

From Concept to Ceremony: Insights into the Design and Making Processes for Officers' Robes of the University of Divinity, Melbourne

By Kenneth Crawford

The University of Divinity is an Australian collegiate university awarding degrees exclusively in divinity and has ten constituent colleges from eight denominations. With the chancery and administration located in Kew, a suburb of Melbourne in the state of Victoria, the University of Divinity is the direct successor of the second oldest degree-granting authority in the State of Victoria, the Melbourne College of Divinity.

The Melbourne College of Divinity was constituted in 1910 by an Act of the Parliament of Victoria. The Act was amended in 1956, 1972, 1979, 1990 and 2005. From its beginnings the College awarded degrees, with several churches appointing representatives to establish the College to provide theological higher education. The first President was the Most Revd Henry Lowther Clarke, Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, and the first Registrar was the Revd John Mathew, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria.

In 2010, the Melbourne College of Divinity applied, through the (then) Dean, Professor Paul Beirne, to the Victorian Regulations and Qualifications Authority for permission to function as a specialist university within Australia. In August 2011, the Victorian Government approved the application, granting university status with effect from 1 January 2012. Dr Graeme Blackman was elected as the inaugural Chancellor and Professor Peter Sherlock the inaugural Vice-Chancellor.

In February 2014, the Vice-Chancellor approached me to ask about possible designs for gowns for the Chancellor and for himself. He said that the University wanted something which was not English, but which reflected the Australian standing and nature of the University as a specialist divinity institution. The officers were concerned, however, to maintain the traditional style of university officers' robes in essence. In seeking to maintain the Australian character of the University, the governing council had devised a badge, or 'logo' as they prefer to call it, in preference to the more traditional coat of arms.

The badge is a star, formed by a constellation of open books. The star is a biblical symbol that appears in the heavens to point the wise on earth towards Christ. It is also an Australian symbol, as shown by the federation star and the Southern Cross incorporated in the Australian flag. The books which make up the star represent wisdom, and are open to critical interpretation. The gathering of these many parts into a whole expresses the collegiate shape of the University. The constellation of books creates two stars, one on the outside and one on the inside, illustrating the University's commitment to tradition and innovation. Through critical study, the University brings ancient truths into dialogue with the issues of the contemporary world. The gold represents excellence. The distinctive accent is red, representing passion and sacrifice which facilitate and flow from the study of divinity.



FIG. 1 The badge.

Designing

As the University of Divinity's colours are red and gold, I thought to replicate the colours through the designs, bearing in mind the traditional style of robes for university officers. The gowns are of red St Margaret damask, the damask giving richness to the gown. The Chancellor's gown is red with gold lace; the Vice-Chancellor's gown has a red coat, but black damask sleeves and silver lace to differentiate it from that of the Chancellor. (See Fig. 2.) Both gowns have facings and flap-collars of black St Margaret damask. The motifs in the damask are symbolic of a university specializing in divinity: the crown alludes to Christ the King and the rose to the Rose of Sharon, the Christmas Rose, and the Rose of Resurrection Life. The gold and silver laces are a geometric, general pattern, keeping the gowns separate from any traditional national allegiance—the traditional English oakleaf design, for example. I suggested the red and gold dice braid to add lustre and outline to the gold and silver lace.

The wing at the top of each sleeve shows a stylized illustration of the Australian national flower, the Mimosa. (See Fig. 3.) The sprigs of 'wattle' surround the central device, which is the badge of the University in proper colours. The Chancellor's gown has gold bullion embroidery for the Mimosa in the wings; the Vice-Chancellor's gown has silver.

The idea was to make the sprigs and blossoms look as natural as possible, whilst occupying the whole space of the wing shape around the badge. (See Fig. 4.) The embroiderer used gold/silver bullion plain (matt) and purl (polished) to create highlights, and very small sequins under purl twists to add lustre to the leaf stems. The blossoms were done in tiny loops of purl bullion to give a sense of roundness with the protruding plain pieces to show the fluffy nature of the blossoms.

In the 'boot' of each sleeve, the badge is repeated surmounting a triquetra, a traditional symbol of the Holy Trinity. (See Fig. 5.)

The making process

Once the fabric is cut into its various pattern pieces, the aim is to conceal as much stitching as possible. This is particularly the case with the braid and lace. The black damask facing panel is machine-sewn to the red damask coat, and then laid out with the seam pressed flat. (See Fig. 6.) The facing is sewn to the inside of the coat panel so that, when the flap-collar is attached, the facing turns out onto the front of the gown. With the facing laid



FIG. 2 The damasks and laces of the Chancellor's gown, left, and the Vice-Chancellor's gown.



FIG. 4 The wings at the top of the Chancellor's sleeve, left, and the Vice-Chancellor's sleeve.



FIG. 3 The national flower of Australia, the Mimosa.



FIG. 5 The badge surmounts a triquetra on the boot of the sleeves of the Chancellor, left, and the Vice-Chancellor.



FIG. 6 Hiding the stitching is a goal of the making process. Here, a panel of the coat.

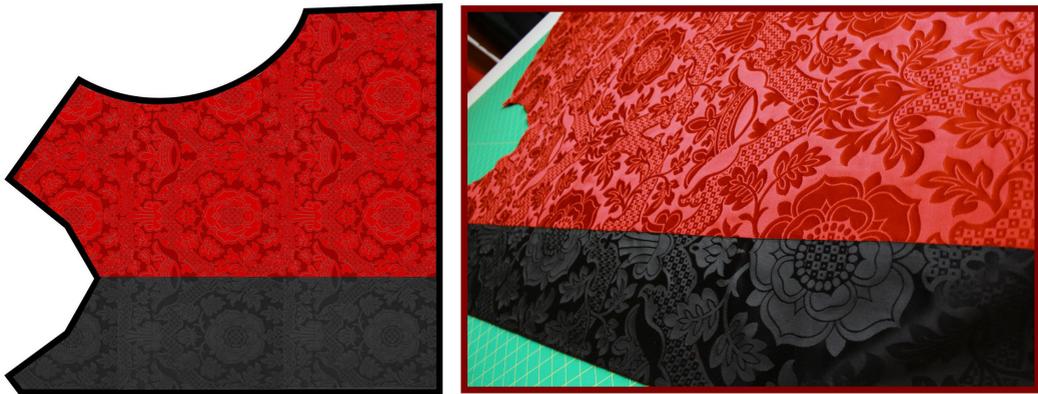


FIG. 7 Gown coat and facing, left, laid flat with the right sides out, with the pattern matched through the centre of the crown. Right, the facing turned back onto the inside of the gown, showing the red damask pattern in reverse and the right side of the black.



FIG. 8 Overlapped lace for the triquetra, left, breaks the pattern. Pinching, right, is preferred.

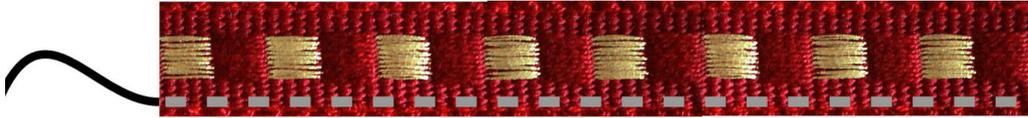


FIG. 9 A slip-stitch is hand-sewn through the dice braid to make it easier to curve.



FIG. 10 The badge is embroidered free-hand under the needle of an embosser machine.



FIG. 11 The completed Vice-Chancellor's gown and cap. (The Vice-Chancellor wears the gown and cap on the back cover; see from front cover for the Chancellor's gown and cap.)

flat, the dice braid and gold or silver lace is sewn down onto the facing. The facing is then turned back inside the red damask and sewn down with a fine line of machine stitching against the hem edge of the facing. The stitching of the braid and lace is then concealed. The seam joining the red and black damask is then pressed flat.

Two aspects of this process are important for me in bespoke work. First, when using damask fabric, if the red and black damask is cut properly, when the black facing is sewn to the red and the facing turned back to the inside, the pattern should match on the inside as in the illustration on the right in Figure 7. The process is easy: the seam joining the black to the red should run directly through a pattern match as if it were the one piece of cloth; in this instance, the seam runs through the centre of the crown, as shown on the left.

Secondly, when using dice braid either side of lace, the dice should match horizontally as far as possible. Otherwise, the result looks like an unbalanced mess and gives quite a lop-sided appearance to the finished robe. The balance of the horizontal matching is evident in the illustrations of the completed robes in Figure 11 and on the cover.

Curving metallic lace for the triquetra is done by sewing the lace flat on the outer curve and ‘pinching’ it on the inner curve, hand-stitching the pinches. The purpose of pinching is that it maintains the lie of the lace pattern. If the lace is overlapped to lie flat on the inner curve, the pattern is partially lost, as illustrated in Figure 8. Pinching keeps the lace weave pattern intact throughout the curve.

Similarly, the dice braid is machine-sewn on the outer curve. (See Fig. 9.) A slip-stitch is hand-sewn through the inner curve and then the curve is pulled together to match the curve of the lace, ensuring that the gold dice is kept at right angles to the curve all along. The inner curve is then hand-sewn down and the slip stitch removed. The ends of the braid are tucked under the respective lace overlaps.

The final piece is the University badge surmounting the triquetra on the boots of the sleeves. This is done in a hoop, free-hand under the needle of an ‘embosser’—a machine which has no presser foot to stabilize the fabric, but has an open needle allowing the hoop to be moved freely under the stitches as the sewing takes place. (See Fig. 10.) The stitch width is adjustable via a knee press under the machine.

The paper pattern is pricked with a needle to make small holes at each point. The pattern is then placed over the fabric in the hoop and dusted with powder to leave the imprint of the holes. The imprinted dots are then joined with a chinagraph pencil and the pattern is ready to be sewn. The illustrations show the process under the machine and the finished badge for the Chancellor’s gown. The books making up the star are embroidered in two different red and gold silks, edged in gold metallic thread; the badge for the Vice-Chancellor’s gown has the books edged with white silk.

I made the robes and Tudor bonnets through my company Robes of Distinction with the wing embroideries done by Hand & Lock, London. From the rolling out of the fabric to the final stitches, each gown took the equivalent of five full days of eight hours’ work.