

Feature



The Hips Don't Lie! *Sheryl Nance-Durst*

A Georgian-era entry in the Costume-Con 31 historical masquerade copped some moves that no Georgian costume has ever made.

I mainly do historical and ethnic costumes, so when I heard that Costume-Con 31 was going to be within driving distance of me, I decided to enter the historical masquerade.

I've always been one to plunge head first into new projects and this was no exception. I figured that if I was going to enter a competition, then I would do it in a big way. So I chose a period that I'd never done before - 18th century. I decided to hand sew everything - which I'd never done before. I also decided to use as close to period techniques as possible, and tried to drape as much of it as I could directly on my dress form without patterns, which I had never done before. Whew!

Fortunately I was able to consult some great books like [Costume Close-Up](#) by Linda Baumgarten which has descriptions of 18th century sewing techniques and [Patterns of Fashion](#) by Janet Arnold, which



Photos by Don Searle.

has diagrams and patterns taken from actual period garments.

Looking over pics of the artwork and existing garments of the era, I liked the second half of the century better - especially the 1760s and 1770s. But the 1770s also had that big hair. And since I was going big, the 1770s it was! I decided to do a robe à la française. This dress style is characterized by the distinctive flowing pleats at the back. (These are sometimes called *Watteau* pleats after the painter who featured the style in many of his paintings.)

For the 1770s, this would have been a formal garment, so for the fabric I decided to use silk taffeta. Stripes were very fashionable in the 1770s as tastes moved away from the extremely ornate fashions of the 1760s to simpler styles. The combination of peach, white and mint green that I chose is seen in a number of extant clothing items. Plus peach looks really good on red-heads! (The mint green is a narrow stripe that doesn't really show in the pictures.)

Sewing was done completely by hand with as close to period techniques as possible, especially following the techniques described in *Costume Close-Up*. 18th century fabrics were much narrower than modern ones, but I chose to use the full width of our modern fabric and not unnecessarily cut and re-stitch panels just to match period fabric widths. From the inside, the seams may look rough or untidy. 18th century seamstresses were not as worried about finishing every seam since outer

garments were not subjected to frequent washing. So I decided to go for period accuracy over neatness.

Here are the layers of 18th century clothes from the skin out that I had to create: shift, stays, pockets and panniers, under-petticoat, fashion petticoat, stomacher then dress. As with any period reproduction, the underwear had to come first in order to get the look right.

The Undergarments

Undergarments of the time were almost



Finished stays, shift, and panniers.

always linen. I started with the shift (or chemise). The main body of the shift is a trapezoid, smaller at the top. Sleeves are rectangular and a square underarm gusset is used for ease of movement. Since the shift gets heavy use and cleaning, I back-stitched all the seams then turned and whip-stitched the seam

allowances down to create a felled seam.

Early century shifts had very full sleeves that went below the elbow, gathered into a band or with a drawstring. By the 1780s, sleeves were above the elbow and slim with no gathering. I chose to make a transitional style.

My sleeve is around elbow length and still has enough fabric to gather lightly, but without the volume of earlier styles. A small band is sewn at the bottom with hand-worked buttonholes, held together by reproduction sleeve links. Sleeve links are 2 buttons held together with a metal connector. (Like cufflinks) I could have chosen to tie the sleeves with ribbons and still been accurate, but since I had to get into the dress on my own, I wouldn't have been able to tie the ribbons!

Before the 1770s, stays (corsets) were completely boned across the entire fabric. But around this time, staymakers realized that they could use less boning if they used a few cross-bones for support in strategic areas such as the bust. I used a period pattern for half-boned stays that was reproduced in [Corsets and Crinolines](#) by Nora Waugh.

Heavy linen was used for the inside layers. An outer, decorative layer was made of burgundy dupioni silk. Slubbed silk was not used in the period, but this dupioni had few slubs and was an acceptable substitute for me. (Plus, I found a beautiful period example of burgundy stays with white trim and loved the color scheme.) Most period examples showed the boning channels

stitched through the top decorative layer so the channels were visible, but there were enough examples that showed a smooth outer layer that I decided to go that route.

The main body was created in sections. Each section had two layers of linen and one layer of silk. I stitched boning channels through the two linen layers using a backstitch with linen thread. I added a separate smaller piece of linen on the top half of the front panels on the inside bust area and stitched the cross-boning channels, taking care not to stitch any of the previous channels closed. This was the hardest part of the entire experience for me, since hand stitching boning channels takes forever!

Stays were boned with either reeds or whalebone at that time. Since I have no legitimate access to whalebone and didn't want to go to jail, I chose reeds. I have heard from other costumers that single large reeds



Reeds in boning channel.

can have a tendency to snap, so I chose to use multiple small reeds for more flexibility. I cut small bundles of reeds to length, steamed them straight and slid them into the channels – 12 to 14 reeds in each channel. It was a lot easier than I thought it would be. The individual reeds were very flexible, and the use of multiple reeds gave it more strength.

After boning the linen layers, I added the silk layer to each section and stitched the sections together. Seam allowances were whip-stitched down on the inside. I hand stitched eyelets on the back panels with a plain overcast stitch. (18th century eyelets did not use a buttonhole stitch.) I added shoulder straps and a pocket for a wooden busk at the center front. I sewed ¼" strips of soft white leather to the outside of the seams to cover the stitching which was visible between the sections.

Wider leather strips were used to bind the edges of all layers together. I cut the strips about 1 inch wide. Using a very sharp, sturdy needle, I sewed the strip to the outside edge of the stays using a running stitch, right sides together. Then I wrapped the strip around to the inside and whip-stitched the leather down. I found a metal thimble and pair of pliers to be absolutely essential for pushing and pulling the needle through the multiple layers.



Finished stays inside. Note cross-boned on top half.

I lined the whole thing with linen. The lining was done last and not caught in the binding so that it could be easily removed for repair or replacement. When it was finished, I found it to be the most comfortable corset that I'd ever worn because of the flexibility of the reed boning.

I then created a pair of pockets. 18th century pockets were a separate clothing item tied around the waist underneath the petticoats and gown. They were accessed through slits in the side seams of the layers above them. Most were made of linen or printed cotton and bound with linen tape. Many examples were embroidered for decoration. I used 2 layers of plain linen and 1 pre-embroidered linen outer layer. I stitched the layers together and bound them with twill tape, which also was used to form the waistband.

The panniers (or hoops) were based on a period diagram in *Corsets and Crinolines*. I used linen fabric and made the waistbands and hoop channels with twill tape. Cane that I got from the local woodworking store was used for the stiffening. These panniers are enclosed and have a pocket slit in the top so that they can also be used as large pockets.

In the 18th century, a woman wore at least 1 ankle-length under-petticoat (like a slip) as part of her undergarments. I used two panels of linen the entire width of my

fabric. The panels were seamed together on the sides, leaving an opening near the top for pocket slits. With modern sewing, the waist is finished first and then the bottom is trimmed and hemmed a certain distance from the floor. But in the 18th century, the hem was straight across the grain and any length adjustments were done at the top. So I hemmed the bottom of the petticoat straight around first. Then I draped the petticoat on my dress form (over the hoops) to get the length and pleating correct. Most period references that I found showed the

petticoat tying at the back. However, I made the front and back panels on 2 separate ties to make it easier to tie it by myself. Twill tape was used for the waistband ties.

Finally the undergarments were finished and it was time to make the actual dress. On to the prettiness!

The Gown

I draped a fitted linen bodice lining onto my dress form (guided by layouts in *Patterns of Fashion*). I only sewed the back seam half-way down, leaving the bottom open. I folded the seam allowances back along the open half and added lacing holes along the edges. This technique is found in many period gowns. It allows for the tightening of the waist after the gown has been pinned on, creating a better fit. Then I draped the gown onto the fitted lining. I was immensely grateful for [The Fashionable Past](#) blog that I found on the web. The author, Katherine, has a series of articles on how to drape a *française* that I found incredibly helpful! The dress was sewn with running stitches on most seams, back stitching only on high-stress seams.

Once the front and back of the dress were draped on the form, I made the sleeves separately and added them. The underarm seam was sewn first. Then I put the gown on my dress form and pleated and pinned the top of the sleeves to the lining shoulder before sewing them in place. The robing (the edging down the front of the gown opening) was created as a separate tube and covers the



Closeup of the trim.

raw edges of the sleeve cap to form a tidy edge.

The skirt is unlined. Period examples show both lined and unlined skirts on the gowns. I chose unlined in order not to weigh down the flow of the silk.

I created the trim using strips of the silk fabric of different widths. The edges of period examples were not usually hemmed, but were pinked with a special half-circle pinking tool with scallops that was used like a chisel. Lacking access to this tool, I purchased scalloped pinking shears and recreated the edging as closely as possible. When I got the shears, I found that they didn't cut well on one layer of fabric, but when I folded it into four layers, they cut reasonably well. So I cut the strips of fabric for the trim, I folded them in fourths and used the scalloped shears to cut half-circle sections on the edge of the strips. The scallops are slightly bigger than the originals, but very close to the overall look. The trim strips were then gathered and stitched to the gown in wavy patterns based on period examples.

The *engageantes* (or lace sleeve flounces) would normally have been made of silk lace or fine embroidered linen. I wanted the look of lace but couldn't afford silk, and most modern synthetic laces are too stiff and scratchy for a good reproduction. I compromised on a cotton lace that I found on *etsy.com* that had a soft synthetic background. The pattern is a little heavier than most laces of the period, but not

outrageously so. I mounted the lace on a twill tape band that is simply whip-stitched to the bottom of the sleeve for easy removal.



The stomacher (the triangular piece that fills in the front of the open gown) is made of silk matching the gown and lined with linen. It is simply two layers of fabric, no boning or other stiffening. It is decorated with pinked and gathered self-fabric strips in a style similar to the gown.

You'll notice that I didn't mention any kind of fastening for the gown. The gown and stomacher are actually held on with straight pins. You have to be very careful to pin into the fabric layers without going all the way through the stays and stabbing yourself!

For the visible petticoat, I used two panels of 54" silk taffeta matching the gown. The construction was the same as for the under-petticoat, except I made it floor length. I used two rows of gathered, pinked strips and one larger gathered ruffle for decoration in the same manner as the ones on the gown.

Accessories

I purchased silk-covered reproduction shoes, silk stockings and shoe buckles from [American Duchess Historical Footwear](#). To match a period shoe that I found on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's web site, I painted portions of the shoe and some satin trim to coordinate with the dress.

I used SetaColor translucent fabric paints. These paints act like dyes when watered down but are easier to control than regular fabric dye. Unfortunately, it doesn't come in peach. But peach is a muted pastel orange. So I tried watering down orange paint. Since the color is translucent, this gave me a pastel orange when painted on white silk. Then I added small amounts of blue paint to mute the color a bit. It took a couple of tries before I got the right color. I then sewed the painted trim around the edges of the shoes as a binding. (Another time when pliers were an absolute necessity!)



Embellished silk-covered reproduction shoes.

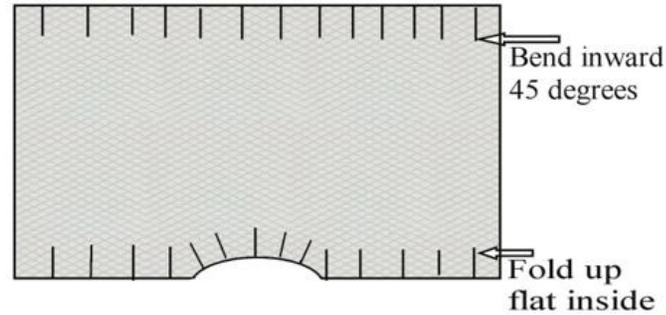
To create garters for my stockings, I sewed rococo-style trims onto silk ribbon. I created matching jewelry using painted rococo-style trim, freshwater pearls and coral beads.

Hair and Makeup

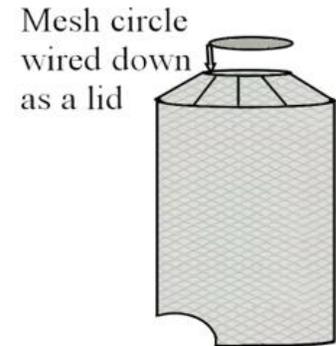
I purchased my makeup from Ageless Artifice. [*Sadly, no linger in business - Ed*] The owner created makeup from period recipes, but with modern substitutes for toxic ingredients like lead.



Photo by Don Searle.



Wire mesh cutting layout for hair cage.



Creating the tall “pouf” hairstyle was an interesting bit of work. I didn’t want a wig, and I had long hair. So I decided to see if I could get my own hair into a pouf style using a few period tricks including a wire framework and a few strategic fake curls.

I started by creating a wire frame. I found some wire mesh at the hardware store that was soft enough to form by hand. (It was normally used to reinforce plaster.) I went through a couple of trials to find a size and shape that I liked. The first one made me look like Marge Simpson! In the end I cut a rectangle 10 by 19 inches and formed it into a cylinder, wiring the ends together.

The trick to making it stable on the head was cutting a shallow semi-circle out of the bottom front. This made it sit closely onto the head with no wobbling. I didn’t want to have the sharp ends of the wire near my scalp, so I used tin snips to cut slits 2 inches deep around the bottom including the semi-circle part. Using heavy pliers, I folded each tab flat to the inside of the cylinder.

To make the top somewhat rounded, I cut slits 2 inches deep on that end also. Those tabs got folded in 45° to narrow the top. Then a round piece of mesh was wired to the top to cap off the end.

Since I wanted the shape to be rounder,



The giant orange tribble.

I padded the cage with wool. A store in my town sells dyed wool roving, so I bought a couple of ounces dyed in shades close to my auburn hair. The fat tufts of wool were applied to the cage and

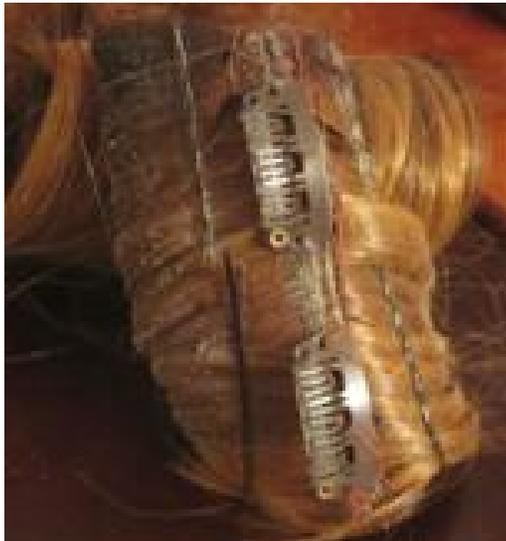
sewn on using a long backstitch - just enough to keep it in place. A curved leather needle was perfect for sewing through the wire. At this point it looked like a big orange tribble.

I then purchased some fake braiding hair from my local wig store. These are sold in bundled lengths with one end gathered together. The gathered ends were sewn to the top of the padded cage. I spread the fake hair out evenly around the cage and sewed around the bottom using a backstitch to keep the bottom of the hair in place. Just to be sure, I also secured the ends with bobby pins. (The fake hair was just a precaution in case my own hair wouldn't cover the whole cage evenly.) A hair net was placed over the whole thing to keep everything in order. I added a wire comb to the bottom front edge.

To create the barrel curls that go on the side of a pouf hairstyle, I purchased clip-in extensions. These are bands of fake hair sewn into strips with clips on the end. I rolled the fake hair around a bottle the right size for a curl, taped it in place and poured boiling water over it to set the curl into the synthetic hair. (Making sure to keep the clip on the *outside* of the curl) When it was cool and dry, I removed the curl from the bottle and used a needle and thread to sew the hair permanently into a barrel curl.

In order to put my hair up by myself, I hung a large mirror behind me as I stood in

front of a wall mirror. This let me see the back of my head as I worked. I created 2 pin curls on the top of my head, positioned about 1 inch back from my hair line, held with bobby pins. The wire comb on the front edge of the cage was slipped under these pin curls. (I tried using 1 pin curl, but found that it pulled my hair too much in one spot.) The cage was then secured in place with about 30 extra-long hair pins.



Clips on barrel curls.

Working in 1 inch sections of hair, I combed my hair, teased it a little to create more fullness, coated it with beeswax pomade (used for hair spiking & sculpting), raised it up to cover the cage and pinned the ends in place on the top of the cage. I kept out a section of hair at the bottom back for the curls that hung over my shoulders. The fake barrel curls were clipped into place on each

side of my pouf and reinforced with extra bobby pins. The whole hairstyle was then given a spray of extra-hold hairspray.

I applied rice powder to my hair with a basic powder brush. It was messy, but it stuck easily thanks to the beeswax pomade and hairspray. In addition to giving me the correct “powdered” look, it also helped even out the difference in color between my real hair and the fake barrel curls. If you want to

try this yourself, do it BEFORE you get your nice gown on and use a towel or cape to cover your shoulders while you're working.

I decorated the hair with ostrich feathers stuck through the hair and into the cage, secured with hair pins. I added fake pearls purchased at the craft store.

Things I Learned

- I love hand sewing, but not when I'm under a deadline.
- Silk taffeta is the best fabric I have ever worked with.
- Use closely woven linen for 18th century linings to avoid stretching.
- Stitching through leather will give you hand cramps but is easier if you have pliers handy.
- Linen thread is evil.

Sheryl Nance-Durst has always loved any kind of body adornment - costumes, jewelry, henna, face and body painting, etc. She's a librarian by day, a henna artist and face painter by night and a costumer always in her heart.

Editor's Note

For Sheryl's playful Costume-Con 31 performance, Georgian-era music gave way to a disco tune as she boogied to the music, before returning to the more stately theme for her exit – the hips don't lie!