

The Chilean Mantle: Tradition in Black

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Abstract

The mantle was an essential piece of women's clothing in Chile during the colonial period and the 19th century, regardless of social class. Around 1880, this mantle would evolve into a specific garment known as 'Chilean mantle' or 'mass mantle' and be in use until around 1920. This garment was black, very sober, covering the body and head, worn tight around the neck, and fastened with a pin. Traditionally, it may have one of its origins in '*tapadas*', typical female characters first seen in Peru and then in Chile. *Tapadas* wore a black cloak covering their head and leaving only one eye visible. This custom, in turn, was probably inherited from Moorish Spain. Local and foreign artists immortalised women wearing Chilean mantles and their widespread use through their works, thus contributing to the dissemination of an image that would become a national symbol.

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Introduction

The mantle is a garment universally used. In America, it was already part of the native people's clothing when the Spaniards brought it as a complement to their own. In the colonial period, it was an essential piece of women's attire; in Peru, the so-called *tapadas limeñas* stood out; and in Chile, the use of this garment maintained its popularity throughout the 19th century (**Fig. 1**).

The so-called 'Chilean mantle' is a type of black shawl, very sober, which was used by women in Chile in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Around 1880, women started to wear it differently,

which contributed to building its reputation beyond the borders of the country. They wore it so that it covered their body and head, and was very tightly fastened around the neck with a pin. It was used to attend mass and/or as a mourning garment, since women had to cover their heads with shawls and black clothes when going to church.

The mantle and its use

Manto, *mantón*, *rebozo*, or shawl are different names for a garment that could be described as a simple woven cloth, usually square or rectangular in shape. It was worn over the shoulders, covered the arms wrapping around the body, and may or may not cover the head. It was used as a means of protecting the body against inclement weather but also as a distinctive or decorative element.

Some travelers who crossed Chile in the 18th and 19th centuries, described Chilean women's dress and mentioned their use of cloaks, shawls, and *mantillas*, regardless of their social class, thus proving that this garment was just as used by the wealthiest ladies as by maids and women from lower social classes.

In her book, Paz Luzzi reports comments from the English traveler Mary Graham, who wrote in her *Diary of My Residence in Chile*, published in 1824, after a two-year stay in the country: 'The dress of the granddaughter is not very different from that of a Frenchwoman, only that the mantle makes hats, caps and bonnets useless' (Luzzi 2003, 5).

Graham also wrote that when she attended a mass at La Matriz Church, in the city of Valparaíso, she had to wear a *mantilla*, a popular Spanish garment made of lace worn over the head, with a comb, usually made of tortoiseshell: 'She had taken off her French-style costume and adopted the Spanish costume; I had to do the same and wear a mantilla instead of a hat, because that is the costume worn to go to church. A boy followed us carrying a mass book and a carpet to kneel on' (Luzzi 2003, 5).

In Chile, for example, the so-called *Manila* shawls, in different colors, were very popular. These garments, which originated in China and were exported via the Philippines, were made of silk and embroidered by hand. At first, they were decorated with dragons, bamboo or pagoda designs, and, later, flowers or birds.

There were also mantelets, widely used in the mid-19th century, usually made of embroidered silk and/or decorated with trimmings and long bangs, as well as large mantles with different designs, highlighting the colorful Kashmir shawls.

As mentioned above, the mantle was commonly used in the Americas. In Chile, we can highlight the case of the Mapuche woman, who wore the *ikülla* on her shoulders, a black garment very similar to a mantle. Mapuche textile colours have a fundamental role, and the basic black colour stands for humanity as it represents the sum of all colours, and has, therefore, a special

'brightness.' According to the *Arte Popular Vivimos patrimonio* website, which collects the words of researcher Margarita Alvarado, black has, aesthetically, 'the ability to produce contrasts and dazzle' (2018, s/p).

The *tapada limeña*. Possible origin of the Chilean mantle

Tapadas were icons in Lima, although from the end of the 16th century to the mid-18th century, they were highly questioned and censored in Peru. Thence, it is believed that their clothing practice had nevertheless been transferred to Chile.

Researcher Francesca Denegri (2018) reports the writer Flora Tristán's description of a *tapada* wearing a mantle and a *saya* in 1836: 'It is composed of a skirt and a kind of sack that wraps the shoulders, arms, and head and is called a mantle [...] The mantle is always black and wraps the bust completely. Only one eye can be seen' (94-95).

In 1855, the 19th century Costumbrismo movement (Grandón 2022) rescued the figure of the *tapada limeña*, turning it into an icon that became part of Peru's identity discourse. This can be seen in watercolors, drawings, engravings, and paintings by local and foreign artists, such as the Peruvian Pancho Fierro and the German artist Juan Mauricio Rugendas (**Fig. 2**).

In the 1860s, photographic studios in Lima began to produce images that closely followed the iconography of the *tapada*, specifically in postcard format, albeit smaller; among them, an album entitled *Recuerdos del Perú* [Souvenirs from Peru], 1863-1873, produced at the Estudio Courret Hermanos, stood out.

It is interesting to note that in those years, the *tapada* became an important part of the iconography of Peru, despite the fact that the one with "*manto y saya*" was already falling into disuse, at least five years earlier.

The last *tapadas limeñas* were seen in the mid-19th century. The end of this practice could be related to European aesthetic influences. In the Chilean case, it is possible to find some photographs from that period in which women wearing very similar cloaks, though not covering their faces, are represented. Therefore, we may say that this custom disappeared earlier in Chile than in Peru, from where it finds its roots.

Regarding the origin of the *tapada*, some researchers suggest that it came from a transatlantic influence, was popularised by Spanish and Moorish women, and was then brought to America. This is what the researcher Norma Rosas exposes in her study on the *tapada limeña* and its Moorish trace, where she concludes that 'the tapado of the limeña woman (mantle and saya) and its gesture (half-eye), is a trace of the clothing of the Moorish woman, who arrived in the Americas as a slave or concubine since the beginning of the Colony, and whose attire, more than a fashion, was a form of socio-cultural resistance and feminine charm for the women who wore it' (2016, 10).

This researcher also argues that the use of the mantle and its half-eye gesture was not exclusive to Lima, since from long ago it had been connected, in a rhizomatic way¹, with other places inside and outside Peru, such as Cuzco, Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Portugal, the Canary Islands, Spain, and Morocco, as well as other areas of the Maghreb.

In Spain, its use was especially localised in places like the municipality of Vejer de la Frontera in Cadiz, the municipality of Los Llanos de Aridane, and the Canary Island of La Palma. In these places, the garment was also called *tapadas de un ojo*, *cobijado* or *encubiertas* (Hernández 2016, 1).

Thence, we can assume that the custom of wearing a mantle—so deeply rooted in the way Chilean women dress—was probably based on the *tapada*, this typical Peruvian character wearing a cloak covering her head and revealing only one eye, especially popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The Chilean mantle

(Fig.3)

In 19th century photographs, paintings, and engravings, it is possible to observe Chilean women from both society and the rural world wearing mantles. However, the mass mantle and the particular way it was worn, was admitted and used in the last decades of the 19th century, until approximately 1920. It was later replaced by the lace mantilla and, subsequently, by the mass veil, which was also made of lace and which disappeared towards the end of the 1960s.

In 1905, the North American traveler and writer Marie Robinson Wright commented on the Chilean women's way of wearing the shawl, highlighting a woman's gesture: 'The "Chilean" gives her a grace that is of her own creation. [...] By drawing her pleats over her shoulders, she knows how to give draping an artistic effectiveness that in a Paris dress she could never achieve.' (Hurtado 2011, 378) (Fig. 4)

Just as in the mid-19th century, the *tapadas limeñas* became a symbol of Peruvian identity; the same happened with the black mass cloak worn by Chilean women, a garment that became known as the 'Chilean mantle.' This vision can be faithfully transcribed through the collection of postcards kept in the National Library of Chile. These documents bear witness to the use of the image of Chilean women wearing this particular cloak to disseminate a feminine aesthetic representative of Chilean women.

¹ This concept introduced by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari is a descriptive model, which takes a botanical metaphor to indicate a type of organization based on the idea of a common root or base that has multiple branches, that is, the arrangement of the elements does not follow a line of hierarchical subordination.

One of these postcards shows the photographic portrait of Elena Lavín de Huneeus, with the handwritten mention 'Santiago de Chile, Oct. 6/06. A good Chilean type with a church costume. Love to all. W.A.' The card had been sent to New Hampshire, United States. The interesting thing about this portrait is that Elena Lavín de Huneeus' face became an emblem, reused in different formats and media. It was published, both in individual photographs and in group montages (**Fig. 5**).

According to historian Emilia Müller (2021), women wearing cloaks on women's national and foreign magazine covers reveals that this particular representation became a 'Chilean export product' at a time when the ruling class sought to highlight achievements, thus distancing itself from its historical past. 'Its visual representation spread with such magnitude thanks to the expansion and improvement of photographic techniques and high quality printing mechanisms, having as an effect, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the dissemination of a feminine aesthetic that became identified as a national symbol' (Müller 2021, 122).

Some foreigners, notably artists and writers, gave an account of the widespread use of the black mass cloak in their works. Among them, we can mention the paintings of Theodor Ohlsen, a German painter who lived in Chile between 1883 and 1893.

Also, the British writer George Egerton, pseudonym of Mary Chabelita Dunne Bright, mentions in her short story 'A Chilean Episode' (*Symphonies*, 1897), the use of the mantle as well as the custom of bringing a small carpet to attend the mass, as there were no pews in churches at that time. 'Many of the pretty devotees made a concession to the ever-seductive world, the flesh, and the devil, by donning a dainty-coloured matinée, the lace trimmed sleeve of which peeped coquettishly out beneath the sombre manto, with the hand of its owner holding the alfombra, or kneeling mat' (1897, 3).

Melton Prior, an English journalist and engraver, was the main correspondent for Chilean subjects for the illustrated British magazine *The Illustrated London News*. During his stay in Chile, besides portraying Chilean customs and landscapes, he provided an exhaustive description of the country's political organisation and social life, therefore giving a complete picture of Chile at that time. This can be seen in his reports and sketches in the *Illustrated London News*, from 1889 to 1991 (**Fig. 6**).

Müller describes one of the recurrent scenes one can find in memoirs and stories alluding to Chile in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century:

Every morning when cities like Santiago or Valparaíso were getting ready for a new day, mysterious silhouettes of women wrapped in black clothes would suddenly appear in the streets in pairs or threes. More than bodies, they looked like shadows, whose undefined contours unintentionally stained the walls of those urban centers in full commercial expansion. These images are especially suggestive in photographs and cityscapes of the time (...). The 'endless procession of women covered in black cloaks' was conspicuous for

the daily masses, during the celebration of Holy Week, on the Day of the Dead celebrated on November 1 and at the Christmas midnight mass. (2021, 119-120)

Finally, it is necessary to remember that there were different ways of adjusting the cloak, as well as different shapes, sizes, and positions for brooches that helped to hold the folds of the garment.

The Museo Histórico Nacional of Chile displays three polychrome ceramic figurines, from the Popular Arts and Crafts Collection, while the mass mantle, as worn in the last decades of the 19th century, and early 20th century can be seen in the Photography Collection (**Fig. 7**).

The variety of materials from which the mantles were made are mentioned in George Egerton's description of the morning mass, held in the Church of the French Fathers, in the port of Valparaiso, in 1891: 'A back view of the kneeling throng was, at first glance, slightly dispiriting; every figure was clad in uniform black, every head and shoulder swathed in a manto, the materials of which they were made ranging from homeliest llama to costliest crêpe-de-chine' (1897, 2).

The Textile and Costume Collection of the Museum, presents 35 mantles, of which 24 are black, made of different materials and elaborated using different techniques, such as manila shawls of embroidered silk crepe, for the majority. This percentage shows how widespread the use of black shawls was (**Fig. 8**).

Conclusion

To conclude, it is possible to confirm, through graphic and written sources, that women wearing Chilean mass shawls or mantles were very present between the years 1880 and 1920, approximately. That period is mostly determined by existing historical photographs; however, it is hard to explain how this singular way of wearing the mantle had been developed over time and finally adopted, and what the precise gesture was to form the folds and adjust the garment to the neck. This is something that is still pending and relevant, especially when it comes to accurately exhibiting the Chilean mantle.

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Fig. 1

Costumes of the inhabitants of La Concepcion (Chile).

Atlas du Voyage de La Perouse (Laperouse) around the world during the years 1785-1788, Paris 1797.

Colección Museo Histórico Nacional de Chile.



Fig. 2

Tapadas en la Alameda,
Johann Moritz Rugendas, 1842-44.

Library of Perú, in:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rugendas_-_Tapadas_en_la_alameda.jpg

Fig. 3

Photographic collage of women in mantles.
Flowers of Chile, ca. 1910.

Colección Museo Histórico Nacional de Chile.





Fig. 4

Josefina Smith de Sanfuentes.
Photograph, ca. 1880.

Colección Museo Histórico Nacional de Chile.



Elena Lavín de Hunneus.
Photographic postcard, 1906.

Colección Biblioteca Nacional de Chile.

Fig. 5



Fig. 6

The manta.
A Visit to Chile and the Nitrate Fields of Tarapaca,
William Howard Russell, 1890.
Print from a drawing by Melton Prior.

Reportaje a Chile.
Dibujos de Melton Prior y crónicas de *The Illustrated London News*, 1889-1891. Santiago.

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Fig. 7

Ceramic figurine.
Sara Gutiérrez, ca. 1890.

Colección Museo Histórico Nacional de Chile.

Manila shawl.
Embroidered silk, 19th century.

Colección Museo Histórico Nacional de Chile.



Fig. 8