

## Medieval Fur TUA Class Handout

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(see also <http://homepage.usask.ca/~schmutz/MedievalFur.html>)

Fur was used for warmth as lining and trim in most countries in Europe and the northern countries in the East. The use of fur tapered off in the 1500s as glass became more common in windows and castles had more heat. Luxury and class was then expressed with silk and fine heavy fabrics more.

The details of the furrier trade are not commonly described, but the literature I have found suggests that fur pelts were usually cut into oblong pieces, removing the paws, head, legs, tail and then the oblong pieces were sewn together into large pieces, suitable to use as a lining for a cloak or garment. The process of “letting out” which means cutting a pelt into many tiny strips and resewing them together to alter the finished shape and add to the drape that is used in fur coats today, was not done in Medieval times. Guilds in some countries prescribed the size that a martin pelt should be. Stretching beyond this was considered “cheating”.

Sumptuary laws existed in Britain and France, and for a short time in Italy. These limited the use of certain types of furs to certain classes of people. Outside those countries, such laws did not exist, but it is likely that economics kept some types of fur in use only by the nobility. However, the lower classes also used fur such as squirrel to line hats, etc.

Fur was more abundant in some countries such as the Scandinavian countries and Russia, and trade for furs from these countries to Britain and France and Germany was robust, according to historical records. The use of fur and its price obviously also varied among countries in Medieval times.

Although there is minimal evidence of fur use in early **Viking** times since paintings don't exist from that era, there are studies which show that fur bits were found on cloak clasps in archaeological digs, for example. There are also examples that suggest skull cap type hats were made of fur.

**Wills** document that fur linings for garments were often bequeathed, and they usually describe the type of fur used. Some noble European persons would own five or six fur linings at their death. Since fur lasts at least 25 years, it is possible these were accumulated over a long time and some might have shown considerable wear.

## Some Terms Used in Medieval Writings about Fur

|         |                              |
|---------|------------------------------|
| arbed   | bordered                     |
| guarded | bordered                     |
| furred  | usually means lined with fur |

## Working with Fur

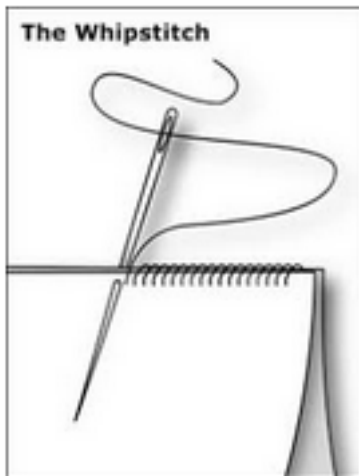
(see also <http://munster.sasktelwebsite.net/FurSewing.html>)

Fur should always be **cut from the leather side** with a very sharp blade, such as a scalpel or exacto knife or box cutter. Be sure that the fur is held up above a hard surface in your hand, so that you cut **ONLY** the leather and none of the hairs.

**Glover's needles** are preferable for sewing fur or leather. Then have sword like edges instead of smooth round edges.

**Thread** that is heavier, such as cotton quilting thread is good for sewing fur. A simple whip stitch is all that is needed to sew two pieces of fur together.

**Thimbles.** If you plan to do much hand sewing with heavy fur, such as beaver, finding a thimble that is comfortable is worthwhile. Inuit women make a water hardened stiff ring of leather to fit over their thumb knuckle.



Even in Medieval times, fur linings and borders were usually designed so that they could be easily moved from one garment to another. Therefore it was typical for a strip of linen to be tightly whipstitched to each edge of a fur piece and then the strip was attached to the garment via the linen strip with looser stitching that could be easily removed. **Twill tape** in a “matching” shade, dark or light, works well for this today. If the fur edge is very curved, then bias tape may work better.

If you want to use **machine sewing**, then purchasing leather needles is helpful. Use a trim that you want to show or hide and stitch the fur to the trim/tape with a zig-zag stitch.

Snap or hook-and-eyes could also be attached to a lined fur strip and then attached to a garment edge at the sleeve edge or neck edge. This is convenient today, but there is no evidence of this technique “in period”.

**New fur** should be “garment tanned”, not just taxidermy tanned, for clothing. Garment tanning makes the fur softer and more supple. Taxidermy tanned fur can work fine for rugs or hanging on walls. Some may drape enough to use as bench covers. Using **old fur** coats or stoles that you’ve inherited or found at Value Village or vintage shops is another option. Working with old fur can be much more difficult than new fur. Before you go through the effort of deconstructing a fur coat, be sure the fur still drapes and isn’t stiff or cracking – which happens when it’s dried out. Once you remove the lining and interlining you can see if the opposite has happened and the fur leather has softened to the point of deterioration. Usually deterioration happens first along major stress areas –

the armholes, major seams, etc. so part of the fur may still be usable, if not all. You will see what looks like a large panel of fur from the outside is many many tiny strips of fur on the inside. If you find that the fur is not suitable for garment construction, then you can always make a pillow or seat cushion from it, using wool fabric on one side to add strength to the seams.

It is legal to order tanned fur or fur products online and have them mailed across provincial borders. This is not true for raw fur. Try to purchase fur within Canada to avoid international border issues. For a list of fur sources in western Canada, see <http://munster.sasktelwebsite.net/CanadianFur.html>. Saskatoon sources often have higher prices, but there would be no added shipping costs.

## Fur and Supplies

Tandy Leather

- usually stocks rabbit skins (about \$30 each)
- sheep skin is often not garment tanned, more for rugs
- other pelts such as fox, etc. occasionally (priced high)

Twig and Squirrel's Wild Goods, 504 20th St. West, Saskatoon

- they carry some fur pelts that are garment tanned

Bill Worb Furs, Inc., Winnipeg (online ordering available: <http://billworb-furs.com/>)

- any type of garment tanned pelt desired, prices reasonable
- fur strips with tape attached

Samuel Bauer & Sons, New York [info@samuelbauer.com](mailto:info@samuelbauer.com)

- cold cloth tape, furrier "knives", earmuff frames, etc.
- (ordering can be difficult and slow)

| Medieval name | Description                                         | Time       | Reference               |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| badger        | (in Scotland)                                       | "Medieval" | 1                       |
| bear          |                                                     |            | Heer 1961               |
| beaver        |                                                     | 1161       | 1                       |
| ermine        |                                                     | 1300-1400  | 1                       |
| ferret        | Sweden                                              |            | 2                       |
| foynes        | polecat                                             | 1549       | Cunnington & Lucas 1967 |
| goat          |                                                     |            | 1                       |
| lamb          |                                                     |            | 1                       |
| lettice       | short-tailed weasel whose fur turns white in winter |            | 1                       |
| lynx          |                                                     |            | Heer 1961               |
| marten        |                                                     | 1300-1400  | 1                       |
| mink          | American mink and European mink (Britain)           |            |                         |
| otter         | (in Scotland)                                       | "Medieval" | 1                       |
| rabbit        | Sweden                                              |            | 2                       |
| red fox       |                                                     | 1300-1400  | 1                       |
| reindeer      | Sweden                                              |            | 2                       |
| seal          | (in Scotland)                                       | "Medieval" | 1                       |
| sheep         |                                                     |            | 1                       |
| White fox     | "from the Caspian" which seems south for Arctic fox | 1300-1400  | 1                       |
| wolf          |                                                     |            | 1                       |
| zibelene      | a type of marten in Russia and the east             | 1300-1400  | 1                       |

1 <http://www.fashionintime.org/history-fur-fashion-10th-19th-century/>

2 <https://themedievalhunt.com/tag/medieval-fur/>

*Note that coyote and raccoon did not occur in Medieval Europe, although raccoons do occur in Europe since about 1920.*



~ 1471 Flemish, Burgundian



1490 Bavaria



~ 1570 France



1400 Italy



1419 Burgundy



1504 Germany



~1250 Austria



1446 Germany



1519 Germany



1442 France "Court Jester"