

# 16<sup>th</sup> Century French Kirtle

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## Description

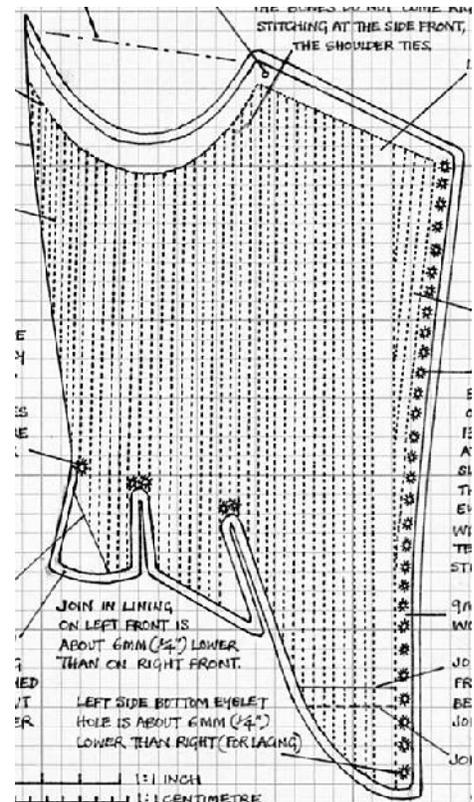
This is an early 16<sup>th</sup> century French kirtle. The garment, as reflected by the character in the story, would have been worn by a princess or someone of the noble class who could afford to buy and wear cloth of gold. This garment was based on an illumination from early 16<sup>th</sup> century French book, Ovid's *Heroides*, illustrating the story called "Phyllis Writing". This story, in brief, "Phyllis, the daughter of Lycurgus, writes to her lover Demophoon, the son of Theseus, king of Athens, after he fails in his promised return from his homeland." (*Heroides*)

## Pattern/Design

I created the bodice pattern by draping the bodice on my own dress form, using the image as a guide as to how the garment might go together. My drape was influenced by my experiences in other Tudor garments in the bodice with the square neckline, with the straps that come over the shoulder to the front. However, there are more similarities to Italian fashion in the style of the sleeve. The pattern for the sleeves was started using an old 2 piece sleeve pattern that fit, and then guessing, modifying, cutting, mocking up and adjusting several times to get the final pattern.

The kirtle is designed to be worn with a supportive petticoat, such as the red bodied petticoat it is paired with. Because of this, both the petticoat and the kirtle bodices are designed differently than most modern interpretations of kirtle bodices are made. I recently recreated Queen Elizabeth's effigy pair of bodies, as outlined by Janet Arnold's notes (Arnold, 2007). In making the effigy bodies, it is clear that the center front of the bodice is not on the straight of grain as is commonly done in recreated bodices, but is actually designed so that the upper portion of the center front goes at an angle to provide extra room for the bosom (see image to right). There is a similar center front shaping in the gothic period, as noted in Robin Netherton's *Gothic Fitted Dress* information (Netherton 2001), although it is most likely achieved in a different manner.

I slightly curved the upper edge of the center front upwards to help give the bust more coverage. The extra room from this off-grain curve makes for a more comfortable and supportive bodice. What was surprising is that from a front view, it appears to be a straight grain seam, but side views show how this allows the bust curve, which matches well with the soft curvier look of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century as seen in many images. It also prevents the bust from being placed too high up, as the bust is usually not obvious above the square neckline in most images. The over the shoulder straps of the effigy bodies is also an influence on the square neckline, as noted above.



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I slightly overlapped the center front of the kirtle in order to mimic garments of the era as seen in various portraits, like the image of Joanna of Castile to the left, that sometimes show an overlapped front. Because there are no extant garments of this early part of the century that has this overlapping front, I am not positive what sort of closing structure might be behind it. This image shows the top undone a bit which looks like something a set of hook & eyes could do, so I chose to go with hook & eyes.

The skirt is patterned to fit my waist at a 3:1 ratio, after much playing with math. I noted that there appeared to be 10 panels in the inspiration image, and thought there would be about an equal number of panels from the portion of the skirt that is unseen. This would work for a slender woman, but I am not so slender. After much deliberating, I added an extra 10 panels which made the math easier to work with. The final size of the panels was 4" at the top, and 8" at the very bottom, with extra for seam allowances. The bottom checkered panel was designed to be 1/5 of the full skirt panel length, a number that works with the Golden Mean rule. I did not curve the top or bottom of the panels, since it made less waste when cutting out the fabric panels. It doesn't seem to have affected the appearance of the skirt, either.

## Fabrics

The outer fabrics of the gown is made from two complementing fabrics, both 100% silk damask. One is of red-purple and golden yellow, the second of golden yellow and cream. Both have the same woven designs. The fabrics would have most likely made in the period in silk cloth of gold with real gold or silver-gilt threads in the damask pattern. Such a fabric is simply beyond my personal wealth. The woven pattern is not a period pattern, but having been cut-up into the panes, the pattern is not so noticeable. Any matched patterning among the panes was not intentional. The pattern matching among the front of the bodice was intentional, as best I could do with the front curved seam. The original image has gold and white damask or brocade looking fabrics. I chose to use the purple/gold and cream/gold colors, as I had these matched silk damask fabrics in my stash already, simply because I fell in love with the purple color. This color may be close to period purple, but I am not sure as I've not dyed silks. The intended purple would have most likely been dyed with imported indigo and imported kermes.

The interlining fabric of the bodice is 100% linen collar canvas, which gives a firm but breathable support. The lining fabric is a 60%/40% linen/cotton blend, again for breathability. In the period, garments of high ranking nobility were usually lined in silk or sometime fur (especially winter garments), with occasional reference to linen. Because of my health needs, I chose linen and linen/cotton blends to keep myself a little cooler in our warm California weather.

## Sewing

The kirtle is mostly machine sewn using 100% cotton. Other threads include 100% Gutterman spun silk for topstitching, heavy nylon and carpet thread for the attached pleats, and polyester blend serger thread for the skirt panels. I used both regular and serger machines mainly for time saving reasons. In period silk or linen thread would have been used, and all of the sewing of course would have been done by hand.

The bodice was sewn with an offset of the fabrics to allow the silk to roll to the inside, to help hide the linen lining. The neckline was bound with straight grain strip of the purple & gold silk to mimic the image. Most

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likely, this portion would actually be an undergarment like the petticoat showing, but my petticoat is bright red which I did not want to show. The skirt panels are serged together with polyester blend thread. I definitely did not want to hand sew and hand finish each of the 60 skirt panels together. The silk unravels quickly and serging the edges finished them both quickly and efficiently.

I prefer to save the hand sewing for the finishing aspects of the kirtle. The front edge was sewn with the spun silk in stab stitches to prevent further shifting of the silk over the linen when the bodice is under strain being worn. I did another line of stitches a half inch away from the edge to prevent the fabric from shifting and showing the closures, doing that line with a sewn running stitch. The pleats of the skirt were sewn onto the lower bodice edge with nylon thread, and the same used for all the hooks and eyes. For the whipped eyelets, I used both silk floss and cotton pearl thread, as that was what I had in my thread stash that was close in color. The binding was sew down using purple cotton thread.

The bodice I initially chose to close with hooks and bars, setting the hooks at the front edge of the front overlap, which raised the level of the garment where this overlap became obvious. I took them off, then reset the hooks a half inch or so from the front overlap edge to allow for a flatter overlapped front. I replaced the bars with eyes set at the edge of the underlap. The front is also top stitched to help keep the front flatter. Brass pins help to close the front further, and to close any gaps in the skirt slit, which can happen even with the overlapping fabrics.

The skirt is mostly unlined. I chose to keep this unlined for weight issues. The silk damask had enough body not to need any interlining, and would have been heavier if I had lined it. However, it did need some extra support where the pleating would occur, so I added a cotton flannel to finish and back just the upper 6" portion of the skirt. There is reference in Mary Tudor's wardrobe accounts of wool cotton being used for padding the pleats (Carter, 1984). I do not have wool cotton or know exactly what that would be like as it is not available that I could find. I thought of using wool flannel instead, but felt it was too thick for my needs, as the amount of yardage in the upper skirt ended up quite full already. So this is why I used cotton flannel instead.

The skirt was originally attached with a simple gathering stitch and whip stitched to the body. I remove this, and did a cartridge pleat at even intervals, marking the dots with a sewing marker on the flannel to help keep the depth of each pleat even. This was again whip stitched to the body of the garment. The front slightly overlaps to match the bodice overlap.

The hem of the skirt was finished with a bound edge of straight cut of the silk damask. In period this was known as a guard, and sometime this guard would be made of velvet. I had only cotton velvet or velveteen available, which I felt was too heavy and stiff to use. I looked for other types of velvet locally, but found they were rather expensive, and of man-made fibers. A silk/rayon blend velvet would have worked well, but I wasn't willing to pay shipping just for a yard of this fabric. So at the end I used the reverse side of the purple and gold fabric to add a subtle contrast while finishing the skirt.

### Lessons Learned

I find myself not wanting to redo aspects when it doesn't work out right the first time. The skirt was not pleated properly in my rush to finish. If I took the time to do it right the first time, I would not have to redo it again. The same for making multiple mockups of the sleeves. I did make a few mockups, but rushed the fitting of them and did not fit them while wearing the entire garment. While the final sleeves are very suitable, they are a touch too long in the upper arms near the elbow bend, which even the laces don't shorten enough.

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A major problem area was the placement of the hooks and eyes. When placed on top of the underlapping section, it raised the upper lapping area and made the whole more noticeable. Another noticeable problem was the pulling of the silk fabric away from the edge showing the hooks and bars when the garment was worn. Adding extra ease to the bodice did not help. Moving the hooks and eyes to their current location and top stitching the front of the bodice a half-inch from the edge has helped keep the front flatter. A few small brass pins should keep it all together visually, while the hooks & eyes take any strain of wearing.

### Bibliography/Sources Cited

Arnold, Janet (2007). *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*", *Costume*, Vol. 41., Maney Publishing, DOI: 10.1179/174963007X182291

Carter, Alison J. (1984). *Mary Tudor's Wardrobe*, *Costume* #18, Maney Publishing, pgs 9-28.

Netherton, Robin (2001). *The Gothic Fitted Dress: Observations and Explanations*.

<http://www.netherton.net/robin/FittedDressPosts.pdf>

General understanding of this garment came from a workshop with Robin, and via emails from the h-costume mailing list over several years.

Illumination of the story called *Phyllis Writing*, fol. 11v. (Image #3 of 46), Ovid's *Heroides*. The book is housed in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France. Français 874. no direct image url available. Search engine <http://mandragore.bnf.fr/jsp/rechercheExperte.jsp>

Heroides, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroides>

*Joanna of Castile*, c. 1500, by Master of the life of St. Joseph. National Sculpture Museum, Valladolid, Spain. Image originally from Wikimedia Commons.

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Johanna\\_I\\_van\\_Castilië.JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Johanna_I_van_Castilië.JPG)