

Introduction to Clothing Design

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Designing clothing can often be a frantic and overwhelming experience. Overall, it is important to remember that you can be as authentic as you want to be. Most importantly, have FUN!

As a designer, there are several questions you need to ask before you begin:

- Who is the clothing for?
- Are there any fiber allergies/special conditions?
- How authentic does the clothing need to be?
- Will you enter this clothing in a competition?
- When does the clothing need to be ready?
- How much are you willing to spend on materials?
- What time of year or climate will the clothing be worn? Summer? Rainy, muddy Estrella War? Arizona or Minnesota?
- Will this be court clothing or working/camping clothing?
- Does the clothing need to be washable?

Designing clothing is incredibly similar to painting. You start with a blank canvas and your inspirations lead your way to the finished product.

Choosing Place and Time Period

What is your inspiration? *Camelot*? *Shakespeare in Love*? That fabulous cotehardie and surcoat or Tudor you saw at the last event?

Movies are a great source of inspiration. Just because a movie is “historical”, it does not mean that the clothing is historically accurate. A good example of this is the movie *A Knight's Tale*. The costumes were made to create a certain “look” rather than using extant clothing as a resource. You can use the movie as a starting point for your research. If you are going to put the time and effort into making a beautiful garment, you probably want document at least part of it.

Researching costume by examining art requires you to be a bit of an art historian. Late medieval and renaissance paintings of historical or biblical events often have background characters in contemporary dress. Styles often progressed so slowly, that many painters were unaware of historical styles and painted their own version of the clothing. Later period artists like Holbein used incredible detail on clothing in their paintings, while others were much more stylized. Later Victorian art dramatically romanticizes the medieval and renaissance clothing, so try to use contemporary sources whenever possible.

Some times and places are much easier to research and document than others. There are many surviving portraits of 16th century Western European aristocrats. Some Islamic cultures, on the other hand, prohibited painting people. What little pictorial evidence we have is usually from an outsider's point of view.

Other costumers can often point you in the right direction, while local libraries and the web are excellent sources for information. Archaeological texts and findings provide the most definitive documentation. Make sure to check into Interlibrary loan programs.

Choosing Social Class

Throughout our period, social class defined life. Not very many people were able to break out of the social strata they were born into. Clothing is a very visible and recognizable display of one's standing in society. Sumptuary laws were imposed in many areas that strictly defined who could wear what fabrics, colors, furs or metals. Fines were levied against those who broke the laws. Of course, the fashionable ones flouted that they could pay the fines and wore what they wanted to anyway.

Royalty and Nobility

The royalty and nobility were on the cutting edge of fashion. The more ostentatious their clothing, the more powerful they appeared. They had servants to dress them and they did not have to perform manual labor. So, long flowing sleeves, trailing trains, rigid bodies and voluminous skirts emphasized that these people did not have to lower themselves to do chores. At the same time, there was variety in the noble wardrobe. Hunting garments tend to be more flexible than court garments.

The more expensive-looking the fabric, the more impressive the clothing will be. Both men and women's garments are often decorated with needlework, jewels and lavish contrasting trim. By today's standards, many of the noble garments were beaded, trimmed, slashed and puffed to within an inch of their lives. Consider what care will be needed for laundering for the additional ornamentation.

Middle Class

The middle class was composed of merchants, artisans and other working professionals. The more affluent the middle class family, the more servants they had. Many people in the middle classes emulated the nobility's fashions. The garments are slightly less restrictive and toned down.

The middle classes would use a good quality wool cloth trimmed with contrasting fabric and modest trim rather than velvet dripping in jewels. Puffing, slashing and pinking were also popular ways of decorating middle class clothing. The fabric would be of good quality.

Peasants

The lower classes were manual laborers and their clothing reflected that. Men could not plow fields in flowing sleeves, and the women could not tend the hearth well in a corset and farthingale. Peasant clothing has simpler lines, easy movement and is typically easily washable. Peasants had limited means and a functional wardrobe. They could not afford to keep up with the latest fashions. Trim would be minimal. Many people favor the simple styles for camping or scullery work.

Designing the Ensemble

Once you begin researching period costume, you will realize that people wore many, many pieces of clothing at all levels of society. During our period, Europe was going through a mini Ice Age and temperatures were cooler than they are now. To give each garment the appropriate setting, consider what other pieces would be worn with it. Four categories to go with the main garments are undergarments, headwear, footwear, and other accessories.

Undergarments

A late 14th century cotehardie just does not look quite right when worn with a push-up bra. Depending on your level of comfort, period undergarments can also be very supportive.

In period, body linens for both sexes were used to absorb body oils...and they were easy to launder! Period undergarments are more authentic and can extend the life of that gorgeous \$20/yard brocade. Body linens, as the name implies, were made from linen. Unlike today, linen was relatively inexpensive. If the wearer is prone to perspiring, a smock or chemise can actually make the outer garment more comfortable to wear. This is especially true if you are wearing a corset.

Headwear

Only recently, have we stopped wearing hats everyday. In period, religion filled every part of life. Christian and Islamic pious women were expected to cover their hair throughout most of our period. The few exceptions to this were young girls and brides. Even if you hate to wear hats, period millinery is a fascinating study of period masculinity and femininity. In earlier periods, different veil arrangements were common for women. Men could wear a variety of hoods. In the 15th century the *hennin* (princess cone-head hat) appeared to accompany Burgundian dress. In the Tudor times, men often sported a flat cap when women wore a variety of structured hoods.

Footwear

Period footwear could be made from a variety of materials. Leather working was refined, as humans had been working with hides for millennia by this point. Shoes changes dramatically over this time, especially in the higher ranks. Rounded toes gave way to gigantic pointed toes and then back again. In renaissance Italy, some women wore *chopine*, early platform shoes.

Other Accessories

A 12th century peasant would not have a velvet-and-brocade purse with rochaille beads. When designing your ensemble, consider what accessories would be appropriate. Accessories bring your ensemble together and finish your look.

Should you carry a needle case? Will you want to include an apron? What jewelry would be appropriate? What types of shoes? What type of belt? The possibilities are endless.

Patterns

Whenever you try a new pattern or design cut out the pattern in an inexpensive fabric like muslin, cotton broadcloth or “bargain fabric” before you cut your expensive fabric. Use this as a practice attempt. Alter the pattern to fit the wearer and use the “muslin” as your custom pattern. Blindly attempting a new pattern can lead to disastrous results. Sure, it takes extra time, but think of the time you may be saving yourself in case the pattern runs a little small or is not designed in your body shape.

Commercial Patterns

Commercial patterns have multiplied over the past few years. Be warned—commercial patterns are “inspired” by the past rather than being truly historically accurate. These patterns are based on modern aesthetics and use modern sewing techniques. Beginners will often find these less daunting, because each step is detailed. If you are new to sewing, commercial patterns are great introductions.

Historical Patterns

Historical patterns are often a little more complicated than their commercial counterparts are. The ones I have experienced had pages of black-and-white documentation, but confusing cutting lines and instructions. Historical patterns are great for the intermediate tailor or seamstress, because they provide guides to authenticity. Be prepared to allow extra seam allowances for fitting and modifying patterns to make them “work”.

Creating Your Own Patterns

You’re ready for the challenge and you want to recreate that Holbein. Creating a “block” is an invaluable tool when you are creating your own patterns. A block is a customized fabric pattern of the body. Several books like *The Medieval Tailor’s Assistant* and websites like *The Renaissance Tailor* (www.vertetsable.com) go through this process in detail. This can be a little scary at first, but it’s easy to get so spoiled that you dread using a commercial pattern.

Fabric and Trim Selection

Shopping for Fabric

Surviving JoAnn’s

You walk into JoAnn’s and patriotic prints and slinky knits jump out at you. Relax. There are many benefits to shopping at a local fabric store the most important being convenience and cost. You often save both time and money over many mail order suppliers. Also, they often have great sales and coupons in the newspaper.

Take some time to learn the layout of the store. Start looking for the cottons, wool, linens, luxury fabric, and upholstery fabric. Learn how they look and feel compared to other fabrics. Look through the sewing notions, thread, ribbons and trim. Definitely check out the bargain area.

You can look at the end of the cardboard and see the fiber content. Sometimes, the most period-looking fabrics are polyester/cotton or acetate blends.

Mail Order

Sometimes you just can't find what you need at the local fabric store. Some places just don't carry spring steel boning or 100% silk satin. There are many mail-order or online fabric stores at your disposal. Historical costuming online stores often carry historical patterns, boning, wool, linen, and millinery wire. Some elite manufactures even sell period reproductions of silk brocades—for an elite price. Several wholesalers also sell to the general public and you can get great deals on trim and fabric. Look around, you may be surprised at what you can find. If the minimum order is more than you could use, then consider ordering with friends.

EBay

EBay can be a great way to look for unusual fabric. In your search criteria, it helps to use “yards” or “yds” to find uncut fabric rather than Aunt Lucy's old wool skirt. Of course, ordering anything online or participating in auctions may be risky. *Use at your own risk!!!*

Fiber Content

Choosing your fabric fiber content is a very important step in designing clothing. If you understand how certain fibers retain heat or react to flame, you can design comfortable clothing that won't melt if you stand too close to the campfire. Generally, avoid realistic looking floral brocades, obviously printed designs and anything “stretchy”. Stylized flowers and striped/patterns woven into the fabric were more common. Today, you can find very rough weaves. Just because the textiles in period were made centuries ago does not mean that they did not understand fabric manufacture. Humans have been manufacturing fabric for millennia. In fact, their textiles were often superior to our machined cloth today in our mass-market, consuming, “disposable” society. Specialized artisans were highly skilled, and textiles were often used over and over again to create different garments. Some silks in the monasteries were several centuries old!

Natural Fibers:

Wool

Wool was the fabric of choice for many outer garments, especially in Northern Europe. Everyone wore wool from the nobility to the peasants. Fine wool easily may be used for lower nobility and middle classes. You may want to use a *slightly* rougher weave for the lower classes. There are many different weaving patterns available. “Suiting” or gabardine works well for tailored garments.

Wool is made of animal hair and many different varieties are available. Wool has natural pockets of air between the hairs, which insulates the wearer. Be careful when caring for wool because it's notorious for shrinking. Wool will return to its original position after being stretched or creased. Wool is also warm when it is damp and breathes well. Also, wool is dirt resistant and flame resistant.

Linen

White linen was used extensively in our period for many garments smocks, chemises, coifs. Linen was bleached by being laid out in the sun. Though linen is difficult to dye, many colors are available. Hanky weight and light weight linens work well for small clothes. Heavier linens can be used for outer garments.

Linen, made from flax fibers, is the strongest of the vegetable fibers and has 2 to 3 times the strength of cotton. Linen wrinkles easily but is easy to iron. Linen can be boiled without damaging the fiber. This was the primary way of laundering linens in period. Linen is very absorbent and breathes—great for our fair lands of Atenveldt. However, constant creasing in the same place in sharp folds will tend to break the linen fibers.

Silk

Like today, silk embodied elegance in period. The silk trade was meticulously monitored and priced, so the elite hungered for it. Modern silk that you can find in your local fabric store is typically too flimsy for period garment construction. Using a heavier liner can help. Heavier silks can be found by mail-order—for a price. Although Dupioni silk is appealing to modern tastes, the slubby texture would appear flawed and inferior to other silks. Those who could afford silk would acquire the absolute best possible.

Silk is the strongest natural fiber. A steel filament of the same diameter as silk will break before a filament of silk. Silk absorbs moisture, which makes it cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It is easily dyed in many deep colors. Silk retains its shape, drapes well, and shimmers. Press cloths and a steam iron are best for ironing silks. Silk is also weakened by sunlight and perspiration, so body linens and linings are highly recommended. Silk does not shrink like other fibers, but washing loosely woven silk can tighten the weave.

Cotton

If linen is not available, cotton can be an excellent all-purpose inexpensive fabric, especially on a hot summer day. Cotton can be used for smocks, aprons, tunics, lining, gowns.... Many upholstery brocades are 100% cotton. In period, cotton was very expensive. In the Middle East, cotton was often used in garments. In Northern Europe it was more commonly used for batting.

Now, nearly our entire wardrobes are composed of cotton. Cotton is absorbent and will retain 24-27 times its own weight in water and is stronger when wet than dry. This fiber absorbs and releases perspiration quickly, thus allowing the fabric to breathe. Cotton can stand high temperatures and takes dyes easily. Boiling and sterilizing temperatures can also be used on cotton without disintegration. Cotton can be ironed at relatively high temperatures, stands up to abrasion and wears well.

Furs

Today, fur consumption can be an explosive topic. In period, nearly everyone used fur or leather. The nobility loved their high-quality furs. Ermine, sable, and fox were often used to display their wealth and stay warm. Peasants often lined their garments with rabbit.

Sometimes you can find old fur coats at thrift and pawn shops and use this to trim various garments.

Synthetic Fibers

Rayon

Rayon is made from cellulose. Rayon is strong, extremely absorbent, comes in a variety of qualities and weights, and can be made to resemble natural fabrics. Rayon burns at high temperatures. Rayon drapes well, has a soft, silky hand, and has a smooth, napped, or bulky surface. Rayon will wrinkle easily and may stretch when wet and shrink when washed.

Polyester

Polyester is a strong fiber that is resistant to crease and thus keeps its shape. Polyester melts at medium to high temperatures. Polyester is made from a petroleum product. Polyester does not breathe well. Blends of polyester give cotton a permanent press property and extend the wear of these blended garments.

Acetate

Acetate is a weak fiber that can be woven into fabrics that have the look of silk but do not wear like silk. Acetate does not absorb moisture easily, but dries fast and resists shrinking. This fabric is wrinkle-resistant in addition to being pliable and soft with a good drape. Caution: acetate in nail polish and nail polish remover and alcohol will melt acetate so take care with perfumes and nail products.

Blends

You may choose to use a blended fabric for a number of reasons. Cotton polyester blends were made to be “wash and wear”. Try to get at least 60% of a natural fiber when you choose a blend. This way, the majority of its properties will be maintained. Fabric breathability usually suffers when natural fibers are blended with synthetics.

Pre-treating Your Fabric

You always want to consider pre-treating your fabric. Pre-treating can help prevent weird and distorting shrinkage. As a rule of thumb, pre-treat your fabric one step mearner than you plan to later. Using the worst-case scenario should shrink or bleed your fabric before you finish the clothing, rather than later. If you are unsure how a mystery fabric will react, try a test swatch first.

Thread

For general sewing, the standard all-purpose thread is sufficient. If you want to get that extra sense of authenticity, linen or silk thread can be used. Choose a thread with similar fiber content as your garment, if you are planning to dye it after construction.

Trim

Today we have so many options for trim like braids, couching, beads, jacquard ribbon. Avoid excessively metallic or glaringly modern designs. If you use fake pearls, try to use glass so that it won't melt at the dry cleaner. Try to match your time period and place to your trim by research. The most impressive trim is made by hand. Embroidery, lace, and beading are incredible embellishments for any ensemble.

When designing clothing, consider making the trim removable. Removing the trim can make laundering the rest of the garment easier. You may want to consider this especially for needlework or other precious trim. Trim removed from a ruined or worn garment can also be reused on a new garment. This is a very period practice of extending the life of expensive trim. Queen Elizabeth was quite thrifty and would often have jewels and trim placed on different dresses.

Starting Your Project

Draw your finished concept and keep it with your research. Keep small swatches of fabric and trim in a Ziplock baggie, for last minute shopping trips. Good luck!

Websites

Costuming Resources

Articles on SCA-Garb

<http://sca-garb.freesevers.com/articles/index.html>

Atlantean MoAS Embroidery Links

<http://moas.atlantia.sca.org/topics/embr.htm>

The Costumer's Manifesto—This site has great links

<http://www.costumes.org>

The Elizabethan Costuming Page—*Highly recommended.* Many links to other resources, not just Elizabethan! This is my one-stop shopping research page.

<http://costume.dm.net/content.html>

The Elizabethan Practical Companion Blackwork Gallery

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Crete/1581/bwgallery/index.htm>

The Greater Bay Area Costumer's Guild

<http://www.gbacg.org/>

Margo Anderson: One Tough Costumer

<http://www.directcon.net/wander/main.htm>

Period Costuming Links

<http://www.sca.london.on.ca/links/sewing.html>

Tudor and Elizabethan Portraits

<http://www.tudor-portraits.com/>

The Auld Garb Monger's Costumes for Manly Men

<http://www.garbmonger.com/>

Suppliers

Alter Years— “offers historical, ethnic, dance and specialty patterns, a vast collection of hard to find costume books, supplies and underpinnings.”

<http://www.alteryears.com/>

Calontir Trim—“Stocks a wide variety of fabric trims, from simple cotton weaves, to elaborate byzantine borders”

<http://www.calontirtrim.com/>

CheepTrims—Wholesale prices and sells in bulk

<http://www.cheeptrims.com/>

Dharma Trading Co.—Textile Crafts and Supplies, Dyes, fabric

<http://www.dharmatrading.com/>

Fabric Club—Wholesale Mail Order Source of Fabrics

<http://www.fabricclub.com>

Fabric.com—Wholesale fabric. They carry wool, linen and cotton velvet/velveteen at discount prices. Their inventory varies, so buy when you can. They add 3 inches per yard ordered for a maximum 1-yard bonus.

<http://www.fabric.com>

Fabric Dragon—Trims, supplies

<http://www.fabricdragon.com/>

Fabric-Store.com

<http://fabrics-store.com>

Grand Garb—Historical costume supply for corsetry, historical patterns, millinery, etc.

<http://www.grand.com>

Hedgehog Handworks—“Hard-to-find needlework and costuming supplies for needleworkers, costumers, and historical re-enactors.”

<http://www.hedgehoghandworks.com/>

Sewing Central—Historical Patterns, fabric, corsetry supplies

<http://www.sewingcentral.com/>

Books

Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion: The Cut and Construction of Clothes for Men and Women C1560-1620*

Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd: The inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes prepared in July 1600....*

Boucher, Francois. *20,000 Years of Fashion*

Crowfoot, Elisabeth et al. *Textiles and Clothing : Medieval Finds from Excavations in London, c.1150-c.1450*

Egan, Geoff et al. *Dress Accessories C.1150-C.1450: Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 3 (Medieval Finds from Excavations in London)*

Houston, Mary G. *Medieval Costume in England and France: The 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries*

Newton, Stella Mary. *Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince: A Study of the Years 1340-1365*

Norris, Herbert. *Medieval Costume and Fashion*

Norris, Herbert. *Tudor Costume and Fashion*

Scott, Phillipa. *The Book of Silk*

Thursfield, Sarah. *Medieval Tailor's Assistant: Making Common Garments 1200-1500*

Weiditz, Christopher. *Authentic Everyday Dress of the Renaissance: All 154 Plates from the "Trachtenbuch"*

Example of Biblical context with contemporary costume:



Deposition (Mary's Compassio)
Rogier van der Weyden, c. 1430



Late Medieval Adam and Eve
Hours of Louis d'Orleans, c. 1490



Portrait of Henry VIII

c. 1540

Oil on panel, 88,5 x 74,5 cm

Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome



Portrait of Jane Seymour
Hans Holbein the Younger, c.1536
Oil on wood, 65,5 x 40,5 cm
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna