



# The Medieval Dress and Textile Society

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Some staff of the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum.  
(See within for text and more pictures)

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## **EDITORIAL**

Although being in the job a short while, Dan Towse has already done us proud in the position of Programme Secretary. The British Museum was a very fine venue for the Autumn Meeting. The theme for the meeting had promised great interest, and I would say that promise was well fulfilled. We have summaries, and more, within.

### **Help!**

Your committee has been without a Chairperson since the passing of Geoff Egan, and a Secretary for even longer since Karen was taken ill. We hear that Karen is somewhat better, but there is no expectation that she will be able to resume any active role in the society in the foreseeable future. So our position is becoming ever more difficult as time passes. Therefore, please, if anyone out there has suggestions for suitable candidates for either post, or might even wish to contribute themselves, do not hesitate to contact some member of the committee.

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To receive the newsletter as a colour PDF file electronically, e-mail me via [medatseditor@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:medatseditor@hotmail.co.uk).

Otherwise, information about MeDaTS, and membership forms, may be had from the Membership Secretary, Carole Thompson, 9 Fairthorn Road, Charlton, London SE7 7RL, or from the society website: [www.medats.org.uk](http://www.medats.org.uk)

**Timothy**

## **NEWS**

### **A new technique for dating silk developed by Smithsonian Institution**

Scientists at the Smithsonian's Conservation Institute have developed a fast and reliable method to date silk. This new technique has great potential to improve the authentication and dating of silk artifacts held in collections around the world.

The method uses the natural deterioration of the silk's amino acids, a process known as "racemisation", to determine its age. As time goes by the abundance of the L-amino acids used in the creation of the silk protein decreases while the abundance of D-amino acids associated with the silk's deterioration, increases. Measuring this ever changing ratio between the two types of amino acids can reveal the age of a silk sample. Archaeologists and forensic anthropologists have used this process for

decades to date bone, shells and teeth, but the techniques used required sizeable samples, which for precious silk objects are almost impossible to obtain.

“Many things an animal makes are protein based, such as skin and hair. Proteins are made of amino acids,” explains Smithsonian research scientist Mehdi Moini. “Living creatures build protein by using specific amino acids known commonly as left-handed [L] amino acids. Once an animal dies it can no longer replace the tissues containing left-handed amino acids and the clock starts. As L- changes to D-amino acids [right handed], the protein begins to degrade,” Moini explains. Measuring this ever-changing ratio between left-handed and right-handed (D) amino acids can be used as a scientific clock by which a silk’s age can be estimated. In controlled environments such as museum storage, the decomposition process of silk is relatively uniform, rendering D/L measurement more reliable.

The Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute team used fiber samples taken from a series of well-dated silk artifacts to create a chart of left-hand and right-handed amino-acid calibration ratios against which other silks fabrics can be dated. new technique takes about 20 minutes, and requires the destruction of about 100 microgram of silk fiber, making it preferable over C14 (carbon 14) dating, which requires the destruction of so much material that it is prohibitive for most fine silk items.

The article ‘Dating Silk by Capillary Electrophoresis Mass Spectrometry’ appeared in the scientific journal *Analytical Chemistry*, authored by Mehdi Moini, Mary Ballard, Smithsonian senior textile conservator; and Museum Conservation Institute intern Kathryn Klauenberg

### **Costume Society Bursary**

The Costume Society has inaugurated a new £2000 bursary for conservation. Applications close on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April. **Further information:** [www.textilesociety.org.uk](http://www.textilesociety.org.uk).

## **EXHIBITIONS**

### **Money and Beauty: Bankers, Botticelli & the Bonfire of the Vanities**



*Adoration of the Magi* (detail of panel painting with the Silk Guild merchants which also incorporated the Florentine jewelers. (Domenico Ghirlandaio, Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1488)

“**Money and Beauty:**” has been on view at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, since the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 2011 and closes on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2012.

For MeDaTS members the contents are indeed familiar. Our colleague, Lisa Monnas, seems also to have anticipated some of the exhibition material in her 2009 book *Merchants, Princes and Painters: silk fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings, 1300-1550*.

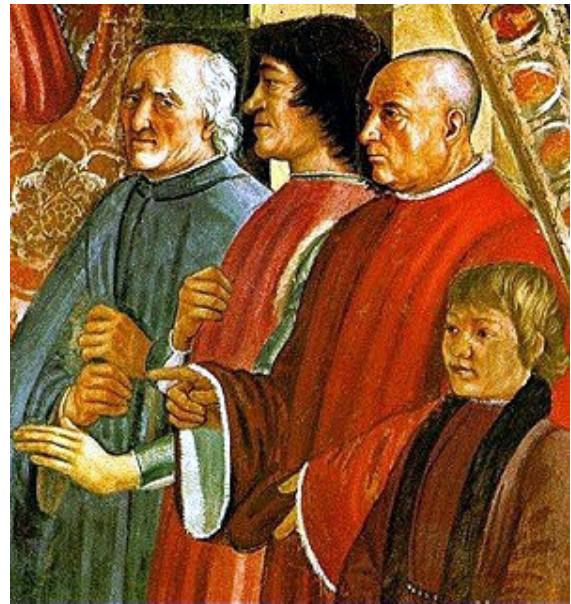
The exhibition displays approaches inspired by the two curators. One is the Savonarola scholar, Ludovica Sebregondi, and the other is the writer-translator, Tim Parks. The theme seems to me to come just at a moment when our contemporary world parallels the exhibition and reads like today’s newspaper headlines. Florentine Medieval and Renaissance merchant-



bankers backed and manipulated international politics. Wars were waged, Popes elevated, Kings dethroned and entire nations made bankrupt through the overt or undercover money-lending of these Florentines. The oligarchical mercantile families produced and sold high-fashion woolen, silk and gold fabrics and/or gems and gold jewelry. High debts were accumulated by royalty and wealthy bourgeoisie to obtain these luxury goods, and the interest rates *never* went down.

Art patronage, too, flourished in the merchant-bankers hands. Townhouses and Palaces were built both in Florence and in the cities where these bankers had important agencies, including, naturally, London. Renaissance humanism and Neo-Platonic culture changed the view of wealth. Florentine merchant-bankers commissioned art both for private delight as well as for public enhancement and ennoblement in churches. Sumptuary laws could somehow always be avoided.

A key artist in the exhibition is Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) whose career is linked to the career of the Medici family. His art envisaged the ideal of Renaissance Beauty.



The Medici banking group: Antonio Pucci, Lorenzo dei Medici, Francesco Sassetti and Giulio dei Medici. Fresco detail, Sassetti Chapel, Santa Trinita Church, (Domenico Ghirlandaio 1480-86)



L. van Reyerswaele, *The Moneylenders*, detail (Panel painting, Florence, Stibbert Museum, 1541)

With the death of Lorenzo de' Medici "Il Magnifico" in 1492, the Dominican preacher in the San Marco Medici-patronized convent, Fra Girolamo Savonarola, then felt free to lash out against the "paganism and sinful debauchery" of the Florentine bourgeoisie. So much so that even many Florentine artists placed some of their mythological paintings onto the 1497 "Bonfire of the Vanities". Boethius' *Fortune*, though, was certainly the same Lady present

here. For, the year after, in 1498, with changing politics Girolamo Savonarola was judged a heretic and himself was burned at the stake in Piazza della Signoria!

In the sixteenth century, the chief centers of European finance, political power and art patronage transferred to the Vatican in Rome and to the German bankers. Vying for power and luxury goods depended on money as always, but the aesthetic taste and the owners changed.

**Further information:** [www.palazzostrozzi.org](http://www.palazzostrozzi.org)

**Rosalia Bonito Fanelli**

**Editorial note:** Rosalia had intended this to be in the previous newsletter, but some technical glitch intervened. My apologies to anyone who may have been disappointed or inconvenienced by the delay.

## **The Cathedral Treasury, Liège, Belgium**

Many people would be aware of some of the holdings of the Liège Cathedral treasury, but may not appreciate how extensive its collection of textiles actually is. At present some two dozen pieces of the cathedral's collection are on display, especially pieces from Byzantium, Iran and Spain. The collection is derived from reliquary linings and tombs.

Recommended by **Stella Jundul**

## **CONFERENCES PAST**

### **MeDaTS Autumn Meeting: 'Reconstruction, Living History, Re-enactment'**

Stevenson Theatre, British Museum

Saturday 22nd October 2011

#### **Christopher Gidlow, Live Interpretation Manager, 'Defining Levels of Authenticity in Costumed Interpretation at Historic Royal Palaces'**

Costumed interpretation should match the high level of accuracy and authenticity seen in our room re-presentations. Our intention is not to interpret the costume, but to use the costume to interpret the sites and their stories.

Our Interpreters accurately convey the physical appearance of the person or type of person they represent. This includes the right stance and accessories, period hair and beard styles and no modern make-up, jewellery or tattoos. Period glasses only for those characters who would have worn them based on jobs and income, and in contexts where they would be worn. Interpreters are cast for verisimilitude in appearance, too.

We use 5 levels of authenticity to define our costumes. Often these are defined by distances at which they work. At the Palaces, however, all interaction takes place at close hand, usually without barriers or staging. Nearly all our costumed interpretation is at levels 1 or 2.

#### **Level 1**

Costumes are made as near as possible in the appropriate materials and using the techniques of the period. This includes hand-woven, dyed and sewn materials, using dyes available in the period. All items are of the weight of original pieces, decorated and finished using known materials and techniques. Appropriate for detailed and prolonged close inspection.

#### **Level 2**

All elements are made as near as possible, to the sight and to touch, appropriate to the period. They are hand-finished and of appropriate weight. They are in colours and types of material known to have existed in the period represented. Judgement can be used as to whether materials and techniques not authentic to the context, but providing the required level of verisimilitude, can be used. Base metals and paste for jewellery. Includes modifications made for health and safety reasons, such as blunted blades or gripping soles. Appropriate to touch and close inspection.

#### **Level 3**

Elements have period appropriate visual appearance. Items such as fastenings and stitches can be modern. Materials and finish can be modern as long as this is not obvious. Costume jewellery and light-weight arms and armour. Appropriate when a distance of a few metres always separates the viewer from the costume.

#### **Level 4**

Costumes have a visible appearance suggestive of a particular period. Appropriate in a crowd scene or pageant. They do not include obvious anachronisms, but may be made of modern materials and techniques. Costumes may appear fully authentic if viewing conditions are carefully controlled, at a considerable distance, under particular lighting conditions, in medium to long shots on film, in miniature.

#### **Level 5**

Fancy Dress costumes. Having a visible appearance suggestive of a particular period, with no attempt to reproduce period techniques and materials. Includes sprayed string armour, net fabric gauze, costumes glued or stapled. Appropriate for social functions, competitions. Even in photographs and at distance, its inauthenticity would be apparent. This includes include higher level costumes worn inauthentically.

#### **Sarah Thursfield and Ruth Gilbert (M.phil), 'Clothing for King Offa: the challenges and compromises of a commercial reconstruction'**

**Source of specifications** for the linen cloth made for King Offa's shirt:

Linen is rare in archaeological finds and patterned linen is less common than plain, presumably because of the time and therefore cost involved. The threading used is that of fragment SH12 from the 7th century Sutton Hoo ship burial, described in Eilsabeth Crowfoot, 'The Textiles', in Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial* 3, London, British Museum, 1983, p. 419, p. 422-4. In the absence of a body the nature of the Sutton Hoo textiles is indeterminate but this piece was in association with a mail shirt and could represent clothing rather than bed linen or wrapping. A very similar 2/2 broken lozenge twill (1404) of carbonised fibre, probably linen, was found in a late 10th - early 11th century level in York. (Walton, Penelope, *Textiles, Cordage and Raw Fibre from 16-22 Coppergate* (AY17/5), York: Council for British Archaeology, 1989, p. 354).

**Source of specifications** for the wool cloth made for King Offa's leg windings:

The reason for hand weaving the leg bands was to have selvages at both edges rather than hems. The cloth is based on fragments of purple wool twill (1306) from 16-22 Coppergate that Walton Rogers elsewhere suggests are leg windings. These showed traces of lichen purple dye, which is bright but fugitive and the necessary extra expense seemed unreasonable when a similar colour was readily available commercially. (Walton Rogers, Penelope, *Textiles, Cordage and Raw Fibre from 16-22 Coppergate* (AY17/5), York: Council for British Archaeology, 1989, p. 324-5).

**Editorial note:** Ruth sent extremely detailed descriptions of the fibres and processes used in making these cloths, which I did not have room to include. Should anyone wish to see them, contact me and I will pass them on.

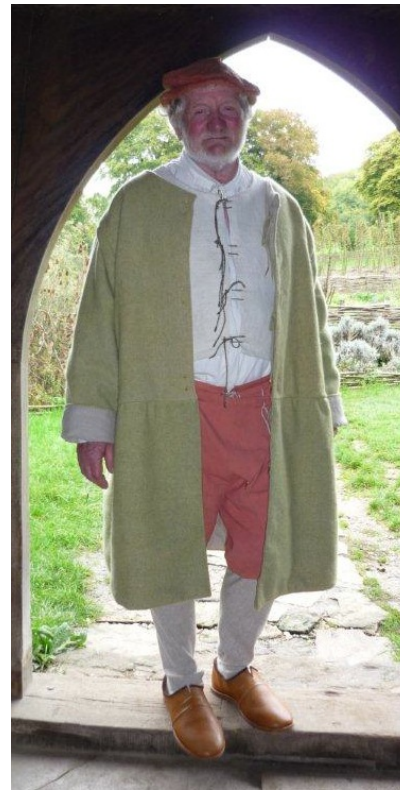
#### **Lesley Parker and Barbara Painter, 'The Historic Clothing Project at the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum, West Sussex Part 1 – The Tudor period'**

The museum's Needlework Group was established in 2006. Its aim has been to explore the rich heritage of surviving garments, needlework and handicrafts as part of the museum's domestic interpretation, and to produce historically accurate clothing to be worn by the staff and volunteer interpreters.

The clothing is made in durable replica fabrics, naturally dyed, and sewn using the techniques of the relevant period. The style, colour and fabrics are as specific to the Weald & Downland region as can be made, and are of a social status applicable to the buildings in which the clothes will worn. The clothing is only one aspect of the

group's work, which also includes domestic textiles for the furnished buildings. A wide range of linens are used – heavy canvas for men's doublets and women's bodies, linen for linings, mattress covers and supports, and sheets. Growing flax has been tried, although lack of funds means that a weaver cannot, as yet, be commissioned.

The range of stitches is not large: a running, or double-running stitch, a tacking or basting stitch, a prick-stitch and over-sewing or over-casting stitches. A back-stitch is used when needed, on harder and less flexible textiles – and there's still a battle to get people to use a thimble! A large sewing group of both staff and volunteers meets up once a month. The skills they learn will hopefully be passed on to another, and younger, generation. The group is made up of stitchers, knitters, quilters, darners and a lace maker, and Steve Kennett, the spinner who has come up with a solution for the wool that gets turned into stockings. Sewing is now done in a small cottage on the site, called Gonville, whose rooms are used for sewing, storage and dressing. The unpredictable outcomes of working with volunteer stitchers almost guarantees that the quality of the stitching does look 'home made'. The volunteers are encouraged to do as much practical work as they feel capable of, including the experimental laying up of patterns to fit a width of cloth, and the knitting of the women's stockings and garters, which are made from the wool of Romney sheep – the closest Steve could get to one of the old breeds. It took a while before a satisfactory tension was achieved, using four pins. The men on site wear cloth hose, now mostly cut with stirrup feet, which are more flexible for the work they do.



Finding images of poor, rural people in Sussex in the Tudor period has been a problem, but a woodcut of a woman churning butter, and a misericord from Fairford in Gloucestershire, though not local, were a starting point. The clothing has to be practical, bearing in mind the variety of tasks carried out on site, and also had to be comfortable and warm in winter. The women's clothing has been made as an outer gown and under-kirtle, worn over a shift and stays. The under-kirtles are made of lightweight fine worsted, dyed using madder, and like the gowns, are lined in linen. Examples of dye plants used on the project can be seen growing in the period gardens at the museum.

The use of canvas for clothing the poor, and leather, can be found in many local records. For being out of doors in all weathers, the men have cotes in a wool cloth, lined in linen, and dyed using natural dyes. They are worn over a canvas doublet, to which are tied breeches and hose. The doublets are collarless, and lace, or tie, across the front, and are needed to hold up the breeches and hose. Health and Safety rules



require the wearing of steel toe-capped boots when using an axe to chop wood on site, but the volunteer in Bayleaf House can wear hand-made shoes.

This has been the first interpretation of clothing relevant to the people and the buildings at the museum. While there is much more that can be achieved -financial constraints are always a consideration! - there is satisfaction in regarding this as a 'work in progress' as we now move forward to work on clothing of the periods circa 1310 and 1380.

### **Christina Petty, 'Historical Recreationists: The (Almost) Untapped Resource'**

Although forms of historical recreation started almost fifty years ago, only recently has the academic community considered tapping into this resource. Historical Recreationists depend on academic and archaeological research for their work: its time to for academics to reap the benefits of the experiential education that Historical Recreations provide. As clothing is the one consistent through all times and places, Historical Recreationists have experience creating and wearing period appropriate dress, often answering some questions or asking others that academics may not yet have addressed. This paper will be an exploration of the increased interaction of these two communities and the ways each may help and inform the other, using examples of experimental archaeology, practices and anecdotes.

### **Katrin Kania, 'Engaging with practitioners'**

With the rise of living history demonstrations as a teaching tool in museums, and living history or re-enactment a popular hobby, this special way of experiencing and learning about history is also becoming a topic of interest for the academic disciplines. Yet many researchers and academics are still wary of engaging with living history groups and individuals. There are, unfortunately, many displays that are thoroughly unhistorical, yet there are also as many good reasons to be involved with living history or re-enactment as there are people active in the field – and accordingly, as many different focuses. The large number of living history participants means that there is a huge pool of potential knowledge and experience, for example regarding crafts or everyday procedures. This knowledge and experience can be harnessed to help with research projects or to furnish museums and exhibitions with high-quality, functioning replicas and reconstructions of everyday items.

One thing to keep in mind is possible communication problems. Even basic terms like "living history" and "re-enactment" may be defined differently by different people, so if something is unclear, it is always best to discuss it. Good communication, here as always, is crucial in getting the intended results.

Another basic fact to keep in mind when working with living history participants is that compromises are an integral part the activity. Most of the compromises happen due to one or both of two big reasons: Health and safety and finances. Compromises due to health and safety may be obvious, such as fights with blunted weapons. Financial reasons often also lead to more or less visible changes, such as using chemically dyed cloth, or fabric of a lower quality. Most living history participants are aware of these compromises. The question of where to draw the line between faithfully replicating past objects and procedures and compromising to keep the interpretation feasible is one that has to be asked again and again, by every group or individual involved in living history or historical interpretation, and the answers will be different depending on the focus and the possibilities of each group or individual.

Living history interpretation is also constrained by limitations of knowledge. Many



people doing living history as a hobby are extremely knowledgeable about their particular area of interest, and can even be in the same league as an academic historian or archaeologist in that. But knowledge about medieval life is not always readily available, and many things have yet to be researched in depth. This causes lacunae in the history, which may need to be filled – and sometimes, this “filling in” is coloured by a modern viewpoint or standards.

Despite all these issues, living history has a lot to offer. Craftspersons working with historical crafts are usually happy to manufacture replicas and will have a good knowledge of tools and methods used, and groups doing living history displays can bring a place or event to life for visitors. With a careful evaluation of the group's or individual's presentation and knowledge, it is possible to get very high quality demonstrators and crafters, and also good, reliable and historically accurate replicas of tools, objects and processes.

However, when dealing with such people, please keep in mind that if you want professional level engagement and professional quality results, the old adage “You get what you pay for” holds true – and hiring professional crafters working with historical tools and methods will also help in keeping their specialised knowledge alive and available.

## **New and Forthcoming Publications**

**Robin Netherton & Gale R. Owen-Crocker, eds, *Medieval Clothing & Textiles*, 7**

Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011.

180pp. ill.

ISBN: Hardcover: 9781843836254

This edition presents six fascinating case histories from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries with a specific focus on the surcoat. Specific case studies to the broader developments regarding the commercial endeavors of cloth merchants are discussed.

Benjamin Wild's analysis of three rolls of cloths from Henry III's wardrobe kept at the National Archives, Kew, London, provides an insight into the negotiation of the royal marriage of his younger sister, Isabella to Emperor Frederick II. The rolls show how Henry took advantage of the wedding through clothing and textiles to demonstrate his position within late medieval politics and society. The documents are also thought to be the earliest surviving documents to record the wedding paraphernalia of an English Royal bride. Wild explains the dynamics and logistics of handling the objects themselves which unlocks a facet into the documentation processes used during this time. The majority of clothing documented was associated with Isabella and Wild often notes and explains the corresponding entries between the rolls; building up a scene of regulating purchases and preferences in choice of cloth. Wild also provides useful transcriptions and translations of the rolls in the appendices.

Isis Sturtewagen's reports on her examination on the variety of frilled veils using over two hundred visual records. This study enabled her to trace the popularity of styles and social significance of frilled veils between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The study relies upon written and visual sources only; referred to as the seriation technique. She provides a useful literary review of work done to date, including several art works. The main aim of her article was to draw better conclusions and understanding of the place frilled veils had in late medieval society. From her collection of sources a database was created containing 193 examples to document

the style changes over the period and to distinguish different types of usage of this fashion. Sturtewagen presents her results in tables and charts which document evidence derived from her visual records. She concludes with a comparison of written sources; reinforcing the increase in popularity of frilled veils in the Low Countries from the mid fourteenth century onwards.

Kimberly Jack focuses on the late fourteenth century English poem, “Pearl” to reassess the dress of the Pearl-Maiden. She examines previous interpretations of the vocabulary of the garments to argue the Pearl-Maiden wears a sideless surcoat, making the dress exceptional, conveying visually that she is a Queen of Heaven. Jack refuses to except the Pearl Maiden’s gown is a ‘simple form of aristocratic dress’, as it is often described in literature. She provides a useful transcription and translation of the section of poem describing the Pearl-Maiden, as well as making comparisons between other editions on terminology regarding this section. Jack explores the development of the wearing of the sideless surcoat from being the choice of attire worn by aristocratic women in the 1330s to it then being a restricted form of dress for queens, powerful noble women and brides in the mid fifteenth century. Her argument certainly clarifies the identity of the Pearl-Maiden as a Queen of Heaven.

Mark Chambers looks at the surcoat, discussing the “surcot ouvert” and the “surcot clos” in the multilingual context of fourteenth and fifteenth century Britain. He compares contemporary evidence with the work of modern costume historians, making new suggestions about chronology and gender distribution.

Eleanor Quinton and John Oldland examine custom accounts shedding light into England’s export trade in wool and woollen cloths in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Prices, destinations of exports and the professional associations of those who shipped the cloth are analysed. Also reported are the mercers and drapers and their business relationships with oversea traders in England. This period is incredibly interesting to target for discussion as England became a leading manufacturer of woollen cloth in Europe. The discussion is taken to the point where the quality of English wool was being challenged. The emergence of the cloth specialist is discussed which allows an insight into the evolvment of the mercers and their powerful and leading companies in London’s cloth trade.

Christine Meek shows the details of textile transactions documented in brokers’ books from the Italian silk centre of Lucca in the early fifteenth century. Discussion includes sources of silk, prices of raw materials, the names and specifications of different silks, the destinations of finished products and designs and designers. Meek highlights that the “Libri de Sensali” or brokers’ book is the most important source. The function of the books was to arrange wholesale transactions between buyers and sellers. Meek goes on to explain the buying and selling of raw materials, finished silk fabrics, sales and values of silk fabrics, silk designs and designers. The only regret with this final chapter is the pictorial reproductions of the Italian silk fragments are in black and white, which removes the impact of these silks to a certain extent.

This volume continues to underline the important impact of both literary and non-literary sources in examining late medieval textiles and clothing. The rich source of evidence, the broad sets of results derived from these sources and important outcomes gained from these researchers is enriching.

**Leanne Tonkin**  
Textile Conservator  
People’s History Museum, Manchester

## Call for contributions

***Iara: revista de Moda, Cultura e Arte, Iara: Fashion Culture and Art Journal***, invites all interested parties to submit articles on the subject of Textiles and Textile Design.

The deadline for this issue is on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2012. Submissions are accepted on Portuguese, Spanish, English and French.

The main objective of this dossier is to show the multiple possibilities of research and the spectrum of knowledge developed on the particular subject of the issue by analyzing different perspectives such as material culture, fashion, design, art, crafts, sustainability, economics, technology, engineering, production and historical studies, among approaches proposed by the authors. In addition, the magazine receives articles, interviews, reviews, essays and audiovisual materials on Fashion, Culture and Arts

**For information** contact the organiser: Prof. Luz Garcia Neira [design.textil@uol.com.br](mailto:design.textil@uol.com.br) or visit *Iara's* website at: <http://www.iararevista.sp.senac.br>.

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## MeDaTS FUTURE MEETINGS

### 2012

**Spring Meeting: *Heavy Metal and Dirty Deeds: Buttons, Hooks & Other Dress Accessories*** - A memorial conference for Geoff Egan held jointly with the Finds Research Group.

Date: Saturday March 10<sup>th</sup>

Venue: Weston Theatre, Museum of London

Some highlights of the program are as follows:

- John Cherry will deliver an encomium for Geoff;
- Anna Marieke Willemsen of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities Lieden, 'Medieval Bling- Spangles, Copper Gilt work and similar';
- Hazel Forsythe Senior Curator of Medieval & Post-Medieval of the Museum of London, 'Buttons- A new collection at the Museum of London';
- Frances Pritchard, 'Silk hairnets, chaplets & related mounts C13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup>.

There will be three or four other speakers. A display of books and artefacts is planned.

**Costs:** £20 for members of MeDaTS or the FRG, £25 for non-members and £15 for students. The member/non-member dual deal remains available. Consult the society website for more details.

**Autumn Meeting (& AGM): *Well Worn Weeds: linen and other vegetable fibres*.**

Date: October

Venue: TBC

### Future topics

*Underwear: linens against the skin / Coronations and Investitures / Dyes.*