

Draping a Custom Caparison for your Horse

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In this class I will demonstrate a method for fitting a simple fabric caparison on any horse.

Materials needed:

- 6-8 yards heavy-weight linen, washed and pressed
- 6-8 yards contrasting linen, washed and pressed (in a similar weight)
- Safety pins- medium to large size, many
- Colored pencil or chalk
- Fabric shears
- Measuring tape
- Cotton twill tape, approximately 8 yards
- Brown craft paper
- Tracing wheel



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Caparison Overview:

This type of body-covering for a horse is found in images from the 13th through the 15th centuries, with similar variations through the 16th and 17th centuries. It is most often made up of two pieces: a hood which extends to cover the chest and forelegs, and a piece which covers the back and hindquarters. The portion under the saddle and the rider's leg is usually left uncovered. Sometimes the hood is omitted, and the front portion covers only the chest and forelegs, and in later periods, the front piece often covers a piece of chest armor for the horse, and extends up onto the front of the saddle, covering the rider's legs as well.

I have found that the hoodless variety will fit a range of horse sizes, though the hem-length will be affected by horses of different widths, as may be seen above.

A caparison is an ideal place for heraldic display, and while they are sometimes shown in solid colors, they are more often used to display all or part of the heraldry of the rider or his master. Pictorial evidence overwhelmingly indicates that these caparisons were lined, usually in a contrasting color or fur.

A few examples of fabric caparisons during the SCA period:



Maciejowski Bible, circa 1250

The horses wear plain, solid-colored caparisons in these battle scenes, whether their riders are armored trumpeters or active combatants. At the far right, one of the horses has an elaborately decorated red caparison which seems to reflect, but not match the rider's shield.



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Manesse Codex, 1305-1340

Both riders wear surcoats which match their horses' caparisons. The rider on the left has an all-over lozenge pattern, which may or may not match the front of his shield, while the rider on the right has small shields (which nearly match the one he carries) scattered over his caparison on a background of a nicely contrasting color. The caparisons of both riders appear to be lined in fur. This manuscript, which can be found at <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpg848/>, has many images of caparisons, with heraldry displayed in a variety of ways.



Romance of Alexander, MS Bodl. 264, circa 1340

Two noble tourneyers, each with his heraldic device displayed on his shield and each quarter of his horse. The horses' bridles are worn underneath the hoods.



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Froissart's Chronicles, late 15th century (from Contessa Illaria's excellent web page, which can be found at <http://ilaria.veltri.tripod.com/overviewbards.html#closed>).

The jousters' horses wear long, elaborately decorated lined caparisons without hoods.



Livre des Tournois, René d'Anjou, circa 1460

The judges of the tournament enter the town with their heralds and their horses decked out in heraldic coverings. Again the device is repeated on each quarter of the caparison. "In front of the judges should come four sounding trumpeters, each carrying the banner of one of the judges, and after the four trumpeters, four pursuivants each wearing the coat of arms of one of the judges... And after the four pursuivants should come the king of arms... wearing over his coat of arms the piece of cloth of gold... and over that, the parchment with coats of arms... And after the king of arms should come the...judges, side by side, each on a fair palfrey covered with the judge's coat of arms right down to the ground... And each judge should be accompanied by a foot servant with his hand on the bridle of the destrier."



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Livre des Tournois, René d'Anjou, circa 1460

“...the destrier of the prince...ought to enter the city first, covered with the device of the captain, and with four escutcheons of the captain's arms on the four limbs of the horse, and the horse's head decorated with ostrich feathers, and on the horse's neck a collar of bells, and in the saddle a very small page...” The Duke of Brittany's horse enters the city in a rather unusual special parade caparison, followed by the Duke's buglers and herald.



Livre des Tournois, René d'Anjou, circa 1460

The two dukes wear a grand array of heraldry, from their splendid surcoats to the elaborate crests and mantling. The horses wear hoodless caparisons which cover their chest armor and the riders' legs. The reins are covered to match, and the horses even wear small crests and miniature shields on their chamfrons. The Duke of Brittany's caparison is cut into tabs at the hem.



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Draping the Caparison:

For the chest piece:

With the saddle on the horse, measure from the horse's chest, in the center at the level of the point of the shoulder, around to the saddle girth. Add 4 inches. Measure from the withers to the desired hem-length (usually between knee and pastern level), add 4 inches, and cut two rectangles to these dimensions.

Pin the two pieces of fabric together at the withers and at the chest. Mark a line along the shoulder to cut away for a good fit at the neck. Make sure that the grain of the fabric remains vertical. Trim the excess fabric away, adjusting as needed, and leaving enough for seam allowance. Re-pin along the withers to get a smooth fit. Make sure that the horse has free range of motion.

Mark tie-points at the chest, and any attachment points to your saddle. Mark heraldry charge placement and any partition lines. Mark a level hem-line and remove the fabric from the horse.

*Note- it may be useful to baste the pieces together and re-check during this process.

Mark the pin-line and all other pin markings with chalk (on both sides!).

Transfer the markings from the fabric onto paper.

Cut the paper pattern out with appropriate seam allowances and trim the fabric pieces to match.

Reinforce the bias edge at the neck with a piece of twill tape to keep it from stretching.

Cut the outer fabric, using the paper pattern.

Apply any heraldry charges to the fabric before assembling.

Stitch the seam at the withers, in both fabric and lining. Flat-felled seams work well.

Attach the ties.

Stitch the lining to the outer fabric, leaving a small opening.

Turn, press, and finish the opening.

For the back piece:

With the saddle on the horse, measure from the desired front edge (anywhere from the back of the saddle to just behind the girth) to the base of the tail. Add 4 inches. Measure from the top of the rump to the desired hem-length (should match the front), add 4 inches, and cut two rectangles of your lining fabric to these dimensions.

Pin the two pieces together along the horse's spine, making sure the grain stays vertical. Trim excess fabric away if needed.

Mark any attachment points to the saddle. Mark heraldry charge placement and any partition lines. Mark a level hem-line and remove the fabric from the horse.

Mark the pin-line and all other pin markings with chalk (on both sides!).

Transfer the markings to paper.

Cut the paper pattern out with appropriate seam allowances and trim the fabric pieces to match.

Baste the seam, and test fit on the horse. Add triangular godets at the back to add fullness for the horse's movement and tail. Align the bias edges of the triangles with straight-grain edges of the body panels or adjacent triangles to avoid stretching.

Mark the pieces and the hem length, making sure that the caparison has not shifted on the horse.

Transfer markings to paper.

Cut the paper pattern out with appropriate seam allowances and trim the fabric pieces to match.



Cut the outer fabric, using the paper pattern.
Mark and apply any heraldry before assembling.
Stitch the seams, in both fabric and lining, using flat-felled seams.
Attach the ties.
Stitch the lining to the outer fabric, leaving a small opening.
Turn, press, and finish the opening.

For the hood:

If there is time, we may attempt this in class. Using the techniques above, you should be able to try this on your own. Remember that a caparison with a hood will fit fewer different horses, however, and be very careful when working around the horse's eyes.

Glossary:

Grain- the direction of threads in the weave of the fabric. The direction of threads which run along the *length* of the fabric is called the *grain*, while the ones which cross the *width* of the fabric are called *cross-grain*.

Bias- a line diagonal to the grain of the fabric. A 45-degree angle to the grain is referred to as *true bias*.

Flat-felled seam- a very strong seam made by off-setting the fabric edges during the first stitching, then turning the longer edge under and re-stitching to secure the layers. This will be demonstrated in class.

Baste- temporary stitching for the purpose of test-fitting the garment. This should be loose enough to remove easily. Contrasting thread is often used.

Godet- a triangular piece of fabric added into a slit or seam to add fullness.

Resources:

Madrone Equestrian Guild site- <http://madrone.equestrianguild.org/> Many articles and resources.

Contessa Illaria's barding page- <http://ilaria.veltri.tripod.com/overviewbards.html#closed>

Linen- <http://fabrics-store.com/>

Archaeological Sewing- <http://heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/index.html> Glossary and diagrams of seam types, including flat-felled seams.

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