

The Persona Pentathlon – A Broadening of Horizons

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Many newcomers and non-members tend to notice the SCA's martial aspect immediately, but Arts and Sciences are definitely an integral part of our activities. Without the research and skill that goes into so many arts-related projects, the SCA would not be as rich an experience as it is, for all its members. A&S has long been a passion of mine, in many forms. Like many other Atlantians, working on various projects allows me to fully participate in and enhance the atmosphere that we all strive so hard to create.

The Kingdom Arts and Sciences Festival was started as a venue to celebrate this aspect of life in the SCA. Its fundamental purpose is to showcase the work of Atlantia's artisans, provide an opportunity to exchange information and potentially allow people to enter their projects in competition, if they wish. The A&S Festival has only been held for five years, and, like many of the works displayed there, is a work in progress. Each year, the Festival is reassessed, and altered to better meet the needs of the participating artisans. This is a difficult process, as nearly everyone has differing opinions on what works best. The way the Festival is organized and what activities are held during the event also depends on the site (for example, a number of smaller rooms are required if classes are to be offered). The A&S Festival is still undergoing a process of evolution, and I'm certain it will continue to improve over the next few years.

One of the changes that occurred for the 2002 Kingdom Arts and Sciences Festival was the addition of a new competition, the Persona Pentathlon. This was something that had not been done in Atlantia before, to my knowledge. Atlantia is not a competition-heavy kingdom, so this was a novelty. The purpose of this article is to chronicle my experience with and thoughts on this particular competition, rather than discussing competitions in general. Many people do not have a desire to compete at all, whether out of frustration born from bad experience, or feeling that they gain little from the competition itself. Others enjoy entering competitions because they are hoping to receive feedback on their entries or because they want to challenge themselves or because they simply enjoy competing against others.

When the Persona Pentathlon was announced in the fall of 2001, I was immediately intrigued. The premise of the competition was completely new to me. The rules were relatively simple: each entrant had to present five items (no more and no less) in at least three different categories out of five. The categories were fairly broad but broken down into sub-categories (i.e., Textile Arts being a category, and Weaving, Spinning, Costuming, etc. being sub-categories). Documentation was required for each entry. (If I were Ruler of the Universe, documentation would be required for every competition, but that's another article.) Every item had to be related in some way to a specific persona, whether it was something the persona would have made, owned, ate, etc. This last requirement was what made the competition so different from most of the others that have been held in this kingdom. Linking all the entries together in such a manner results in a more cohesive display and promotes more focused research.

The judging was performed in a fairly straightforward manner, not differing much from the way it is traditionally done for SCA competitions. New versions of judging forms were developed specifically for the competition, in order to clarify and simplify the judges' task. The forms were placed online so that entrants could look at them beforehand and get a better feel for the criteria that would be used. I made sure to take advantage of this, so that I could better understand what the judges would be looking for.

It wasn't difficult for me to decide what I wanted to do for my entries. I had been contemplating a change to an Italian persona for some time, and I felt that this was a perfect opportunity for me to focus my research energies in that area. Some of my favorite Renaissance artists were from Florence, so I chose that city as the area my new persona was from. I had already chosen a name from the *Catasto*, a tax census from 1440s Florence. Next, I began to think about what items I would make as my entries. My strengths, A&S-wise, are costuming and calligraphy and illumination. I am not much of a cook but I do like making cheese. My original ideas were: a *gamurra*, or Italian dress, a *coazzone*, or braid-case type headdress, a page illuminated to look like a leaf from a Book of Hours (and calligraphed, to count as two entries) and some dish made with fresh cheese.

I began, naturally enough for me, with the costuming and accessory entries. I figured out quickly that the *coazzone* was not going to be a plausible item for a Florentine lady – all the pictorial sources I could find of women wearing this particular headdress were of

members of the d'Este family, from Ferrara. Given that regional variations in dress can differ widely throughout Italy, I didn't feel comfortable making the extrapolation that the same headdress worn in Ferrara was also worn in Florence. I decided to do a second costuming entry and make a *giornea*, or tabard-like overdress, which frequently appears in Florentine art of the 1470s. In retrospect, this was a more appropriate entry because I ended up with a complete outfit which would have been worn by a wealthy Florentine lady.

One idea I had for my entries worked out very well on two different levels. Since I was using the Pentathlon as an opportunity to flesh out my new persona, I wanted to learn as much as I could about the smallest details of Giuliana's life, and, if possible, her mindset and that of her contemporaries. I decided to write part of my documentation as letters, written from Giuliana to members of her family. This was one of the most fun parts of my project. Not long after, I began to feel that using my leaf from a Book of Hours as two entries (one for calligraphy and one for illumination) was sort of a cop-out; it was only one item, after all. So I decided to write out the documentation letters on linen rag paper and enter those as my calligraphy item. I was able to research the type of hand used to write less formal documents in Florence at the time, used a quill pen and iron gall ink, and the letters turned out very nicely.

My fifth entry took a lot of thought. I knew I wanted to make a dish with homemade cheese as an ingredient. First I researched the types of cheese that were commonly available in 15th century Florence. Ricotta was a very common cheese at the time, and is

not too difficult to make at home. It also doesn't require aging so I didn't need to start it months ahead of time. Once I had settled on that, I began searching through books on period Italian cooking for a recipe that called for ricotta (or another soft white cheese that would work as well). I decided on a *torta bianca*, or white torta, a rich dessert which is described by Platina in his *De Honesta Voluptate*.

Researching all these projects was a lengthy undertaking, but resulted in a fascinating journey. I looked at portraits and frescoes, read accounts of daily life in Florence, including diaries and letters, and even went on a trip to Italy last fall (OK, so that last wasn't for the sole purpose of doing research, but it sure helped!). Even after all the research I've done, I feel as if I've barely scratched the surface of what life was like during that time. There is a wealth of information to be had on 15th century Florence, and tapping into it is like opening a floodgate – there is still so much to learn!

Writing documentation for each item was the other large and time-consuming part of this undertaking. I am fortunate to possess fairly decent writing skills but I still spent a lot of time writing, proofreading, tweaking, re-writing and re-proofreading. I did a cover sheet for each entry that included a summary of the information: what the item was, when and where it was from. Then I made a short list of the materials I used, and following that I made a brief list of the methods I used and each step that was involved. The last part of the cover sheet listed the sources I used in my research.

After that, I began the in-depth documentation. I wrote down as much information as I could about each entry – sometimes I felt that I was overdoing it, but my feeling about documentation is that more information is better than less. I discussed how the items were made in period, by whom and with what materials. Then I explained how I did it, including why I used the materials I did. I wrote about the entire process, including mistakes and solutions to problems that I experienced. I mentioned things that I would have done differently. I wanted to make the documentation more like a project diary, so that the judges would know as much about the project as I did.

Doing the actual work of the projects was actually fairly easy once I had figured out exactly what I wanted to do. I tried to use as many period materials and methods as possible, including handsewing part of my outfit and using vellum and period pigments on my Book of Hours leaf. There were a couple of times when I ran into snags, such as the point when I discovered that alizarin lake is a hydrophobic pigment (meaning it doesn't dissolve – oops). I simply improvised or fell back on a technique that I knew would work, and made sure to revise my documentation to explain why. I did test runs of some of the projects, to make sure they would work the way I planned. For example, I did a mock-up of the gamurra bodice to make sure it fit (it didn't the first time) and a dry run of the white torta recipe to make sure it would be edible. This enabled me to spot potential problems and figure out ways to make the end result better.

In addition to researching, documenting and executing my projects, I made sure I had some finishing touches for my display, so that judges and onlookers could get a better

feel for the time period and culture that I was trying to recreate. I found a picture of a contemporary map of Florence in a book on illumination, so I scanned it and printed it out, in order to show what Giuliana's concept of her city would be. I brought a small wooden writing desk to display the Book of Hours leaf and the letters, complete with ink-stained quill pen, as if Giuliana had just finished writing to her sister or praying her daily devotions. This was the sort of effect I was aiming for in my presentation.

Overall, my experience with the Pentathlon competition was very positive. I received valuable feedback from the judges, which will help me improve my next projects. I was able to explore in great depth a new passion, and relate it tangibly to old ones. The process was almost more interesting to me than the result, though of course I was excited and honored to have placed first in the competition. Preparing for the event was a long and intense process; a lot of work was involved, almost more than I'd expected. I spent pretty much the whole six months between the announcement and the competition preparing for it in some way. I understand that there will be another Persona Pentathlon at next year's A&S Festival, so I would advise anyone planning to enter to start working on projects as soon as possible. But I know from my experience that it will be a very rewarding undertaking.