martín (Argentina) appear in wind-swept capes and uniforms of their own design. Many women found themselves called upon to sew the accessories of war, their products in view and their identities concealed. A few, among them Juana Azurduy de Padilla (Bolivia) and Josefa Tenorio (Argentina), took on male uniforms in

order to fight on the battlefield, later arguing that they merited equal status in postcolonial society. Distancing themselves from the customs of Spain, fashionable women of Buenos Aires transformed the Spanish *peineta*, or hair comb, into the three-foot-by-three-foot Argentine *peinetón* in order to assert their presence and at times obstruct the very public sphere that professed independence from oppression but which, ironically, had not yet granted all the privilege of citizenship. In satirical caricatures from the period, the enlarged crests of women's combs take to downtown Buenos Aires and quickly overpower the top hats of men.

Following the retreat of Spanish colonialism, the rhetoric of fashion provided a forum for discussions on the configuration of national identity. In some cases, fashion writing allowed intellectuals to disseminate important political agendas and evade censors. In the Southern Cone region, the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas sought to eliminate the political opposition by requiring a scarlet insignia on a *chaleco*, or men's vest, of all citizens. In a violent push toward homogeneity, a decree prohibited light blue, the identifying color of the opposition, and green, a well-known symbol of hope. In this challenging climate, socialites introduced a secret language of fans, coded inserts for top hats, and message-revealing gloves, to state what was on a wearer's mind. Appropriating metaphors from the realm of fashion, in 1837, a group of Argentine intellectuals founded a fashion magazine, entitled *La Moda* after the audacious *La Mode* that had served as a force of violent opposition in revolutionary France. Using female pseudonyms and taking advantage of the fact that few associated fashion writing with politics, these founding fathers of modern Argentina asserted their urban, democratic ideals before seeking exile in neighboring Chile and Uruguay to avoid persecution. In an exploration of the dynamics of civilization and barbarism in his native country, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, one of *La Moda's* founders and a future Argentinean president (1868-1874), advocated a consolidation process that shed the nation of its traditional rural values, epitomized by the lawless poncho-clad gaucho who had long upheld Rosas's power; Sarmiento's goal was for the country to embrace an urban, and therefore more "civilized," lifestyle more conducive to the government's goals for economic growth and modernization. Economic booms at the end of the nineteenth century would earn Argentina the reputation of the Paris of South America, as its cityscape stood transformed into an allusion of luxury, consumerism, and international capitalism.

Immigrants Bring European Fashion

With the massive influx of European immigrants to Latin American cities at the turn of the century, luxury took on a fraudulent role. Members of the *nouveaux riches* and new arrivals began to imitate the styles of the upper classes in order to find work, holding in high esteem the novelties of Paris. With the emergence of the fashion lithograph, *modistas*, or tailors, copied European designs (sometimes appropriating styles for the climate of a particular region) and then commissioned seamstresses who, enduring miserable working conditions, pieced garments together with the help of sewing machines. While women's dress had become a bit more flexible, it still incorporated the corset and layered skirts and trains that required bustles. As sewing machines became more affordable, many women opted to purchase ready-made clothing or to fashion their own, more comfortable, styles at home. Encouraging readers to consider individualized designs and the prospect of female emancipation, Juana Manuela Gorriti (Argentina) and Clorinda Matto de Turner (Peru) used the language of fantasy and self-transformation, or fashion writing, to enter a public debate on materialism and female economic autonomy.

During the twentieth century, Latin American dress would inspire several fashions in Europe and the United States, from the blouse with lace ruffles inspired by the Afro-Cuban rumba, to the well-known Mexican *huaraches*, or woven leather sandals, to the straw Panama hat actually created in Ecuador. *Vogue* and *Look* turned attention to trendsetting Latin American women whose visions of haute couture, as in the case of Eva Perón (Argentina), and native designs, bringing to mind the surrealist painter Frida Kahlo (Mexico) who incorporated folkloric *china poblana* costume in bright colors and with a full skirt in her self-portraits and in real life, would continue to resonate in the popular imaginary until the present day. Other, more contemporary, fashion statements have tended to revisit the past for a retro effect, such as the young Cuban American donning the *guayabera*, a lightweight, embroidered cotton shirt worn untucked throughout the Caribbean; or the Chicano zoot-suiter, whose wartime appropriations of his father's suits inspired ethnic pride in the face of racism and brutality; or the teenage club kid wearing Inca-techno styles while discotheque dancing.

Revolutionary Times



Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, 2008

The latter part of the twentieth century witnessed a horrifying backlash against democratic values when countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay installed military governments. Strict gender codes imposed clean-cut looks for men and feminine styles for women. Responding to human-rights abuses and the plight of the "disappeared" (which refers to the tens of thousands of victims who were killed or whose whereabouts still remain unknown), the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina began to protest near important national monuments in their morning robes and house slippers, as if to state visually that they had no one at home to care for, as the regime had taken away their sons and daughters. The Mothers wear a white scarf, embroidered with the names of their missing loved ones, during their weekly marches. Serving as living monuments for the victims of repression, mother's groups in El Salvador and throughout the world have appropriated this same white scarf in their struggles against social injustice.

The revolutionary movements of Cuba (1959-) and Nicaragua (1979-1990) signaled a turn toward socialist antifashion, which associated the elitist pursuit of luxury with the kind of capitalist domination that created dependencies on foreign goods and exploited the working classes. Indeed, much of Latin America had experienced uneven economic development throughout the twentieth century. In the garment industry, multinationals relied on the cheap labor of native workers for the weaving, assembly, and sewing of garments. But in more recent years, even revolutionary Fidel Castro (Cuba) occasionally shed his camouflage for the sartorial pleasures of a dark-blue designer suit. A heightened awareness of the sweatshop conditions of the *maquiladora*, the export-processing zones established in 1960s that continue to operate under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), sometimes led consumers to boycott specific collections and push for a more socially conscious fashion system. Some designers, such as Carlos Miele (Brazil), have worked with women of the *favelas*, or shantytowns, and various indigenous communities to establish cooperatives that will ensure fair-trade wages for their creations.

Modern Style

Responding to the possibilities offered by a global marketplace and Internet connections, Hispanic designers Carolina Herrera (Venezuela), Oscar de la Renta (Dominican Republic), together with Beth Sobol (United States) and Victoria Puig de Lange (Ecuador), formed the Council of Latin American Fashion Designers in 1999. An affiliated Fashion Week of the Americas established an international platform for Latin American fashion and culture. In newspapers, a new word surfaced in popular culture that combined *fashion* and the Spanish suffix *-ista* (implying, with a tinge of sarcasm, a devotee). The dress-conscious *fashionista* scoured the ever-expanding style pages of newspapers and e-zines for information about new talents like Narciso Rodríguez (United States), the famed designer of Carolyn Bessette Kennedy's bridal gown, and faced the proliferation of fashionable identities with gusto. In the urban centers of São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Bogotá, supermodels such as Gisele Bündchen (Brazil) and Valeria Mazza (Argentina) promoted national fashion events with international appeal. At the same time, free-trade agreements between countries, such as the Mercosur block of the Southern cone region, have enabled fashion designers to create transnational organizations, such as *Identidades Latinas*, to tap into new markets. Among others, the houses of Laurencio Adot (Argentina), Alexandre Herchcovitch (Brazil), Ronaldo Fraga (Brazil), Rubén Campos (Chile), Silvia Tcherassi (Colombia), Sitka Semsch (Peru), and Angel Sánchez (Venezuela) earned strong reputations in the category of women's wear. Lina Cantillo and Ricardo Pava (both of Colombia) seemed best known for their men's collections. Fraga and Sylma Cabrera (Puerto Rico) were noted in fashion circles for their attention to children's wear. Into the twenty-first century, the reputation of Latin American fashion designers continued to rise on the world fashion stage.

See also [Latino Style](#).

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