

# Costume Construction in Art

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This class is for those folks who want to be able to confidently use a piece of artwork as a guide to making more period correct garb. We will talk about what to look for in terms of good sources, the difference between period sources and later re-interpretations and which artworks/artists are generally “trustworthy.” The class will also spend some time looking at artwork from frequently-worn eras in the SCA and learning to “see” seam lines, understructures, and closures.

At this point, it's mostly Western Europe based, as that's where most of my research/knowledge is, but the concepts can carry over into Eastern/African/New World cultures too- just find the art you can trust!

## Introduction

- Who I am, what I do and why you should trust me:

Mundanely, I'm a glutton for academic punishment- I have a masters in history and an MFA in costume technology, and work professionally as a theater costume technician. Because of this background, I'm both good at seeing how artists (designers) indicate garment details in their work and researching clothing/sewing techniques of any given time period.

-Why this class?

I figured I should start teaching this class when I realized other people didn't just look at clothes and make sense of them entirely naturally.

- How I learned:

Sadly for folks just starting out, a combination of staring at many things much too long and then trying to make them myself (but seriously, part of learning how to see this is looking at both books like Janet Arnold and existing a garments from the period if they exist, and training yourself to see how it all goes together.)

## What I'm Looking For:

### Silhouette:

*Do I see the outline of the body, or is it more blousy?*

One of the first DEAD GIVEAWAYS as to what period you're looking at.

The earlier in time something is, the more likely it is to be rectangular construction, meaning everything is made of rectangles, squares and triangles. Rectangular construction is the most efficient way of using woven fabric, and weaving takes time and effort, so the more efficient you can be, the less fabric you have to make to get a garment:

Pre-1300ish, a vast majority of clothing was very rectangular. (t-tunics, overtunics, byzantine

robes, bliauts etc, even the “fitted” Norse Thorsberg trousers) After that, rectangular construction starts to transition to become the construction method for underlayers -see Tudor shirts/chemises.

Post 1300, we start seeing a lot more of the body itself- the tight “self supporting” cotehardies and shaped men's hose become prominent, and then we transition in the 1500s into garments that change the shape of bodies- pumpkin hose stand out from legs and bodices are stiffened to smooth women's upper bodies out.

A lot of learning the silhouettes is just in looking at them. If you're interested in a specific era or a specific place and your research revolves around that, eventually you'll be able to tell what “looks” right and do less research- there are a LOT of people doing art in the later parts of the SCA era.

### Fabric Behavior/Continuity:

*Is this stiff/drapey/loose/folded/tucked/showing strain etc? What does what I see the fabric doing tell me about what it is and how it was sewn?*

Again, as the art gets more detailed and mediums change, this becomes significantly easier- what a Norse carver may show as a straight line sticking out from the body, a later artist may be able to show as a tunic that falls over the hips.

Shadows/shading by the artist can tell you a lot- they can imply numerous different types of pleats, (think of a Tudor skirt versus a German Cranach gown- one is usually knife pleats and the other rolled pleats), tucks, gathers, embroidery, etc.

A good example of seeing fabric continuity is in houppelandes: these were usually cut of the biggest pieces of fabric folks could get their hands on, with seams to join more fabric in. Because they were only belted to create a waistline, you can see tucks in the fabric that start above the belt and continue below. If there had been a seam at the waist that both the upper and lower parts of the garment were gathered into, it would be less likely for the tucks or gathers to line up as perfectly.

Similarly, if men are wearing pants or hose so tight they look painted on, there's a good chance they needed to be stretchy somehow. As knits weren't common until later periods, they were likely cut on the bias- a 45 degree angle from the warp/weft, where the fabric is stretchiest.

*Do I know what fabrics are common in this time period and how they were often used?*

This can assist you in seeing different treatments and shapes in clothes- a linen garment will usually visually behave differently than a thicker wool one. (which will behave yet differently if it's been lined in fur) In images of folks partially undressed or in "time off," the way the artist has depicted wrinkling or wear on a fabric can also help you figure out how it may have been worn or how it was constructed- there are often a lot of background folks in crowd scenes with jackets undone or skirts pulled up that can show you hints of what the fabric is/how the garment was made.

### Seam Lines:

*Do I see any visible seam lines?*

Sometimes artists are so detailed (often in portraits) that they will paint in seam lines or show a shadow in the fabric where the seam lines are (often true in pile fabrics like velvet)

Other times, seams lines are clear where there are two different fabrics joined together- sometimes they're a true seam line, and other times they're showing where guards or bands of other fabrics were applied on top (Occasionally, what looks like a band is also another layer, so this is another place where knowing silhouettes/ general layering of the period is helpful)

*If I don't see any seam lines, is there any indication with the behavior of the fabric/closures/fastenings as to where they might be?*

Obviously, this builds on the previous question- what is the fabric showing me, as well as the next question- where are the closures or fastenings. While not always true, often where there's a closure, there's a seam, as the join in the fabric is a logical place to close a garment.

### Closures/Fastenings:

*Do I see any closures or fastenings in this artwork?*

Sometimes, these are big and aggressive, like brooches on cloaks. Other times, they're almost invisible unless you see the artwork live or at a zoomable resolution, like pins holding tudor dresses

shut.

Sometimes, you can only see part of the fastenings. On many Cranach dresses you can see the lacings across the torso, but not what they run through, and this is where cross referencing with archaeological evidence can help- there have been a fair number of finds with fastenings in them, which can lead you to the correct solution. This is also where previous reenactor research can help: usually someone has had the same question on fastenings you've had, and has a blog post or a write-up on why they made the decisions they did. Of course, that doesn't mean they're right, and you're always allowed to come to other conclusions, but seeing their thought process can help.

If you CAN see them, you can generally figure out what they are from the shapes you can see, or make an educated guess based on how they seem to be working- short lines down the front of things are often spiral lacings, tiny gold flecks near a seam are often pinheads, and artist frequently show points holding hose up as loose ends from under doublets. This is another point where knowing what was common in the time period is helpful- if a "Norse" garment seems to have points or hooks, that's immediately suspect, and I would check the dates on your artwork.

#### Accuracy to Existing/Known Patterns or Garments:

*Have I seen a pattern breakdown of a garment of this time period before and does the art seem to agree?*

This is a great "research" point, especially with our ability to get books that show pattern pieces and shapes these days. If I'm looking at a Tudor or later garment, I'm likely to check in with Janet Arnold, as her research lays out the various pattern pieces that go into the making of garments. Other research also exists in this vein as well- the Victoria and Albert museum has a couple of books out showing later period pattern layouts much like Arnold does.

There are also a bunch of "how to make your own" patterning books that have been well researched and can give you a good background in what you're looking at. While these aren't giving you the patterns from an exact existing garment, they show you the general shapes of the pieces that you're looking at. I've left a group of those at the end of this handout

As a last resort, you can also look at the shapes commercial patterns are using for the era. Obviously the big pattern companies (the ones commonly found at Jo-Anns and Hobby Lobby) may not have an interest in being 100% accurate but their pattern shapes are generally at least a starting point. Other smaller history-specific patterns also exist that are likely more accurate as far as shapes of garment pieces, but often they don't "make up" into garments quite as well.

There are also a fair number of people who have done "best guess" pattern shapes to help others online. As with anything online, it's always fair to check their sources and see if they have anything to back their best guesses up.

#### *Does what I'm seeing in the art agree with any live garments of this era I've seen before?*

Museums are THE BEST. Even if you can't get to them live, you can look at a lot of collections online, and most museums are MORE THAN WILLING to sell you books of a lot of their garment collections in it, as there's a lot of demand for pretty clothes in coffee table books. (I'll leave a group of those at the end as well)

Similarly, many museum curators are just as big a nerd as you are, and willing to send additional pictures of garments if they exist in the collection. Reach out via email!

#### Accuracy to Others In Time Period:

*Does what I'm seeing in this art agree with the other art from this time period/location?*

Obviously, this can be as detailed and time consuming or as undetailed and quick as you want. Essentially, can you find what you think you're seeing in one piece of art in at least one other piece of art (if not more?) If yes, you've probably found a reasonably accurate depiction of a garment. IF, however, you can only find one very few, there are a couple of possible reasons:

1. Is this depicting a saint? Often times in art, saints and "non-humans" or Exceedingly

Special  
different.

People (like kings and popes) have garments or hats that mark them out as

2. Is this a person being depicted by an artist not from their culture/time? Sometimes folks seeing garments cross-culturally don't quite understand how it all goes together. Similarly, there are a lot of artists (we'll get to them in a minute) from later time periods who do "medieval" art that ISN'T ACCURATE AT ALL.

3. Is this a piece by a "proto-surrealist" artist or a monk with an agenda to scare you out of hell? Hieronymus Bosch was a prolific artist... but also dealt a lot with completely bizarre subject matter. Needless to say, if other things in the painting are suspect as far as realism, the clothes probably are as well. In the same vein, if you're looking at things depicting hell or torture (especially in books of hours or other religiously-bent texts) again, clothes may not be what the artist is focusing on.

Alternatively, sometimes if you find a garment in only a few places but still believe it's a garment worn by real humans, you need to change your research path and go to another type of documentation- miniver caps show up sparingly in art as they were often seen as "undress" hats, but have quite a few things written about them from the period.

### How To Choose Art To Trust:

-Sometimes, it's the only art you have. When you research the Norse, a lot of what remains is runestone art and a few Valkyrie pendants, and folks have tried for years to get the fragmented garment finds to match up to what's depicted there. (however, in the case of Valkyries, see again "Is this depicting a real human?")

-Other times, we have art AND an existing garment (or part of one) that shows us sort of how things were done, so if those lines match, we know that that artist/art is probably decently trustworthy.

-Portraits done by well known artists are often trustworthy, and it's even better if you can find their pre-sketches, where they try to capture all the details. (Holbein) HOWEVER, be careful if you start seeing the "same" portrait over and over again- some are copies of the original, and artists may start taking liberties with the clothes to try to differentiate "their" portrait, and yet others are actually clothes the artist has purchased or been loaned and set up on stands or hangars and not on a body, which sometimes gives you strange wrinkle lines and leads you astray. (Miniatures can also be considered portraits, but are often TINY and hard to get detail from)

-Books of Hours/Illustrations: Western, 12<sup>th</sup> century on. The ones made for show/for Really Rich People were hand written and hand illustrated, and show religious stories illustrated in the clothing of the time. (this is mostly because that's what the illustrators knew, AND because then it was easy to show people who were specifically different for whatever reason.) Illustrations are also where we get a lot of information about non-western cultures at this point too- most cultures were drawing images of themselves in some form.

-Woodcuts can be surprisingly useful, as woodcut artists are often focused more on lines than anything else, and often wind up showing seams and lacings and so forth. Especially if you're interested in Landsknecht clothing or Germany from about 1490-1600, there are a lot of great woodcuts showing clothing detail.

-Statuary can also provide good insights. A lot of funeral effigies from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries are surprisingly detailed when it comes to clothes- a lot of them were likely carved from looking at the dead person's clothes (sometimes probably on the dead person themselves), and probably close to the time they died. (I use effigies a lot in looking at veils and headwear and how layers of clothing worked) Men's clothing can be difficult to find in effigies, as often they're depicted at least partially armored.

-Tapestry can often be useful if you have other references too, especially in the early years, as they don't

give a whole lot of detail. By the time we get into later periods, though, there's a fair amount of detail, as techniques and materials get more refined

### **Art NOT To Trust**

#### Waterhouse/The Pre-Raphaelites

These guys did a lot of pseudomedieval artwork that often gets referred to in costume (the Lady of Shallot, etc) but were painting in the mid 1800s. They did a lot of detail work "in the style of" earlier Italian paintings, but had no idea how the clothes from then actually worked. One of the easiest starting points for this is to get a confirmed solid date range for whatever art/artist you're looking at.

#### Dover Books/Victorian Secondary Engravings

For some reason, the Victorians wanted to codify and label EVERYTHING, including ancient fashions. Since they weren't always working from the best primary sources, or they themselves didn't know what they were looking at, they got a fair amount sort of half-right. A lot of the Dover books use the Victorian plates, which are questionable at best. They'll give you a very general overview of silhouette, but get a lot of the picky details very wrong.

#### "The Mode In" books

See above. These are all a modern person drawing what they think they see in period sources, and they get a little confused in the translation

### **Where To Start Researching (even if all you have is google!)**

#### Primary sources are best!

Consider all research like a game of Telephone- the closer you are to the original source, the better your information is going to be.

TIME  
-original materials: paintings, woodcuts, statuary, stained glass, illustrations in books FROM THE PERIOD/LOCATION YOU'RE INTERESTED IN.

(Use written non-art materials to confirm what you're seeing in art, wills, lists of garments in royal wardrobes, accounts from courts/big events describing the people, passed down stories/myths, written accounts of travels in "foreign lands," and sumptuary laws restricting who could wear what (The laws will also tell you often what people WANTED to be wearing, so you can pick up lot about fashion of the period.)

-look at museum websites! A lot of the bigger museums have a fair amount of their art collection and sometimes their costume collection online. If you're looking for a specific culture (English, German, Persian, Dutch, etc) find a museum in that home country. While they may not still have ALL of the sources from their country/era (we all know cultural kidnapping by museums is an issue) they usually have at least a decent collection of "their" stuff. The best way to find museum collections? GOOGLE ARTS AND CULTURE: <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner> which is giant index of SO MANY digitized collections around the world it's not even funny. (And you can also see which museums are participating with Google, then go directly to the museum's site to search if you want more freedom)

Secondary sources:

A source that's not the original, but is synthesizing/pulling from the original; for instance, a

Vermeer painting would be the original source, and a secondary source is a re-drawing in a cartoony style OF said Vermeer painting for the cover of a book on pigments. Somewhat useful, as you can say "this is the general idea of this thing," but may be missing some of the minutia and the precision of the original, which can really throw you (again, see the Pre-Raphaelites painting "medieval" women in the shape of 1880s corsets.

### Pinterest is amazing and cruddy at the same time.

A lot of making Pinterest useable historically is learning what's a valid source and what's not

SOURCE - if it's an actual textile from a museum, like the British Museum or the Hermitage, GOOD

- if it's art from an actual museum, they usually give you the "pedigree" of it in the comments, so sometimes I'll do a little extra research to make sure I know when/where it's from, and help decide whether I want to trust it or not (this goes back to what art do you trust)

-if it's blogs showing process photos or research images I usually read them just to see how other people are doing things and what sources they're finding to confirm what I'm doing/finding. If it someone I trust (like Edyth Miller or Morgan Donner) that I know has their ducks in a line, I tend to trust their research without double checking.

and if they -if it's photos of people in garb, take it as inspiration, again, unless you know who they are know what they're doing (Again, Edyth and Morgan)

garments There are some people on Pinterest I trust implicitly-  
**Jaana Seppala** is a Finnish textile researcher, who has AMAZING boards of extant  
**Morgan Donner** is a historic costume blogger who has a great hoard of historically labeled inspiration boards.  
**Eva Andersson, Whilja de Gothia, CuriousFrau mmcnealy, Mervi Pasanen, and Gunta Dege,** are all costumers or researchers with well-organized history boards (including more modern ones)

One of the things Pinterest can be great at is giving you an opportunity to hone your eye- if you type in "cotehardie england 1350" and get four things that look almost the same and a fifth that looks completely different, you have at least a good direction to go in.

### Books to Try:

#### Books that show shapes/patterns and research surrounding them:

Patterns of Fashion, Janet Arnold  
The Tudor Tailor (and assorted related books) Ninya Mikhaila, Jane Malcolm-Davies  
The Queen's Servants, Caroline Johnson (edited by the Tudor Tailor ladies)  
The Medieval Tailor's Assistant, Sarah Thursfield  
Woven into the Earth, Else Ostergard  
Viking Clothing, Thor Ewing  
Women's Costume of the Near and Middle East, Jennifer Scarce  
The Modern Maker 1 and 2, Matthew Gnagy  
Ipek, The Crescent and the Rose: Imperial Ottoman Silks and Velvets, Nurhan Atasoy

#### Books that show ONLY images of extant garments and/or art:

Tudor Fashion: Eleri Lynn  
Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings 1300-1500, Lisa Monnas  
Renaissance Velvets: Lisa Monnas  
A Manual of Costume as Illustrated by Monumental Brasses: Herbert Druitt  
Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd, Janet Arnold

The Art of the Portrait, Norbert Schneider  
Art from the Court of Burgundy, the Cleveland Museum of Art

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Occasionally Updated Blog: <https://costumersupportdept.wordpress.com/>

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