

# Virtual Soapbox



## Judging Historical Workmanship *Kayta Barrows\**

*A Costume-Con 27 historical workmanship judge shares her thoughts on workmanship and historical interpretation from the judge's perspective*

Workmanship, one of the three inter-related aspects of a costume, is how well the garments are constructed.

**Myth** - Hand sewing beats machine sewing.

**Reality** - Ugly hand sewing is an embarrassment, both to the judges and to the costume maker. It doesn't say good things about your sewing skill. Good machine sewing beats ugly hand sewing, even in periods before the advent of the sewing machine.

**Myth** - only Master/Open costumers win workmanship awards.

**Reality** - Workmanship is a democratic award, in that it is often won by Novices and

### Editor's Note

An earlier version of this article was posted to the [h-costume mailing list](#).

often not won by Masters/Open costumers. Many Novices have really great sewing skills even if they aren't good at costuming (yet). And many Master/Open costumers concentrate on how the finished costume looks, and are extremely skilled at things that don't show up on stage but which show all their "quick and dirty" at close range. (Many professional theatrical costumes look really bad up close.)

The worst thing we judges saw, in Workmanship, was unfinished raw edges with loose threads fraying out of them. I think about half of what we saw had this problem, and it didn't gain anybody points. (That said, my own seam finish isn't always that great unless I think a workmanship judge, or one of my students, will see it.)

The best case of edge finishing was Katherine Caron-Greig's "A Walk in the Park, 1869" (left) which we gave the Workmanship award we called "Exceptional Frills and Furbelows". Every edge of every one of those ruffles and scalloped flounces was bias bound and hand finished. The only



Photo by Andy Trembley.

reason she didn't get Best Workmanship was because Patricia Anne Buard's entry, "Christian Dior for Vogue Patterns, 1959" (see next page) had even better workmanship. (In competition I always hope my work is as good as those two were.)

Another problem we kept seeing was hems that weren't pressed flat, and that didn't gain anybody points either. (Whatever my own costumes look like inside, I always press hems - because that shows.) If you're worried about what an iron will do to your fabric, press through a scrap of cotton muslin, or press from the back. Press your seams open too, so they lie flat. (I always do that too.)

**What if I do crappy sewing?** Let someone else do the sewing, and share the credit for construction. Two paper certificates instead of one don't cost the convention that much more.

**What should I tell the workmanship judge?** Brag shamelessly. Tell them the coolest things about your costume. Show them the things you do best. Point out all the places you did clever things. In the presentation judging, the workmanship judge is often consulted for an opinion in cases of a potential tie. Good construction is often the tiebreaker.

**I'm worried about losing points for not doing (whatever).** Don't be. Your entry

starts out at zero points - everyone's does. So think in terms of gaining points for doing good things, not losing them for doing bad ones. Think in terms of seizing opportunities to impress the judges and get more points.

**What if the judges don't like my historical period?** This shouldn't matter if



Photo by Andy Trembley.

they're honest. Case in point, all three of us judges gagged when we saw Patricia Anne Buard's entry, "Christian Dior for Vogue Patterns, 1959".

We were all old enough to have developed a bad taste for that period - first hand. (It's stuff like that that made me want to be a Hippie.) And every contemporary

1959 detail she showed us, including that stupid hat, only made us gag more.

But she could have walked right out of the Vogue pattern envelope she showed us (all she had was the envelope, and she had to modify another pattern to get what she wanted). I can't think of much she could



have done better (except picking a period I liked). She tied for Best in Show.

**What is an interpretation anyway?**

An interpretation is a historical that deviates from period construction and/or design for a specified reason. The best reasons include twisted humor (like my cammo-colonial), deliberate mixing of periods (like "The Beautiful People" this year), or for a special use like being worn by someone in a wheelchair or being a theater costume where a quick change is required.

Every interpretation derives from a stated premise, which the judges are honor-bound to go along with. (My "cammo-colonial" was for Martha Washington to

wear while visiting the troops at Valley Forge; see [Virtual Costumer volume.8, issue 1, page 29](#)).

A pet peeve of mine is seeing costumes that I would have put in historical interpretation showing up in the fantasy/sci-fi masquerade. It's not fair.

A fine example of interpretation at Costume-Con 27 was the Tudor couple in "English Court Dress", created by Bethany Padron (below), which got a Workmanship award for "Best Costuming for the Theater" in the Journeyman division.



Photo by Andy Trembley.

The gentleman's doublet had compulsively accurate slashing, but his upper hose (puff pants) had the edge slashing painted on. This is a fine old theatrical "cheat", which was so well done that I didn't spot it on the table across from me until the garment was handed to me.



Photo by Andy Trembley.

The costumes had other such "cheats", like being easy to get out of by the actors without help (thoroughly un-period), and had, in fact, been made for theatrical use (wardrobe tags still in them). I think we talked Bethany into calling her work an interpretation, because as a re-creation it had too many historical inaccuracies about it, and it was clearly theatrical costuming.

There are plenty of lame excuses for calling something an interpretation:

- Lack of funds. Overcoming financial difficulties by persistence, careful shopping, and the application of your brains is a mark of your costuming skill. I could see giving yourself the challenge of trying to make an entire Elizabethan for \$20, and having the result looking pretty dicey up close and off the stage (do brag to the workmanship judge about how cleverly your cheats mimic the real thing). My point is that some reasons for calling something an interpretation are

valid, but using lack of funds as an excuse for inaccuracies, and calling the result an interpretation, is a cop-out.

- Lack of time to finish a costume well. If you run out of time and finish the costume badly it's just bad. I've seen some really skillful saves when the time and/or money ran out.
- Lack of knowledge. This makes it sound like you didn't know what you were doing in the first place.

Some good reasons to call something an interpretation include:

- Dance costume, where dancers needed to look corseted but had to move freely. (Docs should include images from the show, images of dancer dancing in the costume, citations on dance costume construction, and citations on historical on which costume is based.)
- Fantasy costume based on some historical period. Premise is fairy living in (whatever) historical period and only paying lip service to that period but using Magic for fabrics. (Docs should cite garments from actual period as points of departure.)
- What would Puss In boots wear in (insert year here)? (Show workmanship judge construction of your "furry" and cite garments from chosen period.)
- A historical outfit as interpreted by those folks who crochet historical costumes for Barbie dolls. (Cite from places like

[Paradise Publications](#), then try to figure out what period they're doing and cite the real one.)

- Do your entire costume in white, with black edges around each different part, and say you're from a coloring book, not a costume book. (Cite the real period, and don't worry about the underpinnings as long as you look OK from the outside. Wear a white paper wig, and white mask with black edges and detailing.)
- Do your entire costume as flat appliqué, and your entire docs are one color Xerox from one book. (Oops - would this be a re-creation?)
- Make your entire costume out of newspaper, including all the fiddly details. (Document the fiddly details.)
- Make your entire Georgian out of Hello Kitty fabric. (Somebody did that this year, no docs, hall costume only.)

There are more of these, but they just get stranger.

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