Reproduction Elizabethan Coif
16th Century English
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Object Description

This object is a reproduction of a 16th c. Elizabethan coif. The fabric is white linen. The embroidery thread is black silk. Approximately 10g of reproduction metal spangles were used to decorate the blackwork. The embroidery and construction were done by hand.

What is a coif?

A coif is a linen head covering, sometimes heavily embroidered with silk and metal threads. Coifs were a ubiquitous part of late 16th-early 17th century English fashion. The embroidered head coverings were worn by high status women and also women of the burgeoning upper middle-class.

Coifs were worn by themselves and also under hats as shown below. Sometimes coifs were paired with matching forehead cloths, rectangular pieces of cloth that were often embroidered with the same pattern as the coif to make a matching set. However, forehead cloths are outside the scope of this paper.

Source Material for Coifs
There are many sources for coifs. I'll list just a few here.

- The Lacemaker by Netscher.
- Joan Alleyn, 1596, Artist Unknown (photo 55B in Janet Arnold's Patterns of Fashion)
- Lady Catherine Constable, 1590, Robert Peake the Elder. Shown wearing a matching forehead cloth. (photo 51A ibid.)
- Daughter of Sir Thomas Hoby, c. 1610. (Photos 51H & 51G ibid)

There are many surviving coifs available for study in museum collections. In the hardcopy documentation for my reproduction, I included personal photographs of these coifs taken in the museums. I cannot include these photographs in online documentation. I recommend viewing the textile collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum and The Burrell Collection.

It is my opinion that the coif I have chosen to reproduce (hereafter referred to as the "Seligman coif") is an early example of a decorated coif. The rectangular shape is a clue to its age. Later coifs had a more fitted hour-glass shape as seen when unstitched at the top seam. The Seligman coif has a rather it is a hoodish-looking construction.

An example of an early coif sold at auction in London in 2008. Note the rectangular shape. It is similar to the Seligman coif.

"A RARE UNFINISHED COIF
ENGLISH, EARLY 17TH CENTURY
the natural ground finely embroidered with a chain stitch in black silk, partially outlined in cream silks, in a pattern of scrolling flowers
12 x 7.5in. (30.5 x 19cm.)

"Estimate: £2,000 - £4,000 ($3,700 - $7,400)
"Price Realized: £2,375 ($4,237)

"Sale 5422
Fine European Costume & Textiles
1 October 2008
London, South Kensington"
For an example of a late 16th century coif from the Victoria & Albert Museum Textile Collection in London, go to the museum website and search for museum item # T12.1948. Note the hourglass shape when compared to the previous coif.

Another aspect of the Seligman coif that speaks to its early age is the rather simple embroidery. It was probably made at least 20 years before the heyday of heavily embroidered polychrome and metal thread-embroidered coifs.

I find the Seligman coif to be transitional in nature between undecorated coifs and the peak of heavily decorated coifs.

This particular coif is embroidered in blackwork. I believe that it was made by a young or inexperienced embroiderer. It does not look like it was professionally made (as many high quality Elizabethan embroideries were) due to the inconsistent fill patterns and the rustic layout of the pattern.

**Size Estimates & Spangles**

There are no measurements for the original coif so I decided to make the reproduction to fit my head. It measures roughly 9" high by 18" wide at its widest point. Another conundrum was the size of the spangles. Since I had no idea of the size of the original coif, when I enlarged the photo in the book for the measurements of my head, I simply measured the size of the spangle on the page and used that.

**Making the Pattern**

When I decided to make the Seligman coif, I scanned the image from the book, and then enlarged it to the size needed to fit my head. I printed the image and traced it on a light box.

I transferred my pattern to the linen using a lightbox as well, using a black .01 Pigma pen. The photo below shows the pattern inked onto the linen and partially embroidered.
As always, drafting the pattern allowed me to see the details. Upon first glance, I did not realize that a good deal of the embroidery seemed to run right to the edge of the fabric.

The Extreme Costuming website (www.extremecostuming.com) has found an excellent image of a woman transferring an image onto cloth by doing so over a candle placed on the floor for illumination.

Patterns in the 17th century are explained by an excerpt from the description of item T.88-1925 on Victoria & Albert Collections website (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O20024/panel/):

"In England in the early 17th century, patterns for embroidery were provided by print sellers. Many of these were designs inspired by images of birds, animals, insects and plants found in illustrated natural history and botanical books, which were very popular at the time. This was a commercial provision for the needs of the amateur embroiderer; the print sellers not only provided books and separate sheets of embroidery designs but also patterns printed or drawn directly onto a textile ground as seen here. The use by amateur embroiderers of prepared designs was known from at least the 16th century. Mary Queen of Scots, while imprisoned in Lochleven Castle in 1568, petitioned for 'an imbroderer to drawe forthe such worke as she would be occupied about'."

For an example of a 17th century pattern on linen from the Victorian and Albert collections website, search for item # T.88-1925.

**Coif Design and Fill Patterns**

The embroidery design has an image of a pomegranate in the center back with acorns above and leaves below. As is usual with coifs, the sides repeat. It is unfortunate that the only image of this coif is from 1925 because the edges of the coif are blurred. It is possible that this coif was made from an existing piece of blackwork that was cut down. Several areas on the photo look as if the blackwork continues right to the edge as if they were cut off. In addition, other areas have a line of stitching around the circumference of the coif. It is hard to tell without being able to examine the original. In
certain areas, I had to guess as to what the image contained. In these places, I repeated motifs that already existed.

The fill patterns (the pattern of embroidery that fills the open shapes) seen in the photo are, for the most part, a series of dots in rows and sometimes randomly scattered. In many of the shaded areas that clearly contain a fill pattern, the nature of the pattern itself is not clear, even when I put the photo under magnification. I chose to remain true to those patterns that I could distinguish and repeat those patterns in the areas that were blurred in the photo.

The design is outlined in black silk, then filled in with random, uneven fill patterns. The speckle stitch is quite large and is used to create patterns. There is no shading in this coif that I could determine.

**Stitch Used**
Many different types of stitches were used for coif embroidery: chain stitch, plaited braid stitch, back stitch, ladder stitch, French knots, etc. Since the type of stitching cannot be determined from the Seligman photo, I chose to use a simple split stitch for my coif.

**Construction**
The coif has a narrow 1/4 inch hem around the perimeter. It is then folded in half and sewn down the top center seam. Many different stitch types are used in extant coifs. I chose to use the simplest method show in Janet Arnold's patterns of fashion on page 47, photo 52B, which shows a simple visible stitch using white thread. I attached 2/3s of the seam in that manner and then pleated the last third.

A gathering channel was created at the bottom of the coif through which a fingerloop braided cord is strung.

Though most of the coifs that I have seen in period do not have linings, I lined my coif to protect it from perspiration caused by warm Virginia weather.

Example of an unlined coif and a gathering channel is seen below in photo 53A from Patterns of Fashion 4, page 47.

**Amateur or Professional Embroideress?**

Among textile researchers, opinion is divided on whether many embroidered Elizabethan artifacts were made by professionals or amateurs. After looking at hundreds of examples of embroidery from the period, I agree with the centrists who posit that some of the embroidery was done by amateurs and some was done professionally. I, myself, am an amateur and I was able to both draft my pattern from Seligman and do the embroidery myself.

The only difficult aspect involved the time needed. This coif took approximately 250 hours.

**Lessons Learned**

Next time, I will use a better quality linen. In addition, I will use linen thread to construct the seams and hem, to be more historically accurate.
Bibliography

Websites
2. Harris, Karen. www.larsdatter.com

Museums
1. The Burrell Collection, Pollok Country Park, 2060 Pollokshaws Road, Glasgow G43 1AT
2. Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 2RL

Appendix A: Extant Coifs

Appendix A contains personal photos taken at museums that I cannot publish online.