

Oglethorpe University

Sumptuary Society

The Role of Clothing in Renaissance Italy

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For nearly as long as class structures have existed, clothing has operated as visual indicators of the divisions between classes. The courts of France were renowned for their lavish attire, wearing beautiful silks while members of the lower classes starved. The modern upper-class dresses themselves in Chanel and Hermes and sits in the front row at fashion shows to assert their status and relevance. This phenomenon is observable in Renaissance Italy, though it is not as simple as higher quality clothes indicating higher status. Clothes could indicate religious or civic authority or status and wealth; and for people with a desire to rise above their station, clothes could be used to transform one's identity. The role of clothing in Italian Renaissance society was so important that sumptuary laws were enforced to ensure people dressed appropriately for their socio-economic standing.

Clothing as a Symbol of Authority

All through Renaissance Italy, the voluminous, billowing robes of clergymen and civic officials called to mind notions of tradition, timelessness, and stability; the seemingly unchanging attire hid the body from view, invoking the pious concepts of chastity and humility (McCall 1450). The wardrobes of these officials reinforced religious authority, and they suggested the longevity of republican governments. Such timeless dress smoothed out the social order and magnified divisions between classes through slight differences in material (McCall 1450). Lush blacks now associated with sixteenth-century masculinity invoked importance and sobriety; and crimson clothing was typically reserved for governors, doctors, jurists, and nobles, separating the privileged from more common classes through both visual appearances and materials (McCall 1450). Sumptuary laws specifically forbade some lower classes from wearing red clothing at all, though more on this later (Bridgeman 209).

One particular garment which was highly symbolic of the republic was the *lucco*, a traditional long cloak used as an outer garment (Currie 41). Benedetto Varchi's *Storia Fiorentina*, which covers the period from 1527 to 1538, is one of the best-known descriptions of clothing worn in Florence in the sixteenth century (Currie 40). Varchi gave pride of place to the *lucco* above all other forms of male dress. He noted that the *lucco* was made of:

fine wool or black rash, reaching almost down to their ankles, almost always black, open at the front and sides, where the arms show through . . . very comfortable and graceful to wear; nobler and richer people wear it in the winter too, either lined with fur or velvet or sometimes damask (qtd. in Currie 40).

The *lucco* was particularly popular with the Medici in Florence, so much so that, when the garment was falling out of fashion, the Medici dukes enacted laws to revive the cloak. Cosimo I's laws of 1546 and 1562 made the *lucco* necessary wear for Florentine citizens over eighteen years old; and in October 1588, Ferdinando I introduced another law to enforce the use of the *lucco* (Currie 44). Ferdinando I's stated intention was to "reform and re-order the civic dress of his most beloved city of Florence" (Currie 44). Ferdinando also restricted use of the cloak to officials in the Medici regime and added various hierarchical differences concerning colors and types of lining (Currie 44).

Despite Medici efforts, the *lucco* had begun to fall from use by the ducal period, replaced by shorter over garments, such as *tabarri*, *cappe*, and particularly *ferraioli*. The massive inventory taken of the clothing of the marquis and diplomat Matteo Botti in 1621 only contained two *lucchi*, compared with approximately ninety other short cloaks, including *ferraioli* and *cappe* (Currie 46). Despite its noble history, the Florentine *lucco* had fallen from everyday use.

Though the authoritarian attire of civic officials and clergymen was austere and simple, the garb of the nobility and upper class embodied nearly antithetical ideals. The clothing used to indicate status and wealth was luxurious and ostentatious, dyed silks and velvets were adorned with jewels and gilded thread. Where the clergy exemplified sobriety in their wardrobes, the wealthy were drunk on luxury.

Clothing as an Indication of Status and Wealth

Renaissance men and women were sharp and shrewd evaluators of clothing's visual effects: the weight and feel of leathers and fabrics, and the luster and sheen of metallic embellishments and iridescent velvets. Whereas the wider contemporary public pays little attention to pleating, members of all facets of Renaissance society had opinions on the clothing design element. Renaissance fashionista prized pleats, while ecclesiastical and civic authorities condemned the incredibly wasteful quantity of cloth required to tailor the deep pleats desired by the upper classes. (McCall 1454). Shimmering buttons displayed wealth and drew notice to those they adorned when they clattered together, producing a symphony of jingles and jangles. (McCall 1454). These sensory effects communicated status, privilege, and wealth in an instant and tangible way; whether spotted from a distance across a piazza or meticulously inspected up close, the details of these garments gave the impression of wealth and high status. Swords forced men to change their posture by restricting the body's movement, and *chopines* and *pianelle* acted in a similar role to modern high heels, drawing attention to women by making them taller and changing the way they walk (McCall 1455). "Luminescent clothing and adornment differentiated the high-born glitterati from those clad in literally lackluster attire, and thus materialized, reiterated, and confirmed social distinctions through light effects and bright colors" (McCall 1455).

An example of this ostentatious and luxurious mode of dress is found in the shoe collection of Ghostanza Minerbetti (b. 1493), the eldest daughter of a branch of an old Florentine family (O'Malley 45). Ghostanza owned one pair of *scarpelli dorati*, or little gilded shoes (O'Malley 46). Golden footwear of the Renaissance was made of either cloth or leather; but only leather could be properly gilded, which is to be covered with gold leaf, while cloth could only be woven with gilt metal threads and embellished with gilt cording, braid, and lace (O'Malley 47). Gold was a particularly remarkable material in shoes, because feet, which are the one part of the body constantly in contact with the ground, were regarded as a humble part of the body; to wear gilded footwear must have bordered on ostentatious, as it came close to breaking social customs of propriety (O'Malley 71). Perhaps partly for this reason, gold and silver footwear was forbidden by many sumptuary laws across Italy; though, the laws did little to prevent dedicated nobility from indulging in such taboo footwear (O'Malley 71).

The two main types of footwear commonly worn by Italian women in the Renaissance were *scarpe*, which are enclosed, flat footwear, similarly shaped to most standard shoes today; and *pianelle*, which are heeled footwear that typically only covered the front of the foot, comparable to modern slippers or mules (O'Malley 47). In lower levels of Florentine society, where footwear was worn only on feast days or when it was very cold, *scarpe* and *pianelle* were often given to brides by their betrothed; its value as an item of dress exclusively intended for special occasions made footwear an important gift for marriage engagements (O'Malley 59).

Renaissance clothing also had a function as an indication of class, profession, and familial ties throughout the social strata. Individual items of clothing were not trivial, but “absorbent of symbolic meaning in which memories and social relations were literally embodied” (O'Malley 72). Of particular symbolic importance was a bride's clothing. The

objects held in a trousseau, including clothing garments, formed a woman's wealth: the dowry was her only inheritance, and the articles of the trousseau were the only things she would have control of within the marriage (O'Malley 72). Similarly, the groom's gifts of clothing to his bride were important for affirming his affluence and declaring his respect for the union; he also controlled clothing after the marriage, but the gift was critical for reestablishing equality after receipt of the dowry (O'Malley 72). The bride also received rings from members of the groom's extended family to help her integrate into the groom's family (O'Malley 72). These gifts and counter-gifts had the important job of declaring associations and confirming a couple's status within the familial construct.

Color within Renaissance clothes also had a significant role to play in communicating status and wealth. One of the most prized hues of Renaissance Italy was red, though shades of red ranged from orange to brown to violet. Colors such as carnation, crimson, kermes, scarlet, and vermilion were created using red dyes derived from plants, insects, mollusks, woods, and lichen; the most prized red colorants came from the dried bodies of tiny insects (McCall 1451). Alum, an important mordant, so-called because it enables dyes to bite into textiles, was particularly effective in holding fast crimson dyes, making it incredibly valuable to people looking to assert their status (McCall 1451). That group included the Medici. In 1472, Lorenzo de Medici orchestrated the siege and sack of Volterra, which was fundamentally motivated by the Medici family's desire to monopolize alum; countless citizens of Volterra were raped and murdered in the Medici conquest for alum (McCall 1453-54). It was not only Lorenzo de' Medici, but lords and states across the whole of southern Europe fought to control the supply of alum (McCall 1455). "The refined sartorial cultures of the Renaissance, and the materials they

demanded, were deemed well worth the price of violence, death, and destruction” (McCall 1453-54).

Clothing was clearly valuable in Renaissance Italy, but its value extended beyond status symbolism. Reused and frequently pawned by members of all social classes, clothes often stood in for money. In fact, clothing often comprised a large portion of servants’ wages, and the offer of clothing was a key tool in the creation and consolidation of social bonds (Gaylard 128). Clothing, whether payment or gift, “was more binding than money, both symbolically, since it incorporated the body, and economically, since a further transaction had to take place if you wanted to transform it into cash” (Gaylard 129). The relationship between gifts of clothing and servants’ wages, and the capacity of clothing to raise a person’s status, is evident in the writings of Pietro Aretino.

Clothing to Transform Public Identity

In 1504, Baldassarre Castiglione wrote in a letter to his mother from the Montefeltro court:

I would like you to have master Bernardino the armorer beseeched for that ceremonial helmet of mine; and since he did not have any velvet to finish it, I ask that you please get some to him, and it should be black . . . I ask too that you send me those robes of old gold brocade, for I will need them too. Also, I would like twenty ells of thick silk cord, in white: in this city of Cesena there isn’t any, may God hang them all; if there were, I would not bother you for this (qtd. in Gaylard 123)

Castiglione’s close attention to detail regarding the various aspects of his ceremonial dress reflects the extreme importance of clothing as an indicator of public identity (Gaylard 124).

The role clothing places as an outward symbol of identity and status is also seen in the letters written by Pietro Aretino. Thirty years following Castiglione's letter, Pietro Aretino wrote a collection of letters with the intention of publication, in which he used clothing as a symbol of authority (Gaylard 124). Early in the collection, in a letter to Duke Federico II Gonzaga of Mantua, Aretino thanks him for a set of clothes:

On the feast of the Ascension I wore a long robe of black velvet trimmed with golden cord, and lined with gold cloth. My tunic and jerkin were brocade (qtd. in Gaylard 129)

The example demonstrates Aretino's efforts to make himself and his attire as visible to the public eye as possible. Velvet and gold cloth were incredibly valuable, and gold and black clothing was generally reserved for the upper class of Venice; as a commoner from Arezzo, Aretino was not the type of person that typically dressed in this fashion (Gaylard 129). In describing his attire, Aretino elevates himself to a higher status, and it is symbolically relevant that the outfit was for the feast of Ascension. "Christ's miraculous ascent into heaven provides a backdrop for the volume's ambitious message of Aretino's own rise from penniless obscurity to political influence" (Gaylard 129).

It was rare that the letters would contain news of any kind, suggesting that they were always created with the intention of being published to broader audiences; thus the printed correspondence is key to understanding how Aretino constructed his public image (Gaylard 130). The description, quoted above, of Aretino's Ascension Day outfit reflects the writer's full awareness of clothing's importance and illustrates Aretino's constant conscious efforts to elevate his public image using sartorial symbolism. "The Ascension Day letter emphasizes that the commoner from Arezzo has worn a prince's clothes, underscoring his social ascent and suggesting that he has assumed some of the prince's dignity and authority" (Gaylard 133). This

letter to the Duke of Mantua was only one in a series a series of letters dating from 1527 to 1535 in which Aretino thanks a variety of patrons for gifts and asks them for more; but the significance of clothing received as a gift is particularly evident in this letter (Gaylard 130). The letter is noteworthy because is it the first, and one of few, in which Aretino specifically states that he has actually worn garments gifted to him; in most cases, Aretino suggests that he is giving the clothes away (Gaylard 133).

Aretino also used images to communicate his own ascension within the social order. The published volumes of his letters featured author-portraits, which Aretino took as opportunities to further elucidate the details of his wardrobe (Gaylard 132). One of these author-portraits notably dedicates more space to Aretino's apparel and less to his actual features, "so that the increased volume of clothing and the smaller size of the face augment the author's consequence and authority" (Gaylard 132). The two most noteworthy elements of his ensemble depicted in the portrait are his gold chain and large lynx-fur coat; the gold chain in particular hints at princely favor (Gaylard 132). While cannot it is impossible to know if Aretino's author-portraits faithfully represent his own clothes, the luxurious garments depicted in most of the portraits indicate a high level of wealth and social standing, which was Aretino's goal.

The ability of clothing to transform public image is also exemplified in the wardrobe of Christine of Lorraine, the wife of Ferdinando I de' Medici. The different styles of dress worn by Christine of Lorraine, shortly before and after her marriage to Ferdinando I de' Medici, illustrate the conscious use of clothing to project different identities (Currie 34). A portrait held in the Uffizi by an unknown French artist shows Christine in recognizably French-style dress (Fig. 1). The portrait depicts Christine wearing a massive linen ruff with a lace trim, which spreads out like a platter or a halo under her head; her gown has large, puffed sleeves and ropes of pearls are

draped around her neck and upper arms. The image of Christine is an imposing one, and it uses sartorial indicators to create a link between Christine and the French throne (Currie 34).

According to Riguccio Galluzzi, Ferdinando I was fearful of the effect these grand garments would have on his subjects: “the Grand Duke, overly cautious in anything which might suggest to the public his inclination for French things, wanted Christine to adopt Tuscan clothing and customs straight away” (qtd. in Currie 35).

Scipione Pulzone’s portrait of Christine dating from 1590, the companion to his coronation portrait of Ferdinando I, shows her in more distinctly Florentine dress (Fig. 2). She wears a gown made of blue and yellow taffeta, with only the under sleeves in a more costly brocaded silk. Apart from the precious gold aglets decorated with clusters of pearls along the sleeves, the gown itself is markedly more modest than the weighty garments brought from France, which were mostly covered with metal thread embroideries (Currie 36). The overall silhouette of the gown is also evocative of the dresses worn by Florentine noblewomen, with the skirts falling more closely around the body and a slightly masculine, fitted bodice with a high collar topped with a much smaller ruff than seen in the previous portrait (Currie 36).

The year after her marriage, Christine sent one of her French style gowns, likely from her trousseau, to Ferrante de Torres, a Spanish nobleman resident in Italy, for the use of one of his female relatives (Currie 38). The gesture gives weight to the theory that Christine and Ferdinando decided it inappropriate for her to continue dressing in a French style, and it would be preferable to adopt a Florentine wardrobe.

The capacity of clothing to communicate identity speaks to the standardized language of sartorial symbolism in Italy – all members of society knew what it meant to dress in a certain fashion. Because these symbols were so well-known, it was easy for a person with the finances

or connections to support a luxurious wardrobe to manipulate the public perception of their social status or identity. Aretino elevated himself from commoner to socialite by publishing details of his lavish apparel. And Christine of Lorraine was able to assimilate into Florentine society by adopting their fashions. The ability to alter public perception of oneself with clothing is one of the many reasons why sumptuary laws were so common in Renaissance Italy, as the laws made it possible to limit high-class dress to members of the higher class. However, the prime reason cited for many sumptuary laws was a moral one.

Sumptuary Laws

On the 24th of March 1453, Cardinal Bessarion of Bologna issued a sumptuary edict restricting the dress of Bolognese women (Bridgeman 209). All cloth-of-gold or silver garments, or textiles brocaded with silver or gold thread, were prohibited, and strict class-based dress codes were enforced. Wives and daughters of knights, physicians, lawyers, and nobles were allowed three crimson dyed silk or silk velvet garments and one of scarlet cloth. Wives and daughters of notaries, bankers, and wool and silk merchants had two crimson silk garments. Countrywomen were prohibited from owning anything silk or dyed red. Jewelry was also subject to these laws. Wives and daughters of knights were not allowed pearls in their head ornaments, but they could have one gem. They were also allowed one necklace, six rings, and one string of coral. Wives and daughters of artisans were only allowed two rings and a coral string weighing no more than six ounces. The restrictions go on in this manner (Bridgeman 209).

The purpose of sumptuary legislation is generally accepted to be the restraint of excess and self-indulgence; though some argue that the law was intended as a covert form of “supplementary taxation on wealth” (Bridgeman 210). Sumptuary laws did not expressly forbid the wealthy from wearing luxurious attire; rather, the laws allowed the wealthy to dress

themselves in fine clothing, provided they paid for the privilege (Bridgeman 210). Generally, the penalties for those who disobeyed the legislature were unremarkable, usually a fine between five and ten Bolognese pounds. However, one instance at the marriage celebrations of Sante Bentivoglio, the co-ruler of Bologna, in May of 1454 is a remarkable exception. On this occasion, the sumptuary law was severely enforced, so much so that many noble guests of the celebration were excommunicated for their illegal attire (Bridgeman 210).

At the time, “belief that splendid and costly attire was a natural concomitant of high rank and personal merit was ancient” (Bridgeman 211). By the fifth century, it was a deeply ingrained element of society for the “superior virtue intrinsic to persons of high rank” to visually manifest through costly and luxurious clothing (Bridgeman 211). Clothes that were appropriate to the wearer’s social status and the occasion for which they were worn granted honor to the wearer and those around them; and appropriate dress was perceived as a form of “courteous homage” (Bridgeman 212). It may seem that sumptuary legislation would directly conflict with the ability to dress appropriately for a lavish occasion, but sumptuary laws were often temporarily lifted during civic or religious festivities, or for state visits of foreign rulers or political allies, allowing privileged members of society to continue to dress appropriately for important occasions (Bridgeman 212).

The most commonly cited reason for sumptuary laws was a moral one. For some, splendid clothes were a symbol of vanity; for others, they were indicative of the sin of luxuria or self-indulgence (Bridgeman 213). Lavish dress not only posed a religious problem, but social one as well. Courtesans often wore overly extravagant and inappropriate dress to attract the attention of potential clients. If a married woman wore a style that was too luxurious for her class, she may be mistaken for a prostitute. This misrepresentation could lead to unwanted

attention for the woman, and simultaneously harm her and her family's reputation (Bridgeman 213).

Sumptuary laws were also used "to reinforce class stasis and status, to maintain discipline and moral authority, to police distinctions between genders, and to guard against the dissipation of capital and the flight of industrial technology or skilled labor" (McCall 1456). Yet these rules also inspired lower classes to indulge in aspirational spending on clothing and adornments so that they may imitate the elite (McCall 1456). These measures ensured that consumer had a constant desire, which forced artisans to evolve to meet demand, and thereby spurred economies; this sumptuary legislation "offered precisely the terms and materials for fashion to innovate and proliferate" with remarkable efficiency (McCall 1456).

The importance of clothing in Renaissance Italy makes it an excellent tool for studying the society of the time. The details of social operations can be observed in the correspondence of Aretino, the wardrobe of Christine of Lorraine, or the trousseau of Ghostanza Minerbetti. The role of religion and state identity is evident in the sumptuary laws enforced across Italy during the Renaissance. The study of clothing reveals incredible information on global societies and cultures; it is interesting to imagine what future scholars will discern about contemporary society from our wardrobes.

Appendix



Fig. 1. Anonymous (French), *Christine of Lorraine*, 1588, panel, 39.6 × 32.5 cm, Florence, Uffizi. *1588 Christine de Lorraine by ? (Galleria Degli Uffizi - Firenze, Toscana, Italy) | Grand Ladies | Gogm.* <http://www.gogmsite.net/new-content/1588-christine-de-lorraine.html>.



Fig. 2. Scipione Pulzone, Christine of Lorraine, 1590, canvas, 142 × 120 cm, Florence, Uffizi.

1590 Cristina Di Lorena by Scipione Pulzone (Galleria Degli Uffizi - Firenze, Toscana, Italy) | Grand Ladies | Gogm.

http://www.gogmsite.net/iberian_style_in_the_farthi/subalbum-christine-de-lorra/1590s_christina_of_lorraine.html.

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