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# **The Details of English Fashions of the Sixteenth Century: Foreign Influences on Women's Elizabethan Fashions**

by Margaret Roe

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## Overview

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Women's fashions in the late sixteenth century underwent a gradual yet continuous evolution. Chief among the influences that generated these changes were the fashions from the Continent. Yet while foreign fashions impacted English fashion, styles named for those influences are largely limited to the first half of Elizabeth's reign. Nevertheless, by examining the general characteristics of these named styles, we can better understand their impact on English fashion.

In *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, Janet Arnold examines the inventories and warrants for Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe of Robes to determine the characteristics of the named styles. The vast majority of clothing in these accounts refer to "loose gowns, French gowns, round gowns, kirtles, petticoats, and doublets" (112-113). However, occasional entries for foreign-named clothing styles also occur. The pages linked below provide the general characteristics deduced by Arnold from these accounts, coupled with portraiture demonstrating such styles.

## The Dutch Influence



*Alexander Farnese*  
by Alonso Sanchez Coello, c.1559-1565

Elizabeth had four "Dutch" gowns made between 1569 and 1574, but no features are available to distinguish them from other gowns.

On the other hand, Dutch cloaks were very popular among both men and women throughout Queen Elizabeth's reign. Elizabeth herself had eighteen Dutch cloaks listed in the Stowe inventory, half of which are listed with safeguards. This would suggest that Dutch cloaks were popular riding wear.

A Dutch cloak was simply a cloak with sleeves. While many English portraits show Dutch cloaks, they are difficult to distinguish since many are painted in black. While the portrait of Alexander Farnese is not English, it clearly shows him wearing a Dutch cloak.

## The Flemish Influence

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Flanders gowns appear with the greatest frequency in portraiture of the 1550s and 1560s in England. Further, Queen Elizabeth also had a number of these gowns made between 1562 and 1571, but only alterations were made after this date. The Flanders gown likely fell from favor in the early 1570s.

The Flanders gowns usually have "puffy" elbow-length sleeves and decorated guards around the armholes, on the collar, and down the front edges of the gown. They also typically have a high collar that can either be worn straight up and closed, or flaring out away from the face, sometimes appearing to be partially turned down. The portrait of Margaret Audley, Duchess of Norfolk shows this style well.

In addition to gowns, English women favored Flanders partlets and smocks. In 1577, Queen Elizabeth sent a request to the Marchioness of Havrech for linen partlets as worn in Flanders. After a follow-up request, nothing more is mentioned of the partlets. It is likely Elizabeth's request was granted. Earlier, in 1564, Walter Fyshe made a Flanders partlet of "Sipers double lined with taffeta and buckram" (133). While no distinct features are known about such partlets, Arnold suggests there may have been a specific manner in which they were starched and pleated.

Similarly, Queen Elizabeth received a New Year's gift in 1559 from Lady Throckmorton of two "Flanders smocks wrought with whitework" (134). The Flanders label may have either referred to the whitework or the type of linen.

## The Flemish Influence: Images



*Margaret Audley, Duchess of Norfolk  
by Hans Eworth, 1562*



*Pierre de Moucheron and his wife,  
Isabeau de Berbier with their children in Antwerp  
attributed to Cornelius de Zeeuw, 1563*

## The French Influence

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Unlike the other foreign influences examined here, the French influence had, by Elizabeth's reign, developed into a standard gown style in England. However, the latest French fashions continued to be sought in England. In 1566 and 1567, Elizabeth requested a tailor from France through her Ambassador, Sir Henry Norris. Since she only ever employed two tailors, Walter Fyshe and William Jones, Norris must have failed in this task. However, Elizabeth did receive several gowns from France, including one altered by Fyshe numerous times throughout the 1570s. By 1577, Fyshe had developed a method of making buckram toiles and sending them to France so that the French tailors could make the gowns themselves, allowing Elizabeth to wear the gowns as soon as they arrived, without waiting for alterations.

The general shape of the French gown changed over Elizabeth's reign. Earlier French gowns continued in the style of the preceding decades, with a low neckline that curved up from the armholes to the center front of the bodice. These gowns could close up the back or front, as in the portrait of Lady Helena (left). In the 1560s, Englishwomen began to adopt the French fashion of short "puff sleeves" or shoulder rolls in place of the long, full, turned back sleeves of the 1540s and 1550s. In the 1570s, French gowns with "high bodies" were also made. These gowns were probably doublet-style gowns with shoulder rolls, such as in the portrait of Queen Elizabeth (left).

Throughout this period the French gown remained very similar to the Round gown, with the distinguishing feature being the train at the back - the French gown had one, while the Round gown was hemmed to evenly touch the floor all the way around. Often a gown was altered from one type to the other, usually from a French gown into a Round gown. The train varied in length, sometimes trailing several yards behind the wearer, but Arnold conjectures that the average train was only about a yard in length.

## The French Influence (con't.)

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A number of fashions were sought from France in addition to French gowns. In the early 1570s, Elizabeth received a safeguard, an outer skirt or petticoat worn to protect the gown when riding, which Fyshe altered several times in the following years. Additionally, in 1557, Walsingham requested a farthingale for Queen Elizabeth in the style newly worn by the French Queen and Queen of Navarre. This may have been the wider style farthingale that became popular in the following decade. Finally, French jewelry was highly sought after, especially by Queen Elizabeth.

## The French Influence: Images



*Lady Helena Snakeborg, Marchioness of Northampton by an unknown artist, 1569.*



*Queen Elizabeth by an unknown artist, c. 1580.*



## The Italian Influence

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Not surprisingly, given Spain's rule over much of Italy, the Italian influence is very closely related to the Spanish influence. This style gown also included a doublet-style bodice with a high collar, and often either shoulder rolls and narrow sleeves or a combination of narrow and "hanging" sleeves. The hanging sleeves were usually only worn in the Spanish Round style, while the sleeves underneath often took on the characteristic trim of Italian sleeves, with horizontal rows of trim or embroidery equally spaced up the arm. On the other hand, the doublet-style bodice of the Italian style was unique from other doublets worn. Slashed from waist to shoulder, sometimes in multiple vertical rows, this doublet allowed a second doublet beneath to be seen.

The portraits of Queen Elizabeth and Jane Dormer, Duchess of Feria, of the late 1560s or early 1570s, best illustrate the Italian style. Elizabeth also had five "Italian" gowns made between 1568 and 1569.

Venetian style gowns were also popular in England. Walter Fyshe made a Venetian gown for Elizabeth Knowles in 1565. Janet Arnold conjectures that this was a gown with a low, square neckline with small "puffed sleeves," and either laced up the front or with a partlet open in the front (131). Thirty years later, Von Buchenback, part of the embassy sent by Duke Frederick of Württemberg, noted that the women of court wore "Italian costume with breasts beared." Arnold conjectures that he was describing gowns worn open in front to reveal a heavily decorated stomacher beneath, such as in the portrait of Lady Eleanor Herbert.

## The Italian Influence: Images



*Queen Elizabeth I*  
attributed to Hans Eworth, c.1565-1570.



*Jane Dormer, Duchess of Feria*  
by Antonis Mor van Dashorst, c.1565-1570.

## The Italian Influence: Images

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*Lady Eleanor Herbert by an unknown artist, 1595.*

## The Polish Influence

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Janet Arnold notes that Elizabethan Polish Styles are difficult to define, but likely referred to a style of gown with frogging closures down the front. The Darnley portrait and the Welbeck or Wanstead portrait show gowns with such closures. Queen Elizabeth wore a gown of the Polish style for Sir John Melville in 1564.

## The Polish Influence: Images



*"The Darnley Portrait" of Queen Elizabeth I  
by an unknown artist, c.1575.*



*"The Welbeck or Wanstead Portrait" of  
Queen Elizabeth I by Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder,  
c.1580-1585.*

## The Spanish Influence

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Although earlier references to the "Spanish style" of women's clothing usually referred to gowns worn over a farthingale, during Elizabeth's reign this became a specific style of gown. This gown usually included a doublet-style bodice with a high collar, and a combination of sleeves with a "hanging" set worn over a second narrower set. This gown is most famously seen in the portrait of Lettice Knollys, but Elizabeth had four such gowns made between 1571-1577, suggesting much earlier rise in popularity.

While the Spanish wore a multitude of styles of hanging sleeves, the English appear to have stuck to two main styles: the Spanish Round and the Great Spanish sleeves. The Spanish Round sleeve was a half circle style sleeve, with the widest part of the circle at the back of the elbow. It was usually slashed vertically down the front, from wrist to shoulder, but occasionally slashed horizontally at the elbow and then vertically down the front from the elbow to wrist, as the Spanish more often wore their sleeve. This sleeve can be seen in the portrait of Lettice Knollys. The Great Spanish sleeve is not seen in portraits, but a gown with such sleeves was made for Elizabeth in 1569. Arnold conjectures that this sleeve was likely similar to the full length half round sleeves seen in the portrait of Elizabeth Valois. While these sleeves were only worn over narrow fitted sleeves in Spain, the English also wore them over the fuller sleeves that gained popularity in the 1580s.

## The Spanish Influence: Images



*Lettice Knollys, Countess of Leicester,  
attributed to George Gower, c.1585.*



*Elizabeth Valois, Queen of Spain,  
by Sofonisba Anguissola, 1565.*