

A Brief History of Undergarments: The Farthingale and the Pair of Bodies

The pair of bodies and the farthingale are major influences that shaped late period fashion (literally and figuratively). But what did they really look like? When did they first show up? What kind of extant examples do we have of them? This class will give a general sense of how these two items evolved during the late period, touching on construction, materials, and variations in use and style in the centers of European fashion - and doing a little myth busting along the way.

Farthingales and Pairs of Bodies: a Problematic Fave

As research goes, clothing can be a little rough. There's a decent amount of picture evidence, but paintings are often idealized, glossing over details and skipping things like seams and ties. Extant garments are wonderful, but unless they've been carefully preserved, hunting for the truth of their original condition can be a difficult task.

But undergarments are on a whole different level.

You basically don't see them in paintings. They're almost completely absent. Paintings were no easy thing to create during the 16th century, and so you very rarely see a lady in anything but her absolute finest. We might get a sense for what shape the undergarment was intended to create, but we won't see the undergarment itself.

And when you do, they're not necessarily anything close to accurate. When you do see the rare lady in anything less than full dress, there's no guarantee that what's being painted is done from anything close to reality. It may very well be the artist's interpretation without ever having really seen or studied the subject.

They're often closest to the skin, and the first to decay in extant garments. A lot of extant garments come from grave sites, so decay is often a part of the picture. We do have some extants – and they are *beautiful* and you'll see them here – but they're not so easy to come by. Details especially get lost over time: did that early pair of bodies have an attached skirt? What was the stiffening agent? Who knows.

They may or may not be mentioned in clothing accounts. Wardrobe accounts are an incredible source of information about clothing. In some cases, pairs of bodies and farthingales are mentioned. But in a lot of cases, it's just the most expensive things that get listed, and when compared with expensive crimson and fur-trimmed overgowns, the undergarments may not make that list.

From The Bottom Up: The Farthingale

Part I: Introducing The *Verdugado*

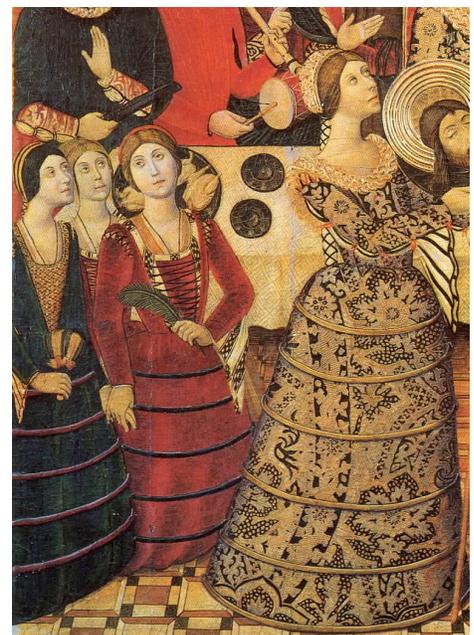
For most of history, a skirt was a skirt. It could be decorated, it could have a lot of fabric or a little, but whatever shape it had came from the cut and shaping inherent in the skirt itself. The farthingale changed all of that.

The interesting undergarment has its origins on the Iberian peninsula. Its name is originally Spanish: *verdugado*, which was later corrupted to *farthingale* when the undergarment made the hop from Spain over to England.



In its first Iberian iterations, the undergarment looks like a cross between the modern farthingale and the modern overdress. Which is to say, the hoops are on the *outside*. Paintings dating from 1475-1500 show this fashion almost ubiquitously, especially for noble or upper class women. Not only are the hoops of the *verdugado* not hidden, they're often done in a contrast fabric or with a distinctive trim to make them more noticeable.

1492-1495, Her Royal Highness Dona Isabel, Queen of Castilla and Aragon, in Marcuello, Pedro. *Devocionario de la Reyna Juana a quien llamaron la Loca*



1470-1480, detail of Salome from *Banquet of Herod*, retable of St. John the Baptist, Pedro Garcia de Benabarre (Barcelona. Museo de Arte de Catalunya)

Sidebar: Joana of Portugal and the *Verdugado*.

While there isn't really a single clear point of origin for the farthingale, there is a super fun story about the woman who may or may not have invented or popularized it: Joana of Portugal, second wife of Enrique IV of Castile, the half-brother of Isabel la Católica (yes, that Isabel). Enrique IV was plagued with rumors of impotence – which combined with some (at the time) scandalous behavior on Joana's part to lead to rampant rules of infidelity when Joana became pregnant. When I say rumors, I mean serious *rumors* – to this day, her daughter is commonly known as Juana la Beltraneja, meaning Juana, daughter of Beltran de la Cueva, Juana's rumored lover.

So where does the *verdugado* fit into all of this? Legend has it that Joana popularized the garment to hide her pregnancies from her impotent husband and from the already very judgmental court.

While it's difficult to say whether that legend is true, it's certainly possible that she popularized the fashion. Unless new evidence comes to light, we may never know.



1492—1495, Fernando and Isabel, from Marcuello, Pedro, *Devocionario de la Reyna de Juana, a quien llamaron la Loca*.

Early *verdugados* might be the outer layer of skirt themselves. They might have panels of fabric draping down over them. They might have an overskirt tucked up in some fashion. But the hoops are always on proud display, no matter what.

These early hoops were almost universally made of willow reeds or wood. These were soaked in water to make them bendable, and then fixed together. They tapered from their smallest point near the waist to a large circle down at the feet. In these earliest incarnations, the *verdugado* appears to have been constructed by encasing the hoops in a different fabric from the rest of the garment, and then either attaching them to a solid fabric skirt, or creating strips of skirt which were then joined between the hoops of the *verdugado*. In some cases, the willow reeds or wood strips might be doubled or tripled to create a more rigid silhouette or thicker appearance.

Part II: The *Verdugado* Goes Into Hiding, Runs Away to England, and Changes Its Name

By the 1530s, Spanish portraiture showed a *verdugado* hidden underneath additional layers of skirts. The shape is still very distinctive – it is clear that the woman in question (Isabel of Portugal) is wearing one by the way her skirts settle – but we're no longer seeing the hoops. By the 1540s, the farthingale had clearly made its way out of Iberia and into portraits in England and France alike.



Isabel de Portugal, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire; Copy of lost work by Titian (Wien. Kunsthistorisches Museum)
C. 1526-1539

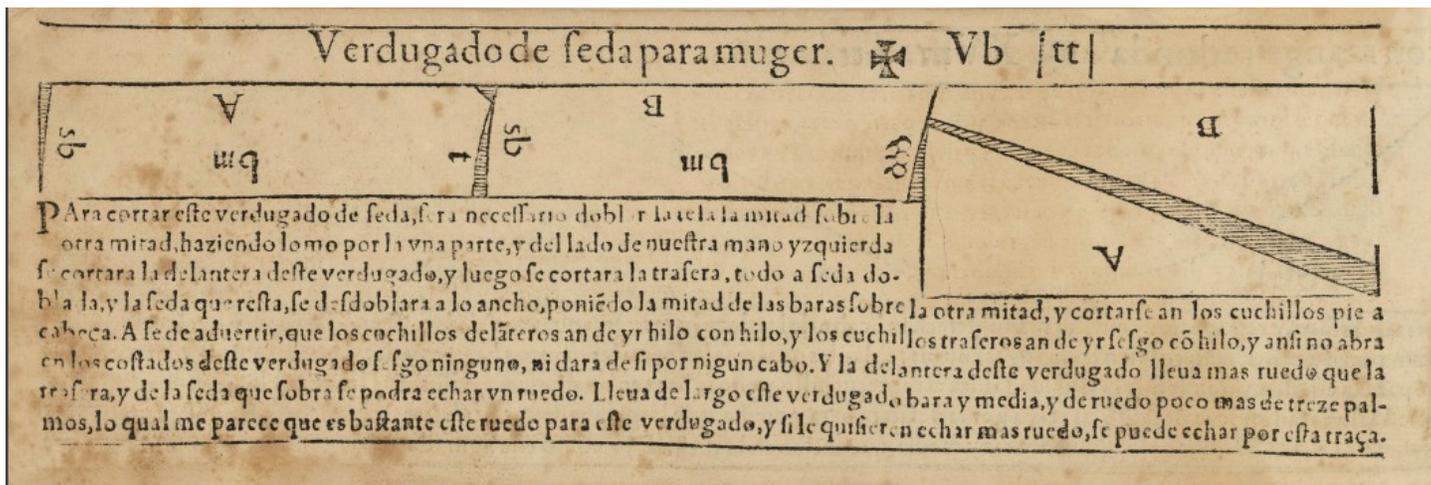


A 'French gown' worn by Catherine Parr attributed to Master John (National Portrait Gallery, London)
C. 1545



Francois I and Eleonore d'Autriche, King and Queen of France, French School, (Hampton Court Palace)
C. 1531

Looking at these portraits, we can see subtle differences in the construction of the farthingale versus the *verdugado*. The farthingale is (at least as it's drawn) much sharper and straight than the *verdugado*, which retains a bell shape. Complicating matters is the fact that these women may have been wearing bum rolls – padded lumps of fabric that sat around the waist to further alter the natural drape of the skirt. Evidence of the bum rolls is even more spotty than for farthingales and corsets, and modern versions of them are, for the most part, entirely conjecture based on picture evidence.



At this time, the construction of the *verdugado* changes as well. Instead of the hoops being joined separately to the fabric, *verdugados* begin to be cut with an extra 10 or so inches of room in them so that the fabric may be simply doubled back on itself to contain the reed or wood hoop that would give the undergarment its shape. This traditional style is outlined in the 1589 *Libro de Geometria, Pratica Y Traca* by Juan de Alcega, a staple of late Renaissance Spanish clothing reference.

This trend will continue in England, France, and Spain for the next 40 years.

Part III: Meanwhile, in Italy*...

*And by Italy, I mean the numerous duchys, kingdoms, states, republics, etc that are in the territory modernly known as Italy

Italy seems to (generally speaking) have avoided the farthingale craze. The burial gown of Eleonora di Toledo, an extant gown dated roughly to her death in 1562, was fairly clearly not designed to have any kind of farthingale underneath it. There is evidence of sumptuary law in some places (Treviso 1507, Perugia 1508) in the early part of the century prohibiting farthingales. Whether these were obeyed or not, especially as pertains to the upper class, is a matter of debate, but the picture evidence of mid-century fashion on the Italian peninsula definitely does not indicate the same obvious presence of farthingales seen in Spain, England, or France.



Sidebar: Eleonora di Toledo

Toledo...isn't Toledo in Spain? And if Toledo is in Spain, what's this lady doing classified under the Italy section of this? Eleonora di Toledo was in fact born in Salamanca, Spain. She was the daughter of the Viceroy of Naples, a (super wealthy) Spanish Don and lieutenant-governor of Charles V of Spain – nobility for sure, but not royalty. She married Cosimo I de' Medici, ruler of Tuscany, in 1539 when she was 17. Her time in Tuscany is infinitely more notable than her time in Spain: she is credited with being quite an active co-ruler with her husband, and the extant portraits of her (including her notorious portrait by Bronzino with her son and Cosimo's heir Giovanni, detail at right) have features most commonly found in Italian style. Combined with the farthingale-negative evidence from her funeral gown, the verdict definitely comes in more Italian than Spanish.



Part IV: In which Farthingales start to get Wheely, Wheely Weird

Toward the end of the 16th century, a new form of farthingale began to emerge. It may have originated in France – it's often referred to as the 'French farthingale' – but its eventual endpoint was prominence throughout most of Europe. This change represented a switch from a triangular or bell-shaped farthingale to one that emphasizes wider hips and a softer, vertical fall.

There is evidence to indicate that the French farthingale started out with padding around the hips, and eventually grew (literally) from there to become the gigantic thing that we think of today, with the wide, wheel shaped silhouette with rigid wood or reed structuring like the kind used in the old Spanish *verdugado*, but repurposed for the new silhouette. This silhouette has definite evidence in Italy after 1600, and in England and France in the last decade or two of the 1500s. There isn't such strong evidence for it in Spain, at least not during that time period.

Queen Elizabeth I, the 'Ditchley' portrait, Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, c1592-5. National Portrait Gallery, London.



Sidebar: Period commentary on the French farthingale

It's no surprise that by 1613, John Chamberlain wrote the following regarding the wearing of farthingales at a prominent upcoming marriage: "...no lady or gentlewoman should be admitted to any of the sights with a farthingale, which was to gain more room, and I hope may serve to make them quite left off in time."

BRING IN THE BODIES

Compared to the history of bodies/pair of bodies/corsets, the history of the *verdugado*/farthingale/hoop skirt is positively perfectly documented. Unlike the *verdugado*, which was a noticeable departure from everything that came before, the bodies evolved over time, very gradually. Only very late in period do we get concrete examples of a pair of bodies, what we would commonly think of as a corset, rigidly boned and laced.

Part I: Boneless Beginnings

The original corset wasn't boned at all. Early images indicate some degree of creasing under the bust, rather than perfect flatness - a softness that cannot be achieved with boning (or any other type of rigid thing that they would've used for the same effect - but we'll get to that later). There are many theories to indicate what might have been used here, and what it might have looked like. Some of the most concrete evidence comes from the Eleanora di Toledo funeral gown (buried with her circa 1562), which happens to have been found with an under-bodice (or more correctly, what might be an under-bodice) somewhat intact (*image at right*)

"The velvet bodice fastens at the front with hooks and eyes, probably eighteen pairs, although many have corroded and disappeared. It would have been lined with linen, from the evidence of the armholes and neckline, which are closely oversewn with matching silk. This stitching is slightly loose and would appear to have held two layers of material together originally. It is not certain if this was a 'pair of bodies' or corset with bents to stiffen it set in the linen lining or a 'petticoat bodies' to support a petticoat, or an under-skirt, of matching velvet. There are stitch holes at the waist but no trace of any velvet skirt, although the description of 1857 would seem to indicate that there was one originally. Further evidence is needed." - Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 3*



In the absence of stiffening agents, costuming scholars have theorized that stiffening may have been accomplished with many layers of fabric (as may have been true of Eleonora's under-bodice above), with stiffened buckram, or other semi-flexible options. While not nearly as rigid as boning, these options could produce a moderately wrinkle-free outer garment.

Sidebar: Buckram

How stiff is buckram really? It's rough-woven linen or other cloth, stiffened with paste or glue, often used in bookbinding. So, pretty stiff.

Part II: Throwing Women a Bone

Boning enters English household accounts starting in the mid-16th century, but there are no extant items closely resembling stays or the pair of bodies in the sense we think about them until 1590. The earliest extant example comes from Germany, where we have the pair of bodies buried with Pfaltzgräfin Dorothea Sabine von Neuberg in 1598 (at right). This may be somewhat indicative of the state of the pair of bodies outside of England, because at this point Austria, the Netherlands, Spain, and France were all fairly closely interrelated via trade, and therefore may have logically shared fashions as well. The Alcega tailoring book makes no mention of any kind of pair of bodies, but does specifically address the *verdugado*.



The second extant pair of bodies (at left) comes from Queen Elizabeth's funeral effigy, and were created circa 1603. This is significant because these bodies are almost certainly crafted for the French farthingale silhouette which came to prominence during the latter part of Elizabeth's reign. The differences between the Dorothea pair of bodies and the Elizabeth are pretty clear - and yet at least in theory, they're less than a decade apart.

Part IIB: Not Your Great-Grandmother's Corset

It's important to note that in both extant cases - and from all indications given by the pictorial record - these early pairs of bodies did not extend below the waist except in the front, and did not focus on any kind of 'hourglass' shape. This is a distinct contrast to the corsets we imagine today, which cinch a woman's waist tightly, making it difficult for her to sit, eat, breathe, etc. The period pair of bodies does not venture below the waist, so it's quite easy to do anything you like. Bending over to the front can get a little exciting once the busks get introduced, but that's pretty much it. Because of that break at the waist, period corsets are actually quite comfortable, even when they've got boning or are otherwise highly rigid.

Part III: Busking (Without The Guitar)

One of the defining features—at least in some places and at some times - of the pair of bodies (and possibly, earlier stiffened garments) was the busk. The busk is a piece of wood, bone, or other very stiff material that would be inserted into a channel directly at the front of the garment. The purpose here was to give the flat, cylindrical silhouette that (for whatever reason) was popular at the time. Busks were often elaborately carved and decorated. They were held in place with lacing at the bottom of the pair of bodies front.

But Wait, There's More! Let's Talk Chemises.

The chemise is kind of the odd man out in this survey of undergarments. For starters, it's by far the oldest. Indications of something recognizable as a chemise go all the way back to the Viking undertunics/smocks, and it's possible something similar existed even earlier. They continued to be a mainstay across Europe throughout the Dark Ages, but they really exploded (and got super fancy) during the Renaissance.

Part I: Rocking The Early Smocks

Most of us are probably familiar with the Viking apron dress concept. If you're not, check out lovely Lady Fede di Fiore here, sporting her Viking finest. The overdress—shaped roughly like an apron—goes over an underdress. This underdress is typically similar in fit to the overdress, which is to say not quite body-hugging, but not loose either. This style of tunic or smock lasts throughout the Viking age.

As we move toward the Middle Ages, the smock as an underlayer endures. As Middle Ages Humour Theory begins to dominate medicine, the theory advises that wearing a layer of linen between a wool outer garment and your skin is the healthiest option and prevents imbalances. There is pictorial evidence from this time to indicate that the basic smock is beginning to evolve slightly.

By 1400, as we are decidedly heading toward the Renaissance, two main styles appear to exist: the loosely shaped shift evolved from older styles, a thin-strapped variant that looks something like older apron dresses.



Part II: An Explosion of Diversity

By the late 1500s, we see clear evidence of more voluminous, flowing undergarments *among the wealthy*. The lower classes maintain the basic, semi-fitted style more or less straight through, the only variation being wider sleeves. The best evidence we have of this shift among the upper class, beyond the occasional extant garment, is actually in the sleeves. They get very large very quickly, and that trend spreads quickly. In Spain, they emerge from carefully crafted slashes and openings in sleeves. In the many separate regions of Italy, they range from being large and exposed to puffed through delicate slashes. In England, they puff out of the distinctive Tudor undersleeves.

At this point, the gathered neckline also starts to emerge. Previous styles had a shaped neckline cut directly from the cloth. In the newer styles, large swaths of fabric are gathered at the neckline to make it fit, creating a different look and requiring a whole lot more fabric to work. And finally, the fabric gets more diverse: in addition to linen, cotton and silk are also used in some cases.



1492-1495, *Her Royal Highness Dona Isabel, Queen of Castilla and Aragon*, in Marcuello, Pedro. *Devocionario de la Reyna Juana a quien llamaron la Loca*



Circa 1520, *Lady with a Lute*, Palma Vecchio. Venetian.



Circa 1546, *The Young Elizabeth*. Attributed to William



Circa 1530, *Marguerite de Navarre*, Jean Clouet.

Sidebar: A chemise by any other name....

The chemise goes by many names depending on the region. In Spanish, it's a *camisa*, in Italian a *camicia* or *camisia*, and in England it's often referred to as a smock. Same basic garment, different name.

Part III: What Do They Actually Look Like?

We have very few extant examples of the huge, billowing sleeve styles found as we head toward the middle of the 16th century. So to help understand what this garment might actually have looked like, I re-created one of the more unique Spanish *camisas*: the hugely draped, dramatically puffed sleeves worn by Isabel of Portugal, wife of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.

The finished product, created after much trial and error, involves tube-shaped sleeves that are hugely long and hugely wide. The neckline gathers all the way around, and the sleeves gather at the wrists as well, although unevenly—the gathers are concentrated at the bottom of the wrist to encourage the distinctive drape of the portrait.



Isabel de Portugal, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire;
Copy of lost work by Titian (Wien. Kunsthistorisches
Museum)

C. 1526-1539

As you can see, the sleeves are enormous. The neckline is gathered into a shape that hides it beneath the neckline of the dress—the fabric you see around the neckline of Isabel in the portrait is actually a partlet, as distinguished by its slightly different color. Once the sleeve puffs up through the slits in the arm of the dress, all of that extra length and width disappears, leaving only the desired drape and fold of the fabric.

It is difficult to see in the portrait, but the sleeves are actually gathered into some kind of jeweled wristband. This is a fairly unique element; I've looked at a number of Spanish portraits of the time, and this appears to be the only place it's represented. It can be easily duplicated with bracelets, but when you're dealing with a copy of an original as I am here, some things may be lost (or gained) in translation.

THE END—BUT WHY DO WE CARE?

So why does it matter how *verdugados* became farthingales? Or buckram became boning? It matters because there is such a clear, defined trend toward shaping the body. We move away from the natural (lightly fitted bliauts and sideless surcoats) into ever-more-aggressive shaping devices. No one naturally looks like the ladies in Renaissance portraits. We've got busts and waists and all kinds of things that a pair of bodies and a farthingale would hide. Look at the Ditchley portrait of Elizabeth. And that's the ultimate story of Renaissance fashion: the first real evolution away from a natural look.

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