

Research for Costumers

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The first step in any successful project is research. Without a solid grounding in research, it is impossible to produce a truly accurate and quality piece of clothing. However, the amount of research required for a project depends on your intent. I think of costuming as falling into one of three categories: Costume, Garb, and Clothing. Costume is something you wear for effect, with little concern for true accuracy, rather with the aim of simply achieving the correct look or passing the “ten foot rule.” I think of Garb as being something you wear to play the game in the SCA with a reasonable level of plausibility – you may make significant substitutions in construction technique, fiber content, and other details, but your goal is to produce a reasonable likeness of Medieval or Renaissance clothing and to pass the “two foot rule.” Clothing, on the other hand, is what I think of as the category of costuming where you have great concern for the accuracy of all the details - from fibers to construction to embellishment – a garment that will pass the “Laurel Handshake.” Garments that qualify as Costume, Garb, and Clothing are all worthy projects for different contexts, but ones that require very different levels of research. This class will focus primarily on how to research making Garb and Clothing.

Primary Sources

A primary source is a source of information that is from the time period being researched. For the purposes of costuming research, this can include extant fibers or garments, documents such as wills, letters, and inventories, or works of art.

Extant fibers and garments – for those interested in the later periods, there are a considerable number of garments that have come down to us in a more-or-less complete state. Those interested in earlier periods and/or wetter climates often have to content themselves with fragments of garments or fibers preserved as imprints or concretions. The Surviving Garment Database (SGD) is a treasure trove of the known, reasonably complete garments that date from before 1500 CE. However, it is currently experiencing technical difficulties. Clothing the Past is an excellent substitute, but PRICEY unless you can get it by ILL. Luckily, many museums are putting their collections online for free, so it is worthwhile looking at the online catalog of museums in your region of interest to see what is available. Even some of the major US museums have collections that include extant pieces from Europe, so remember to investigate those as well.

Coatsworth, E and Owen-Crocker, G. Clothing the Past: Surviving Garments from Early Medieval to Early Modern Western Europe.

ISBN: 978-90-04-35216-2

Surviving Garment Database - <http://heatherrosejones.com/survivinggarments/>

Victoria & Albert Museum - <http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/textiles/index.html>

Los Angeles County Museum of Art - <http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/>

The Met’s Costume Institute - <http://tinyurl.com/gl7gl>

Links to costume museums - <http://tinyurl.com/5fyszv>

Documents – clothing was not considered a disposable commodity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, so wills, records of donations to churches, estate inventories and the like often include detailed lists of garments, frequently with at least a basic description and an estimate of their worth. Sumptuary laws were used in many parts of Europe, especially during the middle and later periods and can represent excellent sources. By specifying who could not wear what (and what fines were imposed for disobeying the law), you can learn what were considered to be the most desirable current fashions and what people were willing to pay in order to dress above their station. Other documents, such as letters and contemporary descriptions can also give information, but should be carefully interpreted, as personal bias can commonly enter into descriptions. Letters between people describing new clothing they had made are more reliable than sermons of clergymen railing against the evils of new fashions, for example.

Gifts to QEI - <http://www.larsdatter.com/gifts/index.htm>

Elizabethan Sumptuary Laws - <http://elizabethan.org/sumptuary/index.html>

Rublack, U. The First Book of Fashion: The Book of Clothes of Matthaeus and Veit Konrad Schwarz of Augsburg an illustrated diary! 978-0857857682

Works of Art – Paintings, sculpture, and other works of art can be an important source for costuming research, especially for those periods where few or no garments survive. However, whenever using a work of art as a source, you must consider that the artist has used artistic license, symbolism, or allegory in order to make their point. For example, sideless surcotes were popular for a relatively short period of time, but survived for centuries in French art as the clothing of queens and saints and some examples of heraldic clothing may be used to identify the person rather than showing actual clothing.

Good Secondary Sources

There are a number of really excellent publications about historical costuming, many of them published in the last few years and still readily available. Janet Arnold and Gail Owen-Crocker are both excellent sources whose work can pretty much be universally endorsed. Other recent excellent sources include *Moda a Firenze* (Renaissance Italy), *Woven into the Earth* (Late Norse Greenland), and *the Tudor Tailor* (Tudor England). Once you have decided on a period and culture to work on, ask other people interested in the same area what the key texts are in that field. There are usually a few “must reads” from which you can branch out. Journal articles in scholarly publications can also be excellent sources, particularly for more obscure cultures and are often available on local college campuses when they are not available online.

Bad sources

However, in addition to the really great publications on the market, there are some truly execrable ones as well. Avoid sources that are extremely broad in scope, rely on re-drawings of primary sources, or are by known problematic authors. Herbert Norris is one of the classic offenders and is particularly problematic because of his wide and easy availability through Dover editions. Other problematic sources include many commercial patterns, which are geared more towards the casual Halloween costume than proper Garb or Clothing and so take shortcuts or use modern methods rather than truly representing period-appropriate construction.

A few things to consider when researching a garment:

Fabric –

- What would be a reasonable fiber content?
- What type of weave would have been used?
- What would be the approximate thread count of the finished cloth?
- What was the method of weaving?
- What would have been a reasonable width of fabric in this time and place?

Color –

- Which dyestuffs were common?
- What colors would have been possible?
- Which would have been difficult to achieve or restricted through sumptuary law?
- Were there any cultural meanings behind certain colors or color combinations?

Cut –

- How was the garment shape achieved?
- How does this garment fit into the overall outfit?
- Was the garment simple or complex in construction?
- How would it have been cut so as to be fabric-conservative? (Remember, in most SCA periods, labor was cheaper than materials)

Construction –

- How would the garment have been put together?
- What sorts of threads would have been used for the stitching?
- Which stitch techniques would have been used in garment construction?
 - <http://heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/index.html>

Embellishment –

- How would the piece have been decorated?
- How would the garment have been fastened, if necessary?
- If embroidery was used, which stitches would have been used? What sort(s) of threads? Which designs are appropriate? How extensive would it be?
- Were decorative elements like spangles, beads, bells, fringe, painting or stamping, etc. used? How and when?

Accessorizing -

- Even the most splendid garment is not worn alone – what are the extras you need?
- Appropriate undergarments and/or foundation garments? Invisible & Important!
- Hats, headcoverings, and hairstyles?
- Shoes and stockings?
- Jewelry?
- Tools or toiletry items?
- Cloaks, jackets, other outerwear?

Sources for materials

SR Harris - <http://www.srharrisfabric.com/>

An amazing fabric store in the Twin Cities, check the website for coupons

Fabrics-store.com - <http://fabrics-store.com/>

A good source for linen – many colors and weights reliably in stock

Dharma Trading - <http://www.dharmatrading.com/>

Excellent source for silks and dyestuffs (mostly modern)

Earth Guild - <http://www.earthguild.com/>

Source for Dyeing and Weaving supplies

Laci's - <http://www.lacis.com/catalog/>

Costuming bits, particularly for corsetmaking

Denver Fabrics - <http://www.denverfabrics.com/>

Tasty fabrics, many linens, wools, and silks

Classic Fabrics - <https://classicfabrics.nl/>

Amazing fabrics, particularly for early period folks.

Sartor - <https://www.sartor.cz/>

Reproductions of SCA-period brocades and other fabrics – some are 100% silk

Sources for accessories

Raymond's Quiet Press - <https://raymonds-quiet-press.myshopify.com/>

Stunning reproduction pieces from many periods and cultures

Fettered Cock Pewters - <http://www.fetteredcockpewters.com/>

Pilgrimage badges and much more!

Billy and Charlie - <http://www.billyandcharlie.com/>

Belts, pewters, and more

Truly Hats - <http://www.trulyhats.com/>

Beautiful, well-made later period hats

Talbot's Fine Accessories - <http://talbotsfineaccessories.com/jewel.html>

Period-accurate accessories and findings

Sources for books

Check to see if your particular flavor of costuming has a specialty publisher, many do!

DealOz – A meta-search of booksellers - www.dealoz.com

Casemate Academic (formerly David Brown/Oxbow Books)

<https://www.oxbowbooks.com/dbbc/>

Excellent source of books, beware their sales!

Poison Pen Press - <http://www.poisonpenpress.com/>

Not always the best prices, but they often buy large quantities of books that then go out of print through the major retailers.

Tudor Tailor - They have a whole line of books on Tudor and Stewart clothing

<https://www.tudortailor.com/>

WorldCat – If you are looking for a book in a library to borrow or to confirm information

<https://www.worldcat.org/>

Google Scholar – To find books to review and check for online availability. It is also a great way to generate your bibliography quickly and easily (Search for the book and then click on the quotation marks. <https://scholar.google.com/>)