

Blackwork Partlet

By Lady Joan Silvertoppe

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Description

This is a 16th century blackwork partlet, with the embroidery done in the simple style of blackwork. The partlet is a garment worn by both gentry and noble men and women of northern Europe and England as an upper chest covering throughout the century. The style of blackwork is not specifically dateable, but is commonly found in images from early to mid century.

Note: The back of the partlet has been left unsewn, to allow a view of the interior for the judges.

Pattern/Design:

The embroidery pattern is an all-over flower & knotwork design, and it is a period inspired design. It was designed by Ianthé d'Avernoigne, mka Kim Brody Salazar, the editor/author of *The New Carolingian Modelbook* - plate 59. It is her design, based on period styles. Originally I had planned on using a period design from one of the pattern model books. However, I know my own tolerance for doing a repeating anything, which is rather low. I wanted a design that would cover the entire visible area of the partlet, not a stripe or series of stripes as most embroidered shirts have. There are a few patterns in the model books that are all over repeats, but they are rather simple and would be mind numbing for me to repeat for long. This design has lots of different flowers, which I adore, along with the knotwork design, which is similar to period model book designs. It had enough interest to keep me going during the expected length of working time which I knew would take me a year or more.

I was concerned with doing an all-over style of blackwork, until I found this image of Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shewsbury from approximately 1560. She is wearing something with a high necked collar and a pair of sleeves that clearly show an all-over knotwork design. The image shows her right arm. It may be a partlet with a matching pair of sleeves, worn under the black fur-lined gown, but this is unclear from this painting. This image to the right shows a detail from that painting, clearly showing the all-over design. Yes, it is in red. Geddes states that this is another characteristic of blackwork. (Geddes, 21)



Partlets appear in many paintings of the period, some of which are decorated with embroidery. There are no surviving partlets from the 16th century, with only one confirmed surviving plain linen partlet of the 17th century. However, there are a few embroidered shirts and smocks that did survive that clearly show the use of blackwork embroidery, along with many paintings that detail various blackwork designs.

I chose to create my partlet without a collar. Many partlets in images have some sort of collar, but a few do not, especially the ones painted in white which might be made of fine linen. This image of Margaret Roper,

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painted after the now lost Holbein painting of the More family, shows such a collarless partlet, closed by a pearl. The blackwork design seen in this image along the edge of the neckline, does not appear to be worked on the partlet, but on another garment edge over the partlet.

My partlet was designed to be worn underneath one of my kirtles that has a low V-shaped opening in the back, which is why the V shape extension of the blackwork design. The partlet can also be worn under another garment of mine that has a rectangular back opening. So to cover all bases, the embroidery extends to all areas that might be seen. The garment pattern is as simple a shape as possible, and is a basic rectangle with no seams. I have no ties added, as I plan on pinning the partlet into place.

Materials:

For the thread, I am using 1 strand of Needlepoint Inc. Silk, which is an 8 ply spun silk thread in the color black. It was what I had in my small stash of silk threads. I had 2 small skeins initially, and had to purchase a larger skein about a third of the way through the embroidery process. In period, the silk threads would have been a filament thread with a light twist, not spun thread with the twist this thread has. A person of the period would have purchased their thread from a merchant.

Partlets of the 16th century appear to be made in various types of fabrics, from various silks, velvets, wools and linens. I chose to use linen as I would most often wear this garment during the warmer months of the year. The linen I chose is a Belfast linen 32 count even-weave in white, that I purchased from an online eBay seller a few years ago for low price. Better quality linens such as a gentry or noblewoman would have worked with would have come at a much higher price than I could afford. The linen was purchased with this project in mind, but before I understood the differences in linen types, which I am slowly learning about.

If I were to do this again, I would not choose this fabric for this type of project, as the linen threads are too thin, with lots of space in between that would have been better suited for cross stitch, or some other style of embroidery where the use of multiple threads would have filled in the holes better. I wanted to only use one strand of thread in order to give a crisp look to the busy pattern, which doesn't fill the holes very well. But a finer, thicker thread linen would also be more expensive for the size needed.

The lining of the partlet is a linen/cotton 60/40 blend, chosen for its light weight and breathability. The white linen partlets seen in paintings generally appear to have been unlined, from its more sheer painted appearance. Blackworked smocks and shirts also are unlined, but may have been worn over another plain linen smock or shirt to protect the embroidery from the oils and dirt of the body. The plain garment would be far easier to clean.

Construction:

The embroidery itself was done by simple hand tapestry needle, size 26. The blunt end of the tapestry needle helps to keep the thread in the holes, not into the fabric.

The fabric was kept taught in a large 10" round hoop, placed in a lap stand. I used both hands to stab stitch the thread. In the period, the linen would be stretched on a large rectangular frame, laced to the frame, then placed on some sort of support. Both professional men, and gentle women at home would create embroidery. I originally planned to use a modern slate frame to hold the embroidery in a



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manner similar to the period manner, but couldn't figure out how to keep the wooden pins in place, so I gave into the modern hoop and lap stand.

The thread was stitched using a double-running stitch often called Holbein stitch today, because of the master painter's clearly painted patterns of blackwork as worn by his sitters, such as Queen Jane Seymour, Henry VIII of England's third wife. In period this stitch is referred to as Spanish stitch (Geddes, 20).

The embroidery was started on September 12, 2009 and completed on January 31 2011. I worked on the embroidery at events, at home, at rpg games, workshops, and even at the park -- whenever I had some time and interest. I did not time myself to find out how long it took, but estimate that it took over 200 hours.

I have lined this partlet in order to preserve the backside of the embroidery from being in contact with my skin when worn, as often the partlet was worn directly over the skin, filling in the area left bare by the usual square necked smocks of the 16th century. Because of the silk threads, this garment will be hand wash only.

The lining and main embroidered fabric were sewn together by hand using fine linen thread, about 100/3 in size (the thread is unmarked so this was in comparison to known thread). With the two fabrics right sides together, the neck and center front area was sewn with backstitches. Then the garment neckline area was cut out leaving a roughly 1/4"-3/8" seam allowance, which was clipped at staggered intervals. The center front was cut in two (leaving a very narrow seam allowance). This was then turned right side out, and pressed open. The outer seams were turned under along the edge of the embroidery, and whip stitched together. I have left certain corners partly unsewn in case I decide to add ties later, but I intend on pinning the partlet into place.

Bibliography/Sources Cited

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Gostelow, Mary (1998). *Blackwork*, Dover Publications, Mineola, N.Y., USA.

Salazar, Kim Brody (writing as Ianthe d'Averoigne) (1995). *The New Carolingian Modelbook, Counted Embroidery Patterns from Before 1600*. The Outlaw Press, Albuquerque, NM, USA. Plate 59, "The Buttery" Inhabited Twist All-Over Repeat, pg 122-123.

Images (in order of appearance)

Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury, by Follower of Hans Eworth, c. 1560. Detail from a photo taken of the painting, © 2010 Lyndsey Jenkins, aka teadevotee from her blog on Feb 15, 2010.
<http://teadevotee.com/2010/09/13/bess-of-hardwick-mary-s-lovell/>

Margaret Roper, from a 1593 reproduction after Holbein's lost original of the More family, c. 1527.
<http://www.kimiko1.com/research-16th/TudorWomen/1520s/MargaretMoreDetail.html>

Embroiderer at work, by Jost Amman and Hans Sachs, 1568
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seydensticker-1568.png>