

When Nike Comes to the SCA: Managing Your A&S Projects

Since I've started down the path of being an SCA artisan and gotten involved in various A&S areas, I've had a lot of people tell me they wish they could get started on A&S as well. This collegium was born partially so I could pass on some tips about what I've found works for me (and partially from some frustrations, which will become clear). Some of these tips come from my own work, some from my professional life, and some I've gleaned from reading about, and talking to, other artisans, both within the SCA and outside. Some of what I am going to talk about will sound very dull and business like, and seemingly stifling of creativity. Project management and SCA?! But believe me, sitting down, planning what you are going to do, and then managing yourself while you're doing it, is the main key to getting things finished. The main differences between successful artists (including people like authors and professional musicians) and unsuccessful ones are not talent and inspiration, but perseverance and discipline.

The Beginning: Picking a Project

It's very easy to get overwhelmed by all the possibilities of what you can do, and want to do it all. The trouble is, this often leads to nothing getting done. So the first thing you need to do is FIND A PROJECT. If there's something you're already good at, like cooking, perhaps you could start with medieval food. Or, if there's something you really need to make for yourself, like clothes, you could start with sewing.

Too often, people don't get started with A&S because they've never sat down and made a plan. There's all these vague thoughts about stuff they'd like to do, which never get translated into action. For example:

- *I really should make myself some better garb sometime...*
- *One of these days, I'd like to have a go at medieval cooking...*
- *Calligraphy and illumination look like fun...*

If you never go beyond this, you'll never get anything done. You need to turn those vague thoughts into concrete goals, like this:

- *I'm going to use the Reconstructing History pattern 406 to make a complete Turkish outfit for Festival.*
- *I'm going to try some of the recipes from Take a Thousand Eggs or More and make a medieval feast for a Christmas in July family gathering.*
- *I'm going to copy a song from the Manesse Codex, and illustrate it, as a Valentine's Day gift for*

my beloved.

When setting goals from your vague plans, make sure you differentiate between the ones you really want to achieve and ones you just think look like fun. If, for instance, you think vaguely that you should make some more garb, but you'd really like to make some medieval furniture, make the furniture your priority and let the garb go for a bit.

One last word on picking a project – consider your current abilities and living conditions. If you've never embroidered before, choosing to replicate the Bayeux (not a) Tapestry, or even a scene from it, simply isn't going to work. Craft is a bit like sport, in that you need to develop stamina for finishing work; starting out with something huge will doom you to inevitable failure. But doing some of the animals on the borders of the (not a) Tapestry – that could work. If you live in a share house with other people, you may not have the space to pursue crafts to the extent you'd like. Maybe you could borrow someone else's space? Check with your local SCA group and ask if there's anyone who already practices the craft you want to pursue, and ask if they can help you with space, gear and advice. Or check with church, migrant and community groups – they often have groups for crafts. And if there are enough people in your SCA group, you may be able to hire some space on a regular basis.

Before you Start Work: Plan, Plan, Plan...

The concrete goal examples above have three important elements: an intended method, a stated outcome and a proposed deadline. You need to know *what* you're doing before you start, and you need to have some idea *how* you're going to do it. And having a deadline can be useful if you know you have a tendency to coast.

It can be useful to break the project up into stages. For instance, if you're going to do the Turkish garb thing, you'd count making the trousers as one stage, the shirt as another, and so on. While you're doing the planning, make sure you have a reasonable idea in your head as to the steps in each stage, including an idea of how long it will take. To get a hand with time estimation, ask people familiar with the sort of project you have in mind how long it took them to do it, or if you've dabbled in that craft, make your estimate from that.

It can help to make up a chart of the stages, so you can tick each stage off as you finish it. As well as reminding you of what you still need to do, the chart will show you what you've achieved, so it can be a double encouragement. There are sample charts at the end of the handout.

Understand what tools and materials you'll need, and gather them together. If you decide to buy

materials in stages, make sure your source is reliable, and that you will be able to get the rest of your materials when you need them. It is entirely possible that you'll need to abandon a project entirely if you run out of some crucial materials, and can't get more of the same.

Getting Underway: Where Do They Find The Time?

(And here's where I may offend people.)

One of the most common excuses people seem to have for not every trying A&S is not having time. "Oh, I'd love to try that, but I don't have the time." And yes, you might indeed have a lot of demands that mean you can't devote as much time to A&S as someone else. But ask any artisan (or many writers, or people who've started successful small businesses from scratch) what they think about the no time excuse, and they'll roll their eyes. It can even be quite insulting, because the implication often seems to be that artisans have time to waste on frivolous pursuits while others are doing Very Important Stuff. Yes, there are people who devote a lot of time to other pursuits, and have been meaning to start a particular project for a while, but haven't gotten around to it.

But too often, you hear the "no time" thing from people who manage to catch all the latest shows on TV, and read all the gossip mags. While some artisans are lucky enough to develop a craft they can make a living from and thus devote most of their time to it, the vast majority of artisans have jobs, families, houses to clean, lawns to mow, other activities and groups to which they have responsibilities, illnesses and countless demands on their time. The difference is, they FIND THE TIME to devote to their craft (and believe me, most would dearly love to have more).

If you are one of those who believe you don't have any time, let's find you some. In the back of the handout, you'll find another chart showing the days of the week with hour blocks between 6 AM and 11 PM, because that would be the time most people are awake. If you have different hours, you'll need to adjust the chart accordingly.

First, block in the time each day you spend at work, including preparing for work, and getting there and back. If you need to get kids and partners ready for their day as well, include that time if you need to. You may find this takes up all the time between 6 AM and 6 PM each day. Next, block in meal times, including prep and clean up. Estimate how much time you devote each week to housework, and block that in, too, along with the weekly shopping.

Next, there's family and other activities. If your kids do weekend sport or have to get taken to after school activities, block that time in. If you do any sports, block that time in, and any training. If you are a Guide or Scout leader, block in the weekly meetings (along with the extra time outside the weekly

meeting). If you are doing any study, allow time for classes and study.

Finally, fun stuff. If you meet your girlfriends for coffee on a Saturday morning, block that time in (there should always be time for coffee with friends). If you and your partner go for a walk in the evenings, block that time in. If you are a complete MasterChef tragic, block that time in. But make sure you only include those shows you absolutely love. For instance, if you regularly watch *The 7:30 Report* just because it's on, don't include that time. If there's anything I've missed that you do regularly, block that time in.

Now, are all those demands on time utterly vital? Can you trim any of them down? For instance, if your kids are old enough, why not get them to help with housework, making their pocket money dependant on their chores (and be ruthless – if it's not up to scratch, they don't get paid). Speaking of housework, if you're devoting hours to it each week, ask yourself if you really need to do all that stuff, like vacuum every day if there's no asthmatics in the house, or iron the sheets, towels and underwear.

And if there are any extra activities you do that you don't enjoy, try dropping them. I know many parents become a Guide or Scout leader because their kids' unit needs a leader, and they keep doing it long after their kids have left, even if they don't enjoy it anymore, because “there's no one else and you'll let everyone down if you quit.” Umm, if all those other parents really want their kids in the Guides or Scouts, let them take up the leadership role. And no one has the right to complain about you “letting them down.”

Finally, can you combine any tasks? For instance, can you do the ironing or fold washing while watching the telly? And you'd be amazed at how much vacuuming or washing up you can do during the ad breaks. If you have any public transport travelling time or time waiting to pick kids up from activities, take a book and note pad with you, and do some research.

You will probably need to re-evaluate your time seasonally. For instance, most sports only take up a few months out of the year (unless you're at elite level), and uni has that lovely long end of year break.

After all of this time blocking, you should have a few gaps on your chart where there's nothing you have scheduled. You may be surprised at how much time there is, or you may only have two hours. Regardless of how much (or little) time there is, this can be *your time* to be doing *your* stuff. And you need to be absolutely ruthless about this time – everyone around you needs to understand this is *your time* and should only be interrupted for emergencies. You need to decide the best use of it, particularly if you only have a very limited amount. This goes back to my earlier point about doing something you really want to – you want to spend that time doing something you're really keen about.

But you also need to consider overall how long the project will take. If you want to do a project that's going to take around 200 hours to complete, and you know you will only have around 2 hours a week, that's going to take around 100 weeks – or around 2 years. If you're happy to have something hanging around that long, go for it. If not, you're best to go with something less time consuming.

If you can, make sure you devote the same time each week to your projects – then, it becomes a habit, and you'll be amazed at how your work progresses.

While Underway: Keeping on Track and Keeping Motivated

Make sure you stay organised. Keep all your notes and materials together, and keep everything tidy. The image of the disorganised artisan living in clutter is all very nice, but it generally means you can't find anything, and personally, I hate clutter.

That said, keep your unfinished projects somewhere prominent, where you see them all the time. I have unfinished garb hanging off the study door, and embroidery projects in bags hanging on the study cupboards. I see them all the time, and the site of all that unfinished stuff hanging around is a great motivator.

Try and log your time. This gives you an idea of how long a project has taken, which can be useful in planning similar projects. Strangely enough, it can also be encouraging – as your skill improves, you'll find complex tasks take a lot less time than easy ones did when you first started.

If you haven't made any measurable progress for a while, sit down and think out all the reasons/excuses why. There will be times when you genuinely couldn't do anything, but if you haven't got any good reasons, only excuses, you'll soon find yourself going back to work if only to shut yourself up.

A Support Group

The idea behind a support group is a regular, fun get-together where people support and encourage . The members don't even have to be working on the same sort of project. However, having a regular forum where you can discuss what your doing can only be a good thing – you can share ideas, receive (and offer) advice and show off your latest progress – or lack of it.

While Underway: The Issues (and Excuses) You'll Encounter

It can be hard to stay motivated, particularly if your project is a big one. Here are some common

problems you'll encounter, and some tips to keep focus.

"I really haven't had time."

There will be times when you genuinely haven't had any time to work on projects. You may have gotten sick, or one of your family members needed to go to hospital at a time when you normally worked on your project (or your house, or your mother's house, got flooded on June 7, 2007, so you spent most of the 2007 June long weekend cleaning up storm damage). When this happens, don't berate yourself. Life happens regardless of what you might like. If you can make the time up, by all means do so, but if you can't you can't.

"I'm really tired."

This one can be vicious, because there will indeed be times when you are really too tired to do anything constructive. If you are really, really tired (and by that I mean getting incoherent, blurred vision etc) then don't do anything. Go to bed. But if it's just laziness, keep going – you may very well find your tiredness goes away once you aren't concentrating on it. Try doing something related to your project, like organising your notes, sorting your fabric stash, cleaning your tools, or just looking at pictures. Often I've thought I was too tired to do anything, but just sorting out embroidery floss has been enough motivation to get going.

"I hate my project."

You may well find a project wasn't as much fun as you thought it would be. If you really hate your project, you're probably best to give it to someone else to finish, because there's no point having something hanging around that you're never going to finish.

"I just can't see how I'm ever going to get finished."

You'll often encounter burnout, particularly during long projects. It can be useful to put it aside for a time and work on something else, whether related or not. But don't have too many long-term projects on the go at once – otherwise, you'll be snowed under with half-finished projects and you may never complete any of them.

Ultimately, whenever you encounter lack of motivation for what ever reason, there's only one thing you can do – PICK THE DAMN THING UP AND KEEP GOING.

Finishing: Evaluation

When you have finished a project (and you WILL finish projects!) it's a good idea to sit down and think

about what you've gained and learned. It doesn't have to be formal, and your evaluation can be as simple as "I am NEVER EVER EVER working with velvet again!" But if you want to think about it some more, here are some questions to consider:

- Was the final result what I expected?
- What was easy about the project?
- What was hard about the project?
- What could I have done better?
- Will I ever do anything like this again?

If the answer to the final question is "yes," the answers to the other questions will help next time.

Other Reasons for Never Starting or Finishing Projects

While the "no time" excuse irritates me, I suspect there's times when people say this to cover up their real reasons for not going ahead with a project. These are some of the thoughts and feelings I've had that have prevented me from doing as much as I'd like.

"I'm not sure what to do."

The answer to this is simple. Ask for help. If you're not sure how to begin sewing, ask someone who knows for help. If you aren't sure what sort of meat to use in a stew, ask a local butcher. If there's no one you know who has a skill you want to learn, check out community colleges, or specialist suppliers in your area – they may have demonstrations or classes you can go to. Or use the library or Internet to find how-to guides.

"I'm scared people will laugh at me."

I think this could be why people don't approach those with knowledge for help; they're scared their lack of knowledge will lead to sneering comments. But here's the thing – experts aren't mysteriously born with their expertise engraved on their brain. Once, they were just like you – without any idea of what to do. They may have taken years to acquire their skills, and the vast majority of people are perfectly happy, even pleased, to offer a starting hand (provided you don't expect them to do everything for you).

"I'm terrified of making a mistake."

This, more than anything, still paralyses me into inaction. Most projects require financial outlay and time commitment. What if you stuff everything up, and have to throw out all that hard work?

It's said that the only person who never makes mistakes, never makes anything. I don't believe this – I believe letting your fear of mistakes preventing you from acting means you have made the greatest

mistake of all. Here's some of the mistakes I've made on various things over the years:

- Haven't cut fabric wide enough (so my tunic is too tight)
- Have cut fabric too wide (so my tunic could fit someone who's about to give birth)
- Haven't remembered to leave a seam allowance when cutting a completed embroidered trim
- Bought the wrong fabric
- Haven't bought enough fabric
- Haven't gotten the material out of the way of the presser foot on the sewing machine so I sew through two layers
- Stabbed myself and bled all over my fabric
- Left the sugar out of the custard when making Golden Pies
- Misread the recipe instructions and left out a crucial step
- Misread the oven setting and burned what I was cooking
- Under salted dishes
- Over-salted dishes
- Dropped a pan of boiling water on my foot
- Not set the router bit properly so I wound up with uneven grooves
- Not measured boards accurately enough before routing grooves
- Killed plants through lack of water
- Killed plants through too much water
- The list goes on...

You're going to make mistakes – it's part of being human. But if you plan well enough, and pay attention to what you're doing, you can minimise the damage.

And if you have stuffed up so badly you can't rescue your project, all you can do is pick yourself up, start again, and try not to make the same mistake again.

A Note About Mental Health

Crafting can be a great way to deal with mental health problems. Picking up tools and creating gives your mind a focus on something other than the fog, black dog, or Beryl utterances (thanks, Felicity Ward!). Many people dealt with COVID lockdown by learning to cook, or sewing themselves a new wardrobe, or redecorating their house.

However, mental health issues can also impede your progress on projects, or bring them to a screeching halt. Because other people dealt with the COVID lockdown by retreating into a blanky fort, watching a

lot of Netflix, and sleeping a lot. And beating themselves up because they weren't doing anything while friends were doing such amazing stuff.

If you need to take time off because you're overwhelmed or stressed, **IT IS OKAY**. The world is not going to come to an end if you don't cook your way through a Maggie Beer book. Maybe you can use your friends' progress as inspiration, but don't let it make you feel inadequate if you can't join them. But please, do get help. If you find yourself flying off the handle for no good reason, or you haven't showered in days, or you've run out of clean dishes or clothes, it's a sign you need help. Reach out to friends first, but there are also excellent resources online for self-care – [Beyond Blue](#), the [Black Dog Institute](#) and Headspace are great places to start.

The Final Word

How much effort you put into A&S is up to you. If you have the desire, you'll find a way. Yes, making a start can be difficult, but the buzz you get from looking at something and saying, "I made this!" is very great. The only buzz that's better is when someone looks at something you've made and says with great envy, "gosh, that's cool..." Ultimately, there's only one bit of advice I can give you:

Just Do It.

Sample Chart: Project Worksheet

Project Name: _____			
Goal Finish Date _____	Date Started _____	Date Finished _____	Total Time _____
Stage 1			
Name _____			
Materials _____ _____			
Est. Time _____	Date Started _____	Date Finished _____	Actual Time _____
Stage 2			
Name _____			
Materials _____ _____			
Est. Time _____	Date Started _____	Date Finished _____	Actual Time _____
Stage 3			
Name _____			
Materials _____ _____			
Est. Time _____	Date Started _____	Date Finished _____	Actual Time _____

Sample Chart: Time Chart

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
6 AM							
7 AM							
8 AM							
9 AM							
10 AM							
11 AM							
12 AM							
1 PM							
2 PM							
3 PM							
4 PM							
5 PM							
6 PM							
7 PM							
8 PM							
9 PM							
10 PM							
11 PM							