

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Spanish Fashion at the Courts of Early Modern Europe

Review Number:

1792

Publish date:

Thursday, 9 July, 2015

Editor:

José Luis Colomer

Amalia Descalzo

ISBN:

9788415245445

Date of Publication:

2014

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

844pp.

Publisher:

Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica

Publisher url:

<http://www.ceeh.es/en/publicacion/spanish-fashion-at-the-courts-of-early-modern-europe-3/>

Place of Publication:

Madrid

Reviewer:

Tara Zanardi

The study of Spanish dress and fashion in the early modern period has generated exciting, innovative, and interdisciplinary scholarship in the past several years, and complements recent work devoted to historical dress, fashion, and textiles from distinct geographical locations and time periods. From scholarly articles produced by specialized journals, such as *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, *Material Culture Review*, and *Dress: The Journal of the Costume Society of America* and the comprehensive coverage of the history of dress in anthologies, including *The Fashion Reader* (now in its second edition) to exhibitions on historic and contemporary clothing and design, the history of fashion has received substantial scrutiny by an increasing number of researchers. Colomer's and Descalzo's two-volume anthology participates in this scholarly trend that lends critical attention to the consideration of fashion, textiles, and costume.

By highlighting one particular era in one centralized site, the early modern period in Europe, the anthology provides a useful introduction to Spanish fashion of the 16th and 17th centuries with in-depth essays that treat distinct themes relating to its dissemination at courts throughout Europe. Thus, the anthology focuses

on courtly dress within Spain and Spanish fashion's appropriations and modifications outside of Iberia. The anthology includes an introduction co-authored by the editors and five sections each with several essays. In total, the anthology offers 29 essays by a variety of scholars from different disciplines, including history, art history, fashion history, material culture, and literature, framed by distinct methodologies that examine the subject of dress, costume, and textiles through myriad lenses. Because not many extant garments from the 1500s and 1600s exist in good condition, the authors also rely on other forms of visual and textual sources, such as costume plates, paintings, descriptions, pattern books, inventories, tailors' treatises, and royal wardrobe accounts. In order to address the various topics, the anthology is organized in two volumes. The first considers Spanish court dress in the Habsburg period, and the second underscores the international ramifications, purposes, and perspectives of Spanish fashion's transmission across Europe. The anthology provides an impressive number of color illustrations, an index, and a list of authors with their affiliations. There is also a version published in Spanish.

Previous studies on early modern and Spanish dress feature some of the participants in this anthology, including Ruth de la Puerta, Carmen Bernis, and Aileen Ribeiro, among many others. Carmen Bernis has written extensively about early modern Spanish dress, from court fashions during the reigns of Charles V and the Catholic Kings to her study of dress and social types in *Don Quijote*.⁽¹⁾ Her contribution is the first portion of the essay, "Spanish female dress in the Habsburg period", co-authored with Descalzo, and is taken from Bernis's "La moda en la España de Felipe II a través del retrato de Corte".⁽²⁾ Ruth de la Puerta has written broadly on the history of dress, textile fabrication and techniques, guilds, and dressmakers. In *La segunda piel: historia del traje en España (del siglo XVI al XIX)* ⁽³⁾, she offered an expansive coverage of a wide range of topics related to dress history, including emblematic meanings for garments, their specific uses, and their modifications throughout the early modern and modern periods. Aileen Ribeiro's *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England* ⁽⁴⁾ highlighted the role of dress in the visual culture and literature of 17th-century England. While her focus is England, her book points out the crucial effect of Spanish styles during the early modern era and how specifically they were understood and interpreted by the English. Ribeiro's essay, "A story of pride and prejudice: perceptions of Spain and Spanish dress in seventeenth-century England?", in the anthology corresponds thematically with her book. The essay offers a close look at the fraught relationship between England and Spain in the 1600s and how this relationship was manifested in English descriptions and depictions of the Spanish and Spanish fashion. These commentaries and interpretations suggest both a fascination with and an aversion for Spanish dress.

Originating in the conference, "Vestir a la Española: Prestige and Usage of Spanish Fashion at the European Courts, Sixteenth-Seventeenth Centuries" in 2007, the anthology has a similar format and international group of authors with similarly themed essays. The conference was in part inspired by and a tribute to Carmen Bernis (1928-2001), and the anthology is dedicated to her memory. While some of the essays come directly from the papers presented at the conference, additional essays supplement these original topics to generate greater depth in the investigation of Spanish fashion. By focusing on Spain's "Golden Age", a period in which the Spanish court embodied the height of fashion and literary and artistic eminence, the authors seek to explore the manner by which Spanish dress promoted Spanish taste both within and outside of Spain. The authors address how clothing styles developed and transformed over the course of the early modern period, how these styles and their corresponding garments were experienced, manipulated, and refashioned, and the ways these fads circulated throughout Europe. In addition, the authors insist on clothing's potential social, economic, and political implications to argue the important and diverse meanings of dressing in specific styles, particular colors, or with individual garments. The essays equally address the process of influence as imperative for understanding the international impact of Spanish style and local participation and shifts in certain sartorial trends.

Colomer's and Descalzo's brief introduction establishes the "collective" nature of an anthology that utilizes the distinct expertise and perspectives of the authors. Such different voices and approaches give the text a comprehensive nature that serves the reader well. The authors propose that the study of Spanish fashion warrants a discussion of the political factors that helped to spread its influence to other European courts and the "dynastic and diplomatic agents who served as models of reference" (p. 9), thus many of the essays focus

on key figures responsible for disseminating Spanish clothing in different parts of Europe. Colomer and Descalzo also stress the vital role of practical considerations, such as technical and economic issues, which contribute to a particular garment's or trend's success. They position their two-volume text as the first to offer such a comprehensive and interdisciplinary scope of Spanish fashion during the 16th and 17th centuries.

The authors in *Spanish Fashion* present insightful readings and analyses of Spanish courtly dress, garments, and textiles, which are welcome additions to the recent body of work on the history of dress. Many of the authors look to archival materials and other primary sources to offer first-hand accounts of clothing, materials, and fashion. The anthology covers a range of subjects, from broad thematic studies, such as Colomer's 'Black and the royal image' to more focused essays on individual tastemakers and patrons, like Marie Louise d'Orléans (essay by Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset) and Catherine of Aragon (essay by Maria Hayward) and specific garments and styles, including the *Tapado* (essay by Carmen Peraita). Practical considerations, like royal wardrobes, clothing storage, and court tailors investigated by María José García Sierra and Sofía Rodríguez Bernis, provide examinations of essential subjects related to the history of dress.

In volume one, which is focused on dress in Spain, the first two essays, 'Spanish male costume in the Habsburg Period' by Descalzo, and 'Spanish female dress in the Habsburg Period', by Bernis and Descalzo, present suitable introductions to masculine and feminine dress in the early modern period with detailed information on the overall characteristics of male and female court dress, specific garments, including outer garments, undergarments, and footwear, and their shifting popularity and modifications, and the materials, such as wool, velvet, or silk, used to fabricate particular items. The authors also briefly discuss headgear and hairstyles.

As Descalzo states in her essay, 'Spain made its debut as a centre of creativity in the fashion world during the reign of the Catholic Monarchs' (p. 15), which coincided with Spain's emergence as the dominant imperial power. As Spain's geopolitical influence spread, the Spanish court emanated an image of elegance, sophistication, and supremacy, which appealed to other European courts. All social classes could partake in wearing individual garments and styles, but expensive dyes, fabrics, and trimmings could only be afforded by elites. At court, all clothing items, shades, and garments displayed were dictated by palace doctrine and regulated by sumptuary laws. Descalzo emphasizes the pivotal role fashion played in the ceremonial 'staging' of the king and the 'most powerful visual vehicle for transmitting the ideals of the monarchy' (p. 17). She asserts that Charles I (r. 1516-56) and Philip II (r. 1556-98) defined the image of the Spanish king, which combined local and international styles. The 16th century witnessed an increased delineation of male dress that restricted movement and emphasized an erect frame and head to lend poise to the wearer. Descalzo suggests that the 1500s marked the height of Spanish influence, although in the 17th century Spain continued to pioneer important developments in dress, including changes made by legal provisions (*pragmáticas*) to curb excessive spending on clothing, and to craft new silhouettes and styles, including the *golilla*, the famed collar associated with Philip IV (r. 1621-65).

As Bernis and Descalzo state, three elements of women's fashion were commonplace in the 16th century: the busk (*cartón de pecho*), farthingale (*verdugado*), and cork-soled platform shoes (*chapines*). Much like male fashion, women's garments tended to reduce movement and confine bodies, creating a rigid silhouette that continued throughout the 16th century with little variety. Changes in trends were seen more readily in the types of collars, headdresses, and hairstyles worn by women at court. The uniformity of women's ensembles continued into the 1600s, although the authors point out that just as it did in male fashion, Spanish influence in female dress began to wane abroad. The introduction of the *guardainfante* (bulkier-style farthingale of French origin) enhanced a woman's silhouette, adding volume around the hips. Despite women's adoption of this new trend, critical reception of and the distinct bans against this contraption lent it increased scandal. Women were not deterred by the criticism and legal action, making it the 'most original and striking feature of women's dress during the reign of Philip IV' (p. 64). Regardless of its popularity at the Spanish court, its Spanish appropriation first began outside the royal sphere.

Other essays in volume one continue themes related to court dress, its regulations, and its representations in visual and textual examples. De la Puerta's and Guarino's essays address sumptuary regulations and luxury

restrictions. The main purposes behind these provisions included reducing spending, limiting imports, establishing a sartorial and behavior model for courtiers to follow, and reinforcing differences among social classes, such as controlling the use of gold and silver thread and other decorative details that naturally increased the price of clothing. These topics are crucial for discussing the history of dress since they can often alter how dress develops locally and globally. More important, they also speak to the significance of dress for conveying meaning and influencing customs and the desire to mitigate the associations they may carry.

While all the essays make vital contributions to the anthology, it is worth noting several examples that offer innovative approaches or examine little-studied subjects. Laura R. Bass and Amanda Wunder highlight Madrid as a new site of high fashion and bustling urbanity, especially after Philip II designated it as the permanent capital in 1561, in "Fashion and urban views in seventeenth-century Madrid". They examine a group of little studied paintings of urban life and argue that these objects embodied and contributed to the "drama" of Madrid. They suggest Madrid was a highly theatrical city with processions, religious festivals, and two public playhouses. As they state, "Clothing and other material objects do not merely serve to identify the various social types depicted; they also create a dramatic picture of a period in the urban life of Madrid" (p. 370). Painted scenes of this burgeoning metropolis capture fashionable centers of the capital and represent them as crowded and diverse spaces where spectatorship was prevalent and clothing was an important distinguisher and marker.

To broaden the definition of "court dress" and the types of clothing associated with it, Cordula Van Wyhe's "The making and meaning of the monastic habit at Spanish Habsburg courts" suggests that the tailoring and meanings of monastic dress are essential to the overall study of court life under the Habsburgs, despite little scholarly work devoted to this topic. She focuses her essay on examples from Madrid and Brussels, and shows the rich integration of monastic garb at these courts to propose these sacred and secular spheres were tightly intertwined. Members of the house of Habsburg donned the monastic habit, as noted in contemporary written accounts and represented in portraits and engravings. She proposes that this practice coincided with a "radical change of appearance from magnificent court fashions to the somber habit of a nun or a Franciscan friar" and promoted "the idea of sacralized Habsburg rule" (p. 251). What is especially significant about Van Wyhe's essay is her discussion of the conflation of monastic and fashionable dress at court, evaluating specific cases of female monarchs. In the case of Empress Maria of Spain (1528-1603), Van Wyhe examines the complexities of this sartorial conflation and the potential connotations they had. In a portrait of the Empress by Juan Pantoja de la Cruz from ca. 1600, Van Wyhe explains that Empress Maria wears widow's weeds and not a habit. The widow's weeds were linked to monastic dress, and that for Habsburg widows such a garment signified the re-entrance into a life of celibacy and a means of self-promotion as their "husband's political heir" (p. 267). Despite wearing widow's weeds, Empress Maria alters the traditional outfit to include individualized fashionable elements that foreground her position at court and engender her political identity.

In volume two, several authors, including Maria Hayward, Franca Varallo, Paola Venturelli, Emilie E. S. Gordenker, and Beatrix Bastl and José Luis Colomer consider the spread of Spanish dress via the relocation of Spanish noblewomen to different foreign courts through marriage. In "Catalina Micaela at the Court of Savoy", Varallo explains that despite the recent interest in Catalina Micaela, much more research needs to be conducted on this influential royal figure. She argues that Catalina's significance was not felt simply in economic and political matters at the court at Turin, but also in the cultural sphere, through her impact on dress and women's hairstyles. As Varallo proposes, Catalina was a woman of "innately lavish and refined taste" who "not only imported Spanish fashion", but also "introduced a new lifestyle and taste" that lasted long after her death in 1597 (p. 66). The author states that without Catalina's influence, the court at Turin would not have kept "abreast of fashion".

To complement the discussions of Spaniards disseminating trends abroad, the essays by Sylvène Édouard, Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset, and Lesley Ellis Miller look to the varied ramifications of foreigners at the Spanish court and the ways in which these individuals may have altered (or been influenced by) the sartorial practices of men and women in Spain. In Miller's "An illustrious English gentleman dressed the Spanish

way: the visit of the Prince of Wales to Madrid in 1623?, she examines the pivotal role dress played during the Prince of Wales's visit to Madrid. As she notes, most of the scholarship on this event has foregrounded the 'political and artistic impact of Charles's visit' (p. 293). Miller instead highlights Charles's sartorial negotiation in Spain, which sometimes included the donning of Spanish dress, and examines the reasons behind his choices and their reception. Her essay situates Charles's garb in the context of his diplomatic mission to Spain, Catholic-Protestant relations, and the practice of royal gifting and exchange. Miller argues that the prince attempted to manage these delicate proceedings by using dress as a vehicle to express his knowledge of Spanish etiquette and his sensitivity to Spanish traditions, potentially useful strategies when engaging in diplomacy.

Overall, the anthology is well-suited for undergraduate study and advanced research in art history, material culture, and fashion history. Because of the number of essays included and the variety of topics addressed, it would have been helpful to have included an extended introduction to synthesize the ideas presented in the essays, explain the organizational choices and framework, and address more fully the interdisciplinary scope of the anthology. In order to situate the anthology's place within an existing body of literature, a short historiography would have also been useful. In addition, it would have been beneficial to have some concluding remarks. For example, how did early modern fashions shift in later periods? How were certain garments or styles transformed, discarded, refashioned for new collective or individual purposes, and ridiculed or praised in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries? What clothing items are still used in contemporary Spain and viewed as definitively Spanish? How far did Spanish sartorial trends travel, especially beyond European borders? While such questions are outside the parameters of the anthology, the editors could certainly speak to these issues in a conclusion to argue both the historic merit and the contemporary relevance of early modern dress.

Despite these minor criticisms, the anthology is an invaluable resource for the study of Spanish dress. It enriches the discussion of the early modern period, validating fashion as fundamental to court life. The authors point to dress as a crucial component to the crafting of individual and courtly identities and as an indispensable means to communicate and transmit taste. The anthology sheds new light on understudied subjects with historically informed and critically integrated essays that utilize non-canonical illustrations and rich archival sources. The editors bring together the essays in a compelling way to provide researchers with an extensive and diverse array of material. The anthology should propel future study in the history of Spanish dress of the early modern period and invigorate the field of fashion history.

Notes

1. Carmen Bernis, *Don Quijote* (Madrid: Ediciones El Viso, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Carmen Bernis, 'La moda en la España de Felipe II a través del retrato de Corte,' in *Alonso Sánchez Coello y el retrato en la corte de Felipe II*, ed. Juan Miguel Serrera (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1990): 65-111.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ruth de la Puerta, *La segunda piel: historia del traje en España (del siglo XVI al XIX)* (Valencia: Biblioteca Valenciana, 2006).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Aileen Ribeiro, *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1792>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/129113>