

Reconstructing a Renaissance *Camisa*

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Figure A

What Is It?

Spanish *camisa* (chemise) of the mid-16th century.

This *camisa* is styled after the one depicted in the portrait of Isabel de Portugal, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, hanging in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, a copy of a lost work by Titian (see Fig. A, above). Isabel de Portugal herself lived from 1503-1539, marrying Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1526. She can be easily confused with Isabel of Castile, her husband's famous grandmother.

Why A *Camisa*?

The *camisa* is actually the first step in a much larger project. I'm aiming to re-create the entire ensemble worn by Isabel in the painting in Fig. A, and to do so in as much detail and with as much accuracy as is feasible. The *camisa* (to a small extent) and all other undergarments inform everything that goes atop them, so it seemed logical to start with that first layer.

My persona is a Spanish lady in the time of Isabel of Portugal, so I focus heavily on reproducing her clothing, and clothing of her court and her era.

And finally, the *camisa* seemed like a good first project to hone my focus on costuming accuracy of construction, rather than simply accuracy of appearance. This was my first time working to ensure that a garment matches not just in appearance, but also in its construction.

What is a camisa made of?

What was used in Isabel of Portugal's time?

In Isabel of Portugal's time, a *camisa* was made of linen or cotton. Inventories documenting all of the clothing that Isabel owned show that both cotton and linen were used in the construction of *camisas*, although linen was more common.¹

What did I use?

The material I used is a cotton-linen blend. Time was a major factor here: I could get my hands on this blend (to literally test its thickness and suitability for this project) in the necessary timeframe. While both materials were used by Isabel of Portugal for her *camisas*, I haven't found any evidence that they would've been mixed (I have not yet completely gone through her inventories).²

Additional notes: There is a real question as to what weight of linen or cotton would have been used to make this *camisa* at the time. Many *camisas* seem to specify Holland linen (*Holanda*), which is known to be very fine and lightweight.³ However, considering that the *camisa* in the reference image (Fig. A) is so distinctly puffed up and through the oversleeves, and is not sheer, it seems unlikely that it was used in this case. I am hoping that further examination of the inventories of Isabel's clothing will reveal an exact match for this *camisa*, or at least something close which might allow me to better pinpoint the specific type of linen (or cotton). The linen-cotton blend used here holds its puff nicely.



Due to time constraints, I used a sewing machine and machine thread to construct the entirety of the *camisa*, with the exception of the gathering, which was done by hand. This was purely a sacrifice for time.

How is a camisa assembled?

How was it done in Isabel of Portugal's time?

¹ *Los Inventarios de Carlos V y la Familia Imperial, Volumen II. Compiled by Fernando Checa Cremades. (Madrid, Fernando Villaverde Ediciones with the assistance of the Getty Foundation; 2010).*

² *Ibid.*

³ Ruth Matilda Anderson, *Hispanic Costume 1480-1530*, (New York, Hispanic Society of America; 1979), 183.

As far as my research has seen, there are no extant garments from 16th century Spain or its surroundings, so it's very difficult to say. Possible/likely answers include run and fell seaming, with a possibility of embroidered joinery or cutwork.⁴

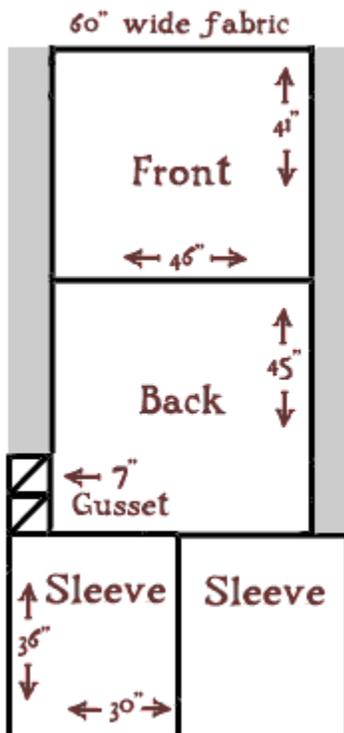
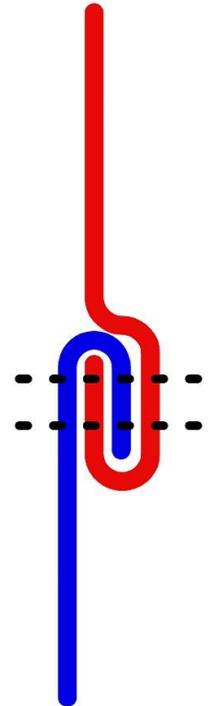
How did I assemble the *camisa*?

I used French seams. I have no evidence of them in Spain at this time. I did not have experience with the possibly accurate seaming techniques nor sufficient time to experiment, and so selected French seams for durability and a similar look.

Additional Notes: We have some relatively contemporary extant garments from elsewhere in the world, and we have a not-contemporary Iberian (Spanish or Portuguese, it's not clear) *camisa* from far later.⁵ The relatively contemporary, non-Spanish *camisas* almost universally use either an embroidered seam treatment or a run and fell seam (the two edges are folded over to make opposing "hooks", and then "hooked" to each other and sewn together, see image at right). The extant Spanish/Portuguese *camisa* uses a very unique form of cutwork joinery. In my research to date, there is nothing to suggest one over the other for this particular *camisa*. I have hope that the Isabel clothing inventories may shed light on this – they do mention embroidery in some cases, and I have hope that they may also mention cutwork.

In the absence of clarity on period technique, run and fell seams appear a likely enough substitute. I did not use it for this *camisa* because of concerns with time. It's not a technique I'm familiar with, and I didn't want to risk messing up the fabric. I selected French seams as a fallback as they are durable and provide an

effect not entirely dissimilar from the run and fell, where the raw edges are entirely hidden. Finally, my seams are (with the exception of the neckline) machine finished, whereas in this time period the entire garment would have been hand sewn.



How was the *camisa* body shaped?

How was it done in Isabel de Portugal's time?

We have very little idea – there is nothing extant from Iberia at that time. What we know comes almost exclusively from observing what can be seen and not seen in images from the time. I have absolutely no concrete evidence to suggest that the *camisa* in the image was constructed in any particular way.

How did I do it?

I adapted a pattern I've used before, the "Easy Italian Chemise" pattern from the Festive Attyre website, which is itself adapted from an extant 17th century Italian chemise pattern found in *Cut My Cote*. The pattern used is an adaptation of the "Easy Italian Chemise" pattern from Festive Attyre, reproduced at left (<http://www.festiveattire.com/p/how-to-make-easy-italian-chemise.html>). I started with the dimensions indicated, but expanded the width of the front and back piece to provide additional gathering that would better match what would be needed for

⁴ Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 4*, (London, Pan Macmillan; 2008), 6-19.

⁵ Arnold, *Patterns 4*, 54-64

the sleeves. My final dimensions are:

Back: 45" long, 53" wide

Front: 41" long, 53" wide

Gussets: 10" square (no bisecting seam)

Sleeves: 53" long by 55" wide

Additional Notes: With no real extant garment to guide me, and no image of the *camisa* alone, I'm conjecturing based on what can be seen in images, and just as importantly, what *cannot* be seen. In this case, the only part of the *camisa* that is visible are the sleeves (which we'll deal with separately in the next section). However, given that the front of the bodice meets the sleeves at a very low point on the chest, that does rule out a circle-shaped neck to the *camisa* – anything other than a square and it most likely would show underneath. Unfortunately, there is no way to know with certainty what the construction was beyond that.

Finally, it is worth noting that, although the conventional wisdom of books on the subject seems to be that this image features a partlet, I have not found anything that seems to be conclusive as to why.⁶ There are roughly contemporary Spanish smocks which feature that kind of fastened high neck, but are one garment rather than a separate partlet covering the upper chest and fastening around the bust, and then a separate *camisa* hidden at the neckline but supporting the sleeves.⁷ I hope that my continuing research reveals the reason the books seem to assume that this is a partlet-*camisa* structure rather than a high-necked smock.

In regards to the specific pattern used here, the Festive Attire pattern is plausible enough, although I hope to get my hands on *Cut My Cote* to find the non-simplified version of that pattern. I believe the simplification largely has to do with the removal of gores that existed in the original. I hope that working from the original *Cut My Cote* pattern I can cross-reference with the extant out-of-period Spanish *camisa* and have a true best guess at what the pattern would have been.



How are the sleeves shaped?

⁶ Anderson, 181.

⁷ La Moda Espanola En El Siglo De Oro. N.d. Museum exhibit at the Museo de Toledo. Spain, Toledo.

How were they shaped in Isabel de Portugal's time?

We don't really know for sure. There is visual evidence that appears to show tube-like sleeves, with the same cut width from shoulder to wrist and the fullness controlled by gathering.⁸ But the construction of the sleeves in this painting is not addressed by any contemporary sources I've found, and the details of the process are hidden by the full oversleeve.

How did I do it?

I created a long (55" diameter) tube sleeve and hand-pleated it with tiny cartridge pleats to control fullness at the wrist and armhole. The wrist is unevenly gathered such that a majority of the fabric gathers along the underside of the hand, creating the characteristic drape. The tube allows for a lot of free fabric to be puffed up and out of the holes in the sleeve proper, another characteristic feature of this ensemble.

Additional Notes: The construction and finish of the sleeves is the heart of this project, as these long sleeves are the single most clear defining feature of the entire *camisa*. I have not seen any extant chemise with sleeves shaped as anything other than a tube, but there is contemporary painting evidence of other styles paired with other gowns so it couldn't be ruled out. However, I considered it more likely that the tube style had been used as that is predominant among other extant chemises. Furthermore, the harder I looked at the sleeves themselves, the more it seemed likely to me that a tube structure and careful pleating would give the desired appearance, and do so better than a shaped sleeve. In particular, I focused on the need for massive amounts of fabric at the top of the sleeve in order to create the distinctive puffs. Close examination of the painting shows that they're actually puffs of substantial puffiness – they cover up a considerable portion of the sleeve trim and fasteners. In order to get that effect takes a substantial amount of spare fabric – both in terms of length and width - along the top of the sleeve, to pull up and through. In a tube shaped sleeve, that length and width would be present at the bottom as well, where it would pool around the cartridge pleated band as the reference image in Fig. A shows. Furthermore, the fold patterns on the drape by her left hand seemed to indicate a tube that had been pleated into the wristband as well – if it were a shaped sleeve, there wouldn't be anything to create those folds.



⁸ Anderson, 184

With this in mind, I experimented with very long, very wide tube sleeves. The first set on the experimental *camisa* were 10 inches or so longer than my arms, and 50 inches in diameter. They immediately confirmed that a tube would work, but the length and width needed some adjustment. I increased the diameter by 5 inches, and increased the length by another few inches to give ample space to puff the fabric up and through.



These are the dimensions used in the final *camisa* presented here: 53 inches of length, 55 inches in diameter. It doesn't present as well when it is laid out flat, but it shows up nicely when worn. All evidence I have from research points to this construction method as being period – tube sleeves are very common, and long or wide sleeves which can be puffed out are known as well.

There are a few details of the sleeves which become evident when viewing the close-up image below.

First, there's the apparent presence of lace around the edges of the cuffs. While it is possible that there was some very early period lace extant at the time, or that there was a form of cutwork used, the far better likelihood is that the lace was added by the painter who reproduced the original work in the late 1600s. Lace was more common at that point, and thus he interpreted a frilled edge caused by gathering as lace. I am hoping to confirm or deny the existence of cutwork by a) hopefully finding a *camisa* within the inventories that exactly matches this one, and seeing how it's described, or b) more carefully exploring some of the extant *camisas* shown in a Museum of Toledo exhibition several years ago. These *camisas* are not a slam dunk – this exhibit has been known to play a little fast and loose with both the era and location of the items they include – but they're a valuable contribution.

There is no clear form of attachment on the cuffs. They cannot have been simply slid over the wrist, as they're too tight for that. There's no evidence of ties or other fasteners, and it would



seem likely that if there were ties, they'd fall downward like the rest of the sleeve. For the time being, I've elected to (eventually) have them fasten with hook and eye closures, although I may adjust that in the future.

There is no concrete evidence to suggest exactly what the stones ornamenting the cuff are. They could theoretically have been fastened to the garment – I hope that more extensive exploration of the inventory of Isabel's wardrobe will reveal something here. If they are fastened to the *camisa*, that would likely make it valuable, and almost certainly increase the chances it would be mentioned there. If not fastened to the *camisa*, they're likely simply bracelets placed over the cuff, and that's what I will be using with this ensemble.

For Next Time

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

- Use of felled seams, embroidery, or cutwork joinery rather than French seams.
- Hand sewing.
- Use of pure linen rather than linen blend.
- Adjustment of the *camisa* body pattern to possibly include gores in the sides.

Things I've Learned

The process of researching is so incredibly much more involved than I would have expected. It's one thing to create a garment that appears to be what they are wearing in the images. It's one thing to be able to highlight the characteristics of what would've been worn, or to talk intelligently about what might characterize the clothing choices of one region versus another. But it's an entirely separate thing to comprehensively research all the details of that clothing with an aim to make it as right on the inside as it is on the outside – there are a million rabbit holes, and until you get to the bottom of each one, it's very hard to be sure that your idea about the garment that you're making is even close to hitting the mark. I've got many hours of research into this project and there's still so much I'd like to research, so much I feel is incomplete! I look forward to continuing to run down all of these rabbit holes, and more besides, in the future.



References:

- Los Inventarios de Carlos V y la Familia Imperial*, Volumen II. Compiled by Fernando Checa Cremades. (Madrid, Fernando Villaverde Ediciones with the assistance of the Getty Foundation; 2010).
- Carmen Bernis, *Indumentaria Espanola en Tiempos de Carlos V*. (Madrid, Instituto Diego Velazquez, 1962)
- Juan de Alcega, *Tailor's Pattern Book 1589*. Trans. Jean Pain & Cecelia Bainton with original text included, (New York: Costume and Fashion Press; 1999)
- Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 3*, (Hollywood, Quite Specific Media Group; 1985)
- Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 4*, (London, Pan Macmillan; 2008)
- 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>

Appendix A: Construction Details

Materials Used To Create The *Camisa*:

- Linen-cotton blend fabric, mid-heavy weight
- Standard weight cotton thread
- Heavy weight cotton thread (for the gathering stitches)

Process Used To Create The *Camisa*:

1. **Determine the desired dimensions and cut the fabric.** My pattern directly adapts the "Easy Italian Chemise" pattern from Festive Attire (<http://www.festiveattire.com/p/how-to-make-easy-italian-chemise.html>), which is itself a simplification of a pattern found in Cut My Cote, based off an extant 17th century Italian chemise. I used the following dimensions: front piece 53" wide by 41" long, back piece 53" wide by 45" long, gussets of 10" square modified to be sewn in as squares rather than triangles, and sleeves of 55" long x 53" wide. The most extensive adaptation comes in the form of the sleeves.
 - a. **Creating the sleeves.** There were two main possibilities for the sleeves, both of which are observed in images of the time: a straight tube that fits the shoulder and wrist via pleating or gathering, or a sleeve that tapers at the shoulder and fills out toward the wrist. Based on the relatively few extant chemises from the period that have been found worldwide, I suspected that the distinctive shape of these sleeves was actually achieved with the tube-and-gather method. To test that theory, I created a mock tube-sleeve *camisa* using a bedsheet and observed the way that it draped. The measurements needed adjustment, but the basic shape was correct. The other concern with the sleeves was more easily addressed: to ensure that they would be able to "puff" out from the slashes in the top of the sleeve, I added 20 inches of length to the sleeve itself. This extreme extra length helps the puffs hold more securely – the more fabric there is to puff, the more securely it fits through the slash, and the less likely it is to pull.
2. **Sew the gussets to the sleeve, and then to the front panel.** The construction of the entire *camisa* can be described in the context of the gusset – I found it very helpful in my sewing to

think about attaching elements to the gusset rather than to each other, as it helped me keep my bearings. Since this project used linen/cotton, and a very fraying-prone weave at that, I selected French seams for durability and to protect the raw edges (sew with the wrong sides together, trim, press, and then sew behind that seam to entirely encase the first). The raw edge is entirely encased and the double-sewing adds strength (for additional commentary on this choice of joinery, please see the discussion section below).

3. **Sew the back and front panel with the top edge slightly above the gusset seam.** For the front panel, I put the edge 2" higher, and on the back, 5" higher. This helps control the fullness of the sleeves slightly, which helps maintain comfort after the gathering process (otherwise the fullness can be too extended into the armpit).
4. **Hem and finish the edges.** I actually cheated a bit on the edge on the sleeves due to time, and used the selvage edge so I could leave it raw. I left the neckline raw, as I knew I'd be doing a neckline treatment which did not require pre-treatment. The hem is intended to be a simple rolled hem, but is currently unfinished due to time.
5. **Pleat the front neck, each sleeve, and back neck.** Pleating these individually is essential to maintaining the square shape of the neckline, which in turn allows the *camisa* to stay entirely out of sight beneath the neckline of the gown. I used a standard running stitch at 1/8 inch intervals, and ran four lines of that around the front neck, each sleeve, and back neck.
6. **Fit the pleating.** Try on the *camisa* and adjust the pleating, making it tighter or more loose as needed to accommodate the necessary fit. The *camisa* should be low on the chest and low on the shoulders – it should be completely hidden by the overgown. The upper chest area would have been hidden by the partlet.
7. **Add the band.** I plan to finish the pleated areas by cutting a 2" wide strip matching each length (cutting on the bias is not necessary as there are no curves). One long edge of the band folds over onto itself ¼ of an inch and is ironed. The other side will be stitched to the neckline, right sides together. The remainder should be folded over (the ironed fold from earlier should now be flat against the back of the neckline). The piece is finished by whip stitching the band on the back.