

A 16th century Spanish Working Class Ensemble

Beatriz Aluares de la Oya



Images of middle and working class Spanish women are difficult to acquire, primarily because most existing artwork has not been made available to the international public in digital format. Also, due to historic political involvements and because the bulk of Spanish images of the period are portraits of nobles dressed in garments similar to those worn in the English court under Elizabeth I, it is also commonly assumed that 16th Spanish clothing was identical to English, Dutch, or Flemish. However, Carmen Bernis' *El traje y los tipos sociales en el Quijote* provides an extensive visual overview of Spanish fashion among the working class.

I will note that the bulk of the images in Bernis' book date from the first decade of the 17th century rather than from the 16th century; however, given what textile and costume historians know about the rate of clothing evolution the lower classes, it is reasonable to assume that a delay of 5-15 years does not negate the value of these images in recreating late 16th century garments.

I chose to model my garment after this image, republished in Bernis:



La Virgen de Monserrat con San Juan Bautista y Santa Margarita. Detail. Barcelona, Museo Frederic Mares.

Although the combination at first glance looks somewhat like English or Flemish clothing of the period, there are several notable differences that characterize Spanish working class garments. First, the neckline is higher and wider than many English styles, with a distinct square cut falling just below the collarbones and extremely narrow straps. Second, the bodice and skirt are probably separate unlike most other working and middle class European outfits of the same period. Finally, the bodice appears to be supportive, yet there is neither an indication that a supportive set of stays is worn beneath nor the rigid, flattened silhouette that one would expect from a set of bodies or stays in the English style.



Jael y Sisara. Antonio de Pereda. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland.

This image shows the same characteristics enumerated in the previous example: extremely narrow straps, higher square neckline, and a separate bodice and skirt that does not in this case match in fabric. Also, the open front of the bodice and the deep wrinkling under the bustline suggests that rigid boning was not used.

For my own garment, I created a separate bodice and skirt of dark green linen trimmed with black. I built an inner support of 45# hemp cording sandwiched between two layers of cotton/linen blend (for stability) using the cording directions found in Jen Thompson's article on boning with hemp cording. The cording channels are spaces approximately .25" apart, and are placed over the entire inner layer. This supportive interlining was then tacked to a lining of white linen; the layers were thus treated as a single layer.

The green linen outer layer was laid over the supportive lining, stretched, and sewn down firmly. By stretching the fabric, I hope to eliminate future sagging. Once the layers were sewn together by hand, I applied strips of black linen to mimic the trim pattern in the original image. Finally, based on the image of *Jael y Sisara*, I chose to make the bodice close with lacing rings. Since there are no images of what the garment looks like from the back, but all of the garments appear to not be front-closing, I decided to make the bodice close along the center back.

The ensemble is worn with a white linen shift fashioned after Jen Thompson's "Easy Italian Chemise" with approximately 10 inches removed from the arm length to better recreate the moderately full sleeves in the original image. This pattern also creates a higher, banded neckline into which the body of the shift is gathered; this shift style is common in working class images.

Accessories for this outfit include a short strand of pearl or imitation coral beads, soft leather or cloth slippers, and a linen shawl that is draped around the shoulders and tucked into the neckline of the bodice. This shawl can be seen in several images:



La cena en Emaus. 1612/20. Pedro Orrente. Budapest, Szepmuveszeti Muzeum.



Abraham envia a Eliazar a buscar esposa para Isaac. Detail. Pedro Orrente. Segovia, private collection.

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