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Four courses or six strings?

How the guitar grew, in official wording, with the dates kept apart.

A modern six-string looks obvious until you read the labels. The museum and a 1911 encyclopaedia do not tell quite the same story, so they sit side by side here.

Source	Official wording
The Met, "The Guitar," 2007	The first recognisable guitars were built in the fifteenth century, "much smaller than its modern counterpart, with four double courses of gut strings (occasionally the top string was single)." They had tied gut frets and a decorative rose. From about 1600 until the mid-eighteenth century, the five-course baroque guitar's popularity "supplanted both the four-course guitar and the six- or seven-course vihuela." That type averaged "approximately 92 centimeters long."
The Met, "The Spanish Guitar"	Many small alterations in the first half of the nineteenth century led up to the concert guitar, "exemplified in the work of Antonio de Torres," whose work "began in the 1850s." A guitar by Pedro Fuentes, made before 1858, is cited for five fan braces and a wooden mosaic that later became a standard classical-guitar decoration.
Britannica, 1911	The modern guitar "has six strings, three of gut and three of silk covered with silver wire." It is "generally stated that the sixth or lowest string was added in 1790 by Jacob August Otto of Jena." The same article says six-stringed guitars and vihuelas "were known in the 16th century" in Spain, citing Juan Bermudo. Those 1911 wordings are not combined with the Met essays.

A length that is not the same as a length

The 2007 essay's "approximately 92 centimeters" is an official average for the five-course baroque type. A Voboam guitar in the Met, dated 1697, is officially 96.9 centimetres overall. A Lacôte of about 1835 is officially "Total Length: 924 mm." A C. F. Martin of about 1838 is officially 93.5 centimetres high. Those four figures are not averaged.

A short quiz

1. According to the 2007 Met essay, how many double courses did the first recognisable guitars have?
2. Until when does that essay say the five-course baroque guitar's popularity lasted?
3. In which decade does the Met's Spanish-guitar essay say Torres's work began?

Answers. 1. Four (occasionally with the top string single). 2. Until the mid-eighteenth century. 3. The 1850s.

Wording from Metropolitan Museum essays "The Guitar" (Wendy Powers and Jayson Kerr Dobney, 1 September 2007) and "The Spanish Guitar," and from the 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica article "Guitar." Museum measurements from Met object records 1989.147, 1992.1.1 and 1979.380a, b. Checked 17 November 2026.