

On Sewing and Project Development

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Some changes have been made to make the article more coherent.

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Yesterday Hillery Brewer asked me, “How do you make your SCA clothing look so right?” First I want to say thank you for the wonderful compliment. As you all undoubtedly know by now I spent a lot of time on my projects and it’s a combination of several different things that create the final result. After all, we are creating historical clothing, not just garb.

Focus

My primary focus is late Elizabethan England, usually 1580-1603. Sure, there are other time periods and countries that spark my interest. I’m fairly certain that every time period has something that I really adore about it but Elizabethan England is my one great love. I know that many people really enjoy having something from every time period and country and I think that’s great. However, I do think that having one primary focus or even a primary and a secondary focus goes a long way to really helping you get the look down. It’s not just the clothes that make the man (or woman). The accessories play a major role in achieving the correct look and if you are focusing on one or two time periods it’s a lot easier (and less expensive) to acquire them. The more you know about your time period and its fashion the more you know about which accessories are correct not only for your chosen period and place but also to your persona. The more you know about what you are looking for the easier it is to steer away from items that are not quite correct and build a wardrobe of accessories that fits your persona. Even if you are paying more per item it’s far more economical to spend \$30 on a ring that’s perfect than to spend \$10 on an item that you decide to replace in 5 years because it’s not “right”. Sure, you may need to slowly build your accessory wardrobe. Some items are expensive and some items take time to craft but in the end it’s worth it.

Acquiring a good accessory wardrobe is not the only way that focus helps to achieve the correct look. Fashion does not happen in a vacuum. A country’s own culture and its interaction other countries also plays a role but I think I will save this for a post of its own.

Research

I start every project with research. It’s not just important to know that gown x is period but I need to know when it was worn, what materials were often used, what classes wore it, what are the differences between similar gowns worn by different classes, how was it worn and the variations within the style. I look for tons of pictures to determine what colors were popular for which classes, how the gown lies on the body, the visual structure of the garment, how things like seams lay. Then I look at sources like Janet Arnold’s *Patterns of Fashion* for similar garments to learn more about possible construction

techniques and the physical make up of the garment. The truth is the more research you put into a garment and apply to its construction the better the finished product will be.

As a side note to everyone out there, if you have not already done so, take some time to learn about the interlibrary loan system. Also, if there is a university or college in your area find out what you need to do to get a library card for their library. These two simple steps will open up a world of research opportunities. I have gotten several of Janet Arnold's old articles through the ILL system and thanks to UNC Libraries I have access to JSTOR and Early English Books Online. These are invaluable research tools that we don't use often enough and if there is any way at all that you can take advantage of them, do it.

Materials

Having the right materials really goes a long way towards making the garment and the look. Yes, it can be more expensive but that's where your budget comes in. Do you need to wait on beginning the project while you save money? Can you use linen instead of wool? Can you cut the cost of buttons and trim by making your own? Can I save money by ordering online instead of going to the local fabric store?

I work nearly exclusively in silk, linen, and wool. Not only are they appropriate to the time period I am working in but they consistently give excellent results. These materials can be expensive but if you take the time to shop around you can often find things on sale or good prices online. I also don't spend money stockpiling fabric. I order or pick up fabric for specific projects. Sometimes I may change my mind about what projects I use what fabric for but it almost always has a purpose when I buy it. If I begin to feel like I have too much fabric in my stash I will work almost exclusively from my stash rather than ordering more fabric. That may mean compromising on color or going with linen instead of wool but unless I absolutely have to have a certain fabric and color for a project then I will try to work from my stash and not order more fabric until I need to.

Time

Taking your time with a project is extremely important. I rarely give a project a specific deadline anymore because when I have I have not been as happy with the results. Something always goes wrong or doesn't turn out the way I want it to. When that happens I'll redo it over and over again until I'm happy with the result. And then there are the times that I'm just sick of looking at a project and I put it away until I'm ready to work on it again.

Taking your time to get the results you want will pay off. I can't tell you how happy I am to have a wardrobe that has lasted me for years and will last for many more. Sure, I still make new things but I have garments in my closet that are 6 years old and are still favorite staples of my wardrobe. Sure, the garments I've constructed more recently are better than the ones I made 5 years ago, but those garments from 5 years ago are still in excellent condition and I wear them quite often. When you have a wardrobe that you have spent countless hours researching and constructing you don't want to just throw things out. If you gain or lose weight you alter your clothes. If you tear a garment you

patch it carefully. If you do decide to cull a piece you want to give it to a loving home.

Fitting, Proper Undergarments, and Correct Layers

When your clothes don't fit well you are more likely to be uncomfortable and your comfort in the garments really does come through to others. Part of what makes *The Look™* is being at ease in what you are wearing. Fitting things correctly takes time and it's a skill that you will continue to learn new tricks for even after you've been doing it a long time. Below are a few things to consider when you are patterning and fitting a new garment.

1. No matter how good or accurate a purchased pattern is you will nearly always need to make at least some adjustments to it to fit it correctly to your body.
2. When you are fitting always make a mock up out of a cheap fabric that is similar in weight to the fabric you plan to use for the final garment.
3. If you are making a complicated garment and working with a pattern for the first time consider making a proof of concept first. The proof of concept can still be made of nice fabric and be a high quality garment that you will be happy with but before you make your garment out of "the perfect fabric" that you paid \$50 a yard for try making it out of linen or a less expensive fabric that is similar to "the perfect fabric" of you dreams. We almost always make some fitting mistakes with a new patten or find some aspect of the garment that we wish we had done differently and wouldn't it be better to learn that before you cut into "the perfect fabric"?
4. Fit your garment over the correct undergarments. They really do change the line and you don't want to find out after you made your new French gown that you can't wear your bodies underneath it because you didn't pattern it correctly.

Foundation garments and wearing the correct layers for the style you are attempting to reproduce are major components of any fashion. Just look at the 1950's. You can be wearing the perfect Dior gown but if you aren't wearing the correct bra and a girdle you aren't going to get the same look. Foundation garments are just that, they form the foundation of the style upon which the outer garments are built. Let's say for example that you were interested in Burundian clothing. You can completely hand sew your gown, use all the correct materials and techniques, do all the research, allow yourself plenty of time, pattern the gown so that it is correct to a gentry impression from 1475-1478 but if you are not wearing the correct foundation garments and the necessary layers for the style your gown will not make the same impression.

Sewing Techniques

Probably the sewing techniques that I've noticed go the farthest towards giving garments *The Look™* is handwork and hand finishing. If you are interested in starting to hand sew your garments try starting with small projects first like a skirt or a hood. You will learn a lot from these projects and because they are smaller you will get the gratification of finishing the project sooner than if you were doing a larger project. The first completely hand sewn garment I made was a skirt. It took me a few weeks but I was very pleased with the way it came out. My blackwork coif was also completely sewn by hand but it

took much longer. I have plans for a jacket next and I'm planning to start it either this spring or after Pennsic, depending on how my current projects progress. If you are not quite ready to completely sew your garments by hand or not interested work towards having no visible machine sewing. You can sew your buttonholes, eyelets, hem your garments and finishing necklines and sleeves by hand. If flat lining a garment or sewing a garment that is not lined try finishing your seams by hand either by flat felling or butterflying them. This gives you a very nice finish while still using the machine to sew the larger seams. I also often topstitch my seams. It gives a very nice finish to the garment and I've been very pleased with the results.

For me the hardest part of handwork is making my stitches small enough. My stitches are still a little big and I am constantly working on making them smaller. But when mending garments I've definitely noticed a big difference between my stitches now and my stitches 4 or 5 years ago. And my current, smaller stitches are much stronger. So if you find, like I do, that you have trouble making your stitches as small as you want to just keep working on it. They do get smaller eventually.

I've picked up a lot of great sewing techniques just from talking to people about their garments and how they made them. If you like someone's gown, talk to them. Ask them how they did it, what techniques they used, how they finished their seams. Maybe you really love how they trimmed the sleeves or patterned neckline. Ask them what they did to create that particular detail that you love.

There is so much that goes into *The Look*TM. It's not just enough to have the right outer garments. It's how you make them, the research you put into them, how they fit, how comfortable you are in them, having the proper foundation garments and layers to go with them. Take your time, do your research. Every new skill you add to your repertoire and new fact you learn is another step toward getting the look and the clothes you love. For further reading Laura Mellin has a great article on her website entitled Extreme Costuming, or: How do you make the "impossible!" clothes you've always wanted? (<http://www.extremecostuming.com/articles/extremethehowto.html>). It's a fantastic article on how to combine research, planning, and construction into creating projects that you thought you would only ever dream about. It's awesome. It has given me a lot of ideas since she put it up and I highly recommend if you are looking for ways to step up your sewing.