

Making My Custom Dress Form

By Alice Estill Miller

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I heard from one of the ASG members about a local Zoom class to make a personal dress form. A custom dress form was something I needed very badly for my sewing room. The class would take place over two Saturdays in March 2021, and would be taught by Lyra Bobo, the highly qualified former Program Coordinator of the Santa Rosa Junior College (SRJC) Fashion Department. Since I knew Lyra to be an excellent teacher, I thought this project would get me out of my Covid isolation, meet other sewing enthusiasts, and provide the only tool I was missing: a second me.

I had actually been down this merry road once before in 2004 when I took a semester of Draping from Judy Jackson at SRJC. I still had the Uniquely You dress form and electric turkey slicer from that class and decided to remake that form into my current shape. In the fall of 2020, I ordered a complete set of sloper patterns from Vonnie Anderson's company, Software Tailoring, made from 3-D body scans. However, I was carrying 15 extra pounds at the time of the scan. Vonnie had included a complete set of detailed measurements (addressing left right differences, and personal oddities), that would assist with this exercise. I was grateful for the pattern set, too. She had scanned me in 2018 and made a bodice set, so I knew how valuable these slopers were for garment making. I now call this new set my "worst case scenario", since, as it turns out, she scanned me at my highest weight since just before childbirth!

Lyra's first task was for me to take my personal measurements as listed on her chart using a simple measuring tape. Then compare them to the same measurements on the proposed dress form. That would determine whether or not to "pad up" the form or to cut it down. In my case, I needed to do both. There was a clear new bulge across the back and shoulders forcing a forward thrust to my neck that was very different from the form. Another age-based bulge had developed across my tummy under the waistline. My breasts had suffered reduced fullness, a 2" drop at bust point and the hips and butt had become flatter. Most significant, perhaps was the loss of 3-4 inches in height, typical of my Italian heritage. At the end of my mother's life, she was 4'9" tall; I am now only 5' tall, when I had been 5'4" most of my adult life.

The hard foam dress form proved to be still pliable enough for the cuts needed yet soft enough for pins to anchor the padding temporarily. When I showed Lyra the problem I was having with the neck and shoulder shaping, she observed that I would need to cut the foam down drastically to realize the forward neck location and shoulder slants. She obviously saw the dress form as an art project, not a personal mountain to climb, which somehow freed me up and gave me permission to move forward.

From Vonnie's scan, I had both images and measurements from all sides as to where the jewel line of the neck and shoulder seams would be with respect to certain other landmarks like C/B, Bust and Waistline. To be completely digital about it, I could have layered photos of myself and the dress form in Photoshop to see where to make the changes. This could be confirmed using the body images from the

3-D body scans as another layer. But I did not go that far, using instead the tape measure procedure Lyra showed us. I might still try the digital comparison in Photoshop when I go to modify this dress form again on my own,

Noting that the foam core had 4" of extra height to play with, I bravely grabbed the electric turkey slicer, and pretended to be Michelangelo re-sculpting a copy of myself out of foam instead of marble, intensely referencing the scanned images and myself in a mirror. Then, I cross checked the results by making up the princess bodice sloper in my preferred cover fabric, and tried it on. I discovered exactly where I had lost weight since my scan, which made me very happy. I thought I prudent to install a jacket zipper up the left side to allow me to access the form and make further changes, should I lose more weight or develop other body mass changes in my dotage. I was further heartened to see that the neck and shoulders I had sculpted fit the sloper, but not so happy to see that the back stoop required padding.

Once the general shape of the form was correct to the knit sloper, I peeled it off the form and fused the extra padding onto the foam core, per Lyra's method.

You might ask why I chose a cobalt blue fabric for the cover instead of a flesh tone. The reason is because my sewing room is about 1/3 of my living room, with a clear window to the street. The color complements the fabrics and colors of my living room, so displaying a garment on it, when it's not in use for sewing, would be attractive.



I finished the armholes, neckline per Lyra's method and added about 6" to the bottom of the sloper to finish it like a short pencil skirt. To match the zipper on the left side seam, I added fusible twill tape to the right seam, and pinned more twill tape to the waistline for easy reference. I was delighted to see how close I came to the plumb line dropping from the shoulder seam on both sides



FRONT



LEFT SIDE



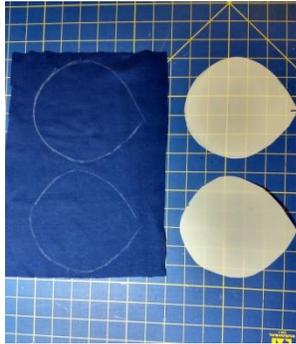
RIGHT SIDE



BACK

I also made arms using the sleeves from the sloper pattern set, this time taking up the excess evenly across the outside to create a future sleeve plumb line. I embroidered "RIGHT" and "LEFT" on the inside armholes so that they would be quick to attach properly. The arms became more of a doll-making exercise with the plastic stops at wrist and armhole to contain the stuffing. I quickly discovered the

perils of overstuffing! Next time I will sausage-wrap the poly stuffing in a “taco” of fusible batting first, and only then stuff the arm with it.



All in all, although I was prepared to face up to my old doppelganger, and all her difficulties, I came to believe she had now morphed into an ally with good qualities. She’s a lot smaller than I thought she would be which explains why people call me “small” and “cute” when I think of myself as relatively larger, older, smarter, meaner...you name it! Nevertheless, I am pleased with the result, however modest she truly is. I think she’s someone I could and will come to like as I work with her. Now I am anxious to really start sewing again!



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*Alice Estill Miller has been sewing since age 7. She graduated with an AA in Fashion Design and Production from SRJC in 2014. She was the principal tailor and owner of the **Make It Sew Workshop** in Larkfield Center, where she shared a workspace with Vonnie Anderson and Software Tailoring. She is enthusiastic about using all manner of digital tools to assist in the making of custom garments.*