

Sideless Surcoat Adelicia of Cumbria

Every period of the middle ages has a distinct style. We can identify those periods through specific images that are evocative of the age. One of those styles is the sideless surcoat. No other clothing item spans a longer period, with the first pictures showing up in manuscripts of the late 1200s – The Cantigas of Santa Maria and the Book of Games of Alfonso X in Spain and 1300-1300, Manesse Codex of Germany all the way to the tomb of Elizabeth Plantagenet in 1503. One hundred and fifty years of one distinctive garment is quite unusual. And while the garment did not stay the same, the

use of it in fashion was steady. The purpose of this class is to present the evolution of this garment in a timeline for better understanding of the piece.



One of the most complete extant garments that we have from the Middle Ages is the pellotes of Leonara of Aragon from 1244. This astonishing garment is in the Museo de Telas Medievales in Burgos, Spain. It features a very distinct cut away at the body and square skirts. Nowhere else, outside of Spain, at this time frame do we have examples of similar garments. There are very clear lines on the sides where pieces were in set to make the square set of the skirt. The body is cut inwards but unless the person was very hippy, this garment comes far away from the body.

Also unique to this type of garment is the bands of trim at the base of the skirt. To very wide bands of trim embellish the skirt. In subsequent years, as the style develops in other portions of Europe, we do not see embellishment of the skirts, except some fur lining. Fur may be impractical in Spain and indeed this pellotes is made of silk.



The documentation now moves to Italy. This fresco of the Marriage of the Virgin dates from approximately 1305. You see her overdress opening at the sides with the underdress showing just at the sleeves. The over and underdress are the same color – although you see a red shoe poking out from under the dress to add some color. You will note that the shoulders are not exposed and the neckline is very high. No amount of

her body shows in the picture. Of course, this is a religious painting, and that could explain the care taken to show the style but not the body.



At the same time as the Giotto frescos of Italy, the Manesse Codex is being illustrated in Germany. Dating from around 1300, this series illustrates knightly life in Germany. Each illustration is a wealth of information on heraldic display, clothing and social norms. In the picture illustrated here, a young maiden helps her knight arm for tournament. You can see clearly the saddle of the horse set for tournament and the elaborate nature of his helm shows this is joust and not war. The young maiden is dressed in a loose fitting gown, again open just at the arms to show the underdress below. The neckline is a little lower for the overdress and you see the underdress at the neckline and at the hem. Her dress is tucked up to show the underdress and the lining of the overdress.



The next two examples come from the Luttrell Psalter, c 1320–1340. This is an English document and illustrates the move of the sideless surcoat into England. The Luttrell Psalter is one of the finest documentation of every day rural life in England.

Commissioned for the family, it commemorates the everyday parts



medieval life. In these illustrations, we begin to see that opening of the sides of the overcoat and exposure of the shoulders. In the top picture we also see embellishment of the surcoat with heraldic pictures. It is not known if this was just artistic license in order to identify the participants of the scene or if heraldic patterns were used in everyday or ceremonial wear. The second picture shows a young couple playing backgammon. While her headdress is quite extravagant, the outfit clearly shows two different pieces with the red underdress and the lighter colored overdress.



The next stop on our search for the sideless surcoat is found in The Romance of Alexander, c 1340 Alexander li Tors, Flanders. The picture to the left shows the overdress and underdress arrangement similar to that in the Luttrell Psalter. Note the neckline is now fully out to the points of the shoulder and straight across. Note also that the other people in the picture - both men and women are showing much more shoulder and neck. The ladies have the hair coiled up around their heads which further emphasizes the shoulders.

The dress is still clearly of one piece. There is no break at the waist or around the skirts. There is also no decoration – either around the neckline, body or hem. Note also that you see more of her underdress at the sides. You can see the hint of a belt at her waist and the opening extends past that belt to the hip line.



This is the tomb of Elizabeth, Lady Montacute, d. 1354. I truly love this picture and am going to track down some more information on it. It is from the wonderful website Gothic Eye. According to the “Handbook of the Cathedrals of England” by Richard John King, published in 1862, her dress is described, “She wears a sleeveless robe, red, and flowered with yellow and green, fastened in front with a row of ornamental buttons. The close-fitting sleeves belong to an inner vest, of a different color and pattern.” There are several items that I wanted to point out on this drawing. The first is the patterns. The surcoat, underdress and cloak all show distinct geometric patterns in the material, and not heraldic emblems. Many of our sources of clothing of this era are funerary brasses or statues and those dresses are mostly plain in their textures, this picture represents a significant departure from the norm if it is correct in the interpretation of the garment. Note the row of buttons down the front of the dress. The surcoat is still one piece, but there are

buttons down the front to mid hip. The buttons are in line with the side opening of the garment. King’s description continues “the mantle, of a buff colour, is covered all over with rondeaux, or rondels, connected together by small bands, whilst in the intermediate spaces are fleurs-de-lys.”¹ Now this was written in the late 1800s and is therefore somewhat suspect and further investigation is necessary... but it is a fascinating piece. A look at the actual effigy on line shows the distinctive patterning of the cloak but from the picture, I could not see the dress. Stay tuned for further development.



This picture is also off of the Gothic Eye site but I have seen it in other books as well. It is of Mary, Duchess of Brittany, dated 1361 and is in Westminster Abby. You will note that the shoulders have come back up somewhat and no longer appear to be falling off. The body is further exposed by the top of the surcoat. The row of decorative buttons is down the front and a belt at the hip can be slightly seen under the arm on the right. The two biggest departures is 1) that this dress appears to be two different pieces, a bodice and a skirt and 2) the skirt appears to have decoration and to be split at the sides. The hem and the split appear to have a trim or a border of contrasting material. If this was the only dress with this sort of decoration, I would put it down to an artist’s reinterpretation of the statue, but Hunnisett also has a drawing of the effigy of Lady Margot

Cobham, c 1375, which shows the same sort of design. A two piece over and under dress, split seems almost up to the hip line of a contrasting color. The top has buttons

from top to bottom. Lady Margot's hair is behind a ruffled headdress in contrast to Mary's crispenette and veil. Also Lady Margot's shoulder line is closer to the neck, covering the collarbone.



Our next stop is back to France and the manuscript *Le Songe du Verger* 1370. Here you see a Queen sitting. Her dress is open past the hip with the belt showing at the center hip point and not the waist. The dress has the top portion as a separate color – perhaps fur. The bottom does not look like the British sculptures of Mary and Margaret; there is no split and no band of contrast at the hem. The skirt appears to be very full, notice the folds of material that she is sitting on and how much material is still draped on the grass. The opening of the surcoat is also different – it is straight across at the bottom and not rounded as the British examples are or pointed as the ones in the *Romance of Alexander*. We see a bit of chest and shoulders and her hair is braided around her face. The underdress is tight to the body and along the arms, with the sleeve extending just past the wrists.



Bassett Lady 1380



Margaret, Lady Cobham, 1385



Lora, Lady Marmion C 1400



Margaret Whatton Lady Bagot C 1407

The four ladies above bring us to the 1400s. As you can see from the four figures, the styles were fluid. Three ladies wear different surcoats over their cotehardies. One just wears the cotehardie, which is obviously decorated with heraldic images. All of the elements of these surcoats have appeared earlier. A new fashion element has been added.



The picture to the right is of Lucy LaStrange, 1409. She is wearing a dramatically different style from the quartette of ladies above. She is wearing a houppelande. Belted just below the breasts, it has a high necked collar, very full sleeves and does not show the body at all. Does this effigy reflect a move away from the cotehardie and sideless surcoat combination in everyday life? Perhaps it just speaks to the concurrent nature of fashion. Also I believe that it represents a move towards ceremonial wear of the sideless surcoat. As fashion begins to move on past the sideless surcoat in everyday wear it begins to move into the areas of ceremonial dress.

But sideless surcoats do not disappear from the scene. Les Belles Heures, Jean Duc de Berry, 1408 has numerous ladies in full sideless surcoats, they are very open – way past the hip- almost to the knee, showing the full body.



Note also the decoration at the hem and the edging of the surcoat in these two illustrations. In the left picture, the surcoat on the right in cream appears to mimic the decorations of the overtunic in blue on the left. The same sorts of decoration at hem and

knee level are repeated in both dresses. The dress on the right also has decoration around the neckline which suggests that decoration was used on the surcoat.



Funerary images, manuscripts and other medium continue to show the sideless surcoat as a part of a woman's wardrobe, but with much less frequency and a move towards ceremonial or Royal garments. In this illumination of the Marriage banquet of Clarisse, a French manuscript that dates to c 1468-1470, we can see the styles side by side. Three of the ladies where the houppelande style with elaborate headdress that were the norm for that style. One wears the large headdress but wears a sideless surcoat with a "gates of hell" styling – just a

strip of fur for the bodice and the long placket coming out from underneath it with buttons.



This Portrait of the Donor by Petrus Christus is dated 1450. It is a fine illustration of what was normal wear for the period. Note the quality of the velvet, the fur cuffs and trim at the shoulders. Note where the shoulders are in this example and compare that to the ones above. The high-necked example in Lucy above has given way in both of these examples to a much more open style. The headdress of the lady on the right is more restrained than the ones above and the quality of the veil is obvious by how sheer it is. Christus was a Dutch painter



Hans Memling 1474-1479

Another Dutch painter.

Uses same dress in Mystic Marriage St. Catherine, 1479-1480

Note the extremely large pattern of the brocade and the train that hangs from the shoulders. Also note that the opening is not the gates of hell style but a more conservative cut just at the sides.



Master of Moulins, Anne de France, 1498-1499

In contrast to the portrait of Margaret of Austria which shows a definite difference in the style of dress.

ⁱ King, Richard John, pg 21.

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