

Black Burgundian Gown of 1475

Costume Review

“Burgundians” is a popularized term for a late 15th-century evolution of the houppelande. The region is Northern Europe (its depiction in portraits is primarily from Flanders, Burgundy and France) and the years are roughly from 1465-1490. Even within this period of time, silhouette changes are obvious.

My documentation will cover the pieces as I have made them – including chemise, gown, headdress and accessories. I will also talk briefly about the evolution of the fashion, the historical reasons for some of the construction and fabric choices I made, and where (and why) I parted from historical precedent and used modern techniques or materials. I did not use commercial patterns for any of the pieces, but worked either from measurements or from a set of basic slopers that I’ve made for myself.

Undergarments

My mentionable (!) undergarments consist of a period chemise, equally period breast binding, and a petticoat.

Chemise

We have some hints of what the 15th century chemises looked like under the dresses. That they had them was certain: you can see them peeping out over bodice edges, poking out from under short kirtle sleeves, and even the occasional top or side in illustrations and portraits. We cannot be certain of construction techniques, but a likely possibility is a four-piece construction with the top edges of front, back and both sleeves forming the neckline. The neckline is then pleated to fit around the shoulders. This style evolved into the longer and wider sleeves of the early 16th century Italian chemises, but for this period the sleeves were wrist-length and narrow. My chemise is full-length with narrow sleeves, and is wide enough at the neckline to fit around the shoulders.

The chemise I am wearing is made as I described above and the pleats are caught with small-edge cotton lace. The chemise fabric is cotton as that is what I had on hand. The most likely period fabric would have been linen. I had been planning to adapt an Italian Renaissance chemise I already had, but found that it was much too full under the snug-fitting and nearly off-the-shoulder Burgundian. I can see why the chemise shapes differed between the gothic Burgundian style and the early Italian renaissance style of the same time period. I made a new chemise that was much narrower in both shoulder and sleeve.

Breast band

I found a period reference to breast binding, which I found fascinating. Here it is:

"If her breasts are too heavy she should take a scarf or towel to bind them against her chest and wrap it right around her ribs, securing it with needle and thread or by a knot; thus she can be active at her play."

The reference is from Jean de Meun's section of *The Romance of the Rose*, written in Paris around 1360 (line 13329 ff.).

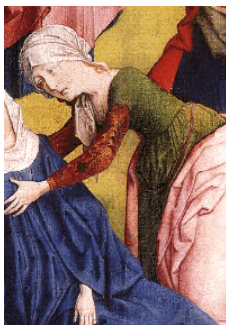
I usually make self-supporting kirtle bodices, but was interested in the reference because of a prevailing costuming theory that medieval women didn't use any supporting undergarments at all until the 16th century, and used the kirtle/cote/whatever itself to provide sole support. It would appear that this was true on small breasted women, but larger breasted women had the option even back then to wear an extra means of support. I was especially happy to find this reference in regards to the Costume Review, because I was going to use a kirtle as my undergarment support, but couldn't figure out how to make a period-looking kirtle that would fit under my Burgundian's near-off-the-shoulder style (see example on the right). Apparently they had the same problem, and the same solution.



Memling, 1484

Kirtle

Over the chemise I am wearing a short-sleeved kirtle made of tobacco-colored silk. (You can see the skirt when I lift up the overgown to walk, a very period look.) I chose to make it with a waist seam, which many kirtles of my time period had. To the left is an example of the waist and the pinned-on oversleeves over the kirtle's short sleeves. When I am not wearing the overgown, I can wear the kirtle by itself over the chemise and pinned-on sleeves. Some portraits showed ladies wearing just the kirtle and the chemise, but they were either loose women or in extreme emotional upset.



Next time I wear the overgown, however, I will make a kirtle just for it – the kirtle I'm wearing now is really pushed farther down my shoulders than it was meant to be to fit under this dress's low neckline.

Burgundian Gown

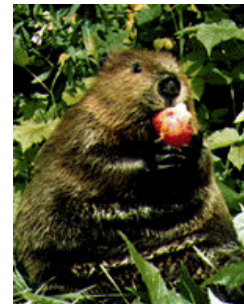
My interpretation of this upper-class gown is made out of black cotton velvet. They probably would have used silk velvet or silk brocade for this gown, but since both are astronomically priced – and modern “silk velvet” is actually a small percentage of silk – I opted for the cotton velvet. I used 5 yards, considerably less than a houppelande would take. Because there is a small amount of yardage in the bodice and narrow sleeves, I could get away with 4 yards in the skirt. However, for my next Burgundian I will use at least 5 yards for a fuller skirt. I gored the skirt panels and cut them long enough so they’d puddle on the floor in front and form a train at the back, a very period style.



Note the coordinated but different fabrics on dress and headdress

I added a red and gold insert under the bodice that is sewn up one side and hooks on the other. I could have made interchangeable inserts, but since the cuffs are matching it I chose to sew it in. I might decide to remove the cuffs and replace them with fur, and then change the inserts at will. The insert and cuffs are quite red and gold, so I have included the portrait on the left that’s even brighter and with similarly figured florals.

Fur trim is quite common even at this later date. I opted for faux fur trim and sacrificed a vintage coat to do it. The coat was already pelted so cutting the strips wasn’t too hard once I convinced my dog to get up off the coat. The faux fur is American beaver, which is similar to the European beaver fur used in medieval Europe as fur trims, coats and hats. In this picture of a European beaver note the reddish cast of the light brown fur on his dry head. I’m glad that no one killed this little fellow for the sake of my fur trim.



I chose to make the Burgundian gown with a waist. The earlier houppelandes almost certainly did not have a waist, and it’s hard to tell about the Burgundian gowns since the waist is hidden under thick belts. But look at this surviving 1477 garment from Charles the Bold, Duke of the court of Burgundy. Along with the waisted kirtles of the time, it certainly points to the existence of a waist seam in at least some of the Burgundian gowns. The bodices of the latter third of the 15th century were also perfectly smooth and showed no evidence of pleats, which is another argument for a bodice cut close to the torso and ending at the waist.



Red satin jacket of Charles the

Accessories

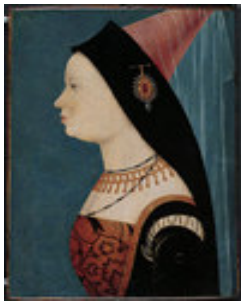
Belts

The belts of the time were wide and made out of sumptuous fabric. They usually ended in a decorated flap, and could buckle either front or back. I could not find a period-shaped buckle that was wide enough for the belt, so ended up hooking it instead to keep it in place. They did appear to use hooks and eyes in period, but I'll keep my eyes open for a very large buckle that doesn't look too industrial. Or horsey.



Jewelry

My necklace, which I consider an incredibly lucky find, resembles this portrait of Mary of Burgundy. The portrait is dated 1528 but other necklaces from my gown's time period are similar in look. As much as I wanted to I could not find examples of earrings, but necklaces, brooches, bracelets and rings were common in Court portraits. I am also wearing several rings, which is becoming a common look at this time. For instance, Queen Elizabeth (Elizabeth Woodville, Edward IV's queen) is wearing one ring on the little finger of her right hand and on the other hand, a ring on her forefinger and another on her ring finger. All three rings are gold and one has around stone in its center.



Mary of Burgundy,
1528

Other types of necklaces range from intricate enamel work to simple chains. Stones were faceted at this time, although not with the brilliant cuts that are common today.

Headdress:

My tall headdress is modeled after a number of contemporary portraits between 1470 and 1490. These hats could be different colors from the gown or could match it. Many of were partially covered with filmy veils, as you can see from the crop of this portrait.

These headdresses were set at different angles, ranging from nearly straight up to about a 45 degree angle. I opted for nearly straight since I was honestly afraid of wiping someone out with my hat as I turned around. The hat gets tangled up in low lighting fixtures, but is a workable height to get through modern doorways.



As for construction... well, I am duty-bound to report on the methods I used and why I made that choice. The hat's base is plastic needlepoint

canvas. I know, I know. But I dislike millinery and intend for my hats to last as long as humanly possible, so I usually use this for the basis of my rigid hats. (I also make Elizabethan tall hats this way.) They would probably have used stiffened buckram of some kind. I believe they would have used several layers at least because of the height of the hats and the attached veiling. It's also possible they would have used a wire framework. I covered the inside and outside of the hat with black fabric and covered part of it with a chiffon veil. I would have preferred to use silk instead of a synthetic veiling fabric, but could not find a silk that was transparent enough. The chiffon fits that bill. I sewed two combs into the front inside of the hat to anchor it, but it's surprisingly well-balanced on my head even without them.

Some of these hats had additional soft brims, both black (as in the picture above) or continuations of the white veil.

References

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