

Knitting the Spanish *Boneto*

An exercise in experimental archaeology



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Headgear is a commonly-overlooked but often necessary part of an historically authentic impression, and nowhere is this more true than in Spain during the reign of the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. Very few men and virtually no women are represented in art without some sort of headcovering unless the lack of such a covering is intended to be symbolic; for example, saints, angels, and Mary Magdalene are usually represented *sans* headcovering as a reflection either of their other-worldliness or social disgrace.

Hats also played a significant role in rites of courtesy among men. The removal and flourishing of the hat was a way to honor one's betters, or flatter those who were not equal in social stature. Indeed, hats could be seen as the very measure of respect for the social hierarchy, as evidenced by the following quote from Lazarillo de Tormes:

...I vow to God that if I meet the Count [his neighbor] in a street and he does not take off his bonnet to me, quite off, then the next time I come, I will enter a house pretending to have business there, or cross into another street if there is one, before he gets near me rather than take off my bonnet to him (quoted in Anderson 35).

I conducted an extensive survey of headgear among the noble classes of Spain from about 1460-1530. While I would have liked to include examples from the middle and lower classes, the majority of existing artwork only portrays characters that are upper class – this includes patrons, royalty, and religious figures.

Vocabulary, Colors, and Ornaments

Ruth Anderson distinguishes between several broad types of hat; her vocabulary is based on earlier works by Carmen Bernis and C. Willis Cunningham. Although there are at least six distinct species of hat this class will cover the styles she commonly calls *gorras*, or caps, as these were heavily exported from Spain to places as far-flung as Belgium, England, and Santo Domingo (Anderson 35). That they are specifically mentioned in trade records and guild membership requirements indicates that they were probably a primary and well-known product, and that their names, unlike many other fashion history terms, may have been tied to those specific items.

A *media gorra* is a "half cap" with "ample crown and partial brim or flap" (Anderson 37), while a *gorra* has a fuller brim often divided into segments or sections. These sections appear in a variety of shapes from slitted to crenellated to a simple upturned flap. A *bonete* is a softer hat with a wider brim and a shaped crown; it may or may not have a chin strap or cord to secure the hat to the head. *Bonete* is also a general term for hats or caps. In general, bonnets and caps were men's garments, but they also appear in noblewomen's inventories and images of women (see figures 4 and 5).

The favored fabric for headwear was wool, either woven or knitted, with velvet and silk making up the rest of the records. A noble inventory from Segovia lists "a black bonnet [and] one of red wool knitted (*hecho de aguja*).” Prince Juan's wardrobe inventory of 1493 lists twenty bonnets in "black, crimson, or

mulberry-colored" velvet, crimson silk, three tawny wool bonnets, and three wool bonnets of red, green, and black wools (Ferrandis 20). The predominant colors in both image and accounts are red and black, with some mentions of green, "wine dregs," and tawny.

Although the texts have no precise definitions of colors, it is not unreasonable to look to other European accounts of the time for some clue. While Spain was geographically isolated from the rest of Europe to some extent, the dyestuffs mentioned in Spanish sources are nearly identical to English sources of the same period. Spain's most coveted dyestuff was cochineal (*grana cochinilla*), discovered in Mexico in 1519 and used to produce a clear, bright red unlike that produced by plant dyes like alkanet (Greenfield 3). According to Carolyn Johnson, tawny was probably a pale gold-brown, while "wine dregs" may be the Spanish name for murrey, a wine-red (Johnson 14).

Several of the hats I made are trimmed with pearls, enamel pieces, and small silver *pailletes* in the shape of Laurel wreaths (this item was a gift, for Master Miguel Estevan de Cabra). Spanish nobles frequently decorated their clothing and accessories with similar trinkets; for example, at a bullfight in honor of the royal family in Medina, Queen Isabella I appeared in a gown with trim consisting of "letters of beaten gold a quarter *vara* (about 7.5 inches) high, forming the motto TANTO MONTA...each letter was garnished with pearls" (Anderson 137). Pearls and silver or gold shaped *pailletes* are commonly mentioned in royal wardrobe inventories, alongside other trimmings such as gold lace and silver braid.

The Wool Industry and Bonnet Production

Wool was, without a doubt, the backbone of the Spanish economy into the 19th century. In the period from 1500 to 1800, Spain exported approximately 7 million pounds of wool annually. During the peak years between the mid-16th century and the 18th century, total exports equalled almost 14 million pounds (Phillips xi). The primary fiber was merino; in the 16th century, *El Honorado Consejo dela Mestade los Pastores de Castilla* (the Honored Council of the Shepherds' Conclave of Castile, founded in 1273) controlled the breeding and protection of approximately 3 million merino sheep (Phillips 37).

While Spain exported a large amount of washed fleeces, the nation also produced a variety of woolen yardages and goods for both internal and external markets. Textiles and goods production was centered in a few areas around the country, with one of the most successful production centers located in the city of Cuenca, in northeastern Castile. Cuenca was ideally situated near a large river (which provided water for washing, fulling, and dyeing), had close connections with the migratory routes of the merino flocks, and had a convenient source of dyestuffs in the city quarters around *Calle Tinte* (Dye Street) (Phillips 196). As a result, the city was home to several wool entrepreneurs called *señores de los paños* (cloth lords) who purchased raw wool from flock owners and turned it over to their own mills and craftsmen to produce textiles. These entrepreneurs thus controlled every aspect of textile production from washing and dyeing the raw wool to fulling, wool dressing, and the creation of garments and accessories (Phillips 197).

Accounts of bonnet creation are not entirely clear on the method of production favored. While a wardrobe account from Segovia lists specific amounts of woven cloth to be made into bonnets, there are also many accounts of knitted and fulled caps. For example, the Sevillian trade ordinances concerning bonnet making note the steps over which potential bonnet-makers were to be examined in order to progress from apprentice to master. As Anderson notes, the makers were to be tested “from the beginning with a needle, to the end” (39) of 6 distinct types of caps.

The requirements to become a master *bonetero* in Toledo provide evidence for the popularity of knitted hats. Such a person must:

know the different kinds of wool and... be able to separate the four parts of a fleece, to know carding combs and the carding process, spinning, the proper shapes of bonnets when they are knitted (*enagujados*), how to do fulling – cleaning, shrinking, and thickening wool – to block (*amoldar*) bonnets and make them even (*aparejar*), to dye in red and black... (Anderson 39).

In addition, a candidate for inclusion in the Toledo *bonetero* guild was required to submit “two perfect *gorras*, a blue and a white, and four *bonetes*, a blue, a white, a simple blue, and a simple white” (Anderson 35).

The entire process of becoming a *bonetero* took at least eight years, and the value of their products is readily discerned through the strict regulations surrounding the trade. All bonnets made by an individual must be marked with their own personal seal as well as with the device of the city in which the bonnet was made. Once produced and exported, a bonnet would undergo a rigorous system of inspection, approval, and labelling in order to be sold in any other city (Anderson 39).

Source Images



Figure 1 Media gorra



Figure 2 Gorra



Figure 3 Media gorra

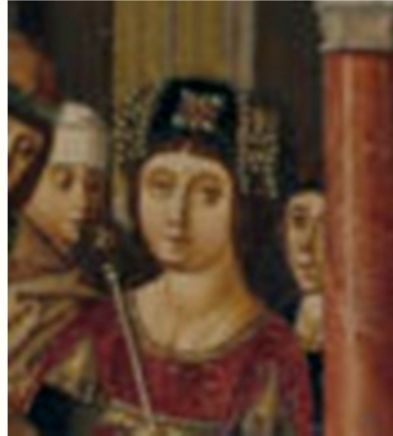


Figure 4 Gorra



Figure 5 Media gorra



Figure 6 Bonete

List of Images

Figure 1: Gallego, Fernando. *Retablo virgen cacaes*. 1480.

Figure 2: Master of the Retable of the Catholic Monarchs. *The Marriage at Cana*. 1496-97. Washington DC: National Gallery of Art.

Figure 3: Master of the Retable of the Catholic Monarchs. *The Marriage at Cana*. 1496-97. Washington DC: National Gallery of Art.

Figure 4: Maestro de Miraflores. *Degollacion de San Juan Bautista*. Detail. 1490-1510. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Figure 5: Figure of Sibilla Africanus. Detail. c. 1515. Relief sculpture.

Figure 6: Borgona, Juan de. *St. Felix Preaching*. Detail. 1520.

Knitted and fulled *gorra* (top down)

Materials

5 size 10.5 dpns

1 skein 100% wool yarn (about 220 yds)

Stitch markers

Directions

Cast on 5 stitches onto one dpn. Using a second dpn, (purl 1 row, knit 1 row)* until you have 5 rows. Do not cut yarn.

Using another dpn, pick up 3 stitches along the side of the square.

Use a third dpn to pick up 5 stitches along cast on edge.

Use the fourth dpn to pick up 3 stitches from the last side.

Round 1: Using the fifth needle, k 1 row plain.

Redistribute stitches so you have 4 on each of 4 needles (16 stitches total).

Place a stitch marker between every 2 stitches. There will be an “imaginary” marker at the end of each needle.

Top

Round 2: (K2, M1, SM)* 8 times (24 stitches).

Round 3: Knit.

Round 4: (K3, M1, SM) 8 times (32 stitches).

Round 5: Knit

Continue, adding 8 stitches every other round. When you have 10 stitches on each needle, you can switch to a circular needle and remove all markers except the beginning of the round.

Body

K plain without increasing for 60–100 rounds, depending on your preferred hat height.

Brim

Place stitch markers every 15 stitches including a different colored marker for the end of the round (8 markers total).

Increase one stitch every section.

Knit one row plain.

Alternate these two rows 8 times until you have 21 stitches between markers.

Loosely bind off and weave in end.

For a larger brim, keep going until you are happy or you run out of yarn.

Finishing

Felt, block, and trim to shape.

Knitted and fulled *media gorra* (bottom up)

Materials:

US 10.5 dpns or circular needle

1 skein Cascade 220 (or 220 yards of any 100% wool worsted weight yarn)

Stitch markers

Directions:

Cast on 120 stitches. Mark beginning of round.

Knit plain (stockinette stitch) until work measures 5 inches from cast on edge.

Decrease row: k3, k2tog around. 96 stitches remain.

Work plain until work measures 11 inches from cast on edge.

Crown shaping:

Row 1: (k10tog, k2tog)*

Row 2 and 3: knit plain

Row 4: (k8, k2tog)*

Row 5 and 6: knit plain

Row 7: (k7, k2tog)*

Row 8: knit plain

Row 9: (k6, k2tog)*

Row 10: knit plain

Row 11: (k5, k2tog)*

Row 12: knit plain

Row 13: (k4, k2tog)*

Row 14: knit plain

Row 15: (k3, k2tog)

Row 16: (k2, k2tog)*

Row 17: (k2, k2tog)*

Row 18: (k1, k2tog)*

Row 19: k2tog*

Break yarn and pass end through remaining stitches. Pull to close opening (not too tight, or the top will pucker), and weave in ends.

Finishing

Felt, block, and trim to shape.

Finishing

Tools

Wash bag or pillowcase

Detergent

Colorfast string, ribbon, or tape

Blocking form

Soft bristle brush

Stiff wire brush

Sweater shaver or scissors

Needle and thread

Trim materials

Fulling

Place the hat in a wash bag or pillowcase to keep it from gathering excess lint. If you have a top-loading washer, you can put the bag in the washer with detergent (I prefer pure soap detergents instead of commercial, but any laundry detergent should work) and several towels for added agitation. I have not had good luck felting in a front-loading washer – although I know people who have – so if you own a front-loader, you may want to experiment with both machine felting and hand felting to find the best method.

Wash the load on hot until the hat shrinks as much as you want – this is subjective, and the hat can be blocked to slightly different finished dimensions if you want it taller. Make sure the finished item fits the circumference of your head.

I blocked my hat over a kitchen bowl with the same circumference as my head. To form the tall, rounded crown, I padded the top of the bowl with a couple of plastic garbage bags, and then wrapped the bowl and bags in a plastic grocery sack. I stretched the damp hat over the form and smoothed the sides down with my hands to form the shape I wanted.



I usually tie a ribbon, string, or piece of linen tape tied around the crease between the brim and sides of the hat to keep the brim from spreading the rest of the hat out of alignment.



Let your hat dry for several hours in front of a fan, or overnight.

Napping

Once the hat is dry, remove it from the block and untie the shaping string. To create the soft nap of a period item, first go over the entire item with a soft brush to loosen any fibers that might have migrated from the other items in your wash load. These can be removed with a pair of scissors or a sweater shaver.

Once any excess lint is removed, go over the entire hat with a wire brush. I use a cat slicker brush for this step. I have found that the best results come from brushing the top of the hat from the center outwards, working around the hat as you go. Likewise, the other sections of the hat should be brushed from the center out.

Continue brushing until you have raised a fine, mostly even nap over the entire item.

Using a sweater shaver or pair of shears, trim the nap so that it is a uniform height. I prefer my nap somewhat short, so I use the shaver. If you prefer a longer nap and are possessed of sufficient patience, trim the nap with a pair of scissors to your preferred length.

Once the nap over the whole item is trimmed, use the soft bristle brush to remove the trimmed fiber and fluff up the nap. Now you are ready to trim and finish.

Dry shaping and trimming :

Place the hat on your head over any foundation veils or head wrap you plan to wear along with the hat. Fold the brim up toward the crown of the hat and pin in place with straight pin.

Tack the edges down with thread. Some slash patterns – such as crenellations – require tacking at the front corner of each slash.

At this point, you can line the hat with any comfortable, breathable fabric. I recommend linen or another lightweight breathable natural fabric. I have tried lining a wool hat with silk, and found it uncomfortable in all but the coldest weather.

Decorate with slashes, beading, or trim as desired.





Kingdom A&S 2012 display featuring two *medias gorras*, one *gorra*, a flat-crowned *boneto*, and a bag hat made of woven and fulled wool. Photo by TJ King.

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Helpful Sources

These are some of my go-to resources that you might find useful.

Chris Laning. <http://chrisknit.blogspot.com/> Her blog is a "parking spot" for some of her historical knitting patterns. Chris is much more active on Ravelry.

"Felting Wool for Absolute Beginners." <http://knitty.com/ISSUEwinter02/FEATfelting.html>

Knitting Help. <http://www.knittinghelp.com>. Many many helpful videos on practically any knitting technique you might want.

Ravelry. <http://www.ravelry.com>. This has become a one-stop-shop for fiber arts research for me. I strongly recommend the SCA Fiber Artists group, as well as the Medieval Textiles and Historic Knitting groups.

Sally Pointer & Gareth Riseborough. <http://sallypointer.com/>. Sally sells (very inexpensively) a range of historical knitted-and-fulled hat patterns. Very well researched with clear directions.

Suggested Yarns

Pretty much any worsted weight, non-superwash 100% wool will work for this project. Below I have listed some of my favorite yarns and where to find them. My area is quickly becoming a yarn store desert, so I buy a lot of my yarns online from Knitpicks or Jimmy Bean Wools. There are *thousands* of yarn shops online to choose from.

Brown Sheep Lanaloft. Available at most local yarn stores or online.

Cascade 220. Available at local yarn stores or online.

Knitpicks Wool of the Andes. <http://www.knitpicks.com>. Multiple colors or Bare white.

Malabrigo Worsted Merino. Local stores or online.

Paton's Classic Wool. Available in most big box craft stores like Michaels, A.C.Moore, and JoAnn.