

## The Capote (ka-poat)

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An integral component to fur trade, Indigenous, and French-Canadian lifeways and histories, the capote or blanket coat has been worn as an outer garment since the mid-to-late 1600s.<sup>1</sup> They appeared among Indigenous peoples soon after blankets were introduced as trade items by European traders. First Nations were documented wearing blanket coats as early as 1644. French sailors wore these coats and traded them to the local Indigenous nations in what is now Atlantic Canada and Quebec. By the mid-1600s, French and Canadian settlers and soldiers began wearing them as well.<sup>2</sup> Blue capotes were the most popular colour worn by Canadian settlers during the last years of the French regime.<sup>3</sup>

For most of its history, the capote has been associated with Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) "point" blankets. These woolen blankets were manufactured in the late 1770s in Oxfordshire and later at mills in Leeds and Manchester. In 1780, the HBC point blanket became a regular inland trade item. Sold in pairs, each blanket was graded by weight and size using a "point" system. The number of indigo blue lines woven into each blanket's corner identified the number of points.<sup>4</sup> The capotes were "white, with blue bands from the blanket near the hemline and matching bands near the wrist. They had an upright collar and were closed in the front by a series of ribbon ties in red, blue or both colours," and were usually tied with a "multi-coloured wool sash."<sup>5</sup>

The Métis capote is a thigh-length, hooded coat with full-length sleeves and a flared bottom to allow for greater leg movement. Both lightweight and warm, they were traditionally worn only by men. One blanket produced one coat with the excess material from the larger coats being used to make fringes, hood tassels, and belts. Capotes were further customized with breadwork, embroidery, and quillwork, or with epaulettes (often made from red stroud) and other distinct identity markers. They were fashioned shut in a variety of means, including tongs, buttons, or a sash.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Beaudoin-Ross, Clothing during the colonial period.  
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/clothing-during-the-colonial-period>.

<sup>2</sup> Eileen Stack, "Very Picturesque and Very Canadian": The Blanket Coat and Anglo-Canadian Identity in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century," in ed. Alexandra Palmer, *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Beaudoin-Ross, Clothing during the colonial period and Francis Back, "The Dress of the First Voyageurs, 1650-1715," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer 2000), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence J. Barkwell, The Capote. The Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture.  
<https://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/14194>.

<sup>5</sup> Jacqueline Beaudoin-Ross, Clothing during the colonial period.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence J. Barkwell, The Capote.

Starting in the early nineteenth century, Métis men in Red River Settlement wore sky blue or dark blue capotes which they kept fastened with a sash.<sup>7</sup> Sherry Farrell Racette argues that during the nineteenth century, Métis men wore blue capotes to affirm their group identity: "The appearance of large groups of Métis in what had become a quasi-uniform submerged individual identity into a large group identity and communicated solidarity throughout the nineteenth century, the blue capote was a garment that was viewed by observers as the visual cue most commonly associated with the Métis."<sup>8</sup>

Capotes became ubiquitous through the western half of North America during the early nineteenth century. Indigenous peoples, fur traders, and European and Euro-American visitors are all described as wearing them in a large body of literature by travellers who visited the region. For instance, in 1823, the American geologist William H. Keating provides a vivid description of capote-wearing Métis bison hunters at Pembina.

These men receive here the name of *Gens libres* or Freeman, to distinguish them from the servants of the Hudson's Bay Company, who are called *Engagés*. Those that are partly of Indian extraction, are nick-named *Bois brûlé*, (Burnt wood,) from their dark complexion.

A swift horse is held by them to be the most valuable property; they are good judges of horses, particularly of racers, with which they may chace [*sic*] the buffalo. Their horses are procured from our southern prairies, or from the internal provinces of New Spain, whence they are stolen by the Indians, and traded or re-stolen throughout the whole distance, until they get into the possession of these men. Their dress is singular, but not deficient in beauty; it is a mixture of the European and Indian habits. All of them have a blue capote with a hood, which they use only in bad weather; the capote is secured round their waist by a military sash; they wear a shirt of calico or painted muslin, moccassins [*sic*] and leather leggings fastened round the leg by garters ornamented with beads, &c. The Bois brûlés often dispense with a hat; when they have one, it is generally variegated in the Indian manner, with feathers, gilt lace, and other tawdry ornaments.<sup>9</sup>

In his 1846 tour of the western United States, American historian, Francis Parkman relates meeting Pierre Dorion's "Dahcotah" son, Paul Dorion wearing a capote at Fort

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<sup>7</sup> Fur Trade Stories. [http://www.furtradestories.ca/details\\_content-id-274\\_cat-id-3\\_sub-cat-id-1.html](http://www.furtradestories.ca/details_content-id-274_cat-id-3_sub-cat-id-1.html).

<sup>8</sup> Sherry Farrell Racette, "Beads, Silk and Quills: The Clothing and Decorative Arts of the Métis." In *Metis Legacy: A Metis Historiography and Annotated Bibliography*, eds. L. Barkwell, L. Dorion, and D.R. Préfontaine. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications and Louis Riel Institute, 2001, 186.

<sup>9</sup> William Hypolitus Keating, *Narrative of an expedition to the source of St. Peter's river, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, &c., performed in the year 1823, ... under the command of Stephen H. Long*. Vol. II. Philadelphia, H. C. Carey & I. Lea, 1824, 44. Biodiversity Heritage Library. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/48506#page/11/mode/1up>.

Laramie. When Parkman reached Fort Laramie, he described the younger Dorion as a “shrivelled little figure, wrapped from head to foot in a dingy white Canadian capote ... His sharp prominent features and his little keen snake-like eyes looked out from beneath the shadowy hood of the capote, which was drawn over his head exactly like the cowl of a Capuchin friar.”<sup>10</sup>

Nineteenth century painters, such as Paul Kane, Peter Rindisbacher, and Cornelius Krieghoff painted numerous brightly-coloured vignettes of Indigenous peoples, settlers, and European travellers wearing capotes. This tradition continued into the early twentieth century as painters of the American West, such as Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell painted images of Indigenous peoples wearing capotes. Also, at this time, the HBC commissioned various artists to paint fur trade employees wearing the famous white HBC point-blanket capote, usually leaving or going to a Company post.

The Manitoba Museum has in its collections a capote made (M37, Artifact 1295) in 1920 to celebrate the HBC’s 250th anniversary. The capote is hooded and made from an HBC woolen blanket. Its cuff and hood are black and its edges, including its cuffs and hood, are trimmed by a narrow strip of red woolen cloth (as known as a llama braid). The coat’s backside has decorative rosettes of red llama braid along its centre.<sup>11</sup>

The HBC introduced a capote made from its point blankets for the general public only in 1922—despite the fact that various people were fashioning and wearing them for almost two centuries. Tailors at various HBC posts, however, began to fashion these wrap-around coats in the 1800s.<sup>12</sup>

Today, both Métis women and men make and wear capotes. Capote-making workshops are held across North America.

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<sup>10</sup> Francis Parkman. *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life*. Facsimile reprint of 1849 book relating his 1846 tour of the western United States. Oxford University Press, 2008, 114-115.

<sup>11</sup> Fur Trade Stories. [http://www.furtradestories.ca/details\\_content-id-274\\_cat-id-3\\_sub-cat-id-1.html](http://www.furtradestories.ca/details_content-id-274_cat-id-3_sub-cat-id-1.html).

<sup>12</sup> Hudson's Bay Point Blanket Coat. Hudson’s Bay Company History Foundation. <https://www.hbcheritage.ca/things/fashion-pop/hudsons-bay-point-blanket-coat>.

## Capote Images:

A Habitant in a capote, 1778 (Ein Canadischer Bauer, 1778).  
Friedrich von Germann (1744–1794), Captain of the Brunswick Rgt Erbprinz; lost original, copy circa 1852. - NYPL 2018-01-20.

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. "Ein Canadischer Bauer. 1778," New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed June 22, 2022. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/92092742-1eac-7304-e040-e00a18065699>.

William Richards, A Man & his Wife Returning with a Load Of Partridges from their Tent, watercolour, c. 1807. Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

Peter Rindisbacher, Winter Fishing on Ice of the Assynoibain and Red River, watercolour, 1821, 2835803. Library and Archives Canada.

Peter Rindisbacher, 1806-1834. - Library and Archives Canada Flickr  
Metis hunting buffalo in the Red River, Summer 1822 by Peter Rindisbacher, (1806-1834).  
watercolour, pen and black ink on paper mounted on support.

Peter Rindisbacher, A Gentleman travelling in a dog Cariole in Hudson's Bay with an Indian Guide, 1825, R9266. Library and Archives Canada, e002291419-v8.

Peter Rindisbacher, A Halfcast with his Wife and Child, c. 1825. Winnipeg Art Gallery, 9-82-215\_med, G-82-215.

Peter Rindisbacher, A half caste [metis] and his two wives, ca. 1825-1826. Library and Archives Canada, 1973-84-1.

Paul Kane, The Surveyor: Portrait of Captain John Henry Lefroy, ca. 1845. Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 2009/507.  
<https://artgalleryofontario.tumblr.com/post/922374761/paul-kane-born-mallow-ireland-1810-died>.

Cornelius Krieghoff, Following the Moose, 1860. Brooklyn Museum.

Louis Voelkerer, Métis dance at Devil's Lake, Dakota Territory, ca. 1870. GV1.3 p31 (Locator Number), 3360 (Negative Number).  
<https://www.mnopedia.org/multimedia/m-tis-dance-devil-s-lake-dakota-territory>.

Old (Upper) Fort Garry, Winnipeg, MB, Colour Lithograph, 1881.  
Mortimer C.O. Lithographies, Ottawa. Gabriel Dumont Institute Museum Collection.

Ernest J. Hutchins, Interior of Old (Upper) Fort Garry, 1874, circa 1910. Gabriel Dumont Institute Collection.

Mr. Anderson, Scottish Metis, Red River, Manitoba, ca. 1870s. Glenbow Museum and Archives, NA-4405-18.

Metis dog driver smoking a pipe and holding a buffalo coat at Lac La Biche, Alberta, 1895.  
Glenbow Museum and Archives, NA-1185-6.

Northern Alberta Metis trapper in winter costume, 1895. Glenbow Museum and Archives, NA-1185-3.

Metis New Year's day celebration at Lac La Biche, Alberta, 1895. Glenbow Museum and Archives, NA-1185-5.

Métis Bison Hunting Camp, Watercolour, circa 1910s. Gabriel Dumont Institute Museum Collection.

Frederic Remington, An Indian Trapper.

Frederic Remington, A Half Breed, 1901.

Frederic Remington, A Breed, 1901. From Frederic Remington's 'Buckskins' - Portraits of the Old West. (Penn Prints, New York, 1956). Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, R-D349-3. (ON DISCS)

Frederic Remington, The Half Breed, 1902.

C. M. Russell, Free Trappers, 1911, C.M. Russell Museum.

E. S. Paxson, Canadian Cree, 1905, Montana Historical Society Museum.

William Flett, Metis York boat guide and voyageur at Hudson's Bay Company historical pageant, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1920. Glenbow Museum and Archives, NB-40-202.

Charles F. Comfort, Last Dog Train Leaving Fort Garry, 1909, 1927. Hudson's Bay Company.

Charles F. Comfort, R.M. Ballantyne, Clerk and Chief Trader George Barnston Arrive at Tadoussac, Feb. 6, 1846, 1941. Hudson's Bay Company Corporate Collection, used with permission. Courtesy of HBC Heritage, [www.hbcheritage.ca](http://www.hbcheritage.ca).

Red River Métis in Winter Garb, Watercolour, circa\_\_\_\_. Lower Fort Garry Collection.

Armand Paquette, Last Days of Autumn" \_\_\_\_\_. Gabriel Dumont Institute Museum Collection.

Metis Man wearing Capote and Sash. Archives of Manitoba, Rackham, William 190 (N12891).

Gingras House Capotes, State Historical Society of North Dakota. SHSND 856-4, SHSND 856-1.