

Medieval Fur

This pdf document was a former website in the Wear Our Heritage series, by Sheila Schmutz (sheilamschmutz@gmail.com). It focuses on artwork as documentation for clothing worn in the Middle Ages, with either fur trim or fur lining. The main period covered will be from about 1200-1700.

However, a few comments about fur in the earlier periods, including **the Viking era**. Because artwork in the form of paintings is not available for the early Viking periods, it's difficult to say how they wore fur. In the SCA, many people wear an entire fur pelt around their neck or as a band of fur on a wool hat.

Fur traces have been found on pennannular brooches, according to [a manuscript from 1995](#), so fur on top of a cloak seems likely. Some archeological books that cover clothing have also mentioned fur bits. One describes a hat with the fur on the inside. A Viking man is wearing a coat of squirrel fur (fur to the outside) in the Baldischol tapestry from about 1150, now in the Oslo Kunst-Museum, shown below.



The inland Britons of 55 BC wore clothing of animal skins and furs that were carefully worked according to Tacitus. The earliest fur coats discovered, with the fur inside or out were found preserved under ice from in the first century in Siberia, worn by people of the Tashtyk culture. The child's coat had sheepskin inside and a band of wolf fur with sable trim on the front and neck edge.

- Ewing, E. 1981. Fur in Dress. B.T.Batsford Ltd, London.

In earlier times the fur was worn to the inside, as a fur lining. Several accounts of the garments owned by English nobles suggest most were fur lined. Often these were sewn so that an edge of fur shows on

the outside of the garment. Therefore it is possible that the garments in some of the images below have fur lining and trim.

- Veale, EM. 2003. *The English Fur Trade in the later Middle Ages*. London Record Society. (Oxford University Press 1966 edition).

Fur Trim on Women's Clothing

This illumination from the *Grandes Chroniques de France* depicts the marriage of Louis VII of France and Aleanor d'Aquitaine in 1137. It is likely that the white fur trim on the sideless surcoats is trim and not also lining, but either is possible.



The painting on the left shows a woman with ermine "tippets". It appears in *Weltchronik in Versen - Mischhandschrift aus Christ-herre-Chronik* by Jans der Enikel of Vienna, written in 1370. (Cgm 5 Folio 168v) Tippets were long fur pieces attached by bands to the upper arms of ladies' gowns. They were in fashion during this period.

The painting on the right, "Portrait of an Old Woman" is by Hans Memling about 1470-1472. He was a Flemish painter. The gown is often called a Burgundian gown. Often the "collar" is black, perhaps velvet. However, on this dress the collar is a gray fur. Speculating on the fur that this might be, I'd suggest perhaps squirrel. It looks relatively short and the options for fur of this color are not that large. Fur dying only began much later.



The right illustration shows part of the Babenberger Genealogy, painted about 1490 by Hans Part. This genealogy was a triptych in the Klosterneuburg Monastery. [They originally ruled in Bavaria and later Austria.](#)

Both women's dresses are a bit unusual. The green sleeveless overdress is trimmed with fur at the neck and armhole edges.

The painting on the right is by Louis Cranach, the Elder about 1500. It is thought to be a preliminary sketch done before the actual painting which shows Barbara, Duchess of Saxony only to the hip.

Her black dress is almost a coat, since it opens down the entire front. It has white fur along the neckline, cuffs, and front edge and a very broad band of fur at the hem edge.



The painting at the left is believed to be of Anne Lovell. It is often called "[A Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling](#)". It was painted by Hans Holbein about 1526-1528. [Some art historians suggest the interesting fur hat she is wearing is made of ermine. The white linen shawl](#) over her shoulders is also rather unusual.

Elizabeth of Austria, right, was a German born princess who lived from 1554 to 1592. She was the daughter of Maximilian II, Holy Roman Emperor and became the Queen of France by marriage to King Charles IX. This portrait was painted by Joris van der Straeten in 1570. The ermine trim on her sleeves is extensive.



Fur Lining in Women's Clothing



The painting on the left shows a woman wearing a fur lined cloak. It was painted between 1225 and 1275 and is part of the Gospel book of Austria. The illumination was likely done in the monastery in Seitenstetten. It is now held in the Morgan Library and Museum.

The illumination at the right is from the Anjou Bible, 1340. The ladies are all wearing fur lined overdresses that are sleeveless. These may sometimes be called a "pelice" or "pelisse", although Wikipedia defines this as fur lined garments of the 1800s. They seem to be painted to stand away from the body, suggesting that the fur used was a thick or long-haired type.





Another 1370 painting from "Weltchronik in Versen - Mischhandschrift aus Christ-herre-Chronik" by Jans der Enikel of Vienna, right, shows a woman in a red overdress. She has lifted it to show the ermine lining. The veil is probably a frilled edge veil with the ruffles or frills around the face and also around the lower edge.



This portrait is of Arnolfini and his wife, painted in the 1430s by the Flemish painter Jan van Eyck. It is held by the National Gallery. Elspeth M. Veale discusses this painting in her book "The English Fur Trade". She discusses that people often favored fur that contrasted in color with the color of the fabric of their clothing. She states that the man is wearing "a robe of very dark purple lined with marten, and his wife wears one of clear bright green lined with grey squirrel."

The painting on the right was painted in 1552 by Paolo Veronese. It is a Portrait of Countess Livia da Porto Thiene and her Daughter Deidamia. It is believed this painting and two others of her husband and son were in their palace in Vicenza, Italy. It is now held by [the Walters Art Museum](#) which states: "Marten fur was thought to protect women in childbirth, and in 1552 the countess was pregnant with her daughter Emilia." She is holding a marten pelt but the fur lining of her coat looks like it may be lynx.

Such fur pelts that were held, were sometimes called [zebellini](#). These could be an unadorned pelt, as in this portrait, or they could have jeweled and gilded faces with gold chains to a belt.



Fur Trim on Men's Clothing and Hats



The illustration at the left is believed to be from about 1400. It is part of the series "Song of Jourdain de Blaye". It is painted on cloth. It has been restored and is now held by [the Civic Museum in Padua, Italy](#).

The foremost man with the beard is wearing a short, full brocade tunic with fur trim at the lower edge. It also appears that the same fur trim adorns the edge where the sleeves join the body.

The woman in blue and the one in red are both wearing ermine tippets on their sleeves. They may also have fur trim at their neck and a wide border at their hems.

The portrait on the right shows Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, wearing fur trim at the neck of his houppelande, probably mink. It was painted by Jan Zonder Vrees in 1419. It is possible that this fur shows at the edge but is really part of a fur lining, since fur-lined houppelande were quite common at this time.





The portrait at the left of Charles VIII, King of France is by [Jean Fouquet](#) in 1445.

The king is wearing a houppelande with fur trim at the neck and cuffs, although there may also be fur at the hem. He is wearing an interesting hat that appears to have a brim with fur underneath the brim. It is possible that the entire hat is fur lined.



The sketch at the right is of Sire John More (abt 1450-1530), the father of Sir Thomas More. ["This drawing is one of seven fine surviving studies drawn by Holbein for his group portrait of Thomas More's family. Here More wears a gown with a fur collar, but in the group portrait, he wears his judge's robes."](#) It is now part of the Royal Collection, Windsor.

He is wearing a large fur collar of a long, soft fur, such as fox.



This illumination is for the month of January from *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. It is believed he is receiving New Year's gifts, in the blue gown. He is wearing a fur hat. This was painted about 1414 in France.

The painting at the right, "Portrait of the Ferrara Court Jester Gonella" is by [Jean Fouquet](#) in 1442.

The jester's red hat has a fur band at the lower edge, perhaps of mink. Many people in the SCA wear wool hats with fur bands but I have not found much artwork showing such styles.



The icon at the left is of St. Boris of Russia, painted in the 14th century. A hat with a fur band of trim is also shown here. Because the photo above is of a court jester, this icon is a better indication that such hats were worn by the nobility. He was a son of Vladimir the Great. St. Boris died between 1015 and 1019 and was canonized in 1071 with his brother St. Gleb, so the icon was painted much later.

This portion of a painting shows a Mongol wearing a hat with a fur band. It is suggested this was painted in the 16th century.



The painting at the right of [the King of Navarre, Antoine de Bourbon](#) is by the French painter Leonard Limosin about 1560. The fur collar is very interesting and is of a long-haired fur on what appears to be a velvet jacket.



Fur Lining in Men's Clothing



The pair of paintings on the left shows Claus Stalburg and his wife, Margarethe vom Rhein. They were painted in 1504 and 1505 and are held by the Städel Museum in Germany. Although the actual name of the artist is not known, he is described as ["the Master of the Stalburg portraits"](#). These portraits were originally donated by this couple for the Stalburg Chapel in Frankfurt.

His full length coat has fur lapels that extend down the entire length of the coat. It appears that the fur is also showing inside his left sleeve, which makes me interpret this as a fur lining. It was common for fur linings to be folded over to show at the edges. This lapel is very wide.

It is possible that the white border on the woman's gown is meant to depict fur also. Black dots or ovals were often painted on white to suggest that the fur was ermine with the black tails trimming the white body fur. I am not sure that this border is fur though.

Furriers in Medieval Times



The illustration at the left is part of a series of tradespeople at work, "Hausbuecher der 12 Bruederstiftung". This one is Hans Frummann, Tailor in 1446. (Amb. 317.2, f.67v, Mendel 1) Nuremburg.

The one at the right is Wentzel Schneyder, 1514.

The garments these two men are making are quite different. In 1446, the fur lined pelisse is very loose and sleeveless. In 1519 the fur lined or trimmed tunic is much more fitted, with tight sleeves.



Bibliography

Websites

- [Appears to be an article about a reconstruction of a fur trimmed 6 point hat found at Birka](#)
- [Many pages of early fur finds in Scandinavia.](#)
- [Fur in Birka, an examination of hair residue on penannular brooches](#) Webpage by Tjorben Agren, *Laborativ Arkeologi* 8:50-58. (1995) Documents that beaver fur was used as cloak trimming, with the guard hairs pulled.
- [Article underlining importance of fur in the 1800's in China.](#)
- [Sumptuary Laws](#) were common in some countries (England, France, Italy, Japan), but not all. These laws changed over time. Types of fur, and sometimes amount or placement were covered in some cases.
- [Keeping Warm in the Mini Ice Age and Today](#) Slide presentation on working with fur by Maistresse Mathilde Bouret, May 2015
- [Warm, dry and happy](#) Webpage from "Exploring the Medieval Hunt" by Johankaeli, 14 Feb 2015
- [Fur as artifice in the 14th to 16th Centuries](#) Powerpoint from "The Brazen Burgundian" by SCA member, HE Master Charles de Bourbon, OL.
- [A fur primer for 14th and 15th century European clothing](#) by Tasha Dandelion Kelly Mele, 14 November 2016 as part of her blog.
- [Glossary of Terms Used in the Medieval Fur Trade](#) from the book "The English Fur Trade in the Later Middle Ages" cited below.

Books and Articles

- *The English Fur Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (2003). by Elspeth M. Veale, London Record Society, 2nd Edition. 254 pages. This book contains very few illustrations. It discusses trade in furs, sumptuary laws, and inventories as part of wills that describe fur linings and fur trimmed clothing.
 - *Fur in Dress* (1981). by Elizabeth Ewing. B. T. Batsford Ltd, London. 168 pages. This book contains some illustrations and paintings in black-and-white. It covers the Middle Ages through the 1950s.
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 - Catherine Killerby: *Sumptuary Law in Italy: 1200-1500*: New York: Oxford University Press: 2002.
 - Maria Hayward: *Rich Apparel: Clothing and the Law in Henry VIII's England*: Farnham: Ashgate: 2009.
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