

Waxing Fabric Edges

In her book *Patterns of Fashion*, Janet Arnold makes a tantalizing mention of fabric edges finished with wax while discussing the construction and conservation of certain sixteenth century hats. It was from this titbit, that this possibly period technique of fray prevention was developed.

Aside from silk, this method of fray prevention has been successfully used for edging velvet, cotton, linen and wool. And although not particularly suited to areas of hard use, the edge created by wax hemming has proved durable in a variety of hats, slashed garments and fabric covered belts.

This particular method was developed by trial and error, and will, no doubt, be refined further as it continues to be used in more projects.

Equipment:

Natural Fibre Brush Synthetic bristles often catch fire, or melt when introduced to the area near a candle flame, and as such are unsuitable to this method. Cheap natural fibre brushes, such as those with uneven bristles are perfectly good as any stray bristles are soon burned away leaving a uniform brush to use for applying the wax.

Candle Ideally a 12-hour or similar long burning (i.e. hard-wax) candle. Tea-lights and other candles will work but are not ideal for the long-term durability of the item.
N.B. In one instance where tea-light wax was used to hem silk, it melted when the item was worn in direct sunlight. The wax seeped through to the outside of the hat staining the silk.
N.B. If there is beeswax in the candle the edging can sometimes be sticky. While this will hold stray fabric fibres flat, it will also hold stray pieces of lint

The Basic Method:

Light your candle and allow it to burn until a small pool of wax is formed and maintained.

Holding your brush in your dominant hand, and the fabric with the edge that needs hemming in your other hand, dip your brush into that pool and hold then hold the full brush relatively close to the flame until the wax is on the point of boiling.

Immediately run the brush along the edge of the fabric.

The wax needs to be absorbed into the fabric for about 2-3mm to successfully prevent fraying. This happens by capillary action when molten wax is applied to the cut edge so you do not need to paint the wax onto the fabric (except for some coarser wools).

Experiment with the temperature of the wax and the speed you can run the brush along the fabric to achieve a 2-3mm wax hem.

Problems:

If the wax is just sitting on the top of the fabric, you can make it soak in by carefully holding the fabric close to the flame and allowing the heat to drive the wax into the weave. Alternatively you can use a hairdryer, bare light bulb or similar source of heat.

If the wax is being taken further into the fabric than 2-3mm, use wax directly from the pool without any additional heating near the flame. This is most commonly experienced with fine silk and/or hotter candles.

With wool and velvet it is necessary to use hotter wax than for the silk, linen or cotton. You will probably find you will frequently need to re-heat what is on your brush as it cools quickly past the point of absorption by the fabric.

Fabric with lots of stray fibres can cause the wax to pool on the stray fibres rather than being absorbed into the fabric. Make sure your brush is in contact with the main fabric edge, rather than just the overhanging fibres.

Projects on which this technique has successfully been used:

Silk covered late 16 th Century English Tall Hat	2000 (Helois)
Silk covered, cotton lined, Truncated Henin(for travelling)	2002 (Helois)
Wide, silk covered V-neck Belt	2003 (Helois)
Wool, Mens' slashed Lanskenecht hose	2004 (Christian)
Velvet covered, silk lined 1570s style Spanish Bonnet	2004 (Helois)