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Through the Needle's Eye; or, How I Became a Robemaker

Two Swedish universities wanted their own gowns, but getting them to know why they wanted their own gowns was a different matter, writes Kerstin Fröberg

This is how I became a robemaker: by chance.

This is how I became an academic robe designer: by necessity.

Mid-December 1998 I got a 'phone call: would I care to give a tender for academic robes for (the soon-to-be) Växjö University? I

Primary Source would, so off I went to inspect the prototype.

Wherein a Fellow's expertise and the outside world meet The prototype looked, basically, like a black sack with a hole for the head, slit (and then buttoned) from chin to hem. Not even holes for the hands.

What to do? I knew nothing about academic dress, but I *did* know this model would not work.

I had someone help button me into the cloak, and asked to be handed the 'regalia' that I knew they were going to give the new professors. After a while, they agreed that holes for hands were necessary—and I was invited to submit a proposal. It had to have no sleeves, and had to be fashioned so that bare hands would (could?) never be seen, at any time. And it had to be BLACK.

This was a couple of days before Christmas, and the robes were to be ready by February 13.

I was in a hurry, both for design, logistics (how to get 120 metres of fabric, in this time of 'just-in-time' philosophy?), and, of course, time. On January 6, I presented three models, and suggested they might want to order the robes for next year, instead. They choose one of the proposed models—they really wanted robes for the inauguration (and understood there was no more time for 'thinking').



The green gown of Blekinge Tekniska Högskola.

To summarize: I made fifteen robes just in time for the ceremony, in a pattern with 'holes for the hands'. With no understanding of traditions of academic dress (no time for research ...), and with no time for 'thoughtful' design

and discussion, the result is not something I am proud of. (Except for the fact that I rescued the poor professors from a straitjacket, and that I was ready in time, even if only 'just'.)

My next commission was equally hurried—thirty robes in six weeks. I just had to make do with the pattern I had (and the customer actually liked it). You can see it in the photo to the left.

In May '99, with the second batch delivered, I thought it a good idea to try to find some facts about the phenomenon—went to England, found some books (but not yet the Yahoo group). Studied the books, made some sketches, found more literature ... and so was better prepared when the third university approached me, in the spring of '00. And—wonder of wonders—this time the client had included some time for planning. We had about 6 months, and what a difference that made!

The result is in the picture to the right.

Now, you may not think this is a good robe design (in fact, I know some of you don't!)—but it is a lot better than my first effort. More, hm, 'dignified', for one thing ... ;-)

Some of the design considerations: this (as were the others) was a gown that was to be owned by the university, to lend to the professors to be installed. Thus it had to be a kind of 'one size fits all'. Therefore the body is wide, to accommodate both thin and stout, pregnant women or body builders. The only size variation is length (usually three different).

The sleeve is set very high on the shoulder, to make the sleeve cap never fall in the

'usual' place.

The sleeve itself has no underarm seam, giving it the look of a cape, almost, to avoid problems of 'too short' or 'too long'.

To make it special for Malmö University the design on the back is an adaption of the logotype.

Since then, I have made two more designs—for the new Linnæus university (amalgamated from Växjö and Kalmar), and two special gowns for Karolinska Institutet.

Long ago, I was a software developer. At that time I found that the customer is (nearly) never 'right'.

This proved to be true for the buyers of academic dress, too: The customer usually does not know what, or even why, they want AD.

The customer has not bothered to plan in advance, and therefore my contribution, from my 'expertise', comes too late, and the result is a compromise from both sides.

It is a problem for small businesses like mine: I can't afford to say no, but I also can't afford to deliver badly designed and/or badly made goods either. This seems to be an unavoidable problem ... but at least I know a little more about academic dress these days.

Thank you, Burgon Society, for having me, and for educating me!

Since 1999 Kerstin Fröberg has been a handweaver full-time and a robemaker sometimes. She lives in Småland, outside Växjö, Sweden. Pictures of her gowns can be seen at bergdalaspinnhus.com/adeng.html.



An adaptation of the Malmö logo on its gown.