

# 1530's French Hood

Exploring new methods of achieving a period silhouette



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## This Project is...

A **folded French Hood**, comprising of a coif, cap, and hood to achieve a look seen in the portrait of Anne Boleyn housed at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

The construction techniques and materials used in this garment are all historically accurate, or at least historically plausible. Each piece is fully hand-sewn with silk thread. The fabrics are linen, silk, and cotton velvet (a reasonable facsimile for period velvet). Freshwater pearls decorate the front edges of the cap and hood.

The hood as displayed is missing a gold frill, which I have yet to successfully recreate.

## Inspiration and goals of this particular project

My interest in French Hoods predates my time in the SCA - it goes all the way back to around 2015, when I was a member of the acting company at the Maryland Renaissance Festival and



My first attempt at a French Hood, circa early 2010's

we began portraying years where the French Hood was coming into vogue. At the time, the best and most accessible research was *The Tudor Tailor*<sup>1</sup>. After building my first two pieces from their book (a farthingale, because I was curious what the historical version of what we were wearing at the Festival would look like, and a smock because at the Festival we get 1 shirt per weekend and I wanted the option of a fresh skin layer on Sundays), I tackled the Tudor Tailor's instructions on a French Hood.

Their pattern calls for a several layers of buckram, each wired on the edge and covered in fashion fabric, to be sewn together to form a rigid headpiece. It works, and gives a very elevated, crown-like crescent above the head that feels more accurate than the hoods we frequently see worn in TV and movies but still fulfills our belief - built by those self-same movies and TV shows - that these were headpieces which stick up like a tiara off of the head.



The pattern never felt quite right to me. Clothes and fashion are

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tudor Tailor: Reconstructing 16th-Century Dress*. Costume and Fashion Press, 2015

almost always an evolution or iteration of the garments which were being worn previously, and the next style continues that trend either iterating further or rejecting it in favor of another style. The Tudor Tailor French Hood in my hands it felt like too much of a leap from the soft, unstructured hoods of the late medieval period, and felt too structured as compared to later evolutions of the French Hood worn in Queen Mary I's reign and beyond.

Luckily I wasn't the only one thinking along those lines. Explorations by Samantha Bullat <sup>2</sup> and Dr Perin Westerhof Nyman <sup>3 4</sup>, among others, have paved the way in investigating how the French Hood may actually have been arranged and evolved out of earlier garments.

Meanwhile... there is anecdotal evidence that Anne Boleyn popularized the French Hood in the court of King Henry VIII. While there are portraits of English women wearing what look like French Hoods before Anne's return to England from France in 1522 - in particular, Michael Sittow's portrait of Henry's sister Mary Tudor circa 1514 - the conceit that Anne preferred the (perhaps more informal) French Hood over the gable worn by Katherine of Aragon, and that Jane Seymour's elevation saw a return of the gable hood for short while, is reasonably borne out in the portraiture of the day.

So, armed with Dr Nyman's explorations of early Scottish French Hoods of the 1510's and Bullat's explorations of slightly later period hoods, I set out to answer the following question:

**Is it possible to build a folded style French hood which replicates the look of the hood in the generally-accepted portrait of Anne Boleyn from the National Gallery in London, UK?**

## Period Examples: Portraiture

One of the things that makes French Hoods such a mystery is that none have survived to the present day, not even in tattered pieces. Our only evidence of the garment is in period portraiture.

I began with the image I'm trying to closely recreate: the portrait of Anne Boleyn circa 1533-1536. The pearl beading gives some indications of what might be going on under the

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<sup>2</sup> Tudor French Hoods || Researching and Making a More Accurate French Hood. Samantha Bullat, YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Cv7A8KJJuo>

<sup>3</sup> Dress Historian Recreates Margaret Tudor's French Hoods. The Welsh Viking, Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YakiReB8cA>

<sup>4</sup> Perin Westerhof Nyman, <https://perinwesterhofnyman.com/reconstruction-portfolio/>

hood, so to speak - the front set of pearls is affixed to a piece that has a sharp angle and comes down to roughly the edge of her jaw, while the back row of pearls extends farther down, curves out slightly at the bottom, and seems to sit slightly above the height of the first. It is *slight*, not acute like in my previous attempts to build a French hood.

This leads me to believe that we are looking at at least two layers: a black cap with a beaded edge and a second hood which is longer and may sit back on the head or fold back somehow in a way that isn't clear given the dark color of the hood itself. This is in keeping with images of French and Scottish hoods of the era.

Although no tie is visible under the chin, there is something in the division between the chin and the neck, along with the way her hair is held at the corner of the hood, which leads me to conjecture that there may in fact be some kind of narrow strap passing under her chin to help hold the headwear in place. A close look at a sketch by Holbein which is also believed to be of Anne shows a similar indentation in her chin indicating this may have been a common way for her to fix her hoods.

Very close examination of the portion under the gold frill in Anne's painted portrait reveals another cap of red beneath the gold. This is also in keeping with French portraiture of the era.

Other things I glean from examining the portraits:

- What the Tudor Tailor called the 'crescent' does not seem to stand up as high as some recreations would have us believe. They are much lower, sometimes almost following the shape of the head and barely standing up at all.
- The way the light is depicted hitting some hoods makes me think that the crescent is likely folded back, in some cases (though perhaps not all) revealing the lining of the top layer of the garment. However in the Anne Boleyn portrait, I suspect that this may not be the case - I will need to experiment once I have pieces in hand.

## Anne Boleyn's Portrait



Anne Boleyn, by Unknown English Artist. Oil on panel, late 16th century, based on a work of circa 1533-1536. National Portrait Gallery, London.

## A sampling of contemporary portraits



Portrait of Renee de France, Duchess of Ferrara, Daughter of Louis XII of France circa 1530's. Corneille de Lyon



Portrait of an Unknown Woman (formerly known as Margaret Tudor). Unknown French Artist.



Portrait of a Lady, said to be Anne Stuart, Claude Corneille de Lyon. C 1533-1536



Detail of *Anne Boleyn*, ca 1533-1536. Hans Holbein the Younger, photographed by Jacqueline Chenault/Marguerite d'Cheneau 2022

## **What came before the French Hood... coifs, caps, and hoods**

There is another prong to my thesis: that French Hoods evolved from other headwear worn in the late medieval and early Renaissance periods. Specifically, that the cap is a perhaps slightly modified version of caps seen all over Europe during the late middle ages, and the hood is an evolution of the hoods worn by women (and men) during the late renaissance.

I won't go into the details of those hoods here - that's a future rabbit hole to dig into. For now I will lean on the scholarship of those who have come before to say: An evolved open-front women's medieval hood with the liripipe widened to form something like a veil works astonishingly well as a potential top layer in the folded French hood.

### **A word on dressing the hair**

With a folded, soft hood as I am experimenting with in these recreations, the only thing that can help to give the hood structure and lift beyond the fabric itself is the foundation upon which it rests: the hair. I am going with the Tudor Tailor and other's theory that the hair was braided on each side and taped to the head using a bodkin and ribbon. When I wear the pieces, I add a false braid to give additional volume as my modern haircut is thinned at the bottom giving it lots of movement and lift... but resulting in rather anemic braids right where they wrap over the top of my head. For ease of styling and removal, I generally opt to pin my braids in place rather than sew them in with tapes. I have found removing tapes is a long and tiring process when you have to do it alone and by feel.

## **Design Decisions, Pattern, and Historical Accuracy**

### **The Base Coif**

For the base coif, I chose to make a close-fitting double layered cap in white linen, with openings in the back to thread a tie through making the hood adjustable. It is seamed and then gathered up the center back, but the top has no seam - this is in keeping with images of French Hoods from the era. The ties on the coif could either be tied in a bow behind the head or wrapped around the head against the base of the dressed hair braids. A chin strap is sewn in to one side of the cap, and secured with a pin on the opposite side.

This pattern draws inspiration from medieval coifs, and is historically justifiable and likely accurate.



## **The Cap**

For the black cap, I made a double-layered cap with top fabric of black silk and lining of white linen, with freshwater pearls sew on the front edge. The pattern is identical to that of the coif, cut ever so slightly more generously. It too is seamed up the back and gathered at the top, with laces threaded through a casing to cinch the cap at the neckline which could be tied there or wrapped around the dressed hair. For extra security, this can be pinned to the coif below or even pinned all the way through into the wearer's hair.

## **The Hood**

The shape of the hood feels the most conjectural to me - but luckily I had the work of Dr Nyman to back up the pattern shape I landed on. I started with a basic pattern for a simple renaissance hood and modified it to shrink it's coverage of the neck and front of the head (so that when worn without folding it is roughly in line with the front of the cap). I then widened the liripipe to be a bit wider, creating the veil-like look seen in portraiture.

It is made up in black cotton velvet, which I believe to be the closest analogue we have to historical velvets with a shorter nap, matte finish, and stiff weave. The lining is black silk, so that if it is worn folded in such a way that the lining is showing it is another fine and expensive fabric - an easy way to display wealth.

Similar to the cap, the front edge of the hood is decorated with freshwater pearls. These serve to decorate as well as provide weight and anchoring to the front portion.

When worn, the hood can be pinned into several different positions. Pins can also secure it to the hoods below or even to the foundational hairstyle.

## **A Word on the Frill**

I attempted to produce a gold frill as seen in most of the portraits using some silk organza, but did not succeed in finding the right ratio of fabric type/stiffness, fabric length, and pleat size to get something close to what is seen in the images. I have opted to forego displaying the frill with the rest of the hood, though my attempt can be seen and it's errors duly noted. It's something to work on for next time.

## **Techniques**

I believe the techniques I used to construct these garments to be period-accurate. They are all hand sewn and were basted together using a long running stitch before the linings were felled to the top fabric. Channels for drawstrings were made with a backstitch or running backstitch.

The hood center back was closed with a running backstitch <sup>5</sup>. All were sewn with modern hand needles of varying sizes suitable to their tasks.

## Materials

The materials for these items were surprisingly simple and lengths needed were minimal, making me think they gave the wealthy an opportunity to display materials that would be quite costly to make into a full garment.

- Coif top fabric and linings for coif and cap: White handkerchief weight linen, ~1 yard.<sup>6</sup>
- Cap top fabric: Black silk taffeta, less than 1 yard <sup>7</sup>
- Hood top fabric: Black cotton velvet, ~1 yard <sup>8</sup>
- Hood lining: Black silk taffeta, 1 yard <sup>9</sup>
- Decorations: Freshwater Pearls <sup>10</sup>
- Silk thread in white and black<sup>11</sup>

I also used:

- Pattern paper & pencils
- Scissors
- Sewing needles (modern)
- Pins (modern)
- Beeswax
- A tailor's open-top thimble
- Cotton thread for basting

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<sup>5</sup> *The Modern Maker Vol. 2*, Appendix A: Hand Sewing Techniques

<sup>6</sup> Source: Gray Lines Linen, New York, NY

<sup>7</sup> Source: Stash, likely from Mood Fabric, New York, NY

<sup>8</sup> Source: Stash, likely JoAnn Fabric, DC area

<sup>9</sup> Source: Stash, likely from Mood Fabric, New York, NY

<sup>10</sup> Source: Stash, from a small import shop in Washington, DC

<sup>11</sup> Source: Sil Thread, New York, NY

## Construction Techniques

I drafted initial patterns based on measurements of my head and examples of period coifs, caps, and hoods from the era and a little earlier. I cut them out of muslin, tested them, and refined the patterns several times before sewing each version in their final fabric. In some cases I tested my initial pattern via machine before making the hand-sewn version.



Coif top & lining cut out of white handkerchief linen



Coif partially pinned in preparation for sewing



Coif fully pinned and held up to test shape prior to sewing



Initial test of coif, cap, and hood with beading complete on cap



Dressed hair



The completed look

## Final Result & What Comes Next

This was very much a first attempt at making these hoods and while I consider it a success there is plenty of room for improvement. I want to experiment both with ways to improve a hood circa 1535, what I think of as “The Anne Boleyn Hood”, as well as see how much modification is needed to evolve the hood into it’s later forms. I also want to undertake additional research into earlier hood and headwear styles, to see if I can more definitively pin down the predecessors to the French hood and see what we can learn about it’s form and construction as it evolved.

My next attempt will likely start by playing with scale - I think my hood may be a shade small for my head, it is quite tight with braids in. From there I’ll continue to experiment. I may try putting a bit of wire in the billament - the front edge of the hood - to see if that gives the curved look seen in portrature. Another version might use ties and tension to pull the fabric in.

I’ll also try to branch out and get some white and red pieces into the mix, as appears to be traditional for the period. Black on black is, among other things, hard to see and understand in photographs.

There’s still an open question for me on the frill - how tight are the pleats? What’s it made out of? What is it attached to? These all bear further experimentation.

That being said - these are very comfortable headpieces. I could easily see wearing them all day, with the coif changing on a regular basis and the other layers more constant. They seem to be a reasonable evolution to the caps and hoods that came before, and set things up for the later 1500’s headwear which likely DID begin to use wire to shape the edge and lift it off of the head to frame the face.

I plan to continue to refine my work on these hoods and see what comes of them. Who knows, maybe I can convince the Renaissance Fair where I was working when I first started making the crown-like Tudor Tailor pattern to switch to these far more comfortable and simple headpieces. Then again, that may be asking a little much. Nevertheless, I intend to continue exploring this folded style of French Hood and its context in the larger arc of women’s headwear in England and France in the period, to see if we can get any closer to what might actually have been worn in the era.

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