

Feature



Thriftpunk – More Steam, Less Stitching! Kathe Gust*

A committed sewing junky comes clean on using thrift stores, the Web, her sewing “stash”, and even her closet to put together a pair of Steampunk costumes on the cheap.

OK, so you’re a novice at Steampunk & Gaslamp. You don’t have a bazillion

Bazooties to blow at the “traders’ concourse”, and you sure don’t want to waste what little green you DO have

on mass-produced duds with the same old machine embroidered gears 'n dirigibles as everyone else. The thrift store, a staple of the punk community at large, is the answer.

“A dank, smelly thrift store,” you huff, “not me – not ever!” Well, hey, not everyone can afford the \$150 top hat or the \$400 custom corset. Not everyone can make them either. Sure, not EVERYTHING you find at a thrift store is going to be the steamiest by far, but who cares? That’s where your own



individuality and creativity can take hold! That’s also where our new outfits for the [Nova Albion Steampunk Exhibition](#) came from this year. Phil gave me two months. I told myself minimal sewing.

I’ll talk you through the two ways I use Thrifts to get me where I need to be faster and cheaper than sewing the whole outfit. Caveat: If a costume is for a masquerade competition and I have not made SIGNIFICANT mods to an item, I ALWAYS identify it as purchased. I buy most of my shoes, so why not confess that I bought that hoop petticoat too?

Before You Shop

Ask your friends, check YELP, or search Google (right) for thrift stores to try. If you don’t know the store, be prepared to wash what you buy. Some stores put out their stock already washed and pressed. If you find one of those, you can decide to wash based on each piece you buy and whether it looks shopworn (or is doused in perfume). The cheapest stores sometimes take the best care of their stock, too. Price is not an indicator on that unless you’re buying real vintage, and even then...

Visit some (or all) of the stores in your area when you are not under shopping pressure. Try to get a feel for size, clientele, how often the stock changes, what things they are concentrating on, where the

donations come from. Try to chat up some staff if it isn’t busy. Are the dressing rooms acceptable? Sometimes large and clean with a mirror is all you can get. Think about the wait time and plan for it when shopping.



A word about shoes – even at a “new” store shoes can be an issue. With Thrifts, sometimes you get new old stock, this is the stuff that didn’t sell and may have been tried on, but wasn’t worn. Sometimes you get vintage or just used. If you don’t know that a shoe is new, assume it isn’t. Take them home and treat the inside with an anti-fungal spray or powder and let it sit for several days. Wear hose or socks, at least for the first several times you wear them. You do not want to catch anything from prior feet. We didn’t need to buy any shoes for this project, but I have done it and have not caught anything. I do take precautions.

The same goes for hats: just disinfect them. In a pinch, bag it and stuff it into the freezer for a few days to kill anything that might be there.

Next check out some examples of costumes in the right genre to get an idea of the styles, shapes, popular colors and accessories. With Steampunk just about anything goes!

Now you are ready to shop. I will cover the two methods I used to assemble costumes for Nova Albion.

Method 1: Start With a Piece and Build

Dig – persistently– through the racks of clothes. Look at every item. If you find a particular item intriguing, picture yourself wearing it. Imagine what else you could pair with it. Open your mind to different styles, colors, and fabrics. You know yourself and your personal taste. If you look iffy in green, put it back, but try to remember roughly where it is on the rack. You may change your mind later when you see something that would make it work great for you. I admit that for this step, I really like stores that sort by color. I have been known to skip over entire sections that are really just not my color.

By the way, a store sorting by size doesn't mean you only look in "your" size either, since people put things back wrong, "hide" things in the wrong size on purpose, and sizing has changed over time. You still have to look at a broader swath than just

your current size. Men should also check women's coats and vests. I found a man's cashmere topcoat hung in the women's section once! Women should always check the men's section as well.

I started with this jacket (\$4). It's brown velveteen with black satin piping. It's got slimming princess seams and the piping does interesting stuff going down into the pockets. It has a little peplum in the back, and it fits.



I already have a white shirt with a wing collar so I decide to try for a vest. I get lucky again and find this dark gray with black pinstripe cotton corset halter (\$1.15). It echoes the princess seams on the jacket with similar black piping. It's a teeny bit long-waisted on me, but that's not unusual so I get it too and just tighten the neck strap a wee bit more.



Next I find a funky little metal box (\$2). I think it might have been a candle lantern, but I'm going to line it with red brocade and make a purse for my outfit. This will be the minimal sewing part.



I try to find a skirt, trousers, etc. and strike out, but I can always wear basic black from my closet if necessary.

Three weeks later I find a cotton "balloon shade" skirt in brown at the Thrift

(\$2.50). I give everything a good ironing, add my basic boots from the closet, throw on my brown snood from [Pillaged Village](#) and I'm good to go.

I admit that about a week before the Con I decided I had to have a hat and bought this Toy Teddy Bear Tyrolean on Etsy (\$6). I thought it was black, but it turned forest green in the post! So I hat banded it in brown lace and black ribbon from my stash. Done!



Total spent over 4 weeks was \$15.15. That hat cost me, but I'm a sucker for hats — and it included the nice spray of feathers! Remember you can use doll hats for Steampunk. They are not very expensive.

While I was putting the Steampunk Lady together for me, I had a shot at doing something similar for Phil. We did find a great green vest with black beads (in the women's dept) (\$2), and could have picked up dress pants and a white shirt, but the store really didn't run to frock coats, tailcoats or great men's hats, and the cold weather had cleaned out the overcoat rack. I could have



INTENSE EXCITEMENT!

That is what you will experience when you travel with the Beard-Wynnington Dirigible Airship Company!

Ride in style in our clean, comfortable, *steam-powered* Dirigible Airships. No luxury has been overlooked in our well-appointed cabins. Fine china, crystal, and silver table settings are brought to you *at great expense* for your dining pleasure!

Our highly trained crew is waiting to serve you. We employ only the most experienced Air Pilots, specially trained to operate our Dirigible Airships with your *safety and comfort* in mind. Courteous Air Hosts and Hostesses are here to ensure that your journey is all that you expect from us.

Book your passage now for the best seat selection. Choose deluxe First Class or elegant Coach Class accommodations on one of *three flights daily* between London and Paris. For further enquiries or to arrange your departure, visit our ticketing office or telegraph our knowledgeable travel agents.

The Beard-Wynnington Dirigible Airship Company
179 Piccadilly
Piccadilly, London
W1A 1ER

put together a Steampunk Gambler or perhaps an inventor, or working class guy for about the same cost or less as the Lady, but not a Steampunk Gent.

If you are looking for more formal menswear items, think ahead and grab them at warehouse sales from the larger tuxedo rental houses, or go on eBay and look at the discontinued stock there. Aside from Halloween, men's formal wear is not often found even in the high-end thrift stores. You may be able to rent, but it isn't cheap, and you can't really mod rentals much.

Method 2: Start With a Character

This method was really fun, but I did have to do a little sewing to get the full effect we wanted. Your mileage may vary.

We decided to be an airship crew from the *Beard Wynnington Dirigible Airship Company* visiting the Expo to pass out our advertising leaflet (left). Phil was an Airship Pilot and I was an Air Stewardess. We printed the leaflets on newsprint for authenticity

We wanted to look as though we were in coordinating uniforms. On the first Thrifting trip, we found the following for Phil's outfit:



- Women's double-breasted jacket with pockets and epaulets (above) (\$5.50)
- Leather suspenders (\$2) – did not use these after all
- Dark brown western vest (\$2.15)

We also found the following for my outfit:

- Tulip shaped knee length skirt (\$2.50)
- Double-breasted linen vest with lace trim (below) (\$2)



Our white shirts with wing collars would work for these also, and we both had suitable boots, but some things were missing that we wanted to have. There were other items we already had and wanted to use that are not so easily found at a thrift store.

Here's that list:

- Backpack base for captain's re-breather and gear – (\$2.50) on the later trip
- Leather belt with steamy look – (\$1.50) on the later trip
- Aviator hat for the captain (prices vary) – we already had a pair
- Captain's trousers – leather pants from 2009 SF Opera sale (\$5)
- Long white scarf a'la the Red Baron (harder to find) – already had one
- Goggles for the captain (prices vary) – Phil made his from stuff in the garage

As regards the stuff we had; the aviator hat and the long white scarf would have been hard to find at a Thrift, but can be found online if you look for them. The leather pants, which we already had from the SF Opera sale (see [Virtual Costumer, Volume 7 Issue 4](#)), could be found at a Thrift, or another kind of trousers could have been used instead.

Total for these two costumes without any optional costs: just \$23.15! It turned out Phil kept his coat buttoned and no one ever saw the brown vest, but he says it helped his characterization to wear it anyway.

Now we come to the stuff that we didn't have to have, but really, really wanted. Here's where the money suddenly escalates! This is also where the sewing comes in although we might have avoided it. I think in this case it made a lot of difference in the costumes, since using a matching fabric tied the two into uniforms, but those pieces would be optional for non-sewers, as would the badge pins and hairpiece.

- Crossover Neckties – optional or look for matching ties at thrift
- Dirigible badge pins – e-bay \$10 each – a real bargain! but optional
- Hat for air Stewardess – told you I'm a sucker for hats – optional
- "Shirley Temple" hairpiece (Collette 1747) – very optional (\$25)
- Traveling bustle and belt – rather tricky to sew - very, very optional

Good replicas of a WW I Dirigible Pilot pins are not cheap, and we needed a pair. It is very hard to find even one of them, except in the "traders' concourse" at a Steampunk convention. Lucky, I was looking for them at the right time and a military store on eBay had two in stock.



Phil could have carved or cast replicas, or even printed images on a color printer, backed them, and attached safety pins on the reverse side, but he wanted "real" ones.

The hairpiece will reappear on other characters and I didn't have one in that style yet. Anyway a wig is really just another type of hat. At least that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.



I found a 2-yard remnant of a cotton quilting fabric in the "Elizabeth" design at Jo-Ann's (\$10). It has different shades of brown and tan with printed cream lace "wheels". I used it to make several accessories that require simple sewing, but help tie the costumes together. The first is our crossover ties. We use the Dirigible pins as tie pins.



I also made a simple traveling bustle and belt for my Air Stewardess outfit. The bustle snaps to the belt, which fastens in the back.



I topped my costume off with a miniature garrison cap. The patterns for all three are from the Web and the trims are from my sewing stash.



I appliqued and embroidered a patch for the backpack to cover up a logo it had when we bought it, using stuff from my sewing stash. This is also more “over the top” than required. A black fabric square tacked or fabric glued over the logo would have worked fine. You can also use fabric paint instead of embroidery. Phil finished the backpack from more stuff in the garage.



This article makes it sound as though my sewing stash and our garage are like Dr. Who's [TARDIS](#). Sometimes they are and sometimes not. Phil has written a companion

article to explain more about that (see “[A Steampunk Airship Pilot's Backpack](#)”).

We're done! Total for both costumes with all the optional costs: \$78.15 -- quite a difference from the basic one, but as I said, totally optional. Still, you couldn't rent two costumes for that price, and you OWN them.



Photo by Blake Barrett – one of a stereo pair.

Don't be discouraged if you can't find everything you want in the first try – it may take weeks, sometimes months, of searching to come across specific items. Jodhpurs for example, took ages, but now we use them for several other characters. Run with your imagination, have fun, and happy Thrifting!

***Kathe Gust** enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genre. Visit her [web site](#) to see her past and current costuming projects.*