

Pleatwork Embroidered Shirt

circa early - mid 1500's

By Baroness Rainillt Leia de Bello Marisco

The inspiration for this shirt developed from the continuing research I am doing in period "smocking". I had done a test piece of the pattern from the fragment and wanted to use it in an entire shirt. I also wanted to try out theories on the layout for the shirt itself and this was a perfect way to do it. The theories behind the shirt design itself while conjectural are based on a logical transition of the styles of garments over the very narrow time that this shirt was fashionable. With no extant garments in existence of this exact style it is the challenge to look at portraiture and fragments and then theorize techniques, stitches and designs.

Materials: Handkerchief Linen, Au Ver a Soie 2 ply silk thread, Krenick 4 ply metallic braid

Background and History

The shirts prior to the late 1400's were based on rectangular construction, in the shape of a T. This silhouette grew fuller and fuller as time and fashion progressed until the middle of the 16th century where it once again slimmed down, most likely to fit inside much tighter fitting doublets.

As the silhouette changed over this 50-70 year period, the shirt saw many different stages of development in an attempt to maximize the amount of pleating around the neckline. In a brief excerpt, Virginia Churchill, in her book Lace mentions:

"Henry VIII issued the Acts of Apparell, which forbad the wearing of "garded and pynched shirts and partlets" to anyone with a rank lower than that of a knight." (Bath 2)

It should be noted that there were prohibitions on certain types of embroidery and embellishment, regionally, depending on the social status. In 1493 and again in 1583, in the sumptuary laws in Nuremberg, shirts embroidered with pearls, having pearls "fastened thereon" and other embroidery "pleated or gathered in gold and silver" were prohibited for all except for the Patrician (Seidel 72-74).

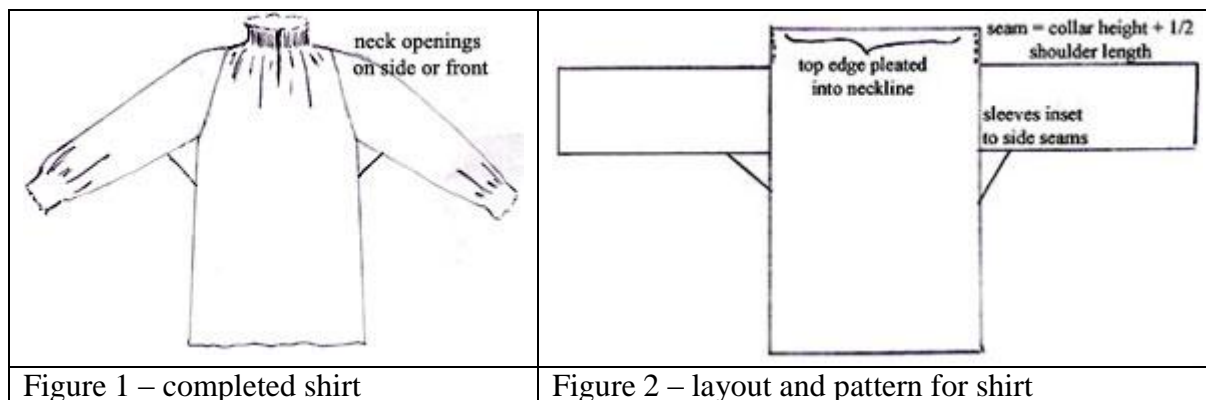
Dr. Jutta Zander-Seidel in *Textiler Hausrat* discusses the custom of German brides presenting their husbands with a shirt worked in gold as a wedding gift. Dr. Zander-Seidel has found records of wives were willing to pay sumptuary law fines of up to 20 guildens in order to provide their husbands with these elaborate shirts (204-206).



Plate 1 : Henry VIII by Holbein

A shirt shown on a portrait of Henry VIII by Holbien (Plate 1), painted in 1536, shows very elaborate gold work overlaid on the collar. The shoulder of the shirt in this portrait appears to have the sleeve head inset high up on the shoulder almost in a mock raglan. If the front and back panels of the shirt were pleated up to form the collar and a small seam placed to form the shoulder, the sleeves can then be set into the side seams. (see layout in Fig 2)

When the sleeves fall into place, they naturally form the V shown in this portrait. The sleeve and shoulder seam in this shirt was sewn together in a form of blackwork embroidery, similar to modern faggoting techniques. This decorative form was used on garments through the early 1600's.



The shaping of the shoulders is conjectural, drawn from portraiture and what would seem to be a natural progression towards the late 16th century shirts with the separate collars where the neckline and shoulder seam is created from the top of the front and back panels.

An extant shirt from about three decades later, shows a final variation on this shirt style. This shirt, part of the Sture collection c1567 (Plates 2 and 3) has the top edge has its corners clipped to form a smoother transition to the neckline from the sleeve. The top edge is again pleated up, but into a collar as opposed to pleating it into a neckline. The silhouette is very similar to the above conjectural design.

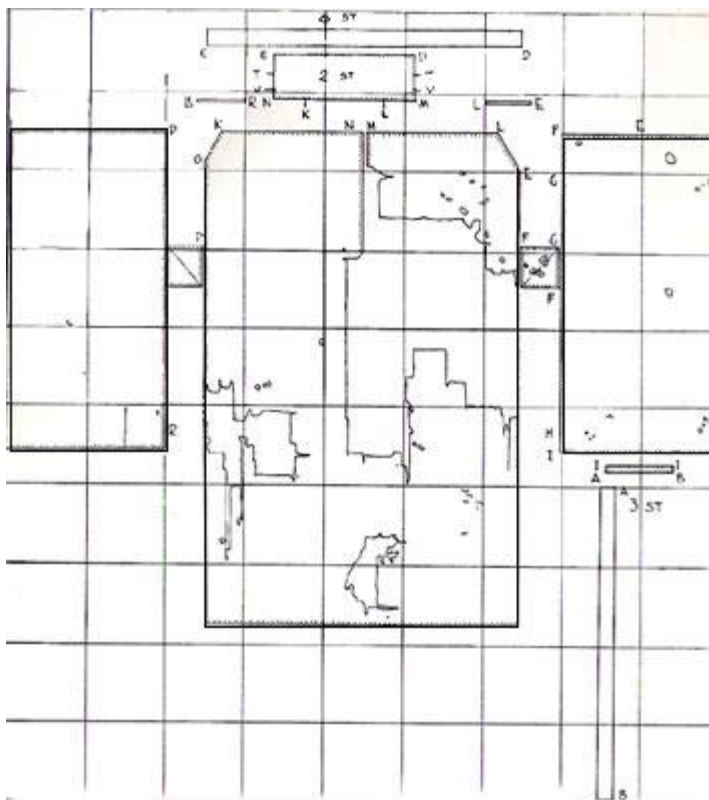


Plate 2: Sture Shirt

Plate 3 : Pattern Layout for Shirt

The design used on for the goldwork was based on a pattern found on a cuff fragment currently held at the Museum of London (Plate 4).

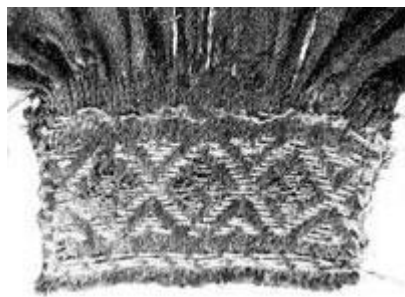


Plate 4: Fragment of Cuff

"A sleeve fragment found in Worship Street, circa 1501-1599, wool and silk, 200mm at widest. A fragment of garment probably part of a sleeve, with gathered cuff and embroidery (smocking). Dark brown weave wool, fragmentary, with fraying edges. One edge with fine pleats held in place with gathering stitches and smocked embroidery in a pale brown thread. Under a microscope, the thread looks like a floss silk. The gathered section measures 80 mm across and is 50mm deep. The embroidery forms a diamond pattern enclosing a pattern of four smaller diamond shapes, in what appears to be silver metal thread wrapped around a silk core, now very discolored and decomposed. The main diamond pattern is bordered with three lines of bold stitches on each side. Each of these bordering stitches is offset to form a decorative pattern"

While the original cuffs were done with both silk floss and silver gilt wrapped around silk, the entire pattern was done in gold braid in order to evoke the full gold design in the Holbein portrait of Henry VIII.

Without the availability of the extant cuff to study, (it is very fragile and has not been studied by the museum) it is impossible to tell how they carried the silver through the pattern. A study of a later period garment, currently held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Plate 5), shows that they did draw and carry over the metal threads in their embroidery.



Plate 5: Elizabethan Goldwork

The usage of a fabric backing on the neckline and cuffs come from an extant cuff fragment from the Alpirsbach monastery (Plate 6). This fragment shows fine pleats lay over with lace and backed by a band of fabric, most likely to give a smooth surface against the skin and to help stabilize the pleats.



Plate 6: Shirt fragments from the Alpirsbach

Construction

The shirt itself was constructed from 4 pieces of linen. Completely rectangular in construction it draws up the front and the back of the shirt into a neckline, a small seam forming the shoulder and the sleeves are then set into the sides of the garment. (See Figure 2).

The neckline and the cuffs were pleated by running rows of gathering stitches with a stitch length about 2mm and the row spacing about 4 mm. The threads were then drawn up to the needed finished measurement and the gathering threads tied off.

The pleats were then embroidered using the technique of pattern darning, the pleats replacing the thread count of the design. The braid was used instead of Japan gold because the synthetic Japan gold does not have the structure of real wrapped gold thread and therefore would have been very difficult to work with. The Mylar of the synthetic Japan gold is too flimsy and stretches. The Krenick style braid would not have been used in period, it provided a reasonable alternative and gave the desired result overall.

Once the embroidery was completed, the neckline and the cuffs were faced with the linen. Seams were whip stitched following documented period techniques. Simple eyelets were set into the cuffs for the ties. The ties for the cuff and collar were made from strands of silk thread and the gold braid braided together.

Conclusions

This shirt was a challenge to do. Not only was I testing out an embroidery form, but a garment shape and pattern at the same time. It took 2 tries to get the sleeves the way I wanted them (and yes I pleated and embroidered 2 sets!!). The pleating is the worst part of the garment to do. Each cuff took approx. 5 hours to pleat up, the collar about 12. While I could have used a commercial pleater, it would not be the same as doing it by hand. I needed to make very very tiny pleats for the cuffs and a pleater does not give you that flexibility.

While I have chosen to document this particular shirt as a men's shirt it should be noted that there were very few differences between the male and female shirts of the era. This style would also be suitable for a early/mid 16th century Germanic female shirt. In fact it proved to be rather amazing how much the shirt looked like the portraits.



Plate 7 Darmstadt Madonna by Holbein



Plate 8: Actual shirt modeled under dress



Plate 9: German Fresco

List of Plates

1. Masters of German Art: Holbein: Stephanie Buck, Konemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH Cologne 1999
2. Nylen, Anna-Maria. "Stureskjortorna", *Lovrustkammaren, Journal of the Royal Armoury Stockholm*, Vol iv 8- 9, Kungl, Livrustkammaren, Stockholm, 1948. Page 228.
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4. Key, Diana. *The Book of Smocking*. Aero Publishing, NY 1985
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7. Holbein the Younger. Darmstadt Madonna. Schlossmuseum, Darmstadt. c 1526-1528. Image located at Web Gallery of Art < http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/h/holbein/hans_y/1531/1darmst.html>. April 2004
8. Photograph of Shirt under a dress. Image provided by author. March 2004
9. Ausburger Fresco. German Historical Museum. Image located at <http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/kurzweil/jan11.htm>. March 2004

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