

The Thrifty Anachronist: The Handbook

by Lady Mathilda Harper

based on a class originated by Lady Aurora Catrina de Vie

Thrift Stores

Or maybe we should just say second-hand stores. Look in the yellow pages for Goodwill, the Salvation Army, and Thrift Stores. Some churches run thrift stores. Also look for Consignment Stores, though these tend to have more fashionable merchandise at higher prices than the charities. Check out garage sales and flea markets if you enjoy browsing. Second-Hand Shops are also possibilities: check that they carry clothing. Other stores you can look in: imports from third-world countries, especially India and the Middle East. Some of these countries have clothing very similar to the Middle Ages, which can be bought and worn just as they are. Some stores and catalogs that specialize in natural fabrics also have suitable ready-to-wear.

Before you Shop

Look at pictures of period clothing. Go to the public library and look under #391 (Dewey Decimal System) for books of historical costume. If you know your persona's period, place, and social station, look for pictures of suitable garb that you would like. Otherwise, just leaf through and find some looks you like.

Ready-Made Clothing

Many ready-made pieces of clothing can be worn straight off the rack. Some can be improved with a little alteration or added trimming. Look below under "Fabric" for suggestions on fibers and colors.

Dresses—what to look for:

- Tunics (for men and women)
- Wedding, bridesmaid, and prom dresses for Elizabethan gowns
- Anything that has a period silhouette in a reasonable fabric

Visible zippers can be removed and replaced with lacing. Period trim can be added.

Skirts—what to look for:

- Full skirts that are floor-length or slightly shorter for peasants. Generally, skirts should be a solid color.

As with dresses, visible zippers can be removed and replaced with lacing.

T-shirts—what to look for:

- Solid colors with no design, preferably no pocket

Belted and worn over leggings, a large T-shirt can be an instant tunic for children or small adults. These have the added advantage of being comfortable, washable, and inexpensive. Poobah!

Nightgowns (for both men and women)—what to look for:

- Long T-shirt style nightgowns that can be worn as tunics (see above under T-shirts)
- Something that could be worn as a dress.

Women's blouses (for both men – look in the plus sizes – and women)—what to look for:

- That Three Musketeers look: trailing lace at the neck and sleeves
- Simple pullovers, especially in white or off-white, or something with buttons that won't show when worn under outer layers.

Women's vests—what to look for:

(I know, I know, you're about to say, "But women didn't wear vests in period!" How right you are. However, what you are going to do with this vest is turn it into a pair of sleeves.)

- Floral tapestry
- Solid color
- Embroidery or embroidered look
- The right cut: long enough to make a full-length sleeve

Now for the interesting part. To turn your vest into a pair of sleeves, take apart the seams to the two front panels (or just cut them off). Hold out your arm; drape a sleeve over the top. Now you can see whether you want to attach it to your arm using a garter or two (hair scrunchies make excellent garters), sew on points (the period name for little ties for attaching tied-on articles of clothing!), use the existing buttons and button holes to lace it up underneath, and/or sew them onto a bodice, dress, or doublet. Detachable sleeves are very period, and can help you stay comfortable as the day warms up or cools down. Wearing your sleeves dangling from the points at your shoulder is perfectly acceptable and keeps them handy. They can also be part of an easy mix-and-match wardrobe (which is also very period).

Pants—what to look for:

- Sweat pants in an earth color can be used under a tunic as leggings, especially if you garter below the knee with bias binding (use 2 packets for adults, 1 for children). Oyster, gold, and berry are good color choices for the binding. You can purchase binding in any fabric store.
- You can do the same with pants in a flexible canvas-like material without a cuff or crease, like painter pants.
- Harem pants can work for Mideastern garb.

Coats—what to look for:

- Cloaks
- Large amounts of real or fake fur that can be sewn onto garb

Fabric

What fibers to look for:

- Natural fibers: wool, linen, cotton, silk

1 Tie your points with a single loop, not with a double loop as you tie your shoelaces, for a proper period touch. If unsure, ask someone how to do this. It is easier to do if one of the points is longer than the other.

- Natural fiber blends: cotton/polyester; linen blends; wool blends; silk blends. The higher the percentage of natural fiber, the better. Cotton/polyester should be at least 50/50.
- Rayon is a good substitute for silk (it's also made from wood pulp, so it's sort of natural).
- Cotton velveteen is a great alternative to real velvet, which is expensive, hard to launder, and tends to wrinkle.
- Stay away from 100% synthetics and satin—they don't breathe.
- No denim, please.

Look for a label that lists the fiber content. If there's no label, how do you tell? Experience, mostly. Rub the material between your thumb and fingers; learn the feel of 100% cotton vs. a cotton/polyester blend.

Why natural fibers:

- This is what they had in period. (Note for those who want to know: some cotton was grown in Italy starting around 1300, but it was used mostly for padding and for making coarse material. Good quality cotton fabrics from Egypt came to Europe late in period. By the late 15th century, a cotton twill called fustian was cheap enough for workmen's doublets, but other weaves of cotton were rare and expensive. So yes, they had cotton in period, but no, they did not wear a great deal of cotton fabric. However, it does give a reasonably period look.)
- Natural fibers breathe. You will be much more comfortable and less smelly. (Yes, body odor was period, but let's **not** re-create that.)
- If you are sitting around a fire, stray embers can melt holes in 100% polyester; that melting polyester can burn your skin. Don't do it.
- Fiber blends are widely available, need less ironing than all-natural fibers, and wash well.
- Wool has the additional advantages of actually resisting catching fire (it smolders instead of flaming) and of being the only material that will keep you warm even when soaking wet. Some people are sensitive to wool's scratchiness, however. If this is a problem for you, put a layer of something else between you and the wool.

What weight and weave of material to look for:

- Most period fabric was thicker and heavier than modern fabric. Look for heavy-weight material for tunics, cloaks, and other basic garb. Go for the heaviest-weight upholstery fabric you can find for Renaissance finery in velvet, brocade (multicolored), damask (solid with a woven design), or embroidered material.
- Gauze-like material was used for veiling (all that stuff that floats from a headdress) and for chemises for nobility (think gauze curtains). For some reason, the very thin, almost transparent weaves of linen that were common late in period are no longer available, perhaps because they don't stand up to machine looming.
- Early period people used some loosely-woven fabrics (like modern burlap; but you don't want to wear burlap next to your skin, it would be pretty uncomfortable).
- Knits are generally not a good choice: they don't hang right and they're hard to work with. Go for woven material instead. How do you tell? Grab the material in both hands a ways apart and pull. If the material stretches, it's knit. If you want your garb to have some give, cut woven material on the bias (diagonally to the direction of the weave). This is what they did in period to make hose and other things they wanted to have some stretch.

Colors

Choose colors according to what period the garb will be used for and the social class of your persona. For body linens (chemises, shirts, etc.) and head wear at all times and for all classes, use off-white or white as these garments were not dyed. For outer garments, earth colors and dark colors except black are always safe, esp. for the lower classes. Neons are never period.

Early period (600-1200 or so)—earth colors: berry, moss green, olive, beige, oyster, purple, dark blue, rust, maroon, scarlet. Bright colors are more English and European; dark colors are more Scandinavian.

Later medieval (circa 1200-1500): natural colors for peasants—off-white, brown, gray. Also blue and green of any shade. For nobility, all of the above plus red and black, which were expensive. Medieval people loved bright colors and strong contrasts.

Renaissance (circa 1400-1650):

Peasants: off-white, brown, gray, blue, and green. Peasants were forbidden to wear fur trim.

Merchants, servants, and others of what we would now call the middle class went for medium to dark blue (the dye was readily available and inexpensive), red, green, brown, white, off-white, and gray. Sumptuary laws forbade the middle class to wear gold or silver trim or embroidery. (Which means, of course, that some of them did wear them—after all, you don't pass a law against something unless people are doing it.)

The nobility went for jewel tones and dark rich colors and fabrics: dark red, medium to dark green, all shades of blue, solid white, and solid black—which was the hardest color to get and to keep (dyes in those days were not color-fast, so some dye leached out with each washing).

Whereas in earlier times most fabric had been solid in color, the Renaissance featured brocades (multicolored), damasks (solid with a woven design), and prints with huge designs (as much as several feet for one repeat). Some lighter tints were also used by the nobility.

Note: Queen Elizabeth claimed the exclusive right to wear true purple.

Patterns

- Solid colors are always a safe bet.
- Plaids in period colors are good for Scottish garb.
- Renaissance clothing used some woven designs. Look for floral tapestries, brocades (multicolored), and damask (a solid color with a woven design). These are usually found in upholstery material and curtains.
- Mideastern and Byzantine clothing often had bold stripes several inches wide, usually alternating between lighter and darker colors.
- Unless you know what to look for, stay away from prints. There was some printed material in period, but most of the prints nowadays are quite different. Note: tapestries and other woven fabrics are made by weaving different colored threads. Printed fabric is made by taking a fabric in a solid color and applying a pattern to the top surface. The easiest way to check: turn it over. If the back shows the pattern, it's woven in; if not, it's printed. Polka dots are **not** period.

What departments in the thrift store to look in

- Fabric remnants. Look for big pieces.
- Tablecloths. You can use these either as tablecloths for feast or as fabric for garb. Simple garb can be made from a circle, oval, or rectangle with little sewing. Note: Large pieces of lace are not period, so generally avoid lace tablecloths.
- Curtains (remember Scarlett in *Gone With the Wind*?). Great source for the heavy, rich fabrics common in the Renaissance. Do NOT use if they have a rubber backing—you'll be way too hot, as it doesn't breathe, and it's the devil to work with.
- Sheets. Cheap source of large pieces of light-weight fabric for chemises, linings, etc.
- Blankets. Occasionally you will luck into a wool or wool blend blanket suitable for a cloak or heavy tunic.
- Throws. Can be used to cover up coolers and other non-period articles. Remove or minimize any fringe. Or you might find one you can use as a simple cloak with the addition of a penanular brooch to fasten it at the neck (these Celtic-style fasteners are readily available at events).

What to do with Fabric

Well, you could use it like fabric you buy at Jo-Ann's: use a pattern to cut it out and sew it together. Or you could make some simple garb with much less bother. Note: if there are any stains or holes in your fabric, try to put those in places that will be cut out or won't show in the finished garb.

Draped garb. Some early period garb is simply a piece of fabric draped over the body and pinned together. This is especially true for cloaks, but can also be used to create togas, Viking women's aprons (two rectangles), and, of course, kilts.

Cut a hole in it. To make an easy tabard, simply cut a hole in the center of a rectangular piece of fabric. Make it big enough to fit your head through. If you like, you can add a slit at the front. If you wish, you can add suitable trim. If the material around the hole threatens to unravel, you can bind it using bias tape. Now all you have to do is belt it and put on leggings.

To make an easy tunic, take a rectangle and fold it in half. At the middle top of the fold, cut a neck hole. Sew one seam on each side in an upside-down J (this forms the sleeves). Cut away the excess material underneath the sleeves, and bind the neck.

A chemise (that basic undergarment worn by both men and women for most of our period) is simply four rectangles plus two small triangles: 2 large rectangles for the front and back, 2 smaller ones for the sleeves, and 2 small triangles where the lower sleeves attach to the body. Add a draw string or elastic at the neck and wrists. (No, elastic is not period, but no one will see it. And no, we don't know that they used draw strings, either, but it's the easiest kind of chemise to make.) Chemises in period were not dyed. Women's chemises were generally ankle-length; men's were thigh- or knee-length.

Accessories

The well-dressed SCAdian does not live by basic garb alone, but by all those little accessories that can make modern clothing look period. A note on head coverings for women: unless your persona is Italian or you are young and unmarried, you should always wear a head covering of some sort. It can also keep you warm and hide a non-period haircut.

What to look for to make head coverings:

- Hats. Look for old-fashioned hats in wool or felt with a period silhouette. You can add a hat badge (decorative brooch), feather, or other item to improve the period look.
- Knitted caps. In an earth color, a plain knitted cap is suitable for a peasant. (Note: knitting is period; crochet is not.)
- Sun visor. Turn it into a French hood (that's a particular style of headdress popular in Elizabethan England) by wearing it on top of your head instead of over your eyes. Cover with something period (like black velveteen) and decorate with trim, fake pearls or gems, etc., as suits your fancy. Glue guns are good for this kind of work. If you attach veiling in a tube shape to the bottom back and allow it to hang down your back, you can tuck long hair inside.
- Lace doilies. Turn a large round doily into a snood (hair net) by running a heavy thread or piece of yarn around the edge and then pulling to form a bag.

Other accessories to look for:

- Belts. For belting your tunic or other garb. Note: do **not** wear a white, red, green, or yellow belt unless you are a knight, squire, laurel or apprentice, or pelican or protégé, respectively. (A laurel is a SCAdian recognized for mastery at an art or science; a pelican is a SCAdian recognized for service to the organization.)
- Hair scrunchies. Solid color. Use for garters to hold up your hose (socks) or attach a sleeve to your arm.
- Linen napkins. Can be used to make head coverings or as napkins for feast.
- A large tea ball. With appropriate decorations and filled with potpourri, can be used as a pomander, hung from one's belt as a sweet-smelling antidote to that authentic medieval stench you sometimes encounter at events.
- Gloves. Worn both indoors and outdoors by the nobility during the Renaissance. Go for thin leather or fabric. These can be in any period color and you can add embroidery or gems for more flash. For a truly period look, wear a ring with a stone and slit the glove above the stone to let it show through (see below under jewelry). Note to fighters: you probably won't find gloves suitable for fighting in a thrift store.

Jewelry

Period jewelry is a topic all its own. Be aware that almost all of the jewelry sold at events and Renaissance Fairs is not period. We know of one merchant in the Midrealm who makes bead and wire jewelry who bases her designs on research (Halden Creations; haldencs@donet.com; www.donet.com/~thughes/catalog.htm). Find out what would have been worn by someone of your time and class before purchasing, as it changed over time and from place to place. Note: stay away from plain gold or silver chains unless you are a knight or a squire.

In general, gem stones were not faceted until late in period, and the faceting was quite simple by modern standards. Instead, gems were polished and rounded (called a *cabochon* cut). They were then set into a metal surround, called a *bezel* setting; prong mountings are decidedly modern. Rings were worn wherever they fit, including the thumb and above the joint; wearing several rings on the same finger is fine. Ropes of pearls are a safe bet for the Renaissance. You can also unstring pearls and sew them to your garb. You can take costume jewelry apart and sew “gems” to your garb as well, or simply buy packets of fake gems in a craft store, in the sure knowledge that glass paste was also used in period for this purpose. During the Renaissance, men as well as women wore earrings, but men usually wore only one. Look for earrings that dangle.

The Housewares Department

While you’re in the thrift store, you might as well take a quick look through the housewares department. Just make sure that if you’re going to eat food off it, you wash and sanitize it before you use it. Here are things to look for:

- Drinking vessels. Metal mugs with a handle and a clear bottom.
- Feast gear. Wooden or metal plates, bowls, cups, etc. Also spoons. (You do know that eating forks are not period, right?—though many SCAdians choose to use them anyway).
- Candle sticks in wood or metal.
- Baskets (for carrying your stuff).

Non-Thrift Store Items

There are some useful items not usually found at thrift stores that we’ll mention anyway.

Snoods are decorative hair nets worn by women. They provide a light-weight, quick cover for the hair. In period, these were not worn alone, but under a hat or headdress, but many SCAdian women wear them alone anyway (this is authentic for the Civil War era). At events, look for a merchant who carries them. Silky fibers won’t stay put as well as cotton snoods, but even these can be anchored with bobby pins. Expect to pay \$4-8 for a snood. You can wear a hat or headdress over your snood. (If you really want to know, the crocheted snoods sold at Renaissance Fairs and at events are not period — crochet had not yet been invented — instead, snoods in period were created with a network of threads anchored at the intersections, and often decorated with real or fake pearls or other gems. However, you can’t tell the difference from a few feet away.)

What, oh what to wear on your feet? Bare feet are, of course, period for peasants. If you have the necessary calluses, won’t freeze or burn, and don’t anticipate any sanitary problems, go ahead and chuck your shoes. But for backup and for the rest of us, consider the following options:

- Leather sandals work for peasants. Straps are preferable to Birkenstock types, and brown or natural-looking leather is preferable to white. Wearing heavy socks under them is perfectly acceptable.
- Men and women can wear cheap Chinese cotton shoes. These usually come in black; most styles have a strap, like Mary Janes. Avoid the ones with embroidery (it’s not in period style).

Expect to pay \$6-10 for a pair. They can be ordered from The Pillaged Village, an SCA merchant (1-877-793-1066 or www.pillagedvillage.com) and yes, they're available in Men's sizes.

- Plain leather shoes that either slip on or fasten with a strap (no tie shoes, please).
- Plain dress flats or low pumps, especially with a square heel (low heels came in late in period).
- Leather boots (or leather-look). No cowboy boots or fringe, please.
- Bedroom slippers, especially leather or fabric. But stay away from anything that screams of the 1950s.
- Platform shoes are sort of period; look for natural colors and materials. In period, they were separate from the actual shoes and were used to elevate the wearer above the mud and muck of the typical city street.
- If you are willing to spend a lot of money, you can have truly period shoes or boots custom-made for you. Look for vendors at Renaissance Fairs and larger events.

A note on shoes: comfort is more important than the look, especially if your garb hides your feet. Many people put modern soles on otherwise period shoes. Watch out particularly for shoes with thin soles. A day spent wandering over pebbles will make you miserable, and who needs that? If you need to wear shoes that look totally non-period, you can always cheat by creating a cover in leather or leather-look.

Check out your local craft stores for ideas on accessories. What to look for:

- Packets of fake gems and pearls. These can be glued or sewn onto garb, especially headdresses, or made into jewelry. See notes earlier on period jewelry.
- Various materials for constructing headdresses.
- Feathers for making fans. Fans can also be made of stiff paper or fabric glued to a wire loop. Note: The standard Oriental folding fan was not known in period, though a circular folding fan did appear late in period.

Lady Mathilda Harper is a Tudor housewife living in Oxford, England, during the reign of Edward VI.

Mathilda Navias (galaxy@woh.rr.com) is a professional musician who delights in hunting for items at thrift stores which her husband then turns into garb. Her favorite to date is a heavy wool cloak fashioned from a green army blanket and a gold curtain. They live in northwest Ohio in the Midrealm.

The author wishes to thank Lady Aurora for coming up with the original Thrifty Anachronist class and inspiring the author to change her conception of thrift stores (silly me, I thought they were just for mundane clothes!). Lady Aurora is generally to be found dressed in gorgeous Elizabethan garb which on close inspection turns out to be fashioned from bits and pieces of thrift store finds. She is also a wonderful conversationalist.