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Grasset de Saint Sauveur and the Indians of Baja California

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ON the cover of the (1976) Summer issue of the *Journal of California Anthropology* is reproduced an original aquarelle engraving of a "California Native." The image was taken from a publication of 1788 ambitiously titled "Civil Costumes of Living People Throughout the World." The French author of this work, Jacques Grasset de Saint Sauveur, is of more than passing interest because he was one of the few Europeans of the time who gave any specific favorable attention in print to the Indians of Baja California.

Grasset was born in Canada in 1757 and died in France in 1810. He served in the French diplomatic service and was recognized as a minor author in Europe. The *Larousse Universal Dictionary of the Nineteenth Century* states, however, that for a time he occupied himself with compilations, of which the least objectionable [mauvaise] have for titles 'Civil Costumes of Living Peoples . . . ' and several others. Unfortunately, perhaps, one of his writings of the New World was fictional, with the flamboyant title "Hortense, ou la Jolie Courtisane. Sa Vie Libertine à Paris et Ses Aventures Tragiques avec la Nègre Zéphire dans les Deserts de l'Amérique."

There is no evidence that he was ever known on the Pacific Coast himself, but certainly he had available the publications of the Abbé Chappe d'Auteroche (1772), who came to Baja California to observe the transit of Venus across the sun. The Abbé Chappe died however, before he could make any obser-

vations on the Indians. Probably also Grasset knew the works of Rogers (1712), Shelvocke (1726), Venegas (1757), and Baegert (1772)—these writers were not markedly sympathetic to the Indians in their descriptions. On the other hand, it is clear from the short text of the section on California Indians' costumes (reproduced below in translation by the present author) that Grasset de Saint Sauveur, probably among many other French intellectuals of the time, was influenced by the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who had died only about ten years before. There may be noted at least partial acceptance of what may be called Rousseau's paradox, that is, the idea of the equality or even superiority of the "noble savage" as opposed to "civilized man." Grasset was perhaps the first European to articulate the notion that the Indians of the California coast, feckless as children in the minds of most Europeans, indeed might have a rational view of their own lives, untouched by intruding foreigners.

The two pictures of native Californians which Grasset had prepared to accompany his text, *viz.*, the male figure on the cover illustration already mentioned and the female figure shown herein as Fig. 1, again may symbolize the influence of Rousseau. Both pictures were done for color engraving by a well-known French artist, Desrais, probably after models suggested from earlier reports, e.g., by Baegert (1772) or Venegas (1757). Other pictures of Indians sponsored by Grasset



Fig. 1. "California woman," by Desrais, engraved by Mixelle. From an aquarelle engraving illustrating Grasset de Saint Sauveur (1788). The spear-like hooked implement may represent a "pitahaya stick," for harvesting the fruit of the large cactus with that name. The hat-net arrangement is probably fanciful, as are the leg bracelet ornamentations. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

are known—they too are almost all portraits of handsome, shapely persons, although certain features of their ornament or dress do not correspond well with descriptions by those who actually saw the Indians. The bracelets or “leglets,” for example, seen in the cover illustration and in Fig. 1 are an almost identifying characteristic of the drawings of Grasset’s Indians. They do not appear in other (“non-Grasset”) pictures of the local Indians, nor do the large head nets, which are more Melanesian than Californian, judging from more recent ethnographic study. The Baja Californian Indians did use head nets, usually depicted in earlier illustrations as much smaller than that shown in Fig. 1.

One of the significant aspects of Grasset’s career, we have seen, is that he was a sort of popular writer, probably more widely read in France than any of the others here named. He was therefore much more likely to give Europeans of the time a notion of how western American Indians looked and behaved than could any of the comparatively dry reports, factual or exaggerated, of the Jesuit priests or of other explorers who preceded him. It is noteworthy also that two additional sets of excellent drawings, probably much more accurate than Grasset’s have apparently not been published in book form before the twentieth century. These drawings were by Ignacio Tirsch (see Nunis 1972), a German Jesuit missionary in Baja California before 1768, and Alexander-Jean Noel, who accompanied the Abbé Chappe d’Auteroche (see Engstrand 1976). Apparently these drawings have been languishing, until recently, in archives in Prague and Paris, respectively.

The following is my translation of the text of Grasset’s views on the Indians of Baja California:



MANNERS AND CUSTOMS OF THE INHABITANTS OF CALIFORNIA

(Chapter heading in volume by Jacques Grasset de Saint Sauveur [1788])

California, a large north American peninsula to the north of the Southern [Pacific] Ocean, is less known by itself than through the celebrated voyages of the Spanish and English, and especially and most recently by the savant Abbé Chappe [d’Auteroche], who died there while observing the transit of Venus upon the solar disk. For the honor of the human spirit, the love of Science thus also exacts its martyrs?

Seeing human beings jostling each other on certain spots on this globe, one might believe that the earth refuses subsistence to them on three quarters of its surface. Meanwhile there exist fertile countries downright wasting themselves—California is of this number. It lacks only industrious inhabitants and devotees of work. Unsuspecting of its true riches, Europeans frequent only the coasts there, to gather quantities of pearls, without bothering to communicate their knowledge to the natives nor to teach them to derive profit from a sun favorable to the culture. Extreme poverty discourages; extreme abundance makes one lazy. The Californians retain for themselves only that which Nature has intended for them, without introducing anything new or adding to what is given. They live on these gifts, without thinking of rendering themselves praiseworthy by improving them. Never having experienced scarcity, they know nothing of foresightedness. Each day brings to them, without shortcomings, everything they need. They are never agitated about what tomorrow may bring. They think not of what they will do, but only of what they have done. Riches are what they happen to possess—and what suffices them; they devote no time to acquiring surpluses. They are not in the way of refining their ordinary delights—they are

happy enough not to dream of becoming "number one." Such an existence evidently does not lead to perfectibility. Is this wrong? Is this right? Alas, experience of almost everybody up to the present time has demonstrated that man, badly steered in making steps toward enlightenment, has swerved, accordingly, from happiness and virtue. Whoever would counsel the Californians to develop villages and granaries, gymnasiums, courts of justice, temples, and spectacles, thus might be ill-advised. Until we have found the way of not abusing the torch of Science and the Arts, in passing it from hand to hand, let the people multiply in freedom, in the shade of interwoven foliage which serves them as domicile during the heat of summer. Let us not, out of false pity, attempt to make them ashamed of the holes which they dig in the ground to shelter themselves from the frosts of winter. If they are sufficiently happy in their present ways, it would be rendering them a poor service to attempt to make them happy after our own fashion—perhaps they would be destroyed in the effort. Indeed it has not yet been fairly decided that the advantages attaching to civilized life compensate for all its inconveniences.

We shall never be certain that the Californians are not closer than we to the true order of things which accord best with mankind. These people, divided into families, have for a code only the domestic laws that each father respectively dictates to his docile offspring. Nothing could be more natural—and such was the patriarchal government that some politicians have attempted to pass off as a mere fancy. On the other hand, the overseas voyages recount to us that the California families are quarreling incessantly and do not live at all in delightful concord. It would be ungraceful, however, for us to feel superior in the face of this account. When the enlightened natives of Europe have found the secret of perpetual peace they will be in a more justifiable position

to criticize the tiny wars that the savage peoples make among themselves. But one may add at the same time that California is well-populated, and everyone is well aware that population is the true thermometer of all government. When one sees the population thriving in a nation otherwise lacking in means of bringing its people together in large blocks, one can develop a good idea of the character of the people and their political state. Perhaps we have judged the Californians querulous because they have such lively spirits and a great penchant for banter and jest. But this is a result of their manner of life: inactive peoples are babbling and corrosive. After all, slander [*coup de langue*] does less injury to the human species than cannon shot [*coup de canon*]. The Californians have no well-ordered religion or worship nor do they have a written code. They cut their hair, it is said, in honor of the moon, which they idolize, dancing to the glimmer of its pallid light. But one knows enough to state fairly definitely that each family behaves according to its own rules. It would be revealing and profitable to observe several of these at close hand. These are, among others: It is not to the parents that one makes a request of a girl in marriage, but to the girl herself. Her choice made, she presents to her mother the one she prefers. The son on his part does as much as the father in this; and the wedding takes place rapidly also. No marriages are celebrated in winter at all. Ridicule flung pertinently is the sole weapon which serves among them to restrain spouses at variance with other. They make use of ridicule also to conclude an affair when they are at too close quarters with a stranger interrogating them. A Spaniard demanded of one of them "Why do you bury yourselves alive in the ground?"—"And you, (shot back the Californian) why do you shut yourselves up for months on end on the sea in those floating prisons? It is far better to sleep warmly in our holes than to make a thousand leagues and to endanger one's life a

thousand times, just to string beads." The latter is of course in allusion to the pearling industry.

The Californians [men] wear no clothing at all [sic]. They envelop their heads in a kind of cordage net, minimally fabricated from long plant fibers. They have for neck ornaments, and sometimes for the hands, various shapes of fairly well carved pearl shell, interlaced very tidily with small round fruits, in the manner of rosary beads. They have for arms only the bow and the spear, but they carry them always at hand, either for hunting or to defend themselves.

The women are dressed a little more modestly than the men. They cover themselves from waist to knees with an apron, comprising several mats finely joined together. They cover their shoulders with skins of animals. They dress their hair also with thin nets, so neat that the Spanish officers make use of them to keep their hair in place. The Californians wore neckpieces of pearl shell, mixed with fruit kernels and shell (beads) which hang to their waists. Their bracelets are composed of the same material.

*Lowie Museum of Anthropology
University of California, Berkeley*

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