

Chapter Eight

Making Costumes and Armor

Early Medieval Dress: A.D. 300-1100

Men Men wore round-necked knee-length linen or woolen gowns belted at the waist, and sometimes covered by knee-length woolen cloaks. Their legs were covered by linen or woolen hose that were baggy, not knit or woven of stretchy material. Because they were baggy, the hose were cross-gartered, that is, bound by thongs in a criss-cross pattern. They wore short, soft leather boots. Their hair was uncovered, and tied with a band above the forehead, or a crown.

Women Women wore round-necked ankle-length linen or woolen gowns, belted at the waist, and sometimes covered by ankle-length woolen cloaks. Their hair was worn long, either free, held at the forehead by a band or crown, or bound up with ribbons in one or two criss-crossed braids. They could also wear a linen veil, hanging straight down the back.

Ornament Both men and women wore *torcs*, heavy bracelets and necklets of rigid gold, silver or bronze. Crowns were made of all these metals, and decorated with large colorful jewels. The edges of their cloaks or gowns could be trimmed with contrasting colored braid trimmed with large jewels. Women's belts were often tied at the waist, falling to their knees in a colorful single band.

Monks and Nuns Wore a long woolen or linen robe and gown, undecorated, in plain sober colors, black, white, gray or brown. They might wear a cross-shaped *scapular* of contrasting plain cloth hanging over their shoulders, and they might carry a wooden or metal cross. Nuns wore white or black linen veils to cover their hair. Monks wore their hair in the *tonsure*, a shaved circle around the crown of the head.

Warriors Early medieval warriors dressed like other men with the occasional addition of a simple leather breastplate to protect the torso. They carried a round or kite-shaped shield, a spear and a sword, and wore a conical helmet with a *nasal*, a protecting metal strip over the nose.

Late Medieval Dress: A.D. 1100-1400

Men Gowns lengthened below the knee; noblemen, churchmen and professional men like lawyers and physicians wore ankle-length gowns in the late Middle Ages. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, young men wore short gowns to their hips over tight colorful hose - often with each leg a different color. The gown was belted at the waist. Men's hats were high-crowned and trimmed with fur or feathers. Merchants and craftsmen wore woolen hoods with long tails wrapped around their necks, called *liripipes*.

Women Dress became more elaborate after the thirteenth century. Ladies now wore sleeveless low-necked *kirtles* over their gowns, with cut-out sides revealing their slender waists. Jewellery became smaller and more delicate. Hats were worn by all married women. Unmarried girls wore their hair loose or flowing free from under a small often jeweled cap; ears were always covered. Ladies wore tall conical hats called *hennins*, or butterfly-shaped headdresses floating high over their heads. Veils often fell from these hats.

Making Medieval-style Costumes

Materials

Wool Most medieval clothing was made at home. Wool was the commonest material, since sheep were found all over the medieval world. Cloth making was an endless labor for women: an unmarried woman became known as a *spinster* from the spinning that filled her day. Women also wove cloth and made up the clothes. In towns, the cloth makers or *merciers* formed one of the most powerful guilds.

Linen The flax plant grows from as far south as Egypt all across Europe to Ireland and Belgium. Linen, the fine cloth that can be made from it, was and is prized for its comfortable smoothness and coolness. Medieval women made lightweight clothing from linen.

Cotton Grown in Africa, Asia and parts of extreme southern Europe, cotton was not available to most people in medieval Europe.

Silk Brought back from China by Marco Polo, silk was a highly-prized luxury fabric worn at court. The first pair of silk stockings brought to England is bright yellow, and was given to Queen Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century. Medieval merchants brought silk from the southeast to their northern customers.

Leather Used for shoes, boots, armor and heavy work clothes. Farmers and craftsmen wore leather aprons. Men-at-arms often wore leather armor such as the *jack*, a leather coat reinforced with iron plates.

Fur In cold drafty houses and castles, fur was worn by all who could afford it in winter. Rich men and women trimmed their gowns and robes with fur, and kings and queens wore robes of *ermine*, the winter coat of the stoat, white with gray markings, as a sign of rank.

Feathers Peacock and osprey feathers were used to decorate hats and helmets.

Color Most medieval clothing was made at home from wool or linen woven by the housewife and either undyed or dyed with vegetables. Undyed cloth was soft off-white, or if made of wool from a black or brown sheep, it might be gray, brown, or a dull black. Vegetable dyes give soft muted colors: onions make a soft orange, parsley makes a gentle green. Lichens make yellow and orange dyes, and so on. Poor people's clothing could come only from this narrow range of colors.

But we know from their brilliant stained glass windows and the glowing pages of illuminated manuscripts that medieval people loved bright colors, and at the court, where money was plentiful, kings and queens and their entourages revelled in brilliant clothing of scarlet, purple, and gold. Purple was the royal color because it was so rare; both it and scarlet were imported dyes made from small shellfish found in the Mediterranean.

Embroidery Royal and noble ladies were no less busy about making clothes than humbler women, but their time was spent not in the basics of spinning and weaving, but in the embroidering

of magnificent pictures on clothing, church and court regalia, and household textiles. Embroidery was an important art form in the Middle Ages, with some of the most impressive being the *opus anglicanum*, or *English work*, which uses gold and silver thread to create raised designs of unsurpassed richness.

Bayeux Tapestry Despite its misleading name, the *Bayeux* (pronounced Bye-yuh) *Tapestry* is actually an example of medieval embroidery. A strip of linen two hundred and thirty feet long by about two feet wide, it shows the whole story of the invasion and capture of England by Duke William the Conqueror and his Norman knights in 1066 in a long continuous cartoon-like illustration. It has traditionally been attributed to Duke William's wife, Queen Matilda, and her ladies. Besides depicting the conquest, the Bayeux Tapestry gives an invaluable detailed pictorial account of eleventh-century life. (*See illustration on p. 54*)

Clothing the Medieval Person Could Not Wear

Lace Not made before the Renaissance. The earliest examples date from the end of the fifteenth century. Medieval women are sometimes shown wearing sheer veils or blouses that appear to be of lace; they are actually made of extremely fine linen or silk.

Knitting Unknown before the fifteenth century at the end of the period.

Stretch fabrics Medieval weaving could not make fabrics that stretched, so even hose should be shapeless and somewhat baggy.

Man-made fibers Nylon, polyester, dacron etc. are twentieth century conveniences!

Chemically-dyed fabric Lurid colors in strange shades do not look medieval!

Who Wears What: Easy Costumes for Play or Festival

Bishops Bishops wear a purple robe decorated with braid. A large jeweled cross hangs around the neck. They hold a crozier, a ceremonial version of a shepherd's crook, which can be made from a broom handle with a papier-mache crook at the top. Their hat is a mitre, a stiff hat made from two shield-shaped pieces of cardboard 12 inches high and 8 inches wide, stapled together at the sides, and decorated with paint or braid.

Children Children wear the same clothing as an adult in their station in life.

Craftsmen & Craftswomen They wear tunics in dull colors. The men's come to the knee, the women's to the ankle. Both wear aprons, and women wear veils. They carry tools of their trade.

Jesters Jesters wear a short tunic in bright colors, a soft cloth hat (see Hennin) with bells, and carry a Jester Stick - a 12 inch dowel with bells and crepe paper streamers stapled to one end.

Kings Kings wear a Robe in red or purple, richly trimmed with jewels and fur, and a golden Crown. They carry an *orb*, a round 6-inch ball topped with a cross and covered in aluminum foil, and *scepter*, a ceremonial mace, made by fixing a round aluminum-covered ball at the end of a 1-foot dowel.

Knights Knights wear a tunic called a surcoat, cross-gartered hose and helmet, and carry a shield and sword. The surcoat is a cloth knee-length tunic that covers the armor and protects it from rain and sun. The surcoat bears the knight's heraldic coat-of-arms on the chest and upper back.

Merchants They wear a tunic or robe in rich dark colors trimmed with fake fur. Their hats are made from second-hand men's or women's felt hats, decorated with feathers and braid. They carry their money in a soft leather purse slung over their shoulders.

Merlin Merlin wears a black robe trimmed with silver cloth or yellow felt cut-outs of the sun, moon and stars, with fake fur around the neck and down the front. He wears a black hennin decorated with zodiacal signs or stars, and carries a magic wand made from an 18 inch dowel ending in a star made of cardboard covered in aluminum foil.

Monks & Nuns They wear a robe in white, brown, gray or black, tied around the waist with a thick cord. They may carry or wear a large cross. Nuns wear a plain white or black veil.

Peasants Men wear a short tunic and cross-gartered hose in dull brown. Women wear a mid-calf length tunic in some faded soft color, not red or purple, with a white or off-white apron. Short veils are optional. Tears and tatters are *de rigueur*! They may carry a gardening spade or fork, or basket of vegetables or fruit, or a stuffed lamb.

Queens & Ladies Medieval ladies wear a gown in rich fabric in bright colors, with a decorated tall hat, the hennin. Queens wore gowns in red or purple, trimmed with jewels, fur and braid, with a golden crown instead of a hat.

Robin Hood He wears a belted green tunic. His green felt hat is made from two triangles of green felt, 18 inches wide by 10 inches high, stitched together and turned up in front. It is decorated with a feather. He carries a bow, and wears a quiver full of arrows on a rope slung around his shoulder. (His quiver can be made from two round oatmeal boxes taped together.) His men dress similarly. **Maid Marian** dresses in green also, like a peasant woman with flair — some woodsy braid or other decoration would be appropriate. She carries a bow and wears a quiver.

Students Students dress like clerics, in a plain dark robe ending below the knee. They may have cheery cross-gartered hose showing under the robe, however.