Is this worth doing?
First, the pitch: the clothing of the Middle Ages is fascinating. What people wear is connected to nearly everything else in their lives, whether it is finances, social status, career, or beliefs about morality, gender roles, or what is beautiful. It can also give information about trade, politics, and many other issues. Clothing, with all of its various implications, is something that students today have in common with people of the past, so it is a wonderful way to introduce many different concepts about medieval society.

But researching clothing of the Middle Ages can be a perilous business. Sources with reliable images and information are scarce, and the other kind are everywhere. Images from the time can be confusing, as they come from a different aesthetic tradition than ours and are often not what we think of as realistic in style. In addition to this, many images include representations of saints and biblical, historic, or archetypal figures whose clothing is symbolic rather than real. The section on research later in this article contains detailed tips on how to judge sources and images. For teachers, the most important problem is that of whether to include information about this topic, and if so, how to make it interesting and relevant.

The first hurdle is to make sure students accept that these are clothes, not costumes. Despite how odd some medieval fashions look to modern eyes, people in the past wore this clothing every day, found it comfortable, reasonable, and lovely, and were able to accomplish what they needed to while wearing it. The key is to find out what these clothes meant to the people wearing them.

Getting Started: An Exercise
This exercise should work well for grades 7-12 with age-appropriate modifications by the teacher. Show images of modern fashion next to some medieval portraits. Have the students discuss their answers to some general questions first:

- Why do we wear clothes?
- What can you tell about a person based on what they're wearing?
- Then have them compare modern to medieval for some or all of the following:
  - How important are clothes?
  - What does each culture consider beautiful?
  - How is social status apparent in clothing?
  - Is that different from wealth or the same?
• What is considered "decent?"
• How quickly does fashion change? What influences the rate of change?
• Who makes the clothes?
• What are they made of?
• How are clothes cleaned?
• What can you tell about people's environment by looking at their clothes?

Here are some interesting tidbits that you can contribute to the discussion:

• Because its production was so labor-intensive, clothing in the Middle Ages was far more expensive relative to income than it is today. Therefore, most people tended to have fewer clothes than Americans do today. The majority in the Middle Ages had only two or three changes of clothes at most. Ask your students how long they could continue to wear clean clothes without doing laundry.

• Speaking of laundry, medieval people had a different view of cleanliness than we do. In general, they had underclothing of white linen under wool or silk outer clothing. The outer clothing might be aired and brushed, but it was not washed. The washable underclothing, which covered the body fairly extensively, protected the more costly outer clothing from the sweat and dirt of the body underneath.

• Being relatively expensive, clothing was extremely important to social status. The style, fabric, color, and décor were all factors in high-status clothing. People tended to spend much more of their money on clothing then than now. As an example, an inventory of one 15th-century family in Florence found that of all the family's possessions, including real estate, business assets, and everything else, forty percent of the total value was in clothing and jewelry (Carole Collier Frick, Dressing Renaissance Florence, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 111).

• The difference in clothing between the upper and lower classes was far greater in the Middle Ages than it is today. This was partially due to the idea that social class was fixed and inviolable and that everyone should dress to their station. Many sumptuary laws survive that detail who was allowed to wear what. The vast difference in expense between the low- to medium-quality wool worn by the lower classes and the high-quality wool and silk worn by the upper classes made it almost impossible for the former to dress like the latter. It was the burgeoning middle class that threatened to overtake their betters in fashion. Also important was the difference in styles-as a sign of their status, the upper classes often wore fashions in which it was difficult or impossible to do physical labor. Expressions of this differed in various times and places but included extremely long sleeves or skirts and ornate and unstable headdresses.

• Unlike today's wide assortment of synthetic fibers, medieval clothing in Europe was limited to linen for undergarments and wool or silk (the silk for the very wealthy only) for outer garments. Some fabrics had precious metal woven in (again only for the very wealthy), and some garments were made of leather. Fur trimmings and linings showed wealth and status in some times and places. The Middle East, North Africa, and certain other places had cotton clothing, but it was much less common in Europe.
• In addition to the fiber content, the expense of various fabrics might be due to a very laborious woven pattern (like a patterned velvet that could be woven at the rate of only a few inches a day), the type of dye used (crimson reds were the most expensive and therefore carried the highest status, followed by black), or labor-intensive processing (certain expensive wools were woven, fulled, and then the nap raised and sheared several times to give them a dense, velvety surface). The fabric used for a garment was almost always much more expensive than the labor to construct it.

• Over such a long period of time as the Middle Ages, fashions changed dramatically, and of course each region had its own styles. But fashion didn't change as quickly in the Middle Ages as it does now. Both the regional differences and the rate of change were influenced by how quickly people could communicate, and of course the speed of communication depended on how fast horses and ships could travel.

• Standards of beauty changed enormously through the Middle Ages, and were to some extent regional. Images of Adam and Eve from various times and places are useful for making comparisons. Idealized twelfth-century French images show people who are impossibly tall and thin. Beautiful fifteenth-century women look pregnant, but with thin arms, small breasts, and narrow shoulders. In many times and places, pale skin was prized in women. Then, leisure meant staying indoors instead of working outside; now, leisure means playing outdoors instead of working inside, and thus being tan is more fashionable than being pale.

• Modern clothes assume a relatively constant temperature inside, no matter what the weather might be. In a cold winter, we wear a heavy coat over something that will be comfortable at 70 degrees and take the coat off once we get inside. Without central heat and modern insulation, the insides of medieval buildings tended to be much closer to the outdoor temperature than modern ones. Therefore, winter clothing relied on more layers, few of which were publicly removable.

A Few Words about Researching Clothing
Hopefully these questions and ideas will get you and your students more interested in researching clothing of the Middle Ages. But where should you start? As was mentioned before, perils await the unwary. First, a short warning about saints and other symbolic personages in medieval art: if the person in the picture is a saint, biblical character, historical character, symbolic or mythical character (like Spring or Venus), wearing a halo, holding something odd (like a tower, a tooth, or a severed head), or has wings, what they're wearing is almost certainly not representative of actual clothing worn by real people of that time. This is the fantasy clothing of the Middle Ages, and it was meant to convey the identity of the person by symbolic elements that were well-known at the time but that modern eyes often miss or misinterpret.

Another potential pitfall is terminology, and problems arise with both medieval and modern usage of the vocabulary. Every time and place had its own words for the garments currently in use. The word chemise as it was used in the Middle Ages could denote an undershirt for either gender but was used mostly in France. Modern scholars generally use it only for women's garments, but they apply it to clothing from many countries. The English word kirtle meant "gown" in a generic sense for hundreds of years and was applied to many different styles until the 16th century, when its use became more specific. Modern scholars tend to apply it only in its specific sense. Some terms have a standard
meaning in most modern texts, and others are assigned seemingly randomly to particular garments by some authors but not others. Try not to get bogged down in the terminology, but rather focus on the styles and what they meant.

Next, a word about good and bad sources for research: unfortunately, the most available books are generally the worst ones, and the best sources are almost all out of print. Beware of clothing histories that have drawings done by modern or Victorian authors rather than images from medieval sources. These are not reliable and include Mary G. Houston, Herbert Norris, John Peacock, Iris Brooke, Hill and Bucknell, Braun and Schneider, Racinet, and R. Turner Wilcox among others.

Even "good" histories of clothing focus mainly on the fashion of the elite and ignore the lower classes. Of necessity they are generalized and attempt to create a single linear timeline of fashion. They often disregard regional variations or mention them only in passing rather than recognizing that each place had its own trajectory of style and many local variations even within regions. Only with intensive and focused research using many different sources can you build a true picture of the style in a given time and place.

The annotated bibliography and webliography below will hopefully provide resources for further research, no matter what grade you teach. You will notice very quickly that sources abound for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries but quickly dwindle for previous eras. The first four books in the bibliography cover earlier centuries fairly well for western Europe. For more in-depth coverage of these eras, see the webliography.

The pitfalls of internet research are well-known. Search "medieval clothing," and you will find a motley assortment of mediocre school projects, terribly overgeneralized summaries, and costumes for sale with bits of decent research buried here and there amidst them all. The annotated webliography at the end of this article is meant to suggest a few sites that have good information, good images, or both. All sites listed were live as of publication, but of course, they may disappear tomorrow.

**An Annotated Bibliography**

**Some good general histories:**

*The Book of Costume* by Millia Davenport (New York: Crown, 1964). Sometimes in one volume, sometimes in two (in which case you only need the first), Davenport's classic and sprawling survey consists almost entirely of thousands of black and white images and her short commentary on the clothing in each. Though the images are small and none are in color, many do not appear in any other secondary source. She also includes images from times and places not covered in most other surveys.

*History of Costume* by Blanche Payne (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). Though some of her ideas about construction are a bit outdated, she has a good series of images. Some are re-drawings.

*20,000 Years of Fashion* by François Boucher (New York: Abrams, 1966). The pictures are better than the text, but they do not necessarily occur in chronological order, so read the captions carefully.
Histories specific to the Middle Ages:

*Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* by Gale Owen-Crocker. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2004). This covers the 6th-11th centuries in England and a bit of Scandinavia. The new edition is excellent and student-friendly. Though many of her images are re-drawings, unlike most, they are fairly trustworthy.

*Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince: A Study of the Years 1340-1365* by Stella Mary Newton. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1980; 1999). For this book, Newton primarily studied France and Burgundy and included relatively few pictures. It is an in-depth inquiry into garment names and what garments were made of which fabrics and furs. This is not light reading, but it abounds with accurate details.

*Woven into the Earth* by Else Østergard (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2004). Østergard details the materials, cut, and construction of 14th-century Norse clothing surviving from a colony in Greenland.

*A Visual History of Costume: Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* by Margaret Scott (London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1986). An ancestor of the currently-available *Visual History of Costume* (a compendium of many eras), this excellent source contains numerous images with brief comments on the clothing and accessories in each. It is out of print and somewhat rare, so try interlibrary loan if your library doesn't have it.

*Late Gothic Europe 1400-1500* by Margaret Scott (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc., 1980). Probably the best source on 15th-century English, French, and Low Countries clothing and its cultural ramifications, this book is unfortunately out of print and hard to find. Interlibrary loan is probably the best way to get it.

*Renaissance Dress in Italy 1400-1500* by Jacqueline Herald (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc., 1981). Part of the same series as the previous work, Herald's wonderful study is also very difficult to find.

*Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes, and Fine Clothing* by Carole Collier Frick. A combination of sociological and economic studies of fashion with descriptions of clothing, this book contains valuable details on layers, garments, and fabrics of 14th- and 15th-century Florentine fashion as well as information on the production of textiles and clothing.

From the Museum of London series *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London*:

- *Textiles and Clothing c. 1150-1450* by Elisabeth Crowfoot, Frances Pritchard, and Kay Staniland
- *Shoes and Pattens* by Frances Grew and Margrethe De Neegard
- *Dress Accessories c. 1150-1450* by Geoff Egan and Frances Pritchard

These very readable archaeological reports catalog surviving clothing, textile, and accessory items from the 12th to the 15th centuries—though most of the pieces are fragmentary, you can find some wonderful detail here.
*Dress in the Middle Ages* by Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane. This rather small book gives a fair though short overview of issues in studying medieval clothing and general topics such as materials, status, and production. It is much less successful as a survey of the actual styles, regional differences, and how they changed over time.

**Making medieval clothing**

*Mediteval Tailor's Assistant: Making Common Garments 1200-1500* by Sarah Thursfield. If you're interested in producing your own medieval clothing, this book is a fairly good guide. Several of the websites below also have helpful information on this topic.

---

**An Annotated Webliography**

(WARNING: BROKEN LINKS!)

**Sites about medieval clothing**

Pages by Carolyn Priest-Dorman


Though these pages are done by a re-enactor, they contain some fairly meticulous research. Priest-Dorman acknowledges that "Viking" is a generic term covering rather a lot of territory and where possible gives the specific origin of various styles.

Pages by Marc Carlson

- *Some Clothing of the Middle Ages*: [http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/bockhome.html](http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/bockhome.html)
- *Footwear of the Middle Ages*: [http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/shoe/SHOEHOME.HTM](http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/shoe/SHOEHOME.HTM)

Carlson's sites include pattern diagrams and some construction information for a number of extant pieces.

*Some Extant Clothing of the Middle Ages*: [http://www.virtue.to/articles/extant.html](http://www.virtue.to/articles/extant.html). Photos of extant garments, most in color, give an idea of the richness of high-status and ceremonial clothing. Some garments have accompanying articles.

*10th and 11th Century Clothing in England: A Portfolio of Images*: [http://www.uvm.edu/%7Ehag/rhuddlan/images/](http://www.uvm.edu/%7Ehag/rhuddlan/images/). Some of these images are of biblical folk and others who tend not to be wearing real clothing-use with caution.

15th-century Men's Doublets: an Overview: http://www.nachtanz.org/SReed/doublets.html. Reed provides a nice analysis of style and construction in a generalized way, but she does not distinguish styles from different places.

Sites with useful images
Maciejowski Bible (c. 1300) selected images: http://www.keesn.nl/mac/mac_en.htm. This site contains a helpful selection of details.
Maciejowski Bible (c. 1300) entire work: http://www.medievaltymes.com/courtyard/maciejowski_images.htm. This site, though rather unfortunate in design, has images of every page in the Maciejowski Bible.
Manesse Codex (c. 1300-1320): http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/sammlung2/allg/cpg.xml?docname=cpg848. In German; click on the links under "Inhalt" (Contents) to see pages from the codex. Keep in mind that these are mostly representations of kings and others of rank.

Lutrell Psalter (c. 1345): http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/ttpbooks.html. The British Library's "Turning the Pages" collection offers a wonderful way to experience historic texts, but it requires some downloading time for slow connections.

Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (c. 1412-1416): http://humanities.uchicago.edu/images/heures/heures.html. Here you will find links to the calendar pages of this manuscript, which are the only useful ones for clothing research.

La Couturière Parisienne: http://www.marquise.de/en/1500/index.shtml. This site consists of images from historic sources chosen for their value as clothing research. It includes many images from the Manesse Codex.

Web Gallery of Art: http://www.wga.hu/index1.html. Click on Search in the top menu bar, and you can limit your search by half-century, region, medium, etc.

Miscellaneous
A Short History of Bathing before 1601: http://www.gallowglass.org/jadwiga/herbs/baths.html. This topic often comes up once you start discussing clothing in the Middle Ages. Separate fact from fiction with this well-researched site.
Medieval Clothing Pages: Articles and essays of interest to costumers (Hats and Headdress): http://www.virtue.to/articles/#Hats. This page links to many of Cynthia Virtue's articles on how to make and wear medieval clothing. Most of her information is quite good, though many of her reconstructions use modern materials and techniques to attain the look of medieval pieces.
From Chaperones to Chaplets: Aspects of Men's Headdress 1400-1519: http://www.nachtanz.org/SReed/histcost.html#Research. Reed's exhaustive thesis contains not only an amazing series of charts following everything from hair coverage to position of hats by region and decade but also a very useful survey of research sources on medieval clothing. Links to each chapter appear on this page.

Melanie Schuessler is Assistant Professor of Costume Design at Eastern Michigan University and a professional costume designer. Her research focuses on sixteenth-century Englishwomen's clothing. Her design and technical portfolios, images of her own sixteenth-century wardrobe, and selected research can be found on her website at http://www.faucet.net/costume/.