A Regency-Era Doll Dress to Sew and Embroider

MARY POLITYKA BUSH

Photos by Joe Coca

PieceWork®

A Regency-Era Doll Dress
to Sew and Embroider

MARY POLITYKA BUSH

⇜ Inspired by the preceding article ⇝

"You are a formidable lady, are you not, Aunt Jane?" she asked wistfully. "When I was a child I used to think you were like a good faerie—always dropping out of the sky with your delightful stories and dolls-clothes you embroidered so neatly. . . ."

—Fanny Knight to Jane Austen in Stephanie Barron's *Jane and the Canterbury Tale*

Any doll owner will adore having this Regency-era dress for a favorite doll. Mary Polityka Bush added a garland of ruched satin ribbon and embroidered chain-stitch stripes on the skirt of the dress.

Jane Austen, who never married, had no children of her own. As a doting aunt, Jane is likely to have lavished attention on her numerous nieces and nephews, in particular her older brother Edward's firstborn daughter, Fanny, who was her favorite niece. It is easy to imagine, as author Stephanie Barron does, Jane sewing and embroidering a diminutive dress for Fanny's doll, perhaps one similar to the dress here. The dress's simple style recalls the signature silhouette of the Regency Era (1795–1837), with its high waist, scooped neck, softly gathered bodice and sleeves, and skirt that falls straight in front and is slightly fuller in back to make walking easier.

The dress was sewn from a pattern designed by Shari Fuller, who specializes in creating doll-clothes patterns based on history and literature. Like her contemporaries, Jane would probably have added trims to a dress in her own wardrobe for a special occasion or to refresh an out-of-date style. In this spirit, I added a garland of ruched satin ribbon to frame the areas of embroidered chain-stitch stripes on the skirt of the dress. Although assembling this dress was conveniently expedited by a modern sewing machine, it could be sewn by hand to replicate a true Jane Austen experience.

MATERIALS

◆ DMC Embroidery Floss, 6-strand 100% cotton thread, 8.7 yards (8.0 m)/skein, 1 skein of #3865 Winter White; www.dmc-usa.com
◆ Thimbles and Acorns 1790s Open Pelisse & Regency Dress sewing pattern for 18-inch (45.7-cm) doll, #1790-01; www.pixiefaire.com
◆ Fabric, cotton batiste, ¾ yard (0.7 m) for dress and lining, Ivory
◆ Ribbon, silk satin, 2½ yards (2.3 m), ¾ inch (1.9 cm) wide for ruched garland and 1 yard (0.9 m) of ⅜-inch (9-mm) wide for sash, Ivory

- Snaps, size 4/0, 3
- John James Needles, tapestry size 28 and sharps size 10; www.colonialneedle.com
- Embroidery hoop, 8 inches (20.3 cm) in diameter, inner ring wrapped with cotton twill tape
- Sewing thread, Ivory
- Marking pens, air erasable and water erasable
- Thread Heaven thread conditioner

Finished size: Fits an 18-inch (45.5 cm) doll

INSTRUCTIONS

Notes: Read the pattern instructions thoroughly before beginning to cut fabric or sew. Compare the measurement scale that appears on each page of the pattern printout with a ruler for accuracy; it may be necessary to slightly enlarge or reduce the page(s) on a copier. Seam allowances are included on each pattern piece; it is not necessary to add them. Unless otherwise indicated, all seam allowances are ¼ inch (6 mm). A hem allowance of ¾ inch (1.9 cm) is included on the skirt pattern pieces. Use the air-erasable pen to mark the ribbon; use the water-erasable pen to mark the fabric; make all marks as small and as faint as possible. Allow the air-erasable pen marks to disappear naturally. Soak pieces of fabric marked with the water-erasable pen in three changes of cold water or dab them with a very wet cotton swab to remove the marks; allow the fabric to dry completely before steaming or pressing.
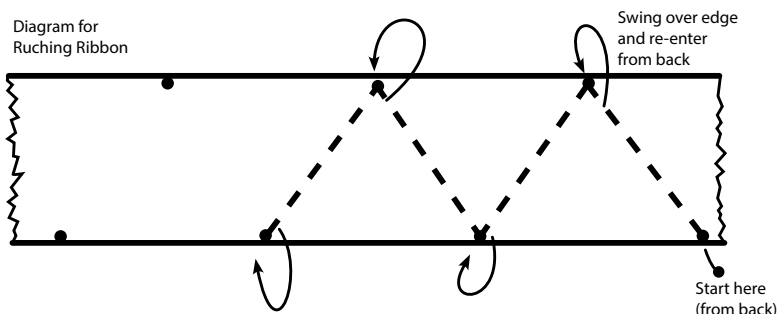
Doll Dress

Ruche the Ribbon

Using the air-erasable pen, mark the ribbon along both edges. On the top edge, make the first mark ⅝ inch (1.6 cm) from the end of the ribbon; make additional marks 1 inch (2.5 cm) apart until the opposite end of the ribbon is reached. On the bottom edge, make the first mark ⅛ inch (3 mm) from the end of the ribbon; make all additional marks 1 inch (2.5 cm) apart. Thread the sharps needle with a 2-yard (1.8-m) length of sewing thread; pass the thread over the thread conditioner, gently pressing it onto the cube so the thread becomes lightly coated but not overloaded with conditioner. Re-treat the thread during the ruching process if the thread begins to tangle or does not travel through the ribbon smoothly. Knot the end of the thread and secure it by sewing through the ribbon two or three times on the bottom edge next to the ⅛-inch (3-mm) mark. Following the ruching diagram, connect the marks on the bottom and top of the ribbon with running stitches to create zigzags. Each leg of the zigzags,

whether traveling upward or downward, begins with the threaded needle being pulled through the ribbon from back to front and ends with the threaded needle on the front of the ribbon before it is taken *over* the edge to the back so it can be pulled through the ribbon to begin the next leg. Work the same number of running stitches of about the same length for each zigzag leg. When 5 inches (12.7 cm) have been completed, *gently* pull the thread while simultaneously sliding the ribbon to gather it; repeat every 5 inches (12.7 cm). To avoid breaking the thread, work slowly, carefully, and pull gently. Continue stitching zigzags until the end of the ribbon has been reached. Adjust the gathering so the completed piece measures 32 inches (81.3 cm) long. Sew through the ribbon two or three times at the end and make a knot to secure the thread. Adjust the gathers evenly and "cup" the edges toward the front. Set aside.

Embroider the Stripes

Cut a rectangle of fabric 12 by 16 inches (30.5 by 40.6 cm) with grainline straight and running lengthwise for the Skirt Front Overlay; do not cut out the pattern piece at this time. Trace and cut out the Trace-off pattern; center and pin it to the fabric 3 inches (7.6 cm) from the bottom (short) edge, making sure its centerline aligns with the grainline of the fabric. Trace around the pattern with the water-erasable pen. Place the outlined area in the embroidery hoop and gently stretch the fabric taut. Using two strands of floss and the tapestry needle, embroider

Diagram for Ruching Ribbon

Swing over edge and re-enter from back

Start here (from back)

vertical chain-stitch stripes ¼ inch (6 mm) apart in both the oval and triangular areas, starting chain-stitch lines at top of design and working toward the hemline. Remove the fabric from the hoop, soak it in three changes of cold water to remove the outline; allow to dry; press. Fold the embroidered fabric in half lengthwise along the center chain-stitch stripe. Pin the pattern piece for the Skirt Front Overlay to the embroidered fabric so the straight edge of the embroidered area is ¾ inch (1.9 cm) from the bottom edge of the pattern piece; cut out.
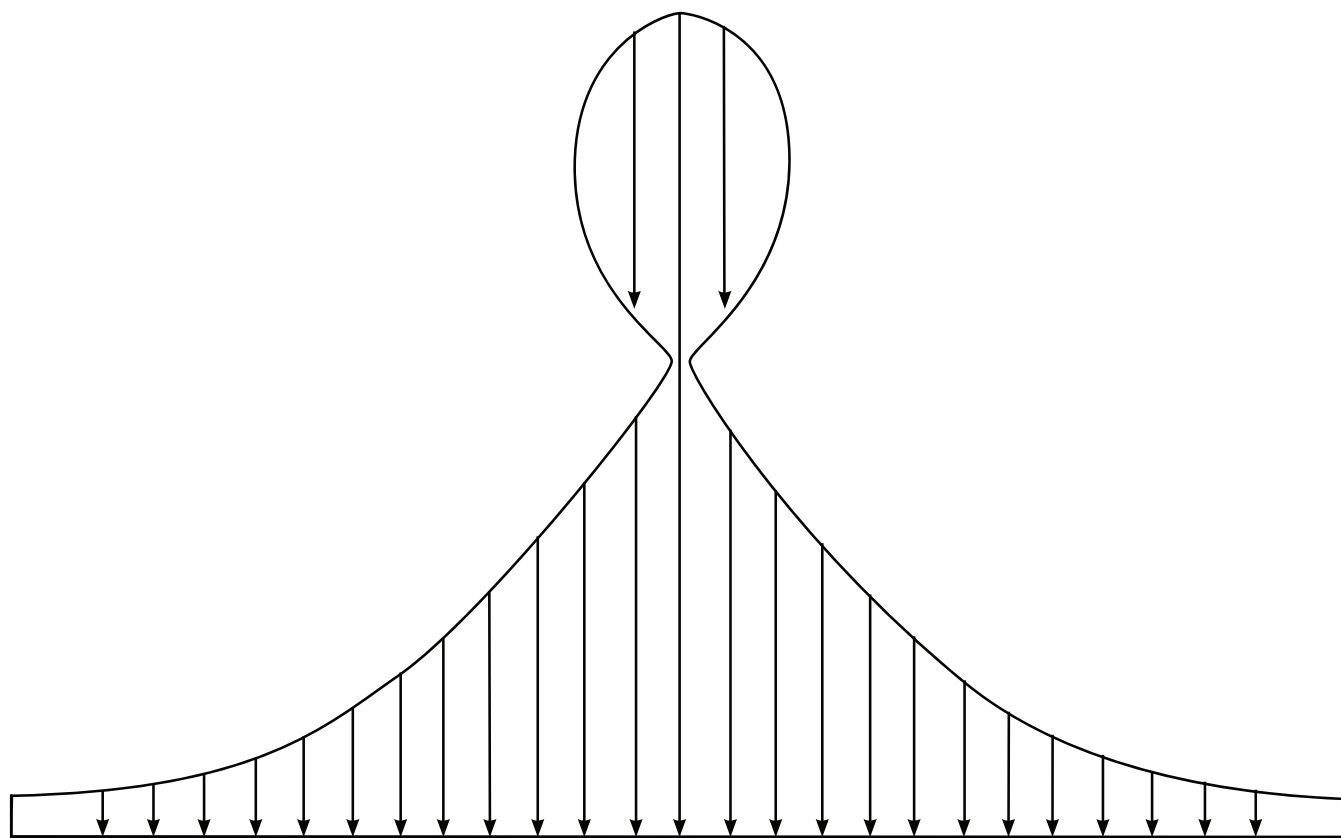
Sew the Dress

Cut out all the remaining pattern pieces for the dress and dress lining. Complete the steps as instructed in the pattern for the bodice and sleeves; set aside. Complete the steps for the skirt layers with *this one exception:* before sewing the back seam of the Skirt Overlay, pin the ruched ribbon to the right side of the skirt about 1 inch (2 cm) from the bottom edge in straight areas, curve and loop it around the embroidered areas, and extend the ends into the back seam allowance on both sides. Working from the wrong side, handsew the ruched ribbon to the skirt with stem stitches, catching the ribbon in three places with each stitch. Sew the back seam as instructed in the pattern incorporating the raw ends of the ruched ribbon. Turn and sew the hems. Follow the remaining steps to attach the skirt and its lining to the bodice. Sew snaps to the points indicated on the pattern.

Finishing

Remove any marker dots and lines that are still visible. Steam-press the dress, taking special care not to crush the puffed sleeves, bodice, or the ruched ribbon. Wrap the ribbon sash around the doll under the bodice; tie a bow in back.

Trace-off Pattern for embroidered area

Pattern may be photocopied for personal use.