

The Pleated Embroidered Apron

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“ a barmclooth eek as whyt as moren milk, upon her lendes, ful of many a gore.”

This phrase from English story “The Miller’ Tale” by Chaucer describes an apron worn by the farmers wife (Garbaty 457). The apron has its origins in the clothing of the rural people. The apron was obviously originally used to protect clothing from the toils of everyday work. It eventually evolved to a fashion item, though the usage varied country to country and from social standing and access to fabrics. This apron is designed to be one possibility for a decorative apron that could be used with clothing from the 15th and 16th centuries across much of Europe.

Materials: Linen, linen thread

Techniques: Pleatwork Embroidery (smocking) and Drawnwork

History and Background



Plate 1: Luttrell Psalter

The Luttrell Psalter written in England in the late 14th century (Backhouse 30) shows a number of different aprons all with very similar style: a long narrow apron fabric pleated into a waistband with cross-hatching at the top of the skirt portion (Plate 1). The crosshatching, such as in this image from the Psalter could be the artists attempt to draw a type of embroidered pleating similar to that described by Chaucer.

In a “Pictorial History of Fashion”, a 15th century engraving of a French Peasant by an anonymous artist (Plate 2) shows a honeycomb pattern on an apron almost identical to that of those depicted in the Luttrell Psalter. (Kybalova et.al. 264)



Plate 2 : French Peasant

From the late 15th century into the 16th century documentation comes from the woodcuts of the Germanic artists, such as Schoen and Durer (Plate 3, 4).

Many of the aprons seen in the woodcuts are of similar style: a pleated apron with some type of crosshatching inferred along the top of the apron.

Written documentation on these embroidered aprons comes from the sumptuary laws. In Germany two such laws were specifically written to include embroidered aprons. In 1512 it was written into law that *“ wifely fashion, citizenesses and citizen's children or residents of the city .none with gold or silver smocking or needlework aprons shall wear”* (Seidel).

and in another law from Germany : *“that no rich pleating should be on an honor-worthy apron - that also there should be less pleating and small smocking so the apron would not be so gathered.”* (Seidel).



Plate 3: Schoen Woodcut



Plate 4: Durer Melancholia

Embroidery and Inspiration



Plate 5: *Fountain of Youth* by Cranach

The type of needlework done on the aprons and the width of the aprons were also controlled by the edicts. A ban was set on the type and manner of the needlework made, and the width of the apron. As a result smocking type embroidery was utilized as a less noticeable way of gathering up the apron. In Nurnberg it was called "seidenfitzen" (silk smocking). (Seidel).

The honeycomb stitch is one of the stitches that is prevalent in the artwork during the 15th and the 16th century, it is by no means the only stitch which was used to create and embellish pleating.

The honeycomb stitch itself is a small satin stitch or overcast stitch done over pairs of alternating pleats. This would have been a very simple way to anchor the pleats in the fabric while still giving a lot of fullness and ease in the garment itself.

An extant garment from the 16th century found in a cloister in Alpirsbach been found with the honeycomb style stitch (Fingerlin).



Abb. 743 Hemd, Ärmelabschluss in Smockarbeit (Kat.-Nr. 28).
Plate 6: Cuff from Alpirsbach find

A painting by Grein (Plate 9) shows a nice version of a 'halbrock' or half apron. There is a large amount of fabric that needs to be drawn into the waistband in some fashion. There is not a specific embroidery pattern or stitch that can be seen along the top of the apron, but like in the other artwork, there is definitely some form of decorative embellishment along the pleats. Along the hem it is even more interesting, there is definitely a band of openwork and it was from this that I drew the inspiration for the drawnwork on my apron.

Drawnwork itself is based around pulling individual thread out and wrapping or binding the remaining threads in clusters to form a pattern. Most of the extant drawnwork that is found is of the form shown in Plate 8. The baby swaddling seen in Plate 7 has been combined with other lace inserts to form the intricate designs.



Plate 7: Baby swaddling c15th century



Plate 8: 16th c drawnwork

Construction

The apron was made from just over a yard of linen. The drawnwork and hems were done first using fine linen thread for the embroidery. The bottom hem was incorporated into the drawnwork. The side hems were done in a simple stitch sometimes known as “mice teeth”.

The embroidery completed, the top section of the fabric was pleated up using 10 rows of gathering threads placed approximately ¼” apart. Once pleated, the threads were pulled up tightly and the subsequent pleats were embroidered in a honeycomb stitch. Once the pleating was done the gathering threads were pulled out leaving an accordion shape on the top edge. A waist band was then sewn onto the top of the apron using a technique similar to that of tacking down carriage pleats. Many of the “fashion” aprons are shown fully pleated. I was not willing to try to iron in this many pleats.

Conclusions

The apron is like any other article of clothing, designed for a specific reason to serve a specific purpose, in this case to protect garments. It is when these simple articles of clothing or accessories are no longer used in the manner they were intended that they become a “fashion” item. Then, like with any fashion trend, they become bigger, fancier, more costly until the next trend begins.

By utilizing embroidery techniques of the time period, the apron changed from a simple object used to protect clothing to an item of such high fashion that laws were passed to regulate it.



Plate 10: Cote and apron

What I love about this garment is its ability to be worn with many different fashions from a 200 year time period and over a number of cultures.

An early image, taken from a polytych (Plate 10), done by an Unknown Master shows a figure wearing the fitted dress of the 15th and 15th centuries with a decorative apron. While it is impossible to tell that the decorative section along the top of the apron is a form of pleated embroidery, it certainly documents the usage of the apron with this type of fashion.



Plate 9: Pyramus & Thisbe by Grien

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1. Illumination from the Luttrell Psalter. Image from :
Backhouse, Janet. *Medieval Rural Life in the Luttrell Psalter*, Univeristy of Toronto Press. 2000.
2. Engraving of a 15th century peasant by an unknown artist. Image from :
Kybalova, Ludmila, Herbenova, Olga, Lamarova, Milena. *The Pictorial Encylopedia of Fashion*, Paul Hamlyn, London. 1968
3. Edward Schoen- Tailor as Lansquenet and Seamstress-1535. Image from the website for
St. Maximilian Landsknecht Re-enactment Guild. Image found at
<http://www.st-max.org/todesengel_woodcuts.htm> December 2003.
4. Durer, Albrecht. Melencolia I. 1514. Engraving , Image located at
<http://www.abcgallery.com/D/durer/durer3.html>. November 2003.
5. Cranach the Elder, Lucas. 1546. Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Image from the Web Gallery of Art. Image located
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7. 15th century baby swaddling done in drawnwork and reticella. Image from Old Italian Lace. Ricci, Elisa. Vol 1.
Lippincott Co. Philadelphia. 1913. Page 40.
8. 16th century drawnwork. Image from Old Italian Lace. Ricci, Elisa. Vol 1. Lippincott Co. Philadelphia. 1913.
9. Grien, Hans Baldung. Pyramus and Thisbe. 1530. Gemaldegalerie, Berlin. Image found at Art Unframed.
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