

Pattern Reviews X

Welcome to part ten of our Pattern Reviews where we pick up the second part of EVENING DRESSES and BALL GOWNS. Oh I know that some of you were very anxious for this and rest assured it will be worth the wait, as there are lovely gowns here!

Last time we separated them into two categories: COSTUMES & PERIOD APPROPRIATE. But all of the patterns included in this month's reviews will be evaluated under the period appropriate category.

A period appropriate BALL GOWN was made for dancing and was suppose to be lightweight and of a very light color so you don't succumb to the "floating head" theory. Remember lighting was not great, and too dark of a dress and all you can see from a distance is your head bobbing around. (the floating head) So ladies please try to stay away from black or navy blue. White and pastels are wonderful!

A period appropriate EVENING DRESS would be worn by a woman who would not be up dancing around. They could have been velvet or a medium weight material. And a more mature woman could wear jewel tones with a bit more color, but not too dark, as no one wanted to be the "floating head".

For those of you who are new to my review articles, I am trying to give my honest opinion of patterns that are available to reenactors just starting out, so that YOU don't waste your hard earned money on bad patterns or ones that are too difficult to understand, like I did when I first started reenacting. I have enlisted the help of several close friends I call my "SECRET SEWING SOCIETY" and together we sew the patterns, compile our opinions, and let you know what we thought. We even include photos of the finished product. (If our secret sewer has a digital camera.)

What specifically will the reviews tell you?

Pros & Cons: any detail we think you'd need to know before buying the pattern. Plus what you may need to alter to make the pattern work better for you.

Sewing Level: No sense buying a totally authentic pattern if you can't understand the directions. None of us are professional seamstresses, if we can't understand the directions we'll tell you about it. We'll categorize Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced.

Sizing: Are the size charts accurate by today's standards. I know size is a big issue with most women, so let me reassure you, I am no size 0 and all of the friends I have enlisted to help are over a size 10.

Documentation: Are the patterns based on original garments or would they be categorized as costumes.

Overall Satisfaction: We will rate each pattern

★ Not worth your time

★★ Not so great

★★★ Average

★★★★ Good

★★★★★ GREAT!

I have divided my series into several sections as Civil War Women have lots of layers. The categories are: Undergarments -- Part I & Part II, Work Dresses & Aprons, Day/Best Dresses -- Part I & Part II, Wrappers, Riding Habits, Evening Dresses & Ball Gowns -- Part I & Part II, Outerwear, Bonnets & Other hair accessories, Corsets, New/Missed Patterns, and of course the "Best-Of-The-Best" Award Winners where we'll pick our top pattern choices from each category and even reveal the identities of the infamous **SECRET SEWING SOCIETY**.

As I mentioned earlier, not only will you see the pattern covers, but we'll show you what our finished product looks like, so you can see for yourself what a dress from that particular pattern COULD look like! We'll also add notes as to what we've changed in the pattern to make it fit, personalized, or more period appropriate.

BUT before we get started on the dress reviews, my Secret Sewing Society want me to mention the **THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES** made by new reenactors in regards to making/choosing their own evening dresses and ball gowns.

#1 -- PERIOD APPROPRIATE PATTERNS!

This will be covered based on each pattern. We all know folks who attend their first events go to the big name store, buy a pattern, some material and just go with whatever. My Secret Sewing Society and I have tried to separate these categories for you. We will call a pattern a COSTUME if we can't find any period fashion plates for which the pattern has been based on. I will

continued . . .

WHAT TO SEW continued . . .

also point out that most costume patterns can be spotted easily by new reenactors (psst they have zippers in the back!) And that is a major no-no for reenactors!

#2 -- FABRIC CHOICE! Sounds easy right, but even the best patterns out there can be ruined if it is made with the wrong fabric.

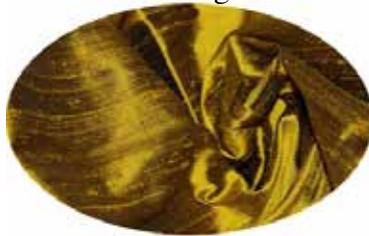
If you plan on dancing the night away, don't make a ball gown out of heavy velvet with lots of trim. And even if black is your favorite color, please limit it to your shoes, and make your dress a lighter color.

If you are a more mature lady and are more of a chaperone than a dancing partner, your dress can be of a medium weight fabric with more jewel-toned color, but still try to stay away from dark colors and try to keep the colors near your face and neck lighter.

Some of the best books I've read say the ladies used to show their wealth in the actual fabric of their dresses as opposed to excessive use of trim. So by all means pay a bit more for the finest silk, and save money on trims. Less really can be more.

And not to be the picky one here, but the debate on Silk Taffeta vs. Dupioni Silk can be summed up in one statement, I've never seen an original dress or photographs of an original dress that was made out of a fabric that contained slubs. So if you can see the slubs in the dupioni, stay away. If the slubs are EXCEPTIONALLY TINY and you cannot see them unless under a microscope . . . well I won't get into that argument.

Here is a picture of what I mean by "SLUBS". See the lines in the fabric? They are quite obvious, so STAY AWAY!



But from my experience on EBAY the better quality Silk Taffeta isn't that much more expensive than the Silk Dupioni. And watch out for those advertising Raw Silk as some is AOK and others are not. Get a swatch sent to you if you can.

#3 -- SLEEVE CHOICE! Again this sounds easy right? Just make any pattern out of any fabric, just like it is on the pattern cover, and Viola! But unfortunately, life is never that easy.

Evening Dresses usually have open sleeves with and without undersleeves.

Ball Gowns have been seen with sheer bishop sleeves, but more commonly short sleeves.

Refer back to the sleeve chart from my previous articles if you have any questions.

#4 -- METAL GROMETS on BALLGOWNS – or anywhere else visible on clothing – is a major NO-NO for CW era! I have seen many a lovely ballgown that was ruined with these, so please stay away from them at all cost.

In my reviews I will be talking about specifics on Ball Gowns, so I wanted to start of with a picture to illustrate what I am talking about. #1. Note the "V" shaped bertha that extends shoulder to shoulder creating a deep V look. This one is trimmed with white lace and is only attached to the underlying bodice at the very top edge. #2. Notice the neck tucker that is just above the bertha that is a sheer fabric with a black ribbon. It adds just a bit of sheer to the dress, and helps in adjusting for fit at the neckline. And notice the overall color. A light color



*Note that this dress has very little trim but I am showing wealth with the silk fabric itself. And the apple green is a very complimentary color for me.

A special thanks to Kay Gnagey (www.Originals-By-Kay.com) for designing this dress just for me.

Ok enough chatter, let's get on with it, welcome to What To Sew . . . And What NOT To Sew: Part X -- EVENING DRESSES / BALL GOWNS Part II.

WHAT TO SEW continued . . .

**TRULY VICTORIAN
1851 PETAL BALL GOWN
SKIRT -- TV246**

Average Cost: \$ 9.00

Sewing Level: Beginner

Dress Fabric 11¼ yds
Petal Trimmings 11 yds
Skirt Trimmings 19 yds
Skirt length 42"

allow extra fabric for a bodice!



Description: This skirt design was first seen in 1847, and again later in 1851, both times as a ballgown. The petals can be made of a sheer fabric if desired. Although designed to fit as a pre-hoop skirt, the extra wide lower flounce gives enough fullness at the hem (225"), to fit over any size hoop. The most common style of trimming shown is for the Petals to be trimmed with fabric ruches or lace ruffles. The lower flounce was trimmed with three rows of fabric ruches, or with lace ruffles.

Pros: Pattern is one size fits all; the waist can be pleated to fit any measurement. Pattern also adds that if you need to make the skirt shorter in front (ie if your hoop is oval) to take the excess fabric from the waist edge prior to attaching the waistband. That will help trimmings etc stay level. Directions are very simple and easy to follow and even include a section on trimming suggestions.

Cons: The directions although very clear, really could use a few more illustrations. We all love pictures to assure us we are sewing the right thing in the right place. Our first sewer chose to make her petal trims out of ruffles. Sewer two chose ribbon trim, and sewer three chose silk fringe. I am sorry to say that all three of our sewers were quite disappointed in the end. Not even submitting photos. Most said the skirt made them look heavy or too wide. (and that's saying a lot coming from our size 10 model) One sewer did mention that if they were to tackle this pattern again, they'd try it in a sheer.

Overall Satisfaction: ★★

Documentation: Our authenticity experts are concerned that the "tabards" look too wide for the skirt. Most illustrations they've seen show the tabards to have at least as much space between them as they are wide.

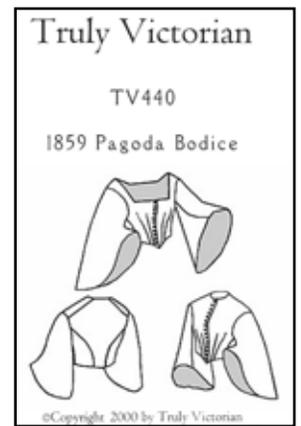
**TRULY VICTORIAN
1859 PAGODA BODICE --
TV440**

Average Cost: \$ 13.00

Sewing Level: Beginner

Fabric 3¾ yds
Lining 3¾ yds
Interlining 1¾ yds

allow extra fabric for a skirt!



Description: This bodice is in three pieces, Front, Side, and Back, the most common style of the early Victorian period. The shoulder is cut with an elongated line, and is finished with a large Modified Pagoda sleeve, which is fitted at the armhole, but full below the elbow. Optional necklines, either high necked for day wear, or an open square neck for evening events. The front can be either straight across, or a shallow point at the waist.

Pros: Pattern is one size fits all. Directions are given on how to choose which letter sizing works best for you.

Cons: The directions although very clear, really could use a few more illustrations. We all love pictures to assure us we are sewing the right thing in the right place.

**Reenactor Note: The open square neck option would be for an evening dress. If wearing that style in the daylight hours we'd suggest wearing a chemisette to cover the exposed skin. Remember showing that much skin during the day would not be appropriate.*

Overall Satisfaction: ★★★★★



SEWER SECRETS:

This secret sewer chose to make the high body bodice in a gorgeous magenta silk and added black glass button up the front.

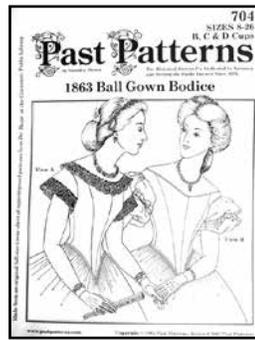
**Note photos were taken on a mannequin and a white collar and undersleeves will be added before wearing.*

continued . . .

WHAT TO SEW continued . . .
PAST PATTERN 704
1863 BALL GOWN BODICE

Average Cost: \$12.00
Sewing Level: Beg/Int
Sizing: Good

Avg Fabric Yds needed: 2 1/2
allow extra fabric for a skirt!



Description: A princess seam construction makes this bodice easy to fit and sew. The puff sleeve with bows or the bell sleeve change the bodice from fancy to tailored. The bodice closes and fastens in the back with lace that is drawn through eyelets. The bodice is boned. The point may be made shorter without changing the overall look.

Pros: Directions are excellent and even include a section on how to determine "cup" size for your bodice. Enlist the help of a friend to help "fit" this pattern for you. The directions include wonderful tips for getting the perfect fit, but you need a friend. (Your mannequin will not be "close enough")

Cons: With all back closing bodices, you cannot get dressed in this bodice alone at events. Trust me, I've tried! Either a husband or friend will be required to get into and out-of. The only other challenges we had was to get the deep point in front to lay right and our beginner had some difficulty with the piping edges.
**Note: This pattern does not include a bertha or neck tucker, which is something most reenactors like on ballgowns.*

Documentation: Made from an original full size tissue sheet of superimposed patterns from February 1863 *Der Bazar*.

Overall Satisfaction: ★★★★★

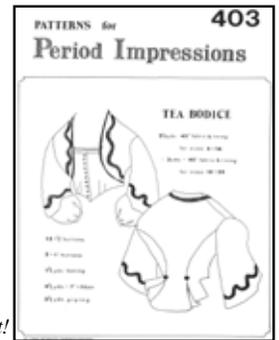


SEWER SECRETS:
Our secret sewer used gold lace and double piping on the bottom. Also added a neck tucker to the top edge which is visible against the purple mannequin.

PERIOD IMPRESSIONS
TEA BODICE 403

Average Cost: \$ 9.00
Sewing Level: Beg/Int
Sizing: questionable

Avg Fabric Yds needed: 3
allow extra fabric for a skirt!



Pros: Unusual style not often seen at reenactments.

Cons: Definitely are some accuracy problems on the pattern pieces. They didn't seem to fit together well. There is no separate pattern directions, they are all printed on the large pattern paper. Directions included illustrations, but were still unclear to our beginner sewer. Our advanced sewer put the pattern together without the directions. All of our sewers had to make modifications. Every sewer had difficulty with the pleating in the back. Most had to re-adjust several times before getting it just right.

Documentation: This pattern is taken directly from one of the Janet Arnold Patterns of History books.

Authenticity Police Alert: A big problem with this pattern is the NAME. The term "tea dress" did not exist until at least a decade or more after the war was over. Then the term was used to describe what is basically a very elegant wrapper that was sometimes worn when a lady (especially one in the family way) was entertaining her close "lady" friends for mid day or afternoon tea. Which is not what this pattern is in regards to. A dress made with a bodice from this pattern should be made of silk and worn for elegant evening affairs such as formal dinner parties or receptions. IF this bodice is to be worn at all during the day, it should have a full chemisette or "habit shirt" of delicate fabric under it to fill in the square "Watteau" "Pompadour" or "Martha Washington" neckline. (All are terms used in Beadle's Dime Guide to Dressmaking and Millinery for this kind of low square neckline.) Remember showing that much skin during the day would not be appropriate.

Overall Satisfaction: ★★

continued . . .

WHAT TO SEW continued . . .

GALLA ROCK DINNER DRESS 211

Average Cost: \$ 15.00

Sewing Level: Beginner

Sizing: Good

Single skirt 9 yds

Double skirt 14 yds



Description: This pattern gives the basic square neckline dinner dress with instructions for single skirt or double skirt & pagoda sleeves. Bodice is boned and piped with hook & eye closure in the front. Skirt is pleated and has hem facing.

Pros: This pattern has the nicest pagoda sleeves I've seen in a while. Personally I have used this particular sleeves pattern piece on 3 different dresses.

Cons: The directions are clear, but we would prefer more illustrations to assist us. One of the only cons we found was there was some difficulty with the back section. Some found a "buckling" problem near the waistband. Others had difficulty getting it to lay flat and properly attached to skirt.

Overall Satisfaction: ★★★★★

**Reenactor Note: The open square neck option would be for an evening dress. If wearing this style in the daylight hours we'd suggest wearing a chemisette to cover the exposed skin. Remember showing that much skin during the day would not be appropriate.*



SEWER SECRETS:

Our secret sewer used this gorgeous green plaid silk taffeta. She made the skirt and bodice as two separate pieces and then attached them together. The bodice is piped on the bottom edge and the skirt opening is in the front.

continued . . .

**SIMPLICITY FASHION
HISTORIAN #5724** **Out of print*

Average Cost: \$ 16.95
Sewing Level: Beginner

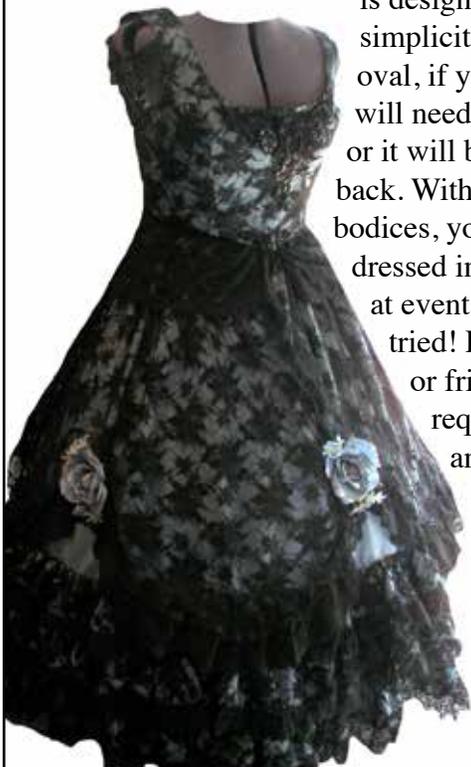
Avg Fabric Yds needed: 16
**note this is for 54" wide fabric*

Pros: Bodice goes together pretty easily, but our beginner did have difficulty with the hand eyelet holes. The overskirt is pleated at the waistband and the underskirt is pleated and cartridge pleated.

Cons: Give no directions on how to alter skirt length. If the skirt is too long you will be tripping on it while dancing. Directions are given for straight stitch gathering or cord gathering the ruffles, both of which take lots of time. When making the pleats on the over sleeve, check for fit before sewing down as some of our sewers needed to readjust the sizing in the armhole. The french seams used are not period. Our fuller chested ladies may want to try on the berth first and make adjustments to the pleats. This dress is designed to go over the simplicity hoop which is oval, if yours is round you will need to alter the skirt or it will be too long in the back. With all back closing bodices, you cannot get dressed in this bodice alone at events. Trust me, I've tried! Either a husband or friend will be required to get into and out-of.



*Here is the original picture
1865 Journal Des Demoiselles*



**Overall
Satisfaction:**
★★★★

Author Notes: Ok be honest, how many of us have seen this pattern at an event? Wow, everyone. I am the seamstress behind the creation below. I made this dress when this pattern was first released. As it is, it is **NOT APPROPRIATE** for CW! Accuracy in reenacting is a process and I am constantly learning! So don't be discouraged if your first CW dress attempts are not 100% CW accurate, as you can plainly see . . . Neither were mine! Let's talk about why this dress is not appropriate for CW. (1) The bodice was from another pattern and is the wrong shape all together. (2) I made it out of too heavy a fabric; the skirt alone weighs about 10 lbs (3) The flowers sprays I made using a hot glue gun & are attached with safety pins.

What have I learned since sewing this dress? (1) Crepe back satin although great for the non-wrinkle factor is way too heavy a material for a ball gowns, stick with lighter weight fabrics. (2) Stay away from black with ball gowns as it is too dark and no one wants to be a floating head (3) Less tank top style and more wide boat neck just off the shoulder (4) STOP THINKING 21ST CENTURY!

Now be honest, how many recognized the dress below as this particular pattern? One thing that I have a tendency to do when making a dress from a major pattern line, is that I do something to make mine unique. No one wants to hear "Hey, your ball gown is made from the same pattern as mine." With so many of these patterns being sold, it is difficult to create something special. The idea behind my dress would still work, use this pattern for the skirt, but use a different one for the bodice or vise versa. That way yours will have a slightly different look from everyone else's from the same pattern. I've actually seen a dress out of this particular pattern at every event I have attended since 2004. Here are the two that stick out in my mind. #1 was made exactly like the cover colors, and it was made out of lining material . . . you could see right through it. And she wasn't in period undergarments which means everyone saw her 21st century lingerie. #2 was made with black satin with silver metallic trim. Don't think she wasn't the spokesperson for the floating head.

Learning is a process and the more you learn what NOT to wear, the more you will be able to take a pattern like this and make it as period correct as you can and make it your own. All my reenactor friends have admitted to wearing something when first starting out that is in their closet now collecting dust, because now they know better. Never stop learning and never think your are 100% accurate, someone, somewhere will have done new research that will prove you wrong.

continued . . .

Simplicity 2881
The Museum Curator
Designs By Kay

Average Cost: \$ 17.95

Sewing Level: Beginner

Sizing: Excellent



Avg Fabric Yds needed: 8

**note this is for 60" wide fabric*

Documentation: Full documentation can be found at http://originals-by-kay.com/learn_about/Simplicityball.htm

Pros: This is one of the very first simplicity ball gowns we have ever found that includes a proper neck tucker!!! Applause, applause! Also follow the measurements carefully on the package because sizing is different from other simplicity patterns. Our sewer who normally sews a simplicity "10/12" was a "14/16" in this one and it fit her like a glove! Our size "24" gal agreed that the fit was perfect!

Cons: This skirt has cartridge pleating which can be tricky if you don't know what you are doing. Take your time and do it right and the results will be amazing. Be sure to clip your seams in the back of the bodice; the curved, cornered back middle piece is tricky. Try sewing it in two steps otherwise the fabric might pucker.



Overall Satisfaction:

★★★★★

SEWER SECRETS:
Our Secret Sewer left off the bretelles and made a simpler version of this gown. She used box pleating on the skirt instead of cartridge pleats.

Description: The gown's design is based on an extant gown in Vienna, Austria, dated to ca 1865. (pictured below) The bodice pattern and sleeve base are taken from a full sized paper pattern published in 1862 in "Der Bazar" (Berlin, Germany) and "La Mode Illustree" (Paris, France).



These photos and many more can be found on the full documentation page listed to the left.

Notes from the website: Take your time, there is a lot of trim, but it is all layered on, so no single step is too difficult, there are just many layers. The bretelles are not attached where they go over the shoulders – the idea is to give a broad square neck look. This should be fitted carefully to avoid the bodice neck edge and/or bretelles sliding off the shoulders. For larger sizes, cut the bretelles wider at the shoulders, so everything looks in proportion.

Notes: This dress is designed to go over the simplicity hoop which is oval, if yours is round you will need to alter the skirt or it will be too long in the back. With all back closing bodices, you cannot get dressed in this bodice alone at events. Trust me, I've tried! Either a husband or friend will be required to get into and out-of.

Definitions:

Bertha -- A wide deep collar, often of lace, that covers the shoulders of a dress.

Bretelle -- One of a pair of ornamental straps that go from the belt on the front of a dress over the shoulders to the belt in back.

WHERE TO FIND THESE PATTERNS

Butterick, McCalls, & Simplicity can all be found in the BIG NAME STORES, but here is where you can find some of the other patterns we mention in our reviews.

Elizabeth Stewart Clark's Free Online Patterns
www.ElizabethStewartClark.com

Fig Leaf Patterns www.Originals-By-Kay.com

Galla Rock www.GallaRock.com

Harriets www.Harriets.com
www.VictorianTreasuresByMary.com

Heidi Marsh Patterns www.JamesCountry.com

HomeSpun Patterns www.JamesCountry.com

Laughing Moon Patterns www.lafnmoon.com

Old World Patterns www.JamesCountry.com

Past Patterns www.PastPatterns.com
www.Originals-By-Kay.com

Peachtree Patterns www.Originals-By-Kay.com

Period Impressions www.abrahamslady.com
www.JamesCountry.com

Truly Victorian www.trulyvictorian.com
www.VictorianTreasuresByMary.com

Our next review will be CORSETS. They have been sewn, and even survived a season of wear and tear testing. See which ones come out on top. My Secret Sewing Society and I will continue to keep sewing, and look forward to filling our closets with new stuff!

Each new review might include new season stuff as well, as the major name brands have new patterns due out in Spring/Fall seasons. So if you see a pattern # and cannot find it in stores check EBAY. If a new pattern comes out midseason and we've passed that layer, one of my last articles will cover "missed patterns".

Please feel free to contact me if you know of a pattern line we are missing. I love new patterns! And if you happen to see me out & about stop by to chat, I'd love to hear your opinions on dress patterns too! I listen to it all: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And for those of you asking for a more "indepth" guidelines I'd like to plug a site that might just be what you are looking for www.ElizabethStewartClark.com is my favorite sewing forum site. She lists free patterns and even had a section on dressmaking articles.

SECRET SEWING SOCIETY FUN FACTS

Are any pets in the room while you are sewing?
100% said YES Apparently we all have a dog or cat that likes to "help" us sew our projects.

When did you start sewing?
70% started before the age of 13
10% started as a teenager
20% started less than 2 years ago

Do you munch while sewing?
100% said YES we all have a drink and munchie well within reach from the machine

Do you watch TV while you sew?
70% said YES
20% said NO
10% was "sometimes"

MEET CHERI FRY

She lives in a small ranch style house in Jacksonville, IL.

Her new home is much closer to work, and has a fully functional sewing room that is completely filled with fabrics and trims.

Cheri lives with two male cats that she has rescued. They are always near her feet as she sews. They love playing with any trims or ribbons that may happen to fall off the table.

Cheri has been Civil War reenacting since June 2004. Her main interest is women's clothing. Cheri does both a middle-upper class & working class impression.

Cheri's real life job is as a Graphic Arts Specialist for Bound to Stay Bound Books in Jacksonville, IL. BTSB specializes in binding quality children's books for schools and libraries. www.btsb.com

Cheri is a driving force behind Veterans Remembered, which honors veterans from all wars. She is also on the General Grierson Days committee. More information can be found on these committees on a web site she designed www.griersonsociety.org

