

Fitted Dress Construction

A Primer

Pre-Project Prepping 1: Choosing your Fabric

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Introduction:

This is one of a series of instructions for turning your four-panel fitted dress mockup into something that you can wear.

This tutorial was written with beginner to intermediate-level sewers in mind. If something in these documents is unclear, please contact me and I will try to clarify or correct the instructions. There are often many ways to skin a cat. I am presenting techniques which work for me and for those who I've helped construct a gown.

I have provided a bibliography of main sources at the end, but quite a bit of this tutorial is the result of knowledge accumulated throughout years. These instructions are not heavily footnoted, as they're more of user's guide than formal documentation. Many of the references can be found in other papers located at my website. If you need your own documentation I'd suggest checking out the books in my bibliography. They're excellent sources, and are good foundation books for anybody interested in knowing more about the period.

Choosing your Fabric:

Wool

The single most common fabric for clothing found in medieval archaeological finds is wool. The properties of wool make it a wonderful fabric for this application, and the variety of wool types give the wearer a choice of gown styles. Wool can be very thick and heavy, as in melton or coat weight wool, or light and airy, as in some gabardines, or even the luxurious and hard-to-find wool satin.

Wool does not necessarily have to be too hot! I have two lightweight wool dresses that I have worn in 90+ weather. I wouldn't say that I was comfortable, because I am never comfortable in 90+ weather, but wearing lightweight wool isn't less comfortable than any other fabric. Wool breathes, and when worn over a lightweight linen smock, is quite comfortable. It's much cooler than any synthetic, and feels cooler than cotton, as cotton

can stick to sweaty skin. I haven't found wool to be any warmer than similarly weighted linen.

Wool melton is a very heavy fabric; I've seen it available with either a tabby or twill weave. Its weight makes it most suitable for outer garments. I would not recommend using melton for a self-supportive gown that will be worn as the first layer over a smock. I would use this fabric for a warm overgown, perhaps as a *surcote* for 14th century, or a *houppelande* or [V-Neck Gown](#)¹ for 15th century.

Wool flannels are usually available in twill. A flannel is a good, historically appropriate choice. Most flannels will shrink and full up somewhat when washed, so they can sometimes be warmer. Flannel does still breathe, so for anything but the height of summer it can still be comfortable.

Some gabardines can also be comfortable and appropriate for historical garments. A worsted gabardine is lightweight, smooth, and usually doesn't shrink much. "Gabs" can come in twill or tabby. The key with gabs is to find one that doesn't look too much like it should be a suit. When washed, it should full up just a little, getting a bit fuzzy. Some gabs look good, others don't change at all when washed.

Not all wools are labeled by type, or some stores may identify the above fabrics by different names. You should familiarize yourself with the various weaves before purchasing. If you are unable to touch the fabric from a vendor or brick-and-mortar store, request samples, which many online retailers are willing to provide. Look for a non-knit, non-stretchy fabric, in tabby or twill weave, that doesn't have too fine of a finish. Avoid crepes, because while they are cheap and generally available, the twisted fibers don't resemble anything produced in period.

Silk

For the supportive layer, some silks, when lined, can have sufficient body. If you can find a silk twill, or silk broadcloth, you may be in luck. These fabrics don't tend to be as shiny as what we traditionally think of as silk. China silk, or *habotai*, is usually too thin to be useful. If your silk doesn't have a lot of body, is slippery like a taffeta, or is loosely woven, it would probably be best to use the fabric for an outer layer, and have another supportive gown underneath, doing all of the work. Avoid slubby silks, such as dupioni, noil, and "raw" silk. There is little evidence that these fabrics were popular or desirable before modern times.

Linen

For the external "fashion" layer, there is little evidence that linen was used or popular, especially for England, France, or other points north. One would certainly have a smock from white linen, or might line the gown with linen, but it's best to avoid it for the outer layer of a dress. Linen also wrinkles under the bust, where often wool will give a smooth

¹ See <http://www.mathildegirlgenius.com/FurDress/FurLinedDressDoc.pdf> for more information.

line (some wrinkling is unavoidable by the end of the day, especially on a larger-busted woman). Linen is preferable to cotton, however, or any synthetic fabrics.

Cotton

While cotton was known, it was not generally available for clothing. Additionally, most modern cottons don't drape or have the same quality as period cottons. Therefore, it is best to avoid cotton, though cotton velvet and velveteen are better choices than rayon and other synthetics.

Synthetics

Avoid synthetic fabrics. In general, they don't breathe, drape strangely, and certainly aren't appropriate for the 14th and 15th centuries.

Colors

It's not my intention to get into an extensive discussion of colors. If you're making this dress for a living history or reenactment group, check with the group for their standards before you make anything. Generally, avoid extremely bright "day-glo" colors, such as neon green, electric blue, hot pink, etc. That said, some bright colors were desirable and often achievable. You may be able to find vendors or online sites which provide a color sample palette of colors attainable through natural dyes. Very bright pinks were possible. As a very general rule, the stronger and deeper the color, the more expensive it was. There are, of course, exceptions to this axiom, but if you want to portray a lower class, a lighter and softer colors may be more appropriate.

Continue to Pre-Project Prepping 2: Washing your Fabric

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