

Basic Middle Eastern Costume Construction

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One of the difficulties in teaching this class is the sheer volume of information on Middle Eastern costume that is available. My goal is to provide an overview of stylistic components found throughout the period. I hope to provide enough information in this booklet to help those people who are interested to find further resources that will enable them to become more specific to a time and place. If you refer to the back of this handout, you will see a chart depicting the major civilizations that existed, in period, throughout the region. Each of these civilizations had their own stylistic differences just as Europe did during this time period. Please bear that in mind as you begin to make your garb or do your own research.

Research Obstacles

There are several obstacles to overcome when first deciding to make middle eastern garb. The belief that very little information exists to be found often prevents people from going out and looking for information. This first obstacle seems to stem from the belief that fundamentalist Islam dominated all writing, art, and preservation. Not all of the civilizations in the Middle East believed that animals and humans should not be depicted in art. The climate in the Middle East also lends itself to preservation. There is a lot of information out there waiting to be found and interpreted into our context. Much of the information is in foreign languages which can cause obstacles. French scholars have actually done a great deal of work in what people actually wore during this time period. Some of those resources can be found at the end of this booklet in the bibliography. The other major obstacle in researching this area is ensuring that you have an accurate date. The Islamic calendar is fairly far behind our own. When looking at illuminations, you must make sure you know the date of the piece in our years. Many things look period

with the Islamic date on them that are definitely out of period. Many of the tighter coats that reveal cleavage are 100 to 200 out of period.

When interpreting illuminations or paintings, try to determine what the nationality of the artist was. Many paintings of Middle Eastern peoples were done in Italy or by European artists towards the end of the period. On the cover you will find one example of this. What you need to be careful of are seam lines. When southern Europeans constructed Moorish costumes to wear, they did not suddenly adapt Middle Eastern construction techniques. They used their own familiar techniques in order to achieve a look. The Milanese Tailor's album is an example of this. There are costume sketches alongside possible pattern designs. These designs do not depict the same type of patterning in use in the Middle East at the time. Please bear this in mind if you are portraying a southern European in Moorish dress. The patterns in this handout are the geometric construction in use commonly throughout the Middle East.

Textiles

Textiles were highly valued commodities in the Middle East. Frequently I am asked if animals or humans were depicted in pattern found on textiles. Yes! The Muslim prohibition against living depiction's is often misunderstood. As with any religion, there are many sects. I believe the Hadith which was codified as late as 200 years after Mohammed's death (AD 631) is the first written teachings dealing with religious art. Fatimids and Iranians continued to use living representations while geometric forms and abstracts were the only things allowed by the Sunnis. The Sunni movement was powerful enough to cause Islamic style to be heavily associated with the geometric patterning. (Harris, p 68)

Tiraz Fabrics

These inscribed bands were developed early in the middle ages. They are frequently seen and associated with the Abbasid dynasty (AD 750-940) which was centered around Baghdad in Egypt and Syria. The word tiraz developed from a Persian word, *tarz*,

meaning embroidery. The word tiraz can be used to describe many different embroidered fabrics from this time period, but is most often associated with inscribed bands found on garments. They are most often silk embroidery on a cotton tabby woven foundation. When originating in Egypt, however they are most often found on a linen background. The cloth was undyed or "glazed" to a white color. Women sometimes would dye them with saffron for their dresses. Poorer quality examples exist that were hand painted onto the fabrics. The main inscription would be lightly written on the fabric and then embroidered over in chain stitch. Smaller lines that are difficult to see in photographs, were then worked in back and blanket stitches. Egyptian variations again include working the strips completely in counted stitches. They were a kind of name tag for clothing listing the name of the owner with a greeting and possibly awards they may have received. These strips of writing can be found on veils, sleeves, turbans, and collars. These are also found on *abayas*. These are large, loose square woolen garments used for traveling. The tiraz bands on these would have been vertical on the garment. I have not found any pictures of this type of tiraz bands. Occasionally, the letters would modify from the kufic base and developed arc and foilage. The arcs between the letters can be found as a simple arc or as a geometric interlaced form. The uprights of the letters would often become trees at the top with palmate leaves. For more information, the article "Tiraz Fabrics in the Royal Ontario Museum" is excellent. It can be found in Veronica Gervers book, Studies in Textile History. (Harris, PP 71-72 and Gervers, PP 82-125)

Decoration

Garments were decorated in numerous fashions. Silk weaves included lampas (with metal threads worked in), twill, satin, brocades, and velvets. Intricate embroiders are found not only on the edges of garments, but covering them. Applique was used extensively from simple geometric designs to ornate court scenes. Paint was used either free hand or by block printing the fabric to

mimic expensive silks. Shot fabrics were woven to produce a shimmering effect. Color and pattern were well loved and used extensively in every facet of life in the Middle East. The climatic conditions of the Middle East have ensured the survival of numerous examples of complete textiles and fragments.

Tippets

Tippets can be found in many illuminations from the Middle East. A tippet in this region is not the dangling sleeve to be found on European cotehardies, it is a decorative collar. This square collar with a hole for the neck in the center and a slit to one corner is worn diagonally with the slit in front. These were often made of the most luxurious fabrics. Embroidery and appliqué decorated them often very heavily. Metal buttons or satin straps were used as closures. Tippets decorated the neck of a kaftan and were worn as the outer most layer. I believe in the Middle East, they were either worn as a separate piece or stitched to the neckline of the kaftan itself.

Sashes

Sashes were worn around the waist on the pants (*salvar*) to hold them up. Make them out of something non-slippery or your pants will fall down. Make your pants out of something non-slippery or your pants will fall down. The sash should wrap around the waist two times and tie in a knot at the front. Sashes were also worn on the outside of the anteri or outer dress. It is tied the same way. The outer sash was used to hike up skirts, hold long braids while dancing, or hold pouches or other necessities. When out in a busy area, an additional robe would be worn over the costume on top of the sash. The outer robe would have slits to enable the wearer to reach in to get a pouch, but keep potential thieves at bay. Some illuminations show plaques on silk sashes at peoples waists.

Suppliers of Accessories

I would like to put in a shameless plug here for Raymond's Quiet Press and Boots by Bohemond. Sir Raymond has the sash plaques for sale at his booth and his web site for a very reasonable amount. His web site can be found at: <http://www.nmia.com/~rqptd/> Sir Bohemond's website can be found at: <http://www.nmia.com/~bohemond/> He is making some very nice Persian shoes currently that are suitable for SCA wear. Both Raymond and Bohemond are excellent craftsmen who stand behind their work and deliver in a very timely fashion.

Good luck in developing your Middle Eastern garb. I like to encourage people to aim towards a period style that suits them. If you are not comfortable with something, don't wear it! If you want a garment that makes you feel attractive, alter what you find here to provide that for yourself. Many people wear a form of Middle Eastern garb that makes them feel beautiful and sexy. These patterns can be adapted to provide that look effectively. I would like to encourage people to wear Middle Eastern garb that would have been found in period. Much of it would have been seen in Europe or by Europeans during the crusades. I believe it is a viable and missing piece of our recreation of the Middle Ages. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me.

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