

The French Hood – what it is and what it is not

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Author's note on images

Most images used in this paper are digital copies of artworks of long-dead artists and are therefore public domain. However, there are a number of photographs of funerary sculpture that are fundamental for this paper. I have contacted the photographers and have written permission from them to use the images for this purpose. Links to the source of the image are provided.

Brief history of the French hood

The French hood originates in France, or more precisely Brittany, with its earliest versions being worn by Anne of Brittany in late 15th century. It becomes popular in England from 1530s. Anne Boleyn is often credited with introducing the hood to England, although Princess Mary Tudor (Henry VIII's sister) is seen wearing the hood earlier, in 1516 (see Figure 11 below).

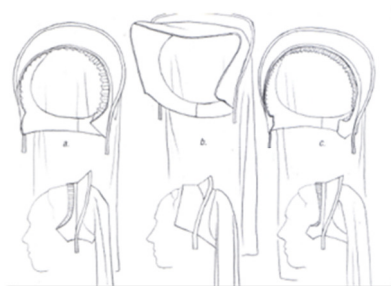
Upper class French women abandon the French hood by the end of 1560s, but it continues to be worn in England until the end of the 16th century and (although not fashionably) several decades into the 17th century.

The common representation of the French hood

The popular belief about French hoods seems to be that it is a rigid headdress with a crescent-shaped protrusion on top, often decorated with jewels. That is certainly how the French hood is portrayed in movies – the examples below are screenshots from “The Other Boleyn Girl”, “Anne of a Thousand Days” and “A Man for All Seasons” respectively.



The popular costuming reference “Tudor Tailor” similarly presents the French hood as a one-piece headdress, featuring a rigid brim with a stand-up crescent, a veil/fall at the back and a pleated organza strip at the front. The pictures below are from page 149 of Tudor Tailor. This is how the French hood is usually constructed in the SCA. I believe that construction is wrong.



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Problems with the common interpretation of the French hood

Impracticality

When I commenced making a French hood in accordance with instructions in the Tudor Tailor it occurred to me that the proposed construction had several puzzling issues. Analysis of extant garments in period, evidences a careful use of fabrics and materials, even for the higher classes. Rich fabrics are reused and garments are often pieced. Also, garments are worn in multiple layers and unwashable fabrics aren't in contact with skin or hair. There is a high level of practicality.

The proposed construction of the French hood involved attaching expensive jewelled billiaments to one hood/crescent, so they would not be interchangeable. Similarly, the brim, which is quite difficult to construct, is attached to one crescent and cannot be used with others. This seems to be quite wasteful in terms of resources.

The pleated organza strip at the front of the hood would come in contact with hair, but was attached to the hood and was not easily removable and washable, thus lacking the normal level of practicality.

Contradicting evidence

IMAGES

All side-on images of ladies wearing the French hood show that the hood sits flat on the wearer's head. There is not a single image showing the stand-up crescent. Three examples are below. I have about 20 other images.

Figure 1



Portrait de femme – c1550s

Figure 2



Mary Tudor, Queen of England 1553 - 1558

Figure 3



Anne de Bretagne, early 1500s

SCULPTURE

Being three-dimensional, sculpture, especially funerary sculpture provides the best visual evidence of French hood construction.

Having collected dozens of photos of sculptures of women wearing French hoods, it became apparent that the stand-up crescent does not exist. All sculptures show a flat multi-layered head-dress. None show anything resembling a stand up crescent. Below are just some examples.

Figure 4



Wife of Thomas Cave, 1558²

Figure 5



Jane Scaregills, 1547³

Figure 6



Lady Fulke Greville⁴

Figure 7



Philippine Wielant (1521)⁵

Figure 8



Tomb of George Talbot, (c 1538) & wives Anne Hastings and Elizabeth Walden⁶

Figure 9



Tomb of Henry Neville, Fifth Earl of Westmorland (d. 1564) and his wives.⁷

So what is a French Hood?

The French hood is a multi-layered head-dress, which sits flat on the wearer's head or is raised slightly by the hair. The "crescent" that we see is an optical illusion created by the multiple layers. A harder question is what those layers are and how they are constructed.

I don't believe there is one "right" way to construct a French hood. A close examination of images suggests that it was worn in a multitude of different ways. Furthermore, as one would expect, its form changes over the course of the late 15th and 16th century.

French hood elements

The following elements appear to be present in a French hood, although not all of them are always worn. Care needs to be taken in naming the various elements, as nomenclature appears to be inconsistent and changes through the course of the century.

1. Coif or cap, usually, but not always with a pleated or frilled edge.

In early to mid-16th century, the frill has gentle pleats on it. There are a few sculptures and one painting of an early version of French hood which show the texture of the frill. It is a curious thing, with ridges running lengthwise (see Figure 4 to Figure 6 enlargements and Figure 10 below). It

² Photo by John Hawes - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/johnhawes/3208881545/in/pool-65944872@N00/>

³ Photo by Jean "the Church Explorer" - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/52219527@N00/2349709066/in/pool-65944872@N00/>

⁴ Photo by Aiden Thomson - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/amthomson/4401601501/in/pool-65944872@N00/>

⁵ Photo by Roel Renmans - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/roelipilami/3962594254/in/photostream/>

⁶ Photo by Aiden Thomson - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/amthomson/2885924006/in/pool-65944872@N00/>

⁷ Photo by Anothy Cairns - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/antonycairns/6036164863/in/pool-1253286@N23>

appears to be most often made of cloth of gold, but I do not yet know the type of cloth or the origin of the ridges. In some instances, a jeweled coif is worn without a frill (Figure 11 below)

It is not entirely clear how the pleating was done, although there is at least one late 16th century sculpture which suggests that the front of the coif itself was pleated too. (Figure 12 below)

Figure 5- enlargement



Figure 4- enlargement



Figure 6- enlargement



Figure 10



Anne Boleyn - 1536

Figure 11



Princess Mary Tudor - c1516

Figure 12



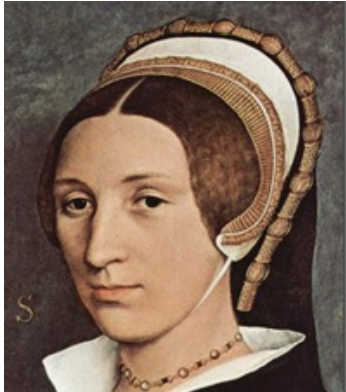
Mary Perry - 1585⁸

2. A second cap, often decorated.

The second cap is the layer that is commonly mistaken for the “crescent” of the hood. It is made of silk, velvet or other rich fabric, usually white, black or red in colour and is sometimes beaded or embroidered (see eg. Figure 1). The cap often has a decorated or jewelled “edge” (see Figure 1, Figure 4 to Figure 11, Figure 13 and Figure 15). It sometimes has a chin-strap to help hold it on (see Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 12 to Figure 15)

⁸ Photo by Jean “the Church Explorer” - http://www.flickr.com/photos/oxfordshire_church_photos/346435463/in/pool-65944872@N00/

Figure 13



Catherine Howard, 1540

Figure 14



Margaret Wyatt, Lady Lee, c. 1540

Figure 15



1540s –Lucrezia dei Rodolfi

In England, the wearing of a jewelled edge was restricted by sumptuary law 1533 c.5, which required that any man whose wife wears "any Frenche hood or bonnet of velvett with any habiliment, past, or egge [edge] of gold, perle, or stone" keep at least one horse of a particular quality

3. Another cap or strip of fabric, appearing only in late 15th and early 16th century.

It is usually orange or red (although sometimes white or black) and probably silk. This element is only seen before about 1540 and then disappears.

It seems to have originally been the lining of the hood, displayed by turning back the front of the hood (Figure 16 below), but later appears to be a separate piece (eg. Figure 18 and Figure 19 below, see also Figure 8 above. It is often hard to discern whether it is an additional layer or the lining. (eg Figure 17). Even after this feature disappears (I have found no examples after 1540), it appears that some ladies slightly turn back the front of their hood, presumably to reveal contrasting lining (see enlargements of Figure 4 and Figure 5 above).

Figure 16



From Poems of Charles of Orleans – c 1500

Figure 17



Anne de Bretagne at Confession – c 1492

Figure 18



Anne de Bretagne's ladies in "Epistres Envoyées au Roi" – c1504

Figure 19



From Claude of France and her daughters – c1520

4. The hood

The shape of the hood changes through the course of the 16th century. The only three constants are that it sits in a round shape on the head, has a fall or curtain at the back, and is always black in colour. Various wardrobe accounts suggest that the hood is made of velvet, silk, taffeta, tissue, satin and similar rich fabrics.

In the early 1500s, the hood is clearly soft, with no stiffness in it. It has long sides, falling to the wearer's shoulders and a longer fall/curtain at the back, falling to mid-back (see Figure 20 below and Figure 17 Figure 18 above). The edge of the hood is often, but not always, decorated with gold embroidery or border – at this

time clearly attached to the hood itself – see Figure 17Figure 18 above and Figure 21 below). In the next decade that border becomes what is commonly seen as the upper billiament of the hood.

The fall or curtain of the hood is loose and broad. It is sometimes flipped up to the top of the wearers head (eg Figure 21). Through the first two decades of the 16th century the sides of the hood move upwards until they sit just below the wearer's ears. The top of the hood becomes stiffer and the decoration on it more prominent, with gem, pearl or metal arclets becoming common (see Figure 22 below and Figure 3Figure 7, Figure 11 and Figure 19 above).

Although there is no French word for a French hood, this headdress is occasionally referred to as "chaperon à templette" – a hood/hat with a headband. There are no surviving hoods, but there are extant hood wires at the Museum of London, which may have formed the "templette" of the hood (see Figure 23). Note the symmetrically positioned loops in the wire. I believe they are for pinning the headband of the hood to the layers below.

Towards the mid-century the fall of the hood is narrower and is sometimes pleated. The bag of the hood also sits tighter around the wearer's head (Figure 24 and Figure 25 below). Narrow and pleated curtains of the hood and prominent billiaments continue to the end of the century in England. French ladies abandon the hood shortly after the middle of the century.

Figure 20



1504-1509 - Louise of Savoy

Figure 21



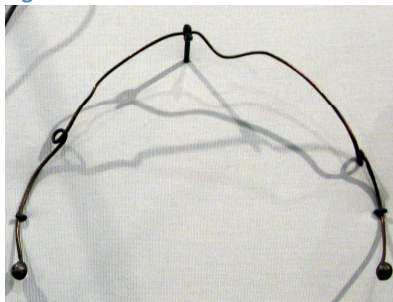
1504 - Anne de Bretagne in "Epistres Envoyées au Roi"

Figure 22



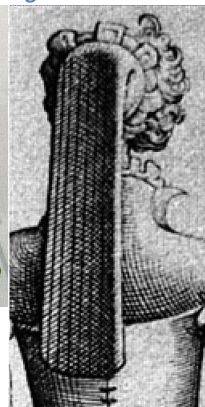
1520s – Claude of France

Figure 23



Extant wire at Museum of London⁹

Figure 24



1556 - French woman from *Habitus Nostrae Aetatis*

Figure 25



1559 – wife of Sir Fulke Greville¹⁰

⁹ Photo by Duchess Yolande. My thanks to Her Grace for the permission to use it.

¹⁰ Photo by Aiden Thomson - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/amthomson/4398806171/in/pool-65944872@N00/>

5. The jewelled billiament – a separate piece of part of the hood?

There are many examples of French hoods being worn without a jewelled billiament, including by highborn ladies (see Figure 26 to Figure 28 below). However, a jewelled billiament or habilliament (derived from the French word for dress or decoration) is a very prominent part of most hoods from the second decade of the 16th century. It often features pearls, gems or metal arclets (see images above).

Figure 26



1566 – tomb of Diane de Poitiers¹¹

Figure 27



1578 - wife of Thomas Offley¹²

Figure 28



Unknown grave in Lillingstone Dayrell.¹³

It is not clear whether the **billiament** is a separate item or is part of the hood. It certainly starts its life as a part of the hood, early in the hood's development (eg Figure 17), but later it is impossible to tell from images or statues. There are some wardrobe accounts that refer to the billiament as a separate item:

- Cambridge Records of Early English Drama volume 1 mentions a 1552 order for “*a frenche whoode of clothe of tysshewe with a byliment for the same*” (page 186).
- Wardrobe orders set out on pages 202 to 204 of Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlocked ('QEWU') mention separate orders for habilliaments and for hoods, suggesting that at least by the late 16th century these were separate items.
- In the dialogue in The French Garden, published in 1605 and referred to on pages 111 to 112 of QEWU, a lady commands her maid to put away “*my French whood and my Border of Rubies*” and give her a different head attire. The “border of rubies” may well be a jewelled billiament and is referred to as a separate item.
- In a 1589 will, Jane Harcourt bequeaths “*one Frenche Hood with the villament and carnott thereunto belonging*”¹⁴
- In an earlier period, the Inventory of Goods of Dame Agnes Hungerford, executed in 1523 lists among her possessions “*an egge of golde smythe wyrke for a past set with perle*”, and two “*egges of golde of damaske for the same past*”¹⁵

It is not entirely clear what a “past” is, but the sumptuary law cited above suggests it is a name for an element of the French hood. I suspect it may be a synonym for the headband of the hood (what the French call the “templette”). The gold “edges” are listed as separate and interchangeable items to be worn with the “past”.

¹¹ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/khelyaan93/5627825351/in/photostream/>

¹² <http://www.flickr.com/photos/stiffleaf/4588587109/in/pool-65944872@N00/>

¹³ Photo by Jean “the Church Explorer” - http://www.flickr.com/photos/oxfordshire_church_photos/3452851079/in/pool-65944872@N00/

¹⁴ From the Wiltshire Archeological and Natural History Magazine, 1898, volume XXX, page 140

¹⁵ From account in Archaeologia or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity, page 369.

It would, I think, make sense for the lady to be able to wear the hood plainly or dress it up by adding an optional and separate decoration or jewelled billiamant. There would be no need to have a separate hood for each decorative billiamant and the precious jewels could be stored separately (and more securely).

The view of the jewelled billiamant as a separate item is supported by a mid-16th century sketch of Jacqueline de Lustrac wearing the billiamant being in front of her hood – across the frill of the coif (Figure 29).

Figure 29



6. The “shadow”

The final element of the French hood, worn occasionally, usually by older women, is the “shadow” or “bongrace”. Janet Arnold cites a 1590s description of this element on page 205 of QEWU as *“bone graces, shadowes, vailes or launes that women use to weare on their foreheads for the sunne”*

I have seen this item referred to as a “cornette”, but the use of this term may be misleading. During early 16th century the word “cornette” in French referred to the fall or curtain of the hood. By early 1600s the word “cornette” is used for the rectangular piece worn on top of the head (which I have called the “shadow”).¹⁶ Janet Arnold at page 203 of QEWU cites a definition of cornet as a *“coif with long ears, tyed under the chin, and hanging down deep to the top of the breast,”* which is clearly not the item we are talking about. So caution is needed with nomenclature.

The shadow is usually worn over the cap, but may be worn under or over the hood (see Figure 2 and Figure 32 for under and Figure 14 for over). It is likely pinned to the layers underneath (see Figure 26), is always black and may have a simple rectangular shape (eg Figure 31) or a more complicated shape (Figure 30). Later in the 16th century it appears to be wired (eg Figure 32).

Figure 30



1555 – Queen Mary I

Figure 31



From tapestry of Isaac blessing Jacob, at Angers Cathedral.¹⁷

Figure 32



Diane Poitiers

¹⁶ [Manuel d'archéologie française depuis les temps mérovingiens jusqu'à la Renaissance](#) – pages 21 to 23.

¹⁷ From page 145 of Camille Piton, *Le Costume civil en France du XIIe au XIXe Siecle*

Conclusion

As may be seen, the French hood has many elements and layers. Some of them are optional and most of them change with time, place or the wearer's whim.

A 1589 letter, extracted at page 205 of QEWU sums up the situation nicely:

"For the manner of their hoodes at the courte, some weare cripins some weare none. Some weare sattin of all collors with their upper border and some wear none. Some of them weare this daye all these fashions, and the nexte without. So that I fynd nothing more certayne than their uncertaynte"

There are so many styles of the French hood that one can find justification for almost any of them – except the stand-up crescent.

I made a French hood consisting of coif, cap with an edge and pearl beading and hood (with jewelled billiament attached – although I have above expressed the opinion that it may be a separate item).



The front brim of the cap is wired, as is the headband/billiament of the hood. I think the wiring on the cap was probably not necessary and the cap would sit better without it.

You can see a clear "crescent", which is just an optical illusion created by the layers.

I was having trouble making the frill look like it does on effigies – further pleating experimentation is clearly necessary.