

## Bringing it All Together

What is it that transforms the modern person into a medieval one? We get to an event, step into the changing rooms and step back out – voila’ - a medieval man or woman ready to dive into the environment we have created. We all play this “game” to different levels and that is okay. That is why we are the Society for Creative Anachronism. Our rules say make a reasonable attempt at a medieval appearance and for many years that would have been ok. I shudder to think the things I made nearly 25 years ago when I first started (there are pictures but I will never tell where...). As our organization has changed over the years, so have our expectations of what “reasonable attempt” means. I would like to discuss a four areas that I believe make the most impact in turning Jane Smith into Her Excellency Mistress Jayne of Withingham (names changed to protect the innocent). These four areas are cloth, construction, carriage and accessories. Each of these areas have an impact on our garb and thus convey the look we want to create when we step out of that dressing room, ready to take on the world or at least this particular event.

Let’s look first at cloth. Human beings have woven cloth since they figured out how to do it. Cloth is constructed out of numerous types of textiles – cotton, linen, wool, silk, polyester, rayon etc. Each type of material has different characteristics – it will lay differently on the body, it will hang differently once made, it will change color with different lighting:

So many unique facets to each type of cloth. So what is it about the cloth, which is important to the finishing touches of garb? It is not necessarily the textile itself that makes a difference. It is the combination of textile and project that makes the difference.

For instance, would you make a bog dress out of velvet? Or an Elizabethan garment out of loosely woven cotton? No. These are somewhat extreme examples but the basic principles are the same. When a person begins a new project they should research the types of material that would have been available at the time period of the outfit and the region. Again, you might not be able to justify some prints in England, whereas those same prints would be available in Russia. Stripes are period and so are many numerous wonderful brocaded patterns but they have particular place and time where those types of patterns would have been more prevalent and thus do not need much justification. One should also consider trade routes and interaction between cultures when deciding on a particular cloth.

The average costumer should have some basic knowledge of color as well. Is bright, florescent pink period? Well no. But pink is and is visible in Italian frescos of the Renaissance. Would you want to make a Viking apron dress out of pink brocade – no – sounds silly but I have seen many things in my years that make me believe that we are capable of any combination when it comes to garb. There are some excellent sources on textile dyes that show the different color combinations that would have been available in

different areas and time periods. Once you have decided to investigate a particular time period, a little extra research into the flora and fauna that existed in the area would stand you well.

It is also important to understand the types of cloth that were used in period. In Janet Arnold's *Lost from Her Majesty's Back*, taffeta is listed as a material used for gowns and undergowns. But it is not the taffeta of today. You would not see a gown made of the tell tale watermark that modern taffeta displays. Other materials were used in period but may not have been used for garments. Cotton is one of these materials. It was used for household items such as pillows and sheeting, but there is not as much documentation for its use in garments in England and upper Europe. When researching it is important to understand that although the words may be similar, it is not always the same cloth as we know today.

What about blends you may ask? It is very hard to find true wool material these days. A quick trip into Joanna's or your local fabric store shows many different materials listed under Wool or more mysteriously Wool-like blends. When you read the content label on the bolt (and I do hope that everyone is reading the labels on their bolts.....nodding heads...) you find that in fact there is not a single natural fiber at all in this material and it is in fact made of polyester and rayon. Now I don't have anything against synthetic material. Sometimes you have to use it. But, have you ever seen synthetic material near a campfire? Have you stood too close to

the heater while wearing what you thought was pure wool, only to smell a horrible plastic burning smell and look down at your surcoat to see it melting into a slag of black goop? Well I have. In fact that happened to me while I was on the throne of Drachenwald and it was immensely embarrassing. So, know the content of your material before you make your garment.

Wash your garment appropriately. If you intend to wash a garment once it has been made, then you need to wash the material before it is cut. This avoids those horrible moments when you look down and see the lining falling down out of the Cotehardie you made for your husband because the Cotehardie shrunk but the lining didn't. If you never intend to wash the garment in the washer that is fine – just remember to share that information with the person who does the laundry!

In the end, try and match the color, weight, type and pattern of your material to the project. The garment will have a head start by being constructed of the correct type of material so that the look is complete. Make good choices of material to design. No more velvet bog dresses.

The second area of consideration is the actual construction of the garb. This is too wide of a subject to go into depth for this class but it is important to touch on a few topics. An outfit starts with what is underneath it. While it is the outside that we see, it is underneath that cover that will dictate the flow of the material on the body. They don't call them foundation garments

for nothing! When deciding on a design, consider the outside look and begin your work from the inside moving out.

No matter what, most outfits should start with a sleeve-less shift. This allows for protection of the cloth against the body's natural sweat. Made a lightweight, natural material this will provide the body with protection from heat and cold as well as protecting the material from the body.

Choose the right undergarment for the right design. Would you put hoops under a sideless surcoat? Well, I have seen it done. Therefore, someone thought it should happen. Or would you leave off the hoops if the design called for them? This sort of thing alters the silhouette of the garment. This applies to men's garb as well as ladies – not the hoops of course, but the right foundation to the garb itself is necessary. Should you wear a corset/ pair of bodies with the gown? You would not wear one with a Cotehardie and certainly would not wear one over the gown, but again these are some of the choices I have seen people make. The corset provides a firm, flat surface for the dress to lay on. This is not the type of surface early period gowns need to show the correct line. The line makes the outfit.

Once the undergarment is decided on, then you can fit your gown. Fit is important for the gown in many areas. Can you still move your arms once you are dressed? Do the buttons pull across the bosom? Do your endowments threaten to pop out of the top of your bodice? Do you insult

the Queen and proposition the King when you curtsy? Does the waist line sit at your waist? All of these questions are important as you measure twice and cut once. As you build your garment, taking the time to construct a pattern, a mock up and make your mistakes before cutting into the one of a kind piece of brocade. How many of us have ruined material from making a mistake in the cutting? I was gave a pattern for a Cotehardie to a friend. I had given her directions and explained that the pattern only went down just past the waist to save on bulk and that she needed to extend the garment to the floor – but I didn't write that on the pattern. She called me shortly thereafter and said, "this just doesn't look right....how do you attach the skirt?" I knew at that moment that a whole lot of wool had just been miscut. So make your pattern well. Take the time to understand how your garment should be fitted on you. Not your best friend, but you. Each of us is too unique not to spend the time to make sure that an outfit fits us.

Another area of consideration in construction is lining. Is the garment that you are making one that should be lined? Should you use an interfacing or completely line the whole thing. Interfacing will alter the flow of the cloth against the body and it must be considered when you think about the type of cloth being used. Interfacing can add stiffness to the garment and since there are various types of interfacing, one should be careful to choose the correct weight. If you use a material that could be prone to stretching, like linen, it is sometimes good to both use interfacing

and to line the whole garment. Also if you have a material that ravel, you may want to make the choice of lining to keep the seems intact.

When thinking about garb, think about the finished garment as a parfait. Each layer has particular ingredients with their own flavor, texture and purpose. From the smooth bottom layer to the crunchy granola on top, each layer offers its own unique attribute to the overall effect.

Carriage and I don't mean the type with four horses and bumpy seats. I mean how you hold yourself and move in your garb. This is another area that impacts the total image of an outfit. You have slaved over making the most perfect Elizabethan gown – from ruffs to petticoats, sleeves to hoops each piece reflects the time and care you put into the outfit. Then, you rush down the hall and grabbing your skirts, lift them up to your knees as you climb the stairs. Oops – there goes that picture of the perfect medieval woman. Now, if you were being daring and showing your ankles to someone whose attention you desired, that would be one thing. But not the true impression you wish to leave. This means that you need to learn to move in your outfit. Once you have finished your garment, you may want to wear it around and practice moving in it before the day of the event. Now, I know that I am assuming that you actually are not still sewing on it as you arrive at the site, but this too should be something to be avoided.

Modern society rarely dresses up. Unless you are a debutant or a military spouse, the likelihood that you have attended numerous functions in

floor length gowns in slim. So, try on the garb that you have made and think about how it feels to walk around. Check your shoulders – are the back and your spine straight. Are you so worried about your hems that your eyes are on the floor instead of leading your forward? Nuns are trained to look downward as they walk to reflect inward thoughts. We are not nuns. Hold you head up and look forward. If nothing else it will keep you from running into the next pointy hat coming your way. Set your hems at a reasonable length or practice how you must walk when moving in long skirts. Medieval skirts with an extra yard of material in front were not made for someone who is cleaning the dishes at an event. Nor are long skirts, stairs, and full hands a good combination. Practice moving in your garments – it will help you avoid those embarrassing moments.

Courtesy is a central focus of our Society. A person may want to practice how to back up in a gown and to rise from a kneeling position. A gentleman may want to practice wearing a sword and escorting a lady without bruising. These things lead to the outward appearance that we wish to create. When you are researching the garb you wish to make, you might want to take some time to understand the customs of that society. Do the ladies curtsy slightly – just a dip of the knees or more fully. Do the gentleman bow with a flourish or simple bend at the waist in simple homage to the Crown. Would your persona kneel at all? At that point you must figure in Atlantian customs as well. In our Kingdom it is customary to kneel



before the Sovereigns if called into their Court. It is customary to greet their passage with a respectful bow and to step aside if you see them coming. It is customary to acknowledge the presence around them and approach when invited. These are small things that make the total image of medieval – that which transforms us from Carolyn to Adelia and sets us apart within the context of our organization. Other people are watching what you do. Will you lead the way by showing outward respect for the meaning of the Crowns?

The last area is accessories. Whole classes are taught on specific accessories. From shoes to hats, belts to jewelry, each piece is important to the overall picture of the garb. Once again, research is required to get a true picture of what a person would be wearing with the garb. Would simple slippers be worn or thigh high boots? Would you wear pattens and stockings or tennis shoes? Now, I can document tennis shoes from the De Medici archives. Of course we don't know what they meant by tennis shoes but I am positive of one thing - it wasn't Nikes. Many of us have not gotten around to medieval shoes but many of the people that my eyes light on as being picture perfect, have the right shoes too. Even if you only see them poking out from under a hem as a lady walks – the lady walks correctly because of what she is wearing. Have you ever tried to wear pattens?

Hats and headcoverings are another area that modern society does not prepare us with much practice. You may have worn a veil once in your

mundane life or you may have come from a traditional home where ladies wore hats to church on Sunday. It is important to understand the cultural implications of headcoverings in the Middle Ages. You should research the area and try and discover the expectations of wearing a headscarf or veil, hat or headdress in both daily and court encounters. I wear a coronet almost all the time. Is this appropriate? We don't know, but I feel that it is important to wear it within the "game" so that I can be identified as someone you can ask questions of or refer others to.

Belts are another one of those areas that so people seem to be unable to match correct outfit to the correct style. This problem is increased with the use of belts as a symbol of affiliation in our Society. Many associates of peers - squires, protégée's, apprentices - wear different color belts to symbolize their association. Knights, by right, wear white belts as part of the symbols of their estate. These belts don't always compliment the outfit. But we wear them anyway. When researching your outfit, pay attention to the belts worn by several different portraits in the same area and time. Try different looks to see what the general trends were. A little time spent on the internet and you might be surprised what sort of beads, appliqués and such that can make the belt look the correct way.

Jewelry is also important. The right type of necklace can make an outfit. Jewels on hats and headdresses make the outfit look correct. Each

time period and place has a particular type of jewelry. Here again you might be surprised at what one can find on the internet.

Jewelry, hats, shoes...fabrics, construction, carriage; each of these elements makes a difference in the total appearance of garb. These are the elements that transform costume into clothing. As you begin your search for the clothes that suit you best, consider these elements in your planning. Each of the items plays a role in completing an outfit. Research and find out what is best for you as you go forward into a new arena.

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