

# Reconstructing a Spanish Bodice

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Figure A

## What Is It?

**The bodice of a Spanish *saya*, the generic term for 'gown', circa 1480.**

This *saya* bodice is styled after those commonly depicted in paintings produced in the workshop of Pedro García de Benabarre, which produced paintings from 1445-1485. The reference used above is the *Birth of the Virgin* painted circa 1475, which hangs in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya in Catalonia. The materials used for the bodice are uncertain, as I am still sorting through the inventories to determine if any matching gown existed. In the meantime, I have used linen, a fabric that

was known to have existed and been in heavy use at the time. Construction is likewise uncertain; I have used my own pattern drafting skills to experiment and find a style that looks similar to the bodice in the images.

### *What is a saya bodice made of?*

#### **What was used in the 1480s?**

**The most likely materials would have been silk or wool.** The women depicted in these portraits are ladies in waiting at a holy birth. While they would not have been the highest class, they are also not considered to be servants, but rather attendants of medium or high status. Those individuals were still using linen for their undergarments and as interlining in the main body of their dresses, but they were not using it as the fashion fabric on the outside of the garment. These dresses represent the beginning of the trend towards garments that shape the body, and as such would almost certainly have been constructed in a way that they were somewhat supportive, but it is unlikely they would have used any kind of more formal stiffening, as references to such do not appear until more than 75 years later.

#### **What did I use?**

**Medium weight linen, lined with heavy weight linen.** This garment is still experimental, and I am having difficulty sourcing wool and/or silk that would have been passable as what the Spanish had in the 1480s. In the absence of those materials, I have been using linen as a convenient way to experiment with construction. The “core” of the bodice is three layers of heavyweight linen. The fashion fabric is an additional lighter weight linen. I used silk thread.

### *How is a saya bodice assembled?*

#### **How was it done in the 1480s?**

**We don't really know.** There are no extant examples of this kind of garment, and I haven't yet found them mentioned in inventories. The best I've been able to do is experiment with them myself – and I have done a lot of experimenting.

#### **How did I assemble the *saya* bodice?**

**I first created the pattern by examining the images.** The bodice is fairly clearly open at the front; it very clearly veers away from the bustline, tending to be more open at the top than at the bottom, and does not appear to be that way simply because the top is laced more loosely – the fabric appears to be tight to the body at all points. Through trial and error, I determined where the bodice needs to flare. Based on other extant garments, I determined it is unlikely that the bodice laces anywhere other than the front and followed extant examples in creating a single back and single front, split down the middle as needed to allow the lacing. **After creating the pattern, I sewed around the edges of the heavyweight linen interlining to make it act as a single piece of fabric. Then I flat lined each piece with the fashion fabric. I experimented with joining the seams together by laying one piece of fabric on top of the other to see how that would lay.** Most extant garments do not join the way modern fabric joins – they are finished, lined edge to finished, lined edge. I wanted to explore how this would wear. **Finally, I hand-finished the lacing holes using a fabric awl and buttonhole stitch in my silk thread.**

#### **For Next Time**

Specific adjustments I know I would make to improve the garment's period presentation include, but are not limited to:

- Pad stitch the interlining. Pad stitching is something I really want to experiment with – this might be a bit early for it, but it was a common technique by the late 1500s, so it may very well have been nascent here.
- Experiment with true edge-to-edge joinery.
- Continue to refine the pattern (one front side ended up longer than the other somehow and will need to be adjusted before wearing)
- Attempt construction with silk or wool

### **Things I've Learned From This Project**

- **The value of repeating the same project.** This is the third dress I have constructed in this way. I've been able to refine the pattern every time, and I've learned new things about the construction every time.
- **The value of hand-worked lacing holes.** In the past, I used eye tape. These holes have a very different feel and I expect will cause the bodice to lay much differently when worn.

References:

*Los Inventarios de Carlos V y la Familia Imperial*, Volumen II. Compiled by Fernando Checa Cremades.

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Carmen Bernis, *Indumentaria Espanola en Tiempos de Carlos V*. (Madrid, Instituto Diego Velazquez, 1962)

Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 3*, (Hollywood, Quite Specific Media Group; 1985)

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Ruth Matilda Anderson, *Hispanic Costume 1480-1530*, (New York, Hispanic Society of America; 1979)

La Moda Espanola En El Siglo De Oro. N.d. Museum exhibit at the Museo de Toledo. Spain, Toledo.

Accessed via the highly detailed online gallery provided by FiberFerret on Flickr:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/fiberferret/albums/72157656258313642>