Orthodox Vestment Patterns and Fabric

Eastern Orthodox Christian vestments are essential to liturgical worship. The vestments, including fabric and design are reminiscent of the Byzantine era--changing little since the collapse of the empire in 1453. Orthodox vestments are often crafted with intricate embroidery and encrusted jewels.

There are many different articles that make up the liturgical vestments. The under-robe, or baptismal robe, is usually a white robe that flows down to the feet. The epitrachelion is a stole that is worn around the neck and was traditionally made of wool to represent sheep—symbolizing Christ’s flock. Cuffs are worn over the flowing sleeves and are a reminder that the hands belong to God. An embroidered belt holds the baptismal robe in place. The phelonion covers the entire body along with the sakkos or imperial robe. A mitre is worn on the head, which derived from the style of the Byzantine crown. Aside from the white baptismal robe, all the other vestments are usually, colorful, with intricate designs.

There are no specific rules concerning the patterns used to adorn the vestments; however, the vestments are usually made from elaborate brocade with floral, crosses or dove designs. Brocade is a woven fabric with a raised floral or figural design. There is no preferred color for vestments, though certain colors connect with certain feasts or times of year. For example, purple robes are worn during Lent as an acknowledgement of Jesus who wore that color on the day of his crucifixion. Additionally, blue is worn on holy days attributed to the Virgin Mary.

Historically, Orthodox vestments were made from linen. It was considered finer than wool, which was courser and more common. The superiority of linen is also mentioned in the Bible. Ezekiel 44:17 states: “When they enter the gates of the inner court, they are to wear linen clothes; they must not wear any woolen garment while ministering at the gates of the inner court or inside the temple.”

Contemporary clergy, however, do not have to wear traditional fabrics during the liturgy: man-made fabrics such as rayon are acceptable. Rayon is an artificial material composed of regenerated plant material that resembles silk. Aside from plant or animal-based fabric, silver and gold thread is often woven into the brocade or embroidered onto the vestments to enhance the aesthetic of the material.

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<http://oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/worship/the-church-building/vestments>

Encyclopedia Britannica: Byzantine Empire

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/87186/Byzantine-Empire>

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<http://www.roca.org/OA/32/32f.htm>

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<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/80606/brocade>

Bible Gateway: Ezekiel 44:17

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezekiel%2044:17&version=NIV>

Encyclopedia Britannica: Rayon

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/492560/rayon>

Vesna Vestments: Ecclesiastical Brocades

<http://www.vesnavestments.com/fabrics.html>