

Virtual Soapbox



Historical Costuming: Doing It Wrong on Purpose *Kayta Barrows**

Common wisdom is to make historical recreations as accurate as possible. A well-known historical costumer thinks that doing it wrong is sometimes better – and more fun!

As mostly a historical recreation costumer, I research and copy historical garments as closely as I can manage. Some folks cast aspersions on this kind of “slavish copying”, but I think it’s because they just don’t get it.

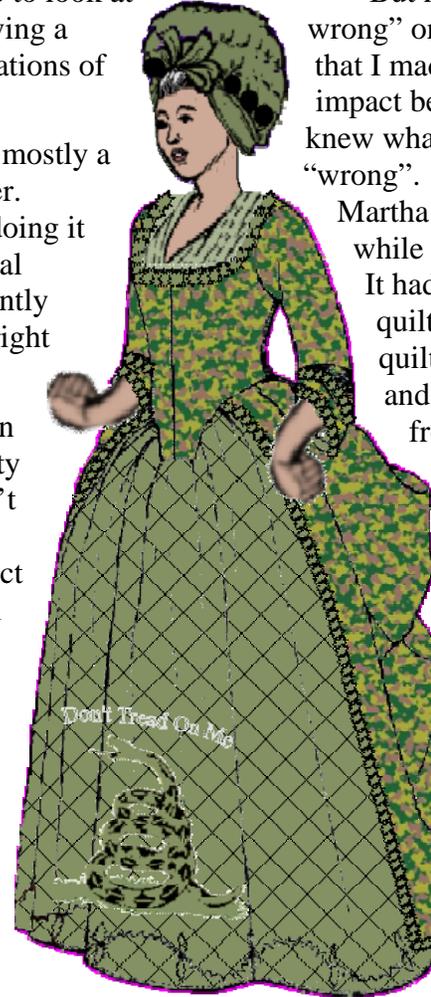
I’m not doing my recreations slavishly, nor am I being so anal as to think that there’s only one way to do historicals. Every historical period seems to have several “right ways” to do things, which you find if you do lots of research into that period.

When I copy historicals hyper-closely I’m learning how the originals were done. It’s a learning exercise, to see if I can recreate all their techniques. This increases my knowledge of historical costuming tactilely as well as visually. It also helps me turn out a more historically accurate finished

product for a historical judge to look at when I compete. I enjoy having a reputation for accurate recreations of period handwork.

But, as I said, I’m only mostly a historical recreation costumer. There are occasions when “doing it wrong”, recreating a historical garment significantly differently than the original, is just the right thing to be doing.

One is when working on a nano-budget for Community Theater, where there just isn’t the money to “do it right”. (How can I capture the correct historical look on \$150. total budget for costumes for the whole show?) Another is when attempting to recreate materials that have not been manufactured for at least 100 years, where “doing it right” would require ripping up and destroying a surviving antique to get the right parts. A third is when working to a design change required by a modern repurposing of a historical design. (Your dance troupe wants to do *what* in that dress???)



But my favorite is when “doing it wrong” on purpose is funnier. One costume that I made some years ago had more impact because someone who theoretically knew what she was doing did it deliberately “wrong”. It was a “cammo-colonial” that Martha Washington might have worn while visiting the troops at Valley Forge. It had an olive colored underskirt with a quilted diamond pattern, a “feathers” quilting design on the bottom edge, and the ‘Don’t Tread on Me’ snake in front. The buckle shoes were also painted cammo. I imagined that if Martha Washington had cammo material available, she would have worn this outfit.

I’m pleased that CostumeCons have allowed and encouraged both “doing it right” and “doing it wrong” recreations for more than two decades. Costuming is a “big tent”, with plenty of room for polite costumers to appreciate each other’s work.

Kayta Barrows is a historical costumer with a special interest in historical interpretation. She is a founding member of the Greater Bay Area Costumers’ Guild (GBACG) and a new member of SiW.