

# The Golden Virgin Mary Cope

FOR BIRGITTA NORDSTRÖM, IT WAS ALCHEMILLA, OR LADY'S MANTLE, THAT BECAME A GUIDING ELEMENT IN THE MAKING OF A COPE FOR THE DEAN OF GOTHENBURG CATHEDRAL, KARIN BURSTRAND

SENSING I AM TREADING somewhere I should not, I climb the stairs up to the pulpit to get closer to the carved back of the canopy. Its surface is strewn with stars and there is a thick fringe below, draped as if to say: the performance can begin!

THIS PARTICULAR PULPIT is in Gothenburg Cathedral, built in the Neoclassical style with light, plastered walls, rounded forms and pillars. It was for this church that I had been commissioned to create a cope.

I MAKE SKETCHES and cut a leaflet into bits for a collage. Back outside the cathedral I remain sitting on a park bench for quite some time, absent-mindedly picking a leaf from the flowerbed.

Then I peer up at the façade again and I quickly draw its symmetry, somewhat reminiscent of a drawing for a Baroque garden.

TEXTILES PROVIDE warmth and protection. They can serve as signals, adornment, narrative. Walls, floors and ceilings are given their own kinds of tex-

tile. They can get grubby, then be cleaned. Textiles have the capacity to switch between an active and a passive mode. We undress and get dressed. Making a liturgical vestment, is for me, like creating costumes for a sacred drama. Something to be enacted for the moment.

SO THERE I AM SITTING AGAIN ONE DAY with the leaf in my hand. By then it had dried out and I could clearly see the veins in the leaf foliage. The whole leaf was just like a mantle! A lady's mantle or *Alchemilla*, known traditionally in Sweden as the Virgin Mary mantle (*daggkåpa*). It was, though, the Dean of the Cathedral, Karin Burstrand, who was to wear this vestment.

I do some modelling on her, bringing newly purchased silk fabrics to the cathedral. The reason why I was given the commission was that the copes already belonging to the church were far too big. My secret wish is that the day she tries on the finished vestment, she wants to take a few dance steps.

I BEGIN TO SEW the leaf ornamentation on the silk fabric and dye the silk thread for the weaving of a cope shield. The

orphrey panel is to serve as a woven narrative about growth, about cultivation. The cathedral is portrayed as if it were a garden. A cope that would flutter in the wind and swirl becomingly round the wearer – that was the challenge for me.

I experiment by joining the silk fabric to a support fabric. Washing is the next step. The ground fabric shrinks, but not the silk, and this creates volume but not weight. Fabulous to work with – at any rate for the first hundred metres of machine stitching.

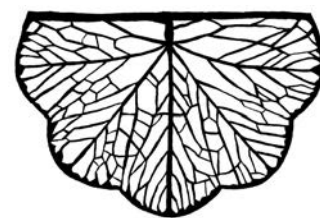
AN IMPORTANT SOURCE of inspiration is a cope to be found in the German town of Halberstadt. Dated to the year 1000, this vestment is made of a shimmering gold silk (from

Byzantium or Syria). The word for cope in Latin, *pluviale* (protection against the rain), becomes more obvious. The stylized form that now lies shielding the upper back of the cope was indeed once a hood. Closer investigation could lead one to think that the hood form is more a representation of its function than in fact being something wearable.

Nevertheless, it exists there like a vaulted cone, reminiscent of the garment that was once its



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**Dean of Gothenburg Cathedral Karin Burstrand** trying on her cope in the cathedral sacristy. Detail showing the cope shield woven in satin, with a mercerized cotton warp and dyed silk weft.



The stitched contouring forms relief embroidery. And finally, being able to blanket stitch the hooks in place for the clasp! (By then I had stopped counting up the hours of work put in.) How many metres of sewing thread was being used? For a good stretch of time, I began my working day in the studio with some hours of machine stitching. What became the lining and support fabric for the silk cloth with all the red stitching was a cloth that shrank in the wash, creating a fuller texture.

model, an outer garment from Roman times.

Another detail on that historic cope is the pleating and gathering of the cloth, that make it easier to wear comfortably.

THE STYLIZED FORM of the cope and to an even greater extent, the shape of the episcopal cope still extant is something I ponder over. It is cut like a half

moon, formed around the body like a cone – this puts a great deal of strain over the shoulders and around the clasp by the neck. It is as if it is made to be seen, spread out like butterfly wings, and not really for wearing.

I weave the cope shield in satin on a digital thread controlled loom. I then embroider it with threads in relief, like leaf veins. Something is missing though.

My friend Annika asks:

– What about a trip to New York? A long time ago, that was.

The Bead District! Streets and streets of bead wholesalers and shops. Of course my mantle needed its bead, a droplet like the droplet of dew on a rain mantle. We went there and back home again I came with a pair of Brazilian freshwater pearl earrings. I took the earrings apart, placed

one pearl in a box and stitched the other onto the cope shield.

KARIN receives her cope on Maundy Thursday 2012. In the peace and quiet of the sacristy with its desk, altar, rug and mirror, she tries it on. She takes a few tentative steps, then starts twirling around. I laugh, liberated. The cope has found its wearer, arrived at its home.