

Henrican French Gown & Kirtle circa 1530's England

Inspired by a portrait of Anne Boleyn



Or, an excuse to play with silk. And (faux) fur. And pearls.

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This Project is...



A woman's kirtle and "French" gown in silk, lined and interlined in linen and wool. This style is the mainstay of women's fashion in the court of Henry VIII in England during the early to mid 1500's.

This outfit is particularly inspired by the gown worn by Anne Boleyn in a portrait painted circa 1533-1536. While the original painting has not survived, replicas - including one particularly well executed one held by the National Portrait Gallery in England¹ - appear to have been painted based on that original and still exist for us to examine today.

Despite the portrait evidence, we do not know of any extant French Gowns from the era that survive to this day so we must theorize on how they were constructed and what the layers might have been. I have chosen to layer the gown over a kirtle and add beading and decoration to the kirtle

rather than the gown. I made the gown in red silk rather than black as I felt the black on black would be a bit severe, and wanted to highlight the differences in the layers.

The gown and kirtle's drafted shape should be reasonably correct to period patterns - they were initially drafted from Alcega's pattern for a *cuerpo bajo*² and then modified to create more of a v-shaped back neckline more in keeping with Hans Holbein the Younger's sketches of a lady wearing an English hood³, likely preparation images for his later drawing of Lady Guildford. The skirts are both shaped, also cut according to the patterns in Alcega's pattern manual.

¹ Portrait of Anne Boleyn, by Unknown English Artist. National Portrait Gallery, London, UK. <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw00142/Anne-Boleyn>

² Modern Maker, Vol 2. Matthew Gnagy

³ Drawing, Hans Holbein the Younger, circa 1532-1535. The British Museum, 1895,0915.991. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1895-0915-991

Inspiration and goals of this particular garment

This project grew out of several goals:

1. To re-create one of the only surviving portraits of Anne Boleyn, a gown I've wanted to reproduce for some time.
2. To create a gown that could be worn to accompany my explorations of the French Hood, one of the pieces that started me down the path of historical garment reconstruction.
3. To play with swathes of faux fur, because who doesn't need little bits of that floating in the air of their atelier?



Anne Boleyn, by Unknown English Artist. Oil on panel, late 16th century, based on a work of circa 1533-1536. National Portrait Gallery, London.

I began by studying the aforementioned portrait of Anne Boleyn. The black of the garment leads me to think it may have been velvet, however it is difficult to find velvets with the correct nap and weight so I chose to use a heavyweight black silk faille instead.



Princess Elizabeth, attributed to William Scrots
c 1546. Royal Collection Trust.

At first glance, the gold and pearl trim would seem to be sewn directly to the gown. However, studying other portraits - especially the later portrait of Anne's daughter Princess Elizabeth ⁴, which is executed with more detail and specificity than the surviving portrait of Anne - leads me to believe that the jewels were likely attached to a kirtle and the gown was fit snugly up against the bottom of that supportive garment. This is the style I chose to go with in my garment.



Drawing by Hans Holbein the Younger, c
1532-1535. The British Museum, London UK.

For additional design details (as well as another example of the multi-layered kirtle and gown with likely pinned-on front placard) I took inspiration from the aforementioned Holbein study of a lady wearing an English hood, where a seaming pattern in the back clearly indicates a 'v' shape, as well as rather dramatic padded pleats.

⁴ Elizabeth I when a Princess c 1546, attributed to William Scrots, Oil on Panel. The Royal Collection Trust, Windsor Castle UK. <https://www.rct.uk/collection/404444/elizabeth-i-when-a-princess>

Of course, we have another portrait of one of Henry's Queens, also executed by the skilled and realistic hand of Holbein: Jane Seymour. In this portrait ⁵, it is easy to see that the gems are sewn on to a separate garment from the red overgown, that the placket is held by a series of pins down one side of the garment, etc. She You can also see that the skirt of the gown is split, with a contrasting fabric displayed there along with in the large inner sleeves, and that white linen fabric is puffing out of the gaps in the sleeves.

In a sketch that was likely a study for the portrait, the layers of the gown are rendered slightly thicker - giving evidence to the painterly 'photoshopping' that took place to clean up the image.⁶



Jane Seymour by Hans Holbein the Younger, c 1536-37. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Austria.

Given how quickly Jane followed Anne in their times as Queen - Henry VIII married Jane 11 days after Anne's execution, and she died two weeks after giving birth to Prince Edward in 1537 - I feel reasonably confident in using her portrait to infer potential style lines and material choices for my recreation of Anne Boleyn's look for her own portrait.

⁵ Jane Seymour, by Hans Holbein the Younger. Circa 1536-1537. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna, Austria. <https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/966/>

⁶ Jane Seymour, by Hans Holbein the Younger. C1536-37. Photographed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Jacqueline Chenault/Marguerite d'Cheneau. Image lent to the Museum by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Design Decisions, Pattern, and Historical Accuracy

The Kirtle Bodice

My kirtle bodice pattern began as my go-to draft using the Bara drafting of a cuerpo banjo outlined by Alcega⁷ and refined by Matthew Gnagy⁸. I then modified it to use a v-shaped back drawing inspiration from the Holbein sketch of Lady Gilford and the pattern drafts listed in the Tudor Tailor (likely inspired by the same Holbein sketch). I believe my kirtle bodice to be relatively accurate to the time.



The Gown Bodice

I used a similar pattern in drafting the gown bodice as I did for the Kirtle: starting with a bara draft (this time using measurements taken while wearing my completed kirtle) and then modifying it based on the Holbein sketch. This time I added an additional set of panels in the center back, as indicated in the sketch. That said, from handling the garment I wonder if those panels were not part of the initial draft and were instead inserted later to accommodate a larger figure. Food for thought.

I added bones only at the lacing edges, to keep them stiff and neat under tension.

I drafted the placket to match the front of the gown. It has a few bones in the center front, again to keep the front stiff. These might have been a wooden busk in period, but I used what I had on hand: synthetic whalebone.

⁷ Tailor's Pattern Book c 1589, Juan de Alcega

⁸ The Modern Maker Vol. 2

Again, I believe the bodice pattern for the gown to be reasonably accurate.

The Tie-On Sleeves

The tie-on sleeves are self-drafted, drawing on the portraits of Jane Seymour and Princess Elizabeth. I am reasonably confident in their accuracy. A lesson I did learn and hope to remember for future projects, however: Put the long parts of the ties inside the sleeve and the loops on the tie-on sleeve. It is not easy to get the tied on sleeves attached correctly in their current configuration.



The Skirts: Kirtle and Gown

Both the kirtle and gown's skirts are shaped, and were drafted using Alcega's pattern manual layout for a basic skirt. I extended the back of the gown at the waist to add more fullness, and added a little length to the back to create a train.

Techniques

The kirtle and gown were made using a combination of period and modern tools and techniques. I believe the basic techniques to be period accurate: pad stitching, interlining, basting, backstitch, running stitch and running backstitch, felling stitches, and whipstitches are all documentable to period.⁹

I did use some machine sewing in this project, especially in the long seams in the skirts. This was due to time: I was building these garments to wear at King Henry's Holiday Huzzah in Lochmere, and between holiday travel and illness had a very tight timeline for construction.

⁹ *The Modern Maker Vol. 2*, Appendix A: Hand Sewing Techniques

Materials

Most of the materials in these garments are period-accurate or reasonable facsimiles of period-accurate products. They include:

- Kirtle Top Fabric: Red silk taffeta, approx 4 yards 60” wide.¹⁰
- Gown Top Fabric: Black silk faille, approx 6 yards 60” wide.¹¹
- Gown Sleeve Turnbacks: Brown faux fur, approx 2 yards. ¹²
- Kirtle and Gown Interlining: Heavyweight “Warsa” linen, approximately 3 yards.¹³
- Kirtle and Gown Lining: Yarn dyed handkerchief weight linen, approx 3 yards¹⁴
- Gown skirt & sleeve upper lining: Dupioni silk from my stash.
- Kirtle facing & padding throughout: Heavyweight melton 100% wool from my stash.
- Sleeve pullings out: White handkerchief weight linen from my stash.
- Silk thread in appropriate weights and colors

I also used:

- Pattern paper & pencils
- Scissors
- Sewing needles (modern)
- Pins (modern)
- Beeswax
- A tailor’s open-top thimble
- Cotton thread for basting
- Sewing Machine for long seams

¹⁰ Source: New York Elegant Fabrics, New York, NY

¹¹ Source: New York Elegant Fabrics, New York, NY

¹² Source: New York Elegant Fabrics, New York, NY

¹³ Source: Gray Lines Linen, New York, NY

¹⁴ Source: Gray Lines Linen, New York, NY

Construction Techniques

I constructed the kirtle and gown using a combination of methods I learned from Matthew Gnagy/The Modern Maker and The Tudor Tailor. Most bodice seams were hand-sewn, while others were done on the machine. Seam allowances were generally 5/8" or 1 chest dedo.

In general I pinned pieces together, basted them with wide running stitches, then stitched them as indicated. The basting acts like pins without risking constant sticks with pins, and is a plausible construction method for the period.

For more details, see the appendix.



Final Conclusions & Next Steps

This ensemble is my second attempt at building a French Gown. I'm generally satisfied with the result, though I don't think I've quite unlocked the correct layering of the kirtle and gown at the corners of the bodice near the armscye - when I wear them, the kirtle tries to pop out from the gown.

Interestingly, when I put the ensemble onto a smaller mannequin, the kirtle compresses oddly and does not fit correctly **but the gown looks right, despite its being sewn for a larger torso**. This leads me to believe that the kirtle might have been a fitted, customized piece but that the gown may have been far more adjustable and flexible as the wearer's body changed over time, either due to pregnancy or simple weight fluctuations.

I hope to continue working on French hoods - see my other documentation on that project - and will likely wear this gown when appropriate for those garments. My next attempt at a French gown will likely be dictated by the textile - if I find a red velvet that is dying to be made into Jane Seymour's gown I might attempt it. While there are other projects on the horizon that I'll be tackling first, I suspect I am not yet done with my exploration of Henrican Tudor French gowns.



Bibliography

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Conversations and notes from an in-person workshop and subsequent online classes and interactions by the author with Matthew Gnagy, focusing on tailor's hand-sewing techniques that were likely used in the Renaissance. In-person class focused on producing a Cuerpo Bajo or Kirtle. Later conversations ranged into additional drafting and sewing techniques to produce doublets and other period garments as well as deeper exploration of the Bara method of drafting.

Chenault, Jacqueline. *Photographs from the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit: The Tudors*. New York, NY. 2022.

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Eleri, Lynn. *Tudor Textiles*. Yale University Press, 2021.

Written by the curator of the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection at Historic Royal Palaces. Focuses on the fabrics used in royal Tudor garments with mentions of what other classes might have worn.

Gnagy, Mathew, and A. LaPorta. *The Modern Maker, Vol. 2: Pattern Manual, 1580-1640*. Printed by Creativespace.com, 2018.

Explores the techniques of Spanish tailors in drafting patterns using mathematics and geometry using proportional measurements, drawing on the works of Alcega and Burguen.

Mikhaila, Ninya, and Jane Malcolm-Davies. *The Tudor Tailor: Reconstructing 16th-Century Dress*. Costume and Fashion Press, 2015.

An exploration of the clothes worn in Tudor England, written by the collaborative team behind the Tudor Tailor, who who specialize in the social history of dress with practical guidance on reconstructing historic clothing for interpretive projects.

Appendix A: Making up the Kirtle and Gown

Make up the Kirtle:

Cut Pattern Pieces & Prepare Flatlining

1. Cut out all bodice pattern pieces in top fabric, interlining, and lining, being sure to add extra fabric for lacing opening fold-backs.
2. Cut 1 additional layer of front panel to roughly the width of the shoulder strap in wool and interlining.
3. Cut strips of wool melton and linen or silk to stiffen skirt hem. Using steam and an iron, curve the strips.
4. Trim back and pad stitch front panel layers to front panel interlining/foundation to stiffen & add support.
5. Flat line prepared front foundation & back interlining pieces to top fabric. Treat as one piece moving forward.
6. Clip the curves on the bottom edges of the bodice, fold up, and baste into place.

Assemble Bodice

7. Pin or base the center back right sides together and stitch. Press open. Repeat for lining.
8. Pin or base shoulder seam right sides together and stitch. Press open. Repeat for lining.
9. Baste lining into bodice. Hand-fell side seams of lining into the bodice, leaving several inches open at the bottom.
10. Use a straight-grain piece of interlining fabric to shrink the front of the armscye by gathering a small portion of the armscye (a solid pinch) into the tape. This makes the straps take on a 3-D shape and pulls the acute curve of the pattern out.

Assemble Skirt & Attach to bodice

11. Sew the skirt long seams, leaving openings of 6-8 inches where the bodice will lace.

12. Sew the skirt top edge to strips of straight-grain fabric the width of the bodice piece(s), gathering where appropriate. These will become internal waistbands.
13. Sew the internal waistband into the bodice , taking care that the bottom edge is hidden inside the bodice. It will come straight across at the dip but otherwise the edge of the tape should be in line with the folded bodice edge.
14. Working from the outside, fell the skirt to the bodice using very small stitches.
15. Working from the inside, fell the lining to the skirt and bodice, taking care not to go all the way to the outside of the garment.

Finishing

16. Finish the neckline and armscye, either by binding in self or contrasting fabric or folding the top fabric back, basting it, and then hand-felling the lining to the folded top fabric.
17. Pin the hem to find its correct length. Trim the edge with approximately an inch of seam allowance. Fold the seam allowance back the curved wool strips and baste the wool into place. Add strips of lining or other fabric as a facing. Sew the facing, wool, and top fabric on both the top and bottom of the facing to secure in place.
18. Add any beads or trim as needed.

Make up the Gown:

The gown is made up in a manner very similar to that of the kirtle. Cut a lining for the skirt. The sleeves are sewn in and the lining used to wrap around the raw edges, and the placard is treated as a separate piece. The skirt may be sewn in with an internal waistband or cartridge pleated to the waist of the bodice. The center front of the skirt is left open, with the skirt lining felled to the outer fabric. Add two loops inside each sleeve to allow the tying in of the false sleeves.