

The Pleated Embroidered Apron

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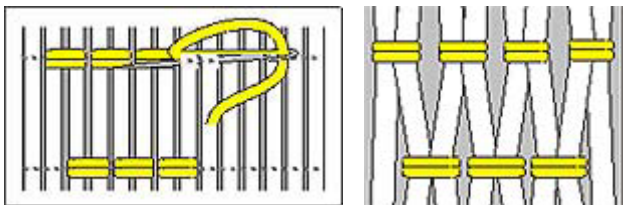
“ a barmclooth eek as whyt as moren milk, upon her lendes, ful of many a gore.”

This phrase from English story “The Miller’ Tale” by Chaucer describes an apron worn by the farmers wife ⁽¹⁾

The apron has its origins in the clothing of the rural people. They were obviously intended as a way to protect their clothing from the toils of their everyday work. According to Alma Oakes and Margot Hamilton Hill in their book “Rural Costume “the long narrow apron was worn in all the western European countries.” ⁽²⁾ The variation of the styles of aprons did vary from country to country and from social standing and access to fabrics. This paper is intended to explore one possible style of apron in existence during the 15th and 16th century: the pleated embroidered apron.

Without extant articles, like with other clothing research, we must take what we know about the garments, couple it with documentation from sumptuary laws, household and estate logs and artwork and come up with a logical conclusion.

Smocking itself is a very modern term coming into origins some time in the 18th and 19th century when it was used to describe stitches that showed up on the rural smocks of the British Isles. A better term would be “pleated” embroidery, used to describe the embroidery either done as a decorative means to control fullness or the embroidery used to embellish the pleating itself.



The honeycomb stitch is one of the probable stitches that are 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 the pleatwork. ⁽³⁾

The actual stitch 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 Alpirsbach been found with the honeycomb style stitch. ⁽⁴⁾



in

Abb. 743 Hemd, Ärmelabschluss in Smockarbeit (Kat.-Nr. 28).



The Luttrell Psalter written in England in the late 14th century [\(5\)](#) 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. These two images have some form of embroidery along the top of the apron.

The crosshatching on the apron on the left could be the artists attempt to draw a type of embroidered pleating similar to the honeycomb stitch shown above. They are doing something to draw in the fullness of the fabric into a waistband and simple embroidery would not create the required fullness unless it was also gathering in the fabric at the same time.

An early image, taken from a polytych, done by an Unknown Master [\(6\)](#) 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.



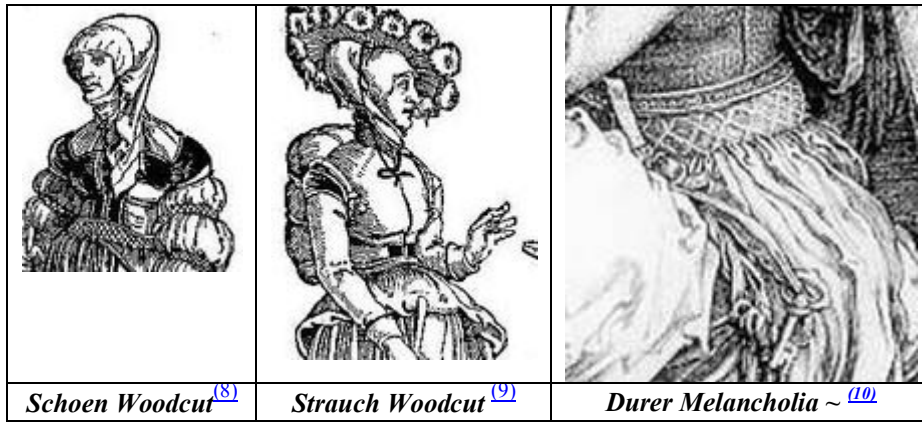
In a “Pictorial History of Fashion” there is a picture of an anonymous 15th century engraving of French Peasants. It also clearly shows a honeycomb pattern to the apron, almost identical to that of those depicted in the Luttrell Psalter. [\(7\)](#)



Hill and Oakes described the fabrics being used on the aprons in rural settings as being made of coarse linen or helpen with “Seckcloth, Dowlas or Lockram,” which are all types of fabric used for clothing during the period. They go on to say that the English rural apron had a uniqueness in style, that it was “honeycombed .that is gathered at the waist and overstitched with the basic stitch of smocking” [\(2\)](#)

This turns out to be not quite the fact especially as the usage of the embroidered pleated aprons is documented in other regions of Europe through the 16th century. The most prevalent documentation in this time period comes from the woodcuts of the Germanic artists, such as Schoen, Strauch and Durer.

Three examples drawn from the woodcuts of these artists show similar styles to the apron shown above: a pleated apron with some type of crosshatching inferred along the top of the apron, most likely a variation of the honeycomb stitch described above.



While the "Schurz" more specifically the "Doppelschurz" (or double apron, in which the apron was secured like a bib over both the torso and the skirt, and tied around the neck) was used throughout Europe, another style of apron was also very common.

The 'halbrock' or half skirt was a style of apron that covered the skirt and was gathered into a narrow waistband.(half skirt) that covered the skirt of the dress and was gathered into a narrow waistband. It was these aprons that were documented in many of the portraits in throughout Germany. It is interesting to note that just as with the other clothing articles of the time in Germany it was a sumptuary law. [\(11\)](#)

"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."

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." [\(11\)](#)

Additionally, 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). [\(11\)](#)

These aprons were a prized part of a woman's estate. Made from mainly linen, linen-cotton blends, and linen-wool blends they were not only white but also inventories show a number of different colors. Ursula Holzschuer listed her valuables in order of their cost to make, the embroidery and the gold borders. [\(11\)](#)

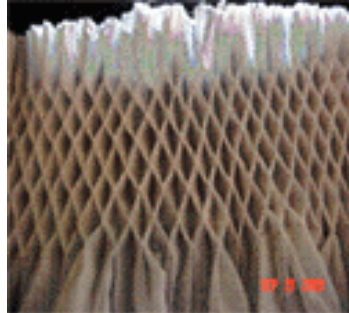


Colored Apron by Hans Baldung Grien c 1528 [\(12\)](#)

- 2 black and one green apron*
- 1 black Schetter (dress weight linen) apron with a Sammaten (silk)*
- 1 green apron*
- 1 black apron with a golden bag*
- 1 red wammasin apron with gold work*
- 1 red wammasin apron worked with white silk*
- 1 red-colored apron*
- 1 white wammasin apron with a false seam (waistband)*
- 1 white wammasin apron*
- 5 white aprons*

While it is difficult to see on some of the artwork coming from the German and Saxon artists when you look at images of the finely pleated aprons there shows up some form of fabric treatment at the top of the apron below the waistband.

In this painting of the Fountain of Youth by Cranach the Elder, done in 1546 ⁽¹³⁾, a full length pleated apron can be seen. There are clearly defined honeycomb shapes along the top of the apron as duplicated in this pleated fabric shown here.



*The Fountain of Youth
by Cranach 1546 ⁽¹²⁾*



Pyramus & Thisbe by Grien 1530 ⁽¹⁴⁾

This painting by Grein ⁽¹⁴⁾ shows a nice version of the '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.

By the latter half of the 16th century the apron had turned into a fashion item for the upper class. This portrait of Mathildis von Munchhausen by Ludger Tom Ring the Younger done in 1572⁽¹⁵⁾ is a perfect example of such an apron. Very narrow and finely pleated, it has some form of embroidery up along the top of the apron, consistent with what is seen in the other aprons.



Mathildis von Münchhausen
by Ludger tom Ring the Younger
1572 ⁽¹⁵⁾

The actual use of the apron was as much of an issue as was the apron itself. In 1496, in Nurenburg, there was a law passed that stated:

"that under womanly immodesty. an abuse and unlawful behavior is, that they at times both day and night go openly out into the streets and cover their heads with aprons (Schurzhemden) and tablecloths (tischtuch) rather than with the proper headgear (Gebennde) and therewith make themselves unrecognizable"⁽¹¹⁾

This continued though the early 16th century where it was again readdressed in 1523

"this law is renewed with proper consensus because of the continuing covering of women and maidens with tablecloths and aprons schurzhemden)."⁽¹¹⁾

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.

Citations

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15. Mathildis von Münchhausen by Ludger tom Ring the Younger 1572. image supplied by Katherine Barich

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