

Researching and Planning Arts projects

Many people seem to get all tied in knots when asked to document Arts entries, however if you have done your research the documentation should be fairly straightforward. Here then is an introductory guide to doing research towards creating an item for use at SCA events.

How to go about your research

First decide what you want to make e.g. a purse, a shoe etc and from what time and place. It may be necessary to do some preliminary research before you finalise this decision to ensure that the thing that you want actually existed.

Now you need to research it. Researching involves searching for information and evidence and recording it, then synthesising it into your project. While you will find many opinions about what and how things were done you must always concentrate on evidence from the period rather than the opinions of modern researchers.

Searching for information

Start with your own collection of resources but don't stop there.

Don't rely on only one type of resource. Books are great but often you can find more current and more specific information in journal articles. If you have access you can sometimes find useful information on the Internet - but be careful...

Be critical of all information. Check what sources your sources are using. Make sure that what the books say is backed up by **real evidence**. Just because something is in print does not mean that it is true. Also be aware of whether you are looking at a typical example of an item, or an unusual specimen: often researchers overlook 100 typical examples to focus on the unusual – more interesting for them, but less useful for us.

Pay attention to detail.

- What materials were used at the time you are interested in? Just because one material was popular at one time does not mean that it was popular throughout the medieval period.
- What colours were used?
- What forms of decoration were used?
- What techniques were used?
- How can you tell? Collect evidence. Go to the next level and find out which variations were used together and which were not.

Recording information

Take notes/copies

Especially when you hit on something important you need to keep a copy – either write it down or make a copy of the page. Make sure that your notes or copies have the author, title and publication details for its source written on the back and the page number as you will want this information when you come to write up your research. Make sure that you store this information so that you can find it again.

Get pictures

Invest in photocopying as you will need hard copy information for your documentation and for your long-term files. Invest in colour photocopying when appropriate. Make sure that your photocopies have the author, title and publication details for its source written on the back and the page number. If it's a

smallish picture go ahead and enlarge it when you make your copy to maximise the detail that you can see.

Planning Your Piece

Now that you have lots of information about the materials, styles, method and decorations of your piece in it's time and place you can use this information to plan your recreation of it. There are a number of things that you need to consider.

1. **Your skill level.** Some people like to do simpler things really well whereas others are always trying to push themselves by doing more advanced pieces. There is something to be said for both approaches. Know which you are and design your piece accordingly. If this is a first attempt you should start off relatively simple. Understand what techniques your piece will demand from you and your ability to do them. Do a sample on some cheap but similar materials.
2. **Materials: availability and cost.** Many of the materials used in the middle ages are unavailable or hideously expensive now. You must decide to what lengths and expense you are willing and able to go to recreate your piece. If you opt for a cheaper alternative try to find something as similar as possible. Maybe cheaper alternatives were even used in period e.g. glass pearls, your research should indicate what a reasonable alternative would be.
3. **Time.** Generally speaking the more advanced the piece in terms of complexity and techniques used, the longer it will take to make.

The plan

Having considered all of the above you next should plan the piece. Write a few lines about what you want it to be. Then do some drawings. Once you have a drawing go back and compare it to some of the pictures you got in the research stage. Does it look as if it could have been made in the same place at the same time? If not, try again. Keep doing this until it looks right. Make a good copy of this pattern/picture to use in your documentation. Now make some more copies and start to play with colours. Check your colours as above until you are satisfied with the periodicity of the piece.

Now you should have your design all planned out – you know what techniques to use, you have your materials, or you know what you are going to use. You are ready to begin your piece. While you are making it keep referring back to your draft to ensure that you are sticking to it. If it's a major piece, you might even want to take photographs of the construction. Once it's done you already have all the information that you need to write up the documentation if you choose to put it in an A&S competition, and if not you have an excellent set of notes to lend to friends, or write an article about.

A note about copying a period piece

We often do not think of making copies of period pieces: some assume that the "creative" part of the society's name as explicitly discourages copying medieval pieces. Yet there are many excellent reasons to copy a piece as exactly as you can, and in some art forms (singing or cooking for example) it is the norm. Many medieval pieces were copied from the work of a master and one of the best ways of learning is copying so don't discount it, especially when you are new to a style or skill.