

Medieval Clothing and Textiles

Recent Books of Interest

Spanish Fashion at the Courts of Early Modern Europe, edited by José Luis Colomer and Amalia Descalzo (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2014). ISBN 978-8415245445. 844 pages in 2 volumes, 405 color illustrations.

This two-volume set seeks to give the reader a full understanding of clothing and material culture in early modern Spain, including its political connections as well as its social implications in both upper and lower classes. Its nearly 30 chapters, written by different scholars, are densely packed with information and well worth the read.

Volume I begins with menswear in the Habsburg Period and follows with womenswear. The first two chapters shower us with the vocabulary of clothing and definitions of specific clothing types, their uses, and, in some small measure, perceptions and popularity of individual styles. The descriptions, taken from historical texts, are troves of valuable tidbits. The following chapter discusses in great detail the reasons behind the prevalence of “Spanish black” and the journey that brought the color such wide acclaim, including enlightening information about dyes and methods to create the deeply coveted “raven’s wing black.” The volume goes on to discuss the tremendously varied occupation of tailoring and the different job posts within the court, including how individuals were paid, how often they changed posts, and what other trades were intimately linked with the process of making clothing for the court. The research also encompasses the storage, maintenance, and rhythm of the use of clothing, and even how clothing appears to have influenced such matters as the design and construction of storage chests and beds. Volume I also looks at the ups and downs of the textile trade and gives concise information about different fibers, their uses, and seasonal preferences, as well as laws governing their manufacture and use. The final chapters are devoted to the meaning of dress and the various coded stylings of clothing and accessories. There is a brief foray into monastic styles, mostly in relation to mourning. Of particular interest is the chapter on methods for researching Spanish dress and material culture. In short, Volume I contains more high-quality information about Spanish clothing in a single volume than one could hope for, making the reader feel much more connected to the period, in part because of the similarities to our own modern interactions with personal attire.

Volume II broadens this understanding by giving a more detailed sociopolitical context to Spanish dress and how it spread throughout Europe. Focusing on specific monarchs, their fashion influences, and the way they were perceived helps the reader to understand better how these people became fashion icons and influencers in their day. Nation by nation and court by court, this volume demonstrates how style changed because of individuals, as well as how and why those changes either persisted or vanished from the fashion stage. The final chapters explore the perception of Spanish fashion in other countries.

This invaluable resource belongs in the hands of everyone who has an interest in Spanish fashion and its cultural influences on Europe as a whole. Even for the individual who is just starting a journey into the complex world of Spain, this brilliant compilation can be mind-opening to the depth of interconnectedness of fashion, perception, legislation, craftsmen, culture, and social standing. — *Mathew Gnagy, Parsons University of Fashion Design*