

Make a Simple 14th Century Bag

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Introduction

The article will teach you how to make a simple 14th century purse based on illuminations from medieval manuscripts produced in Europe in the 1300s. One of the most famous examples of purses in illumination is the German manuscript Codex Manesse, c. 1300-1340, folio 64r.



The woman shopping in this image is a high status woman of the elite or ruling class. A poet named Deiter is flirting with her and perhaps promising to buy her something. Since there are no 14th century romantic German poets hanging around in 2022 waiting to buy purses for any of us these days, I'm going to teach you how to make your own purse.

Materials

I recommend using a woven wool for the outer shell of the purse and lightweight linen for the interior of the purse. Other materials are more easily substituted for the drawstrings and tassels. Here's the recipe:

- (2) 7" x 8" pieces woven wool (not felted)
- (2) 7" x 8" pieces lightweight (preferably handkerchief) linen
- 3 skeins of cotton or silk embroidery floss for draw strings and purse cord (or you can use purchased cord or ribbon)
- 1 skein of wool or cotton or silk embroidery floss for tassels (or you can purchase pre-made tassels). Tassels are optional but most people want them.

Prepare or acquire all the pieces before you begin any construction.

Cut the Fabric Pieces



Step 1: For the outside of the purse, cut two pieces of woven wool 7" x 8". Please don't use felted wool. It is too bulky for the drawstrings.

Step 2: For the lining, cut two pieces of lightweight linen 7" x 8".

Note: This example is made with high contrast fabrics so it is easier for you to see. The lining is made with silk (not recommended) but I used silk to prove a point later.

Make or Buy the Tassels



Teaching you how to make tassels is outside the scope of this article however, there are many tutorials available on YouTube.

To be historically accurate, the tassels should be wool (as the sample tassels on the left) or silk.

If you don't care about historical accuracy, cotton DMC floss works, too.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THGfiIFnhjI>

Make or Buy the Drawstrings and Beltloop Cord

Teaching you how to make fingerloop cords is outside the scope of this article however, there are several tutorials available on YouTube. If you don't care about fingerloop braiding, then purchased ribbon is perfectly acceptable for SCA purposes. For the drawstrings, you'll need 2 pieces of 20" ribbon, about 1/4" wide. For the beltloop cord, you'll need 20" of wider ribbon (1/2"). Make the beltloop cord to your preference.

If you're not interested in hanging the purse off your belt, then don't add a beltloop cord at all.

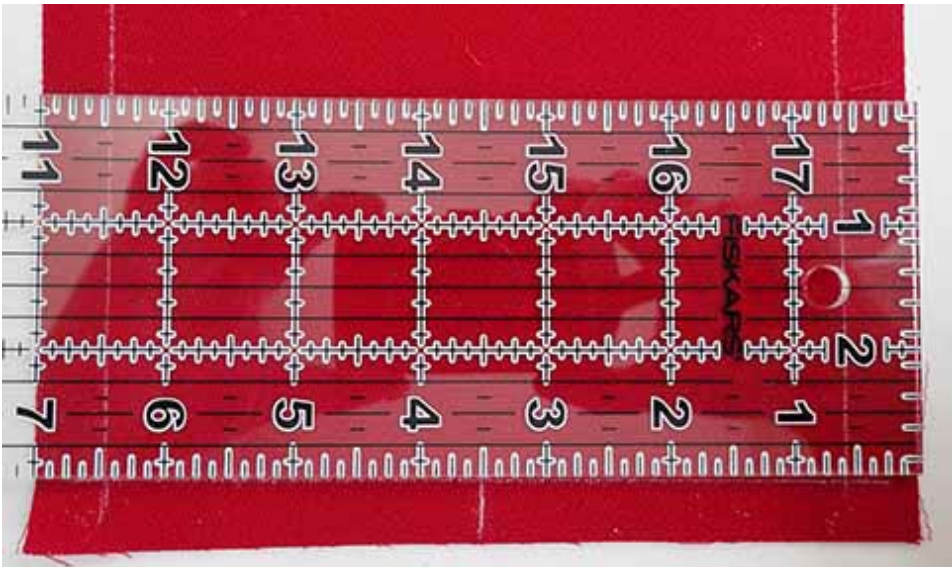


Here's a link to one of the fingerloop braiding tutorials: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQpEcGfv-rY>

Construction

Make the Outer Shell

Mark 1/2" seam allowance around one piece of the outer shell. Also mark the midpoint of the lower edge (this is the 7" short side).



Using those guidelines, pin the three tassels on the short edge on one piece of outer shell. The body of the tassels is facing towards the purse body.



Baste in place.



With the tassels pulled toward the body of the purse, pin the second of the outer shell to the first piece. Pin on three sides.



Sew with ½" seam on the two long sides and the short side containing the tassels. You can use the basting marks to make sure you don't run over the tassel bodies. If you're going to use a sewing machine, use a presser foot so you can sew right up to the edge of the tassel.

I've used a contrasting thread so you can see the seam. If this example was not made for an article, I would have used matching thread.



Trim the seams and turn the purse right-side out.



Baste the beltloop cord to either side of the outer shell top at the side seams.



Sew the Lining

Pin the two lining pieces together on three sides, two of the long sides and one short side.



Leave an opening at the center of the short side. You will use the opening to pull the outer shell through.

Sew the two pieces together along the two long sides and partially on the short side.



Trim the seam allowances and clip the corners to reduce bulk. Do not trim back the seam allowance directly over the opening. You'll need that extra fabric later.



Sew the Lining to the Outer Shell

Insert the outer shell of the bag into the lining, right sides to right sides.



With right sides together, pin the top of the outer shell to the top of the lining. Make sure the beltloop cord is between the outer shell and the lining. Sew all the way around the top openings.



Pull the Outer Shell Through

Pull the outer shell of the purse through the opening in the lining center bottom.



Poke a chopstick or a thin ruler into the bottom corners, making sure that they are fully popped out.



Close the Opening in the Lining

Pin the opening in the lining closed.



Whip stitch it shut.



Push the lining into the bag.



Finger press the top edges of the purse together so that the seam is nearly visible. Pin in place.



Using tiny stitches, baste the top edge together to hold it into place, preventing it from curling back in upon itself.



Make Drawstring Holes and Thread the Drawstrings

1. Mark 12 drawstring holes $\frac{1}{2}$ " down from top.

2. Use an awl to work a hole in the fabric for each drawstring hole.
3. Weave a drawstring cord through each hole as it is made.
4. Tie the ends of the drawstrings together.

Bibliography

Digital Manesse Codex. University of Heidelberg Library. <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpg848/0123>