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A MATTER OF PRIDE

The Textile Tradition of Lagartera

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attire.





Lagartera is located 2 hours away from Madrid by car. Miles and miles of flat golden landscapes interrupted once in a while by hay bales, stand in deep contrast against the blue sky. There are dwarf olive trees, grape vines, and the famously buttery Manchego cheese. Along the way, one can see the windmills, guilty of making Don Quixote believe that they were giants he had to fight. Don Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra once said, 'He who reads a lot and walks a lot, sees a lot and knows a lot'.

The town is located in the province of Toledo, Castilla La Mancha, with a population of 1300. It is part of an area referred to commonly as La España vacía 'empty Spain', the agriculture-reliant region in the vast interior of the country which includes Castile and León, Castile-La Mancha, Extremadura and Aragón. These territories missed out on industrialization and development that larger cities and the tourist-friendly coast enjoyed from the latter years of Franco's dictatorship. That disparity encouraged migration toward the cities, especially by the young, further accentuating the rural-urban divide. Today, the statistics speak for themselves: 10 percent of Spain's population inhabits 70 percent of the country. Although small in population, this region is home to a textile empire that is surprisingly baroque, intensely ornate, and layered with influences that speak of rich history.

The town is pristine and mysterious. Every house is concealed behind dramatic wooden doors; if a door is open the interior is concealed by a linen or crocheted curtain. There is a silence, emptiness, and austerity expressed in these stone walls, dark wood and old tiles. If lucky, one can peek inside a house and see groups of women sitting under a tree, and hear them talk, laugh, and tell stories as they stitch. These women, the labranderas are the carriers of an ancient tradition, one that dates back to medieval times, encompassing traditional dress, domestic trousseau and liturgical garments. For their daily assembly, each one carries a little wooden stool, a lace pillow, scissors, threads and centuries of traditions to be embedded stitch by stitch. Pertinently, the Lagarteranas are not embroiderers, they are labranderas. An embroiderer works stitches onto the surface of the cloth, while labranderas work the warp and weft as if they were plowing the earth while creating relief patterns and forming mathematical topographies.



What makes this dress unique? Why Lagartera and not another nearby village? According to archaeological finds, Lagartera's history dates back to the 13th century. After the 12th century, migrating Arabs and Jews from Toledo brought both Arabic and Jewish heritage into the area. Lagartera became a melting pot of beliefs and ideas. Motifs, such as filigree, stylized flowers on long graceful stems, and geometrics, worked in symmetrical patterns, provide a material link between Lagartera and the ancient eastern Mediterranean.

In the 16th century, this textile tradition begins to be documented. A text has been found linking Countess Doña Juana de Toledo with the artisans from Lagartera, who she commissioned to create a few pieces for her private chapel. Accounts from the 16th century also tell of three village embroiderers, Isabel, Beatriz and Maria, who were summoned to the nearby castle of Oropesa to prepare the trousseau of the residing Countess, a well-known patron, and lover of high-quality textiles. The Court of Castille in 1563 documents traditional dresses as a form of social and political recognition. Documents from the time dictate specific stitches and metal thread which were to be used only for religious textiles, with mention of fines if used otherwise.

The village of Lagartera features prominently in cultural and artistic endeavors. The 1850s Geographical, Statistical and Historical Dictionary of Spain and its Overseas Possessions describes sumptuous gold traditional dress, elaborate gills, and embroidered socks. Lagartera is found in the 1633 work *Virgen Niña en éxtasis*, by Spanish painter Zurbarán, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Joaquin Sorolla incorporates Lagartera in his paintings at the beginning of the 20th century. In 2011, the Queen Sophia Hispanic Institute in New York presented the show *Joaquin Sorolla and the glory of Spanish Dress*, focusing on the uniqueness of the dress from Lagartera.

The Lagarteranas began to market their work at the beginning of the 20th century, applying their virtuosity to household items, including tablecloths, bed linen and towels. Anyone who lived in Madrid in the 1940s can remember the visits of Lagarteranas, extravagantly dressed in their traditional costume, going from door to >



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Sorolla Museum. Madrid. Spain.

Image Above Centre: Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida (1863–1923). Spanish painter. Types of Lagartera, 1912. Oil on canvas. 200x206 cm

door in well-to-do neighborhoods, selling their goods and taking orders for gifts and bridal trousseaus. Right through the 1940s, this was one of the few Spanish villages where both adults and children continued to dress in the traditional manner on a day-to-day basis. Today there are still embroidery businesses in the town and most women know how to sew, although few master the more complex and distinctive techniques. To do so requires a monastic amount of time, patience, and concentration.

The origin of the particular Lagarteran culture and its clothes is still an open question. The late historian Julián García Sánchez wrote that the town could have been founded by medieval Mozarabs exiled from Andalusia by Muslim pressure and that, in defense of their Catholic faith, they locked themselves 'in a circle of hostile indigenism'. What Tomás Alía, the inheritor of Pepita Alía's legacy, maintains, on the other hand, is that Lagartera must have been founded at that time from an original neighborhood called Toledillo, made up of Jews from Toledo and that which has survived until now, half a millennium after the forced conversions and the expulsion edict of the Catholic Monarchs, is the residue of the Sephardic essence. 'What is in this town is not folklore', affirms Alía, whose mother is the Gran Dame of Lagartera and the owner of the collection presented here. 'This is an open book of anthropology. It is the result of a culture committed to defending and preserving its identity, even though the religious origin has been completely erased'.

In an effort to confirm the Sefardic origin, Alía makes a list of the indications that would support his hypothesis. He begins with the ruffs of the women of the mellah (Jewish quarters) of northern Morocco that share the same lace motifs, symbols of infinity, as the Lagarteran ruffs. He mentions the hanging beds, used for weddings and profusely decorated and covered by a canopy, which he links with the chuppah, the Jewish wedding canopy. He also talks of the cantera, a common niche in Lagartera houses, reflected in the spaces where the Torah would have been placed in the past. In his own house, he shows the abundance of Catholic religious imagery; a prominent feature of the homes of the families of Lagartera since ancient times. He deduced that perhaps it was a result of the zealotry of the convert.



This village is responsible for much of Spain's fine needlework, embroidery, and drawn-thread work. Traditionally, the work of Lagartera is of two kinds; the peasant embroidery of heavy wool or cotton thread in bright colors on crude white cotton cloth in the cross, chain and satin stitches, the other more intricate and sophisticated technique of drawn-thread work, in which threads are pulled from linen cloth and the remaining threads counted, grouped and stitched together with the thread removed from the cloth, creating open spaces and a delicate geometric design with the look of lace. Such work is thought to be the link between embroidery and lace and is typically white on white.

The traditional dress is, above all, intricate and layered: a shirt, petticoat, girdle, stockings, handkerchief, skirt, foot-guards, apron, choker and ruff. Interestingly, the children are the most enthusiastic when the occasion calls for them to dress up, for Corpus Cristi, the village's most important fiesta. From the early morning, the lagarteranos prepare their houses for the procession of the icon. The streets are carpeted with fennel, mint, and mistranzo, which, together with the atmosphere of the morning, perfume the environment. Altars are adorned with the best textiles pulled from the coffers to see the light only at this moment, because, once the Procession is over, they return

to their place of origin. During this festival, the young women of the town show off their clothing with exuberance and delicacy, accompanied by young men, also dressed in special models of men's suits. They too, start getting dressed early in the morning, each of the garments that make up the suit. The garments are treated with great care as many are adorned with old silk embroidered ribbons and buttons, some made by hand. Every year more visitors come to Lagartera to attend the procession and witness a cultural expression that is alive and en route to being named intangible cultural heritage by Unesco.

The textile culture of Lagartera has survived, this has been made possible by the unusual zeal that this community gives care to their heritage. Thus, community, pride, and rich heritage can explain something so beautiful and unique that it hardly needs explanation and calls for joy and enjoyment. ... **Marcella Echavarria**

