

A Pattern For Full Fabric Horse Caparison  
(Approximately 13th through 16th centuries)  
By Lady Isabeau Pferdebandiger

Introduction:

After trying some other caparison patterns, and another attempt trying to use a horse blanket pattern modified into a caparison, I still was not completely happy with the results I was getting and set out to draw a completely new, easier pattern that could be adjusted to fit the horse, would stay on when the horse was in motion, and looked great. This caparison pattern that I have developed has three parts: the hood, the front part, and the quarters sheet. Each piece is easily adjusted to fit a different sized horse by making a few simple measurements. Most of the Period Caparisons of this type in manuscript illustrations and sketches of the time appear to be made in 2 parts rather than three, but having the hood separate adds the option of leaving the hood off in the case of hot weather, a spooky head shy horse, or for another reason. The separate hood also allows for greater adjustment if the caparison is to be used on several different horses, or on horses whose head-set varies greatly.

Ideally the hem of the caparison should fall to an imaginary line from the carpus ('knee') on the front legs to the hock on the hind legs to allow for freedom of movement and to reduce the risk of the horse stepping on the caparison if it shifts to the side.

General Fabric Considerations:

I suggest the use of a single layer of sturdy, but light, fabric such as trigger, light twill cotton canvas, washable velvet, or other similar weight fabric. The first caparison I made was lined, and while it held up better than a lighter caparison, it was much too hot to use at most summer tourneys. It is fairly important that the fabric chosen to make the caparison is washable

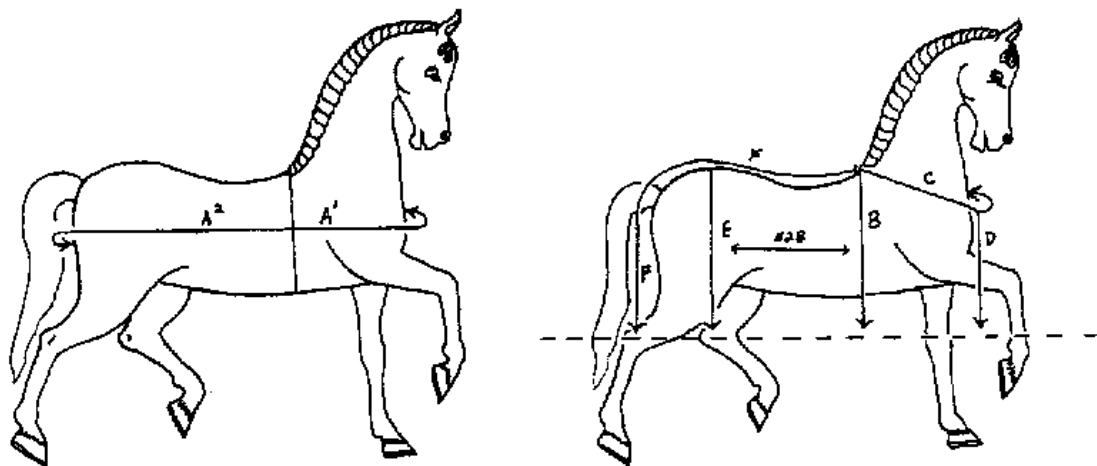
and has been pre-washed to allow for any shrinkage due to washing to occur before the caparison is cut out. An average full caparison will require approximately 10 yards of 55-60 inch wide fabric depending on the size of the horse. This does not include the optional saddle cover or gusset inserts. If making a caparison for a very small horse, or pony a narrower fabric may be able to be used. For finishing raw edges and the hem I suggest the use of the "Extra Wide Double Fold" bias tape rather than turning a hem, this is especially true on the eye and ear holes on the hood. One can now get kits to make your own bias tape which can allow for an exact match of the fabric if desired, and is cheaper than commercially made bias tape. Contrasting color bias tape in one's livery colors can also serve double duty as trim.

#### Taking the Measurements:

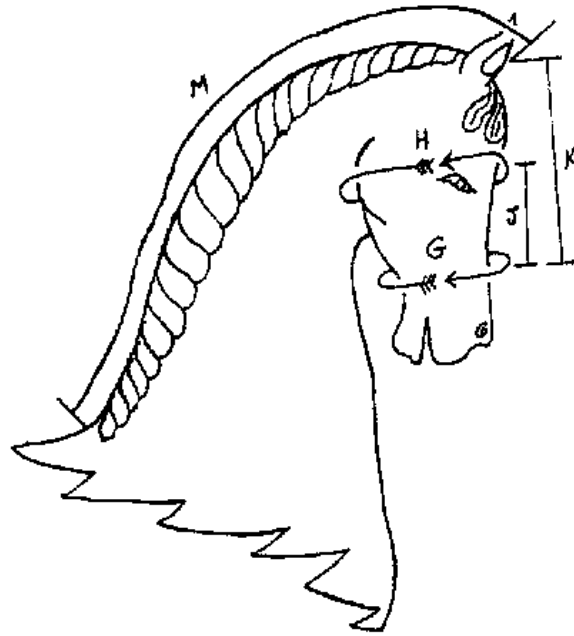
The first step in making the caparison is to measure your horse. If you do not have your own horse, try to find a horse that is about average for the size of horse that you are likely to borrow or rent. Use a long cloth tape measure (it needs to be able to bend around the horse's curves). If you don't have a long cloth tape measure, use a string then measure the length of string with a yard stick. The measurements you will need are as follows (See included diagrams):

#### Caparison Measurements:

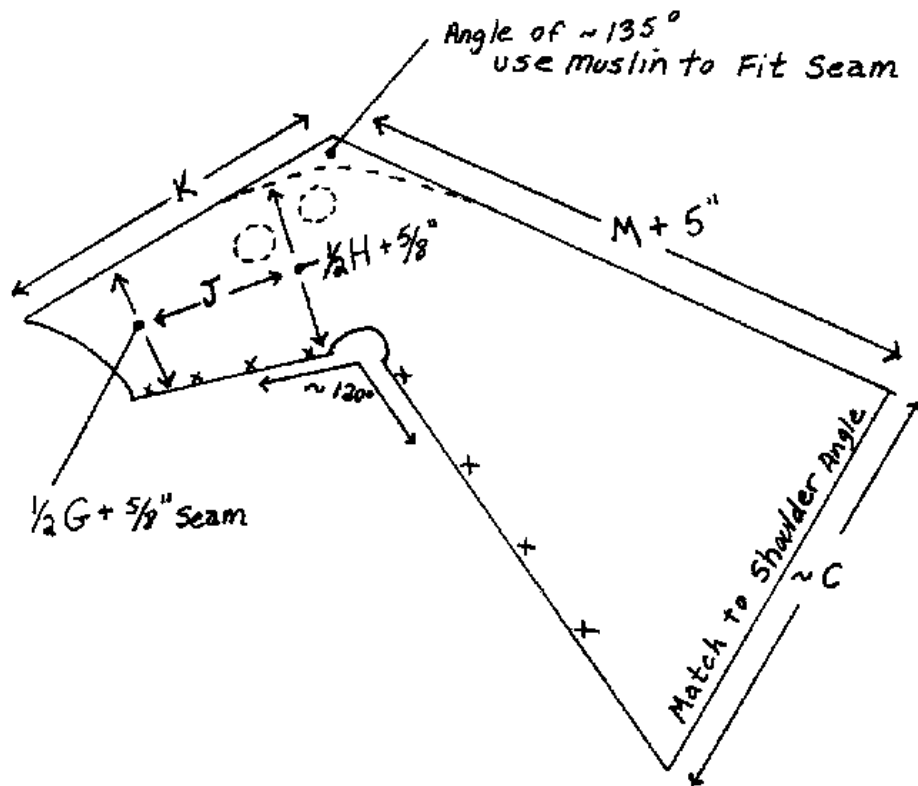
- From the center front of the horse's chest to the saddle girth (A1) \_\_\_\_
- Center of back to knee/hock line at Girth area (B) \_\_\_\_
- Center of back to knee/hock line at highest point of rump (E) \_\_\_\_
- Distance between E and B (E2B) \_\_\_\_
- From front of withers down to center front of chest (C) \_\_\_\_
- Center front of chest to knee/hock line (D) \_\_\_\_
- Spine-line measurement from girth to hock (F) \_\_\_\_
- Length of face from poll to mid-nose (K) \_\_\_\_
- Length of neck from poll to withers (M) \_\_\_\_
- Circumference of head at widest point of jaw (H) \_\_\_\_
- Circumference of head at mid-nose (G) \_\_\_\_
- Length between H+G measurements (J) \_\_\_\_



Once you have your horse's measurements, plug them in to the corresponding positions on the pattern diagrams below. A few additional instructions specific to that piece accompany each diagram.

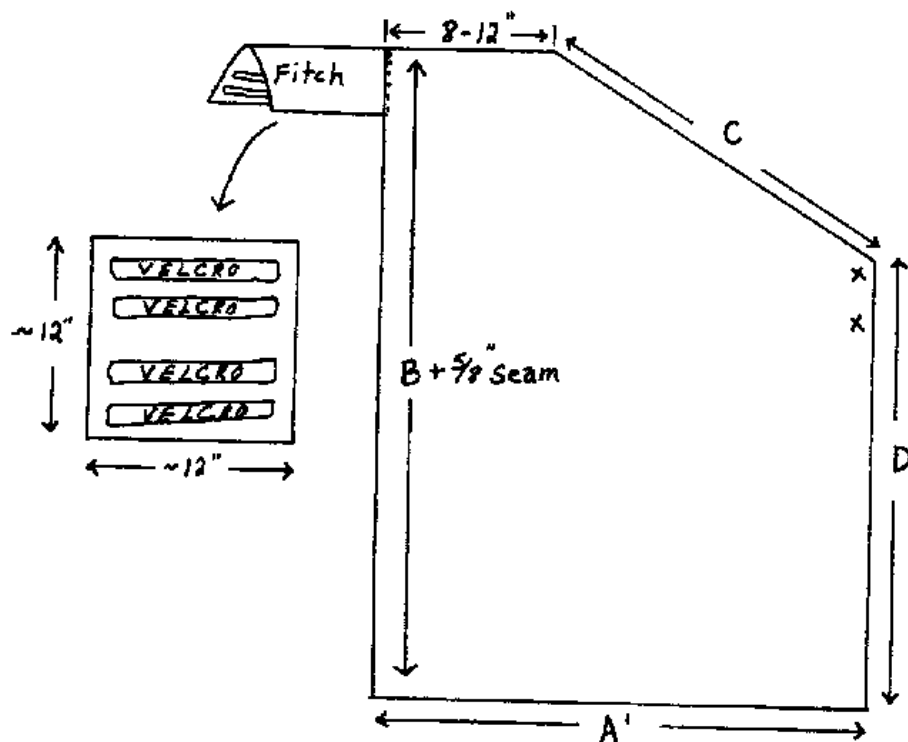


The Hood:



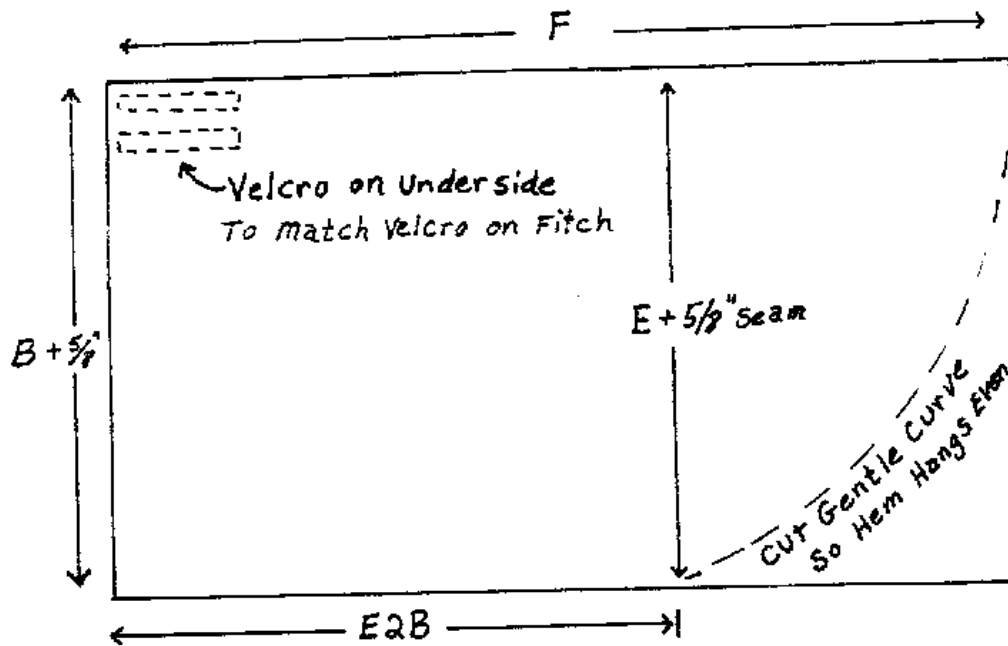
The most difficult part about making the hood is getting the eye and ear holes in the right places. I suggest making a muslin (any cheap fabric will do) mock-up of the hood, in order to have the eye and ear holes and the part of the seam over the poll right before cutting on the fabric you will make your caparison out of. The hood has a single seam that will run up the center of the face and along the top of the neck. I strongly suggest that all seams on the caparison be french seams or seams 'finished' in some other way to prevent fraying and to help the caparison stand up to the wear and tear of use and washing. The edges of the hood and the eye and ear holes should be trimmed in bias tape and ties need to be attached at regular intervals along the bottom edge (This is represented by "X"s on the pattern diagram). The horse's bridle is usually put on underneath the hood, though a few period illustrations do show the bridle on the outside of the hood.

The Front Half:

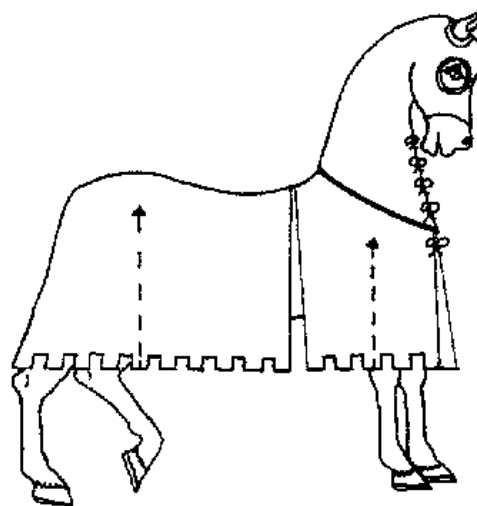


This part of the caparison will cover the horse's shoulders and chest. It ends approximately where the girth of the saddle crosses the horse's barrel. Unless adding gores or gussets for a fuller effect, there are only two short seams, the first along the top line over the withers approximately 8-12 inches long, and the second to attach the Fitch. The Fitch is the attachment point of the caparison where the front and the back halves meet. Generally one would put on the horse's saddle pad, then put on the front of the caparison, laying the fitch over the saddle pad. The fitch is generally equipped with velcro as is the leading edge of the quarter sheet part of the caparison. This rear part of the caparison is laid over the fitch with the velcro matched up and the saddle is then put in place with the girth going through the opening between the front half and the quarter sheet. Dags can add a nice touch to the hem of a caparison, bias tape can also be used to edge dags so that they don't have to be lined.

The Quarter Sheet or Rear Part:



This is the biggest and most unwieldy part of the caparison simply due to it's size. The only seam is down the center back. The hem should be done the same as was done on the front of the caparison with dags, bias tape etc. A couple of hints on the maintenance of this part are the possible use of scotch guard to aid in cleaning, also keeping the back of the caparison flipped up over the saddle when not riding will help keep it out of harms way. An under-crupper may be added if there are problems with the quarter sheet not staying centered. This would attach the center of the quarter sheet to the tail head as a rear point of attachment. I have found with my own horse that the quarter sheet with the added gussets stays centered during movement better than the ungusseted variety even without an under-crupper. The figure below shows the suggested placement of gussets if desired.



### Saddle Cover:

This part is optional. Some people who do not have period saddles like to cover their saddles with a piece of cloth. To do this measure from the side hem of the caparison on your horse up over the seat of the saddle and back down to the other side hem. This measurement will be the finished length of the saddle cover. Be sure to add hem allowances to this before cutting your fabric. If using bias tape to trim the edges though, no hem allowance needs to be added. Next measure for the width of the saddle cover by the following calculation:  $\text{Total Length of Saddle} + 2 \times \text{Height of Pommel} + 2 \times \text{Height of Cantle}$ . This should give you approximately the finished width you want your saddle cover to be. The final step to making a saddle cover is making the slits for the stirrups. These slits will need to be large enough for the stirrup to fit through and should be reinforced. The way that I do this is to put the saddle cover on the horse and mark the cloth at the height I want the stirrup slit to be. On English saddles this can be fairly high since the leathers are narrower than the stirrup and you will want to give yourself plenty of room for stirrup length adjustment. On some Western type saddles the stirrup fender can be wider than the stirrup and may require that the slit be made wide enough for the fender to slip through a little way. Do Not cut the slit at this point, just mark it! Now cut a piece of fabric approximately 5 inches longer than you need your slit to be and 5 inches wide. Center this piece of fabric over your proposed slit on the right side (outside) of the fabric. Sew a long narrow rectangle the length that you needed your slit to be and one half to one inch wide. Now within this sewn rectangle cut your slit down the middle and clip into the corners of the stitched rectangle being careful not to clip the stitches. Now turn your fabric rectangle to the wrong side or back of the cloth by turning it through the slit. Press this seam and then top stitch to hold it in place. You should now have a neat and well reinforced stirrup slit in your saddle cover. One complaint some people have with saddle covers is that they can be slippery on the leather. If this is a problem, a few strips of the rubberized material that is used under rugs to keep them from sliding can be sewn into the underside of the saddle cloth where it contacts the saddle.

Trim, embroidery and extensive use of heraldry are the additional factors that can give your caparison real ooh-ahh factor. Fabric Painting was also used to decorate fabric in the middle ages particularly in heraldic motifs. If fabric painting is not your forte a similar look can be achieved by using color photocopy heat transfers. These heat transfers look best applied to white fabric so on caparisons of other colors, apply the heat transfer to white fabric first, and applique it to the caparison. Look through some pictures of period manuscripts for ideas on the many possibilities of heraldic display on caparisons.

I have not included cloth rein covers here for the simple fact that no one I know likes them once they have made them. I would suggest that if decorated reins are desired, a separate set of reins be made to go with the caparison then the various dagged and bejeweled decorations can be sewn directly to these reins. Fabric rein covers tend to slide and bunch becoming unattractive and in some cases unsafe if the rider is unable to find a firm grip on the reins due to sliding cloth.