

SECTION III: WOMEN'S CLOTHING

WOMEN'S FASHIONS: AN OVERVIEW

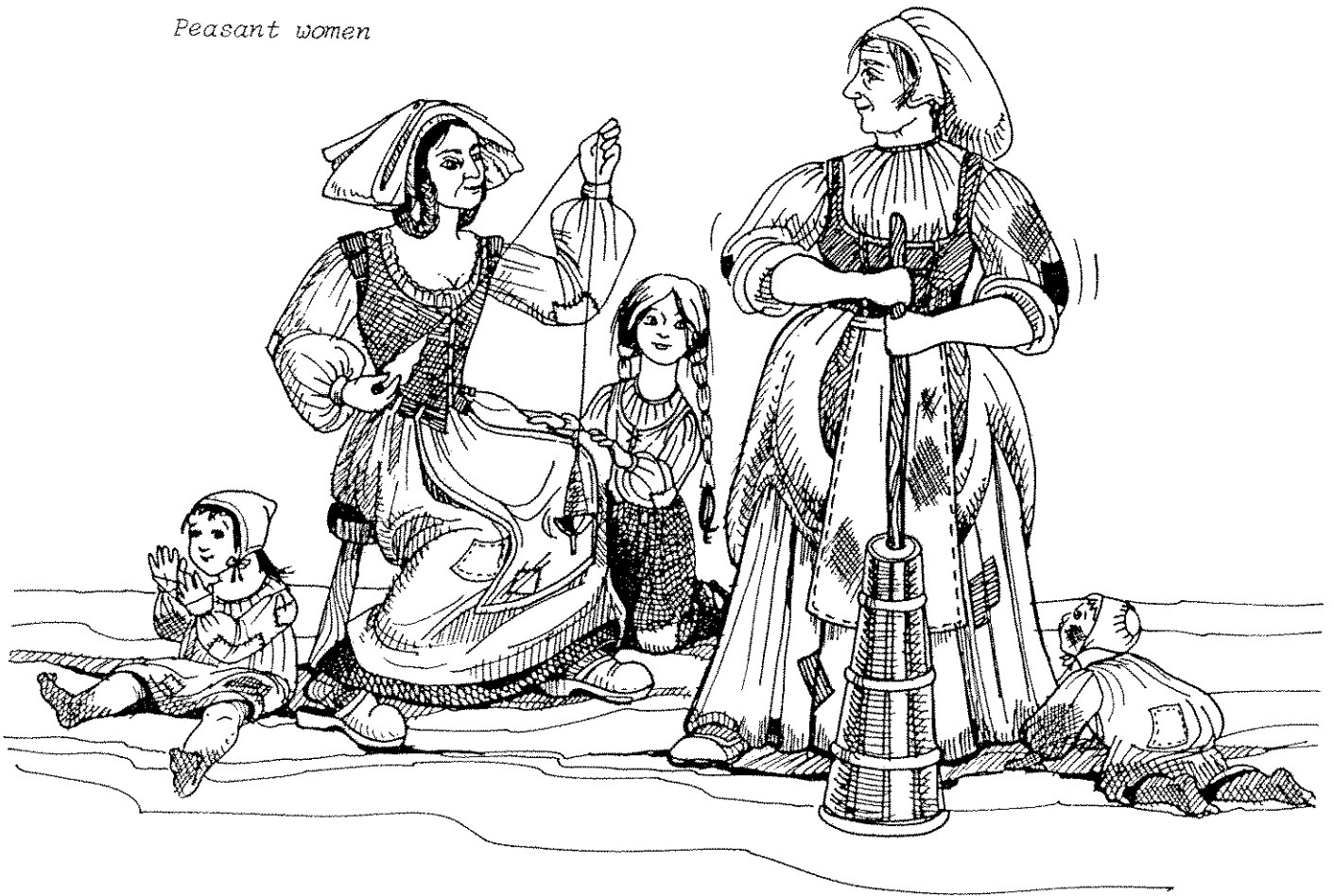
I. Lower Class

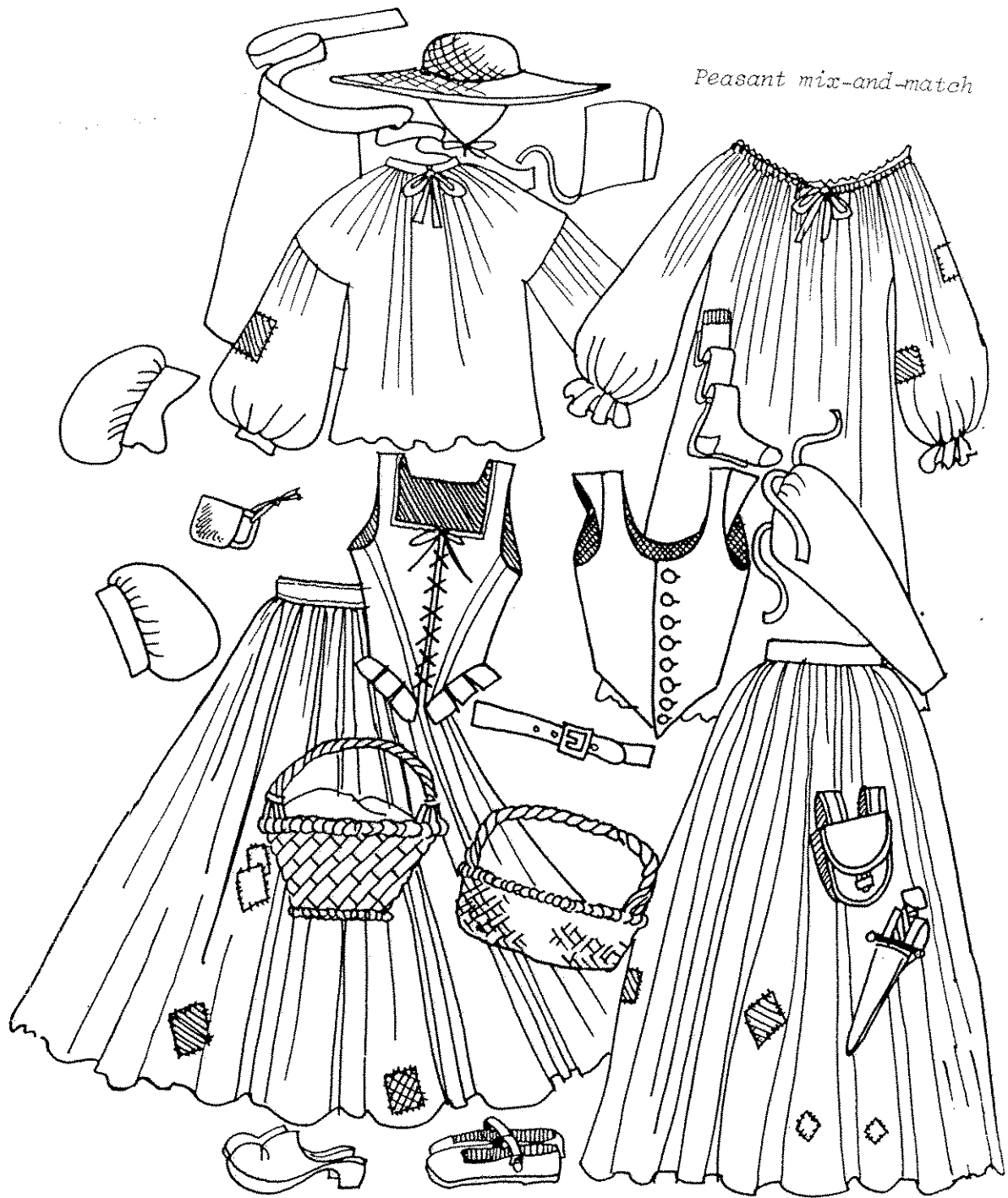
A peasant woman wore a long-sleeved shift under everything, and at least two skirts over that, with the upper skirt, usually newer than the underskirt, tucked up out of the dirt.

Women wore at least two skirts at all times for several reasons. The primary reason was that two or more skirts was a more efficient insulator than one. You must remember that there was no central heating in a peasant's hovel, and much of their time was spent out-of-doors anyway.

She had an apron on over the skirts to keep them clean if she was doing some work, which was most of the time. She wore a tight-fitting, scoop or square necked bodice or vest, which usually came to a point in front, and laced or buttoned on over the shift. It had removable sleeves which were worn or not, depending on the weather.

Peasant women





Peasant mix-and-match

Any woman over the age of thirteen had her hair covered by some sort of headgear, such as a biggins or muffin cap, and the hair itself was usually braided or bundled up out of the way. Women sometimes, but not always, wore knee-length cloth hosen held up by garter ties and she had some kind of shoes if she was lucky.

She had a belt pouch and a small eating knife of her own. She had a basket to carry things gathered in the fields or bought at morning market. In cold weather, she would have a cape or shawl wrapped around her. She had no lace! It was much too expensive.

II. Lower Middle Class

This woman owned more than one shift and the fabric of them was much less coarse than the one worn by the peasant. Her bodice and skirts fit better and could be made of matching fabric. Her sleeves might match, as well. One of her skirts might be decorated or made from a richer material than the other skirt. She wore the richer or newer skirt over the underskirt so it could be shown off to advantage, and tucked it up out of the muck of the streets when she went out.

She could have a modest bumroll under her skirts, and her bodice might be boned on the seams or have a busk down the front of it to have the effect of a corset. Her hair was neater but still worn up off the neck. More care was lavished on the hat or headress, which could be any of several designs.



The hat and pouch or other accessories might be embroidered as well as perhaps matching the fabric of the rest of her garments. She would have some leisure time for that sort of thing. She often carried a bunch of keys at her belt for the various chests and cupboards in her house and she might have a maid-servant to help with her housework. Or she might be a servant to a higher class lady, herself.

Her hosen and shoes would be nicer than those of the peasant woman, but they would still be simple and unadorned. She might have a plain ruff to her shift if it were high-necked. She wore a cape or shawl, perhaps fur-trimmed, to keep her warm in cold weather.

III. Upper Middle Class

Ladies of this class were wives or daughters of knights, country squires, or wealthy merchants or artisans, with their own servants. Or they might be highranking servants in a noble household with a lot of authority and power of their own. Wives and daughters were under the control of their male relatives, having few rights. But widows at this time had a great deal of freedom, being allowed to continue their dead husband's businesses and administrating his properties in their own right. Like their male equivalents, they dressed as well as they could afford.

The upper middle class lady's chemise was almost always high-necked, and made out of some delicate fabric, such as fine linen, imported cotton lawn, or even silk. It might be embroidered and had neck and wrist ruffs, which were lace edged, budget permitting. A married lady or conservative spinster wore her chemise closed down the front and a single lady wore hers open. In the coldest weather, everybody probably closed their chemises just to keep out the cold.

Over the chemise, she wore a busk or corset, bum-roll, farthingale (hoop-skirt), and petticoats, just like the noble ladies but in a less exaggerated style. Her corset was less tight, maybe, her bum-roll was smaller, and her farthingale was less wide around the hem.

Her underskirt, richly decorated, was cut to fit closely over the farthingale, so the effect was that of a stiff A-line long skirt. The bodice was tight-fitting, square-necked and pointed at the bottom of the front, or it was high-necked, with a tall collar. The overskirt was full and pleated or gathered into the waistband. The bodice and overskirt matched and the overskirt might be split up the front to display the fancy underskirt. Her



laced-in sleeves sometimes matched the relatively plain fabric of the skirt and bodice, and sometimes they matched the more ornate underskirt. She sometimes wore the open Spanish Surcote as an extra warm layer of clothing over her gown, or she wore it closed, as a housedress or maternity gown over the shift alone.

Her hair was dressed to imitate the styles of the Court ladies and she wore a variety of wigs, hats and headdresses, just like they did. She might have knitted hosen with pretty ribbon garters and her shoes would have low heels, or be more like dancing slippers. Out of doors, she wore chopines, similar to wooden clogs, over her slippers to keep the mud of the streets off of them.

She had embroidery or other trim decorating the garment edges, and they might also be beaded or jeweled if she was rich enough. Her hat or cap, pouch and shoes could also be decorated like the rest. She still wore the household keys at her belt, but probably not a knife anymore. She would eat with a table knife and fork,



instead. Depending on her pretensions, she might also have a fine feather fan or pomander. She wore whatever jewelry she could afford and the sumptuary laws would allow. Jewelry would include gold and silver chains, strings of glass beads, semi-precious stones, or small pearls. She may have worn rings, brooches, earrings and pins, as well.

IV. Upper Class & Nobility

The upper class lady was a person of rank and distinction. She was often the administrator of vast estates when her lord was gone, or she did so in her own right. She was well educated and her opinions were respected. Elizabeth herself understood, wrote, and spoke something like seven languages fluently. She ruled an empire and left England stronger than she found it. Her ladies of the Court were a power to be reckoned with as they were clever, witty, and politically aware, as well as being beautifully dressed. They were fully a match for the men they lived with.

When a great lady arose in the morning, she removed her night or bedgown and night-cap, and was helped by her servant into her partlet or shift. Night gowns, specifically for sleeping in, had been introduced into the Court of England from France by Anne Boleyn. The lady's chemise was made of the very finest linen, cotton, or silk, and was often so delicately woven as to seem like gauze. They were sometimes embroidered or sewn with pearls. Like the middle classes, married ladies closed their chemises, and single ladies opened theirs.

After the chemise was put on, the next things to be put on were the petticoat, farthingale, bum-roll, and more petticoats. The tightly laced corset took care of any unsightly bumps and bulges, and pushed up the breasts for all to see. Then went on the elaborately decorated underskirt, overskirt, bodice and sleeves. Many ladies wore the Spanish Surcote over all this, especially in cold weather, or they wore the closed surcote by itself over the shift as a casual at-home or maternity gown.

Her hosen were hand-knitted of silk or worsted and were very costly. She wore soft leather shoes with 1"-2" heels, or low heeled slippers made of velvet, satin, or fine Spanish Cordovan leather. They would be further embellished with shoe roses or jeweled buckles. She wore chopines over slippers if she went out walking in the muddy streets.

Her face was heavily made up with the rather primitive and decidedly dangerous cosmetics of the time. The look was for pale skin, pink cheeks, red lips, and large, dark, expressive eyes. White lead was the main ingredient in the foundation, and it pitted the skin, causing more than one lady's early death. Fulminate of mercury was used to peel off the skin pitted by the lead and give a lady a smooth complexion again. Ladies put drops of belladonna in their eyes to make them look bigger. Red hair was always "in" during Elizabeth's reign, but the substances used to dye the hair sometimes caused it to fall out, hence, the popularity of wigs. The Queen herself often wore wigs, especially as she got older, and upper class ladies strove to imitate her. Hair and wigs were dressed in a variety of styles from short and curly

to long and straight, brushed over pads to a bun in the back, like the 1940's pompadour style.

Hats were many different styles, too. The most popular styles were the flat cap, French Hood, Attifet, and the tall crowned hat that was so popular with the middle classes. Court ladies would sometimes wear a long, pearl-edged gauzy veil over a diadem. For hunting, they bundled up their hair into a net and securely pinned on a flat cap or other hunting hat over that.

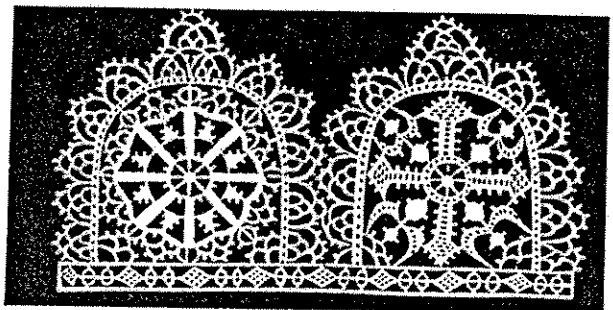
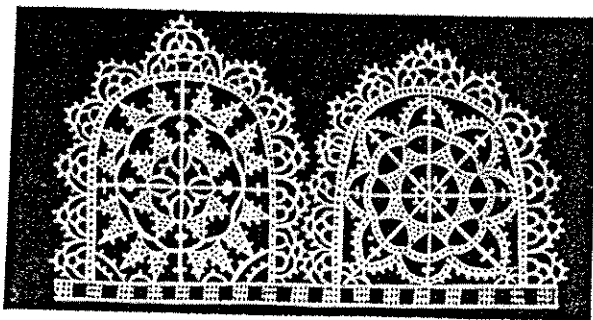
Ruffs were every size from tiny ruffles at neck and wrist to 6" wide constructions which owed their size and stability to liberal applications of starch. The largest ruffs had to be held up by a wire support and special long spoons were designed to help the most fashionable to eat their food. This era saw the rise of an entire profession dedicated to keeping these ruffs beautiful.

From her girdle (belt), she would have hanging a pomander, fan, maybe a small purse, hand mirror, handkerchief, or scissors and needle-case combination. Fans were made of feathers or cloth and were shaped like a flat circle or oval on a stick. Folding fans, imported from the Orient, made their first appearance toward the end of this period, so a very few Court ladies might have them, but no one in the lower classes would. They had fans woven of straw most often. Pomanders were pierced metal balls with scent inside, or a dried orange or lemon studded with cloves and placed in an embroidered or jeweled velvet covering. They were used to keep away "bad airs" which they thought carried diseases. In a time when people seldom bathed and streets were an open sewer, they might not have been far wrong.

The lady would wear scented gloves made of fine, soft leather and slit over the tops of her fingers to display her rings. When she went outside on a rare, sunny day, she wore a mask over her face to avoid sunburn. This also served to guarantee her anonymity if she so desired.

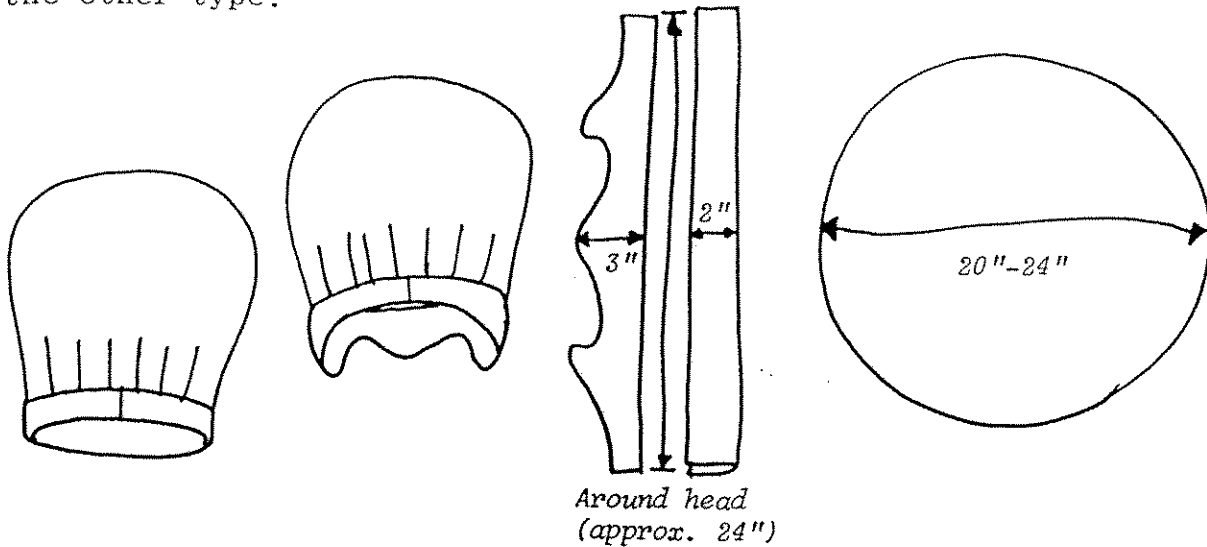
Jewelry was abundant, including gold chains, bracelets, necklaces, brooches, rings, strands of pearls, earrings, jeweled buttons, girdles and tips for her points. After she was dressed, it was a wonder that she could move at all.

It must be remembered that a great lady did not work with her hands more strenuous than needlework, or mixing simples. Also recall that ordinary day wear, even for a noble lady, was much less ornate and confining, than her finest gown for Court wear.



Lace patterns

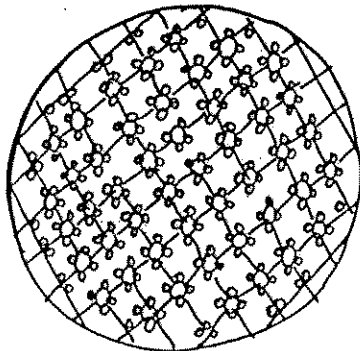
To make the muffin hat with the shaped brim, cut a pattern from a piece of paper 4"-5" wide and 24" long. Play with the shape of the brim, until it pleases you and use this as a pattern to cut two brims out of your fabric (and interfacing if you want to make it keep its shape). Join the ends of the brim and sew them together along the front edge. Turn and press, then finish as with the other type.



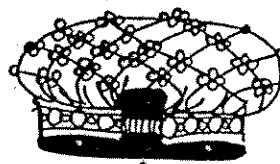
Escoffion or Caul

Similar to the muffin cap was a headpiece known as the caul or escoffion. It was made in a way similar to the muffin cap with the plain brim, except that the fabric was much richer and highly decorated with embroidery and beadwork, with a fancy jeweled headband. It should be made slightly smaller than the actual muffin cap, so that it won't hang down the back of the neck so far.

To make a caul, cut a band like that of the plain brimmed muffin cap, and a circle of 18"-20" diameter. Any decoration of the round piece should be done while it is still flat. Then, gather it into the band as for the muffin cap and decorate the band to please yourself.



Decorate & jewel
(18"-20" diameter)



Elastic or
ties here

