



Gauchos

Art of Argentina

Rebecca Hinson

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SOURCES Jorge Luis Borges, *A Personal Anthology*; Paul Grous-sac, *Popular Customs and Beliefs of the Argentine Provinces*; Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra*; Eduardo Gutiérrez, *The Gaucho Juan Moreira*; Huw Hennessy, *Insight Guide Argentina*; José Hernández, *The Gaucho Martín Fierro*; Henry A. Holmes, *Martín Fierro: An Epic of the Argentine*; Ventura Lynch, *Folklore Bonaerense*; Carlos Páez de la Torre, *The Gaucho, Yesterday and Always*; Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo*; Aldo Sessa, *Gauchos, Icons of Argentina*.



Over centuries, livestock escaped from 16th century Spanish settlements of South America's Southern Cone. They grew into millions of free-roaming cattle and *criollo* horses, on the Argentine Pampa—the vast grasslands descending from the Andes down to the Patagonian Desert.

By the 18th century, Creoles of Spanish, Native American, and African stock wandered there, catching and taming horses and capturing cattle. These nomads of the Pampa were called *gauchos*, derived from a word of the Quechua dialect which means “orphaned, solitary figure.”

With a lasso and *boleadoras* (bolas), a gaucho on foot could capture a horse and pull down a fierce bull. Witnessing the rush of the wild steed, the force of the storm, and the rumble of stampeding cattle, the gaucho was a front-row spectator to the wonders of nature. Making his home under the star-studded sky each night, he lived as free as a bird in the sky.



On horseback, a gaucho twirls the noose of a braided rawhide lasso to rope a calf around the neck (above). Argentines wrote many songs, poems, and books which honor the gaucho. Poet Jorge Luis Borges called them “peasants of the rough lands, steady on the desert horse they broke that very morning.” The horse is essential to the gaucho, who learns to ride at a young age.

Ezequiel Ramos Mejía said, “The gaucho and the horse are legendary twins. On foot, he is inconceivable.” Amid dangerous and routine tasks, the gaucho relies on his horse—his unfailing ally, deliverer, and friend.



Wise, self-reliant gauchos made their home in the open fields. Above all, legendary gauchos like author Ricardo Güiraldes' character, Don Segundo Sombra, cherished their freedom. Historian Paul Grossac said that this type of gaucho had an "unquenchable thirst for adventure and nostalgia for the desert."

He sometimes hired himself out (but not for long) on some *estancia* (ranch), where he tamed horses; drove, branded, and slaughtered cattle; or sheared and corralled sheep. The gaucho suffered drenching rains, brutal sun, and cutting cold. He accepted whatever came along without grumbling.



Some gauchos left the wanderer's life on the Pampa for a plot of land where they could start a family, manage a herd of cattle or sheep, and grow a few crops. Like the nomadic gauchos, they were superb horsemen—skilled at using the lasso and boleadoras, and at doing livestock-related tasks.



The nomadic gaucho was poor but independent, because he didn't need much beyond his criollo horse, saddle, poncho, and a *facón* (short sword).

He wore a shirt, a vest or short jacket, cotton drawers, and a *chiripá* (rectangular piece of clothing, of Indian origin) wrapped around his waist and legs. He secured the *chiripá* with a woolen sash and a *tirador* (stiff wide leather belt with two or three pockets). Later on, *bombachas* (pleated pants with buttoned ankles that fit inside boots) replaced the *chiripá*. Most also wore a *chambergo* (wide-brimmed hat), or a wool *bonias* (a beret, inherited from French and Spanish ancestors).



The gaucho often wore *Botas de potro* (boots made from single pieces of hide, slipped from the legs of a colt). After yanking a hide inside out, he pulled it up his leg to his knee, where it dried tightly in place. Often, he left the toe open.

A gaucho hung rawhide straps from each side of his saddle. Near the bottom he tied a knot, creating a loop that he grasped with his big toe. Later, a metal stirrup with a flat base to support the rider's foot (above) replaced the rawhide loop. The gaucho tied spurs to his ankles.

A gaucho of lesser means like Don Segundo Sombra wore *espadrilles* (fabric shoes with braided fiber soles).



The tirador (front and back, above) fastens at the front with a *rastra* (silver or gold buckle, with buttons and chains). Gauchos for hire often took silver coins, which they received as pay, to a silversmith who converted them into stirrups, spurs, knife handles or sheaths (knife covers), whip handles, bridles, horse harnesses, or embellishments for their tirador.

Instead of a tirador, Don Segundo Sombra wore a thick pigskin belt with a piece of bone from which his *rebenque* (leather whip) hung.



At the gaucho's back, between his woolen sash and tirador, he tucks a sheathed facón. It is his most prized possession after his horse. He uses it throughout the day for butchering, castrating, skinning, eating, and self-defense.

In *The Gaucho Juan Moreira*, Eduardo Gutiérrez wrote about a gaucho outlaw. Juan Moreira faced rivals one-on-one in deadly duels with a facón. In a fight, Gutiérrez writes, "the dim of the room flashed with the hot lightning of their eyes and the cold lightning of their steel." Moreira became known as the greatest fighter in deadly knife duels, avenging wrongs, which drove him to a life of crime.

In the poem, *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* by José Hernández, Martín Fierro describes the gaucho: "His hope is his courage, his defense is his caution, his horse is his salvation, and he spends the sleepless night with no more protection than the sky and no other friend than his blade."



The gaucho's poncho (of Indian origin) is a blanket with a center slit for the head. Made of vicuña wool, the poncho reaches down to the wearer's knees. When he is not wearing his poncho, the gaucho folds and ties it to his saddle. It serves as a blanket at night, and as a shield when wrapped around a spare arm during a knife duel.



To protect the horseman's legs against thorny thistles in northern Argentina, gauchos tie *guardamontes* (flared rawhide guards) to their saddles (above).

During the War of Independence, in the Battle of Tucumán of 1812, gaucho militias beat their *guardamontes* with their *rebenque* handles, resulting in ear-splitting assaults.