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The Autry Presents
Dress Codes

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**Exhibition offers a fun and subversive look at what our clothes have to say
about Western identities**

Los Angeles, CA.— What stories do clothes tell? What do a pair of blue jeans or a plaid shirt say about the wearer and their identity? The exhibition *Dress Codes*, on view from May 21, 2022, through January 8, 2023, at the Autry Museum of the American West, examines what we wear, how we wear it, and why through six enduring icons of Western style: blue jeans, the plaid shirt, the fringed leather jacket, the aloha shirt, the China Poblana dress, and the cowboy boot. Featuring more than 150 objects—including apparel drawn primarily from the Autry’s extensive clothing and textile collection as well as art, photography, and historical artifacts—this exhibition excavates the histories embedded in these key garments and explores their connections to ideas of Western identity, tradition, individual freedom, hybridity, and reinvention.

“*Dress Codes* threads the stories of garments from a variety of cultural origins and trajectories to look at the ways in which we express ourselves through how we dress, an experience we all share,” said **Stephen Aron, President and CEO of the Autry**. “The Autry brings together stories of all peoples of the American West, and this exhibition tells stories of pasts that resonate in the present and that are deeper, denser, and more exhilarating than any of us assume.”

Following an Introduction, the exhibition begins with a section examining **blue jeans**, an article of clothing that evokes the American West perhaps more than any other garment. We wear jeans for reasons that have evolved and changed over time. While denim is globally ubiquitous today, its roots are in the West. The history of jeans weaves together stories of miners, cowboys, dude ranches, and fashion rebels, as well as struggles for racial equality and sexual freedom. Women in the Western United States drove a fashion revolution by wearing jeans borrowed from brothers, boyfriends, and husbands. As wartime migrations to cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles offered new public spaces for LGBTQ people, some women wore jeans to defy social and sexual conventions, and across the country, police used cross-dressing laws to raid lesbian bars, fining and arresting women who wore fly-front jeans or other “masculine” clothing. Jeans also became central in the American culture wars of the 20th century.

After WWII, fashion increasingly became a symbol of divides: generational, racial, class, gender, sexual, and political.

The next section highlights the **plaid shirt**, particularly the varying ways this item of clothing is coded in different communities. Popular with lumberjacks, farmers, longshoremen, sportsmen, and ranchers, the colorful wool plaid shirt became an icon of rugged strength, outdoor lifestyles, and Western individuality. In Los Angeles, the plaid work shirt became part of subcultural styles worn by people outside the city's mainstream. Plaid wool shirts like Pendletons became the work shirt of choice for longshoremen and dock workers on the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach; Mexican American and African American youths wore plaid cruising the streets of L.A. as part of a lowrider aesthetic; and on the coast, surfers put on plaid shirts as part of the surfer style.

Aloha attire examines clothing designed and worn in the Hawaiian Islands, and Hawai'i's long history of exchange with California and the American West. From its earliest beginnings, aloha attire blended ideas and designs from Indigenous and immigrant cultures to connect island residents and visitors to Hawai'i. This section highlights how the aloha shirt evolved in the 1920s and 1930s into a unifying emblem of Hawai'i's ethnic diversity as island tailors created a signature garment for both local people and tourists. During the 1940s and through the 1950s, wartime restrictions on imports and exports shifted the market for aloha shirts from tourists to local island communities and American soldiers stationed in Hawai'i eager for a souvenir of their posting. From the islands to the mainland, generations of families continue to wear these fashions at home, at work, and to celebrate community. "The aloha shirt is our medium," explains Sig Zane, founder with his wife, Nalani Kanakaole, of Sig Zane Designs, which is featured in the exhibition. "This contemporary approach in sharing the culture of Hawai'i makes it fashionable, both literally and figuratively! Our lives and experiences inspire the art. Each shirt is an expression of tradition, craft, and prophecy!"

Combining a Native style of adornment with fashionable European coat styles, the **fringed leather jacket**—one of the original fashion innovations of the early West—first appeared in regions and among people who straddled Native and European worlds. This section encourages visitors to consider how clothing can be a dialogue between cultural groups, and also how it can be politically charged as meaning and context changes with new uses. By the late 19th century, popular forms of mass culture, such as dime novels, Wild West shows, and film, made the fringed jacket inseparable from the mythology of the American West and rugged individualism on the frontier. In the 1960s, the fringe hide jacket became an emblem of the antiestablishment aesthetics of rebels and artists searching for models for alternative lifestyles. And while Western fringe comes and goes as part of celebrity and high fashion, fringe still remains an important form of artistic expression, performance, and tradition for many Native American groups.

The next section highlights the **cowboy boot** as another icon of Western style. Like many Western fashions, cowboy boots started as workwear. Beginning in the mid-

1870s, cowboys shifted from wearing generic working-men's boots to a narrower boot with a taller heel designed to accommodate horseback riding. Innovation in color and design soon followed, and by the 1930s, the cowboy boot had become a canvas for adornment, as actors and country-western performers, male and female, brought cowboy style to a global audience.

In the final section, visitors will find a separate complementary gallery that explores the imaginative power of the Mexican and Mexican American dress style known as **China Poblana**. The name—*China* (“female servant”) and *Poblana* (“of Puebla”)—reflects the outfit's origins in a combination of legends, Mexico's Indigenous and colonial history of enslavement, revolutionary politics, and nation building. Legends inspired by the 17th-century mystic Catarina de San Juan, and styles of dress worn by 18th-century indigenous and multiracial working women, coalesced during the Mexican Revolution into the figure of the China Poblana. Today, the China Poblana dress lives on in dance and musical celebrations of Mexican culture and in dresses created by Indigenous women past and present.

“What we wear is often deeply personal and individualistic, but sometimes fashion is also used to demonstrate a belonging to a community or to express tradition or cultural identity,” said **Carolyn Brucken**, curator of both exhibitions and **Chief Curator** at the Autry. “The story of the China Poblana is a story of how a garment became a symbol of Mexican identity on both sides of the border and reflects the broader themes of both exhibitions—that clothing can be imbued with meaning and history and stir something personal in the wearer.”