Renaissance Fashion - Women's Clothing in Elizabethan England

By Dolores Monet

The Elizabethan period in costume design refers to that time encompassed by the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (from 1558 - 1603) during the Renaissance. The daughter of King Henry VIII and Ann Boleyn, Elizabeth became one of the world's most famous monarchs. The style of clothing and fashions of the Elizabethan era are distinctive and striking, easily recognizable today and popular with designers of historic costume.

As in the Middle Ages, the fabrics used to create garments of the Elizabethans were wool and linen. Clothing worn by the upper classes also included silk, cotton, and other imported fabrics. Fashions worn by the elite inspired the dress of lower classes and rural women, though the fabric, weave, and embellishments improved with economic status.

The clothing worn by Elizabethans look heavy and over done to many of us today. But weather in England during the period was cool and wet as northern Europe shivered in the grip of a mini Ice Age. So the heaviness of Elizabethan fashion was out of necessity, yet is remembered as romantic and beautiful, and still popular as seen at the Renaissance Festivals of modern times.

Queen Elizabeth I
Elizabethan England - Historical Background

Elizabeth Tudor, daughter of Henry VIII and Ann Boleyn ascended to the throne of England after the death of her half sister Mary (daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon). Henry VIII had assumed the role as leader of the Church in England when the Catholic Pope refused to grant Henry an annulment from Catherine of Aragon. During those difficult times, the idea of freedom of religion was not on anyone's mind. Religion was a state establishment so the fight was over which religion would be the state religion.

England, at the time, was still basically a feudal society. Most people lived in the country. In Elizabethan family based culture, the nuclear family, servants, and apprentices lived and worked in close proximity. While women were subservient to men and performed the usual household chores, their work also included the care of livestock and kitchen garden; assistance at harvest; the making of cheese, butter, candles, and soap. Women commonly had basic medical skills, spun wool, and knit.

Employment opportunities included domestic service, laundry and
seamstress work. The wife of a craftsman might assist in the shop, the running of a business, or take over the business if widowed. Women earned money by selling produce, eggs, butter, spun wool, and other items made or produced at home.

The population exploded during Elizabeth's reign despite widespread disease including several outbursts of plague. Irish troubles, war with Spain, and a growing underclass of unemployed poor added to Elizabeth's challenges. But in a time when women were subservient to men, a woman ruled a great and powerful nation.

**Damask**

[Images of Damask patterns]

*An example of damask - Italian, 14th century*

**Elizabethan Clothing - Textiles**

Linen and wool were the most common fabrics used during the Elizabethan era. As in the Middle Ages, people wore linen undergarments next to the skin. Linen, made from the flax plant is
comfortable, cool, and easy to launder. In a time when people rarely washed their clothes, linen could be washed and became softer with use.

- **Wool** keeps the body warm in cold weather, and cool in warm weather. Wool produces long lasting fabrics, takes dyes well, and does not absorb moisture.

- **Fulled wool**, or heavily felted wool is tough and durable. Felted wool, that is wool that is washed to shrink, was often so dense that it did not need hemming as it would not unravel.

- Both **wool and linen** appeared in finer weaves for the upper classes. Linen, imported from France and the Low Countries, appeared in heavy or finer weaves with Lawn being the finest weave.

- **Imported cotton** was used to create fabrics and blended with linen to make Fustian.

- For thick, dense fabrics, **canvas** was made of hemp.

The luxurious fashions depicted in Elizabethan art work most often reflect the clothing worn by royalty, the nobility, and the elite. The upper classes wore garments made of silk, satin, velvet, damask, and taffeta, in addition to wool and linen. Finer linens were bleached in the sun, embroidered, or block printed. Fashionable embellishments included braiding, borders, embroidery, lace, guarding (ribbon trim), and gems or pearls sewn onto the fabric.

- **Leather** was used to make shoes, gloves, hats, belts, and men's doublets and breeches.

- **Colors** came from natural dyes that often faded, so even richly colored garments became muted over time. Brown and gray, cheaper dyes, were the obvious choice of the lower classes. Blue, another somewhat inexpensive dye is associated with servants and apprentices. Blue fades easily, so a light shade was predominant.

- **Black**, an expensive to make and very fashionable shade, popular in Spain, shows up often in royal portraits of Elizabethan England, especially for men.

- **Two shades of red** occur frequently in Elizabethan clothing.
russet red, made from the plant called madder created a warm, homey hue, while a brighter crimson red, made from imported dyes was reserved for royalty.

Elizabethan Style - Layers

Undergarments made of linen were easy to wash and often the only garments that were laundered. Both men and women wore similar under shirts, much like the under tunics of the Middles Ages. Women's under-gowns, or smocks, reached the knee or fell full length.

A kirtle was a long, slightly fitted dress without a defined waistline, a simple garment similar to those worn during the Middle Ages. On top of this, a woman wore a bodice, several layers of petti-coats (or skirts), and a cloak.

Layers were needed for comfort in the chilly, damp climate of Elizabethan England.

Elizabethan Costume - V Shaped Bodice, Ruff, and Split Skirt with Matching Sleeves
The Elizabethan Bodice

A bodice is a close fitting garment for the upper body. Elizabethan bodices were quite stiff, severe, and almost masculine in a shape that presented wide shoulders, and a small waist like an inverted triangle. Some bodices drew into a narrow V shape at the waist as pictured on the right.

Necklines changed over the years. While low necklines were popular at the beginning and toward the end of Elizabeth’s reign, necklines were high in the middle years.

Young, unmarried women wore lower bodice necklines. Often, a high necked smock, worn with a low necked bodice, created an interesting contrast between the heavy bodice fabric and the lighter muslin or linen of the smock.

Bodices often featured decorative tabs called pickadills at the waist.
Also, with embellishment by rolls or wings at the armholes, the same bodice could appear quite different with detachable sleeves for variety.

The fashionable elite used whale bone (baleen) stiffening, willow wood, or steel in their bodices. A busk was an extra piece used for stiffening and was made from wood, bone, or ivory, and attached by a ribbon at the top. The tiny ribbon often seen today at the top center of a bra is a last reminder of the busk.

The flattened bosom and stiffened upper torso restricted upper body movement so was limited to the idle elite. Working women and commoners would have been unable to function with such restriction. Front laced bodices (so popular with Renaissance Fair attendees) were worn by working and common women. Back laced bodices were limited to women with servants. Bodices were fastened by lacing or with hook and eye.

Detachable sleeves added pizzazz and variety to a bodice (as mentioned above). The wide, cuffed trumpet shaped sleeves of the 1540's - 1550's gave way to a narrower Spanish style sleeve. A high, wide appearance with slashed upper sleeves evolved into shoulder loops, pads, and the elaborate shoulder rolls of the 1580's.

False sleeves created an elegant style when elongated at the back to drape down to the floor.

**Eizabethan Woman Wearing Lace Ruff**
The Ruff - An Elizabethan Collar

One of the most distinctive elements of Elizabethan fashion is the exaggerated collar called a ruff.

Early on, a gathered neckline produced a simple ruffle at the neck. Later, a separate piece of detachable ruffle could be tied around the neck. The ruff became more elaborate and eventually took on the gargantuan proportions that framed the face.

In 1565, the addition of starch created the ability to increase the size and height of the ruff. By 1580, ruffs became so massive, they required a wire framework for support. Ruffs were made of fine muslin or lace, or muslin trimmed with lace and often paired with matching cuffs at the wrist.

Late Elizabethan fashions included a falling band which was a separate, detachable collar made of lace or embroidered linen.

Common women and country women often wore a chin cloth to protect their faces and skin from the sun and wind. They also wore a
kerchief over their shoulders.

Elizabethan Clothing - 2 Londoners and a Country Woman - the Lady on the Left is Wearing a Coif on her Head, the Lady on the Right is Wearing a Kerchief

Queen Elizabeth I wearing a wheeled farthingale
Elizabethan Skirts and the Farthingale

Elizabethan style demanded a tight upper body paired with a voluminous lower body. A heavy outer skirt split open into an A-line shape in the center, revealed an attractive under-skirt or petti-coat. Sometimes the exposed under-skirt or forepart was paired with matching bodice sleeves.

While cool weather created the need to wear several layers of petti-coats for warmth, skirt size became an extreme fashion trend.

The Farthingale was the hoop skirt of Renaissance costume. Beginning as a padded roll to extend the width of the the top of the skirt, it evolved into a hoop skirt - circular strips of whale bone (baleen), wood, or steel were inserted horizontally into the fabric of an under skirt.
Originating in Spain to create a dome shaped skirt, a farthingale held skirt fabric away from the legs and offered ease of movement. A lower class woman might wear a padded roll for fashion as well as convenience.

The wheel farthingale produced the exaggerated, huge skirt pictured at the right.

Skirts often featured hems or borders that could be easily replaced if worn out or soiled.

A belt or 'girdle' functioned as a hanger for carrying items such as purses and bags for the elite and common people of both genders.

**Elizabethan Shoes and Footwear**

Shoes of the Elizabethan period were generally blunt toed and flat, and made of leather or fabric. Women's dress shoes made of silk, velvet, or brocade were often decorated with embellishments.

Early Elizabethan slip-ons gave way to laced or buckled shoes.

Most shoes of the time were made the same for both feet. After wearing, the leather or fabric molded to the shape of the foot.

Platform or high heeled shoes originated for convenience. Pattens were tie-on over shoes that held the foot up off the ground, protecting the shoe from dirt, mud, or debris. Similarly, chopines made of cork or wood lifted the foot up away from debris or dirt in work places, on roads, or in the street.

The Renaissance introduced the wearing of high heels for vanity and style. Mary Tudor (1/2 sister of Queen Elizabeth) wore high heels to improve her stature and appear more regal.

**Woman Wearing French Hood**
Elizabethan Hair, Hats, and Face

Women wore their hair long when young and unmarried, often adding headbands or circlets of fresh flowers. After marriage, women pinned up and covered their hair. Fashionable women added hair extensions, golden chains, pearls, or feathers int elaborately braided or twisted hair styles.

A coif was a close fitting cap made of linen, sometimes referred to as a Mary Stuart cap (after Mary Queen of Scots) who wore one in a famous portrait. A Woman might wear a hat on top of a coif.

Early Elizabethen women wore a French hood, a fabric bonnet shaped with wires, a style introduced to England by Elizabeth's mother, Ann Boleyn. The half moon or crescent shaped style was a glorified head-band with a veil attached at the rear.

The Attifet, similar to the French hood, dipped in the center to create a heart shape, often decorated with the addition of lace.
A caul was an attractive hair net or snood, worn simply or festooned with decorations such as pearls or beads.

Between 1568 - 1574, Sumptuary laws (an old fashioned method of keeping people in their place by regulating attire) required all women, unless gentle women, the wives of nobility, to cover their hair.

A kercher or kerchief, a triangular piece of muslin tied around the head and was worn under a hat.

Women also wore pill box hats, flat hats (like a beret), and small brimmed hats similar to men's hats.

The ideal Elizabethan face was pale and sometimes highlighted by the application of cosmetics - rouge for the cheeks and a bit of color on the lips. Occasionally, eye lids were tinted. Cosmetics were used by the fashion elite and were lead based products.

Perfume was popular for both men and women and almost necessary at a time when bathing was a rare occurrence.

(All of the pictures used in this article are from wikimedia commons)
Making Armour

The manufacture of plate armour was a complicated process which required a number of different specialist craftsmen:

- The armourer or "hammerman" who shaped the plates
- The polisher or "millman" who polished the shaped pieces
- The locksmith who made the hinges and fastenings (only employed in larger workshops)
- The finisher who assembled the whole suit and fitted its strappings, linings, padding and leather gloves
- In the case of fine armour, etchers, gilders and painters were then employed to complete the decoration

Plate armour was made from billets of iron, which were hammered cold into flat sheets and then cut to size with large shears. Most of the plates seem to have been worked cold and only heated occasionally to allow detailed work such as the turned edges to be done. Once holes were made for rivets and other fastenings, the pieces of armour were packed on the outside with charcoal and 'cooked' in the oven. The charcoal reacted with the iron to form steel on the outer layer of metal, the inside remaining softer iron.

The plates were then sent to the millman who would polish them on a water powered wheel giving them a shiny finish and removing all hammer marks. The pieces were then sent back to the master armourer or finisher who assembled the suit in the right order. If the armour was to be decorated, it would then be sent on to the etchers, gilders and painters.

The most difficult design problem faced by armourers was to give protection whilst providing sufficient mobility. Wherever greater movement was needed than could be provided by a hinge-at the top of the arms or on the skirt for example- the armour was made of smaller plates called lames. These were attached by rivets to backing straps of leather. The rivets passed through slots in the leather and so could slide smoothly over each other.

However well a suit of armour fitted, the soldier needed protection from the constant chaffing of sheet metal and from the impact of the armour against his body. The undergarments therefore also served a vital protective role. Beneath their armour, soldiers wore a first layer of a linen shirt and underdrawers, woollen hose and shoes. On top of the shirt a padded arming doublet made of a double thickness of leather stuffed with boiled wool, prevented chaffing and acted as a shock absorber. The arming doublet had extra padding on those parts especially at risk and was reinforced with mail to protect those places too awkward for plate armour. An arming cap made of stuffed leather was fixed into the lining of the helmet to protect the skull from impact.

A suit of armour weighed between 18-27 kg and so the arming doublet also played its part in preventing too much discomfort from the drag of this weight. However, in a well-fitting suit, the weight was evenly distributed over the body and was actually less than the modern soldier carries. ‘Complete Equipment Marching Orders’ for a modern soldier is 36 kg and 53 kg for a paratrooper.

Style

A good suit of armour could also act as a statement of fashion and status; it was very expensive. The finest armour was made in the workshops of southern Germany and northern Italy and many armourers marked their work. It was not until the time of Henry VIII, who founded an armoury at Greenwich, that armour made in England matched the quality of that made on the Continent.

The design of armour was greatly affected by changes in men’s dress. As medieval costume gave way to the puffed and slashed trunkhose and doublet, the full sleeves and blunt-toed shoes of the Tudor age, the style of armour reflected these changes. The body armour (cuirass and skirt) became full and rounded with straight cut necklines, the shoes (sabatons) rounded or square-toed.