

# Highland Women's Dress



17th century illustration  
by Hieronymus Tielssch

The fact is that although many descriptions are given, nothing but the Highland woman's veil is ever described in detail. In the late 1500s, Highland women were much abused by the accounts, legislated against for wearing silk, and called whores for veiling their heads. The plaid is forbidden (under penalty of 40 shillings) to be worn out of doors as early as 1580 "lest they be taken for loose women or suspected persons." It is confusing why the wearing of a plaid was associated with harlots.

In Glasgow in 1604, "great disorder hath been in the Kirk by women sitting with their heads covered with plaids during sermon sleeping, therefore ordains intimation to be made that afterward none sit with their head covered with plaids during sermon time." Similar admonitions were made in 1621, 1624, 1642, and 1643. The sermons mustn't have been too exciting.

To the description: the aforementioned female plaid was called an *arisaid*, possibly related to the Gaelic word *ársa* or ancient. It was essentially a cloak that extended to the heels. It was usually made of undyed wool with a few bright lines or stripes on it. It was fastened at the breast with a metal brooch and around the waist with a leather belt. In essence, it was the female version of the belted plaid. At the end of the seventeenth century, Martin Martin wrote, "...called Arisad, is a white plaide, having a few small stripes of black, blew and red; it reached from the neck to the heels, and was tied before on the breast with a buckle of silver, or brass, according to the Quality of the person...the plaid being pleated all round, was tied with a Belt below the Breast; the Belt was of Leather, and several pieces of silver intermixed with the Leather like a Chain."



Surprisingly Accurate Victorian Depictions of the Arisaid  
from McIan's "The Clans of the Scottish Highlands"

William Sachceverell in 1688 writes: "The usual habit of both sexes is the pladd; the women's much finer, the colors more lively, and the square much larger than the men's, and put me in the mind of the ancient Picts. This serves them for a veil and covers both head and body."

Edward Burt described the ladies of Inverness in his Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland in 1754: “The plaid is the undress of the ladies at Inverness and to a genteel woman who adjusts it with a good air, is a becoming veil. But as I am pretty sure you never saw one of them in England, I shall employ a few words to describe it to you. It is made of silk or fine worsted, checkered with various lively colors, two breadths wide, and three yards in length; it is brought over the head, and may hide or discover the face according to the wearer’s fancy or occasion: it reaches to the waist behind; one corner as low as the ankle on one side; and the other part in folds hangs down from the opposite arm.”

“The ordinary girls wear nothing upon their heads until they are married or get a child, except sometimes a fillet of red or blue coarse cloth, of which they are very proud; but often their hair hangs down over the forehead, like that of a wild colt.

“If they wear stockings, which is very rare, they lay them in plaits one above another from the ankle up to the calf, to make their legs appear, as near as they can, in the form of a cylinder; but I think I have seen something like this among the poor German refugee women and the Morrish men in London.”

Alexander Carmichael’s *Carmina Gadelica* describes a highland woman’s headdress: “‘am breid’ the kertch or coif was a square of linen formed into a cap and donned by a woman on the morning after her marriage. It was the sign of wifehood as the ‘stiom’, snood, was the emblem of maidenhood. The linen of the kertch was pure white and very fine. The square was arranged into three angle symbolic of the trinity, under whose guidance the young wife was to walk. From this it is called ‘currachd tri-chearnach’ -- three-cornered cap. The kertch was fastened to the hair with cords of silk or pins of silver or gold. It is said to have been very becoming and picturesque.”

The *arisaid* is shown here worn over a Woman's Léine.

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