

Simplicity’s “Fashion Historian” Line: A Review

By Mrs. Clark

Overall Grade: B to B+/A-

The Martha McCain Fashion Historian line for Simplicity has quite a few good features, and can work as a budget-conscious base for accurate period clothing. This short review, coupled with your own research and study, will help remove some of the modern anachronisms that Simplicity inserted into the designer’s original research. These notes apply *only* to the *Martha McCain/Fashion Historian series*—other Simplicity offerings *not from this designer* just don’t cut the mustard as anything other than fun Halloween costumes. My notes won’t help those.

Some notable negatives:

- Widely available—and quite easy to spot. It’s hard to get away from the cookie cutter look.
- Simplicity edited in some modern techniques to the designer’s original work.
- No instruction is given in how to adjust the skirt lengths in a period fashion, leading to some very droopy, ungainly hems.
- Lack of room to share that research in the pattern sheets. You’ll need to do your own research into styles to determine what’s best for your own impression needs before starting.
- Simplicity will discontinue them at some point; several numbers have already gone out of print.

On the plus side:

- Budget-friendly: With most chain stores offering fairly regular \$2 pattern sales, this entire line is accessible to even the most cash-strapped sewist. And now no one has an excuse to skip a corset!
- Widely available, in person and on-line.
- Good basic period shapes from a designer with solid research and dressmaking skills.
- All the dresses so far have very good “dog leg closure” instructions and diagrams.
- The pieces fit together well.
- Patterns can be mix-n-matched for more unique styles, if you’re already familiar with common styles for your chosen textile.

General Notes:

IN ALL CASES: MAKE A MUSLIN FIRST. You’ll need to adjust seams, darts, and bodice length at the very least. Twenty minutes and two yards of cheap cotton spent now will make all the difference.

- Replace snaps with hooks and eyes (for actual fastening) or with hand-basting (for collars).
- Do not use French seams. These are post-war. For chemises and drawers, use a flat-felled seam or plain seam; for skirts use the selvedge as a finished edge, or a plain seam; for bodices, hand-whip allowances. Do not serge or zig-zag.
- Press seam allowances together, to one side. Hand overcast the edges together, if desired.
- Leave darts intact, pressed to one side.
- Use homemade self-fabric bias binding and very tiny self-fabric piping, and wool hem tape or braid from Wooded Hamlet (www.woodedhamlet.com), if you choose to use hem tape.
- You don’t need pattern pieces for skirts! I recommend reviewing our free skirt articles, or reading our book *Skirting The Issue*, for period appropriate, simple techniques to a beautiful skirt setting. Adjust your hem to suit, from the waist.
- Skirt plackets can be positioned along a seam, rather than slashed into the skirt breadth (both are mentioned in period manuals). This necessitates “rotating” the entire skirt to the left if a dog-leg is used.
- Use regular cotton thread and a #9 or #10 Sharps needle for gauging, and ignore the dots. See our free article *Gauging Skirts*.
- Skip all modern fusible or sew-in interfacings. Period clothing occasionally uses an interlining for greater fabric support, but the flatlining technique generally provides excellent support.

Additional Notes on Specific Styles	
9761 Basque Dress with Flounced Skirt	Dates to pre-war, about 1857. Suited to only the most delicate of sheer wools and sheer cottons, or silks with good body (not appropriate in cotton “calico”). The flounces are more full than needed. This dress has been heavily and poorly copied since it’s debut, and is one of the easiest to spot when used.
9764 Covered Crinoline & Petticoats	Good shape, but large and long on most people. It may be difficult to alter for a smaller circumference, though it’s easy to trim off lower portions to shorten and narrow in one step. For most women, daywear hoops of between 90” and 115”, and “high fashion” hoops between 100” and 120”, work well. Supplies will be pricey for this hoop, close to \$100 in supplies, as noted by the testers at www.farthingleases.on.ca . Petticoats are easily made without a pattern at all—see <i>Skirting the Issue</i> , <i>The Dressmaker’s Guide</i> , or <i>Practical Prinkery</i> .
9769: Chemise, Corset, & Drawers	Shaped seam, single-layer <i>corset</i> (repeated in 5700 series). Can be easily made double layer with sandwiched boning. Skip trims along the top edge, and be sure to test the sizing in all cases—there appears to be wearing ease added when the pattern was graded for production (not the designer’s fault.) Cut the <i>chemise</i> of 36” fabric, or 24” fabric to recognize the utility of side gores. Cut the sleeves closer to the fold for a less-bulky shape; you might also shorten them a bit. Make the band a comfortable length for your own flexed bicep, rather than using the standard size strip. If you opt for a trimmed version of the pattern, select 100% cotton, imported Swiss embroideries. These far surpass the quality of poly-cotton eyelet in chain stores, and do a better job of mimicking the machine-made embroidered trims of the era. You may make up the pattern perfectly plain, without any of the trims and embellishments. The <i>drawers</i> are also a good shape, similar to any other period-based pattern (including our free pattern); you will want to adjust the crutch depth/length to your own body to avoid pinching or chafing. The construction is good; similar caveats on trims apply.

7212: Basic Darted Dress w/ Coat Sleeves	Shown with ovoid hoop; works just as well with round footprint. Twill tape facing at the bodice placket is different; a plain folded facing can be used instead. Instructions include a bust pad, but no notes on how/where/why to use one (see our article on Judicious Padding in the Free Patterns section). Scale of the trims are excellent, but have been used by everyone, so they're easily recognized. Combo of pleating and gauging is not perhaps so common as all pleated skirts, and "Divide & Conquer" is an easier method of sizing the pleats than that given in the pattern. If sleeves are not used with undersleeves, lengthen them. Base shape of collar is good. Skip modern rayon lace appliqué, and do not interface the collar. Detachable cuffs would also be a good option for this style. Apron is a basic style, easy to make, and very recognizable at this point. Half aprons are also quite common, and need no pattern.
7215 Chemise & Corset	Chemise repeats from 9700 series. Corset is two-layer, gusseted, with front lacing hook. Good option for a fuller figure, with decent instructions on gusset insertion. The shaping dart in front does make length alterations through the waist a bit more tricky. Use of the lacing hook is explained.
7216 Oval Crinoline	Tends to want to work "circular" on, will need careful re-sizing to avoid being too long for most folks (its pictured *very* long). Cages that end 8-12" off the ground are more common and easier to get around in.
5724: Ballgown	Supported by primary source material, but it's been copied frequently, and is very recognizable. Bodice style is good, needing not much more than basic "tweaking" to yield a nice evening bodice. Use a functional cotton net tucker (basted in, easily removed) rather than the ornamental one given in the pattern. Consider combining the bodice with the flounced skirt from 9761.
5726: Undergarment	Corset repeats 9700 series. While I have not examined an 1860s chemise in this style, similar styles appear in The Workwoman's Guide of 1838, so it is not an entirely improbable variation. The <i>petticoat</i> , however, can be skipped entirely. Rather, use full cotton petticoats to give loft and softness to the skirts over the cage.
5740: Headwear	The headwear styles in this pattern are really quite lovely. They've been copied a lot, so plan to augment with trimming ideas taken from original engravings, fashion plates, etc. The sunbonnet is an interesting variation; it may not be so common as a plain, non-button style of slat bonnet, but the quilted brim is a good variation to use with a "normal slat bonnet" style if you've been feeling claustrophobic wearing your slatted "mailbox." Finding quality silk flowers for the evening headdress will be the most difficult thing of any of the projects!
5442: Sheer Dress	<p>A pretty, basic pattern for a sheer dress with half-high lining, and the basic construction is good. Use only 100% natural fibers (sheer wool, silk, or cotton) for every part of this ensemble, or you totally defeat the "cool" part of a sheer dress. I never did figure out where seam sealant would go. The lining closes with the fashion fabric, and has multiple buttonholes. This could be a problem with frayable, loosely woven sheers; also, making the placket really stiffens the front opening; for a very delicate look, make the placket in the lining only, and work functional closures there; work a narrow hem along the front bodice edges of the sheer, and close it with a hook and eye at the waist, and one at the neckline (or use a brooch.)</p> <p>The instructions call for machine gathering in the front of the skirt, and gauging at the back; you should gauge the whole of the skirt for the best set. There is erroneous information on how gauging works for larger or smaller waistlines. By varying the size of the gauging stitches, you can vary how densely you're able to pack pleats; larger waists use smaller stitches, not spread-out pleats! That looks skimpy and quite awful, truth to tell. Sheer fabrics can tend to "squash" more than is needed. Carolann Schmitt, proprietress of the Genteel Arts Academy in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, shared a period fix for this: Lay a strip of white fabric, such as polished cotton, between your outer sheer fabric, and the amount turned to the wrong side during hem adjustments. Gauge through all three layers. The extra fabric "bulks up" the gauging just enough to get dense pleats, and helps the dress sit out from the waist very well, without requiring non-period skirt widths. You should be able to make your skirts in this way with 140"-170" of fabric, rather than the 270" or more needed with "non-bulked" sheer fabric.</p> <p>The flounce is set on with a cording and header, which is a very nice touch; it would be lovely done in bias-cut fabric. The scale of the flounce is good; not too skimpy, which is a problem with a lot of repro dresses. The waistband is totally topstitched, and non-functional beyond adding some strength and stability. The sashes are pretty, and will be a versatile accessory item. Use buckram or cotton organdy for an interfacing, rather than modern materials, and silks for the sashing.</p>
5444: Mantle & Garden Hat	The <i>mantle</i> is pretty, though it would be more effective in a sheer fabric. The construction is decent, though rather more complicated in the instructions than it really needs to be. Similar styles can be found in Peterson's and Godey's. The <i>Garden Hat</i> , while based on an original item, is very limited in its applicability, and should probably be avoided by those engaged in living history; a fashion bonnet would be suitable with any of the gowns from this series, and is a much more universal item.
4551: Gathered-to-fit Bodice	Three interesting sleeves will be interchangeable with any bodice in the Fashion Historian series, and can be done well in cotton fabrics, or in silks or light wools, making it quite versatile. This pattern can be a good base for everyday and "working" clothing, particularly. Accessory items could be used with any dress in the series; same notes as in 7212 apply to collars.
4400/4510: Pointed Front/ Back Bodice w/ Sleeve Variations	<p>Same bodice style on each, again with interchangeable sleeves and accessory items. These are not suited to mid-weight cotton dressmaking; use silks, as the pattern specifies; some sheer wools can also make up well in these styles, but do additional research to pinpoint the combination of stylistic choices. Again, excellent scale of embellishments!</p> <p>The method of collar construction, using seamed wedges of embroidered trims to mimic whitework collars of the time, is clever, but is not something I've found in period sources. *If* it is used, consider doing miniscule hand rolled/whipped seams to cut down on their visibility, and always use top-quality imported Swiss embroidered edging as your base; the "eyelet" found in chain stores doesn't come close to the quality of original whitework, and is unsuited for this use.</p>