

FERAL FABRICS:

Stalking Free-Range Textiles in their Natural Habitat

... **OR** ...

*Cheapskate Couture for the Cash-Conscious,
the Courageous, and the Casually Curious.*

--- by Mistress Sancha Lestrangle, ML ---

Sewing begins with cloth, and we are fortunate to live in an era (unlike the Middle Ages) in which cloth is relatively affordable through retail and on-line merchants. However, the yardages required - especially for women's clothing - can add up. The cost of cloth can make it stressful to cut into and Very Not-Fun, and worse, the affordable choices are limited and usually Rather Boring. Still, with a bit of effort, interesting and inexpensive textiles can be found in other places. Think thrift stores!

Thrift stores are full of options in the household linens section, but shopping with a specific goal in mind will nearly always end in disappointment. Instead, consider a range of projects, and allow the cloth you find to determine the garments you will make. The broader your range of acceptable possibilities, the more likely you are to find something suitable. Before shopping, familiarize yourself with what period cloth looks like, so you will recognize a good contender when you see it. There were many varieties! Some were used throughout Society period, while others were specific to certain times and places.

Historical reproduction using modern materials always requires some compromises, but the desired level of minimum authenticity is up to you. Everyone will have their own set of acceptable compromises. Some insist on authentic fibers, or authentic colors, or authentic weaves, but it's easier to find cloth if you prioritize; which attributes matter most to you? The more flexible you are, the more possibilities you will find. It's not hard to avoid blatantly modern fabrics: if you skip stretch knits, patterned or shiny stuff, and extremely vivid colors, you will be in safe-enough territory for any era.

Woven, solid color cloth is a good bet for any era. If it generally resembles linen or wool, even better! Modern linen tends to be plain-woven and thin, and woolens tend to be heavy and tweedy, but in period, linens and woolens were produced in a far wider variety: winter-weight linen, for example, or even delicate, gauzy wool. We tend to use cotton for those purposes nowadays, or rayon, so if you are flexible in fiber content, many more weaves and weights are available in these fibers. I recommend avoiding anything with more than 50% synthetic content next to the skin, however: it is sweaty and will melt if exposed to flame. Use natural fibers against skin, and use synthetics for outer garments only!

A BESTIARY OF PERIOD CLOTH:

Linen was worn universally throughout Society period. In all eras and styles, an undyed linen undershirt was worn next to the skin. Think sheets! Cotton bedsheets are often too thin and 'crisp' to look good as outer garments, but serve well as white undershirts, or as a colored base-layer tunic under an overtunic. Linen is currently trendy in home décor, so finding white or colored linen (or linen blend) isn't unusual. Linen is difficult to dye brightly, so avoid very vivid shades.

Wool is the most common fabric for outer garments throughout Society period, but it's hard to find secondhand. As a substitute, I look for medium or heavy-weight cotton bedspreads or tablecloths, or woven curtains, in any solid colors. Avoid tweed.

Silk and satin is found among the aristocracy of Byzantium, but is scarce elsewhere until the Renaissance. Modern synthetics like polyester and rayon often look convincing, but avoid super-shiny fabrics. Silk dyes well, so brighter colors are more suitable in silk than in linen.

Cotton was an expensive import from Egypt, and rare until the Renaissance. When used, it was nearly always combined with linen. However, modern cottons can make fair stand-ins for other period fibers, and are easy to find!

Patterned weaves (in any fiber) tend to be period-specific. Early Europe tended toward very small-repeat loom-patterned fabrics (herringbone, diamond-twill). Elaborate brocades were used by the early upper classes, in strong, regular patterns with high-contrast colors and an average 6-8" pattern repeat. Later periods moved toward larger patterns, and 15th c. brocades often had wild designs with enormous pattern repeats (hard to find!), though the older patterns continued. Printed fabrics simulating smaller-pattern woven brocades arose in this period as well. Renaissance brocades are the easiest to find, as curtains and bedspreads are still woven in authentic 16th century designs. (Look for regular undulating vine patterns between foliage clusters.) The Renaissance invented subtlety, too: for the first time, brocades are sometimes woven in neutral colors or low-contrast color combos. In all periods, avoid brocades with naturalistic or free-form designs. Look

for rhythmic repeating patterns, geometrics, or an abstracted depiction of foliage or animals. Stripes are not common, but when they are used, they generally run horizontally.

Velvet is strictly an upper-class Renaissance thing. Bonus: bedspreads and curtains made of cotton velveteen often look more period than pricey modern velvets do!

A BESTIARY OF THRIFT-STORE TEXTILES:

Sheets: They are cheap and come in many colors. If this is your first attempt at a particular style, make it from sheets. If it works well, it can become a pattern for future garments, and if not, well, you didn't spend much...just try again! Twin size will make a child's garment or a man's short tunic. Queen size will make a long tunic for a slender man or woman, or a short tunic, or a sleeveless overtunic. King size will make a long garment for nearly anyone, even with wide sleeves. Sateen-weave sheets tend to drape better than plain-woven ones. Avoid polyester or 'microfiber' – there are better choices! All sheets are really too fine for humble uses, but when used as underlayers, nobody can tell anyway!

Duvet covers: A king-sized duvet cover is a wonderful find. They run about \$12, and will supply enough fabric for four short undertunics, or two extravagantly drapy biaux. The top and bottom are often in two different fabrics: bonus! They are found in plain weaves and in brocade (or sometimes both!)

Curtains: are great! They come in linen-like textures, velvets, brocades, and many colors. They usually come in multiples, too, so they're a good bet for longer yardages. Note: if the curtain lining is cotton or a blend, it might make a good undershirt, veil, farthingale, or other white linen-type accessories. (Bonus!) Some curtains have a waterproof backing – not period, but handy for cloaks and covers for modern camping gear. Note: some drapery fabrics are not readily washable. If the label is still present, check. If it says 'professionally clean' or some such, it might be OK, or it might shrink horrifically. I don't usually risk it. If you like them, go ahead, but don't launder them; just spot-clean as needed. For this reason, I wouldn't use curtains next to the skin, or for 'working' garments.

Tablecloths: Seldom big enough by themselves for anything but a short man's tunic, hoods, or hose, but can sometimes be found in multiples due to store closeouts or caterers' discards. A wide variety of weaves. (Easiest to find after Christmas, but warning: may contain holly and snowflakes!) White Irish linen tablecloths sometimes have damask (same-color brocade) designs, but are usually subtle enough to go unseen, and they make great veils and undershirts.

Bedspreads: Found in a wide range of weaves and colors, and a good source of heavier cloth. Avoid quilted or tucked versions - it's usually not worth the time to pick out the stitching. (see 'sheets', above, for size info.)

Pillow Shams: very short yardages, but often wonderful textiles. Loom-patterned weaves are good for contrast facings on early-period tunics, and embroidered satins make good Renaissance sleeves.

Blankets: usually too small for clothing, as beds were smaller back when wool blankets were popular. Blankets are usually too thick for garments worn indoors, anyway. However, they make great hoods and square early-period cloaks.

Slipcovers: Seldom worth the effort. Nearly always boring fabric, and made of awkwardly shaped pieces.

Bedskirts: The ones with a sturdy non-woven top are the best pattern-making material ever! Unlike paper, it doesn't rip and is easy to pin for fitting. Unlike cloth, it has no directional grain and doesn't ravel, so patterns can be cut out any which way, trimmed or added to easily, and doesn't stretch or wrinkle much. A king-size bedskirt costs \$3-5, for the equivalent of about six yards of material.

Skirts and Dresses: Skirts are often made in lovely high-quality wool. Long ones are sometimes big enough for a small hood, or early-period tunic facings. Prom dresses can sometimes supply satin or velvet for Renaissance linings, sleeves, and facings if the price is right. Look for woven or embroidered skirt borders than might ornament an early tunic!

TAMING THE FERAL FABRICS:

To help visualize whether the yardage is sufficient, fold it in half (either direction), and hold it up to yourself. Is it as wide and long as the intended garment? If so, it'll likely be sufficient. If you intend to have big hanging sleeves or a pleated long skirt, be sure you have the equivalent of another doubled-over arms-length.

When laying out the fabric for an early-period tunic, cut it into strips that are approximately body-width plus about two or three inches extra. This will make it much easier to visualize how the tunic parts will fit the fabric, and it will look more period. (Bonus!) For later periods, if your yardage is tight, use bedskirt tops to make a rough pattern first. No need to be too precise. Just make all the parts a bit large, then pin to fit and cut down as needed. Now you have a pattern!

Household linens are basically never the width of period cloth, and can result in odd splicings. Some may have seams in awkward places, too. Fortunately, piecing cloth together to maximize yardage is about the most authentic thing you can do! Every seam you sew uses 1" of fabric, though, (1/2" seam allowance on each side of each seam), so allow for this when measuring.

A MISCELLANY OF HINTS:

USING SHORT YARDAGES: Short yardages aren't always doomed to be hoods and hose, facings, or kids' clothes. The 14th century used parti-color (multiple fabrics) on the same garment, divided vertically. Two yards each of two different fabrics will be ample if the weights are similar. German clothing used parti-color from the mid-14th century through the mid-16th, with a wide variety of fabric types in one garment.

HEMS: Unless a yardage is very close to being short, it's seldom worth the trouble to pick out existing hems or bindings. The cloth underneath probably doesn't match properly anymore anyway. Save yourself the effort!

THIN FABRICS: Skimpy, lightweight fabrics can look heavier if lined! You can either make the same-shape garment from each fabric, then sew one inside the other at the neck and sleeve cuffs, or just cut out and sew both fabrics together as though they were just one layer. Contrasting linings are period! Very thin fabrics work well as summer undertunics; the overtunic prevents see-through.

DYEING: It is often possible to dye a repurposed fabric, if it is mostly a natural fiber. There are even dyes made for synthetics! The cost of dye may equal the cost of the fabric, however, and results can be unpredictable. Don't set your heart on a particular outcome.

CLASS CONSISTENCY: Finely woven high-quality fabrics would have been dyed with bold, bright, or deeply-colored (expensive) dyes, and used for upper-class garments. Humble coarse or plain fabrics used more neutral, dull, or pale colors, which were cheaper. Indigo blue, russet orange, and dark brown were the darkest/boldest 'cheap' dyes. Bright red, kelly green and true black were very costly. (Neutral and pale colors came into vogue for the upper classes only in the Renaissance.) Trims with extensive embroidery or metal were very expensive, and suitable only for upper-class garments. A well-made authentic-looking lower-class garment will look far better without inappropriate ornament. Save the blings for courtly things!

LAUNDRY: If a garment is intended for wearing close to the skin, or for fighting, cooking or other messy activities, use a launderable fabric. Most repurposed fabrics have already been laundered a lot, so you have a good idea of whether they can handle it before it's even been purchased. (Bonus!) Curtains and upholstery often launder poorly, but if you want to use them, cut a measured swatch at least 6" square, wash it and dry it just as you would in actual use, then flatten it and measure it again afterward. If it shrinks badly or turns 'weird', save it for something else. Laundering every garment every time it's worn is a modern notion anyway. In period, undershirts got thoroughly laundered (that's what they were for), but outer garments just got spot-cleaned when needed. I get good results just scrubbing dirty hems in the bathtub and laying the garment out to dry.

A FLOW CHART FOR CLOTH HUNTING:

