

What do I wear to my first event?

(So that's what garb is!)

By

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The first rule you hear when you join the SCA is that in order to attend an event, you have to wear garb. What's garb you ask? Well it's clothing that was worn any time from 600 to 1600, which is the typical time frame we use in the SCA. Our rules state that an attempt at pre-16th century clothing is required at any event you attend. So even if you're just wondering what it is we do and want to have a look-see, you still need to be dressed to look similar to everyone else that you see when you arrive on site.

One of the reasons we have such a time span, is because not everyone wants to wear 14th century Norman clothing. Some folks want to be a part of the early Celts, Gaul's, Romans, or Saxons. Still others want to dress in Renaissance clothing from, Germany, Italy, France or England. Vikings, the Far East (Japan and China) and even India and those regions from the 15th Century have been seen at events.

When you attend an event, you will see many different variations of some of the garments I will talk about. Many folks try and recreate these garments in fabric that is as period as they can find. Silk, linen and wool are expensive now, where flax/linen and wool were more common and affordable back in the Middle Ages. Cotton was a known fiber, but was as expensive as silk is now. Most of the upper class had silk, good wools (fine weave) and fine linens for their garb. All those in the SCA portray those in the noble classes. You can choose any time period within the given years, research as far as you want to go, and wear those garments. Some folks like all kinds of clothing, and so choose to wear whatever catches their fancy. Feel free, as long as you look period, to wear any kind of garment from 600 to 1600. Yes, there are some folks who portray the Middle East, Russia, China and Japan. Once you have the hang of this, jump on in.

Unless you plan to enter Arts & Science Competitions with the garb you make, don't worry too much about documentation or hand sewing. While it would be nice to have everyone document every piece they wear, and hand-stitch the entire garment from the inside out, not all of us have that desire, or the time. Use a sewing machine or a surger, whichever works best for you.

Before I get into the typical easy garments, let me clear up a rumor. Those of you that have been to the Renaissance Fair and have seen the low-slung bodice on some of the good ladies of the fair, are they period, True or False? False! No good English lass would be caught dead with the top of her bodice that far below her armpits. We are not selling our wears now are we? Good English lasses have their bodices level where the edge of their armpit starts. This way we are modest, and a good gentleman of means won't take advantage of us. Those bodices known as wench wear are PURE FANTASY.

Ok now on to the goods! Up to about 12th to 15th century, most folks wore what we call the T-Tunic. The reason we say that, is if you take a t-shirt and lay it flat, you can pretty much make a medieval garment from this layout. Men wore them to their knees or a little longer. There are some tunics for guys that do go to the floor. But most men wore them at the knee, with a girdle and hose. And no, I'm not talking about women's under garments or pantyhose. I'm talking about things that look similar to a belt and tights if you cut them straight up from the joined seem and put ties on the end to tie around the waist or to a small thin belt you wore under your tunic. Or braes (pants), which can be gartered to the lower leg. No, not a garter a lady would wear, but long strips of fabric or leather to keep the pants from dragging in the mud. And don't forget a head cover.

Now I'll discuss the ladies garb. Woman of any age wore one to two T-Tunics. One would be the under tunic, usually white or cream and the other tunic would be a shorter sleeve and come to the knee or longer. They would also wear a girdle, and cover their head in some fashion especially if they were married. Some would pin an apron to the front, yes pin, as aprons as we know them weren't around then. It may even be just a square of fabric that tied around them.

Colors for these garments for both men and ladies were almost any color they could get from berries or other natural things that made a dye. So browns, greens, reds, dark orange, yellow (very mellow color) and some blues to purple. Most lower classes to middle class would have the darker earth tones with some brighter tones now and then. Your upper class had deeper tones, jewel to pale, as they could pay for the finer things. Stay away from neon colors and really busy patterns. Plaids (what we think a Scotsman would have worn) were used, but it was more the Irish and later periods.

What wear on your feet? Well shoes had no heel and most were like a t-strap type shoe you see younger kids wear. All were made of leather. Some had a thin sole and you may see boots also. Most of us in the SCA use clogs or boots with very low heel to slip-ons that have no laces. If you have a foot problem, feel free to wear what you need in order to be comfortable. There are those that want to be as period as possible and will make their own shoes or purchase them. There are merchants that come to some events and wars that the SCA participates in who sell these goods. You can also find sources on the internet.

One of the last things you will need is a cloak for cooler weather. You can use a square of fabric that will go around your shoulders and pin in front. You can line it with fleece (not a period fabric but it keeps you warm) wool or flannel. If you buy a commercial pattern, don't put any ruffles or lace on it. Trim is nice around the bottom edge but not really needed. Hoods are great! Plain fabrics are great, while wool would be ideal, most use 100% cotton twill or a heavy fabric with a warm lining to make their cloak.

Layers are one other way to stay warm in the cooler weather of late fall and winter. The use of long underwear, while not period can keep you comfortable. Just because we can't document it, doesn't mean it may not have been in use. The Anachronism coming through here. Keeping a layer close to your body and under the T-Tunics can keep a person pretty warm

In the 13th to 15th century clothing got tighter to the body and buttons came into more use for the middle to noble class. Also more seams, gores and better fitting clothes. If you think of Henry III, Richard II, Edward III to Henry V, you see this kind of clothing on both genders. After that, we get into the Renaissance and the fashions of Elizabeth I, Italy and German Ren.

The clothing of what we call the High Middle Ages mentioned above is more detailed and requires a bit more skills in sewing than the T-Tunics. They are quite simple to make, once you know the techniques to make them look more period. The clothing of the Renaissance, England, Italy and Germany, takes a bit more skill. It can be accomplished, and having a buddy to help you, works wonders. The Shire of Beau Fort has a sewing guild that you can join to help teach you all the skills you need to make your own garb.

Simplicity, McCall's and other commercial pattern makers have for the last 4-5 years been producing patterns for re-enacting enthusiasts. Some of them look like they came from paintings you see in museums and art galleries. But when you get right down to it, they are made for the modern seamstress or tailor. With Simplicity and McCall's, there are some things you can do to alter these patterns slightly to make them look more in fashion to the time period. One is to use as natural of fibers as you can afford. Silk in almost any form is the most period, along with 100% linen. Cottons are great, especially down here in the South. There are 100% cotton velvets and cotton brocades. These are all fine to use, but make sure if you use brocade with a pattern, that it isn't too modern in design. The Past Patterns and others that have historic pictures on the front of their package don't need much in alteration of the actual pattern, but make sure you take your body measurements and adjust your pattern accordingly. They give historical information, and guidance.

You may hear folks say it's better to make your own pattern than to use those that are commercial. Well that's their choice. If you are more comfortable following a pattern that someone has already made, feel free. Just follow these simple guide lines and you will have a much better looking piece of garb than what it shows on the front of the package. The following points in the paragraph below are mainly for the ladies. The men's patterns are well done and except where an outer garment may have the sleeve sewn in, historically it may have been tied on instead. Ask lots of questions, and write down what you learn. The SCA is a teaching society that recreates the best of the past, as we wish it had been. Yep that's without the plague, bad sewage, and bad water.

Any pattern that you see a white sleeve like in patterns Simplicity # 9256, 7756 and McCall's # P477 have what is historically called a chemise under them. This is an undergarment for ladies (A shirt for men) that are worn under the gown. This can be the under T-Tunic, or has a gathered neckline and sleeves. They are usually to the knee or to the hem of the gown you will wear over it. Layers help keep you warm in cool weather.

The next item to look for is darts. There were none in medieval garments. They used gores or gussets to make room if the garment was too tight and you needed more room in the ribcage. Where you see these most are in S/ patterns # 9256 and # 7756 and M # 2806(P477) these aren't needed and you just lay the pattern flat. You will be adjusting when you put in grommets or ties on the back or front of these gowns.

Some of these patterns have you put a grommet or buttonhole to connect shoulder seams. (S # 7756) This would not have been done. Shoulder seams were either all one piece (Picture N) or there was a seam. Sleeves were tied on, pinned or hand stitched in place for the day. There were instances of sleeves sewn in the garment but this was seen more in the 12th to 15th century England and some parts of Europe.

Italian gowns, the sleeves tied on and as you get closer to the 16th century they were sewn in depending on the style. You can use grommets (make sure you cover them) buttonholes, rings, or loops to tie on your sleeves. McCall's #2806(P477) pattern should have one more band that is closer to the upper arm and there would be ribbons or ties to connect all 3 bands together. Your sleeve of your chemise would then be made extra long to make the puffs you see in the photo.

Grommets should be covered, but you won't be picked on if you don't. It takes time to sit and take silk ribbon or embroidery thread to cover each grommet. There weren't grommets in the middle ages. They used what looked like a washer or mettlet ring (like chain mail) or a piece of extra material, made a slit where it would go between the edges of fabric that you want to lace up...and you would stitch around the ring or in a circle to make the whole.

The last pattern S # 8725 is what we in the SCA call a cotehardie and a side less surecoat. This is from the time period we call the High Middle ages. While you see a lot of fabric in the picture that sweeps the floor, this would be gores in period and the gowns would be more up on the shoulders. Artists often took liberties with clothing in paintings and they weren't always as the artist portrayed them. This pattern while a nice representation is not put together in a period way. The most period piece of this pattern is the sleeve. The sleeve of this gown is set in, but the seam comes not from under the arm as your blouse or shirt does, but from at the back of the arm and runs down the elbow towards the wrist. You can recognize a cotehardie in paintings because of the many buttons down the front or back and on the sleeves. Buttons were for the wealthy and would be of mettlet, carved wood or bone, or fabric. A Great book to do research and help you build this kind of gown the right way is *The Medieval Tailors Assistant (making common garments 1200 to 1500)* by Sarah Thursfield. Simplicity # 8725 is not a difficult pattern, but with help from someone who understands how it should have been put together, this pattern can be used over and over again.

There are also merchants on line who have ready to wear garments. Be watchful of pricing and what they are made out of. Simple tunics and pants shouldn't run more than \$25 to \$75 depending on fabric, trims and embellishments. More extensive clothing like the cotehardie and those from the Renaissance will cost more.

Well I hope that answers most of your questions. Please post questions to our yahoo list, or ask someone at the next meeting. Anyone with the desire can learn to sew the clothing found in the SCA. With a little help and research you will soon be on your way. Welcome to the Shire of Beau Fort and the SCA.