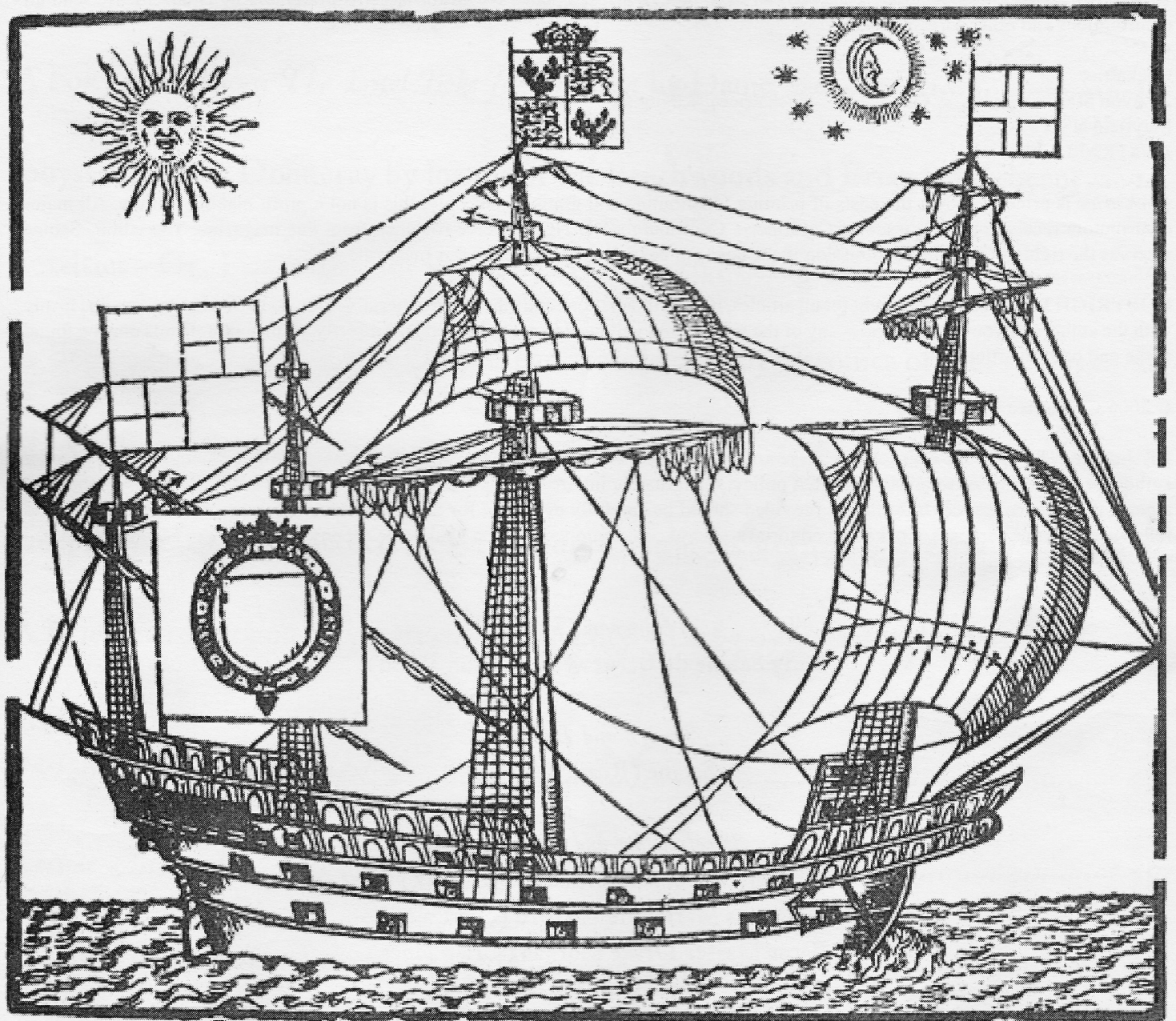


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Keeping up with the Medicis

Image and Conspicuous Consumption in Florentine Renaissance Dress

By La Signora Onarata Katerina da Brescia

If I were to choose one sentence to describe clothing in the Italian Renaissance, especially in Medician Florence, I would say: *Image is everything, daahling!* The Florentines would advertise their family's wealth and prestige in the clothing they wore. The more extravagantly clothed and adorned, the wealthier and of higher status the family would appear. Or to put it another way, the use of conspicuous consumption was highly desirable.

Look at contemporary portraits, inventories, and descriptions - all point to displaying wealth (or at least what you want people to assume about your wealth) via clothing. Before banks were common in Europe, wealth was commonly converted to goods (*Renaissance Clothing and Materials of Memory*, p27). Up to 40% of a family's total wealth could be invested in clothing worn (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*, p 210). Clothing was the obvious and immediate difference between the upper and lower classes. This was especially important in early Renaissance Florence, where the upper class was not necessarily nobles but self-made bankers and merchants.

What was the thinking behind that?
(Projecting the Three Virtues).

Florence had a paradoxical philosophy with regards to clothing. In everyday dress, Florentines were sober and practical. At home, women would often wear the gamurra (under dress), usually made from linen or inexpensive wool. Their headdress could be a linen wrap knotted around their head. For special occasions, clothing was the 'vehicle for family honour'.

Clothing also helped to portray the virtues that Florentines found desirable - that of Honour, Modesty and Respectability. Florentines loved luxury and wealth but flaunting it was not looked on favourably (*The House of Medici: It's Rise and Fall*, p21). In public, men wore a tunic, often of rich, dark red cloth (an expensive wool with expensive dye). They were the image of *Respectability*. Mature

women were the family's projection of *Modesty*. In public, little of their clothing was visible, being covered in a mantello (loose cloak). Young girls, under 17 years of age, were not considered old enough to wear one. Young unmarried women or girls were the representation of the family's *Honour*. They were often closeted in their homes and, when allowed out on special occasions, would show off the wealth of their families in their clothing. This was expressed in the fabric, accessories, gold and silver threads, pearls, embroidery and jewellery. Girls under the age of 17 years were exempt from sumptuary laws, at least prior to 1500.

A girl's wedding was the height of the family's *Image Machine*. This consisted of the bridal trousseau (supplied by the bride's family), the more expensive counter trousseau (provided by the groom, partly using her dowry) and temporary gifts, essentially on loan from the groom.

Wedding clothing was designed to show off both families' wealth. Many pieces were often resold or taken apart and reused after the 'honeymoon'. However the wife's trousseau was usually of lesser value than her husband's. Also, it was effectively on loan from the husband. There are documented contemporary records stating instances of the most expensive dresses being kept by a husband's family after his death.

The only real expressive outlet for a Florentine woman was her clothing. But it was only for special occasions. Clothing was the 'vehicle for family honour' and it was only then that it was allowed for the woman to express sumptuousness or extravagance.

The most important of the Florentine population absolutely needed new clothing for all public events. *Clothing Renaissance in Florence* (p83) gives a contemporary document concerning Florentine ambassadors in Rome:

"When in Rome, Florentine ambassadors make a point to change clothes continually.

Any excuse for a party and new clothes!

Rome never saw then in the same outfit from one day to the next.”

This apparently did them great honour. But true to Florentine control and the male virtue of Respectability, the outfits were apparently of very good quality but not too over the top.

Festive occasions deemed suitable for new clothing to be specially made were public holidays, feast days, office holding and rites of passage. The major Florentine

Renaissance fabric was expensive. There was no getting around it. Embroidered silks were in the range of \$150-\$300/m.... To make 50 braccia (about 50 yards) of damask took two months... brocaded velvet took six months. Everything was woven and sewn by hand.

festivals were during the Spring Festive season with May Day and the Feast of San Giovanni (24th June) being the most important. Rites of passage, such as weddings, commanded the most extravagant of clothing.

Sewing for outfits was often started up to 2 months in advance. The actual shopping for fabric, decoration and commissions involved could be done well in advance of this. Family log books (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*, p 80) note purchases made concurrently, over a year, for outfits for different events throughout the year. Records often recorded the cloth and who it was purchased from, the cost, type of fabrics for linings, fur trims, ribbons, laces, jewellery, metalwork or decorative feathers (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*, p 125). Sleeves often had their own entry, as they were commonly the most decorated part and could be worth more than the rest of the dress!

A typical outfit

The way Renaissance clothing differs from modern clothing possibly the most, is in the amount of material that was used. Today clothing seems to be shrinking, with minimal material used. In Renaissance Florence, there were at least four layers worn by women. These were the *camicia* (and underclothes), *gamurra*, *overdress* and *mantello*.

Camicia: this was worn closest to the skin, protecting the expensive clothing from body oils and sweat. It was usually made from linen, but could be made from silk or cotton (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*, p 162). Contrasting underskirts were worn as

well. (Now if you were really flash, these could be decorated as well!)

Gamurra: the everyday dress with fitted bodice. This was the common form of day dress.

Overdress: This was worn over the *gamurra* in public. It was rare for a non-family member to see a woman only in a *gamurra*. (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*) In summer, this was sleeveless (*Gionea*) and could be

made of silk brocade or damask. In winter, the *overdress* had long sleeves (*Cioppa*) often made from cut and figured velvet or silk brocade. Sleeves could be highly decorated and embroidered and were often of expensive contrasting materials. This was the most decorated layer of clothing.

Mantello: The outer public layer being a plainer cloak. This was worn by upper class married women and covered all the other layers.

The costs of looking good

The cost of an outfit could be broken down into the following areas: fabrics, commissioned accessories, notions and tailoring.

The least expensive of these was the tailoring. It appears that a typical cost of tailoring (not decorating) a dress could be 10 soldi (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*, p 100).

Next is the material required for an outfit. Bearing in mind the number of layers mentioned above, let's concentrate on exactly how much fabric this would require. Modernly, material can be purchased relatively cheaply, especially when on sale. To get an idea of the costs of renaissance fabric, think handmade embroidered silks in the range of over \$150-\$300/m plus!

Why was cloth so expensive? Cheaper, machine-made materials did not become reality until the industrial revolution. Until then fabric was woven,

by hand, on looms of smaller width. Different types of materials took differing amounts of time to make. For example, to make 50 braccia of damask it took two months, the same amount of taffeta took 4 ½ weeks, and the same of three pile, brocaded velvet took six months to make (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*. p 91).

Adding to the costs was the dye, of varying quality and expense, used to colour the fabric. One of the most expensive and sought after dye was kermes - a rich red. Other colours associated with wealth and luxury were purples, blue-violets, red-violets, crimson and scarlet (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*. p170).

But exactly how much fabric is required for a typical outfit? (See Table 2 for 15thC and Table 3 for 16thC, both below). It is safe to say that the amount of cloth used

was directly proportional to the wearer's social status. Florentine tailors cut the visible over garments of the upper classes "big enough to amplify opportunity for magnificent display without resolving to undignified stuffiness" (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*. p 90). A lot of fabric, in voluminous cloaks and skirts, would slow down the wearer, artificially creating a slower, more dignified walk. This was highly desirable to the Florentine who not only wanted to show their wealth, with lots of expensive fabric, but look dignified while doing it!

A simple upper-class dress, from the 15thC, would take about eight braccia. Twenty braccia would make an average gown. One dress was recorded to have taken thirty-five braccia! (*Dressing Renaissance Florence* p 90-1). So you can see where the costs would start stacking up. e.g. An average dress (20 braccia) of

Material Type	Cost per Braccia
Damask	3 ½ Florins
Changeable tafetta (tafettqa cangiante)	15 soldi
Figured/ voided (cut/uncut) velvet	2 ¼ - 3 ½ Florins
Multiple pile velvets (uncut)	4 - 5 1/2 Florins
Cloth of gold, silk velvets with gold threads in weft (used esp in weddings)	Up to 20 Florins
Fine wool	From 1 ½ Florins
Cheaper wool	5 lire

Item of Clothing	Year	Length of fabric in braccia
cotta	1440	18
gamurra	1475	8
giornea	1448	26 1/3
giornea	1447	25 3/4
Maniche (sleeve) (pair)	1448	1 1/2
Mantello (mourning)	1423	14
Mantello	1423	26
Roba	1447	35

Item of Clothing	Material width	Length of fabric in Castillian barras	Source
Kirtle (similar pattern to Eleanora Medici dress)	66 in (1.6m wide)	2 (1.6m)	Patterns of Fashion /Alcega (p8)
Fitted ropa	60 ½ in (1.54m)	4 11/12 (4.12m)	Alcega f.168
Loose gown	66 in wool	12 (11.30m)	Alcega f181
Ropa	60 ½ in (1.53m)	4 ½ (4.15m)	Alcega f.175
Woman's doublet	22 in silk (0.56m)	2 ½ (2.1m)	Alcega f.14v
farthingale	22 in	6 (5.03m)	Alcega

TABLE 1: Typical Costs of Materials in Renaissance Florence

TABLE 2: Approximate lengths used for various garments in 15thC Florence (based on *Dressing Renaissance Florence*. Pg 231)

TABLE 3: Approximate length used for garments of the 16thC (Alcega and *Patterns of Fashion*).

damask would cost seventy florins just for the material, let alone the decorations, which could outstrip this cost easily.

Even in the 16thC, with wider material widths (see Table 3, previous page), there were significant amounts of material used in various garments.

Trims such as furs were highly desirable. Family documents, from the 15thC, have recorded one dress requiring 300 half pelts of grey squirrel, costing nine florins. Another used 200 small furs at

on the other merchants who would like to be seen as upper-class. A distinction had to be made.

The first large list of Florentine sumptuary laws were in 1322-5. These attempted to restrict types of headwear, jewellery, decoration and the amount and type of fabric and dye that could be used by an individual. At this time, there was also a limitation of only four gowns that could be owned. Later laws even attempted to control the shape, style and heights of necklines. In 1472, it was

The first large list of Florentine sumptuary laws were in 1322-5. Items were often renamed in an effort to avoid sumptuary laws. There is documentation of one woman, accused by authorities of using buttons, who argued that they were not 'buttons' but 'studs', as there were no buttonholes and were not used for closures.

12 ½ florins. (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*. p 189) *The Medici Archive Project* quotes costs for the embroidering of a cape for Eleanora de Toledo in December 1542, as being 31 lira.

Sleeves were often highly decorated with pearls, embroidery, ribbons, gold and silver threads and such. An example of one set of brocaded sleeves (1415) costing ten florins gives a hint at the amount spent on just a small part of the dress (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*. p194).

To put this more in perspective, it is interesting to look at some average expenditures and wages of the general population at the time. Two soldi could buy a day's food. Two florins could buy a week's worth of food. We could have lived comfortably for one year on 150 florins. For thirty-five florins a year you could rent a small house and garden. One thousand florins would get you a palazzo (*The House of Medici: It's Rise and Fall*. p33). A maidservant earned ten florins per year and you could buy a slave for fifty. A further list of costings for comparison can be found at *Stefan's Florilegium -p-prices-msg*.

forbidden for men or women, under 30 years of age, from the 'extravagant use of gold, silver, furs and jewels.' (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*. p182).

In the late 14thC, foreign clothes made and manufactured outside the city and district of Florence were forbidden. At this time, there was a major wool industry crisis in Florence. The mid 15thC saw the importing of cloth, other than from Italy and southern France, banned (*Sumptuary Laws in Italy:1200-1500*. p123).

A common Tuscan motto was "he who has little cloth wears short clothes". This is confirmed in one sumptuary law that forbade servants and slaves from wearing clothing that would touch the ground.

Over the years, sumptuary laws were written and rewritten as clever citizens worked out ways to get around the laws. As laws started to dictate the use of decoration on gowns, the fashion of highly decorated sleeves grew, in an effort to avoid the law but still show off as much as possible. Use of contrasting materials, often with two to three fabrics, was also seen (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*. p 182). Items were often renamed in an effort to avoid sumptuary laws. There is documentation of one woman, accused by authorities of using buttons, who argued that they were not 'buttons' but 'studs', as there were no buttonholes and were not used for closures. Another claimed that she was not wearing ermine but 'lattizzi' ('milky')

Curbing natural tendencies

All of this massive spending on clothing, and 'keeping up with the Medicis', as it were, resulted in many sumptuary laws in an effort to control the amount of money spent. With Florence's varying-economy and problems with the textile industry, some control over spending within the local economy was also desired. Florence's upper classes mainly consisted of wealthy merchants, so some sort of control had to be made

which later came to commonly mean a white fur of unknown origin (*Dressing Renaissance Florence*. p.189).

Another way to get around the regulation of clothing worn, was the purchase of a lead 'seal of approval' which allowed for a garment to be worn for a given length of time. This was usually only given if the garment was made before a new sumptuary law was proclaimed and if the appropriate fee was paid.

Where does this leave us?

Hopefully this discourse will help to better understand the contemporary thinking behind the upper class Renaissance Italian, in particular in Florence. If we can understand the social background, renaissance mindset and its economy, then this can direct us in recreating a particular outfit befitting our chosen social stature and the purpose of the outfit chosen.

Today we have banks and so have no need to have 40% of our wealth on our backs to show off our prestige. Modernly, clothing is cheap and our attitude to it is very different. Mundanely few can afford to spend so much on clothing, let alone the clothing worn as part of the SCA. But, in a way, little has changed. These days we tend to show off with houses, cars, holidays and electronics. But still we try to keep up with the Joneses (who have replaced the Medicis).

Within the game however, we can recreate the 'look' of the wealth our personas would like to achieve. Luckily, today we can substitute fabrics, faux jewellery, decoration and gems, in our recreations. This way we can attempt to achieve the look of conspicuous consumption at a much cheaper price.

Glossary

Measurements

Braccia (pl): measurement, being an arm's length, usually approx. One yard.

Alla: an elle

Canna: 3 -4 braccia

Pezza: 12-14 cannae: regulation length of woolen cloth in Florence markets.

Yard = 0.914 m

Money

Denari: is the smallest denomination of Florence. 12 denari was the equivalent to 1 soldi.

Soldi: equivalent to 12 denari.

Lira: silver coinage, the equivalent weight of which varied:

1490 - 5.9g,

1530 - 5.2g,

1550 - 4.5g.

1 Lira = 20 soldi = 240 denari."

Florin: (Florentine Ducat): gold coinage, the actual value of which varied with the economy.

When first issued in 1252, the Florin weighed 72 g (24 carat).

In the 13-15th C, the Florin weighed 3.536 g gold.

In 1400, a florin was worth about 75 soldi.

By the early 17thC, the ducat is worth 124 soldi.

Clothing

Cotta: basic gown

Gamurra: basic gown, usually unlined and worn over camicia. After 1450, sleeves were detachable.

Giunea: long, sleeveless overdress, worn in public. This was often elaborate, could be lined with fur or silk.

Maniche: pair of sleeves.

Mantello: loose cloak

Roba: robe

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La Singora Onorata Katerina da Brescia is an Italian noblewoman born in Brescia in the 16thC. Escaping an arranged marriage, she became a Privateer. Having made her fortune and lived in Ferrara for a short time, she is now 'retired' in Firenze (Florence). She lives the life of a noble woman, married a younger man and has a beautiful daughter. Katerina is also known as *Black Kat*. Though she is retired from the Privateer life, she has retained ownership of her privateer ship *The Gardian*, berthed at the Port of Innilgard. *Karen Carlisle* is an optometrist. She is married to a younger man and has a beautiful daughter and way too little time for all of her interests.

A Brief Introduction to Western Christianity – Part 3: Crusaders and Scholars By Collette de Harecourt

The previous parts of this series followed how the church had developed from a small group of Jews in the first century, to the dominant power throughout Europe and around the Mediterranean, having an enormous impact on the lives of the early medieval people. United for the first thousand years of its existence, the eastern and western parts of the group had split in 1054, giving rise to what are now called the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

The Roman Catholic church had established a system of church government that ran all the way from the Pope at the head, down to the local priest in the medieval village. The church provided education and help for the poor and the sick, as well as spiritual guidance. The monasteries and cathedrals became centres of learning and arts, as students flocked to learn in the more stable environment brought about by feudalism. However, though the church had a vast quantity of theology and canon law, what the layman (whether peasant or noble) thought about various issues did not always agree with church teachings.

Though the eastern and western halves of the church had excommunicated each other, efforts

were made to heal the breach a number of times, and relations between the east and west were generally good. Pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem from western Europe could find shelter throughout the journey, as the Muslim rulers in the areas around Palestine in the ninth and tenth centuries were usually tolerant of both Jews and Christians. Bishops were able to organise mass pilgrimages – the largest recorded, from Germany in ~1065, had about 7000 people (Shelley, B., 1995, p. 187, and Clouse, Pierard & Yamauchi, 1993, p172).

During the eleventh century, however, internal tensions between rival Muslim groups began to cause problems for Christian pilgrims. Reports circulated back to Europe of persecution of Christians. When the Seljuk Turks invaded Palestine and took Jerusalem, they were much harsher than the previous rulers. After taking Palestine, the Seljuks moved back to the north and into the Byzantine Empire. At the battle of Manzikert in 1071, they captured the Eastern Emperor Romanus Diogenes, and within a few years, Asia Minor was under their control.

In early 1095 the emperor Alexius Comnenus sent envoys to the western rulers and the pope,