

ANALYSING A STYLE

Mistress Rowan Perigryne

Background

Some time ago I wrote a Style Analysis for Calligraphy and Illumination, to help people learn to look clearly and reproduce specific styles. This is a similar piece for costuming.

Within the Society, many people produce costumes which are pretty but generically "medieval" rather than of a particular period and country. My own aim is to produce work which is an accurate reproduction of a specific time and place. This might mean copying a specific portrait exactly (and this is a good way to start to focus on a style), but it also means being able to analyse what makes a particular style distinctive. Once you have achieved this, you can produce a new and original outfit, perfectly in keeping with the originals.

I should also stress that my aim is to produce clothes rather than costumes. This means the same sort of solid construction, finishing and attention to details as you would give to making mundane clothes. And, as with regular clothes, I make different SCA clothes for different functions. If you look at the examples from period, you will see that they too had everyday clothes and feast clothes - even the upper class. Clothes for working in the kitchen or going to a tourney will often be simpler, more sturdy, washable, less decorated and more functional than those for attending a high court event. I usually copy middle or lower class styles for tourney gear and upper class styles for court clothes. So what are the features - general and specific - which make a particular clothing style recognisable? There are many costume books around which try to distil a specific style and present it to you. Some of these are useful, but others may be misleading or even downright wrong. I want to show you how to do this for yourself.

Let me give you an example. I make German clothes from the early 16th century. Looking over hundred of paintings, woodcuts and etchings I see many variations in style. Some have high collars, some are cut low front and back. Some have tight sleeves, others are slashed and puffed. Some have breastbands and front lacings, others are sidelaced, or centre front hidden laced.

But some aspects are common. Colours (for court wear) are typically red, green, black and gold, with an occasional pink or teal. Velvet was the most common fabric for court wear, with brocade, especially for contrast bands. Skirts are always very full, pleated into the waist and banded (to differing degrees), with petticoats below. Bodices are always tight fitting to the true waist (but not boned) and usually contrast banded. Chemises are always white and visible (to varying degrees) and may have black or gold embroidery. Heads are always covered with a cap and usually a barret as well, or occasionally dressed in ringlets under a barret.

The conclusion is that if I want to reproduce this court style, I should use red, green, black and gold, velvet, full pleated banded skirts, etc. If I was going to make a cloak, a typical example would be dark wool or velvet, without pattern or trim (although both were found in some men's cloaks), lined with fur, mid calf or longer, with full sleeves and no fastening. It would have a square back collar down to mid back and cut circular to hang in folds from the collar.

Analysing the features is the first step in reproducing them. And not just looking at one specific portrait, carving or other reference, but trying to extract and understand the general features across the range. The ideal method is to sit down with a number of examples of the style you want to emulate. This could be several examples from one source, or different sources of the same period.

Sources

Where do you look for these examples? Since you are trying to look at what actually was worn, rather than someone else's ideas, the closer you can get to actual period examples, the better.

Real examples are sometimes called "primary sources". Unfortunately, there are very few actual pieces of clothing left and we are not likely to get the chance to handle them. Some of the better historical books have the occasional picture of a real piece and some pieces are shown in museums - usually in Europe.

The most available source for us is contemporary art. This could be paintings, drawings, etchings, woodcuts, carvings, mosaics, tapestries, brasses, embroideries or manuscript illuminations. The later the period, the easier these are to find. Contemporary writing can also give some clues: there are descriptions of what people wore in many texts and even examples of lists of household clothing. Although you will find some examples of relevant art in costume books, the best source is art books.

There are also some costuming books which provide careful drawings of period clothes, where the author actually got to handle the real thing. Examples include the Janet Arnold series and "Cut my Cote". These books are also very useful sources for garment construction.

The next best sources are "good" costume books, based on period sources. The worst source are the more generic costume history and stage costume books, which are usually compilations of other peoples work, often re-drawn for the third time. These books can be misleading and are usually English-oriented, but can provide some useful additional material if you are having problems.

Questions

So, assuming you have collected a number of sources from the same time and place, here is a summary of questions you might ask yourself about a particular style.

First the big picture...

Shape

- What is the general shape or silhouette?
- How full are the body, the sleeves, the skirts?
- Does the shape follow the body? Exaggerate it? Restrict it?
- What length are the garments?

Layers

- How many layers are there?
- Hose - full, separate, none?
- Undergarments - chemise, shirt or undertunic - is any part visible?
- Petticoats, rolls and corsets?
- Tunic, dress or main garment - more than one?
- Overtunic, surcoat, etc

For each layer...

Fabric

- What type of fabric is used - what was the weave? Velvet? Silk? Linen?
- What is the weight and drape? Heavy? Stiff? Soft? Fine?
- What is the range of colours used? Are any colours reserved for special garments, purposes, specific classes or occasions?
- Is there any pattern or surface decoration?
- How it is applied? Woven in? Dyed? Sewn?
- What type of pattern is used? Geometric? Foliated? Symmetrical? Random?

Decoration

- What are the main decorative features?
- Is there any trim? Is this braid? Contrast fabric? Embroidery? Cording? Beading?
- Where is the trim used? How much does this vary?
- What specific patterns are used? Geometric? Foliated, etc?
- What colours are used?
- What about buttons, tassels, jewels, fur?

Fit

- How closely does each layer fit? Loose? Fitted? Restrictive?
- What provides support?
- What can you see? What do you deduce from the shape?

Openings

- How do you get in? Centre front? Back? Sides? Over the head?
- What fastenings are used? Buttons? Hooks? Laces? Hidden or decorative?
- How are they spaced? How large? Any special patterns?

Construction

- How full are the skirts? The sleeves? The body?
- How is the fabric shaped? Are pieces straight or bias cut?
- Where are the seams? You may be surprised!
- Are seams a feature? Ignored? Hidden? Decorated?
- Is bulk gathered? Knife pleated? Cartridge pleated? Box pleated?
- Is the garment waisted? High, true waist or low?
- Are sleeves part of the body? Laced or pinned? Set in?

Feet

- What type of footwear is worn? Bare feet? Sandals? Shoes? Boots?
- What shape and design?
- What materials and colour?
- What decoration?
- Does this vary between classes or situations?
- Do men and women wear the same shoes?

Heads

- What type of headgear is worn?
- How is the hair dressed?
- What shape and design?
- What materials and colour?
- What decoration?
- Does this vary between classes, ages, gender or situations?

Accessories

- Do they wear belts? What type, pattern, colour, material;?
- Where are they worn - Waist? Hips? Under the surtunic?
- How are they fastened?
- Do they wear a pouch or pocket?
- Attached to the belt? Hanging down?
- What form? What materials? What decoration?
- What other accessories are there? Knives? Chatelaines?
- Do men and women wear the same accessories?

Jewellery

- Do they wear any jewellery?
- What type? Earrings? Necklaces? Brooches? Rings? Armbands?
- Are there jewels on clothing, hair, hats, shoes or accessories?
- What is the style?
- What materials are used?
- How much variation is there?
- Do men and women wear the same jewellery?

In summary, break what you see down into little bits and focus on each aspect, so that you can see what really is there. Then compare this information across the sources you have and you will arrive at the basis for the style you are trying to emulate.

Once you have completed your analysis, you can start to make your design decisions - how will you select from and apply all this information? Once you have made these decisions, all you have to do is make it!