

The History and Construction of Elizabethan English Costume

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Queen Elizabeth I ruled from 1558 to 1603, during the height of the Northern European Renaissance (Tortora 175). While her reign produced some of the most enduring works of English culture (the works of Shakespeare, Jonson, Marlowe, and Spenser among them), I have always been intrigued by the fashion of the era. The exaggerated hourglass silhouette, the enormous ruffs, the sheer amount of decoration on everything... though I was familiar with the style, I knew that there was more to learn. When Professor Margo Shively offered me the chance to undertake an independent study exploring Elizabethan costume further, I could not resist. What follows is a summary of my research and an account of my attempt to recreate the court dress of an English noblewoman living in the early 1570s.

The innermost garment worn by any Englishwoman was the smock or shift. These were basic, calf-length linen undershirts that served the extremely important purpose of protecting the wearer's outer clothing from sweat and body oils; the heavily embellished outer garments would not stand up to frequent washing, and so instead had to be guarded in this way. They could be either high- or low-necked; the high, collared variety would often have a ruffle attached at the neck, and the low, square-necked sort would have been worn with a partlet. Partlets were a sort of false undershirt, much like the modern dickey—they gave the illusion of wearing a high-necked smock, while serving to fill in the neckline of the wearer's gown. Both varieties of smock, as well as partlets, were often richly decorated (Leed). The iconic ruff began as an integral part of the smock, but as the century progressed, they grew larger and became separate garments attached to outer clothing with pins or lacing (Arnold, 57).

Over the smock, a corset or “paire of bodies” would be worn. Unlike corsets of later

eras, Elizabethan bodies were not meant to reduce the waist, “but to smooth the lines of the torso, compressing it into a smooth cone shape. The waist is not overly compressed, and the breasts are flattened, resulting in a high, mounded bustline” (Anderson). Both front- and back-lacing corsets existed, stiffened with a variety of materials, ranging from reeds to whalebone to simple quilting. Back-lacing corsets often had a busk: a strip of horn, wood, whalebone, or another material slipped into a pocket at the corset’s front for additional stiffness (Arnold, 146-7).

The undergarment that most shaped the Elizabethan outfit, perhaps even more than the corset, was the farthingale, a petticoat with willow or whalebone hoops to support the skirts. The conical Spanish farthingale was brought to England by Catherine of Aragon in 1501, but was not embraced by the English until around 1545 (Malcolm-Davies and Mikhaila, 21). Starting in the 1560s, women began wearing bumrolls over their farthingales, creating more of a dome-shaped skirt. This emphasized the hips, working with the corset and gowns’ pointed bodices to create the illusion of a tiny waist (Arnold, 19).

Over these underpinnings, a petticoat or kirtle would be worn. These underskirts (which may have had attached bodices) added fullness to the silhouette and prevented the farthingale hoops from showing through the gown (Anderson). Often, these featured a flat, richly decorated front panel called a forepart, which was made of much more expensive fabrics than those of the rest of the garment, which would have been hidden under the gown (Arnold, 153).

The final layer, the gown, was worn over all of these. The gown’s skirt was usually open down the front to reveal the forepart underneath, and its bodice was tightly fitting with a waistline that dropped to a point at the center front. Such bodices could be high- or low- necked (much like smocks) and often featured large rolls or tabs at the shoulders and some sort of skirting at the waist. Gowns of the elite were richly decorated with embroidery, pearls, and all

manner of other trims. Sleeves were usually detachable, and came in a variety of styles (Anderson). They often matched the fabric of the forepart.

For this project, I have attempted to recreate these Elizabethan garments with as much accuracy as is feasible. I have tried to use period materials as much as possible, but have made exceptions when modern alternatives are more desirable due to price, availability, or comfort in today's climate. Though most of the pieces are machine-sewn, many required extensive hand sewing and all seams are finished with period techniques.

I chose to begin with a low-necked smock and matching partlet. These are both made of fine white linen with attached hand-gathered ruffs decorated with machine embroidery. Both also have handmade thread-covered buttons. The corset is linen and canvas with hand-sewn ribbon binding, stiffened with reed boning and a wooden busk. It spiral laces up the back through hand-sewn eyelets worked over metal rings. The farthingale and bumroll are both made of heavy-weight linen; the former is stiffened with rigid plastic tubing, comparable in strength to period willow bents. The corset, farthingale, and roll are all fastened together to create the firm foundation needed to support the other garments.

The petticoat is a light cotton, with the forepart made of heavy linen backed with felt—the same fabric as the separate sleeves. The gown is made of a coordinating linen, with the bodice supported by a layer of canvas and more of the reed boning. The skirt is cartridge pleated (a period technique done by hand), and both sections are decorated with hand-attached trim and pearls. The gown fabric is probably the biggest departure from historical accuracy in the entire outfit; while linen is certainly period, most dresses of this style were made of other materials, and their patterns would have been woven into the fabric or embroidered, rather than printed on like most modern fabrics. In the end, I had to choose convenience over accuracy. I simply could not

afford the sumptuous wools and silks that would have been used, and as I intend to wear the gown outside during the summer, linen was the best choice. As for the pattern, it looks period enough from a distance of a few feet, and that is good enough for now.

This project has been very rewarding for me. There is such a tremendous difference between seeing a portrait from this era and actually wearing these garments—feeling the weight of the skirts and the sway of the farthingale as you walk, perching on the edge of chairs because the corset keeps you upright, struggling to walk through narrow doors... Being able to experience this, as well as learn more about the techniques and styles of the period, has been very gratifying, and I hope to continue using what I have learned both in my own projects and at work in the costume shop.

Works Cited

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Pictures by me (Emily Hastings):

