

A 13th Century Continental Reliquary Bag

I based my design primarily on the reliquary bags and "liturgical purses" found in the *Royal Institute for the Study and Conservation of Belgium's Artistic Heritage* collections. Many are from Belgium, with some examples from Italy and France.

Fabric

Many reliquary bags were made of multi-color woven textiles. Some had broad bands of color and others had distinct patterns [2, 3, 7, 11]. I used a scrap of upholstery fabric that looked similar in color and texture to the pouch in Image 1. The size of the *Royal Institute* pouches varies from a petite 6 cm to 15 cm [2-11]. The pouches are usually square or rectangular with a slightly longer length. I aimed for a finished work of approx. 8x10 cm.

Construction

I attempted to replicate construction methods as seen in the images of the *Royal Institute* pouches. I cut my fabric as a long rectangle, hemmed the ends that would form the pouch opening, folded it "wrong" side out, and sewed up both sides. I used the back-stitch, universal in the middle ages [12], with standard modern sewing thread. A running stitch might have normally been sufficient for this task [13], but the fabric had a very loose weave and I wanted something stronger to keep it from coming loose.

Many of the pouches have the drawstrings threaded in and out of the fabric so the strings can be seen along the edge [7-11], so I slit holes directly into the fabric. I did not finish the holes with a buttonhole stitch as they do not appear to be finished in the pictures [10]. This later presented a problem as the string holes frayed badly. The pouch could not be lined and the holes could not be finished without taking apart the whole project. I used a solution of flour and water to act like glue to stabilize the threads around the string holes. I cannot document this step, but I wanted to at least find a solution that was not of mundane manufacture.

Drawstrings and Hanging Straps

Drawstrings and straps are near universal in the *Royal Institute* pouches and are seen in secular purses of the day as well [14, 15] (see image 2). The *Royal Institute* pictures show what look like tubular and plaited braids. I did not have detailed information on the materials for these cords, but braids of a similar nature found in England are most often made from silk, and sometimes linen or wool [16]. The wool braids can be multi-colored. Image 3 shows a pouch in the *Royal Institute* with a coarse plaited braid, possibly of wool or linen. The drawstrings and hanging strap for my pouch were made with five strands of embroidery wool, chosen to match the pouch fabric.

Tassels

Tassels are another popular element with medieval purses. They are found in continental reliquary bags as well as secular purses [5, 9, 14]. I made mine out of wool to match the drawstrings, using mundane craft techniques [17].



Image 1. Reliquary bag, 13th century, from Liege, Belgium. Royal Institute for the Study and Conservation of Belgium's Artistic Heritage [11].



Image 2. Pouch, funeral effigy of a lady, 13th century, France, in The Cloisters Museum, New York [15].



Image 3. Reliquary bag, 13th century, from Lierneux, Belgium. Royal Institute for the Study and Conservation of Belgium's Artistic Heritage [8].

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