

Background

The *rostro*, or face mask, was a common item of travel clothing for the 16th century Spanish lady. It was used to protect the face from dirt and sun, as well as to protect the identity of women. The *rostro* was commonly constructed of silk taffeta or velvet lined with leather, with two “apertures for the eyes.”¹ According to Carmen Bernis, *rostro* were mentioned in the inventory of the fabric merchant Simon Ruiz (1597); specifically, there is listed “a *rostro* of taffeta, of the road.”² A possible example of this item is shown in Bertelli’s engraving of a woman wearing “a capotillo [and] a mask that simulates the form of the nose and mouth, which justifies the name “*rostro*” that it is given.”³



Bertelli, Pietro. *Diversarum nationen habitus*. Venecia, 1594.

¹ Bernis 55.

² Bernis 55.

³ Bernis 55.

The *rostro* is also seen in Hans van der Becken's panoramic painting of the procession of Empress Maria. In this image, the young women of the procession are wearing a black *rostro* like the one in the Bertelli engraving:



Beken, Hans van der. *Viaje de la emperatriz Maria desde Praga, 1601*.

Construction

The methods I used to construct my *rostro* were based heavily on the research presented by Mistress Belpheobe de Givet in her article "A 16th Century 'Visard' Mask."

I chose to build my *rostro* on a base of buckram covered with silk taffeta and lined with perfumed leather. Although cardboard is also mentioned as a possible stiffening base,⁴ buckram seemed to be a better choice for a lightweight item that would have been worn for lengthy periods. Silk taffeta was specifically mentioned in the Ruiz inventories; using Hans van der Beken's painting as an example of typical travel attire, I chose to use black taffeta. I also chose to line the mask with a thin goatskin perfumed with rose oil; although this is not specifically mentioned in my sources, I have come across the use of perfumed leather in Spanish glovemaking.

I first wet the buckram and stretched it over a Styrofoam wig form to dry into shape. Once the buckram form was dry, I used a rabbit skin glue to attach the outer layer of taffeta to the buckram form. While the glue was drying, I placed a piece of 1.5 oz. goatskin in a bowl of water mixed with .5 oz of rose otto oil.

⁴ Bernis 54.

After 48 hours, I peeled the mask off the head form, pinned a square of goatskin leather, smooth side down, on the form. I applied a layer of rabbit skin glue, then pinned the buckram and taffeta shell over the leather and let it dry.

Once the *rostro* was dry, I placed the mask over my own face to mark the position of the eyes. The Beken painting I used did not seem to show any apertures for the eyes, nor was such an opening mentioned in Bernis; I opted to stitch a wooden bead inside the mask rather than cutting an opening.

Notes:

Rabbit skin glue is remarkably strong and fast-bonding, allowing little time to reposition items if they are misaligned. This led to some accumulated slippage that makes the final product look off center. Next time, more pins.

Rose water has quite a strong odor, and was possibly not the best choice for the interior of the mask.

Bibliography

Beken, Hans van der. *Viaje de la emperatriz Maria desde Praga, 1601*. Madrid: Patrimonio Nacional, monasterio de las Descalzas Reales.

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