

How to Sew A Venetian Camicia

Based on the Dorothy Burnham "Cut My Cote" Camicia, V&A Museum, London

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The first time I set my eyes on the camicia at the [Reconstructed Chemise](#) page of the [Reconstructing History](#) site, I knew I had found a very likely construction method for the sixteenth century Venetian camicia. The Reconstructed Chemise page is an excellent resource, and I was so curious about the mention of Dorothy Burnham's Cut My Cote that I just had to buy the book. Of course I had to try making my own, and I decided there and then that all of my camicie would follow the same style. But after three slightly frustrating attempts to make a camicia using the instructions found there, I came to the conclusion that some things had not been addressed, and so I had to make things up as I went along.

The results were less than ideal, and so I felt the need to re-examine the conjectured construction method. Having found solutions to the problems I encountered, I thought I should share with you what I did and how I did it. Here you will find my instructions for sewing it, and I also include a table that, hopefully, will make it easier to calculate the length of fabric you will need, as well as a layout diagram, below. If you would like more information on sixteenth century Italian camicie, please visit my page on the camicia at [The Library](#).

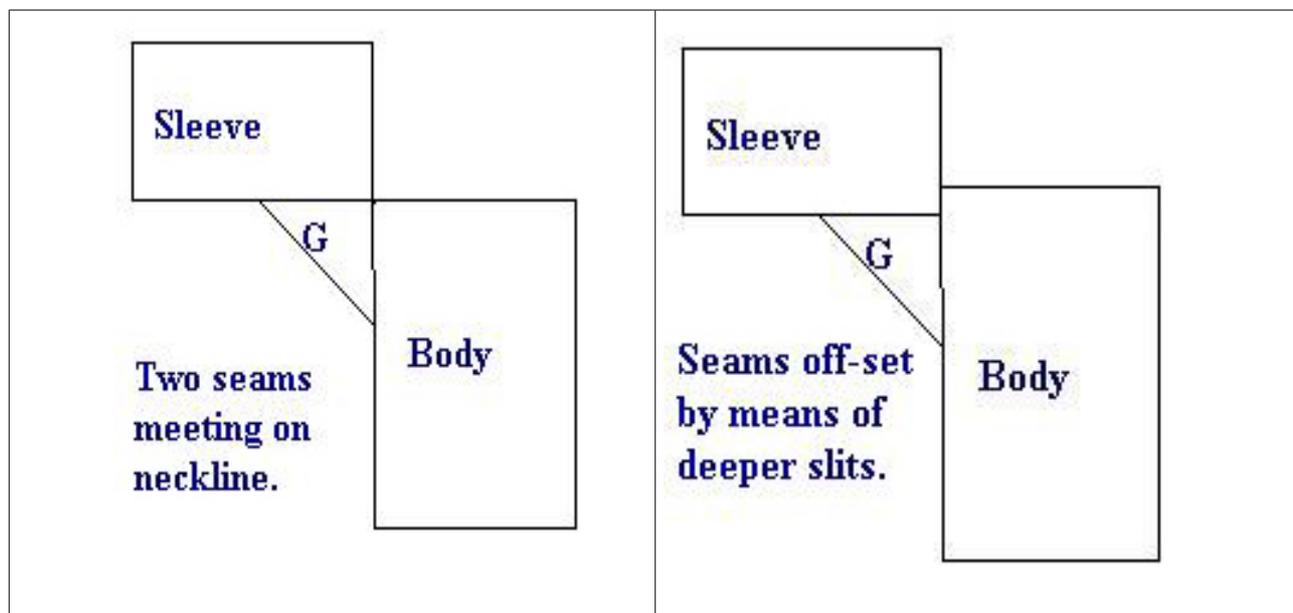


5. Woman's shirt. Probably Italian. 17th century.
Linen with polychrome silk embroidery.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London. T.770.191

So what is so "period" about this extant camicia - what makes it different from non-period or commercial patterns? To start with, this camicia has no shoulder straps, and therefore no armhole - the sleeve tops become part of the neckline. There are gussets under the arm, adding extra room where it is most needed. There is no shaping of fabric to be done with scissors at all - all the shaping is the result of the pleating up of the neckline. You don't need a paper pattern - every piece can be cut, or even torn from the fabric. I have done this - linen tears very well and this both saves a lot of time and results in a perfectly straight line - the easiest hemming I've ever done. The only cutting you will **need** to do are the little snips into the fabric that you will need to take to enable you to tear more easily. But of course you may **choose** to cut every piece.

You may wish to use the period loom width of 71cm (28"). Front and back are each a full loom width, and each side piece is a half loom width each. This will result in a finished camicia which measures approximately 2 metres (79") at the hem. The neckline should be approximately 2.7 metres (106 and 1/2") after sewing sleeves on but before finishing. This circumference is determined by adding together the width for front, back and sleeves (which are each a full loom width) and subtracting for seam allowances. This may seem like a lot, but when you take into consideration that most period neckline finishing methods result in a neckline diameter of only one quarter of the unfinished neckline, you'll see that the resulting neckline diameter of 67.5cm (26 1/2") is actually too small for a Venetian neckline. You may also choose to utilise a modern loom width, which will result in a fuller camicia, or to add 2 extra 71cm panels front and back, adding an extra 142cm (56") to the neckline. Whatever you decide, it's important to add extra panels in evenly front and back. The length of fabric you will need thus depends greatly on whether you go with the period loom width or utilise a modern one, as well as your height and girth, and thus how long and full you need your finished camicia to be.

The only downfall to Burnham's examination is that it leaves us with a few questions - the depth of the slits on the side sections being one, and the size of the gussets being another. If the layout in "Cut My Cote" is drawn to scale, then the gussets are approximately 25cm (10") square each. This is also the size given on the Reconstructed Chemise page. I agree with this size as it has worked perfectly for me.



Unfortunately, after making three camicie from the instructions at this site, I do not agree that the size of the slits should mirror the size of the gussets - this results in two seams meeting at the same point on the neckline, as seen in the diagram above left, which makes for an awkward neckline to pleat. A solution is to make the slits an

extra 5cm (2") deep, to offset these seams, as seen in the diagram above right. This is the impression I get from the diagram in "Cut My Cote". Of course we can't know what was done on the extant camicia without examining it for ourselves.**

**Since the above was written I have been fortunate enough to find [Katherine](#) via one of the costuming lists I'm on. Katherine was lucky enough to examine this camicia up close and personal, and has generously shared her information with me. My conjectured construction method (slits deeper than size of gussets) is actually correct!! Yay! This is what she has found:

1. Gussets are 9 inch squares (on each side)
2. The distance from lowest gusset to neck 'edge' is 13 inches, therefore the gussets should be set four inches lower.
3. Sleeves are 25 inches wide (mid point, i.e. 12.5 inches when folded in half)
4. Neck circumference is approx. 26 inches.
5. Overall length is 39 inches (neck to hem)
6. Centre panel is 28 inches, side panels (2 of) are 14 inches.

I was only off by an inch or two in estimating the size of the gussets and depth of the slits, but completely right in my solution to the problem! Ok, ok, I'll stop being so smug now. :-)

1. Measuring Up:

The only measurements you need are one to determine camicia length and one for sleeve length.

A: Measure from where you want the finished hem of the camicia to end (somewhere between just below the knees and just above the ankle is best) up to just above the nipples.

B: Measure from the point of your shoulder to where you want the sleeve to end - remember that poufing out from 'windows' and gaps between dress and sleeve or paned sleeves requires extra length. At a minimum the sleeve should end on the knuckles (I've allowed a minimum of 60cm (23 1/2") below; at a maximum perhaps a foot to a foot and a half beyond the tips of the fingers - this would be most suitable for later 16th century dresses with large paned sleeve tops that need filling with lots and lots of frothy white linen. Be aware also that linen is bulkier than cotton, so you may need more cotton and less linen for this sleeve type.

2. Calculating Fabric Requirements:

1 metre = 1.1 yards or 39"

The following instructions are for cutting the period loom width of 71cm (28") from two different modern fabric widths. You may of course choose to make your front, back, side and sleeve sections as wide as you wish. Just remember to allow for the greater width in your calculations. If you don't wish to cut to the period loom width, instructions are included below these tables.

A: Calculating Fabric requirement for cutting to period loom width:

| Finished Camicia Length Required | To Cut Period Loom Width from 112cm (44") wide fabric Formula: 2xA+2xB | To Cut Period Loom Width from 150cm (59") wide fabric Formula: 2xA+B |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| *90cm (35 1/2") | = 2x90cm+2x60cm = 300cm or 3 metres | = 240cm or 2.4 metres |
| *100cm (39 1/2") | = 2x100cm+2x60cm = 320cm or 3.2 metres | = 260cm or 2.6 metres |
| *110cm (43") | = 2x110cm+2x60cm = 340cm or 3.4 metres | = 280cm or 2.8 metres |
| *120cm (47") | = 2x120cm+2x60cm = 360cm or 3.6 metres | = 300cm or 3 metres |

Please note: This calculation is based in the minimum sleeve length requirement of 60cm (24"). If you require **longer sleeves** do the following calculation:

To calculate fabric requirements for longer sleeves:

$$[\text{sleeve length required}] - 60\text{cm (24")} = C$$

On 112cm (44") wide fabric add 2 x C to the required fabric length.

On 150cm (59") wide fabric add 1 x C to the required fabric length.

Thus, if you were using 112cm (44") wide fabric and your fabric requirement from the above table was 320cm, and your sleeve length required was 100cm, then:

$$100\text{cm} - 60\text{cm} = 40\text{cm (C)}; \text{ Add } 2 \times C: 2 \times 40\text{cm} = 80\text{cm extra fabric required.}$$

Thus your final fabric requirement would be 320cm + 80cm = 400cm or 4 metres.

B: Calculating fabric requirement for cutting to a modern loom width:

If you choose to go with a modern loom width of 112cm (44") for your camicia pattern pieces, you can calculate the fabric required using this formula:

$$3 \times A + 2 \times B + 2 \times C + 25\text{cm (10")} = \text{camicia}$$

Where A= length of camicia from above nipple to required depth (3 x A is for 1 front, 1 back and 2 sides each a half width)

B= Basic 60cm long sleeve

C= extra length for sleeves, if any

25cm (10") is for two gussets cut side by side

Please also note: I have not allowed fabric for the band seen around the neckline of camicie that hid the lines of stitching and were often decorated by embroidery. If you would like to make these from matching fabric please allow enough extra fabric to make a strip long enough to fit around the neckline. Alternatively you can use ribbon or bias-binding.

3. Preparing your fabric:

It's important to prepare your fabric for cutting and sewing. You may have already noted the hints and tips about preparing the fabric. If so go on to step 4. If not, you may want to read this first.

Always pre-wash your fabric whether it is for the garment, interlining or lining. Don't be afraid to wash fabric that is labelled 'dry-clean only' , but test first: cut two squares (15cm x 15cm or 6" x 6"), overcast all edges and throw one in the washer on the hottest cycle you can manage, then in the dryer on hot. After it's washed and dry compare the two and check for shrinkage and to see how the wash/dry has affected the pile/surface of the fabric. Don't worry if it has shrunk - you want this! Better now than after you have laboured hours and hours on a gorgeous court gown only to accidentally throw it in a hot wash and have it shrink on you!

In the case of woollens the result may be less than desirable as some wools will full with agitation and hot water - in that case you may want to wash further test squares on a medium hot/warm setting and a cool dryer.

To be doubly sure that all possible shrinkage and dye bleeding occurs before you cut do a double or triple wash/dry. If at all in doubt, for instance in the case of expensive silks or brocades, buy enough to make the two test squares before making the complete purchase.

Always pre-wash and pre-shrink your trim too. You would be surprised at how much difference trim that has shrunk in the wash after it has been sewn onto the garment can make to its appearance. Do not machine wash though. Try a sample first, then immerse the trim into a basin of hot water and detergent. Agitate a little and let soak for half an hour or so, then rinse twice in hot water, (more if there is any dye bleeding) then once in cold. I do not recommend throwing the trim in the dryer though.

Dry the trim as flat as you can manage - laying it in rows on a folded towel works in most cases, but be sure it is an old towel in case there is any dye still bleeding - in this case you may want to give it a few more hot washes until the bleeding stops - you don't want your garment to bleed on your chemise, and even sweat is enough to get it bleeding. In the case of a trim sample that has reacted badly to a test immersion in hot water, you

can also pre-shrink by using a steam iron - cover it with a cloth if necessary.

Always be honest with yourself about the state of your freshly dried fabric. After your fabric comes out of the dryer, or off the washing line, you might find it is pretty much wrinkle-free and easy to lay and fold for cutting. But if not **iron it** - even a light pressing will be a marvellous help when it comes to the next step.

Always, and I mean **always**, when folding your fabric for cutting, pin it right sides together along the selvages every 15cm or so, having first checked the folded edge - make sure it sits flat, showing no signs of twisting.

Always, when cutting a napped fabric, piled like velvet, or patterned like brocades, find the 'right way up' and mark it in some fashion. I prefer to use the pins used to pin the selvages together by having the head of the pin point "up". This way they perform a double function, and pinning metres and metres of fabric won't seem quite so much of a chore! When you cut straight skirt panels don't forget to mark the top of each piece before unpinning at the selvages. **Note:** this is a modern practice, in period they didn't always care to lay all pieces with the nap, so you can ignore this step if you choose and be perfectly period.

Always, when trying out a new style/cut of bodice, cut a mock-up from your interlining fabric (if using, or old sheets, scrap fabric etc if not, anything so long as it is colourfast and preferably pre-shrunk) and do a test-fit before cutting your fabric. It is also sometimes a good idea to do this if you tend to gain and lose weight often. When a perfect fit is found, separate the pieces and make permanent pattern pieces from whatever takes your fancy - I prefer thick brown wrapping paper which is available quite cheaply. This is also a good thing to do if you are using commercial patterns. You may want to do this for each style you make, and label them clearly (For instance 'Palma Vecchio style dress, 1520s, Bodice Front) you can then re-use the mock-up as interlining pieces in your garment.

Always, if pinning and draping the pattern on yourself, use a mirror and take your time. It's helpful to have a body double, or at least a friend to help, but it can be done without. So far every pattern that I've altered or drafted myself and draped by myself has worked out well. You do need

time, no distractions, and patience.

If you are a novice sewer who is not used to what pattern pieces are supposed to look like, or starting on a new project with many unfamiliar pieces, it may be helpful to leave the labelled pattern piece pinned to the fabric pieces until you are ready to sew.

It is sometimes also helpful if you print out/copy your instructions and check things off the list as you go. Not only does this help to remind you where you are if you should be interrupted, but it also gives you a sense of achieving goals.

Whenever you are faced with an unfamiliar task/garment it helps to go through each step in your head several times before attempting it. I sometimes do this at night before bed as I find it helps me to remember.

When in doubt ask - a friend, colleague, the pattern company, the web author, family member, fellow sewer - anyone who may be able to help you with a problem is fair game.

Don't say to yourself "this is too hard - I can't do this!". It takes time and patience to learn anything unfamiliar, but before you know it you'll be sewing like a pro!

Don't rush - leave yourself plenty of time. That is the foundation on which the building blocks to success depend.

4. Layout and Cutting:

*Cutting to the period loom width from **112cm (44")** wide fabric*

(You can also use the layouts below as a guide to cutting to the modern loom width)

G=Gusset

S=Side Piece

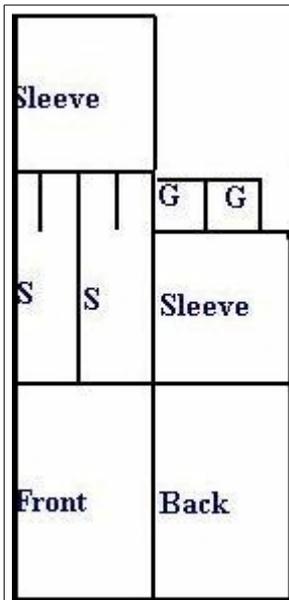
| | | |
|--------|---|---|
| Sleeve | | <p>1. Take the length of fabric you will need from the Fabric Requirements table above plus the calculation for any extra length in the sleeves, and lay it out across a table. To make things easier make sure you have the exact length needed by cutting or tearing off any excess - the following instructions are for an exact length of fabric.</p> <p>2. From one end measure in 71cm (28") from the selvedge and snip into the fabric. Either cut or tear a straight line from the snip right along the complete length of fabric. You now have two lengths of fabric, both the same length - a wider and narrower length.</p> <p>3. Front and Back: From the wider length take the measurement for the length of your front piece, the "A" measurement, and mark it on the selvedge and snip - then cut or tear straight across. Do the same again for the back section.</p> <p>4. Sleeves: The remaining fabric on this length will make two sleeves - fold this section in half crosswise so that both halves are exactly the same, insert scissors in fold and snip. Open section out, cut or tear in half.</p> <p>5. Side sections: Take the narrower length of fabric. Mark "A" measurement along selvedge with a snip. Cut or tear straight across. Do the same again for the other side section. Take the top narrow end of each side piece, mark the centre, and cut slits into fabric 30cm (12") deep. Set aside.</p> |
| Sleeve | G | |
| | G | |
| Back | S | |
| Front | S | |

6. **Gussets:** Take remaining narrow length and mark 50cm (20") section - cut or tear straight across. Fold this section in half to form a double square - snip into fold, open out and cut or tear straight across - this will give you two gussets each 25cm (10") square.

*Cutting to the period loom width from **150 (59")** wide fabric*

G=Gusset

S=Side Piece



1. Take your calculated length of fabric and trim (snip and tear, or cut) 8cm (3", more or less if your fabric is wider or narrower than 150cm) from it along the selvedge for whole length. This will leave you with a width of fabric exactly twice the period loom width. Fold in half lengthwise, snip in fold and cut or tear along the whole length. You are left with **two** lengths of the period loom width.

2. **Front:** From the **first** length, measure out your A measurement, snip into selvedge and cut to tear straight across.

3. **Sides:** Take your A measurement once again, mark it on the long side along the selvedge, snip, and cut or tear straight across. Take this section and fold it in half lengthwise - snip into the fold, open out and cut or tear right through. These are the two side sections. Make a slit in each by folding each section in half, snip into fold, open out and cut a slit 30cm (12") deep.

4. **Sleeve:** The remaining fabric from this first length will be one of the sleeves - use the cut/torn edge for the neckline and the selvedge for the sleeve end.

5. **Back:** Take the **second length** of fabric. Measure out your "A" measurement along the long side, snip, and cut or tear straight across.

6. **Other sleeve:** Take your "B" measurement along the long side, snip, and cut or tear straight across.

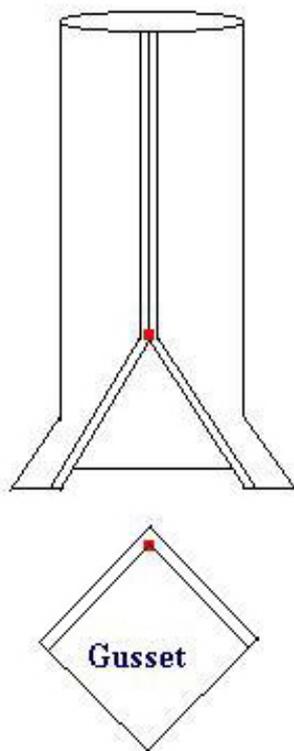
7. **Gussets:** Measure 50cm (20") along the long side, snip, and cut or tear straight across. Take this section and fold in half so you are left with a 25cm (10") square, snip into the fold, open out and cut or tear straight across. This will leave you with two gussets.

The remaining fabric should be a square or rectangular piece of fabric just perfect for a handkerchief.

5. Sewing:

These instructions are written with machine sewing in mind, but of course the same steps can be taken sewing by hand. Please note, this is a modern method of construction – it is not based on period practice.

I find it much easier to construct this camicia if I sew the gussets to the sleeves first, so....



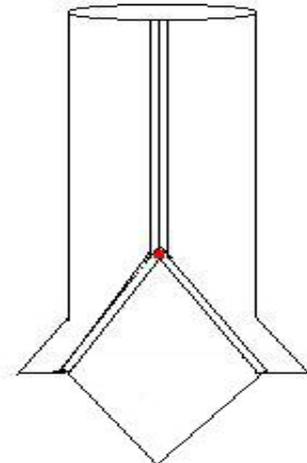
Note: it is much easier if you neaten all your raw edges by your chosen method before you begin. You could also use french seams, but it does complicate things quite a bit.

1. On both sides of each sleeve piece mark a point 23.5cm (9 1/4") from the neckline end of the sleeve pieces. Right sides together, matching marks, sew sleeve seam from wrist end to mark. Press sleeve seams and unsewn seam allowances open. These openings in the sleeves are the gusset openings.

2. Take each gusset and fold in half diagonally, wrong sides together, forming a triangle. Finger press a crease along this fold. (It is not necessary to use an iron - this crease is for ease of reference. Fold is not shown in diagram) With the crease vertical, finger press or lightly iron the seam allowances on either side at the top of the crease - this will form the shape of an arrow pointing up. On the wrong side make a mark in from the point where the three creases meet. Do this again on the other point on the other end of the crease.

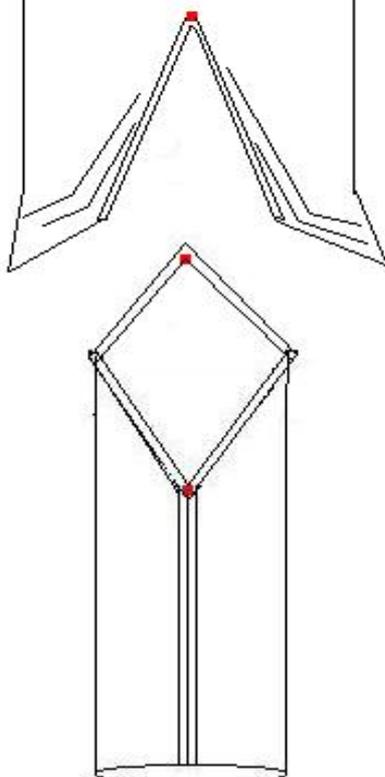
3. With the unstitched end of the sleeve seam toward you, wrong side up so that the seam allowances are visible, place the mark in the gusset point over the seam where the stitching ends. Pin in place. Open out one side of the gusset opening and pin the gusset to it along the seam allowance. Do this again along the other gusset opening's seam allowance.

4. Open out seam allowance and, making sure sleeve is clear of the machine foot, lower it onto the fabric - lower needle into mark, backstitch a little to reinforce, and stitch from that point of gusset out to ends of sleeves. The finished sleeve will look something like my attempt at a diagram to the left.



Finished sleeve with gusset inserted.

Side section with slit opened out slightly and seam allowances lightly pressed.



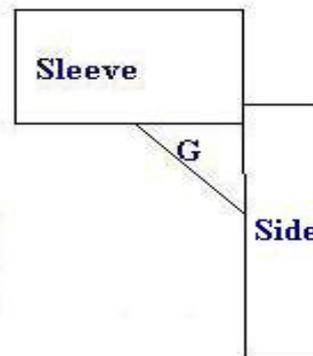
The next step is to sew the sleeves into the side sections. It makes it easier to do this rather than the after the camicia is assembled because there is less fabric to fight with at the sewing machine...or across your lap.

1. With the side section laying with the slit end toward you, wrong side up, mark a point 1.5cm (5/8") directly above the slit. Place the other point of the gusset over this and pin in place.

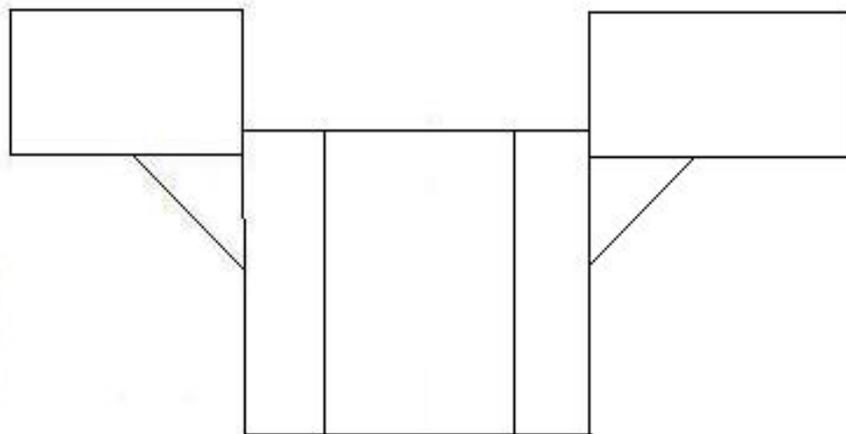
2. Just like you did for the sleeves, insert the gusset seam allowance along the slit seam allowance, edge to edge. The gusset seam allowance will narrow at the point. Pin in place. Repeat for other side.

3. Open out seam allowance and, making sure sleeve is clear of the machine foot, lower it onto the fabric - lower needle into mark, backstitch a little to reinforce, and stitch from that point of gusset out along gusset, over sleeve seam and to end of slit. Do the same again for the other side. You may find this step easier to accomplish by hand.

When you're done you should have something that looks like this:



4. All that is left to do now is to sew each of the side+sleeve sections to the back, then the front, and you're done! You're left with something that should look like this:



You are now ready to work on the neckline. A quick and easy method to determine if the camicia is roomy enough for your needs is to run a temporary line of stitching (longest machine stitch set to nil tension, or a double row of hand basting will do) along the neckline. Pull up as much, or as, little, as you want. Adding extra panels, should you wish it, can be easily achieved - simply cut along the centre front and back and add one or two panels.

Finish the neckline by your chosen method and you're done!

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