

Cloth Production



Sheep were among the many important livestock animals the Spanish introduced to California. The wool sheared from the animals provided the necessary materials for cloth production. Within the first few years of any missions existence, looms, spinning, wheels, and carding brushes, were either imported or constructed. Skilled textile artisans hired from Mexico came to California to teach the Native American converts the skill of wool cloth production.

The already highly skilled female basket weavers, adapted quickly to the new type of weaving, and soon surpassed the skills of the artisans from Mexico. These hard working women of the mission communities created cloth by completing the following steps:

1. The wool workers washed the fleece to get all the dirt and bugs out.
2. They carded the fleece with two rectangular paddles that looked like wire brushes.
3. After carding the fleece, it was spun into yarn by using a spinning wheel.
4. After the yarn was made, they sometimes dyed the wool. Wool naturally came in all sorts of grays, whites, and blacks, but if they wanted a bit more color, they used flowers, berries, bark, and roots to make different colored dyes.
5. The yarn was used in the loom to create cloth.

From various padres' reports, and sketches drawn by visitors, we have a good understanding of what kind of wool clothing the Native Americans made and wore during the Mission Period.

Father Ramon Abella and Father Juan Lucio of Mission San Francisco de Asis reported on the clothing the Mission Native Americans wore:

The male Indians wear the Cotón, which is a kind of shirt of wool, the breech cloth, and the majority also wear a blanket. Others on horseback, or who go about the house, such as the alcaldes, or who occupy some position, wear pants, and those who wear pants also wear shoes. The Indian women and girls also wear the Cotón, a skirt, and a blanket, all these of woolen cloth woven in the Mission.

As for the padres clothing, they too wore wool, but their clothing consisted of a habit. In California the Franciscans' robes were gray the color of undyed wool. In other parts of the Spanish empire, they were blue. The Franciscans also wore sandals and sometimes wore long flat brimmed hats.



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