

***Making and Historical Justification: Ensuring Academic Reliability in Embodied
Research.***

The historical recreation is not an object of history but a window into what might have been. Far from a new phenomenon, artists and creators have been recreating the art of their forebears for millennia. Gombrich remarks:

‘The [Greek] sculptures in our museums are, for the most part, only secondhand copies made in Roman times for travellers and collectors as souvenirs, and as decorations for gardens or public baths.’

(Gombrich, 1984, p.53).

Historians look back on these objects with fascination and frustration in equal measure. In many instances, they are all that remains of the original artworks, as is the case with my research. We can never be sure of their accuracy or the faithfulness of the creator. Each artist lays down brushstrokes differently to the next, and each recreation will bear the unintended marks of its maker. For my recreations, designed to represent lost originals in an academic setting, it is of utmost importance that each process of the making journey is recorded religiously, documenting every technique, material and, vitally, every substitution for future generations to critique. These must come under academic scrutiny to ensure the finished piece is the best possible solution to the problem of recreation. As substitutes for garments that once existed, I feel a deep responsibility to recreate the clothes as faithfully as I possibly can within the environment of the present.

To achieve these goals, I split my practice diary into two parts.

Firstly, a Making Diary to record my daily embodied experiences, of learning historic techniques, working with unfamiliar processes and the impact of my personal bias and experience on the project as a research exercise.

Secondly, a Justification journal to interrogate my choices every step of the way, from pattern drafting systems to the accuracy of fabrics to the correct placement of specialised seams. I found this process gave me an academic framework to promote authenticity in my work, as far as it can be achieved (Davidson, 2019, p.16). In this Justification, I recognise that my recreations are not perfect replicas of the originals, nor can they ever be. They can, however, serve as educational tools to document the daily lives of the British working class and raise awareness for the preservation of these items in future requisitions.


The Making Process

Central to my process is the Making Diary in which I record every step for production, research source and key pieces of information. The making process itself begins with historical research. Wherever possible, contemporary sources must be used to distinguish even the most basic techniques. Home sewing guides (e.g. Howard, 1952) can be an excellent resource as they discuss skills from the bottom up, whereas many vintage specialist books - such as those concerned with tailoring (Hulme, 1945 and 1946) - assume the student has a basic working knowledge. Information can also be gathered by studying extant garments. As these techniques often vary between makers, let alone decades of development, it is essential to start at the very beginning. By keeping a list of techniques, alongside the method, samples, uses and source, I create an easy-to-use guide for sewing my historic recreation.

Georgia Long: Strategies for Practice

SAMPLES

Herringbone



1. Working from left to right (or top to bottom), bring the thread through the fold in the fabric and tie off.

2. Moving down 5mm, catch a thread on the face fabric (right to left). Bring the needle across and down to catch a thread on the fold.

3. Pull through and repeat.

Context: Used for hemming or catching seam allowances and inner panels.

Used in my 1940s example to hold shoulder pads in place.

(Mugill, 2017, p.20; Phipps, 2019, p.85).

Difficulty

Notes

Definitely the least tidy of the techniques from the inside. This stitch is best used where a lot of support is needed to allow for movement and stretching. Time to complete: 5.24

Figure 11 - Herringbone

Figure 1 - A 'samples' page showing the method and contextual information for herringbone stitch

With this resource I can easily look up accurate techniques with a direct record of where I sourced the information and its reliability. They may also be recorded in the diary, which should be updated after every making session with the tasks completed, any issues that arose, substitutions and other topics flagged for further justification. This part of the diary is an excellent means of recording the embodied experience, as described by Davidson (2019) and Prown (1982). It can be used to record further research questions, identify solutions to existing questions and provide evidence for the practice of embodied learning. It can also be used to organise time and task flow and ensure that good practice is being maintained.

Making Diary	Georgia Long, Masters I: Exploration
Date 21.03.21	Date 01.05.21
Task Making coat	Task Coat structuring
<p>What went well</p> <p>Coat went together very easily over the weekend with few hiccups. Fit is good on the mannequin and on the human body. Overall the finish is nice and the fabric gives the correct aesthetic.</p> <p>What could be better</p> <p>Unfortunately, I could not effectively ease the sleeves in between the side and side back seams due to where the side back panel inserted into the arm hole. In the future, I shall measure where the back seam sits in the armhole on the toile.</p> <p>Notes for next session</p> <p>The gathering is a detailed issue which I shall explore further in justification. Next steps are to reinforce the waistband and add period accurate shoulder pads. I am currently awaiting delivery on the lining fabric.</p>	<p>What went well</p> <p>Canvas in collar gives it good structure and helps it keep its shape. Also makes the CF panel sit better on the body. Breast felt gives the coat a good weight as well.</p> <p>What could be better</p> <p>Reinforced waistband but it is collapsing from own weight. Will stab stitch in place for additional support, however I might replace it with a lighter interfacing.</p> <p>Notes for next session</p> <p>Sew lining together and decide how to finish edges.</p>
12	13

Figure 2 - Two typical 'Making Diary' pages

Limitations

As exact as recording the making process might be, there are still some unavoidable limitations to recreating historic garments. No product made in the present day can be an exact copy of a garment of the past, regardless of whether the historian is working with a photograph, an extant garment or a full manufacturer's method. The world we live in is simply not the same. The factors which limit the accuracy of historical recreations are so varied and prolific that it is beyond the bounds of this essay to list them all. I shall therefore discuss those which I have found the most provoking through my own experience.

First, and foremost, matching the fabric of a reproduction to the original is the most challenging task in historical recreation. Besides any pattern, fibre content, and weave construction, the

machinery and methods used today differ for the most part from those used in the past. Fabric manufacturing has grown more and more efficient over time, with finer, stronger and smoother threads that prevent breakages, and the rise of automated machinery. There are still manufacturers who produce fabric using historical techniques precisely for re-enactments (for example, The Historical Fabric Store), however when searching for something specific these collections are often lacking. Without becoming a master at every stage of manufacture and undertaking the work first-hand, compromise must be made.

Even if one was to spin the fibre and weave the fabric to the exact specifications for recreation, the fibres themselves must be scrutinised. Davidson describes how ‘our particular moment in history cannot essentially replicate the conditions of other points in history’ (Davidson, 2019, p.17). Chemical formulae for manufactured fibres are continuously updating and improving, and even natural fibres are not a guaranteed match. Two prime examples are Rayon and wool. The formula and process for Rayon has changed several times over since it’s initial invention in the mid-1880s (Britannica, 2016) for improvements in efficiency, safety and sustainability. Selective breeding has ensured that even wool fibres from the same breeds are different now than they would have been fifty years ago.

In a perfect world, all these elements could be recreated without a single divergence from the original, and it still would not be enough to recreate the garment ‘accurately’. As an individual, my skills do not compare to those of the craftspeople who made the original garments. My experience of the world is different, and I found handsewn techniques a lengthy process compared to their modern mechanical counterparts.

These discrepancies required a justification system, to catalogue compromise and analyse the problem in order to find an effective solution.

The Justification Process

I developed a process to justify historical inaccuracies within my work and record them for future critique. This sits alongside the Making Diary and offers historical and contextual support for substitutions and decision making where evidence cannot be gathered from the original source. One of these instances was in deciding on a lining for Stella's 1953 coat.

After identifying the issue (the coat lining was not visible in the original photograph, and therefore could not be visually identified), I opened an entry in my Justification Diary. The entry examined alternative extant garments and contemporary records for examples of lining fabrics and construction (Vogue, 1952, p. 131). Using the information gathered in the 'evidence' section, I concluded that a rayon lining would have been a common choice and that a light grey to compliment the charcoal wool was a popular colour scheme. However, upon sourcing this fabric I found that there were no readily available options matching that description available today.

I turned back to my Justification enquiry to find alternatives, examining viscose as an alternative to rayon. As rayon producers started using the term 'viscose' in the early twentieth century, the fibre would still be appropriate (Kehoe et al, 2013). Under this fibre, I managed to find a pale grey in a satin weave, appropriate for linings if less commonly used.

Justification

Date 18.03.21

Subject Wool fabric for
Stella's coat

Description

The grey is darker in person than it appeared on screen. Had the shops been open (COVID closures) this issue would have been avoidable. However, this was still the closest grey in 100% natural wool fibres that I could find. Other than the colour, the fabric is a good weight. The surface is scratchy, however a coat affordable to the working class in the 1950s would not have been made from the finest, softest wool.

Mitigating steps

Ensure that the fabric is a close enough match when photographed in black and white, with similar lighting to the originals.
Consider returning and replacing the fabric: the timeplan will have to be re-organised to allow for additional delivery times.

22

Georgia Long, Masters I: Exploration

Evidence



Figure 3 - Right: photograph taken by author of recreation fabric. Left: photograph taken in 1953 of Stella on her scooter.

Figure 4 - See figure 3

Analysis

Having taken the photographs, I believe this to be the correct colour for the coat, even though it is darker than I had imagined. Stella described it as 'dark grey' and the photographs show that the shade can be very different according to the light source.

Outcome

I shall use this fabric for my recreation as I believe it to be an accurate representation of the original.

23

Figure 3 - A completed Justification of the coat fabric choices.

There are six key steps to my Justification method. The first step is to catalogue the issue with a **date** and **subject title**, so it can easily be found and related to the Making Diary and to the final garment. The second is to **describe** the issue in detail, including its impact on the project as a whole. Thirdly, I will suggest the steps I might take to **mitigate** the issue, such as finding a historically accurate alternative, studying extant examples for validation, or conducting specific research into the issue. The fourth step is to gather **evidence**, which may be textual or visual, that I can use to support my final decision. **Analysis** occurs in step five to test the suitability of the solution. Finally, I shall resolve an **outcome** with an explanation of the next steps in the making process. These are usually specifics regarding fabric and component choice, an adjustment that needs to be made to the pattern or an alternative technique for production.

I kept the steps simple, each one with a specific focus in order to efficiently dissolve blocks in the process and maintain integrity when deciding on compromises. The evidence provides an academic backbone for each choice, preserving the value of the garment as an object of historic study. After Justification is complete, the issue should be solved and work on the recreation able to continue once more.

Both the Making Diary and Justification are vitally important steps in my own historical recreation practice. They cement my work within academic boundaries and provide clarity and reliability in an iron structure. The Making Diary records my daily experience to allow other practitioners to look back on my work and critique it fairly within an academic setting. The Justification challenges choices head on to find valuable and historically accurate compromises that do not damage the purpose of the garments as an academic tool. It is these documents that elevate my work beyond simple reproduction of aesthetic trends into the realm of embodied historic research, enabling them to enter the flow of history without disturbing it. The recreations, supported by the Making and Justification Diary, are elegant representations of garments lost to time, which will provide interaction, information and inspiration to historic collections.

List of Figures:

Figure 1: Long, G. (2021). *A 'samples' page showing the method and contextual information for herringbone stitch*. [Document]. In possession of: the author.

Figure 2: Long, G. (2021). *Two typical 'Making Diary' pages*. [Document]. In possession of: the author.

Figure 3: Long, G. (2021). *A completed Justification of the coat fabric choices*. [Document]. In possession of: the author.

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