

Fabrics and fashion in clothing of the 18th century

by BÁRBARA ROSILLO, PhD in Art History

¹ I have covered this topic more extensively and in more detail in my book: *La moda en la sociedad sevillana del siglo XVIII*, which won second place in the Art category of the *Archivo Hispalense* 2016 awards. Sección Arte, serie 1, nº 58. Excelentísima Diputación de Sevilla, 2018, pp. 295.

Notary records are an essential source in studying fashion and the household furnishings throughout the Modern Era. Dowry letters and post-mortem inventories give us a huge amount of information on textiles, both those used to make clothing and those for household items. These sources provide first-hand knowledge of the type of garments women and men wore, from underwear to suits, as well as the many accessories¹.

The dowry was laid out in a document before a scribe and witnesses. With the parties present, the grantor and the future husband, a letter of payment and receipt was signed, which contained a detailed list of the tangible and intangible items in the dowry. Providing a dowry was nearly essential to get married, so it was a practice seen at all levels of the social spectrum, from ladies of high nobility to poor damsels. This type of document is of great interest, as it shows all the pieces that were part of the female wardrobe, including the fabrics, colours and decorations.

To learn about male garments, we must turn to post-mortem inventories and appraisals of goods, or a type of document known as “capital” or “capital” inventory, which some men gave the families of their future bride before the wedding. It is important to remember that clothing was very expensive, so it had many lives. Sometimes we’ve even seen that items were left to others in wills, or that some testaments set aside an amount for those in need to buy clothing. To make up the dowries and inventories, people could turn to various professionals to appraise the goods, such as tailors for the clothing or woodworkers for the furniture.

In the Modern Era, the main industrial activity was textiles. Until the 18th century, the most common materials were linen, wool and silk. In Spain, all sorts of fabrics were manufactured, the most common being wool materials like felt and cloths. In fact, in 1630, wool from Segovia and Molina de Aragón were traded on the Amsterdam stock exchange. Studying these records tells us about the different types of fabrics on the market, with their origin if they were not Spanish. Seville received goods from Portugal, France, England and Italy, while we often see linen from Bizkaia, fine cloth from Segovia and Grazalema, silk from Valencia and stockings from Toledo.

Wedding dress. 18th century.
Netherlands. Rijksmuseum.
Amsterdam.



In general, the dowry letters and receipts listed the bride's clothing, the bed with all of the necessary accessories (mattress, sheets, pillows, duvets, bedspreads or drapery), and possibly furnishing for the household, cash and jewels. Likewise, male fashion can be seen through analysis of the post-mortem inventories, which often included not only the deceased's clothing but also that of the whole family: wife, husband, children, servants or slaves. By analysing the notary records from Seville between 1700 and 1800, we've reached the conclusion that the bride's clothing made up a significant part of the dowry. That is why this type of records are key to research on clothing. The letters included a list of all the garments with their corresponding appraisal, which shows their high value compared to other items in the dowry, such as furnishing and paintings. The clothing clearly denoted social status. These issues were of the utmost importance during the Old Regime.

A lady or gentleman was known as such for their clothing and their presence had to unequivocally reflect their position in society, as this position clearly corresponded with their appearance. The different social classes wore practically

Stomacher. Circa 1720.
Metropolitan Museum. New York.



Pair of shoes. Circa 1720s.
Victoria and Albert Museum.





Anonymous. *Portrait of Antonio del Carmen de Castilla and Páez Casino*, Marquis de La Granja. Circa 1750. Private collection. Seville. Photo © Carmen de Olivar.



Anonymous. *Portrait of a lady*. Circa 1790. Palace of Lebrija, Seville. Photo © Antonio del Junco.

the same items of clothing, with the same names: *hongarina* (waterproof overcoat), *casaca* (dress coat), *chupa* (waistcoat), *calzones* (breeches), *guardapiés*, *basquiña* and *saya* (types of skirts), etc. The difference lay mainly in the materials and decorations used. Underwear for both sexes was made of linen, which is sometimes called ‘*lienzo*’ and defined in the *Diccionario de Autoridades* as: “*La tela que se fabrica del lino o cáñamo, el cual se hace de diferentes géneros bastos y finos, de que se hacen camisas, sábanas y otras muchas cosas*” (The fabric made of linen or hemp, which comes in rougher and finer qualities, from which shirts, sheets and many other items are made). Men wore shirts and underpants, while the women wore shirts, shifts and, rarely, underpants. The shirt was considered a second skin and wearing a clean one was a sign of good hygiene and cleanliness. The pattern was simple, and they were made of all sorts of linen fabrics, from the roughest to the finest and most expensive, like “*holanda*” and “*bretaña*”. It was quite common for the body of the garment to be in one material and the sleeves, another. The shirts, underpants and shifts of the rich could be decorated with lace, as were other household linens and undergarments. In the 18th century, this handicraft was at its peak and is often found both in underwear and outerwear or accessories like handkerchiefs and mantillas. Lace, as it was costly and could drastically increase the value of any garment, was always recorded. Fashion brought in lace collars and cuffs, which are sometimes noted as separate pieces.

The dowry letters always include underwear, although not many pieces, mentioning new ones as frequently as those already worn. Some documents for

Corset. Early 18th century. Spain.
Metropolitan Museum. New York.



important figures group all the household linens and undergarments under a heading labelled “*ropa blanca*” (literally, white clothing), “*vestiduras blancas*” (white garments) or “*vestiduras de ropa blanca*” (white clothing garments). These show us how spaniards dressed under their clothing in the 18th century. These headings could include shirts, “*camisolas*” (kind of more luxurious shirts), breeches, doublets, hair capes, towels, night gowns, sleeping caps, handkerchiefs and beard towels; while the women’s items included shirts, petticoat, bodices, doublets, corsets, night gowns, towels and hair capes.

In terms of outerwear, in the last quarter of the 17th century, gala fashion became popular, so that by 1707 the common society dress in Spain was French. During the Enlightenment, tastes became international. All of Europe followed French styles, which had become the supreme arbiter of fashion. The men’s suit was made up of a dress coat, waistcoat and breeches, a look based on military dress and brought into the civil sphere by Louis XIV. In Spain, it is often called “*traje a lo militar*” (military suit) or “*a la moda*” (fashion suit).

Courtier's suit. Circa 1760.
LACMA. Los Angeles.



The notary records also note that men's clothing was made of similar fabrics to women's garments, including embroidery and decorations over wide swaths. The inventories generally include the colour, material and decorations of the garments. They also frequently mention the conditions, even when they can no longer be worn. The *casaca* was a knee-length dress coat with wide sleeves and a box neck. It had large buttons on the front, from top to bottom, and a pocket with flap on either side. The buttons could be gold, silver, metal, filigree or covered in the same fabric as the jacket. This garment was fitted with side darts starting at the waist, so it had some drape. To give it more shape, it had an interlining made of stiff linen, stuffing or even horsehair. Its shape became simplified over the course of the century, with the sleeves losing volume and becoming more fitted to the arm. The *chupa* (waistcoat) was hip-length and originally had sleeves.

Robe à la polonoise. Circa 1780.
Metropolitan Museum. New York.



Later, the sleeves disappeared and it became a vest. The dress coat and breeches were a set, but the waistcoat was separate and interchangeable. The front featured decoration that gradually came to be seen on the dress coat, while the back was made of simpler materials as it wasn't visible. The waistcoat was normally worn somewhat open to leave space for the tie. Men's suits were made of a wide variety of fabrics, although in 18th century Seville the most common were cloth and lightweight wool, as well as taffeta for the lining. We have also found references to silk, satin, lamé, taffeta, barracan and thin wool. In terms of colours, the most common are various tones of black and brown. However, the men also wore red, blue, white, green, purple and pink.

Womenswear featured a wide variety of garments and accessories. In the early 18th century, the most common outfit seen in the documents is made up of several garments, which could be combined in different ways. On top,

Robe à la française.
 Circa 1770-1775. The Kyoto
 Costume Institute.
[See more.](#)



women wore *hongarinas* (waterproof overcoat), corsets and dress coats; and on the bottom, there were three different types of skirts: *guardapiés*, *saya* and *basquiña*. All of these garments were worn by women from all social classes, although in different fabrics, colours and decorations. We often see taffeta, various sorts of felt, satin, damask and thick silk, among others. There are also rich materials like brocade and silk lamé in silver and gold. Around the middle of the century, we see pastel tones, typical of the Rococo style, like pinks and sky blues, as well as flower embroidery. In terms of full dresses, the ladies of Seville wore sack-back gowns, polonaises and close-bodied gowns. The sack-back gown or robe à la française appears in the documents of noblewomen. One example is the dowry of Inés María de Barradas (1768), which included four appraised at 15,200 reals, the most luxurious of which was decorated in overlapping silver and flower lace. The polonaise was created by Rose Bertin, Marie Antoinette's seamstress. What set it apart was that the volume was in the

back of the skirt, while the close-bodied gown or robe à l'anglaise had boning in the bodice. Finally, it must be noted that both of these models appear in the wardrobes of Seville through the end of the century. They were made in all sorts of fabrics, like linen and silk; but we also see that cotton becomes popular very quickly in the form of muslin and paisley, a printed fabric from the East Indies.

After an extensive study of vesture and dress-code though all different social cases in Seville, and consequently in Spain during the 18th century, it is unquestionable that french-style fashion was dominant at that time. Nevertheless there are some clothing elements, which are clearly of national origin and which take an important part in people's garment. The cape for men appears constantly, at wich the segovian cloth was especially appreciated for its high quality. Also cloaks, which had been used since the medieval times, were very common in a masculine wardrobe at that time.

Regarding feminine equipments, we find a lot of mantillas and cloaks. The latter ones could be of different types, such as "de soplillo" (very thing fabrics), "de humo" (mourning garment) or "de lustre" (glitering materials), but also often mentioned are cloaks of raw cloth. They were generally black. The mantilla was day-to-day ornament used in all social categories. The inexpensive ones were made of white fine cloth. Others were manufactured with diverse materials, colors and decorations, wich made their production very high-priced. Their colors rande from white to black, reaching green, light-blue and rose tones. There were often decorated with plaits and fillets and lacing was highly value. Some pieces hade ven different fabrics and colors on front and back side. According to several accounts of travelers at that time, the mantilla was highly admired by foreigners and transformed it into a characteristic attribute for the spanish woman. ●