



# Medieval Trappings – or Putting Your Horse In a Dress

By Patty Gardner

*In 2003 Patty Gardner, long time FHANA member, wrote several articles for THE FRIESIAN. Due to space and the need to run certain articles, only two made it into print at the time. Patty was always ready to assist with photographs, article topics, and support. We offer her work here as a tribute to Patty, who lost her battle with cancer on March 26th, 2008. - Editor*

During the Middle Ages, knights faced each other on horseback and tilted in battles and in tournaments. Many times those knights wore surcotes (or surcoats, sleeveless tunics or coats worn over armor or other clothing) with their arms embroidered on them, which identified them to their opponents or to the tournament audience. Early in the Middle Ages, the horses were clothed in garments that mirrored the function of the knights' surcotes.

Over the next few hundred years, those garments got more extensive and more elaborate, until the garments, known as trappings, might cover the entire horse from ears to tail, and were as highly decorated as the knight's clothing. This aided in identification of the knight and his horse to his opponents and observers. These trappings often reflected the heraldry, or coat of arms, of the knight.

The simplest trappings are straps, which probably evolved from harness straps that kept early saddles in place. Those



might include breast straps and cruppers, and then hanging straps from the crupper strap that are similar to breeching used in harnesses for driving horses.

The addition of a saddle cloth steps up the trappings to the next level. I have seen pictures of saddle cloths that usually went over the saddle with an opening for the stirrups, or under the saddle with an opening for the girth. Those saddle cloths functioned as mud guards, to protect the rider from dirt or mud on his



(or more often, her) clothing and shoes. These might have started out as plain cloth, but I doubt they stayed that way for long. These are actually quite easy to make: the hardest part is figuring out where those darn openings go and then finishing the cuts so they look good!

Another type of trappings covered the entire horse. Most of these were made in two or more pieces, but it is possible to make them in one piece. If doing it this way, you can use a horse sheet or blanket as a pattern, but cut it longer, so it hangs down on the horse farther. Again, you'll have to cut slits on each side for the saddle girth to pass through and under the trappings. A jagged edge is the perfect excuse to use tassels and making them is very simple.



Two piece trappings still covered most of the horse, but left open a small section for girth and stirrups. Sorry my photo does not show this, but the trappings were made for a smaller, and short-bodied horse! (photo right).

Some trappings were even more elaborate; I found a 16th century pattern layout involving 4 pieces of trappings for a horse. In each pattern layout (there are two, one longer than the other), the tailor instructs the reader to make a pattern of canvas first, that can be fitted to the horse, and then use the canvas pattern to make the actual trappings of silk. The book only

gives the pattern pieces and how to lay them out on the fabric; what goes where and how is not included.

Which brings us to fabric. While I don't discount the beauty of silk, I'm not going to put it on my horse, especially when I can't afford to put it on me! If you really want to use silk I'd recommend a heavy silk. But you might find trigger to drape as well and cost a lot less. Any other heavier woven fabric will also do well. Drapery fabrics also come to mind, even old drapes can be used. Try to find fabrics with a high natural fiber content, which allows air to pass through and thus cool the horse. Those natural fabrics are cotton, linen, wool, silk and ramie. Ramie is a fabric made of wood fibers that are chemically processed to become thread. Fabrics made up of such materials as polyester, acrylic, rayon and nylon need to be carefully screened for breathability and wear.

Many pictures of trappings I have seen have shown them lined. While lining a garment (be it for man or horse) is a great way to improve its look and feel, don't feel obligated to follow the exact look of medieval trappings just because "that's how they did it." Also, although quite a few sets of medieval trappings are fetlock length on the horse, you might want to make yours shorter (say knee/hock length) since horses have been known to trip over such long garments.

At the end of this article is a short bibliography. One of those books will give you lots of pictures of trappings to look at; the other is the one I mentioned above, with the four pattern pieces. To check out some modern re-creative trappings, there are some web sites on the internet featuring some SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) equestrian arts and activities, some professional jousting associations, and other groups that recreate medieval or Renaissance equestrian-related activities.

Continued...







## Medieval Trappings

Between the historical horse clothing and the modern, you too should be able to create trappings for your horse.

### Bibliography

1) de Alcega, Juan. Tailor's Pattern Book, 1589. Trans. Jean Pain and Cecilia Bainton. Carlton, 1979. Robin and Russ, 1981. *(Gives two pattern layouts for horse trappings for jousts.)*

2) Barber, Richard and Juliet Barker. Tournaments: Jousts, Chivalry and Pageants in the Middle Ages. 1989; Weidenfeld and Nicolson, New York. *(Great pictures of riders on horseback, horse armor, trappings, etc., with many in color.)*



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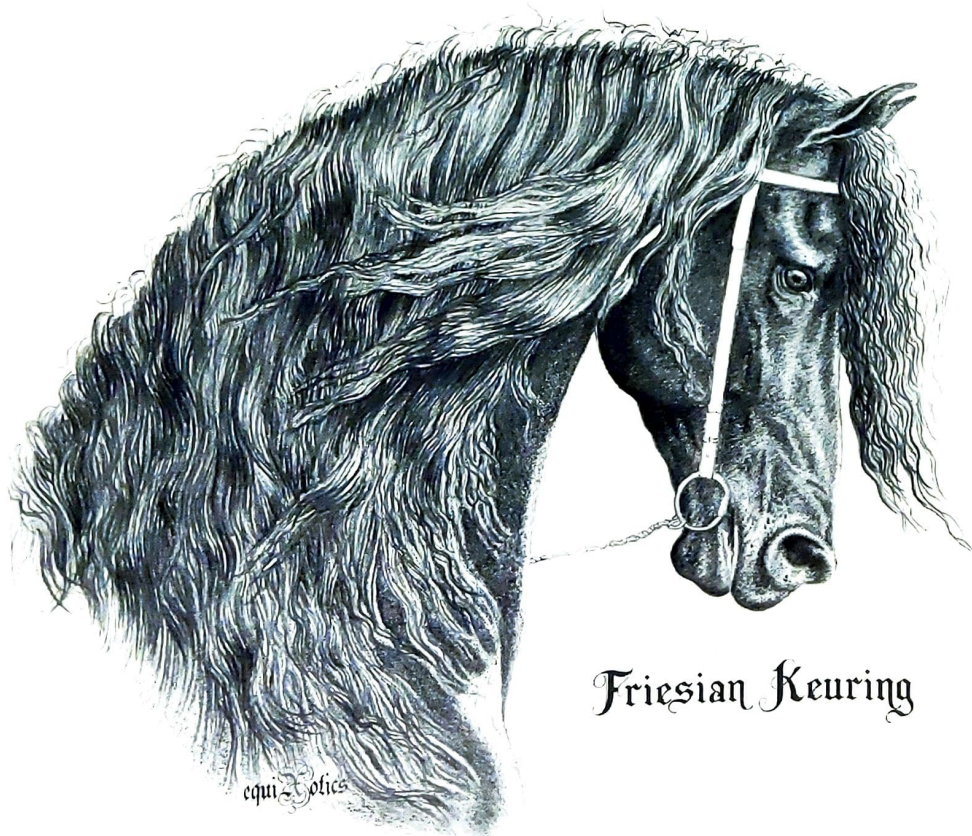
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