

# Spanish Fencing in the 16th Century



Tabula XXV from Girard Thibault's *Academie de l'Epee* demonstrates specific moves and responses as described on page 10.

by Ramon Martinez

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Schools of arms have existed in Spain since the middle ages in places such as Leon, Toledo and Valladolid. However, the unique system of Spanish swordsmanship that developed in the 16th century was born of the genius of one individual, Don Jeronimo de Carranza. Considered the father of the Spanish school, he was given the title *El Primer Inventor de la Ciencia de las Armas* (The First Inventor of the Science of Arms) by his disciple and successor Don Luis Pacheco de Narvaez.

Carranza, in his treatise *De la Filosofia de las Armas*, 1569, states that he created his school by applying his education, of which science and philosophy were a major part, to the improvement of the management of arms. He called his system of swordsmanship *La Destreza* rather than *esgrima* (fencing), because it better expressed what his system encompassed. The term has no literal translation, but can be interpreted as a "high level art and skill." Carranza created a complete system that incorporated science, art, experience, philosophy and spirituality. These crucial elements must be viewed in their historical context. The 16th century Spanish culture, religious, philosophical and political character are the key to understanding the mindset from which *La Destreza* emerged.

Carranza and Narvaez, as well as all the masters who fol-

lowed them, held the firm conviction that science, which is irrefutable, must be applied to swordsmanship. Carranza chose the science of geometry because it has elements that are not only necessary but also facilitate the cognitive process. Geometry improves the quality of thinking in non-mathematical situations. It is the primary method for training the *Diestro*, as the swordsmen were called, to think logically, methodically and unemotionally. Ibn Khaldun, in his work, *The Muqaddimah*, 1377, states: "Geometry enlightens the intellect and sets one's mind right. All its proofs are very clear and orderly. It is hardly possible for errors to enter into geometrical reasoning, because it is well arranged and orderly. Thus, the mind that constantly applies itself to geometry is not likely to fall into error. In this convenient way, the person who knows geometry acquires intelligence."

Geometry also provides one with a firm understanding of special relationships. In *La Destreza* the understanding of such is imperative, because it affects every aspect of the system: stance, footwork, body-weapon positioning, distance, attack and defense. Narvaez, in his treatise *Libro de las Grandezas de la Espada*, 1600, explains that the *La Destreza* is presented in geometric proofs in order that the *Diestro* sees how the placements of the body, arm or sword are most effective and efficient in relation to those of the adversary.

The proper stance, according to Carranza and Narvaez, is one in which the swordsman assumes an upright, semi-profiled posture, legs straight and heels slightly apart (approximately the

space of one foot's length). The sword arm is held straight out at shoulder level, the sword blade parallel to the ground. The sword is positioned in such a way as to have the point constantly menacing the adversary. The points of the combatants' blades are held in front of each other's sword hilts, and termed *medir las espadas*, literally "measuring the swords." This determines the diameter of the imaginary circle.

In his magnificently illustrated treatise *Académie de l'Espée*, 1628, Girard Thibault, a Dutch master following the Spanish school, determined the diameter of the circle by the distance of the swordsman standing straight with his heels together, extending his arm over his head and pointing up with his index finger. The distance from the ground between his heels to the tip of his index finger is the diameter of the circle. All of the combat occurs within an imaginary circle of that dimension. The circle and the possible angles of attack and defense are etched into the thought process of the *Diestro* after years of theoretical and practical study.

The swordsmen standing at opposite ends of the diameter of the imaginary circle assume their stance. They will then commence to step around each other along the circumference of the circle. The *Diestros* endeavor to maintain the diameter as they walk around the circle because the diameter offers the safest location. If the swordsmen attack along the diameter, impalement on each other's swords would be inevitable. Narvaez states, "*Por la linea del diametro no se puede caminar sin peligro*" (Along the line of the diameter one cannot walk without peril). The attack is always executed at an angle to the adversary, on either side of his blade. They attack or defend by stepping, passing or crossing the circle along chords. The *Diestro* elicits his adversary's responses by strategic movement and repositioning using varied changes in the rhythm, tempo and distance. This is accomplished by sophisticated footwork required for the generalship (command of timing, distance, space and movement) that enables the swordsmen to apply the geometry with effectiveness. Narvaez termed this *llave y gobierno de la destreza* (key and government of *destreza*). The *Diestro* creates the appropriate angle from which to launch an attack, executed while the adversary is moving and most vulnerable.

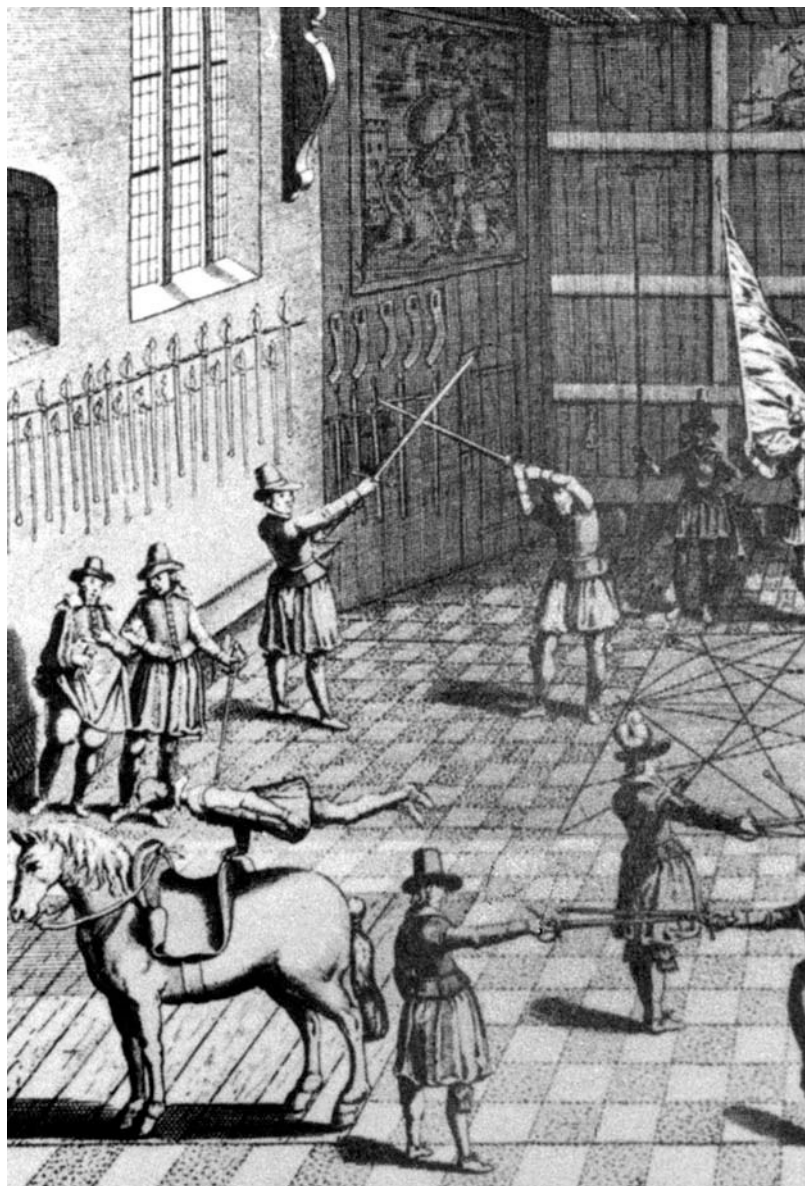
One of the central concepts to the understanding of *La Destreza* is the *movimientos* (movements). These movements are classifications of specific isolated actions of the body or weapon. Carranza analyzed the actions of swordsmen engaged in combat and then divided those actions into the separate movements of which they are comprised. Each technique (*treta*) in *La Destreza* is formed by a combination of *movimientos*. These are learned separately and can be executed in innumerable combinations. Examples are *violento* (sudden upward movement of the sword) and *natural* (deliberate downward movement of the sword). As well as sword movements, there are also specific movements of the feet e.g.: *passo* (the distance from the center of the heels when one foot is moved and not the other) and *passos en genero* (steps that are done alternately walking).

The analysis of movement in *La Destreza* was so precise that its terminology was adopted by the Spanish school of dance that flourished during that era. Dancing was an essential part of the education of a gentleman as was swordsmanship and riding. References to *movimientos* and their relation to the school of dance can be found in the *Discursos Sobre El Arte Del Dancado*, 1642, by dance master Don Juan de Esquivel Navarro. Since

training in *Destreza* was an integral part of the life of a gentleman, Esquivel does not go on to explain the *movimientos*, but rather assumes that the reader already has knowledge of them as part of his training in arms. As in dancing each step (formed by movements) is learned separately and, when performed, the combinations create the dance.

The following is an example of a *treta* composed by *movimientos*. *Diestro* A does two *passos en genero* counter-clockwise along the circumference of the circle, to *Diestro* B's left. When *Diestro* A arrives on point C he then does a *passo* across chord CD of the circle at an angle towards *Diestro* B attacking with a downward slicing cut to the head executed by the movements *violento* and *natural*.

Cuts are classified by the type of movement executed by the swordsman, rather than by the direction that they travel. These are *arrebatar* (from the shoulder), *medio tajo* (from the elbow) and *mandoble* (from the wrist). Thrusts (*estocadas*) are not classified, they are executed from all angles depending on the placement of the weapon and the swordsman's body in relation to that of the adversary. In the defensive manipulation of the weapon *La*



The fencing hall at Leiden University in 1608 clearly displays le circle mysterieux.

*Destreza* clearly defined the defensive techniques as a redirection or rerouting of the offensive weapon by the placement of the *Diestro's* weapon against the adversary's. The positioning of the weapon is not fixed or numerically designated, because it can be applied in an infinite variety of ways.

However, it is required to make contact on the adversary's weak part of the blade with the strong part of the *Diestro's* blade and sword guard. This technique is termed *desvio* (literally to change course, deflect, parry). Spanish treatises constantly emphasize that the control of the opposing weapon must be maintained by *atajo* (taking control of the adversary's blade with one's own, an engagement of opposition). The ability to control the opposing weapon is acquired by cultivating what is termed *tacto*, best described as the sensitivity of the hand in which the weapon is held. This is what enables the *Diestro* to read the strengths, weaknesses and intentions of his adversary through blade contact. *Tacto* is in fact the same as the French term *sentiment du fer* used in smallsword and foil technique, which Thibault refers to as *le sentiment de l'épée*. In order to achieve this *atajo*, the controlling blade must be placed against the opposed

blade at the most efficient position to ensure the maximum leverage and mechanical advantage.

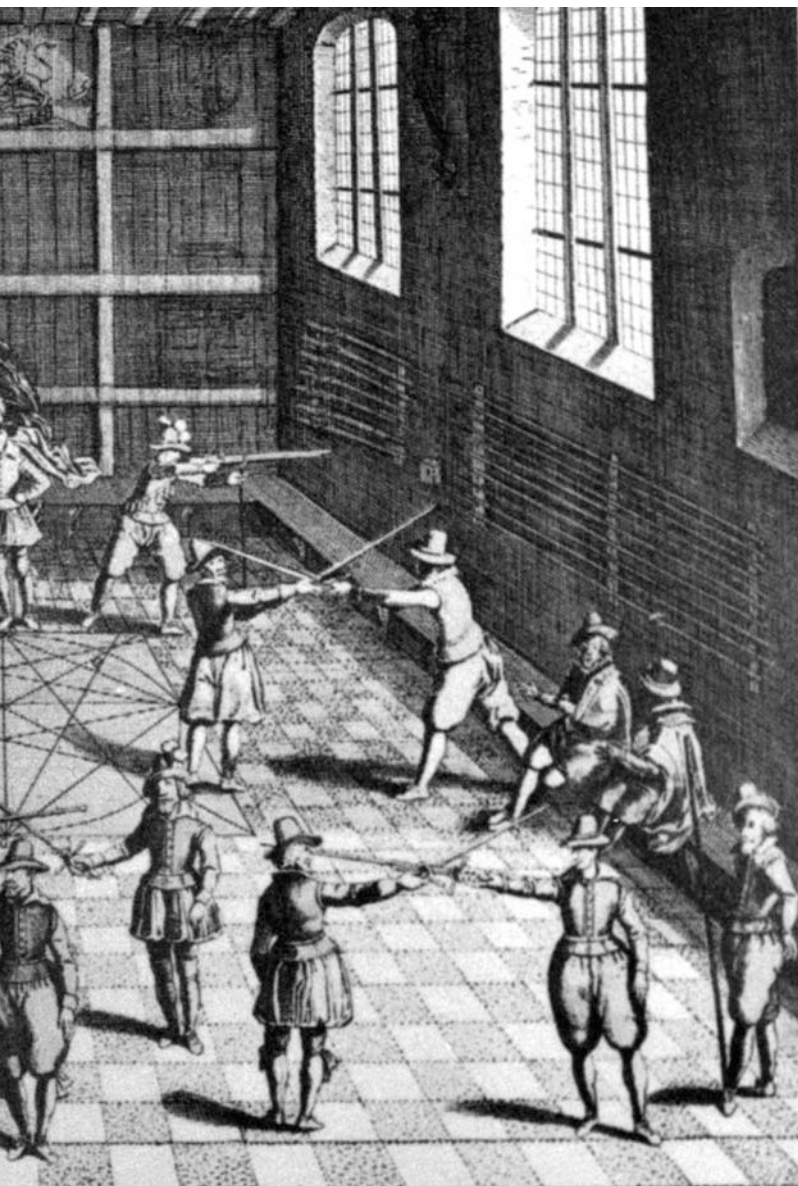
The Italian schools of the same period focused on a preconceived standard. Italian treatises, which were well illustrated, collected and classified certain types of attacks (*bottas*) and counter-offensive actions. These techniques along with their associated counter techniques are learned and then practiced in drills. In comparison, the *Diestro* is trained to reason his way through a conflict rather than react in a previously set manner. He learned to instantly apply the geometric reasoning that he had assimilated. In accordance to the changing circumstances of combat. *The Diestro* constantly repositions himself according to his intention, whether it be attack, defense or counter-attack. It is extremely difficult to illustrate this kind of dynamic action and movement. Precisely for this reason Carranza, Narvaez and many of those who followed deliberately did not illustrate their work with many figures. The treatise left by Thibault is the only one to fully illustrate the Spanish school, and the author admonishes the reader that the illustrations are not fixed postures, but dynamic action whose movements have been divided into time segments. Hence the vast variety of pairs of swordsmen engaged in combative sequences.

Thibault's illustration of *le circle mysterieux* presents many precepts. One of these is the length of the weapon, which is determined by standing straight with feet together and placing the point on the ground between the feet. The sword's length is correct if the cross bar of the hilt intersects with the swordsman's navel. The same illustration shows foiled rapiers—purpose-made practice weapons an example of which, along with the foiled dagger, can be seen in the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The Spanish rapier's evolution reflects the manner of its use. There were many blade designs produced in Spain with a variety of cross-sections. The blade of choice had a diamond-shaped cross-section from at least the middle to the point. This type of blade lent itself to a system that emphasizes both thrust and cut. A stiff diamond-shaped blade offers tremendous penetrating power. In *La Destreza* there is an emphasis on thrusts to the head and face. This type of blade facilitates the point passing through the skull and can deliver an effective cut without being unduly heavy. Cuts in rapier play were not intended to have the same impact or lethal capability as a sword or sabre. For the most part they were utilized in wounding and/or stunning the adversary so that the more lethal thrust could be delivered. Also, good blades taper in width from the strong part of the blade nearest the hilt, terminating in a very sharp point. This type of blade design with its well-distributed overall mass makes a weapon that is extremely maneuverable.

The guard of the weapon evolved from the swept-hilt design to the cup hilt and this also reflects a system that gives consideration to both thrust and cut. The cup hilt, along with its extended cross-bar and knuckle bow, offered more protection to the hand, wrist, forearm and elbow from thrusts as well as cuts.

In the 18th century the Spanish school was still practiced, as is evidenced in books dealing with the smallsword and the French school. In these books, especially in *L'Ecole des Armes*, 1763, by Domenico Angelo and *L'Art des Armes*, 1766 by Danet, advice is given along with admonishments as to the risks involved in encountering a Spanish swordsman. This practical hilt design offers more protection to the extended target (hand and arm) from a weapon that was lighter and faster. The rapier's



longer blade along with the Spanish methodology, presents a considerable difficulty for a swordsman wielding a smallsword. In attempting to close the distance and reach the body, there is the danger of being seriously wounded by either thrust or cut.

The term “mysterious” or “mystic” applied to the description of the circle in Thibault’s treatise that is continually associated with *La Destreza* appears to be a concept that is his own, part of his variations on the Spanish school. Narvaez comments that Thibault has over-complicated the Spanish system.

The importance of the development of the swordsman to higher levels of chivalry and consciousness is stressed by Narvaez in commenting on the master-disciple relationship: “The primary diligence that a master must undertake with his disciple is to know if he is noble and known to be of virtue; because, nobility and virtue always incline towards good and in general those who are noble are of generous spirit not subject to any passion nor disturbed by vain glory, or predisposed towards arrogance.”

The only other work that illustrates *La Destreza* and approaches the scope of Thibault’s is the treatise written much later by the Spanish Master Don Francisco Lorenz

De Rada *Nobleza de la Espada*, 1705. As Narvaez expounds on the system of his mentor Carranza, Rada explains and further clarifies Carranza and Narvaez. It is of interest to note that Rada in his work elaborates further on the explanations of *La Destreza* but not in its execution.

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Domenico Angelo’s *L’Ecole des Armes* displays smallsword versus Spanish rapier.

## Lessons from *Tabula XXV* (see page 7)

Two participants, Zachaire and Alexandre, demonstrate the specific movements to be performed in answer to a variety of situations. The accompanying text describes the nuances of the inner workings of Thibault’s system, such as the sensitive fingering of the weapon and the function of the footwork. In the following description of *Tabula XXV*, the reader is guided through the 13 Circles in which Zachaire, always on the left, presents his blade throughout in a similar manner with subtle changes of pressure. Alexandre responds according to the stimulus he receives.

**Circle 1** Zachaire presents his blade and Alexandre steps in and engages. This response is typical of the Spanish school in that one of the major principles is to immediately gain and maintain control of the adversary’s blade. Note that the weight distribution of Alexandre is mostly on his left leg, a basic principle of *La Destreza* being that one is never to be double weighted.

**Circle 2** Alexandre, while maintaining opposition of blade to the outside, brings his right foot forward and delivers a thrust through Zachaire’s head.

**Circle 3** As Alexandre brings his right foot forward, Zachaire disengages and thrusts with full force at chest. Alexandre sees the change in blade positioning and closes the line by meeting his forte to the foible of his adversary’s blade. As Zachaire moves forward Alexandre closes the distance so that Zachaire impales himself.

**Circle 4** Zachaire is in the same position as Circle 1, but holds his hand a bit more to the inside. This minute change in hand position causes Alexandre to engage the blade from underneath without exerting undue pressure or opposition. It is a firm but subtle contact.

**Circle 5** Continuing from Circle 4, Alexandre moves his right foot forward and transports Zachaire’s blade to the inside of his arm, while shifting the position of his body towards the inside in order to add more leverage to his blade pressure.

**Circle 6** Both participants hold the same posture as in Circle 5 with Alexandre opposing his adversary’s blade. Zachaire reduces the pressure and Alexandre responds by leaning his body forward while at the same time releasing Zachaire’s blade and straightening his arm to pierce his adversary through the head.

**Circle 7** This is a variation of Circles 5 and 6. Here Zachaire maintains the blade pressure, causing Alexandre to move his right foot forward while executing a *froissement* on his opponent’s blade. He then performs a *volte* while executing a diagonal cut to the left side of Zachaire’s head.

**Circle 8** This begins as in Circle 5. Both men seek to control each other’s blade. Alexandre, sensing an increase in pressure, relinquishes contact, causing Zachaire’s blade to pass over his head. At the same time, Alexandre steps forward with his left foot, bringing his left shoulder forward

and pulling back his blade to present his point to the right side of his adversary.

**Circle 9** Continuing from Circle 8, Alexandre brings his right shoulder forward and thrusts through the left side of Zachaire’s body.

**Circle 10** This begins as in Circle 1, except that Zachaire is holding his hand higher. Alexandre moves forward slightly to the right, improving the leverage of his blade against that of his adversary.

**Circle 11** Continuing from Circle 10, Alexandre maintains opposition and advances his right foot forward (lunging) to thrust through Zachaire’s head.

**Circle 12** This begins as in Circle 10. Zachaire, feeling the pressure from the engagement, disengages and thrusts at Alexandre’s chest (lunging). Alexandre advances his right foot and closes the line by opposing to the inside. He then thrusts through Zachaire’s face while maintaining opposition.

**Circle 13** As in Circle 12, Alexandre moves his right foot forward with his left following slightly behind, so that he displaces his body while piercing his adversary through the head.

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