

Neckline Finishes For The Venetian Camicia

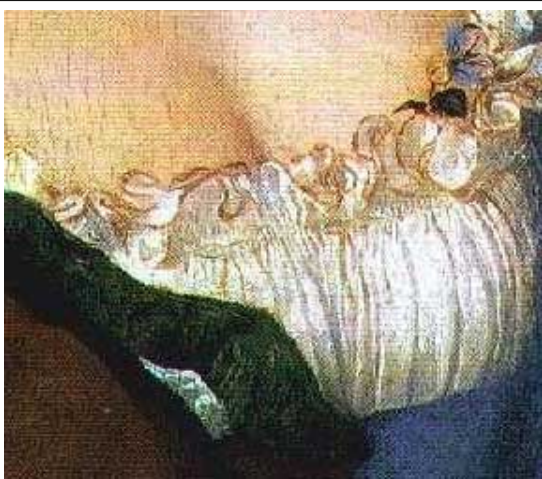
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First off I think I should answer one of the questions that comes up frequently when discussions of the camicia arise. The question has different answers, depending on how the question is phrased. If it is "can I use a drawstring?". The answer is yes, of course you can - if that's what you prefer for whatever reason, go right ahead. In fact I myself have made two camicie with drawstring necklines for my girls - they are growing, and differing styles of dress require different sized necklines, so for the sake of my bank balance and not having to sew up multiple camicie for them, the easy to adjust drawstring neckline was the go. But if the question is phrased thus - "is a drawstring neckline accurate for the sixteenth century Venetian camicia?", then I have to reply that I have yet to find evidence for a drawstring neckline in any woman's shift anywhere within our Knowne Worlde, let alone Venice, in our SCA period timeframe.

Here you will find a few methods of finishing the neckline on your Venetian camicia - the drawstring method and the knife or box pleat method, both with or without frill; and the gather-pleat method, with flat band, also with or without neckline frill. Note: on some portraits the thickness/density of the camicia does not quite match up with the thickness/density of the frill. In some cases this could be because the frill is not integrated, but a separate part sewn to the neckline of the camicia. I have not included instructions for this particular style here.

Gather-Pleating Method, With Integrated Neckline Frill



You can do this method with either a matching fabric band, or with bias-binding - both act as a stay for the pleats. You can also do this without fabric band or bias-binding, by back-smocking, but it is best worked on a camicia that has very closely-packed pleats **but** is made from a fine fabric - the thicker and/or coarser the fabric, the harder this is to do. (Back-smocking is back-stitching through the pleats inside the garment with an upholstery or quilting cotton thread along the gathering-stitch lines)

1. Neaten raw edge of your camicia neckline by your chosen method - hand or machine-rolled hem; overcast closely by hand, or by machine, or if the fabric is not too thick, a tiny hem will do. Decide on how deep you want your frill.
2. Set your machine to the longest stitch, and adjust tension to zero. Using strong cotton thread, run a line of machine stitching completely around the neckline, leaving some thread both at the beginning and end of the run. You can do this either in one straight run, or in sections for the sleeves, front and back of the camicia. (This last is good if the neckline corners aren't readily visible, because it is hard to make tidy corners by this method). Repeat this stitching 1 centimetre (half inch) deeper, creating two identical lines of stitching.
3. Pull up threads to form tiny pleats - secure ends of threads by temporarily tying the threads in a figure 8 around a pin. You want to achieve the desired neckline circumference exactly - so use a tape measure frequently. Once you've got the neckline to the desired size, you can adjust the gathers so they are more even and tie the ends of the gathering threads together.
4. Use a band, or length of bias-binding, raw edges turned to wrong side and previously cut to the circumference that you require the neckline to be plus overlap, and 1centimetre wide from folded edge to folded edge. Pin in place over the lines of stitching on the gathered neckline - you can do this from either the inside or outside. Most machines will not sew through this, so you may have to do it by hand. Use the lines of stitching as a guide and sew through the pleats. Alternatively, omit the band and back-smock. On the inside of the garment using doubled upholstery or quilting cotton and a strong needle, back-stitch through every two pleats, along top and bottom machine-gather lines.

Gather-Pleating Method, Without Neckline Frill



This method requires the making of a very full camicia whose neckline is gather-pleated up into many closely-packed pleats which form a rigid neckline. In the image on the left the camicia appears to have been first pleated with quite wide knife pleats, then gather-pleated, the pleats being secured by means of embroidery/smocking stitches on the front, which acts as a stay for the pleats. I have made this style by simply gather-pleating my camicia with very strong thread, then back stitching through every two or so pleats inside the garment. It is not as decorative as the embroidered/smocked finish, but it is quicker to do.

1. Neaten raw edge of your camicia neckline by making a small hem - turn in .5 of a centimetre (quarter inch) and then again 1 centimetre (half inch).
2. Run two lines of machine stitching as for gather-pleated camicia with frill, just in from folded and hemmed edges.
3. Sit down in a comfortable chair and relax. Make sure you have your pins handy, and plenty of time so that you aren't feeling rushed.
4. Pull up threads, as before, to form gather-pleats. Once you think you have the neckline circumference right, leave long thread ends and secure by wrapping in a figure 8 around pins. Try the camicia on but BE CAREFUL of the pins, especially when taking the camicia off.
 - If you need to make the neckline larger, undo the figure 8 threads and pull gently on the gathers to loosen. Secure again and try camicia on. Once it is just right secure ends of threads by knotting them together. Remove pins and adjust gather-pleats so they are even.
 - If you need to make camicia neckline smaller, pull threads up more gently - never tug on the threads or they might break and make lots more work for you. Try camicia on again - once it is just right secure ends of threads by knotting them together. Remove pins and make sure gather-pleats are even.
5. Either embroider/smock the pleats on the front of the camicia, or back-stitch through every two or so pleats on the back, following both top and bottom of the machine gathering stitching lines.

Gather-Pleating Method, With Flat Band



This method requires the making of a firm, fairly rigid, fabric band, which acts as a stay for the pleats. You can also do this without the fabric band, by back-smocking (back-stitch through the pleats inside the garment with an upholstery or quilting cotton thread along the gathering-stitch lines). The band has a textured look that may indicate that it was embroidered.

1. Follow steps 1 - 4 above.
2. Make your band by cutting a strip of fabric as long as is required for the neckline, by either one layer which is twice the depth you need (this will be folded in half along the length, forming a folded edge), or two layers of fabric of the depth you need sewn together - this appears to be the method seen on the camicia at left, where the edge appears to have been given a rolled hem finish.

Knife or Box Pleating Method, With Neckline Frill

Strictly speaking, purely box or knife pleated camicia necklines are not often seen in sixteenth century Venetian portraiture. The image on the right is the only one I have found so far, and being an apocryphal theme, it is not as reliable a source as a portrait.

What is seen, however, is what looks like a combination of gathering and knife or box pleating: on some necklines it appears that the very full camicia had the neckline edge first gathered (or gather-pleated as I prefer to call it), then box or knife pleated to again reduce the circumference. However, this should not stop you from making a purely knife or box pleated camicia - my very first was made this way because it is quicker and less fiddly than a gather-pleated neckline.



I prefer the look of box pleats, but knife pleats are just as nice. The corners on the camicia are tricky - I find that I just fudge the corners - somehow I manage to make them disappear behind a box or knife pleat. As to pleat size, some people get very technical and get out the formula and a calculator to work out how wide each pleat should be. I unashamedly admit to a loathing for anything that requires mathematical ability, so so I "eyeball" it. It probably takes me much longer to pleat a neckline, as I find that sometimes I have to go back and re-pleat. I pin as I go along though, so it's a matter of taking out pins and making the pleats smaller or larger, farther apart or closer together. It's trial and error, but after a while you kind of get the hang of it. If you'd like to use a more precise method of calculating your pleat size, or would like to learn how to knife or box pleat, [Drea's great page on pleating](#) is a marvellous resource.

1. Neaten raw edge by narrow hemming it. You can make a narrow hem if you have a lot of fabric to pleat up, or a deep hem if you have less fabric to pleat up - the deeper hem will mean that your pleats hold their shape better.
2. Sit down in a comfortable armchair and relax. Make sure you have pins and tape measure ready, thread and needle for basting, have plenty of time and aren't feeling rushed.
3. Beginning at the centre front, pleat using desired type of pleat. Make sure the pleats are of your required depth and width - remember to allow for the width of the band which will cover the stitches that will hold the pleats in place. For now use pins to hold pleats in place. Even if you are using knife pleats, starting with a box pleat at the centre can look really nice. Remember to mark the centre back with a pin so that you can finish off your pleats

nicely at the back as well as at the front. If you've used the "eyeball" method to determine pleat width and you are pleating from centre front or back towards the sides and suddenly find that your pleat size doesn't allow for even pleats all the way around, make the adjusted pleats at the side/shoulder, especially at the back, so that they aren't noticeable, or even visible in some cases.

3. When the pleating is done, try the camicia on to make sure it fits as you want it to, BE CAREFUL of the pins. If it fits right you can now baste the pleats in place - trust me, this makes them much easier to sew, whether by hand or machine.

4. Make your band, or use a length of bias-binding.

5. Stitch down in place over the stitching line on the outside of the camicia. This band may then be embroidered over - a criss-cross or herringbone stitch in white is most common.

Drawstring Method, With Integrated Neckline Frill

After your camicia is finished you will end up with a huge square or rectangular neckline. The corners on this are tricky if you want to use the 'make-a-casing-by-turning-down-the-raw-edges' method. The best way to make a casing is to use either a strip of fabric matching your camicia (band), or a length of bias-binding sewn to the inside of the garment. To make it look a bit more period I chose to put the casing opening on the inside of the camicia. The band method takes more time and effort, but the fabric will match exactly. You can cut it on the straight grain, or make a bias strip instead. The purchased bias binding method is quicker and easier.

Fabric Band:

1. Use a band as long as you need to get around the neckline circumference plus at 2 centimetres (1 inch) (you'll need enough to allow for some easing around corners), and about 2 centimetres (1 inch) wide. Fold .5 centimetre (half an inch) on both the long edges over to the wrong side. Fold and press 1 centimetre (half an inch) on one short end over to the wrong side.

2. Neaten the raw edge of the camicia neckline by the method of your choice - hand or machine-rolled hem; overcast closely by hand, or by machine; or if the fabric is not too thick, a tiny hem will do.

3. Open out one long folded edge of the band, but leave short end folded over. On the inside of the garment, with right sides together and starting at the centre front, pin raw edge of fabric strip to camicia neckline X distance from the neaten edge, X being the depth of the frill you want on the neckline - anything from one centimetre (half an inch) to two centimetres (an inch) is most commonly seen. When fully pinned in place, sew band to camicia neckline .5 centimetre (quarter of an inch) in from raw edges - this should be along the fold in fabric strip. Take care to allow fabric strip to curve around corners by making small pleats in strip. When you have gone all the way around the neckline and are within one and a half centimetres of where you started, trim off excess band, allowing for the cut edge to be folded over to neaten the edge. Finish sewing, taking care not to overlap the

band, but butt them together - this will create the opening for the ribbon or cord to be threaded through and adjusted.

3. Take band to the inside of the garment. Fold the other long side under and stitch down from the inside. Thread ribbon or cord through and adjust.

Bias-binding strip:

Use bias-binding strip as long as required (see above) and fold one short edge over. Stitch to camicia as for above. Thread ribbon or cord through casing and adjust.

Drawstring Method, Without Neckline Frill

There is no need to neaten the raw edge of the neckline. Instead of pinning band to camicia a distance from the neaten edge, pin it with both raw edges even. Stitch as for above.

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