

WHAT NOT TO WEAR

An introduction to the pitfalls of dressing for the SCA
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So you've found this really cool group of folks to hang out with and you want to go to an event you've heard about, but you don't know what to wear. Sprinkled throughout this article are illustrations of garb (SCA speak for period clothing) that is comfortable, easy to wear and attractive.

For your edification, here are a few suggestions of items you might wish to avoid:



Anything made of spandex: I guarantee you that spandex is not a period fabric. The fibers are made of petrochemicals (post 1960s). Period fabrics are silk (worm spit), wool (fuzzy hair shaved off of sheep), linen (rotted flax leaves), and cotton (fuzzy stuff taken from the pods of the cotton plant). These are the natural fibers from period, with linen and wool being the most common. Using very labor intensive methods, they were turned into thread and then woven into cloth. The advantages of cloth made from natural fibers are many. Best of all, they breathe - polyesters and manmade fibers (except rayon) generally don't. This means that air will pass through the cloth allowing your body temperature to regulate much more easily and you will be more comfortable after wearing it all day.

Wool will keep you warm, even when it's wet (ask a sheep). Silk will keep you warm or cool depending on the weave. Linen and cotton will wick the sweat away from your body and dry easily. Yes natural fabrics wrinkle - wrinkles are period. Wool doesn't wrinkle as much as the other types of fibers, in fact tailors usually have to set creases with steam and pressure. Linen wrinkles a lot. But, the more you wash linen, the less it wrinkles and the softer it gets. This is a very useful property, seeing as it is the preferred fabric for underwear and chemises. I'm not telling you that you can't use a fabric with a percentage of polyester blended into itⁱ, just make sure that it doesn't look like polyester (plastic).



As a safety note, most natural fabrics do not burn as dangerously as polyesters, silk being somewhat the exception (it gives off a dangerous gas when burned in large quantities, rather like mustard gas). How a particular fiber burns and what residue it leaves is one of the ways fabric can be identified (called a burn test). Cotton and linen turn to ash (very similar to paper, which can be made from cotton or linen fibers), wool smolders and frequently goes out before burning completely. Polyester melts into beads and adheres to the skin causing really bad burns. This can be a serious problem in a group that loves its campfires like the SCA does. The potential for a veil, a hanging sleeve or the hem of a full garment catching fire increases when using a fire for warmth or light, and extinguishing the fire generally puts the garment close to the skin. Not good if the clothing adheres and causes skin damage.

Additional materials used for clothing and accessories include fur (empty, dead animal skins with the hair left on) and leather (empty dead animal skins that have been scraped and tanned). Although types of fur in period could be restricted to particular social classes due to scarcity or beauty (think ermine), fur's main use was for warmth. The fur you see on garment edges indicates a fur lining, because the hair of the fur would hold a layer of warm air against the body, acting as an insulator. Fur comes in natural colors from real animals, which means pink spotted leopard or blue tiger stripes are not good choices for period clothing.

Neon colors: Most super bright colors are from aniline dyes, which were developed in the 1800s and are made from coal tar derivatives. Period dyes are made from rocks, mushrooms, different parts of plants, squished up bugs, shellfish and/or snails. These are fixed into the cloth with something called a mordant, which can be as simple as salt, vinegar, iron filings (or other minerals) or as dangerous as cyanide. Mordants can also be used to change the original dye color to something different due to the chemical interaction between the dye and the mordant. The fabric is soaked in a solution made from the mordant, dried a bit and then put it in a vat of boiling dye. After stewing it, you cool it and rinse it in a few water baths to get the excess dye out (this is a very simplified view of a complex process).

Naturally dyed fabrics will fade over time, exposure to light and/or washing. Silk and wool hold color longer and more intensely than linen or cotton. Silk and wool are animal products and have protein cell walls, which hold on to dye very well, rather like human hair, nails and skin do. Linen and cotton have cellulose (plant) cell walls, which break down more easily and do not take or hold color as well. Unlike modern colors, naturally dyed colors always go together. Even really strange color combinations work, because they all come from the natural world. Ever see a natural landscape where the colors didn't work? I will admit to two oddities that are almost neon in brightness: international distress orange and magenta can both be made from natural dyestuffs and mordants (mushrooms and bugs are involved).





Anything from a ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ or other fantasy movie: Pirates are period, however the Golden Age of Piracy is in the 1700s. All those lovely coats and hats are Georgian and not within the SCA period. If you want to be a pirate, look up Sir Walter Raleigh, the Norse, or certain Venetian and Middle Eastern merchants gone rogue. Along the same line, most Vampire, Goth or Steampunk outfits are Victorian (mid 1800s) or Edwardian (late 1800s early 1900s). Although corsetry is very common for late period outfits, Victorian corsets are differently shaped than Tudor or Elizabethan corsets. Belly dancing costumes generally fall into cabaret (1930 to present), American Tribal (1960 to present) or Fantasy (think ‘I Dream of Jeannie’). On the other hand, really

good ethnic clothing from the Middle East is relatively timeless (and modest) and most silk or cotton saris can be wrapped in a period fashion.

Symbols of Rank: Like all groups, there are special symbols that have particular meanings in the SCA. All are tokens of achievement, rank or membership of a particular group. Wearing them will get you attention, perhaps more than you desire. Some basic items to shy away from would include:

- 1) Strawberry Leaves-symbol of the Dukes and Duchesses (past Kings and Queens who have reigned at least twice).
- 2) Yellow Tudor roses (in Caid)- symbol of the Ladies of the Rose, i.e. the past Queens of Caid, or members of the Legion of Courtesy (an award given by the Queen of Caid).
- 3) White belts, heavy unadorned chains and spurs: restricted to the Order of the Chivalry (the Knights or Martial Peers).
- 4) Laurel wreath: restricted to the Order of the Laurel (the Artisan Peers). It is also used as an indicator of a geopolitical group in the SCA (sometimes referred to as the Laurel Kingdoms by other re-enactment groups).
- 5) Pelicans: restricted to the Order of the Pelican (the Service Peers), although the symbol is particularly the Pelican in her Piety, wearing any kind of Pelican would be considered to be in bad taste.
- 6) Anything that looks like a crown- these are reserved to Royalty or certain other ranking members. (note: all ranks/titles are earned and conferred by the Crown, you can’t just claim them).
- 7) A White Scarf: restricted to the Order of the White Scarf, the top notch Rapier fighters.
- 8) Red, yellow or green belts- Although not restricted in Caid, they are usually used as an indication that the person is a Peer associate and in fealty to a Peer. Other members will ask who you are in fealty to, leading to long involved, sometimes unpleasant conversations.
- 9) Anyone else’s registered arms without their permission. As a group, the SCA embraces heraldry, which is a pictorial system of identification. Each is unique and there is an entire bureaucracy dedicated to its maintenance. Some of it you will be entitled to use just because of where you live, some of it is restricted due to being already registered to someone else. A lot of visual puns are made just by the juxtaposition of some of the

symbols. One of my favorites is a donkey's head over a semi (group) of alligators.ⁱⁱ I would strongly suggest that you not wear any well known arms from period, because you would be claiming to be that person. I am quite certain that the Queen of England is unlikely to be attending a local tournament. Ditto the King of France, or King Arthur, or even the CEO of Shell Oil (yellow seashell on red background).

Now that I've removed all the fun from choosing what may be currently hanging in your wardrobe, I have a few suggestions on what to do:

- 1) For your first event, call or email the local area Chatelaine and ask to borrow some clothing for the event. Most areas have an officer who has loaner garb for newcomers. This way you are not out any money for clothes and can come and get a look at the group. Alternatively borrow some garb from the friend that invited you to attend.
- 2) Bring a camera and ask to take pictures of anything you particularly like. Ask the wearer about the time frame (period), social class and country of origin of their garb. This is a great way to meet people. Most SCA folks love to talk about their clothing (or anything else they do, for that matter).
- 3) After you have a rough idea of what period of clothing you like. Start looking into the cost of buying or making that type of garb. Many folks have decided to change their preferences when they find out the complexity/cost of their originally desired period.
- 4) Add a few decent pieces at a time to your wardrobe. In period, most people had an expectation of about one new set of clothes every year or two. I usually suggest something for court and something for field/tournament wear. This can be a couple of simple tunics with the only difference being the type of material and the embellishment (embroidery, beading, trim, etc.).
- 5) Add underwear. A chemise/shirt, an underskirt or pants/hose/tights, socks, undertunics, corsets. An added advantage is that period underwear makes the clothing look better and you can wear the outer pieces more often between cleanings.
- 6) Buy or make some decent accessories. A hat/veil/head covering, period style shoes or boots, a purse, a drinking vessel.
- 7) Add a cloak, coat or cape for warmth.
- 8) Learn to sew your own garb or develop some skill (armoring, leatherwork, cooking, painting, fetching and carrying, etc.) that you can barter for garb.



Building a period wardrobe is very similar to building a modern one. You will probably have specialized clothing for different occasions – Court, war, tourney wear, cold or hot weather and perhaps different periods or countries for themed events. Most likely you won't build one overnight, you will acquire it over a period of years. Your taste in clothing may change-sometimes because of skill level, sometimes because of economic influences and sometimes just because. For me, one of the greatest joys in the SCA is the constant opportunity to learn something new. Be it a new stitch, a new way to make a garment or a new research source - clothing for me epitomizes this. It is an opportunity show who you really are, whether that person is a peacock or a wren. Clothes may not make the man, but they certainly help define the persona.

ⁱ This is considered rank heresy in some costuming circles and, among the 'more period than thou' types, will sometimes cause seizures and stammering. Also, consistent use of polyester is a form of Laurel bane.

ⁱⁱ Up to my ass in alligators.

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