

Elizabethan Smock, late 1500s

The fabric that was used by the people in Elizabethan London for under garments, such as shirts and smocks would have been linen. Those undergarments would absorb the skin oils and sweat, and protected the harder to clean fabrics that comprised the outer layers from needing to be washed.¹ Linen was easy to wash and bleach to white in the sun.

Smocks were made from white linen, and could have quite a bit of variation. They could be long or short, with attached ruffs or not, have a low neck or a high collar, or be highly embroidered or plain.² Most of the variation would be dependent on the fashion of the time and status of the owner. At this time, most didn't have attached ruffs, that style having fallen out of favor and usually indicated someone was quite poor.³ I modeled my smock after one from the Manchester City Galleries, found in Patterns of Fashion 4, by Janet Arnold. I added cuffs that were theorized to be missing from the extant smock, indicated by stitching holes.⁴ I replicated most seams as described, but used a sewing machine for the straight stitching of the large seams that had been run and fell on the original smock (and even some of those had to have sections re-sewn by hand). While most seams were run and fell style, the under the arm sleeve seam had finished the edges first, with a narrow hem, and then sewn the two sides together, this made inserting the under arm gusset, and leaving a small bit open at the cuff very easy. The cuff seam should have been worked similarly to the underarm seam, but I got so distracted by finally finishing the embroidery, I worked on auto-pilot and encased the end of the sleeve in the cuff instead. I sewed eyelets into the ends of each cuff, to thread a small tie through to keep them closed.⁵ (I had to use a ribbon in one of the pictures, which was the only thing long enough to tie by myself while wearing it). The gussets were slightly inset into the tops of the gussets, which I feel was much more complicated to do than it should have been.

I didn't like the embroidery pattern that was used in the original, so I copied the pattern from another smock, also in the Patterns of Fashion 4, which I thought was prettier.⁶ Instead of using pink silk thread, I chose to use blue (indigo) silk.⁷ I looked at both the images in POF 4, and pictures of it online, and copied the design on to paper, which I was then able to trace onto the cuffs and neckline, using a lightbox and heat erasing pen. I had to modify the pattern a bit at the back of the neckline, as the

¹ Leed, Drea. The Elizabethan Costuming Page <http://www.elizabethancostume.net/>. ©1997-2010

² "Smock from 1575-1585" (T.113 to 118-1997), Victoria and Albert Museum, Retrieval 8/18/17 <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78732/smock-unknown/>.

³ Arnold, Janet, "Patterns of Fashion 4" (Costume and Fashion P/Quite Specific Media Group LTD, 2008.) p11

⁴ Arnold 4 pg 114

⁵ Arnold 4, p 59

⁶ Arnold 4 pg 119

⁷ *Au Ver à Soie, Soie d' Alger* by Kreinik was recommended by Eowyn Amberdrake, OL. as being suitable to replicate Elizabethan embroidery.

original had a smaller motif in that area, and the pattern I was copying didn't have a smaller section. I then used a stem stitch to embroider the pattern. The neckline was cut out and finished after the embroidery was done.

The original smock had stitch holes around the neck line, which was theorized to be from lace that was removed at some point.⁸ I chose to create a copy of an example from the 1620s. In that decade, Elizabeth Isham sent several samples (with prices) of lace to her father, Sir John Isham in Northamptonshire. The page, with the samples, still exists. The examples were all made from linen, and were quite small, all under an inch wide.⁹ I made a 36 inch length of lace following the pattern for the "7 Pence" lace that Elizabeth sent to her father. This length is a tad bit longer than the edge of the neckline for the smock so the ends tuck under the fabric in the back and aren't seen. The very fine thread used in the extant example would be comparable to modern thread size 100/2 or 120/2 linen thread. 120/2 is a very small thread, and at the time I was starting this project I have yet to find a source for it in white. I used a white Bockens linen thread, 90/2, which is the smallest I had on hand. I tested the thread I had with a true to life pattern, unfortunately the 90/2 thread was too large. I used a pattern that was scaled up which was more proportionally matching to the thread.¹⁰ Once the neckline, and lace, were both finished, I used a whip stitch or overcast stitch to attach lace.¹¹

⁸ Arnold 4 pg 114

⁹ Dye, Gilian *The Isham Samples and other Linen Edgings, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Bobbin Lace, Book 2*, Clevedon Press, Glasgow. 2012, Intro

¹⁰ Dye, Book 2, pg15

¹¹ Arnold 4 pg 111

Bibliography

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