

## A Beginner's Guide to 16<sup>th</sup> Century German Women's Dress –

### How to look like a Frau.



Hans Holbein – Portrait of a woman in a yellow dress

There's no doubt about it: the German woman had an individualistic way of dressing compared to that of her English or French counterparts. For the most part, there were no corsets or support skirts (farthingale), no outrageous headwear (that is, the gable hood) and a conservatism of fabric that would have had an English woman dying of shock. For the purposes of today's discussion, I'll be concentrating mainly on what is known as the Landsknecht style.

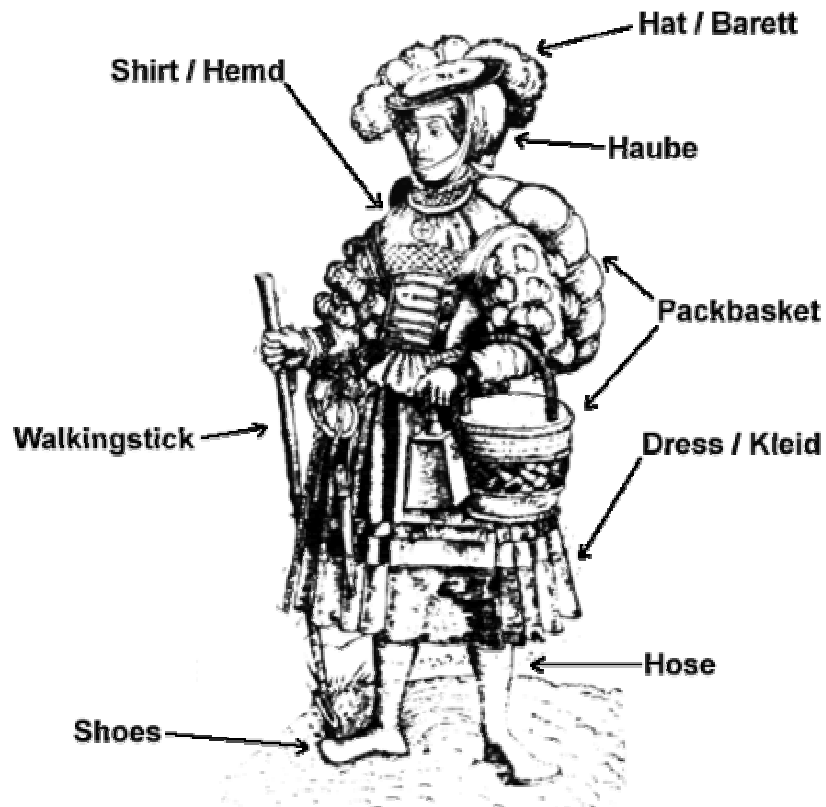
The Landsknechts were professional soldiers, employed to recruit and train both local men and Dutch refugees to fight in the wars in the Low Countries - as Holland and Flanders are now called. These German-speaking mercenaries and their women came from

Bavaria, Tyrol, Swabia, and other parts of the Western Holy Roman Empire.

Their brightly colored clothing was "flashy" even by the standards of their own time. Sumptuary laws which kept the English from wearing clothing above their station did not apply to Landsknechts. The Emperor Maximilian was infamously quoted as saying the lives of the Landsknechts were so miserable and short that they deserved so wear flashy stuff.

As with any outfit from period, there are several layers to consider if you want to look like you just stepped out of a Cranach painting. Let's go from the inside out, starting from the layer closest to the skin, the hemd (or chemise) to the various accessories that always add the finishing touches to any outfit.





Source: <http://www.st-max.org/costume-female.htm>

### The Hemd (chemise)

In period, this would have been made from linen, or silk if you were really well off, and always white. Why bother having a coloured garment that no one would see for the most part; the colour would only fade eventually because this was the layer that was most often washed and period dyes weren't necessarily as colourfast as our modern dyes. Coloured banding, a braid of some kind or embroidery around the neckline and smocking was an option for a more fancy pants look.

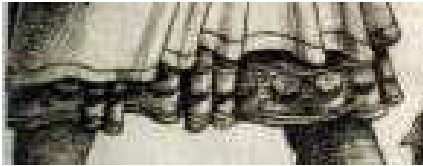


Sleeve length would have been long sleeves which could be tucked up under a shorter sleeved gown (I'll get to those later). A good length for the hemd is to the knees. Any longer and it would get too dirty too quickly (think of the dust at Festival) and probably stick to your hose; any shorter and your knees would get cold.

For us, an alternative to linen is cotton voile; it's light and cheap and will stand up to repeated throws into the washing machine. Personally, I prefer to have fewer chemises made of linen than loads made from voile as linen, even though it can be a heavier fabric, is actually a lot cooler to wear against the skin than cotton.

### The Underskirt/Petticoat/whatever it's called in German.

Depending on the look you're after, this can be either made as a rectangular tube gathered into a waistband or as trapezoids gathered into a waistband. For the most part, the typical decoration was guards, or strips of fabric in rows running horizontally around the hem. In some instances, there were triangles or even patchwork in earlier periods, but simple guards were the most popular and generally two or more.



### Dress/overgown

Here's where you can either dress it up or dress it down, but even a kampfrau looked kinda specky when compared to the lower classes in other parts of Western Europe at the time.

Basically, the dresses were of a simple bodice and skirt construction, with the skirt pleated in. Pleats were either box, knife, cartridge or sometimes rolled. At the skirt, two or more guards were popular but not always worn and it was floor length or lower (that is, the skirt puddled on the floor).



To get in and out of the dress, there is good documentation for front lacing or hooks and eyes as a popular choice, but there was also side lacing and back lacing could be argued for certain styles.

For front lacing gowns, the style which I will be concentrating on, there were guards around the neckline and down the side of the lacing.

Sleeves are mostly attached at the shoulder, but they may be two-, or even three-, piece sleeves laced together or puffed and slashed. Plain sleeves with a guard that matches those of the bodice at the wrist are the most popular according to the available artwork.



### Accessories in brief

- Headwear: ALWAYS worn. No one in this period was without something on their head unless they were bathing and, if some of the paintings are to be believed, they still had something on their head even then. The layer closest to the scalp was either a 'water on the brain hat' or, to use its correct term a stechlein and \_\_\_\_\_ or a caul-type covering called \_\_\_\_\_. Over that, a 'pizza hat' or (mel's red hat)\_\_\_\_ could be worn, but that was more at the discretion of the wearer than anything else.



- Chest covering: partlets, gollars and jackets were a good way of either keeping warm or keeping the sun off and avoiding ‘bodice burn’.



- Belt and pouch



- Jewellery: the class of the gown would determine whether jewellery was worn. The higher the class, the higher the chance of jewellery.
- Gloves: white or beige, probably leather, with slashes in the knuckles. Rings were sometimes worn over the gloves.



- Apron: was functional for the lower classes but decorative for the higher classes. It could almost be like another dress, a whole other skirt or just a rectangular length down the front.



- Hose: linen or wool, cut on the bias and hand sewn as hand stitching actually provides better stretch than machine stitching. A modern way of getting around having to hand make these is to use knee-length socks.
- Shoes: For very period shoes, go to <http://www.medievalshoes.com/> and you can purchase a pair of German cow mouth or Landsknecht shoes. If they aren't an option for you, square-toed Mary Janes are a good approximation for period shoes, or any other flat, black square-toed shoe. No heels!

#### References:

- <http://frazzledfrau.glittersweet.com/>
- <http://www.st-mike.org/groups/german/women.html>
- [http://www.curiousfrau.com/Art\\_research/Kampffrau.htm](http://www.curiousfrau.com/Art_research/Kampffrau.htm)
- <http://www.st-max.org/costume-female.htm>
- <http://www.landsknechts.org/>
- <http://home.znet.com/savaskan/germans/>

**What in the heck is a landsknecht?!** From <http://www.kings-highway.co.uk/archive/topic.cgi?forum=25&topic=5> written by Johanna Weydehart.

In the late 15th century, Maximilian of Austria (later Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I) needed a highly trained, well disciplined army in order to consolidate his hold on his wife's inheritance of the Netherlands against Louis XI of France. He based his troops and their training on the Swiss model of pikemen.

This heralded the return of the infantry as an effective fighting force, and sounded the death knell for the era of the mounted knight. In companies of five hundred, armed with 15-18 foot pikes, the Landsknechts (German for *land servants*) quickly became the most highly respected and feared troops in Europe.

After 1500, when Maximilian allowed them to hire out as mercenaries units, they became the most sought after as well. The Landsknechts fought in virtually all of the major European conflicts from 1482-1660. They were employed by Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I of England, Louis XI, Francis I and Henri II of France, and, of course, Maximilian I, Charles V, Ferdinand I, and Rudolph II, and Maximilian II of the Holy Roman Empire.

They were renowned for their fierceness and professionalism, but they were also known for their drunkenness, brutality, and loyalty to only their commanders and the money provided them.

In a time when most peasants-farmers earned roughly two marks per year, the lowliest Landsknecht was paid four marks per month. Additionally, soldiers were often given incentive pay, being allowed to keep anything they could carry off from a conquered city or town.

When the Landsknechts sacked Rome in 1527, the looting lasted for over a year, and in the end, the mercenaries were paid to leave, since no force could drive them out. If a soldier survived three or five years of hard campaigning, he could retire as a wealthy man!