

## Working Class Kirtles from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century



*Haymaking*, detail. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1565. Narodni Gallery, Prague, Czech Republic.

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*Children's Games*, detail. 1558-1560, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, De Agostini Picture Library.

## Introduction

Working class clothing is a hard subject to document, especially prior to the sixteenth century. The materials used for this clothing was often used until it was threadbare, and were given to others through a will, when a person died (Mikhaila, 15). A Netherlands painter called Pieter Brueghel the Elder, created a large body of work which focused on the lower classes of society. Brueghel's paintings were scenes of joyful events such as feasts, weddings, and the harvest. Rarely did Brueghel explore the dirtier or desperate side of the peasants' lives, but it has given modern historians a clearer image of the lower classes than had been available of centuries. The peasant paintings of Brueghel consulted for this project were all completed in the last eleven years of his life, 1558-1569 (Snyder, 503).

Before continuing with this paper, readers should understand what a kirtle is. During the sixteenth century a kirtle is a jumper like dress worn by women. Some kirtles, typically the outer most layer, would have sewn in sleeves. Other kirtles may have detachable sleeves which are pinned or tied into place.

## Materials

In the sixteenth century, wool production in northern Europe was on the rise (Boucher, 222). Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries gave Church lands to the upper classes. These nobles used most of the land to graze sheep and produced a surplus of wool. The wool produced on former church land becomes one of England's largest exports to the Netherlands for processing. Later England would build more mills for its own textile production. Wool takes a variety of dyes well, including many shades of red. To reflect on the boom in the wool trade, I have made my kirtle of a red wool which reflects the description Caroline Johnson gives to broadcloth. "[A] good quality fleece, the weft

particularly thick and fluffy; the nap repeatedly raised and sheared (Johnson, 14).”

The inside of this bodice was lined using linen scraps from another project. The linen, a common material for lining garments like this, will stay cooler in this desert climate and is cheaper than additional wool. The front sections have an additional layer of buckram. Typically buckram is used to stiffen hats, but has been used to stiffen sixteenth century garments

Finding period sewing threads was a challenge in our small town. I started by using a linen thread produced by DMC and beeswax, but ultimately switched to a Gutermann silk sewing thread for strength. Both kinds of thread were used in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but a high quality linen thread would have been more common.

Metal rings were used to reinforce eyelet holes, or act as lacing points on garments, even before the sixteenth century. Because they are easy to use, I have used these rings on my garment as well. In Brueghel’s paintings it is not clear how kirtles are laced together, only that lacing is an acceptable way to close the kirtle. These were purchased through an SCA vendor.

## Patterning the Kirtle

In *The Tudor Tailor*, Ninya Mikhaila and Jane Malcolm-Davies base their pattern for working class kirtles on paintings by Brueghel and other sources. After examining several of Brueghel’s paintings myself I drafted a pattern to my measurements based on the diagrams on page 69 of *The Tudor Tailor*. Fitting the pattern to my body produced a back similar to the girl in red at the bottom left of Pieter Brueghel’s *Children’s Games* detail (see page 2).

Other images showing the back seaming of these kirtles has the center back pieces forming more of the shoulder of a garment than seen in the *Children’s Games* detail. It is doubtful the seam placement is a subject of Brueghel’s imagination considering the consistency he uses in depicting them. The slight differences in how the center back of the kirtle is pieced is probably just the difference between different

tailors, the amount of available fabric, or the size of the different women in these paintings. The pieced backs seen in many paintings, such as *The Wedding in Open Air*, reflect an economic reality that few people understand today. In the sixteenth century, the cost of materials was much higher than the labor of sewing a garment together. Also these fabrics did not necessarily come in the standard bolt widths modern tailors have access to. The high costs and irregularity of materials meant that people would not waste fabric in the way modern patterns do. One logical way to save money is to piece garments.

In an effort to keep this dress simple and uncomplicated, reflecting its social class, the skirt is made of two rectangular panels using the width of the fabric and a length from my waist to the floor.



Right: *The Wedding Dance in Open Air*, detail. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1566 Institute of Arts, Detroit.  
Left: *Doublet # C.I.41.124.60*, Back. 16<sup>th</sup> century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

## Construction Methods

This dress was entirely hand sewn using a steel needle. I started the kirtle by sewing the linen lining together with linen thread. Because of the poor tensile strength of the linen thread available I tried using a back stitch. After sewing the lining I became convinced the linen threads available would not be strong enough for the tension bearing seams of the kirtle and switched to silk for the remainder of stitching. The front sections of the bodice were stiffened with a very lightweight buckram to prevent the bodice from warping. There will be no pair-o-bodies (aka corset) worn under this kirtle.



Left: Back stitching with linen thread.  
Right: Running stitch sewing with silk to complete the kirtle bodice.

I did not to line the skirt panels of this kirtle to stay cooler in Arizona's hot climate, but in period skirts on a kirtle would have been lined to help protect the seams, and add an additional layer of warmth. If I had lined the skirts, I would have finished the bodice lower edge and the upper edge of the skirts independently of each other and attached them using a whip stitch. For further reading and diagrams on this technique consult *The Tudor Tailor*. Instead, the seams of the skirt panels have been finished with flat-felled seams to prevent fraying. To construct a flat-felled seam first sew a running stitch into the seam. If the fabric is bulky, such as wool, trim down one side of seam allowance. Fold the remaining seam allowance over the raw edge and sew down (Jones). The skirt panels were evenly box pleated around the bodice and stitched in place to the wool with silk thread.



Left: Flat-Felled Seam in progress on skirt.  
Right: Box Pleating attaching skirt.

Finally the linen lining was stitched over the tops of the pleating to prevent fraying. The final steps were hemming, finishing the armholes, and attaching lacing rings. For more information on medieval and renaissance hand sewing techniques please consult *Archaeological Sewing*.

## Conclusions



After finishing this process, I had a new appreciation for how expensive even peasants clothing was. It took almost 135 hours for of handwork to construct this kirtle. The wool was an amazing deal at \$9.00 per yard. With all of the supplies the gown cost approximately \$65.00 to construct without a lining on the skirt. In contrast, new ready made dresses at American retailers is typically between \$20.00 and \$40.00. Kirtles, and other garments, were highly valued items to a women in the sixteenth century.

Left: *The Corn Harvest*, detail. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1565. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New

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