

## **FROM COSTUME TO CLOTHING**

### **Mistress Anne Greye, OL**

Sometime in the past, maybe even today, you have seen someone who looked like they just stepped out of a period portrait or illumination. Have you ever stopped to consider what makes that person look “real” and not like someone who is dressed up for a costume party? I began considering this some time ago and have come to the conclusion that it’s a complicated thing! I have seen two dresses, made from virtually identical patterns, but one was “clothing” and the other a “costume”, and had to think hard about why they were different or perhaps why I felt differently about them. The upshot of all of this is that I have come up with some tips from transforming a costume into actual clothing and am pleased to share these with you!

### **Starting a Project**

Before starting any project, it’s a good to have a firm idea of exactly what you want. This may entail some careful study of period portraits or other sources and perhaps a sketch of your basic idea. Pay attention to what features of the clothing give it that distinctive look. Another good idea is to look at several paintings by the same artist (if these are available) or compare other sources from the same time period. Looking at sources from at least three different media, such as manuscript illuminations, tapestries, woodcuts, paintings, stained glass or sculpture will give you a feel for the time period and a sense of what “looks period”. Look at this material critically! There are depictions of garments that were indeed “costumes” in period and these are not to be taken as examples of fashion in the day. Particularly in later period, illustrations of masque costumes and allegorical or storytelling clothing abound! You may want to read up on any extant garments from your proposed time period or try cutting graphed diagrams for them if these are available. Bounce your design ideas off someone who is sympathetic and interested!

### **Fabric**

For me, more than anything else, choice of fabric can make a difference. In order to get your garment to look like the period portraits, you need to consider your choice of fabric very carefully. Look at the period sources and see how the fabric drapes and hangs. In our SCA costume recreation, we tend to use a lot of upholstery fabrics and, many times, this is just too stiff to hang properly. If you do find an upholstery fabric you just can’t live without, wash it a bunch of times. Yes, it will probably shrink some, but

better now than later! Also, put a lot of fabric softener in the wash and in the dryer to get that upholstery fabric as soft and fluid as you can. I have collected many swatches of different fabrics and have divided them up into three categories: period fabrics, modern fabrics that are good period substitutions and the “don’t use this” division. When I want to make a gown out of satin, I get my swatch of silk satin (very period) and take it with me to the fabric store in order to get fabric that is as close to the feel and drape of the silk satin as I can. Pull a yard or two of fabric off the bolt and drape it in the store, watch how it moves. Also remember that many fabrics in the store have been treated with sizing, making them crisp and smooth. Once washed, the character of your fabric could change a great deal if it was heavily sized. Most period garments were lined and interlined as well, and it is worthwhile to take this extra step. Try to use more natural fibers in your clothing, especially wool, silk and linen – nothing else handles, sews or acts like them. And finally, just use MORE fabric. So many times, you see someone who had the right idea but just seemed to run out of material! Yes, you can make a skirt out of three yards of fabric, but that’s just what it looks like! You don’t want to end up with a glorious Elizabethan bodice paired with a narrow skirt that looks like it goes with a 1900’s suit or, even worse, a dress that’s eight inches off the ground because there just wasn’t enough yardage!

### **Garment Construction**

My number one recommendation on garment construction is to buy a good book on basic sewing and refer to it often. Even the best tailor occasionally needs a little advice! The Reader’s Digest Complete Guide to Sewing (ISBN 0-88850-247-8) is excellent and covers a wide range of sewing techniques, but there are many others as well. This book is often available in the local library and it could be worth it to photocopy pages as needed.

If you are machine sewing, sew a lot, aiming for accuracy. There is no substitute for experience! Use your iron and pressed open all seams carefully before crossing them with other seams....even the Vikings had irons! In places where you need good control of the fabric or don’t want to squash your construction, consider hand sewing. Practicing your hand sewing stitches isn’t a bad idea either, since the idea is to obtain smaller more regular stitches with good control of the material. Make sure you clip your curves to removed excess fabric and, finally, knot off threads and danglies and clip them! I often have the urge to chase people with scissors just to cut off hanging threads!

## **FIT**

Fit is important. There, I've said it...Fit is IMPORTANT! If a well constructed garment doesn't fit, it isn't going to look right! Buy a full length mirror and use it often throughout the construction and fitting process. It is almost impossible to fit a garment on yourself, so try to work with a fitting buddy (someone who likes you but will tell you the truth!) on patterns and garments in progress or construct a dress dummy or fit form that is your exact shape. There are some excellent instructions for doing this here: <http://www.threadsmagazine.com/item/3659/clone-yourself-a-fitting-assistant>.

STOP WEARING A BRA with your medieval garments! This is not to say that you need to let it all "hang loose"! Renaissance woman (or man) didn't want their bits unsupported any more that we do. Period undergarments and supports are crucial to obtaining that period look and fit. A late period Elizabethan bodice without a corset underneath is just a disaster, but a 15<sup>th</sup> century French houpelande with a modern bra is also just wrong! Period undergarments and garments in general were made to provide some type of support and do make all the difference in the fit and overall look. Look for medieval solutions to any problems you may be having.

## **Finishing Touches**

Pay attention to the details! Take time to find out what accessories you need. There are lots of good facsimiles of period jewelry available today and lots of jewelry is an essential for most time periods. Remember too that the "wrong" jewelry can just ruin a look. Investigate period hairstyles or ways to camouflage your modern hairdo. Hats were a necessity for virtually all time periods. Shoes or boots are an essential element as well, particularly for men or early period personas of either sex. Ladies shoes don't show as much in later period, but believe me, people will look!

While this is, in no way, intended to be the ultimate guide to "authentic" costuming, I hope that it may guide and inspire those of you who wish to "dress" instead of "dress up"!