

Buying Guide by Criss

If you are going to make a lot of garb at home, by hand or by machine, this is a guide for buying time-saving equipment, period looking cloth & trim, and an idea of retail store areas where you can get the most out of your time and money when shopping.

People interested in going shopping in one of the cloth districts with me should call (718)436-6278. Also feel free to give me a call while out shopping if you have any questions.

Sewing Arsenal

In order to sew, you need some minimal equipment. However, as you continue to sew, you may want to increase your "arsenal" to maximize your time, to produce more outfits, or to increase the durability and period styling of your clothes. The following are supplies you might consider having in your arsenal:

Minimal Necessary

- *Scissors - for cutting cloth (Dressmaker's shears are better)
- Sharps (hand-sewing needles) in varying sizes
- *Thread (of good quality) to match your fabrics & trims
- **Fabric
- *Yardstick
- *Tape measure
- *Chalk, tailor's chalk (pref. non-wax), blue-line pen, etc.

Very Highly Recommended

- *Scissors (small for cutting thread, etc.)
- *Dressmaker's shears (bent handle)
- *Pins, silk (size 20) - for lightweight fabrics
- *Pins, glass-headed quilting (size 28) - for wools & velvets
- *Sewing machine
- Machine needles - universal for general sewing, sharps for wools, jeans needles for heavy denim, canvas, or other heavy tight-woven fabrics.
- Craft paper (large roll), for saving patterns
- *Seam ripper
- **Iron, ironing board
- Interfacing

- *Seam guide (accessory for sewing machines)
- Scrap material - cheap material for testing on
- Beeswax (to wax thread when hand-sewing)

Optional

- Pinking shears
- Rotary cutting tool (use w/cutting board or self-healing cutting board)
- *Sewing patterns (Simplicity, McCalls, Vogue, etc.)
- *Trim
- Cutting board
- Carpenter's square
- Seam gauge
- *Serger/overlock (machine that does "professional" stitches)
- Index cards & stapler (for swatches)
- Pincushion
- Metal ruler
- French curve (or dressmaker's curve)
- Liquid fray preventer
- Books: sewing techniques and pattern alteration (ex. *Sewing Made Easy* by Dorothy Sara - try a used book store), a serger book if one has a serger (such as Singer's *Sewing with an Overlock*), garb-making books & pamphlets

* Bring with you to sewing workshops, if you can. Also recommended is to bring a surge protector with you. If you can't bring a sewing machine, call to reserve one. If you have spare sewing machine(s), please offer them for other's use. We may be able to arrange a pickup at your place for them.

** If you have a car, please pack your iron & ironing board, just in case.

Where to go

There are several local garment districts which include many cloth shops. There are scattered shops outside of the particular garment districts. For the most concentrated number of stores and the best retail prices, check out the districts. I have not had a chance to check out selection and pricing at all of the stores listed below, but I've included phone numbers so you can call for hours and ask questions, and I've included comments for the ones I've been to.

Brooklyn:

Fulton Mall fabric district (Bridge St. between Fulton Mall and Willoughby St.) Sew Rite Fabrics (388 Bridge St. 522-2525, patterns [McCalls, New Look, etc.], fabrics & remnants), Fabric Discount Stores (392 Bridge, 625-7200), NY Fabrics (393 Bridge St. 624-3211), 398 Bridge St. Fabrics Inc. (875-9255). I have probably shopped all of these stores, but I need to re-survey them to add comments to this list.

There are two craft stores I know of which carry sewing supplies & patterns [Simplicity & MaCalls]. I am generally disappointed with their fabrics & fabric prices: Rag Shop (1260 60th Street, 871-8580), Fabric Bonanza (5644 Ave. U, past Kings Plaza, in the Pergament mall 951-1228).

There are three small fabric shops on 7th Avenue in the Slope. Two of them are quilter's paradises which happen to carry sewing supplies as well, the third is a pricy upholstery shop: Sew Brooklyn (228 7th Avenue, 499-7383, quilting, patterns [Berda & New Look in stock, McCalls & Kwik Sew to order]), Park Slope Sewing Center (297 7th Avenue, between 7th & 8th St., 832-2556, more quilting, patterns [McCalls & Berda]), The Fabric Alternative (78 7th Avenue, 857-5482, upholstery & drapery supplies, no patterns, a few remnants, pricy!)

There are two shops on 5th Avenue in the South Slope: Bergos Antonio (637 5th Avenue, 768-0419), Pola Fabrics (5th Avenue & 8th Street).

Bensonhurst: Fabric Discount Stores (2044 86th Street, near 20th Ave., 996-2100, fabrics, remnants, patterns (McCalls, Vogue, Butterick)), AABC Fabric Corp (2255 86th St., between Bay Parkway & 23rd Avenues, 232-7876).

Other Brooklyn Stores that might be of interest: Dan Sacks Fabrics (8214 3rd Avenue, 748-0059), Khan Fabrics (6211 18th Avenue, 234-7323, open 7 days), Bergos Antonio (8022 5th Avenue, 748-2274), Belle Fabrics (8310 5th Avenue, 921-3873).

Manhattan:

Broadway below Grand St. (the district just keeps going block after block). Look out for the "Wholesale Only" sign at the door of

fabric shops, they won't let you in unless you're buying bolts of fabric. The following are retailers on this strip: Rae Home (452 Broadway, 212-966-1414, raetrading@compuserve.com, upholstery galore, don't know their prices, they have a "bargain" section in the basement), Jariel Fabrics (459 Broadway, across from Rae Home, 212-226-7967, some good looking upholstery fabrics, etc. I didn't get a price range), Fabric Warehouse (406 Broadway 212-431-9510, just South of Canal St., open 7 days, check out their remnant wools and velvets!), P&S Fabrics Corp (355 Broadway, 212-226-1534, between Leonard & Franklin St., they carry Vogue, Butterick, McCalls, Simplicity, New Look, Berda & Style patterns at least 50% off list prices, more wool & velvet remnants, upholstery fabrics & remnants downstairs), 360 Broadway? (across from P&S Fabrics, 212-226-4530, \$.99-1.49/yard fabrics with some great selections in the chemise-weight cottons & they have some upholstery remnants in a bin at the door).

Between 7th & 8th Aves. on 38, 39 & 40th Streets (39th has a wonderful, huge, discount fabric shop). The next time I'm in that district, I'll be sure to get cards and jot my comments down so I can flush out a better listing.

Woolworth's (33rd or 34th St. Between 6th & 7th Aves, Manhattan) is currently selling patterns at \$1, but you have to deal with the closeout sale chaos to get them. Other locations may also have the same deal.

Cloth Selection

Fabrics

Stay away from obvious synthetics, stretch knits, stretch velvets, cotton lycra, etc. There are times you might use stretch fabrics for leggings, but keep in mind that this is not period. The more period you want your fabrics to be, the more choosy you must be when selecting your fabrics. Cotton was uncommon in period Western Europe, but common enough in the Middle East. Silk was (obviously) a luxury item, and brocade and velvets were usually made using silk thread. Linen and wool are very period for Western Europe, and probably much less common for Middle Eastern.

For a peasant look, try using cloths with uneven thread thicknesses, uneven dyeing in solid colors, and very muted, natural hues.

Keep your personal preferences in mind. If you love cotton, use cotton; if you don't care, then cheaper synthetic blends may be the better bargain (and wrinkle less). Keep the care of your cloths in mind. Most silks and wools must be dry-cleaned, while most cotton is machine washable, (make certain it is preshrunk or prewash it yourself before sewing). The safest bet, if you want wash-and-wear outfits, is to wash the cloth before you make an outfit.

Colors

Bold, rich, colors are less common than muted cool tones. Depending on your persona's class and your personal tastes, try playing with color strengths, and evenness of tone in the fabric. Cloth of gold was much more common in Byzantine and Middle East, and was exceptionally costly. Regarding specific colors: **Don't go there:** fluorescents. **Reserved for Royalty:** candy-apple red, royal purple, indigo blue, etc. **Uncommon:** Lighter tones of the royal colors, magenta, deep blue, etc. I haven't done a lot of research myself into colors, so you may need to yourself.

Patterned Fabrics

Patterns were woven, embroidered, painted, etc. Early patterns were simpler, as in geometric patterns or large paisley. Byzantine uses cloth of gold in bold geometric patterns. Later patterns are more complicated. When looking at floral patterns, (and tapestry, etc.) keep in mind that in the middle ages, artwork looked "flat" and two-dimensional, with unrealistic perspectives. The more like photographic reality a pattern looks, possibly the less period it would be. Look for simple repeating patterns.

Remnants

There are usually remnant bins at the stores. They sometimes contain velvets and silks, cotton shirting, or remnants from upholstery fabrics. Remnants usually fall into the under 4 yard lengths. Sometimes the remnants are samples and have unwashable stamps on them saying so. When you find remnants in 2-3 yard lengths at half the off-the-bolt price, you have a steal. Some stores only have remnants in the under-two-yard lengths, and they are less useful (but you can still make veils, vests, pouches, belts, linings, bodices & maybe even doublets, etc. from these lengths).

Fabric content of remnants is usually left to the imagination by the stores, but there are ways & ways of testing cloth for content: feel & burn. [To burn-test a fabric, take a swatch of the fabric (a small clipping), and pull the threads apart, crumple into a ball and hold it in a tweezer. Take a match or lighter to it. Keep a cup of water nearby just in case, and BE CAREFUL.] Silk feels sticky, soapy, or gummy to the touch, wool is sometimes rough, both burn with a smell similar to burnt hair or feathers, burn slowly, curl away from the flame, & leave a crushable ash. Linen, cotton and rayon wrinkle easily when crushed, and burn vigorously, smelling of burning paper, leaving a soft gray ash. If the fabric burns or melts only when in the flame, with a chemical smell, and leaves a hard bead (like melted plastic), it is more than 50% synthetic. Blended fabrics will generally act like the predominant material in the fabric.

Retail Bargains

Cotton: chemise-weight 100% cotton \$1-\$2/yd. Shirt weight 100% cotton at \$3-4. **Silks:** discounted at \$4 (although that's fairly rare. Surprisingly, I found solid-colored silks from \$2-\$2.50 at one discount sale), retail at \$6-8/yd, more with printed patterns. **Wool:** \$6-12/yd in cloak weights & suit weights. **Linen:** from about \$4-12/yd.

Trim

When buying trim, you should have a swatch of the cloth you are buying for with you, or vice-versa when buying cloth. To trim a women's outfit, you will need at least 4 yards for a T-Tunic, but if you have a wide skirt, trailing hemline or trailing sleeves, you may need as much as 20 yards (or more)! For a man's knee-length T-Tunic, you will need at least 3 yards of trim. Trim can be made from remnants, or from 1-2 yards of expensive tapestry or brocade. Several complementary trims, or several strips of the same trim, can be applied side-by-side on an outfit to give the illusion of wider trims (multiply the amount of trim you buy accordingly). Trim can make or break a mediocre piece of garb. Similar rules apply to trim patterns and materials as do to cloth. Trim with gold filaments running through it was far more expensive than cloth trim. It is harder to launder without ruining it; the gold threads now used are plastic, giving it a tendency to break under normal use. Cotton trim is more hardy in the wash machine, but should be laundered before it is sewn to the garment, to avoid shrinking. The colors and pattern on the trim should be within the styles and ability of the period of the garb you are making.