

# Cockatrice

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# Tailoring Techniques of Medici Florence, 16thC

## by La Signora Onorata Caterina da Brescia.

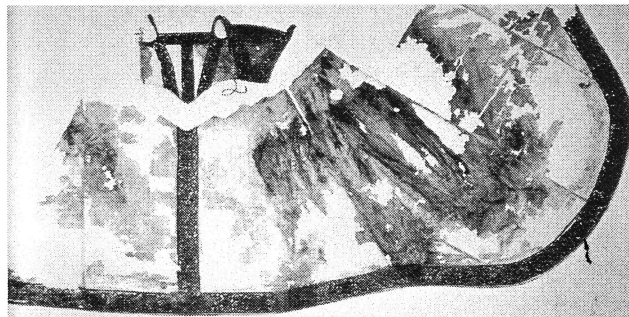
**Introduction** As part of my research, I am looking into specific construction techniques used by Florentine tailors of the 16th century, particular the first half. The tailor of the Medici court, during Eleanora's time was Mastro Agostino. (La Moda a Firenze p26)

### Extant Examples



We are fortunate to have two examples of extant Florentine sottana (petticoat/dress) from the middle decades of the 16th century. One is a red, velvet sottana trimmed with satin gards and gold couching. This sottana was found on a wooden effigy in Pisa and has been assumed to belong to Eleanora d' Toledo (Figure 1, at left). It has similar construction techniques to those of her burial sottana which is in poorer condition.

The second extant example is the burial sottana of Eleanora di Toledo. This is also discussed in La Moda a Firenze (Figure 2, below). It shows decoration and spiral lacing at the side back. A detailed picture of the placement



of the pieces of this sottana can also be found in La Moda a Firenze. The burial sottana was also studied by Janet Arnold in Patterns of Fashion.

There is also an extant outfits owned by Cosimo Medici and Don Garzia d' Medici. Both are discussed in Patterns of Fashion. This gives us more information on types of stitches used during this period.

### Patterns

Looking at the layout of Eleanora's burial sottana, it is very similar to those found in Juan Alcega's Tailors Pattern Book. The burial sottana clearly shows the pattern used (1562). This is consistent with Juan Alcega's Tailor's Book, suggesting that tailoring techniques used in the middle of the 16th century were still relevant a few decades later. Juan Alcega's Tailor's Book also provides contemporary patterns for various outfits. Possible patterns will be dealt in a separate article.

### Amounts and Widths of Material used

La Moda a Firenze has listings of loom widths used in Florence. The usual width of material was 58cm, but looms wider than this are not uncommon for plain fabrics such as satin, taffeta, and possibly damask (La Moda a Firenze, p 184). Loom widths are recorded range from 73cm to 117 cm (2 braccia - see Glossary). Wider loom widths made materials would be more difficult

to work, especially for piled fabric. This would logically make these larger looms less common and would produce more costly materials.

Examples of differing loom widths are:

1. Gold damasks, gold and silver tabbies (double sided) (curtains and bedspreads) - also woven on looms 73 cm (1/4 braccia).
2. Satin (Eleanora's burial) - 1 1/4 braccia wide.
3. Velvets with 2 braccia widths have survived.
4. 140cm wide loom (1499) velvet was worked in Florence.

La Moda a Firenze also gives a listing of dates, types of outfit and lengths of materials used to make them. Unfortunately the widths are not mentioned but from the loom widths (above) for various materials, we have an idea of how much was used, for example:

p201 (1544): a sottana of velvet ('petticoat' or what Florentines called a sottana) made of 17 braccia - approximately 10m today (assuming anything from 73 cm to 140cm wide).

p. 202 (1544) another sottana of velvet with only 6 1/2 braccia of material used. This may have been as it used a wider loom width material (?)

p 203: sottana co la coda (with a train) using 18 braccia...

p 227: (1557) sottana of velvet again using approximately 17 braccia...

The braccia measurement appears to be different, not only between Spain and Italy, but also within the Italian States. The Florentine braccia, of the 16th century, is recorded as 58.8cm (La Moda a Firenze).

### Stitches and sewing techniques

This is one area in which research is very slow and difficult to pinpoint specifically to the time, region and specific items of clothing. Assumptions can be made based on contemporary stitches used and well-established tailoring methods.

A very good summary of documented and published stitches used in Florence (and Europe) can be found at the Sewing Stitches Used in Medieval Clothing web site. This site quotes examples of running stitch specifically used in Florentine clothing - (which can be confirmed in Patterns of Fashion)

- a.. 1575; Suit of Cosimo I de' Medici.
- b.. Raw edge of silk on panes on trunk hose turned under and held by running stitches (and some hem stitchign) in 2-ply silk (pp. 53-54),

suit of Don Garzia de Medici, 1562

c.. Stab stitch, Suit of Cosimo I de' Medici.

d.. Row of stab stitches down center front about 1.5mm (1/16") from edge (pp. 53-54.)

Though not a sottana, the 16th century (non-Florentine) camicia found at the New York Metropolitan Museum has seams of backstitching which are then over embroidered. (in-progress research project of Kathy Page, see below). This shows that this stitch was also contemporarily used.

La Moda a Firenze shows close up of an extant camicia which appears to have a decorative hem stitch - a pulled thread technique (on the neck of embroidered camicia dated mid 16th century. There is embroidery over these seams also. (Figure 3, at right)



### Construction Methods

La Moda a Firenze and Patterns of Fashion both discuss the following found in the two extant dresses available:

- a.. Stiffening of imbusto.
- b.. stiffening the hem
- c.. edging the imbusto and skirt hem
- d.. edging of skirt opening and lacing
- e.. lining

#### 1. Stiffening of bodice:

In the first half of the 16th century, the imbusto (bodice) of women's sottana had a more rounded shape. This could easily be achieved by layers of stiffening and had no need of corsetry. By the 1540's, the imbusto was becoming more rigid in shape. This would require some sort of better support.

For England, 'payres of bodies' are recorded in Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd. Much speculation has been made about corded corsets and other forms of corsetry with regards to the first half of the 16th century Florence. More up-to-date research on Florentine sottana can be found in La Moda a Firenze. This information is based on Medici documents and Gardaroba (wardrobe listings), portraits and the few extant items of clothing available.

In Eleanora's Gardaroba, there is no mention of 'payres of bodies' or corsets stiffened with either whalebone, bents or reeds which appear to be the most common form of stiffening used for corsets of the time. There are 'stays' or busto de sotto recorded. However it appears that Eleanora's stays were mainly of soft materials. They were lined and interlined with linen. All stays recorded for Eleanora were made of velvet. However other stays had been recorded to be made of satin.

As previously mentioned, there are only two known extant gowns from 16<sup>th</sup> century Florence. A red velvet sottana, with sleeves, from a wooden statue in Pisa. (La Moda a Firenze, p 70 ) and Eleanora's burial sottana (La Moda a Firenze, pp 72, 73) and Patterns of Fashion, p 102-4) .

The second is the more documented of the two, having being described in detail in Janet Arnold's Patterns of Fashion, and more recently in La Moda a Firenze. Both gowns were made in a similar fashion. It appears that the stiffening for the gowns was incorporated into the actual imbusto itself. This padding of the consisted of four fabric layers:

- a.. doppia: felt or felted/ worsted wool (?)
- b.. two types of cloth one stiffened other finer of San Gallo (linen) or bottano (cotton)
- c.. this thick layering was then covered with copertura della doppia (silk or taffetta usually the same colour as the petticoat, as used to cover the hem stiffening, with a few millimeters visible and decoratively slashed) (La Moda a Firenze, p 85, 93).

Traces of wool felt and linen were found in both the above extant garments.

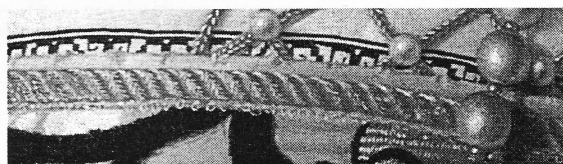
Cardboard was also suggested as a form of stiffening, being slipped into the imbusto. This is also suggested in The Tudor Tailor which was recently published in March, 2006. This books deals with English clothing of the first half of the 16th century. This method was also used in Spain (La Moda a Firenze, p 84-5). Eleanora di Toledo's family was Spanish so it is not surprising that this form of stiffening may have been used in Florence at the time she was Duchess. Cardboard was commonly used in Florence for imbusto stiffening by the 1650's.

According to both La Moda a Firenze and Patterns of Fashion, the hem of Eleanora di Toledo's burial gown had stiffening at the hem to help hold it out. This was a band of wool felt (or possibly felted wool?), covered by a satin strip. This form of stiffening is also found in the red velvet extant sottana from Pisa, discussed in La Moda a Firenze.

Patterns of Fashion states that the wool felt is 38-44 mm wide. It is interlined between the silk facing and the skirt itself.

A common edging done by Mastro Agostino was a 'picidil-type' decoration. This was often done with the lining of the imbusto. A very good example of this can be seen, on the edge of Eleanora di Toledo's zimarra (loose gown, (Figure 4, at right) in another Bronzino Portrait of Eleanora. There is also a line (vertically) in from the edge which may be a seam for this edging piece. Other examples of this edging can be seen in various Florentine portraits:

- a.. Eleanora and Her Son by Agnolo Bronzino (Figure 5, below)



#### 2. Stiffening the hem

#### 3. Edging the imbusto and skirt hem





b.. Agnolo Bronzino Portrait of a Little Girl with a Book, 1545,

Agnolo Bronzino (Figure 6)

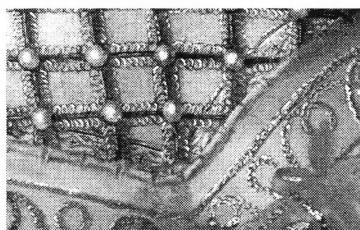
c.. Portrait of an Unknown Lady attrib. to Bronzino, c.1530-32 (Figure 7)

d.. Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi 1540 by Agnolo Bronzino (Figure 8)

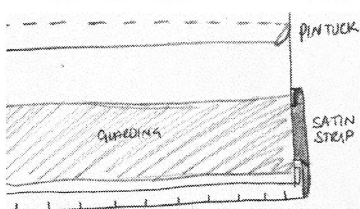
e.. Eleanora of Toledo 1542, by Agnolo Bronzino (Figure 9)



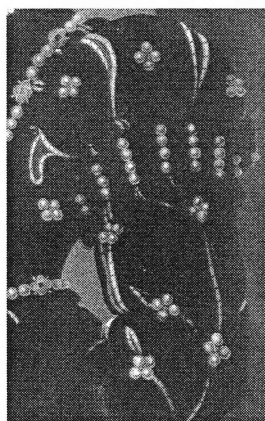
These examples show the edgings, mostly in linings matching the main imbusto. Some could be of contrasting lining however. This can be seen in Portrait of an unknown Lady (Figure 7, second from top at left). The second example, Portrait of a Little Girl with a Book (Figure 6, top left), shows a possible diagonal slash to the edging. This edging would be best done on the bias to reduce fraying. Fraying can be seen on the red sottana edging of the Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi. (Figure 8, at left)



The clipped decorative edging was also found on the skirt hem of Eleanora's burial sottana. Details can be found in Patterns of Fashion (p104). It was made from a 8.8 -10.1 cm wide (matching) satin strip covering the 'wool felt' interlining used to stiffen the inside of the skirt hem. The lining or satin strip was extended 3mm beyond the edge of the skirt. (Figure 10, left). The extended piece was clipped 1.5mm deep at 13mm intervals.



This decorative edging was can also be seen, in portraits, on the baragoni (panes at the top of the sleeves) in Bronzino's portrait of Laudomia de' Medici, 1560 - 65. (Figure 11, at left).



It was not exclusive to women's clothing of the time. The extant burial outfit of Cosimo d' Medici (1575) has the same decorative edging on the collar, front opening and cuffs. This outfit is discussed in more detail, in Patterns of Fashion (p 55,56). In the case of the front opening and cuffs, the decoration is on the edge of a satin facing (3.2cm wide strip), separate from the lining. The extant garment of Don Garzia de Medici (1562) also shows the same decorative edging on the cuffs.

Approximately 25-28mm above the hem garding, on Eleanora's burial sottana, is a pin-tuck decoration running around the hem. This is 13mm in depth. (Patterns of Fashion, p 104). This is also seen in the red velvet sottana from Pisa (La Moda a Firenze, p86). Such a pin-tuck decoration can also be seen in other portraits of Italian origin as early as 1517 (Susana and the Elders by Lotto) and other portraits in the 1530s. This pleat may also help to stiffen the hem.

Patterns of Fashion provides the only evidence I have found so far, on how the side-back skirt openings were edged and finished. The two slits were faced with silk bias strips,

approximately 25.4 x 2.2cm. It appears it was topstitched in place (p 104).

The side back edges of the bodice have lacing eyeholes which are staggered. This is a common setup for spiral lacing, commonly used at this time. (La Moda a Firenze).

Both La Moda a Firenze and Patterns of Fashion (p56) suggest that the handsewn eyelets were worked over a metal ring for reinforcement.

## 5. Lining

The imbusto is usually lined with linen or silk which is 'blindstitched' to the neckline (to allow for the above edging). The edges of the lining are turned under, then stitched by hem stitch or modified running stitch. (See Archeological sewing). It is not commonly 'bagged' - stitched and turned inside out.

## Glossary

**baragoni:** puffy top of sleeves

**bottano:** cotton

**braccia:** length of measurement used in Italy and Spain. The length of the braccia appears to be vary in different areas and possibly also in differing time periods. The Florentine braccia, of the 16th century appears to be approximately 58.8cm.

**busto de sotto:** stays or bodies

**camicia:** chemise

**convercie:** shoulder cape/hankerchief

**damask:** material with a reversible pattern which is woven into it.

**doppia:** layers used to stiffen the imbusto

**faldaglia:** skirts

**Gardaroba:** Italian wardrobe listings of clothing

**gorgiere (e colletti):** partlets

**imbusto:** bodice

**Piccadil:** edging for collar, hem or front opening, often snipped

**San Gallo:** form of linen

**sottana:** petticoat. The petticoat was originally the underdress but was later worn on its own.

**tabby:** plain weave fabric

**zimarra:** loose overgown, typically with 'frogs'

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Above, top to bottom: Figs 6 - 11.

## 4. Edging of skirt opening and lacings

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Metopolitan Museum of New York. <http://www.metmuseum.org/>

Web Gallery: Medici portraits by Bronzino. <http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/b/bronzino/1/index.html>

Archeological Sewing by Heather Rose Jones (2001) <http://heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/index.html> (new address: 8/06)

Sewing Stitches Used in Medieval Clothing: <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/stitches.htm>

Archive of Stitches from Extant Textiles. [www.bayrose.org](http://www.bayrose.org)

"How much yardage is enough" Susan Reed, 1994. <http://patriot.net/~nachtanz/SReed/fabuse.html>

Suggested Yardages for Elizabethan Garments by Drae Leed. <http://costume.dm.net/yardages.html#> (29/5/03)

Other:

Information provided by caitlin\_oduibhir, who has seen the Metropolitan Museum's extant drawers first hand (thanks).

Details regarding the "Trousseau of a Sicilian Bride" collection at the Metropolitan Museum of New York, Costume Institute is currently an in-progress research project of Kathy Page. The information presented here are current working theories of hers at the time of discussion (October 3, 2006), based on available information at that time. This information is bound by US copyright and publication laws, and as of yet cannot be fully published on the internet. Any questions about the details presented here on the collection or its provenance can be directed to her at [caitlin\\_oduibhir@yahoo.ca](mailto:caitlin_oduibhir@yahoo.ca).

More about *La Signora Onorata (THL) Katerina da Brescia*. *Katerina* lives in the Barony of Innigard. She used to be a Privateer, made her fortune, met a handsome, younger man, retired and got married. She now lives the life of a noble in Fiorenze, travelling on occasion. She does not have enough time for all of her interests (especially while looking after her 5 1/2 year old child, cat and husband!): garb making, calligraphy and illumination, drawing, researching, bobbin lace, glove making, archery, embroidery, silverpoint, pageantry... always finding something else of interest to do (now patten making)... She is currently protégé to Mistress Aislinn de Valence, is head of the household Casa Viola, has served as Baronial Rapier Marshal in years passed (now retired due to injury), has served as a Baronial and Canton A&S Officer and Kingdom Arts and Science Minister of Lochac. She is a member of the College of Scribes (Journeyman), the Painters and Limners Guild (Verger), the Worshipful Company of Broiderers and the Guild of Tailors, Haberdashers and Mercers. *Karen Carlisle* is an Optometrist, who met a handsome young man and got married, has a 5 1/2 year old daughter and still does not have enough time for all of her interests! Contact details: [katdb@bigpond.net.au](mailto:katdb@bigpond.net.au)

