

Sumptuary Laws and SCA Custom & Etiquette

By Aislinne of Alainmor, transcribed by Eleanor of Huntingdon, slightly edited for publication. ©Aislinne 2009, used on the Vest Yorvik website by permission.

[My apologies for any incomplete or misleading information; I am working from Lady Aislinne's notes - any errors are my own - Eleanor]

Sumptuary Laws

Sumptuary laws are laws which were passed in an effort to limit excesses in dress or dining habits. Historically speaking, they tend to be the exception, not the rule, but many still tend to accept them as the norm.

Generally, sumptuary laws tended to be passed in an effort to keep a segment of the population "in their place", or, as in the case of England and the wool trade, to discourage foreign trade in favour of supporting local industry. Enforcement was usually lax, and tended to consist of fines rather than any physical punishment.

Items which have been regulated in the past by sumptuary laws include: the use of particular colours; the number of courses which could be served in a meal; the length of a pair of shoes; which furs could be worn by whom and the types of fabric which could be used. For example, in the early 17th century in France, a law was passed which forbade any except the nobility and royalty to wear clothing decorated with precious stones and gold embroidery. For the Romans, purple was a sign of rank. Young men of rank wore purple-bordered togas, Senators' tunics bore a wide purple stripe, and knights had narrower ones. (Interestingly, Wilcox notes that the word 'purple' actually arises from the shellfish from which the dye came, and suggests that the colour produced may have been a deep crimson rather than what we today call 'purple'.)

Within the SCA, such sumptuary laws as exist are few in number, and generally easy to follow. There is no restriction as to the colour or type of fabric which may be worn, nor the amount of material used, nor the type of fur which may be worn. The only restrictions on shoe length are those imposed by common sense, and as to the length of the train on a lady's gown, well, she is the one who will have to clean it.

There are, of course, the typical heraldic restrictions concerning not wearing another's device, or the device of an award which you have not earned - but our main restrictions number only two: belt colours and headpieces (circlets and crowns). Traditionally, red belts are reserved for squires, as are heavy, unadorned silver chains and silver spurs. Knights are the only ones allowed to wear the white belt, heavy gold chain, and gold spurs. Note: even though we use white to represent the heraldic 'argent' or silver, there is no problem with wearing a silver-coloured belt.

You may occasionally see someone in a green or yellow belt. These are the protégées of the Pelicans (a service award) and the apprentices of the Laurels (arts & sciences award). While the use of these colours is not as firmly set as the white and red belts, it has become traditional to reserve these colours.

Etiquette

Etiquette within the society follows the ideals of courtly love - essentially, honour those who are your equal or above; treat those who do not outrank you as your equal; and be deserving of the respect of others. The most common method of showing your respect is to make a reverence. This is either a bow or curtsey, usually given when passing within about 10 feet of a person of higher rank. It is also the custom to make a reverence when passing in front of the thrones (as symbols of the Crown). Strictly speaking, one should make a reverence to each pair of thrones (a custom which I have heard Mistress Kaellyn refer to on one occasion as the "Ealdormerean Two-Step".) As well, if you are ever called up in court, it is proper to make an individual reverence to each representative or pair of representatives who are on the dais, starting with those of highest rank and moving down.

The easiest way to identify those of higher rank is by the crown or circlet on their head. Briefly, in Ealdormere, a Lord or Lady may wear a circlet no wider than one inch. A court Baron or Baroness wears a silver circlet with 6 rounded items on it (usually referred to as 'pearls', they may actually be almost anything.) A Landed Baron or Baroness (one who is currently holding a barony for the crown) wears a gold circlet with 6 pearls. A Viscount or Viscountess is a person who has been Prince or Princess of a Principality once. Their coronets are silver, and embattled (like a castle wall). They outrank the Barons and Baronesses, except Landed ones on their own lands. Both the Viscounty and Baronetcy are addressed as "Your Excellency", and referred to as "Their Excellencies". A Count or Countess is a person who has ruled a Kingdom. They wear an embattled gold coronet. A Duke or Duchess has ruled a Kingdom more than one time. Their coronets bear strawberry leaves, and they are addressed as "Your Grace". The Heirs to the Throne are the Prince and Princess, who are referred to as "Their Highnesses", and the current King and Queen are "Their Majesties". The Heirs' crowns (and there are more than one set) are silver, usually with a 3 inch point in the middle front; the King's and Queen's are gold.

Bibliography

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