

# En Español

## Defining Characteristics of Spanish Womens' Fashion from 1500-1600

As the Renaissance approached, Europe became increasingly interconnected and trends started to sweep the continent rather than just one particular region. But look closer, and fashion stays surprisingly distinctive. This class will survey the characteristics of Spanish fashion, focusing on the unified kingdom brought together by Isabel and Ferdinand in 1492.

**This is not a complete, authoritative guide.** It's a survey of the most common things I've observed in studying Spanish clothing of this era. There will be exceptions. But all in all, this will set you up to more easily recognize "Spanish" when you see it.

We'll go through clothing piece by piece and element by element, broken out between social classes. Then we'll finish up with some reference images to show how it all pulls together.

Basic components of womens' clothing:

- ♦ *Camisa*, a body layer made of linen.
- ♦ *Saya*, a catch-all term for a dress.
- ♦ *Gorguera*, a partlet.

Virtually all women in all social classes would wear these basics.



Detail from *Birth of the Virgin*, ~1480, Pedro Garcia de Benabarre, Museo Nacional de Arte de Cataluña, Barcelona



Detail from *Retablo de la cathedral de Palencia*, Juan de Flandes 1514-19 (Museo del Prado, Madrid)



*Isabel de Portugal, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire*, copy of a lost work by Titian ~1530 (Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum)

## Hair & Headgear

Upper Class:

- Elaborate *cofia y tranzado* (cap and braid case)
- *Capa* (small, caplike hat) or jeweled caul
- Thin veil, often held on by a roundlet (a thick circlet of fine fabric)
- Elaborately braided hairstyles, sometimes combined with any of the above

Middle Class:

- Less elaborate *cofia y tranzado*
- Plain veil, worn long (to the shoulders) - sometimes colored
- *Sombrero* (large brim sunhat)

Lower Class:

- Plain *cofia y tranzado*, or just *cofia*

In all cases, hair is never left down. It is always covered or otherwise coiffed.

## Gorgueras (partlets)

Upper Class:

- Virtually always present
- Highly decorated with embroidery, pearls
- Sheer fabric or net
- May be elaborately gathered or styled.
- Usually not solid/colored

Middle Class:

- Embroidery around the neckline rather than throughout
- May be less fitted at the neck

Lower Class:

- Plain, or very minimalist
- May appear more like fabric tucked into the bodice than a shaped garment

Depending on the era and style, the partlet could either fit tightly around the neck, have a collar, or be open in a v-front.

## Overall Dressing Layers:

Upper Class:

- Pantaloons, *camisa*, stockings, and *chopines* (very high platform shoes)
- Multiple layers of dress; never seen without sleeves.

Middle Class:

- Pantaloons, *camisa*, stockings, *chopines* less common
- Multiple layers, may include jackets, less ornate than the upper class.

Lower Class:

- Pantaloons, *camisa*, stockings, leather shoes.
- May be sleeveless and/or wearing only one layer of dress.

## Saya (dress)

Upper Class:

- Very elaborate overgown, almost always brocaded and silk, jeweled
- Undergarments shaped the body, flattening chest completely
- Elaborate trim around the bottom edges, along the bodice, and down sleeves
- Emphasis on flattened bosom, not cleavage

Middle Class:

- Overgown decorated with *tiras* (see pg x). Often a solid colored silk.
- Minimal or no shaping (bodice follows the natural contour of the body)

Lower Class:

- Overgown minimally decorated. Fabric is often plain wool.
- Supportive, not shaping—built for work and service.

There is always a fitted gown in Spanish fashion. Loose gowns may go over this, but it's there.

## Mangas (sleeves)

Upper Class:

- Always present and often very large, sometimes draping almost to the floor
- Highly decorated with trim, occasionally puffed and slashed

Middle Class:

- Long and loose, decorated with *tiras* or left plain
- May also be more fitted and open at the back

Lower Class:

- May be absent, often detachable from the dress
- If present, plain and close fitting—may be pinned up

The most common theme of Spanish sleeves is that they are open in some way. This could mean that they are open along the top of the arm, held together only by buttons. They could be open along the back along their full length, tied together with ties. They could be open only at the elbow. But this deliberate gapping (often with the *camisa* left to puff out through that opening in the seam) is quite characteristically Spanish.

It is important to note the distinction between this style of seam puff versus puff and slash seen elsewhere (and on some Spanish garments too, because why not make it confusing!)

Spanish, open  
on the seam



Landsknecht,  
slashed  
(vertically and  
horizontally and  
diagonally)

## Necklines

Upper Class:

- For the first half of the period, square neckline, with the front slightly rounded
- Gradual evolution to a high collar
- Usually showcasing many decorated layers at the neck (embroidered *camisa* and/or *gorguera*)

Middle Class:

- Usually softer and rounded

Lower Class:

- Rounded or squared off

## Fastenings and Construction

Upper Class:

- Laced on the back diagonal (undergarments may have front laced)
- Later, evolved to hook or button at the front

Middle Class:

- Laced at the front, back, side, or (rarely) 3/4
- Used hooks and eyes occasionally

Lower Class:

- Front or side lacing

## Skirts

Upper Class:

- Multiple layers of skirts, often attached to the bodice in the dress (although underskirts/overskirts may have been separate)
- Virtually always worn over a *verdugado* (farthingale) and so very wide; may have been additionally volumized with a bumroll
- Sometimes have a split skirt with a decorated underskirt forepart, but equally often are closed front (especially toward the end of the period of study)

Middle Class:

- Smaller *verdugados* or absent entirely
- No split skirts, but elaborately decorated underskirts

Lower Class:

- Minimal decoration, no *verdugados*, maybe one underskirt

All classes capable of affording it would utilize a unique system of tucks in their gowns. This tuck would simply entail folding the fabric of a skirt up and then fastening it, creating a pocket of spare fabric. This was usually used purely for decoration. It did two things: it communicated conspicuous consumption (as they could afford to simply waste that fabric) and it made it easy to wear skirts with *chopines* and *verdugados* of varying height and fullness.

## “Spain-isms”

These unique elements are either completely characteristic of Spanish fashion, or evolved so extensively from it that they can still be considered Spanish in origin.

**Tiras**—Strips of fabric, often (but not necessarily) cut on the bias. Used as trim to decorate bodices and skirts, particularly among the middle class, but also on interior garments for the more wealthy (including some *camisa* sleeves, necklines, etc)

**Cofia y tranzado**—This fashion eventually made its way to Italy, but it came from (and endured far longer in) Spain. This functional garment could be ornate with joinwork, lace, net, or other embellishment, but it could also be plain linen. Whether a separate cap and braid case, or one connected tube of fabric, this style had enduring popularity throughout the period of study. Some of the lower class women would use this to wrap their hair up around their head for easy work.

**Verdugado**—Another example that spread, eventually becoming the farthingale and hoop skirt that are more familiar to modern audiences. The *verdugado* originated in Spain, and Spain retained a lot of trends from this. In particular, it was common to see skirts with *tiras* applied as though the skirt were a *verdugado* even though it did not have the rope or other stiffening agents characteristic of actual *verdugados*.

**Open sleeves**—As mentioned previously, the Spanish have a strong trend of leaving their sleeves open along certain seams. At the beginning of the period of study (and throughout amongst the middle and lower classes) this would often manifest as an opening along the top or bottom sleeve seam. In upper class garments, it was very often the top seam left open, held closed by buttons. This is a strong contrast to many other sleeves of the era, which followed a more puff-and-slash model. While Spain did puff and slash, open seams were far more likely. Over time this evolved to whole dummy sleeves, which were so open that the wearer could either put the sleeves on or take them off without removing the dress.

**Ornate Gorgueras**—The ornate *gorgueras* of Spain are distinctive in their workmanship. Spain rarely used the more functional heavier partlets that were common at the beginning of the period of study in England and the low countries. Spanish partlets were worked in gold and often featured extensive cutwork and drawnwork. Toward the end of period, the *gorguera* of Spain and the partlets of the rest of the world began to converge, especially as the ruff began to gain prominence.

**Ruffs**—Spain adopted ruffs closer to the 1600s, but their ruffs were characteristically much smaller than those found elsewhere in Europe.

## Upper Class Dress



*Isabel de Portugal, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, copy of a lost work by Titian ~1530 (Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum)*



*Catalina de Espana, copy of the original by Sofonisba Anguissola, Turin 1585-1589 (Castillo de Racconigi, Italy)*

## Middle Class Dress



Detail from *La Predicacion de San Felix*, Juan de Borgona, 1518-1520 (Museo de Arte de Gerona)



Detail from *Retablo de la cathedral de Palencia*, Juan de Flandes 1514-19 (Museo del Prado, Madrid)



Detail from *Retablo of St. Mary Magdalene*, Pere Mates (Gerona Cathedral, Tesoro)

## Lower Class Dress



Detail from *Birth of the Virgin*, ~1520-1530, Choir book miniature, (Granada, Cathedral)

Detail from *Birth of the Virgin*, ~1480, Pedro Garcia de Benabarre, Museo Nacional de Arte de Cataluña, Barcelona



Detail from *La Virgen de Monserrat con San Juan Bautista y Santa Margarita*, (Barcelona, Museo Frederic Mares)



**Questions? Comments?  
Thoughts?**

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