

An exploration of 16th century French dress

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A copy of this paper and more images/information can be found on
<http://frenchrenaissancecostume.com>

What this paper covers:

- This paper covers 16th century female fashions in France.
- It covers mostly upper class dress with some middle class.

Things to bear in mind:

- France was not one homogenous country
- It was a collection of regions, under feudal allegiance to the French crown
- Those regions had different cultures, wealth and even languages. There were regional dress variations, but they are beyond the scope of this paper.

1 First quarter of 16th century

Early in the century the French fashions became strongly influenced by Italian fashion, due to Francis I's interest in renaissance arts coming from Italy and ongoing wars which led to increase in communication and exposure to Italian fashions.

So in this early period you see the heavier bulkier French fashions and the lighter, more elegant Italian fashions. A good illustration is in this early 1500s tapestry (in Cluny museum):



The lady on the left is dressed in the Italian style. The lady on the right is in the typical early 16th century French style.

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1.1 Gown

The bodice of the gowns is mostly undecorated, with a square neckline. The neckline is quite high on the French-style gowns early in the century and gets lower and wider towards the later part of the first quarter of the century. The neckline on the Italian-influenced gowns is lower.

I have seen two instances of a decorated bodice – one on an Italian-style gown early in the century (*image 1-9*) and one on a painting of Claude of France in about 1520 (*image 1-12*)

The gowns could have front closures (eg. *image 1-2*), or back closures (eg. *image 1-13*). Because it is hard to see side closures in images, it is not clear whether side-closing gowns existed. I haven't seen any pictures with external lacing being visible in front closures, so presumably they have internal lacing or possibly hooks and eyes.

Many of the early French-style gowns do not have a waist seam - eg. *images 1-2 and 1-3*). However, with many other gowns it is difficult to tell because the ladies often wear a girdle on their waist (eg. *images 1-5, 1-6 and 1-13*). The Italian style gowns all have a waist seam (eg. *images 1-10, 1-11*)

1.2 Sleeves

The sleeves of French-style gowns early in the century are “bombard sleeves” - voluminous, loose sleeves very wide at the wrist and turned back at the cuff. They are often trimmed with rich fabric or fur.

They are otherwise undecorated and are not slashed and appear to be always set in and not removable. See *images 1-1 to 1-8*

Underneath these wide sleeves there is an under-sleeve, which can be decorated or slashed. See *images 1-5 to 1-8*

It is not clear whether these under-sleeves are permanently attached to an under-dress or are a separate accessory, but I would guess the latter.

The turned back sleeves continue to be worn until almost mid-century, although the top of the sleeve becomes tighter and acquires decoration.

The Italian style gowns that are becoming more popular at this time have narrow fitted sleeves, often in two parts, and laced at the shoulder, with puffs of chemise showing through the gaps. See *images 1-9 to 1-11*

1.3 Skirts

The skirts are very full, with most of the fullness gathered at the back. Some of them are split in front, revealing an underskirt (eg. *images 1-3, 1-9, 1-11, 1-14*), others are not (eg. *Images 1-1 to 1-3, 1-6, 1-10*).

There are several that appear to have a split in the side (*Images 1-11 and 1-15*). Where a skirt is not split, a part of the hem is often tucked up to reveal the lining and the underskirt (eg. *images 1-1, 1-11 and 1-16*).

The skirts are soft and flowing, there is no farthingale or any apparent support undergarment worn.

1.4 Under-dress

Under the top gown one can always see an under-gown, usually, but not always also square necked, cut slightly higher than the over-gown and almost always black (*images 1-1 to 1-3, 1-5 to 1-9 and 1-14*) In the *image 1-14* the last lady on the right is wearing a v-necked under-dress. It is not clear whether the entire under-gown is black or whether, black being an expensive colour to produce, only the neckline is trimmed with black so as to display the rich fabric where it is visible. Given the wide-spread practice of using rich fabrics in visible places only (for example, skirt foreparts), the latter seems to be the more probable option.

1.5 Partlets

There do not appear to be any partlets worn earlier in the quarter century. The chemise is square-necked and occasionally peeks out of the square-cut neckline of the gown and under-gown.

Partlets start to emerge towards the end of the quarter and are worn over the gown (*Image 1-17*)

1.6 Accessories

The ladies often wear girdles, often with beads or tassels at the end (*images 1-1, 1-11 and 1-16*), or sashes tied to form a loop (*images 1-5, 1-6*).

As jewellery, they also wear large pendants on a chain (*images 1-1, 1-5, 1-11, 1-14, 1-15*), or necklaces (*images 1-2, 1-3, 1-6, 1-7 and 1-9*). Sometimes two necklaces are worn, one sitting wide across the bust and one descending down into the dress (eg. *images 1-6 and 1-7*). The trend for wearing multiple necklaces continues into the late 16th century.

1.7 Headgear

For most of this period the most common form of headdress is an early version of the French hood.

It was made popular by Anne of Bretagne and is a layered head-dress, probably consisting of a coif, sometimes with a frilled edge, a cap, sometimes with a decorated edge and a hood/veil, often with a decorated front edge. There may be one or more other layers there.

During the earlier period, the hood/veil was long at the sides (see eg. *images 1-2 to 1-5, 1-14, 1-18 and 1-20*), sometimes with a slit on the side (eg. *image 1-22*). Later, the sides of the hood became shorter and the veil at the back narrower/more pleated (see eg. *images 1-7, 1-8, 1-17, 1-19, 1-21 and 1-22*).

Sometimes the veil was placed over the head to form a shadow or a bongrace. (eg. *image 1-5*). A form of this head-dress became very popular with middle-class ladies in the second half of the century.

1500 to 1525 images

Image 1-1



c1500 - Tapestry of the scenes of Court: The bath.
From the Cluny Musee National du Moyen Age

Image 1-2



1503 – Illumination from a Manuscript by Jean PICHORE

Image 1-3



Before 1514 - Anne of Brittany (1477-1514) with her ladies. Painting in Musée Dobrée, Nantes, France

Image 1-4



1506 (approx) - Hélène de Chambes-Montsoreau,

Image 1-5



Before 1514 – Anne of Bretagne in "Epistres Envoyées au Roi"

Image 1-6



Early 16th century - Tapestry of the scenes of Court: gentlewoman embroidering

Image 1-7



~1525 - Madame de Canaples by Jean Clouet

Image 1-8



Exact date unknown - French - Jeunes gens et jeunes femmes autour d'une table

Image 1-9



Early 16th century - Tapestry of the scenes of Court: gentlewoman embroidering – Cluny museum

Image 1-10



Album of Calendar Miniatures, France, ~ 1517–20 by the Master of Claude de France

Image 1-11



Early 16th century Tapestry at Cluny museum

Image 1-12



~1520 – Claude of France and her daughters

Image 1-13



1515 - David and Bathsheba, French Book of Hours

Image 1-14



Before 1514 - "Epistres Envoyées au Roi"

Image 1-15



C1500 Cluny tapestry

Image 1-16



1524 - Parisian Book of Hours by Jehan de Luc

Image 1-17



Approx 1525 sketch of an unknown woman by Jean Clouet.

Image 1-18



Early 16th century - Portrait of a woman by Jean Perreal

Image 1-19



Anne de Bretagne, prior to 1514.

Image 1-20



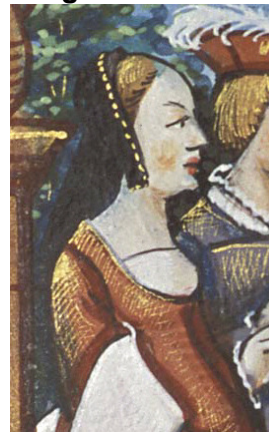
Anne de Bretagne from "Epistres Envoyées au Roi"

Image 1-21



1515 - David and Bathsheba, French Book of Hours

Image 1-22



1524 - Parisian Book of Hours by Jehan de Luc

2 Second quarter of 16th century

In the second quarter of the century, we see the development of the elegant French style that is no longer copying from Italian styles of earlier decades but is very much its own. The late 1530s to 1540s are a period of very rapid transformation of French fashion.

2.1 Gown

The gown bodice in the second quarter of the century has very wide necklines, sitting on the outer edge of the shoulders. The neckline also acquires more of an upward curve, which looks quite elegant.

There are still plenty of plain bodices, especially earlier in the quarter century (eg. *images 1-1 and 1-2*), but towards the late 1530s and 1540s the bodices are increasingly decorated in the style that becomes characteristic of French fashion later in the century. That is they acquire a decorative band at the neckline and then two parallel decorative bands (sometimes more) down the middle of the bodice. Those decorations often continue down to the skirt) and matching decorations sometimes appear on the sleeves (see *images 2-3 to 2-6*).

The bodice is more tightly fitted, but does not have as narrow a waist as one sees later in the century. There is a dearth of full-length images, but where visible, it appears that gowns now have a waist seam. The bodice begins developing a gentle downward curve at the waist, but does not have a pointed waist (unlike the incorrect portrayals often seen in movies). (Eg *images 2-3, 2-7, 2-8*)

2.2 Sleeves

Throughout this quarter century we still see the style of sleeves of the sort seen in the first quarter - voluminous at the wrist with a turn back exposing fur or rich lining with under-sleeves, although they do become much more fitted at the upper arm than early in the century (eg. see *images 2-2, 2-8, 2-9*)

However, at the same time there is development of a variety of different sleeve styles that become increasingly decorative as the century nears its middle.

- There are bands of decorative trim - both horizontal and vertical (eg *images 2-3 to 2-6*),
- there are shorter, capped sleeves with under-sleeves (eg. *images 2-5 and 2-7*)
- there may be button-on tighter sleeves with a puff at the top (eg. *image 2-4*)².
- Towards the end of the quarter we see sleeves with decorative puffs and beads (eg. *image 2-10*) and multiple layers of "scales" decorated with beading (*images 2-11 and 2-16*)

By mid-century French fashion has a great variety of sleeve styles, most of which develop in the 1540 to 1550 decade.

² The image is dated by the museum as 1536, however, I think the ladies dress style is more consistent with a later period - about 1550s. Hence the doubt about the existence of this sleeve style during this time.

2.3 Skirts

Unfortunately, there are few full-length portraits or drawings in this period and it is difficult to determine the shape of the skirts.

From the limited images available, it appears that the skirts are voluminous, but are not supported by large farthingales of the sort seen in English fashion of the period (where the farthingale is used to give the skirt a conical shape). If there is a farthingale under the French skirts, it is likely quite narrow at this time. (see *images 2-12 and 2-13*.³)

Even in the early 1550s, the skirt shape remains quite narrow compared to what is seen in England and bell-shaped, suggesting padding at the hips (see *image 2-14*).

2.4 Partlet

There are very few partlets to be seen prior to 1540. From 1540 onwards, rather suddenly, partlets become very popular - seen in most portraits.

The partlets are worn under the gown, have a stand up collar which is often edged with a little frill and covering most of the neck. (*images 2-4, 2-6, 2-7, 2-9, 2-15, 2-16*)

Partlets tend to be decorated with vertical lines of cord, embroidery or possibly gathering/smocking (*images 2-6 and 2-9*), (its hard to tell which from the pictures) and, from about 1545, with a net pattern, which appears to be overlaid on the linen partlet and has beads or similar decoration at the intersections between cords (*images 2-15 and 2-16*). These partlets become very popular (and increasingly more decorative) in the next quarter of the 16th century.

2.5 Accessories

Because there are few full-length images, it is hard to tell whether ladies are wearing girdles, however, the images that do show the waist seam do not reveal a girdle (eg *images 2-3, 2-7, 2-8 and 2-13*), which was almost always present in the previous quarter-century. Its lack in the available images doesn't mean a girdle was not worn however, and its presence in the next quarter-century suggests that it may well have been.

The ladies all wear necklaces, often more than one. Most commonly these comprise of a necklace worn near the base of the neck and another going down into the bodice (eg. *images 2-1, 2-5 and 2-12*) or pinned to the bodice in the middle, (eg. *images 2-2, 2-4, 2-9 and 2-15*) or in several places (*images 2-10, 2-11*), forming decorative loops

2.6 Headwear

Almost all the headwear in this period is French hoods (see *all images*).

The French hoods have increasingly more prominent decorations - the cap and the billiamant are often decorated with large pearls or gemstones, that sometimes, but not always, match the decorations on the gown or the lady's necklaces. (see eg *images 2-2, 2-3, 2-5, 2-9, 2-11*)

³ These are unfortunately the only images showing skirts in the period 1525 to 1550 that I have been able to locate to date.

Although they are now shorter than the earlier hoods, the French hood is still a series of layered headdresses. The hood does not have a stand up crescent often portrayed in movies (or in the Tudor Tailor book).



Image from The Other Boleyn Girl - WRONG way to do a French hood!

All profile images of the French hood reveal that it is in fact flat and multi-layered (eg *images 2-17 to 2-20*), like the earlier versions, with more prominent and narrower billiaments. The veil/fall at the back is always black.

I will be doing a paper on French hoods shortly, but if making one, please bear in mind that the most popular reconstruction is incorrect.

French-style bongraces also appear occasionally (eg. *image 2-12*). I believe it is a billiamment, with a long veil. The veil goes down to mid-back, then upwards and is pinned over the head, then turned back again (to form the square shape on top of the lady's head) and the remainder is allowed to fall hang back.



This image is from a 1568 book, but shows the details of the bongrace

1525 to 1550

Image 2-1



C 1530 - Portrait of a woman by Corneille de Lyon

Image 2-2



C1530 - Françoise de Longwy by de Lyon

Image 2-3



1533 – Anne de Pisseleu by Corneille de Lyon

Image 2-4



1536 (approx) – Portrait of unknown woman

Image 2-5



1543 (approx) – Françoise de Brézé by Clouet

Image 2-6



1545 – Portrait of Marguerite de Lustrac, Clouet

Image 2-7



1540s – Jeanne d'Albret (child)

Image 2-8



c1549 - unknown woman - school of Clouet

Image 2-9



1548 (approx) – Jeanne d'Albret - Clouet

Image 2-10



1545 – Isabeau d'Hauteville by François Clouet

Image 2-11



1550 (approx) - Charlotte Du Moulin

Image 2-12



1532 - engraving from Illustrations de Flammette

Image 2-13



Approx 1540 - miniature of queen Marguerite de Navarre giving her book *Le débat d'amour*, to Anne de Pisseleu

Image 2-14



1553 - Marriage of Diane de France to Duc le Castro

Image 2-15



1540s - Renée de Bonneval

Image 2-16



1545 - Marie de Montchenu

Image 2-17



Date unknown - medallion of Losina de Manteca

Image 2-18



Portrait of a woman - on a medallion, date unknown

Image 2-20



English funerary effigy of Sir Thomas Cave's wife, constructed in 1558.

3 Third quarter of 16th century

In the third quarter of the 16th century French fashions become increasingly decorative and extravagant.

Decoration on gowns, sleeves and partlets increases. The styles are elegant, but become more rigid, shaped by the underpinnings. The French fashion is strongly influenced by Spanish styles at the time, but is more "immodest", with open décolleté collars, not seen in Spain, becoming more common towards the end of the quarter century. Head covering becomes increasingly sparse, with a lot of hair showing

3.1 Gown

The bodice of the gown is now most commonly decorated with rows of trim along the top and parallel rows down the centre of the gown (*images 3-1 to 3-3*). Sometimes several rows are used for a more unique look (*image 3-4*). These were sometimes combined with additional decoration and trimming (see eg *image 3-5*)

After the late 1560s this style of decoration starts disappearing from high-class gowns and is adopted by the middle-class (see eg *image 3-6*). Towards the end of the quarter-century the upper-class gowns use rich embroidered or damask fabrics, jewels, fanciful puffs and slashes to distinguish themselves (eg *images 3-7 to 3-9*), although more modest styles are still seen among nobility away from the royal court (eg. *image 3-10*)

The bodice now has a distinct V-shape, which becomes sharper towards the end of the quarter. (eg. *images 3-3, 3-6 and 3-9*). The waist is narrow, probably shaped by corsetry.

Quite a few gowns with high-necks are seen, possibly as a result of strong Spanish influence in fashions of this period (eg *images 3-5 and 3-8*)

3.2 Sleeves

There are several sleeves styles common in this period.

There are short sleeves, with an under-sleeve. Sometimes they are plain (eg. *images 3-1 and 3-6*) but are often decorated, have slashes and puffs, are ornamented with beads or have fancy edges and construction (see eg *images 3-3, 3-4, 3-5 and 3-11*).

The under-sleeves are embroidered (eg. *image 3-3*), slashed (*images 3-5, 3-11*) or otherwise decorated (*image 3-6*)

There are removable long sleeves, most usually buttoned on (eg. *images 3-2, 3-8, 3-12 see also 2-4 above*). This style appears to be influenced by Spanish fashions which also have buttoned sleeves in this period. Here too, the sleeves are trimmed or otherwise decorated.

Then there are set-in long sleeves. Again, slashing, puffs and decoration with beads are common. (eg. *images 3-7, 3-10, see also 2-14 and 2-18 above*)

Note the shape of the sleeves - they are quite fitted in the arm and towards the 1560s and 70s there is an increasing puffiness in the shoulder (see eg. *images 3-3, 3-7, 3-*

10, 3-11 and 3-13) These sleeves are often called "mutton leg" and have a large head that needs to be gathered into the shoulder to give that effect.

3.3 Skirts

Skirts of the upper classes are usually supported by a farthingale. Note the shape of the skirts - they have a bell shape rather than a cone shape often seen in English styles and are not very wide. (eg. *images 3-6, 3-9, 3-13, 3-14, see also 2-14*)

Note also the curve at the waist - this is most likely achieved with a small bum roll worn with a Spanish farthingale (having tested this theory I can confirm that the combination of the two gives the right profile).

Later in the century the proportions of the bum roll increase and it evolves into the French or wheel farthingale. In upper-class gowns, the skirts are often split to reveal rich petticoats below.

3.4 Partlets

Partlets are almost always worn in this period. They have high-necked collars, with a small ruff (*images 3-1, 3-5*), which gets bigger towards the 1570s (*images 3-7, 3-8, 3-13*). The collar of the partlet is sometimes worn open (*images 3-3, 3-4, 3-6 and 3-12*) - a precursor to the décolleté necklines that become popular shortly afterwards.

The styles of the partlets are often extremely decorative. They are sometimes made of transparent fabrics (*images 3-2, 3-4 and 3-12*), are decorated with embroidery (eg. *images 3-1 and 3-13*) or gathered into the neckline to create textured effects (eg. *images 3-10 and 3-14*).

A very popular style of partlet is one that has a net-like pattern on it. Some seem to be a net, sometimes with decorations at the intersections, overlaid on a cloth partlet (eg *image 3-16*).

Some of the partlets have decorations in the middle of each net square (eg. *image 3-3*). They tend to be the ones where I have the most trouble deciphering whether the net pattern is made up by gathering fabric of the partlet itself or by couching/laying cord on top.

Then there are some where the net overlaying the fabric is made entirely of beads/pearls. (eg. *images 3-7, 3-12 and 3-15*) Because the beading continues up to the collar, I think the bead partlet is sewn onto/couched onto the fabric partlet underneath and is not a separate item. In some of the portraits you can see the light fabric puffing up inside the net squares – giving a rather lovely effect (eg. *image 3-7*). These tend to be in the portraits of very great nobles or royal ladies and the intersections of the net are often adorned with contrasting jewels.

Image 3-4 shows a partlet where the net itself is dispensed with and pearls are sewn onto the fabric in a regular square/diamond pattern as though they were decorating the intersections of the net.

And *image 3-17* is a portrait showing a partlet where the fabric itself is dispensed with and the partlet is composed entirely of the net, made of pearls and jewels.

3.5 Accessories

Ladies wear necklaces in much the same style as in the earlier quarter century. They also quite frequently wear earrings which comprise of a round hook with a single pearl or bead on it. (see *images 3-4, 3-8, 3-16 and 3-17*)

Girdles can be seen in some images (eg. *images 3-1, 3-3, 3-13, 3-14, 3-18*) , sometimes these are long and some a short, stopping at the waist, but very decorative (see *image 3-18* for a particularly decorative short girdle). Middle class ladies often have pouches hanging off the end of a long girdle (as in *image 3-13*)

3.6 Headgear

The 1560s see the abandonment of the French hood among nobility in France. Although it is frequently worn in the 1550s (eg *images 3-2, 3-3, 3-5, 3-15 and 3-17*) and occasionally, often in a modified form in the 1560s (see *images 3-4 and 3-16*), it is very rare to see it in the 1570s in the upper class portraits (*image 3-11* is one of the rare examples) or beyond.

The ladies now wear their hair dressed with ribbons, pearls or other gems and otherwise uncovered (eg. *images 3-7 and 3-10*) or wear small jewelled caps (eg. *images 3-8 and 3-18*) or beaded cloth caps or snoods (eg. *images 3-1 and 3-12*)

The hair is worn parted in the middle and slightly raised at the front. That raise of the hair becomes more prominent towards the end of the century.

Middle class ladies often wear bongraces - it seems to be the most popular headwear seen in illustrations of middle class (eg. *images 3-6, 3-13*)

1550 - 1575

Image 3-1



1550 - Portrait of a Woman – by de Lyon

Image 3-2



1550s– Anne d'Este-Ferrare

Image 3-3



1555 (approx) – Louise de Halluin by Corneille de Lyon

Image 3-4



1565 – Claude de Beaune by Clouet

Image 3-5



1550s – JEANNE DE HALLUIN, DAME D'ALLUYE

Image 3-6



1575 – Orléans – Civitates Orbis Terrarum

Image 3-7



1571 – Elisabeth of Austria, Queen of France by François Clouet

Image 3-8



1570 – Madeleine le Clerc du Tremblay By François Clouet

Image 3-9



1573 – part of Valois Tapestry – Ball at Tuileries

Image 3-10



1570 – Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre

Image 3-11



1574 – Gabrielle de Rochechouart by de Lyon

Image 3-12



1570 – CATHERINE-MARIE de LORRAINE

Image 3-13



1575 – Bourges – Civitates Orbis Terrarum

Image 3-14



1567 – Lyonnoise woman

Image 3-15



1555 – Miniature of Catherine de' Medici

Image 3-16



1562 - CLAUDE DE BEAUNE

Image 3-17



Approx 1556 - Catherine de Médicis

Image 3-18



1560 (approx) – Isabel Valois