

# The Espada Ancha in New Mexico



## CONSERVATION OF A NEW WORLD SWORD

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Commencing in the fall of 2002 and extending over a two-year period, the Conservation Department of the Museum Services Division, in conjunction with the Palace of the Governors' collections staff, began a condition survey of the Palace of the Governors' collections. This was done prior to moving the objects to a temporary storage location while the New Mexico History Museum is under construction. As part of the conservation team, I inspected the arms and armor collection during the fall of 2003. Included within this extensive collection were several swords of a type I had never encountered before.

These swords, known as *espada anchas* (wide or broad swords), are unique to the northern frontiers of New Spain, or what are now

New Mexico, Arizona, and Southern California. These weapons were initially selected for treatment based on their structural instability and a high exhibition priority. Research prior to treatment revealed that these swords were excellent examples for illustrating the development of the *espada ancha* and the changes that took place in the



sword's style and construction over its 250-year history of popular use.

### SPANISH SOLDIERS OF NEW SPAIN

The story of the military weapons of New Spain is rich, and in many ways reflects the status and role of Spain as a world power. The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a pivotal time for Spain as she emerged from a period of dormancy to resume her role as a world power under the reign of Charles III. But this renaissance was brief, and by 1830 Spain had lost most of her overseas empire through war and treaties.

New Mexico, Arizona, and West Texas were among the most remote and inhospitable reaches of Spain's global

**Top and Right:** Espada ancha, late-18<sup>th</sup> to early-19<sup>th</sup> century. Palace of the Governors Collection, POG #2572/45.

empire. By the late eighteenth century, the lack of supplies, shortages of regulation soldiers, and hostilities from indigenous peoples forced the Spanish military to develop a new system of defense and a new form of soldier for the northern frontier. This defense system was known as the *presidio* line, and the cavalry soldiers who manned the presidios were called *soldados de cuera*, after the heavy leather armor worn as protection against arrows.

*Soldados de cuera* were distinct in a number of ways from the Spanish foot soldiers who manned the presidios. First, many of them were born in the New World and were often of Creole or *mestizo*

blood.

Second, they were almost always mounted on horseback.

Finally, they were more heavily armed and equipped than a regulation soldier.

While a regular Spanish soldier was issued a musket, a pistol, and a saber, *soldados de cuera* also carried a lance, a shield, and the aforementioned leather armor. The *soldados de cuera* also had six horses at their disposal while the regular Spanish dragoon had only two. But the unique attribute of the *soldados de cuera* was their sword, the *espada ancha*.

### THE ESPADA ANCHA

The *espada ancha* is a form of sword developed exclusively in the New World, where it evolved from the traditional Spanish hunting broadsword of the seventeenth century. Designed to function as both a weapon and a tool, the *espada ancha* was used by both soldiers and civilians on horseback. The short and heavy blade of the *espada ancha* served both as an offensive and defensive weapon as well as a tool for clearing brush or butchering animals. Over its span of use, the *espada ancha* underwent several changes, becoming more of a tool, and less a refined weapon.

The precursor to the development of the *espada ancha* was the seventeenth-century Spanish broadsword,

manufactured primarily in Toledo, Spain, and brought to the New World by Spanish soldiers and colonists. The excellent example,

POG #

10105/45

(see page 24)

has a blade length of

36 and 3/4 inches, the longest

of the three swords pictured in this

article. It was not uncommon for

this type of sword to bear inscriptions on

its blade: two of the most popular were “*No*

*me saques sin razon*” (“Do not draw me without reason”) and “*No me embaines sin honor*” (“Do not sheath me without honor”).

Various socioeconomic factors led to the development of the *espada ancha*. The isolation of colonial Mexico during the early eighteenth century resulted in shortages of iron and skilled bladesmiths. As a result, old blades were often cut down in size and resharpened so that they could be reused. A shorter blade was also more useful as a tool in situations where a longer blade would be clumsy and unwieldy.

Of the few differences between the earliest *espada anchas* and the hunting broadswords that preceded them, most noticeable is the *espada ancha*'s shortened blade, ranging from eighteen to twenty-six inches in length. POG #303/45 (see page 25) is a fine example of such a transitional sword. It retains the double-edged blade found on seventeenth-century broadswords, yet the blade is significantly shorter, only twenty-five inches in length. Blades of this type typically had three or four



**Left:** Presidial soldier of California in official uniform, ca. 1791. Sketch by Jose Cordero from the Museo Naval, Madrid, [www.soldados.us/StBarbara/Cardero1.jpg](http://www.soldados.us/StBarbara/Cardero1.jpg).

**Figure 1**

Espada ancha hilt before treatment (notice the broken knuckle guard).

**Figure 2**

Espada ancha hilt during treatment (note replacement metal element in center of hilt).

**Figure 3**

Espada ancha hilt after treatment (the replacement metal element has been inpainted to match the patina of the sword).

*"Do not draw me without reason."*

fullers, also known as blood grooves, which extended approximately one-third the total length of the blade.

One of the most distinctive features of an espada ancha is the hilt. The grip of the hilt is a laminated structure with the tang (the only part of the blade that you do not see) forming the core. On both sides of the metal tang are pieces of wood or horn. Plates of iron form the outermost portion of the grip. Rivets hold this sandwich structure together. The hilt also has a distinctive single guard, often in the shape of a shell.

The espada ancha changed significantly during its last incarnation in the late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century because of socioeconomic factors such as the Mexican Revolution and increasing influence of the expanding United States. The espada ancha blade became slightly curved, with a single edge instead of the straight, double-edged blade found on earlier swords. Overall blade length was significantly reduced compared to earlier forms, often because of a reuse of old blades. POG #2572/45 (see pages 22-23) is a good example of the late style of the espada ancha, although the distinctive shell guard is not present. This form of espada ancha remained in active use in Mexico and the American Southwest until the early-twentieth century.

## CONSERVING HISTORIC WEAPONS

Extensive research into the history and manufacturing



techniques of espada anchas was required before their treatment at the conservation lab. Treatment of the sword shown to the right (POG #303/45) was representative of the problems encountered when dealing with historic weapons. There were two principal condition issues to address in the treatment of this espada ancha: structural damage to the hilt, and a heavy layer of corrosion.

*Figure 1* illustrates the condition of the hilt before treatment. The tang of the blade was broken, allowing the knuckle guard of the hilt to move. It was necessary to secure the knuckle guard in its original position so that the sword could be safely transported and exhibited. This was accomplished by shaping a new piece of metal from commercial steel and attaching it in place with a synthetic resin adhesive (see *Figure 2*). After the replacement metal piece was in place it was then toned with acrylic paints to match the patina of the rest of the sword (see *Figure 3*).

The next step in the treatment involved removing as much of the corrosion from the sword as possible. This corrosion removal was selective however,

### Left

Spanish hunting broadsword, 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Palace of the Governors Collection, POG #10105/45.



**Figure 4**

Espada ancha hilt before treatment (note the heavy corrosion of the shell guard).

**Figure 5**

Espada ancha hilt after treatment (corrosion has been removed to expose the silver inlay). Figures 1–5 Palace of the Governors Collection, POG #303/45.

All photographs by Conor McMahon, 2004–2005.

## "Do not sheath me without honor."

with only the soft, red corrosion removed, while the compact, black corrosion layer was left untouched. The corrosion removal was accomplished through two techniques: the use of carefully chosen abrasives applied with cotton swabs, and mechanical corrosion removal using a microscalpel. As seen in *Figures 4 and 5*, the results of this corrosion removal are quite dramatic. Cleaning revealed an inlaid silver disk in the shell guard, which had barely been visible underneath the corrosion. After the treatment was complete, the sword could be safely handled and exhibited. The reduction of the corrosion layer allows viewers to better appreciate the craftsmanship and quality of the sword.

New Mexico's unique history and geography have influenced many of its arts and crafts, and weapons are no exception. The espada ancha is a blade unique to the Southwest, where it was developed to meet the specific needs of mounted soldiers and ranchers. While much of the rest of the world abandoned the use of swords during the nineteenth century, New Mexico's isolation preserved the use of the espada ancha into the twentieth century. Several excellent

### Right

Espada ancha, early-18<sup>th</sup> century.

Palace of the Governors Collection, POG #303/45.



examples of these historically important swords have been preserved in the Palace of the Governors' collections for many years, and with the opening of the New Mexico History Museum in 2007, these beautiful weapons will be on display in a permanent exhibit for all to appreciate.

### References

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