



Reconstructing a Spanish *Saya*

By Elena de la Palma
(elenadelapalma@gmail.com)

What Is It?

A Spanish *saya*, the generic term for 'gown', circa 1480.

This *saya* is styled after those commonly depicted in paintings produced in the workshop of Pedro García de Benabarre, which produced paintings from 1445-1485. The major reference is the *Birth of the Virgin* painted circa 1475, which hangs in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya in Catalonia. **That image is all I have.** There are no extant garments, and nothing like this is featured in any tailor's manual, nor described by any contemporaries that I have encountered.

I used a combination of the garments in the painting (reproduced in full at the back of this documentation) to create a single gown. I referenced the blue garment at the top left for my color choices (solid red), sleeves (sleeveless), and basic shaping of the bodice. The orange gown prominently featured at left was used as a reference for how the entire ensemble should look, and particularly for the cut of the skirt and the placement of the *tiras*.

Figure 1 - a full-length image of a *saya*

What we know about this garment:

- **Its visual appearance from the front** (as rendered by an artist)
- **Its provenance in Spain** (nothing like it appears elsewhere)
- **That the bodice was not boned, but was shaped** (it does not exactly conform to the wearer's body like an unshaped garment, but it does not force the wearer's body into a shape like a rigidly boned bodice – and we have minimal evidence of rigidly boned bodices for another 70+ years)
- **That the skirt was not a *verdugado*** (the skirt has too many folds and drapes too neatly for it to have been stiffened, even with something soft like rope)
- **That the skirt was pieced/seamed** (this look cannot be achieved without a cone-shape skirt)
- **That it could be worn with a variety of different sleeve options** (several are rendered in the images, including sleeveless)

What we don't know:

- **What it was made of** (no extants nor mentions in inventories)
- **Any details of its construction** (no mentions in any patterning manual)
- **Whether there were any invisible underlayers** (additional shaping or fitting garments)
- **Exactly how many external pieces there might be** (a separate skirt?)
- **Whether it would have been worn with a partlet** (partlets could be so sheer, artists rendered them as invisible, and they could only be spotted by their necklace-like edge decoration).
- **What (if any) specific name it might have had** (*saya* is a rather generic term for dress; individual styles e.g. *habito* and *brial* existed, and there are some 'unclaimed' names used in inventories, but we have no basis on which to put a name to this garment)

Common/useful evidence we don't have:

- **Not featured in tailoring manuals** (the earliest manuals don't appear for another 75 years)
- **Not mentioned in any inventories** (this could mean it was not valuable enough, not a high-class garment, or that it is present but simply identified under a yet unrecognized name)
- **Not similar to any other, more researched gowns of the period** (Italy and England both had very different garments at this time, so there is no cross-referencing available)
- **No extant garments** (nothing exists from this time period or with this appearance)
- **No firsthand descriptions** (if it is mentioned, it is not clear they refer to this garment)



Figure 2 - *Saya* showing at least one overskirt, and underscoring the lack of stiffening in the skirt

What is a saya made of?

What was used in the 1480s?

The most likely materials would have been silk or wool – but really, we don't know.

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. The skirt is the same fashion fabric linen, unlined. The tiras are cotton-poly bias tape. I used silk thread.



Figure 3 - close up of *saya* bodice showing cross-front lacing and gap at bottom

How is a saya 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 drafted the pattern by examining the images. The bodice is fairly clearly open at the front; it noticeably 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. Tightness is achieved by lacing across the chest. A stomacher placed beneath the lacing will hold in place all day without pinning or fussing, leading me to conclude this was the likely case for the obviously distinct piece of fabric

beneath the lacing. This would be logical, as these stomachers would be easy to interchange at minimal cost, allowing for a more fashion-forward presentation even amongst lower classes. The bodice lacing commonly allows for a small gap over the stomach (which provides its own



series of complications for the skirt. 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 outer garments from this time 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.**

Figure 4 - Saya showing *tiras* and clearly draping, making a *verdugado* impossible

How did I assemble the *saya* skirt?

I used an extant pattern commonly found in the later Spanish tailoring manuals. This is a complicated choice because that manual was published some 100 years after this garment was constructed. However, **this skirt seems to be of a design that mimics the *verdugado*, a garment just coming into fashion at the time of the portrait's painting.** We can see from the folds in the skirts that it is not an actual *verdugado*, but rather regular fabric adorned with *tiras*, small strips of fabric used as trim that are highly characteristic of Spanish clothing throughout the Renaissance. Since my materials selection is already imperfect, I elected to use pre-cut poly-cotton bias tape, measured by comparing the width of fingers in the image to the *tiras* in the image, and seeking the same size relation between my fingers and my bias tape. Given the overall shallowness of the folds in the skirt and the soft flare shape, I determined that this would not be a large rectangle roll pleated as is sometimes seen in German gowns. Overall, the skirt looks much like a *verdugado*, but just without the stiffening elements that give that shaping garment its characteristic rigid bell shape – and given that similarity, **I drafted the skirt using a pattern taken from the pattern manuals that closely mimics the *verdugado* also listed there.**



Figure 5 - Contemporary image of a *verdugado* showing seams

This is far from a perfect choice. All available patterning manuals were published at least 70 years after this style would have been in fashion. While it is plausible that these methods of construction would have been available, it is not guaranteed. However, using this pattern did allow me to **use the *bara* method of drafting, whereby pieces are created based on a series of tapes custom fitted to the wearer.** This was the custom by the time of the publication of the tailoring manuals I referenced. While it is possible that the system developed over a mere 70 years, I find it far more plausible that it was already in use (or at least, something resembling it was in use) during the time this garment would have been constructed. By this time, fabric was being traded and purchased, but there remained no consistent national or international system of measurements (like the modern yard), which would make a numerical based patterning system (like our modern system) potentially problematic. A *bara* tape, by contrast, could be measured once, and used repeatedly to generate custom clothing for a client that was guaranteed to always fit them precisely. **It was necessary to adjust this pattern to account for the openness at the bottom of the bodice** as the original pattern is designed either as a standalone skirt or to be attached to the bottom of a bodice that would be completely closed. To do this, I **cut out both front pieces individually and seamed them together, leaving a small area at the top that could be tied**



shut, rather than cutting the front on the fold. **I opted to include a small tie to secure the top of the skirt.** While there is no extant evidence to support this method, similar ties are used in other applications, such as to secure *camisas*, sleeves, etc. When compared with other methods of securing (sewing it in, pinning, or using a hook and eye) this seems the easiest and most adjustable choice. Note: it is also entirely possible that the lacing continues down to a point, but appears to end at the waist because a secondary skirt is worn. There is some pictorial evidence for this (ref. fig) **The seams in the skirt were flat-felled for durability.** While extant gowns seem to favor folding over the seam and whip stitching the excess fabric down on either side, none of them are made of linen. I've instead selected a common fabric joinery technique used on contemporary linen items, which were most usually undergarments.

Figure 6 - A possible indication that lacing continues below the waist. If covered by a second skirt, this would create the 'gap' characteristic of the other paintings. San Sebastián habla a Marcos y a Marceliano y san Sebastián y san Policarpo destruyendo...

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 whipstitch joinery
- Continue to refine the pattern
- Construct with silk or wool
- Use self-made bias tape of the appropriate material (silk or wool) for the *tiras*

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.
- **How to use the *bara* system for clothing construction.** This is a fascinating system and I very much look forward to experimenting with it in the future. I would not be surprised if my next project were to be a dress from a pattern using the *bara* method.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Ruth Matilda. *Hispanic Costume 1480-1530*. New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1979.
- Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 3*. Hollywood: Quite Specific Media Group, 1985.
- Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2008.
- Bernis, Carmen. *Indumentaria Espanola en Tiempos de Carlos V*. Madrid: Instituto Diego Velazquez, 1962.
- Checa Cremades, Fernando, comp., *Los Inventarios de Carlos V y la Familia Imperial*, Volumen II. Madrid: Fernando Villaverde Ediciones with the assistance of the Getty Foundation; 2010.
- Garcia de Benabarre, Pedro. *San Sebastián habla a Marcos y a Marceliano y san Sebastián y san Policarpo destruyendo los ídolos*. 1470. Oil on canvas. Madrid, Museo del Prado. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/san-sebastian-habla-a-marcos-y-a-marceliano-y-san/0719d982-abfe-40eb-836c-4285f218bd31>
- Garcia de Benabarre, Pedro. *Banquet d'Herodes*. 1473-1482. Oil on canvas. Barcelona, Museu Nacional D'Art de Catalunya. Accessed October 12, 2018. <http://www.museunacional.cat/ca/colleccio/banquet-dherodes/pere-garcia-de-benavarri/064060-000>
- Garcia de Benabarre, Pedro. *Decapitació de sant Joan Baptista*. 1473-1482. Oil on canvas. Barcelona, Museu Nacional D'Art de Catalunya. Accessed October 12, 2018. <http://www.museunacional.cat/ca/colleccio/decapitacio-de-sant-joan-baptista/pere-garcia-de-benavarri/015883-000>
- Garcia de Benabarre, Pedro. *Naixement de sant Joan Baptista*. 1473-1482. Oil on canvas. Barcelona, Museu Nacional D'Art de Catalunya. Accessed October 12, 2018. <http://www.museunacional.cat/ca/colleccio/naixement-de-sant-joan-baptista/pere-garcia-de-benavarri/024102-000>
- Garcia de Benabarre, Pedro. *Naixement de la Mare de Déu*. Circa 1475. Oil on canvas. Barcelona, Museu Nacional D'Art de Catalunya. Accessed October 12, 2018. <http://www.museunacional.cat/ca/colleccio/naixement-de-la-mare-de-deu/pere-garcia-de-benavarri/114750-000>
- Gnagy, Matthew. *The Modern Maker Vol 1: Men's Doublets*. Charleston: Createspruce.com, 2014.
- Gnagy, Matthew. *The Modern Maker Vol 2: Pattern Manual 1580-1640*. Charleston: Createspruce.com, 2018.
- 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>
- Mikhaila, Ninya and Malcolm-Davies, Jane. *The Tudor Tailor*. Costume and Fashion Press, 2016.



Pedro Garcia de Benabarre, *Naixement de la Mare de Déu*. Circa 1475. Oil on canvas. Barcelona, Museu Nacional D'Art de Catalunya.



Pedro Garcia de Benabarre, *Naixement de sant Joan Baptista*. 1473-1482. Oil on canvas. Barcelona, Museu Nacional D'Art de Catalunya.



Pedro Garcia de Benabarre, *Decapitació de sant Joan Baptista*. 1473-1482. Oil on canvas. Barcelona, Museu Nacional D'Art de Catalunya.



Pedro Garcia de Benabarre, *Banquet d'Herodes*. 1473-1482. Oil on canvas. Barcelona, Museu Nacional D'Art de Catalunya.