

Lettice See: An Exploration of the Tudor Lettice/Miniver Cap

This project started from a single portrait, Hans Holbein's "Girl with Squirrel and Sparrow," and the desire to figure out exactly how the white hat the girl wears was made. It doesn't seem to be a commonly made hat in the Society, possibly because there seems to be very little assembled research on it. The current extent of the easily found information seems to be the facsimile made for A Knights' Tale, and a Tudor Tailor pattern that looks (to me) horribly off scale and made of fake fur and millinery wire.

Research:

In initial searching, this hat seems to be mentioned in a couple of different places both as a "Miniver cap" or a "Lettice/Lattice Cap", both referring to the fur originally used to cover the caps, miniver being unspotted white fur, usually from the stomach of a squirrel, and lettice being the fur of the "snow weasel" or winter stoat. In John Stowe's "The Annals of England to 1603," he describes a hat that seems to conform to what we see in the Holbein portrait.

*About the tenth or twelfth year of Queen Elizabeth, and for four or five years afterwards, all the citizen's wives in general were constrained to wear white knit caps of woolen yarn, unless their husbands were of good value in the Queens' books, or could prove themselves to be gentlemen by descent; and then ceased the wearing of miniver caps, otherwise called "three corner caps," which formerly were the usual wearing of all grave matrons. These miniver caps, were white and three-square and the peaks thereof were full three or four inches from the head, but the alderman's wives, and such like, made them bonnets of velvet after the miniver cap fashion but larger, which made great show up on their heads, all which are already quite forgotten*¹

From this, the implication seems to be that the miniver caps were originally worn by the lower classes, but that the aldermans' wives were, by making them out of velvet, raising them up to be status symbols. In 1853, Philip Stubbs also refers to the hats by name, saying "And some wearre Lattice cappes with three hornes, three corners I should saie, like the forked Cappes of the Popishe Priestes."²

At this time, aldermen were very well off tradesmen from various guilds, and served as a sort of city council, as well as being the group from which sheriffs and mayors were selected. Many famous names of the period can trace back their ancestry only a few generations to find aldermen: Anne Boelyn's grandfather Geoffrey Boelyn, Sir Frances Bacon's great-grandfather Sir William Fitzwilliam, and Sir Francis Wathingham's wife Anne's father Sir George Barne. As well as being well moneyed and well connected, the aldermen founded, built, and monetarily supported many institutions, among them St. John's College, Oxford (Sir Thomas Whyte,) the East India Company (Sir John Harte,) and the "great stone bridge" at Stratford-on-Avon (Hugh Clopton).³ In short, these were the landed gentry-the upper class who were landowners and well moneyed but lacked a peerage.

1 Edmund Howes' 1615 annotations to John Stowe's "The Annals of England to 1603" in *An Illustrated Dictionary of English Costume From the First Century BC to C. 1760*, James R. Planché (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2013), 79-80 (https://books.google.com/books?id=tFSOwcCYfPoC&source=gbs_navlinks_s)

2 Philip Stubbs "Anatomie of Abuses, 1583" comp. Drea Lead <http://www.elizabethancostume.net/stubbes.html#hats>

3 Aldermen of London, digitized at http://www.tudorplace.com.ar/Documents/aldermen_of_london.htm



Illustration 1: Margaret Giggs, Holbein the Younger (larger version in appendix)

The two best surviving visual examples of this style of hat are both painted by Hans Holbein the Younger, the first in a sketch known to be Margaret Giggs (nee Clements) and the second in his portrait “A Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling,” dated to about 1526-28, where the sitter is presumed to be Anne Lovell. Both Margaret and Anne were part of well-off families, with Margaret a foster daughter of Sir Thomas Moore and Anne the daughter of an alderman. There are a few similar hats from a later date that seem to be worn pushed farther back off the forehead, with more of the forehead cloth or coif showing, and Stowe mentions the “miniver cap” first in 1549 while referring to the way they were worn previously.

Shape-wise, (as well as the time period in which it shows up) this hat seems to have evolved alongside the gable hood. The earliest this shape seemed to have appeared was in 1492 with the “Child Praying” portrait of Suzanne of Bourbon, which showed her wearing what looks to be a white brocaded version of the pointed cap.⁴ The shape could also be seen as taking some cues from the clergy: as

Stubbs says, “the Popeish Priestes.” Holbein had painted Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham in 1527, and his initial sketched study clearly shows the similarity between the religious black felt hat and the shape of the lettuce or miniver cap⁵. In 1520, Albrecht Durer also shows “Bearded Man in Red Cap” in a hat that, while slightly lumpier than Anne Lovell's, definitely has the same shape⁶. Interestingly, as time wears on, this shape of hat appears more frequently, but worn farther and farther back on the head-this is where they start being referred to in informal research as the “Triceratops hat,” because the flat front of the hat is being worn far enough back to look like the flat ridge of a triceratops' frill, as seen in the portrait of Alice Barnham and her Two Sons from 1557, and the silver medal with Dorcas Eglsetone on it from 1562.⁷

In my research, I found little to no record of any Tudor or Elizabethan fur-covered headwear other than the soft, fur lined hoods of advanced graduates, although I could find a good number of hats made from either a beaver or wool felt base and covered in velvet. In his “Anatomie of Abuses” from 1583, Phillip Stubbs complains of women's hats:

Than, o toppes of these stately turrents (I meane their goodly heads wherein is more vanatie than true Philosophie now and than) stand their other capital ornaments, as french hood, hat, cappe, kercher and such like; where over some be of velvet, some of taffetie, some, (but few of woll), some of that, and some of this color, some of that, according to the variable fanrasies of their serpentine mind. And to such excesse it is grown, as every artificer's wyfe (almost) wil not stick to go in her hat of Velvet everye day, every merchants wyfe and meane Gentlewomen in her french-hood and every poor Cottagers Daughter in her taffatie hat, or els of woll at least, wel lined with silk, velvet or taffatie.⁸

4 Image in appendix

5 Image in appendix

6 Image in appendix

7 Image in appendix

8 Stubbs, Anatomie of Abuses

The sumptuary laws as stated in the 1533 Act for Reformation of Excess in Apparel say

*And that no man under the said Estates and Degrees other than such as may dispend inlands or tenements rents fees or annuities as is aforesaid a hundred pounds by year above all charges, shall after the said Feast wear any satin damask silk camlet or taffeta in his gown coat with sleeves or other outermost apparel or garment, nor any manner of velvet otherwise than in sleeveless jackets, doublets coifs, partlets or purses, nor also shall wear any fur whereof the like kind growth not within this Realm of England Ireland Wales Calais Berwick or the Marches of the same, except foins, genets called Grey genets, and budge.*⁹

Because women are seen as connected to their fathers, both well off families of Anne Lovell and Margaret Giggs would clear the income bar to be allowed to wear velvet or a non-domestic fur. However, because both miniver and lettuce are from animals commonly found in Tudor England, if their hats were to display the family's wealth (which seems likely, if they were worn specifically for a portrait to be painted), it seems more likely that the hats would be velvet covered, in order to show not just that the families had the monetary ability to import velvet, but also to show that they were allowed to wear velvet as an outside layer. Although this text comes from the 1533 Act, the 1510 Act that it follows lays out a similar set of rules, implying that around the time the portrait of Anne Lovell was painted in 1520, it would be well known that velvet worn as an outer layer and non-domestic fur were signs of wealth.

Although the cap is referred to using the fur terms “miniver” or “lettice,” the fact that Howe specifically says that upper-class women were making them out of velvet seems to imply that while the name was originally used for fur, it may have evolved to imply any hat of that specific shape with a pile. Janet Arnold gives an example of this in *Patterns Of Fashion*, showing a wool hat with a silk pile from Nuremberg.¹⁰ She seems to imply with her description of it as a “thrummed” cap that the pile fabric is of a significant length. While thrumming today is generally remembered as a technique to add heat-capturing wool fiber into knitted hats and mittens, in the 15th and 16th centuries, there also seemed to be a technique of applied thrumming that was used on wool felt hats to approximate the look of fur. If this were done in silk (as in the Arnold example) on a wool felt base, Howe's use of “velvet” to describe it as a pile fabric may just be his attempt to use words that already exist in the lexicon -if Howe wasn't a textile person, he could be doing his best to describe what he's seeing without exactly the vocabulary needed. Thrummed caps also show up in Shakespeare's “*Merry Wives of Windsor*,” first published in 1602 but believe to have been written prior to 1597, as part of Falstaff's disguise as a woman. Mistress Page describes him by saying “She's as big as he is; and there's her thrummed hat and her muffler too.”¹¹ Notes in the *Accounts of the Revels at Court* also suggest that thrummed caps could be made from silk, with a 1578 record for the torch bearers in *A Maske of Knights* wearing “their hatts of crymson silk and sylver thrommed and wreythed bands with Feathers.”¹²

9 Noel Cox, “Tudor sumptuary laws and academical dress: An Act against wearing of costly Apparel 1590 and An Act for Reformation of Excess in Apparel 1533” *Transactions of the Burgon Society* 6 (2006) 15

10 Arnold documentation in appendix

11 William Shakespeare, “The Merry Wives of Windsor” act 4 scene 2, line 62

12 Great Britain Office of the Revels, *Extracts from the accounts of the Revels at court: in the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James 1, from the original office books of the masters and yeomen*, by Peter Cunningham. (Great Britain, 1842) <https://archive.org/details/extractsfromacco13greauoft/p127>

The use of pile fabrics to approximate fur also occurs later in history. “Beaver Cloth” is defined in the Fairchild Books Dictionary of Textiles as “a silk plush with a flat pile. Uses: hats.”¹³ In a 1910 copy of *The Illustrated Milliner*, volume 11, reference is also made to many different colors of hats in “silk beaver.” Before that, in the mid-1700s, there are surviving examples of “half beaver” hats made out of a felt that had beaver fur added back into it to create a pile effect,¹⁴ and around the turn of the 19th century other hats appear to use it, such as a French bicorne in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in, Boston, described as “black plush over cardboard foundation.”¹⁵ By the 1810's silk beaver appears in records more frequently again, as it was being used on military bicornes. Although significantly later than our Tudor caps, the combination of a first hand account from the Tudor era claiming velvet and the later affectation of calling a velvet “silk fur,” as well as the first hand example of the Nuermberg silk pile hat leads me to believe that although a miniver/lettice cap may have initially been made of miniver or lettice fur, by the time Margaret Giggs and Anne Lovell were wearing them, they were likely velvet or some other sort of silk pile fabric, likely silk thrum

PROCESS:

I started this hat by trying to figure out the structure inside. My initial gut feeling was that it was one of two things-either a wire or cardboard frame or a solid wool that held its shape. I was basing the “frame” concept off of some of the ways I'd seen gable hoods done before-either using a wired edge or a solid cardboard piece to hold the flattened top edge. Ultimately, I decided to go with a wool felt instead, knowing that if it came out not stiff enough, I would always have the ability to size it in order to make it stiffer. There are a few extant hats in Janet Arnold's research of this era that are made of covered felt, suggesting that this was a valid material choice. Although I thought about creating my own felt from white wool I processed and washed myself, I happened on 100% wool felt in a fabric store, and bought two yards of it instead. Because it initially came in a much looser form, I then felted it into a more solid sheet, using a combination of working it wet, working it with steam and sending it through a modern tumble dryer with a damp cloth. I kept the wool going through the dryer until the consistency resembled commercially made wool hat “blanks” and then took it out and ironed it until it was flat. Obviously, both the choice to buy pre-made felt and the choice to use the dryer to felt it tighter weren't period, but were time and space saving methods instead.



Illustration 2: A successful pattern!

I also briefly considered attempting to make the four-pointed shape of the hat through wet-felting it into shape, but after a brief patterning experiment and three generations of paper patterns, I realized that with the right flat shapes, it only took two seams to create the four points of the hat. Working under the assumption that the simplest solution is probably the right one, I used these two patterns to cut out the felt for seaming. To sew the body of the hat together, I used Gutermann silk thread doubled and a baseball stitch*, butting the edges of the pieces together and sewing them by hand. After they were sewn, I ironed over the seams using steam in attempt to encourage the edges to felt together a little and make the transition less harsh. (*I know this stitch as either the “Baseball” or

13 Phyllis G Titora, and Ingrid Johnson, *The Fairchild Books Dictionary of Textiles*. (New York: Fairchild, 2013) pp 52

14 <http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/71222.html>

15 <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/mans-bicorne-hat-with-tricolor-cockade-120853>

“Henson” stitch, but I’ve also found it under the name “Fishbone stitch,” which is probably what was used in period.)



Initially, I started with the idea to use rabbit fur, because any form of mink or ermine or squirrel bellies were going to be well out of my budget. My first three skins came from a merchant at Pennsic, and I resorted to Amazon for the backup two when I realized I wasn't going to have quite enough. In looking at the Anne Lovell hat, there seemed to be clearly defined stripes between sections of the pile, which I interpreted to be the joins between squirrel bellies. To simulate this, I cut my rabbit fur into 1” strips.

Eventually, as I started piecing my rabbit fur together, I realized that because of the length of the rabbit fur itself, I was losing a lot of the detail of the hat itself- my points were less pointy, and the whole thing just looked kind of shaggy and unfortunate around the face. In research during this pause, I realized that part of the problem was the length of my fur: the rabbit I had was probably

Illustration 3: Fur strips taking shape

1.5” long, while ermine and mink, as I found in another person's A&S research¹⁶, is usually more like .5” So of course, I did what any sane person would do, and shaved my rabbit, first with a set of hair clippers, and then, with a borrowed set of dog clippers.



That ridiculous deed done, I continued to lay out my pattern of fur strips. I worked out a system of tracing out the pattern as I added sequential strips, and indicating on the paper pattern how the shaped pieces from the front “corners” should add in. Each of the fur strips was sewn together with a baseball stitch as well, using a glover's needle and silk thread.

As I finally got the fur shaped and able to pin on to the wool in a convincing enough manner to set it on a head form to look at it immediately I disliked it. It didn't look distinct enough in the corners to match the portraits, and it was sort of shapeless. I attempted to iron the wool stiffer into the corners, and without thinking, hit the steam

Illustration 4: The Great Shave

button, accidentally shrinking one side of the fur. That sort of settled it, I disliked the way the fur looked, I disliked the way the fur acted, and I was taking it off of the wool base because now it didn't even fit.

This was, of course, when I went back to the research, because I couldn't believe that the hats shown in the two portraits were actually fur, when the fur I had just didn't look right. It was, of course, at this three-weeks-out point that I actually read all of the other text **around** the research that mentioned miniver caps, and couldn't find any record other than the names “miniver” and “lettice” that specifically mentioned fur. Stowe, in my first research example, specifically says that they're made of

16 Lady Mairghread ui Silbheard uu Coinn, mka Margaret Wilcox. “Ersatz Ermine for the Eager Elite” https://www.academia.edu/11016367/Ersatz_Ermine_for_the_Eager_Elite

velvet among the aldermen's wives, and Stubbs complains vociferously about all the velvet hats on women. Janet Arnold's hats from *Patterns of Fashion* are all either velvet, silk or leather and in *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, velvet, taffeta, satin, sarcenet, felt, or beaver are mentioned in her discussion of hatters and cappers, but never fur. I ran through a few more lists of Tudor wills and listings of goods via a Google search, and yet again, couldn't find any proof of a fur hat.



Illustration 5: Fur side, pre shaving.

Instead, I started thinking about “velvet” as being shorthand for “pile fabric,” and started re-researching silk beaver and thrum hats. At this point, I'm reasonably convinced that either Anne Lovell's hat is fur, but made from ACTUAL miniver or lettice by a significantly more skilled furrier than me, or more likely, it's actually a silk thrum cap. Because I might be crazy, (but not quite crazy enough to re-invent sewn silk thrumming in less than a month) I decided to follow Stowe's original instructions, and cover the wool base in velvet with a silk lining, which, (judging from the period examples) seems like a just as plausible a finish even if it doesn't give quite the same visual effect as the hats painted by Holbein.

To that end, my final display hat is a white wool felt base covered in a “silk” velvet (in reality, a silk/rayon blend from Dharma Trading, as silk/silk is beyond my price range) and lined in a white silk. All of the velvet and the silk seams were handsewn with a silk thread backstitch, and the first thing I did was sew the points of the lining through the points of the wool base. Then, I stretched the velvet over the wool base, rolling the velvet to the inside and securing it with a whipstitch. Last, I joined the lining to the velvet with a silk thread slip stitch, and have embroidered my makers mark, a broad arrow, inside the center back of the hat.

Appendix



A Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling (Anne Lovell)
1526-8, Hans Holbein the Younger



Margaret Clements nee Giggs, Hans Holbein the Younger, 1526-27.
Study for portrait of the family of Sir Thomas Moore.



“Child Praying” Suzanne de Bourbon by the Master of Moulins, 1492



William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, Hans Holbein the Younger, 1527



Portrait of a Bearded Man in a Red Hat, Albrecht Durer, 1520



Dorcas Eglestone, Silver cast and chased medal, 1562



Alice Barnham and her two sons Martin and Steven, painter unknown, 1557



Portrait of Young Woman with a White Coif, Hans Holbein the Younger, 1541



Modern silk thrum hat made by The Crafty Beggars (craftybeggars.org) for the Globe Theater, 2012