

## The Next Step

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I get asked, fairly frequently, about how to make garb more period. Over time, I developed a mental checklist of sorts that I go through when I am planning my garments. It took years of exploration (and mishaps!) before I started really thinking things through on a deeper level, rather than just jumping into something and not always making the best choices.

Note: I absolutely make the distinction between "period garb" and "generic" SCA garb. There is nothing wrong with either, and most people (especially those who attend longer events like Pennsic) will have far more items in the latter category than the former (because those items can usually be quickly made or are your starter kit for a new-to-you culture or era). This article predominantly applies to those interested in taking things a step beyond the SCA-required 'attempt' and who want to explore history a bit deeper and help add to the atmosphere of the events they attend.

1) The first question you ask yourself is 'for what will you wear this garment'? Is this going to be for Pennsic days (i.e. cool is mandatory), is it for Court (to show off your finery), is it going to be worn for serving feasts (washable)? Knowing your intended purpose can help you sort some things out from the very start and make better choices for materials and how to spend your time constructing the item. It might not make sense to painstakingly hand sew a tunic out of \$1 quilting cotton that's intended purpose is to wear while working in a kitchen at events. Instead, your limited time might be better spent hand-finishing the hems of your court gowns.

2) Research: Do you need to be able to write a thesis about your garb? Certainly not! But it's always good to be able to separate fact from fiction or at least fact from 'the movies'. It's also beneficial to know what exactly you are wearing -- is part of it period, period inspired or totally Renn Faire fantasy? For most cultures/eras, it's very easy to find a well-educated member of the SCA or two and start your research there - after all, these people have already done some of the work and they are sharing it for a reason! Use their work to form a basis for your own.

It's also very easy to then take it one step further -- look to period art for answers! Yes, artistic license existed, and people might not have worn the exact garment that was painted on them, but this is also a good starting point for your own work. In the age of the internet it's easy to find period examples of art (and sometimes even extant garments!) in online museum exhibits.

I do have to note here that good research does lots of cross-referencing. Do you love a certain person's interpretation of a gown? Look at their resources directly if you can (dig deeper online or get thee to a library!) see if you come to the same conclusions or if, perhaps, you see things differently and can draw your own conclusions about how something was done.

I clearly remember a friend's excitement over the pleats on the side of an extant, period, Turkish coat. Her conclusion was that they added that to allow for fuller side panels (and to a modern Middle Eastern dancer in the SCA, more fabric is always a good thing). She could be right. When I looked at the images, however, that is not how I 'read' them. I saw a seam added to the side that allowed the coat to be more tailored (after initial manufacturing) to the body. I tried this on a coat that I already had completed and it created the same folds and bunching. While doing further research at a later date, I discovered that often these coats were not custom tailored, but rather were manufactured without a specific individual in mind (and were often given as gifts). I now look at those side pleats and see a garment that was purchased or gifted and THEN taken in to allow for the form fitting garment we so often see in period art. Is she right, or am I? Either, or both of us, could be. That is part of the joy of research and reproduction AND sharing your work with others!

Of course, research might really just not be your thing? Maybe it reminds you too much of those painful history papers you had to write in college, maybe you just don't have time for it. Remember that there really is nothing wrong with building a wonderful garment based on someone else's work (again, that is why they put their documents online and teach at events!), but please always cite your sources, or let others know from where your inspiration came. Even better, tell the person THANK YOU! And, let the source of your inspiration's Kingdom know that they inspired you to take things a step further! It only takes a few minutes to send a letter via email to the reigning monarchs!

3) Think about social standing when you start to put your ideas together - consider who would have worn the garment you intend to recreate, and WHERE they would have worn it. Were you a fruit seller in a market (perhaps a good choice of garment for someone who often finds themselves helping in the kitchen at an event) or were you a wealthy merchant's wife? A noble lady might have had one type of dress for managing the affairs of the home and another for court events.

Ask yourself if this garment was something that would have had different variations for upper and lower class? If, for example, you want an upper class gown you might be better off creating a specific piece in silk, velvet or fine wool with a long train, while a commoner might have worn a linen or coarse woolen version short enough that it didn't drag in the dirt.

4) The next step is to determine the best construction method for your garment. Again, you can look to your SCA Laurels and teachers for this, as well as costuming companies such as Reconstructing History and Period Patterns. Often period garments were constructed in a manner that leaves very little fabric waste - these methods of fabrication can benefit you now as well by saving you money. Plan out your ideas carefully and do diagrams of the best way to cut the pieces from your fabric.

Consider simple things here - would the skirt have been gored or pleated, how full would it have been? Were the sleeves rectangular cut or were they set in? What tailoring methods were used in the time/era of a garment? If they didn't use bust darts or curved seams, you probably shouldn't either when making an attempt at greater authenticity.

Do not forget to test any pattern first! Always make a mock-up from scrap fabric first, as it can prevent costly mistakes later.

5) What would your fabric have been made of? What fabrics were available to the people who wore the garment you intend to recreate? Did they weave it themselves or would they have been more likely to import materials?

This one is often a stumbling block for people. Due to cost, we often have to make substitutions, but it's always good to know what WOULD have been used, even if you can't actually resource the item for your project. When a newbie comes up to you to compliment you on your stunning Italian Renaissance gown made from silk dupioni, you might do well to thank them and then explain that while you researched the construction down to the last detail, you could not afford the pricey silk brocade you desired, and when that slubbed silk came upon sale at \$5 a yard, in a period color, you could not resist! If you inspired another individual to create something similar, they do so with the understanding that you did make an allowance for something not period, and they don't assume that everything you did was authentic (and inadvertently spread misinformation).

Keep in mind that linen, wool and cotton are much more comfortable than synthetics and for most personas, linen and wool were the most common fibres used. Try to find the best option - that you can afford - for the specific garment you are recreating.

6) Fabric weave is one item often not considered by people new to period garb. Early on we are told "Cotton, Linen and Wool" but nothing more. I remember years ago when 'raw silk' or silk noile became popular in the fashion industry. Every SCAdian I knew was buying up tons of it and proclaiming that they FINALLY were making silk garb (yes, sadly, I was one of those!). I now understand that what we think of as raw silk today was not a period fabric at all. It is created by spinning the left over short bits from production of finer silks, and has a texture unlike period silk fabrics used for making garments. I did once hear someone state that it actually has a look and hand similar to some type of period wool, but I do not recall the source to verify the statement. Personally, if I found a pile of that raw silk left in my stash I would be more likely to use it for 'generic tunics' to bulk up a Pennsic wardrobe, than I would to try to recreate something more period. Likewise, thin 'china silk' (habotai) would not have had the body needed to recreate the stiff Entari worn by an official in the Ottoman court.

Pay attention to the weight of your fabric and the weave. Even in early period there was more than plain tabby weave! Look for fabrics that might drape or hang like the skirts in a painting, or look for archeological articles to find out what types of fabric were most commonly found in the Viking graves (so many wonderful twills!). There is a lot of wonderful information about weaving out there and proper fabric selection can make your garment really stand out.

7) Color and Pattern: I remember when I started in the SCA (nearly 20 years ago) I was told we could never use black, that medieval people had only the dullest of color choices and that pink is not period. These were blanket statements and were treated as gospel.

Fortunately, the internet and research of people who love natural dying, have illuminated my understanding of color and its use throughout history. Several years ago at Pennsic I saw a display of period dyes at the A&S Exhibit. I took photos of it, but did not get the creator's name. These colors ran the spectrum and some of them just really popped.

If you are going to make a more period garment, strongly consider color when selecting your fabric. What colors would have been available in the region your garment comes from (or would have been available if the wearer had the ability to purchase imported fabric)? Would station have affected the colors you could use/afford? Sumptuary laws? And yes, pink is very, very period.

8) Ornamentation: It's very common in the SCA, particularly among new people, to go out and buy miles of trim that quite often don't even resemble anything period - just because it's pretty, sparkly or whatever. While there is nothing wrong with this (it's a great way to jazz up tunics!), it's always good to learn more about how your garment would have been ornamented in period. Looking at research and art can give you valuable clues about the motifs used during different eras and help you better select pre-made trim to accent the item in question.

You can take it even one step further and learn period embroidery techniques, how to weave your own trims or make cords for decorating clothes!

It's also important to look at what areas of a garment were most likely to be embellished. Would decorative stitches at the neck have been used on your tunic, or would a band of trim at the hem make it better match a period illustration that appeals to you?

Always remember, that sometimes less IS more! If you are recreating a linen workwoman's gown, it may look better simply (or not at all) adorned. Would you really have worn that metal brocaded trim (which took you dozens of painstaking hours to complete) out to pick herbs in the garden?

9) Finishing touches are just as important as your construction or ornamentation when you are trying to reconstruct a more period article of clothing. Often a machine stitched, rolled hem can detract from an otherwise spectacular garment. There are many articles online about period stitches used for hems and other surface-visible seams. Even if you do the bulk of your sewing by machine, it can make for a wonderful finish to do those final stitches by hand.

Consider also your fastenings. What type of buttons would have been used by your persona? Would button loops be better than buttonholes? Does your garment close with laces? Maybe a spiral laced braided cord would be better than a broad satin ribbon cross lacing the closure. As always, look to other research and period art to find out what would best complete your piece.

10) Accessories, as in the modern world, are another way to display your sense of style. As a reenactor, you should always do the same level of research on these items as you did on your garb! Making sure that the items you choose or make are appropriate to the time, place, social station and persona that you are representing can really make your ensemble stand out. Fine details, such as the proper pouch, shoes, jewelry, or even make-up (or lack of) can really make a difference! Taking a step towards more period attire is not something that happens instantly and it's perfectly ok to focus on some items rather than others. Take the time to build your knowledge base and improve your wardrobe bit by bit. Learn new facts and new skills and most importantly, HAVE FUN!

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