

The History and Construction of Elizabethan English Costume

Emily Hastings

Introduction

This project was an independent study I undertook after taking the Costume Design course (THTR 224) last fall. During that class, one of our projects was researching the costume of a given historical era, and I chose Renaissance England. I enjoyed the project so much that I wanted to learn as much as I could about the subject, and so I couldn't resist when Prof. Margo Shively offered me this opportunity. During the course of the Spring 2013 term, I researched the dress of Elizabethan noblewomen of the 1560s-70s, wrote several papers on my findings, and constructed a set of garments that were as historically accurate as possible based on what I learned.

The Process

Starting with the research I had done for my Costume History project, I began to determine which of the many clothing pieces worn by Elizabethan women I would need to make. When this was tentatively finished, I started searching for as much information on these garments as I could find, relying especially on the work of costume scholars Janet Arnold, Margo Anderson, and Drea Leed.

I drew a fashion plate depicting my plan for the final outfit, and then, using the most accurate techniques I could, I began to construct the garments. Mockups were made for each piece out of cheap muslin, fitted to my measurements, and then used to make their actual counterparts. I attempted to use period materials as much as possible, but made exceptions when modern alternatives were more desirable due to price, availability, or comfort in today's climate.

Conclusion

This was a fascinating project, and one in which I learned so much. It became obvious very quickly why many of these garments were made by specialists in period—an immense variety of skills is required, and it could easily take a lifetime to master them all. It was also an extraordinary opportunity to step into the shoes (in a nearly-literal sense) of the subjects of Elizabethan portraits. There is such a tremendous difference between seeing a painting from this era and actually wearing the 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.

I would like to thank Prof. Shively for being my faculty mentor for this project, Prof. Carlin-Metz for nominating me for this event, my mom for making my beautiful hat and caul, and the rest of my family and friends for all of their support.

The Garments:



Low-necked
smock



"Paire of
bodies" (corset)



Spanish farthingale



Petticoat and
forepart



Partlet



Bumroll

Not pictured (on form):
Gown and Sleeves



Photo by Peter Bailley

Quick Facts:

- About 250 pearls
- 20 yards of fabric
- 10 yards of trim
- 150-200 hours of work
- Weighs 20 pounds

