

# Looking "Hot" in a Cold Climate: Boys in Banyans

Because the cut of banyans seem to be based in most cases on the most efficient use of the fabric chosen, I use banyans as a beginning sewing project in Costume Design and Construction I at UAF. It is curiously popular with our male students who really like making themselves something to muck about at home in while looking like Valmont, not a dweeb in a bathrobe. Students bring in a piece of fabric that they like: a border print sari, a bedspread, a wall hanging, or just 3&1/2-4 yards of upholstery fabric, and I show them the best way to cut it into a long robe. The three main cuts I use are shown on the next few pages. *The Bedspread* cut is obviously suitable for converting wall hangings and bedspreads, *The Valmont* makes the best use of border patterned fabrics like saris, and the most advanced project, *The Baptista* lets you use heavy patterned upholstery materials to best effect.

A banyan was quite a few different things over time. Starting in the late 17th century, and through the beginning of the 19th century men in Europe wore a variety of different styles of robe, which now we collectively call "banyans". The origin of both the term and garments are debatable, but what is consistent about all of them is that they were loose robes, of Asian cut, worn indoors for informal occasions, usually over one's shirt/vest/breeches during the day, and worn as a kind of bathrobe over one's night clothes (presupposing one wore any) at



Three banyans made for the stage. The one at right (Valmont) is cut similar to a basic kimono; the two at left (Baptista) are slightly more fitted at the shoulders like a European garment.



Robe made from an Indian block printed bedspread.

night before going to bed. It is the precursor to a dressing gown, but didn't originally have fitted sleeves, or the more tailored look of 19th Century dressing gowns.

Cut varied depending on the models used. Some surviving examples are clearly based on Persian style, East Indian or Turkish style men's robes (probably the first ones were imports), while others are cut much closer to Kimono. Some Colonial American examples look as though they might have been economically cut from a single East Indian cotton block printed bedspread, of the patterns still used today.



Two examples from Japan which were made for export to Holland look like a kimono with arm slits sewn up, and filled with batting till the wearer looks like an ambulatory Japanese sleeping bag. Not too many examples survive total, but enough to know that they were cut a variety of ways and were done in whatever material simultaneously suited the weather and looked either exotic or opulent.



Called not only by the term banyan, but also nightgown, morning gown, Indian gown, dressing gown, wrapper, hausmantel (Germany), rock, cambaij or shamberlouk (Holland), Robe de chambre (France), kaftan (Russia) and more, these garments were worn by men of middle class and higher around their homes, or even in their places of business for all sorts of casual occasions. By 1785 in London the fashion even moved outdoors for a few years and students and

other young men were seen to wear these comfortable garments to coffee houses, gambling establishments and the street.



Rich colonial American businessman Joseph Sherbourne, painted by John Singleton Copley 1767-1770

Isaac Newton, 1689. Proving even uber-science-geek physicists can look hot if they wear a banyan.

Sir Issac Newton was painted wearing a nightgown by Godfrey Kneller in 1689, an image that was reproduced in subsequent years in many popular prints, suggesting to male Enlightenment era minds (especially in Colonial America) that intellectual or scientific men wore gowns. *"Loose dresses contribute to the easy and vigorous exercise of the faculties of the mind. This remark is so obvious, and so generally known, that we find studious men are always painted in gowns, when they are seated in their libraries"* wrote American scientist Benjamin Rush a few years after he himself was painted wearing a banyan by Charles Wilson Peale in 1783. French intellectuals also seem to make a point in the mid 18th century of being painted wearing their banyans instead of outdoor wear. French painter Etienne Jaurat was twice painted wearing a Robe de chambre, once in 1769, and again in 1771, and the encyclopedist, Denis Diderot was painted in one in 1767.

Upper class men invariably owned at least one, and it was popular for them to wear them, while wigless, with a heavily embroidered cap, when receiving visitors or petitioners at home in the morning, like a pasha handing out favors while dressed "in state."

You can find some online links to images of banyans in museums and links to commercial patterns for making them at my [Manifesto](http://www.manifesto.org/history/100pages/BANYAN.HTM) page: <http://www.manifesto.org/history/100pages/BANYAN.HTM>

For further enlightenment on this topic I recommend:

Baumgarten, Linda, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*.

Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002.

Buck, Anne, *Dress in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England*. London: Batsford, 1979.

Burnston, Sharon Ann, *Fitting & Proper: 18<sup>th</sup> Century Clothing from the Collection of the Chester County Historical Society*. Texarkana: Scurlock Pub. Co., 1998.

du Mortier, Bianca M., *Aristocratic Attire*. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2000.

Fortune, Brandon Brame, " 'Studious Men are Always Painted in Gowns' Charles Wilson Peale's *Benjamin Rush* and the Question of Banyans in Eighteenth-Century Anglo-American Portraiture", in *Dress*, v. 29, 2002.

Maeder, Edward F. "A Man's Banyan: High Fashion in Rural Massachusetts." *Historic Deerfield*, Winter 2001.

*Brown figured silk faille banyan,  
English, c. 1735. in the  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New  
York. →*



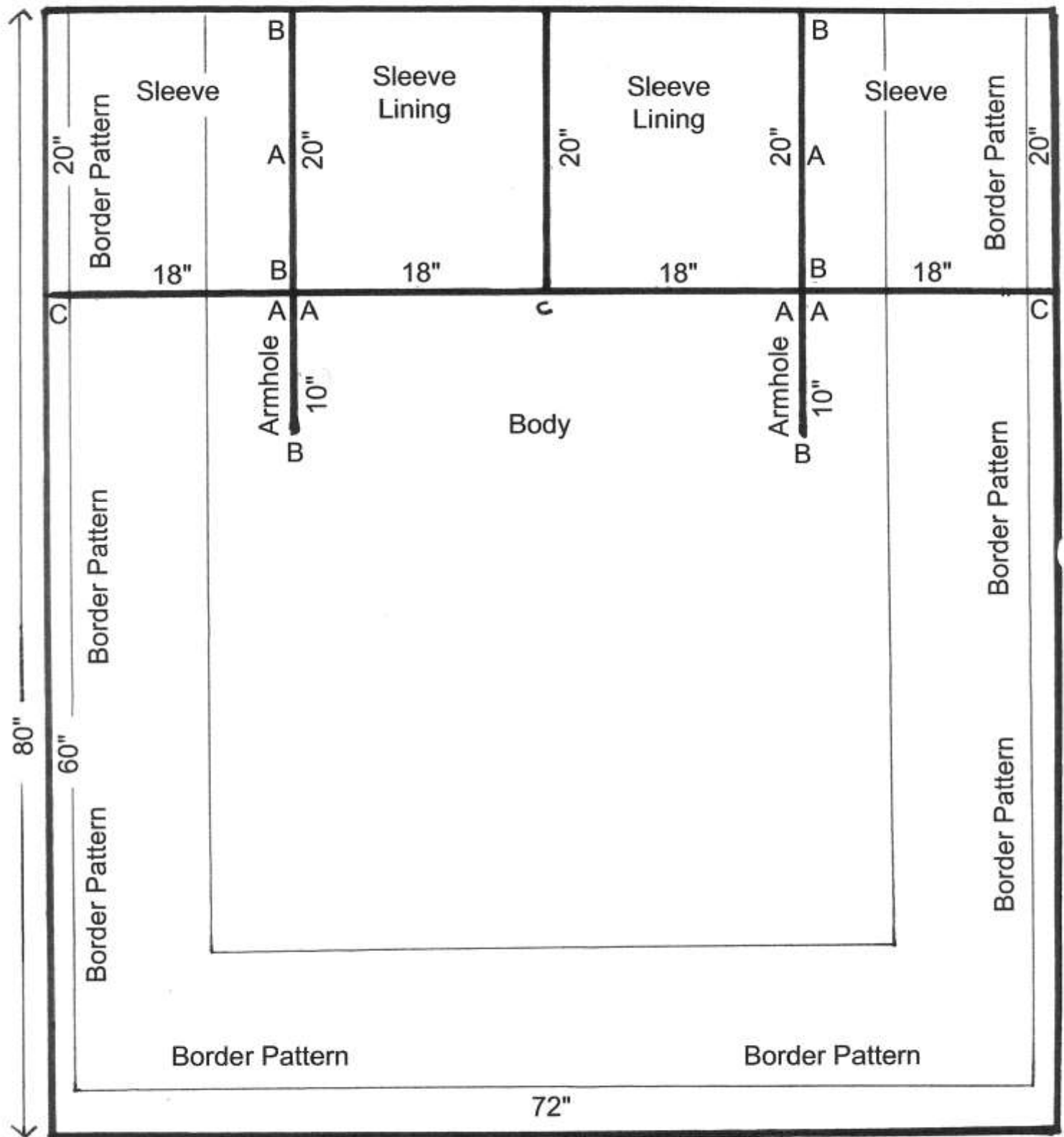
*Unusual yellow silk damask  
banyan cut like a longer version  
of a man's shirt, c. 1790, in  
Historic Deerfield,  
Massachusetts. →*



*← Gown of multicolored silk brocade with  
a rosy-plum ground owned by Peter the  
Great of Russia c. 1700-1725. In the  
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.*



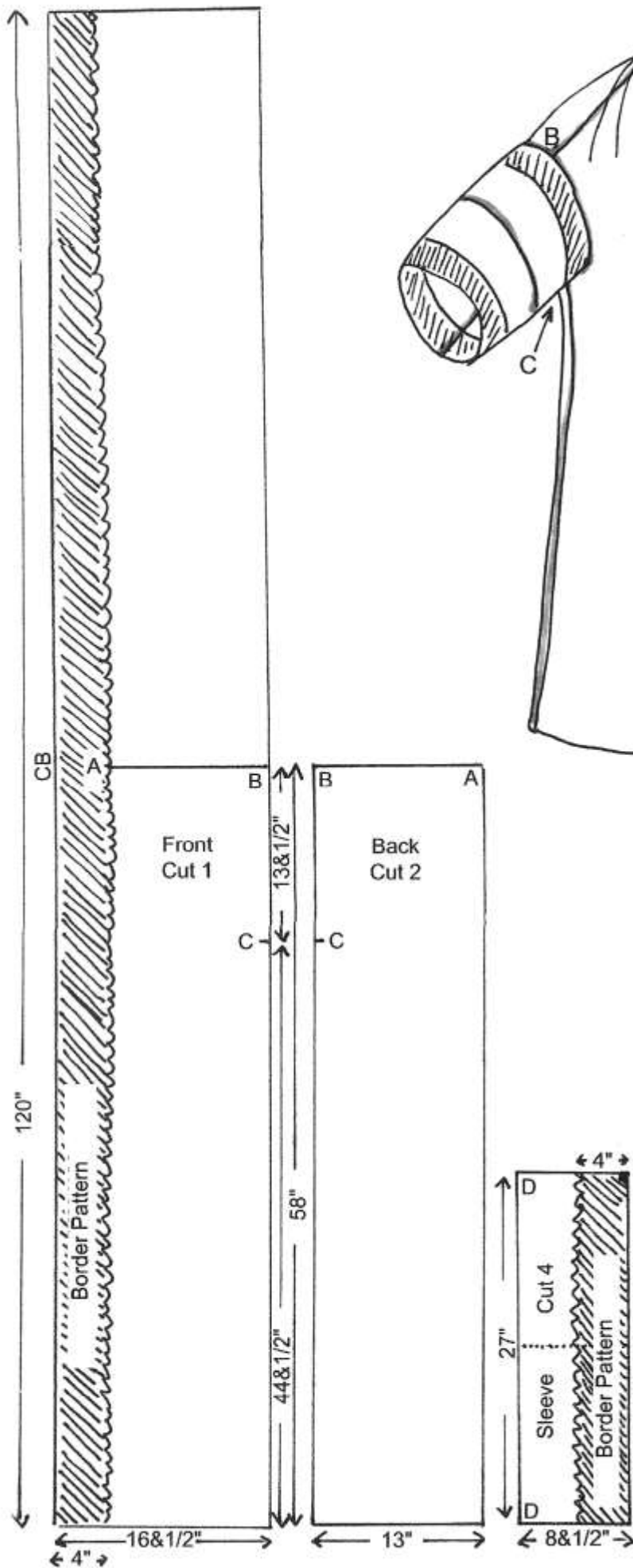
Cutting diagram for a "Bedspread" Banyan. Seam allowance included.  
Made from a patterned Indian wall hanging or bedspread at least 72" x 80"







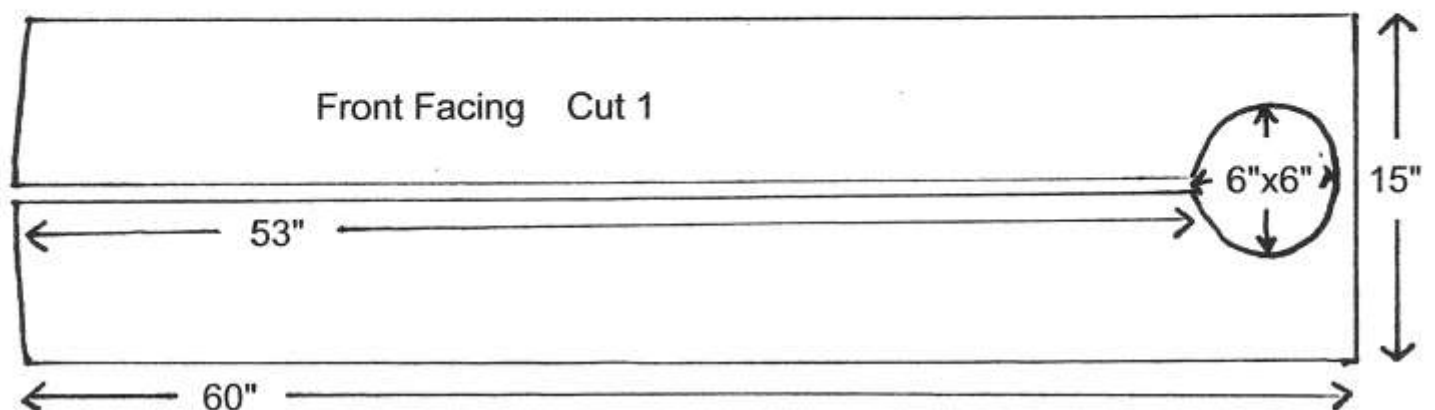
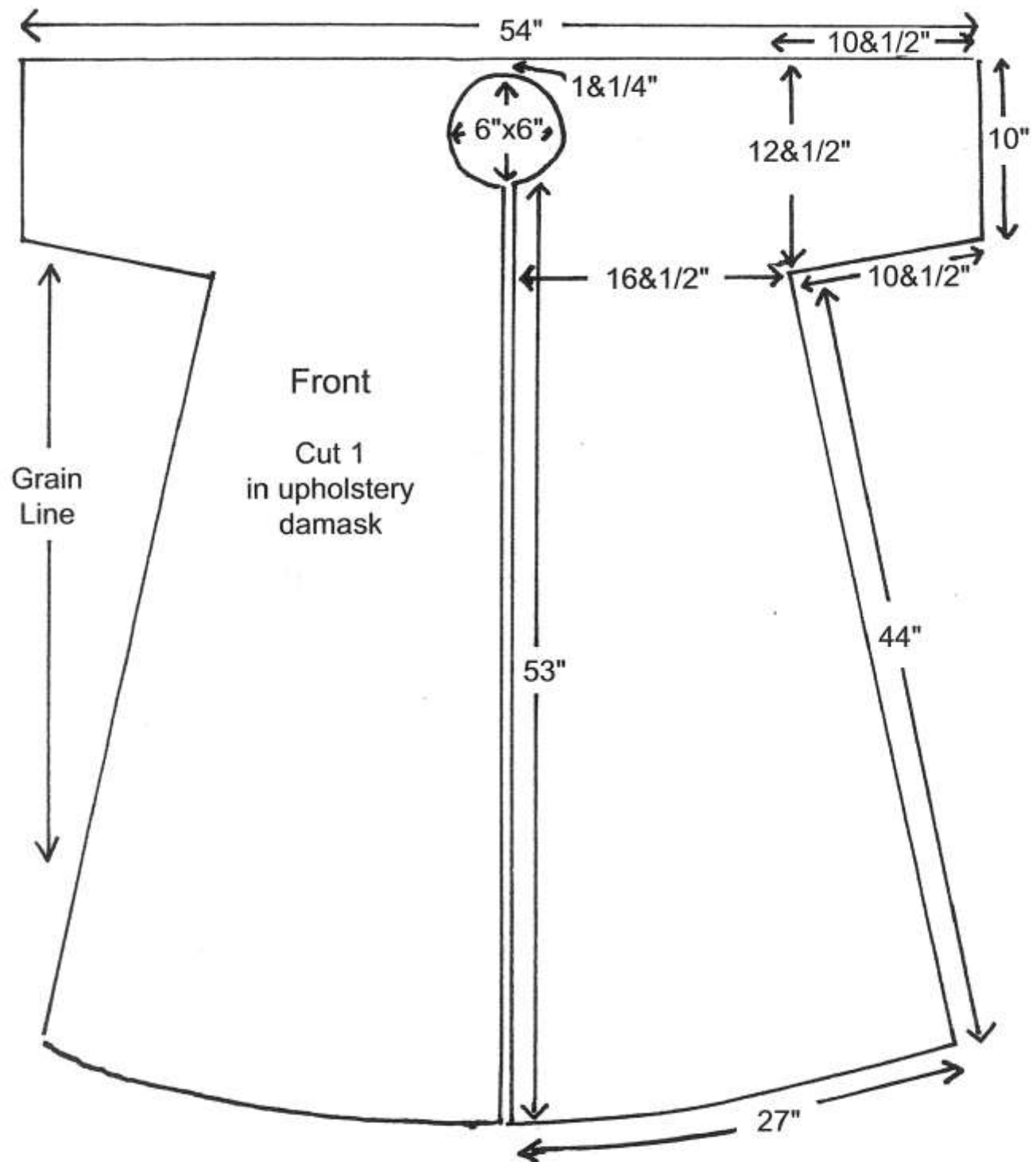




*"Valmont"*  
*Banyan*  
 suitable for  
 bordered fabrics



# *"Baptista" Banyan for 55" or wider upholstery fabric*





*"Baptista" Banyan for 55" or wider upholstery fabric*

