

## Women's Florentine Costume in the 1560s



Bronzino: *Lucrezia Panciatichi*  
c. 1550-60.

Five hours ago I set a dozen maids to attire a boy like a nice gentlewoman; but there us such doing with their looking glasses, pinning, unpinning, setting, unsetting formings and conformings, painting blue veins and cheeks; such stir with sticks and combs, cascanets, dressings, pearls, falls, squares, busks, bodices....and so many lets that yet she is scarce dressed to the girtle... a ship is sooner rigged by far, than a gentlewoman made ready.

Thomas Tomkis

Hannah Rosner

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The history of costume is problematic since the almost complete disappearance of actual work before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, discussion of costume during any particular time period relies mainly on painting, sculpture, frescos, miniatures, stained glass, coins, seals, tapestries and engravings. This paper, as it deals specifically with Italian Florentine costume during the 1560s will use existing patterns and pieces as its primary resources, seconded by a number of portrait paintings. Fortunately, both are available through a number of paintings and actual pieces worn by Eleanore of Toledo, wife of Cosimo I de'Medici. Eleanore died at the age 40 of malaria and was buried in clothing designed in the height of fashion. Only fragments now remain of the unembalmed corpse and clothing.

At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Italian influences in fashion dominated Europe. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, we begin to see year-by-year changes in costume, which were affected by personal and national characteristics. Fashion was born in the modern sense of the word. More and more, political and commercial organization rather than weather affected the costume of the time. Patterned fabrics, usually velvets and brocades, were more popular

than materials of a single color from about 1480 to 1510. Silk was highly in demand, and the main European weaving guilds were found in Lucca.

The luxury brought through Christopher Columbus' discovery of America and the ease in trade between Europe, Americas and Asia was at the expense of trade through Venice. Trade in luxury items and dyes was reorganized through Spain, and Italy had to react through growth in banking organizations, production of micro beads called "seed beads" and the newly developed lace-making industry (both to be discussed later). By the time the 1500s rolled around, the best silks were no longer made in Italy, but instead in Spain. Throughout the time period we are most interested in, Spain has become the leader of fashion.

Pompe: *Isabella of Portugal*

1564



## 2. ITALY DURING THE 1560s

During the 1500s, Italy was constantly under foreign influence. The great European powers of the period were France, Spain and the German Empire. Allied, they did not find it difficult to expand in Italy, often using dynastic claims as justification. The French reconquest of Milan in 1515 by the Valois Francis I and his subsequent agreement with the Spanish ruler Charles V, at the Peace of Noyon 1516 allowed Italy to be divided into two spheres of influence, French in the north and Spanish in the south and the islands.

The conflict between the king of France and Charles V, who had meanwhile also become emperor of Germany, was to last for some thirty years, until the death of Francis I in 1547. During this period the Lansquenets sacked Rome in 1527 and Florence, after a brief republican period between 1527-30, once more accepted the Medici dynasty. The Medici fortune allowed for some great portraiture, which will figure largely in this paper. While in order to counteract the English Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther in 1517, vainly excommunicated in 1521, Pope Paul III was forced to summon the Council of Trent (1544-63) in order to organize the Catholic response.

With the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559, between Henry II of France and Philip II of Spain, the predominance of Spain over Italy was confirmed. The independence of the Italian States was only an appearance. The Duchy of Savoy, for example, was returned to Emanuele Filiberto, previously commander of the Spanish army against the French at St. Quentin (1557), but he had to accept the presence of Spanish and French garrisons. Only the Papal States and the Republic of Venice maintained full independence and as a result held onto earlier Italian Renaissance fashion for longer than the rest of Italy.

The consequences of this new alignment, also on the cultural and economic level, were not slow to manifest themselves. Though the culture of the Italian Renaissance was to continue for some considerable time to influence the rest of Europe, nevertheless Italy gradually became marginal to the cultural, scientific and political movements of modern Europe.

### 3. THE DYES

Dyes are applied in any one of two points during Renaissance fabric production. Either the dyes were applied to spun fibers, which were then worked into fabric using new milling processes, or the fabric was first woven and then dyed. Pieces were never dyed after they were constructed, although sometimes a gown would be taken apart and redyed if the colors had faded. This was more complicated than expected however, due to extensive fabric manipulation, to be discussed later in sections 4 and 6. Dyes themselves fall into two categories: those that were easy to obtain and those that were difficult and thereby expensive. Although the portraiture of the Renaissance mainly shows its sitters in their best (and thereby most expensive fashions), and as the portrait sitters had to be wealthy in order to afford an artist painting, this section will discuss some of the more expensive dyes as well as the common ones.

Dying fabric itself was a time intensive process. There was no written work or set of recipes to be used in dying fabric until the "*Plicto of Gioanventura Rosetti*" in 1548. There was a dyer's guild however, which kept all its dye lots and the mordants used to "fix" the dyes a closely guarded secret. This secret was especially well kept when the guild was dealing with a particularly expensive or rare dye.

The common dyes were not necessarily all earth tones. Browns and greens were understandably common, but brighter colors were available from plant materials around Europe. Common colors included yellow, orange and goldenrod, dark and light greens, lilacs, pinks and black. Black was the unexpected color. Originally considered by historians to be an expensive color, and certainly still a difficult color to obtain (most blacks are really an extremely dark brown or blue now unless extremely toxic chemicals are used), it was Spanish fashion and not price that stated this color was to be worn by the rich. Black was obtained through a number of easily obtainable sources including lime, oak galls, blackberry leaves and human urine.

Expensive dyes included purple (closer to a plum color), dark blues, and bright reds. All of these dyes were difficult to fix and garments would need to be redyed from time to time. The plum color, royal purple or Tyrian purple, was obtained from the ink sacks just inside the shells of a single species of muscle. Hundred of these tiny mollusks from the Mediterranean would need to be collected to dye a single garment. A less expensive and bluer violet color could be obtained through local plants including anchusa, and black currant

Blue was obtained through two different plants. Woad was native to England, France and Italy. It was boiled down and used by ancient Scots to cover their body while fighting. Like henna, it would dye the skin, so it seemed a natural move to begin to dye cloth with the plant. Woad gave a deep, rich blue, but the processing of the dye seems to have something to do with fermenting and sticking it in horse manure for a number of weeks. The odor of the processing was so bad that Queen Elizabeth, during the 1600s, forbid that the plant should be boiled anywhere near her castle. Further, the blue dye had to be very strong otherwise it was not fast. Accounts state that a barrel full of powdered dye was needed for a single dress. A gown dyed from woad, as a result, could cost the same a small house.

Indigo, a softer and clearer blue, was introduced to Europe by the Dutch traders and was originally imported from Baghdad. It threatened the native woad industry. It was an easier plant to grow and had been around for thousands of years before the Romans discovered the Picts painting themselves in woad before fighting battles (incidentally, woad is mildly hallucinogenic), but was not native to Europe. But, when trade in Indigo began to threaten the English, French, and German woad industry, the importation of Indigo was forbidden in these countries. This ban was not lifted until the 17th century. Indigo was not only beautiful, it was very fast to light and water, rare qualities in natural dyes. Add to this the major restrictions on import and use, and one can see why it was an expensive dye.

Bright red could also be obtained in one of two ways. Rich, deep, long lasting reds much like the reds that must have been used on *Lucrezia Panciatichi's* gown (page 1) came from two sources, madder and kermes. Madder, traded from Arabia, comes from the root of the madder plant, and was the principle dye used to achieve the bright red of the infamous red wool coats of the British Army in the 18th century. Kermes comes from the dried and crushed bodies of insects cultivated along the Mediterranean. A piece of leather dyed with kermes, which was recently excavated from an Egyptian tomb, was found to be as bright red as newly dyed material. Kermes is expensive because, not only is it bright and fast, but it required so many thousands of little insect bodies to produce just a small amount of dye, and it had to be imported from the Mediterranean. Madder was expensive because its cultivation was extremely painstaking, (requiring three years to grow and ten years for the ground to lie fallow), and the process of extracting the very bright Turkey Red was, besides being a closely held secret, very long and complicated. Investing in this dye was not short term.

Recreation of gown  
worn by Eleanore of Toledo.  
She was buried in these clothes in  
The Sagrestia Vecchia in San Lorenzo.  
Florence, 1562.  
Not much of the gown remains (see page IX)



#### 4. FABRIC MANIPULATION BEFORE CONSTRUCTION

Fabric manipulation was a common way to add surface texture to a gown. Before the fabric was cut, it was sent to one of the tailor's assistants for fabric manipulation, which included slashing and embroidery. Beadwork and other types of finishing were left until after the costume had been assembled. They are discussed in section 6.

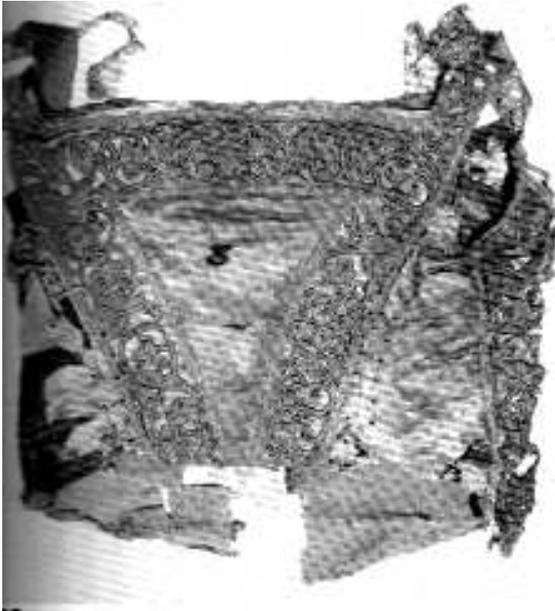
Generally, a pattern was either made of stiff brown parchment or of buckram. Using a pounce bag made of a thin material and full of chalk, charcoal or powdered soap, the tailor (a purely masculine occupation until the 17<sup>th</sup> century) would force the powder through the bag into tiny holes in the pattern. The outline of the pattern would be transferred onto the fabric.

Slashes, cuttes, And pinkes were all names for various types of holes in fabric. It is believed that the style originated with German and Spanish mercenary soldiers whose clothing became slashed on the battlefield. Slashes are straight or shaped cuts over 2" long. These generally had pieces of cloth pulled through them called puffs. A drawing of puff sleeves is shown in the recreation of Eleanore of Toledo's gown (page VII), based off the painting by Bronzio (page IX). Cuttes are small straight cuts, and pinkes are holes, either round or a decorative shape, usually under 1/4" and generally made with leather punches (photo right).



In period, these holes were either faced, bound with braid, or left unbound and allowed to fray along their edges. The edges of slashes were sometimes sealed with wax or other substances. Generally, they were also backed with another thicker fabric for durability and body. For this to be an option, they had to be cut out of a firmly woven fabric, and the slashes were cut on the bias.

Embroidery was very popular in the High Italian Renaissance and was often augmented by couched gold and silver threads. Metallic embroidery was worked with bullion threads. They were couched onto the surface of the fabric with silk thread. Metallic



embroidery was either done before the piece was assembled or afterwards on the final trim pieces, at which point it was often combined with pearls or other jewels. An example of the couched threads is the gold metal embroidery done on the bodice of the 'raso bianco' (white silk satin) floor length gown worn by Eleanore of Toledo at the time of her death. Very little remains of this bodice, as the corpse was apparently not embalmed and was also the victim of grave robbery (left). All women with any

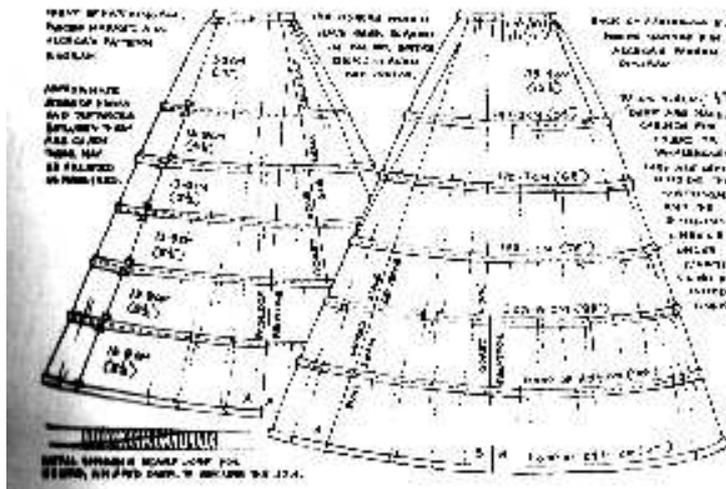
leisure time embroidered even those in very high positions. Mary, Queen of Scots, was a superb needlewoman and spent much of her imprisonment embroidering.

Blackwork embroidery was one of the most popular types of embroidery of the 16th century. It consisted of monochrome embroidery stitches in black, scarlet, or another dark color. The pattern was traditionally worked on white linen. The stitches were counted patterns in geometric forms, worked either as bands for edgings or as filling stitches on larger, naturalistic motifs. Often spangles, or oves, which were similar to sequins, but made of either metal or glass, were added. Whitework embroidery was often used for ruffs and undergarments. It could incorporate drawn thread work, cuttwork, and faggoting. Many of the large ruffs we think of as lace are actually whitework. Polychrome embroidery was worked in silks, often augmented with gold and silver threads. Naturalistic patterns of plant and animals were popular, as were symbolic designs.

## 5. THE SHAPE OF FLORENTINE COSTUME DURING THE 1560s

From 1550 to the Elizabethan era, costume in Europe was dominated by Spanish fashions (see the statue of *Isabella of Portugal*, page III). Geometric shapes influenced the costumes more than the contours of the body during the 1560s, but they were anything but basic. The human form was considered as two platforms--hips and shoulders. While clothing was constructed to fit the wearer, on the outside it was padded and shaped to show a completely different form. Dark silks and velvets were the most popular fabrics, for they were effective backdrops for precious stones and jewelry. During this period a person's wealth was gauged by the value of the gems sewn onto her clothing.

The underclothing set the geometric shape of the fashion. Spanish influence is seen in devices for expanding women's skirts, sometimes to extraordinary dimensions. The earliest of these was known as the Spanish farthingale (below). Basically, a cone shaped



hoop skirt, it consisted of an underskirt suspended by hoops which grew progressively wider toward the hem.

Combined with ballooned sleeves and expanded ruffs or the later circular lace collars, it made a woman appear formidable or even

unapproachable. This suited a society in which women were only appreciated when chaste.

The Spanish Farthingale, as its name suggests, originated in Spain. The name "farthingale" itself is an English corruption of "verdugados", the Spanish word for twig, which refers to the rings of willow and cane bents originally used to hold the hoopskirt rigid. Boning materials used in the 1560s include rounds of wood and cane, ropes and

rags stuffed into channels, and whalebone. A wealthy woman's farthingale might be made out of silk taffeta and satin; accounts from England of both Queen Elizabeth's and Queen Mary's wardrobes mention both. A woman of lesser means would likely make her farthingale out of a heavy linen or linen-silk blend. Certainly the Medicis would have been able to afford silk for both Eleanore and for her daughter Maria.

Waist cinching undergarments in theory existed from 1450 on, but there are nearly no surviving examples until the mid-1500s. During the 1560s, these garments were boned and stiffened to the point where they were truly "stays" or corsets. They cinched the waist and flattened the breasts into a single cone shape (right).



By mid-century, clothing was so stiffened and so well lined in linen, it could nearly stand on its own. The bodice was tight and stiff while at the same time the



sleeves were stuffed and padded. Sleeve shapes took gigantic proportions (see pages I & III) and were the only truly "soft" part of the fashion.

Both Eleanore of Toledo (left) and her daughter, Maria de'Medici (next page) have been painted by Bronzio in the 1560s wearing similar gowns to that worn by the statue of Isabelle of Portugal (page III). Embroidery appears on the front of the gown and puffs of the smock have been pulled through the openings in the sleeves and in slashes in the sleeves themselves. The neckline is covered in a pleated, semi-transparent

silk partlet in the case of both, although Eleanore's gown has an interesting set of braidwork over the shoulders. Overall, the gowns shown are very similar in appearance and shape. The sleeves, embroidery, and finishing work are what made each one unique.



## 6. FABRIC MANIPULATION AFTER CONSTRUCTION

The tailor was not finished once he had sewn the pattern pieces together, however. Once the embroidered and slashed fabric had been sewn together, the fabric was further manipulated by use of trim, fur, and bead or gem embroidery.

The most available type of trim was plain bands of fabric, contrasting in color or texture or both. This most closely resembled modern grosgrain ribbon. Wide bands of fabric were often used along the edges of clothing, where they were called guards. Guards could be plain or embroidered before they were applied. Braided trims of either a contrasting color or silver and gold threads were also widely used. Confusingly, they were often called lace in the period.



Lace itself (photo, left) was a very new invention, was tedious and difficult to make, and was fabulously expensive. A piece of bobbin lace such as the one enclosed at the end of this paper would take approximately four hours to make. Lace was made in geometric or stylized florals, not flowing, naturalistic forms. It was fairly heavy, usually starched to be more so. White, gold, silver, and black were the most common colors in an uncommon medium. The maximum width was not more than 3" or so; sewing strips of lace together made wider laces. Lace as a

fabric did not yet exist, and it was only used on the edges of collars, cuffs and some headwear.

Fur was occasionally used as a trim, but more often as a lining. Working with fur was a completely separate craft from the tailor's craft and would be sent out from the tailor's studio to the furriers to be finished. Common furs during the 1560s included sable, marten, lynx, ermine, polecat, wolf, fox and goatskin.

Buttons were used as fasteners on doublets, sleeves, shirts, and smocks, and also as non-fastening decorations. Often, the sleeves were made separately from the bodice and buttoned on with a loop fastener. This made the sleeves easily replaceable for different occasions. The sleeves of the gown in the drawing on page V did not survive in the tomb and have been drawn by conjecture from the painting of Eleanore and her son by Bronzio (page XI), but they appear to have buttoned onto the bodice with jeweled buttons. For the upper classes, gold, silver, and pewter were popular, often enameled and set with gems. Another button style was wooden molds wrapped with thread in various patterns (right). This style was so popular that cast metal buttons were made that imitated the look.



Beads and Jewels were worn only by the upper classes. Enormous quantities of beads of either stone, pearl or the relatively new invention of glass seed beads were sewn onto the fashions of the time. Middle class followed the fashions with "beades of bone, box and wood of all sortes." Jewels were usually mounted in metal settings. Pearls, both real and glass imitations, were widely used, sewn on in strands, individually, in clusters or patterns, or mounted as jewelry. Glass beads, such as bugle and rocaille beads were a very new and expensive invention.

Bead embroidery must be considered separately from other embroidery work as it was applied after the garment was put together. Relatively few examples of secular bead from the Italian Renaissance still exist; it seems that beadwork was mainly done using

silk threads. Silk dryrots easily when it has come into contact with human sweat. Clothing and other embroidered items were often recycled as they became worn and fell out of fashion. Pearls, beads, precious metals threads and gemstones were snipped from their original embroidery and used in new works. In the case of the garment worn by Eleanore of Toledo, once again grave robbers have stolen the gems. For this reason, portraiture is the best way to look at the ornamentation of clothing via bead embroidery of the time period.

A. Bronzino's *Laudonia de' Medici* (1560-65, right ) shows a great deal of the embellishment on her gown which this paper has discussed. The sleeves have been slashed and edged in braid, lace has been used to trim her upturned collar and a great number of pearls and gems are shown embroidered to her velvet gown. The gown is still the basic shape with one exception - it has been split up the front to show a light colored underskirt. The gown that the statue of Isabella of Portugal (page III) wears shows this same variation.



Glass beads became a terribly important way to define and elaborate fabric during the Renaissance because of the glass factories developing in Venice. Though the making of the beads was easily enough understood, the actual recipe used to color the glass was a closely guarded secret in the same way that dyes were. The traditional way of making glass seed (tiny) beads involves a glassmaker and a fast assistant. The glassmaker gathers a small ball of molten glass on the end of a long hollow rod and blows a small bubble of air into the glass. An assistant attaches a second rod, called a punty or pointil, onto the end of the bubble and runs across the room. This stretches this bubble out into a very thin, long tube. The tube is cut into beads, which are then tumbled in hot sand to

round out the sharp, cut edges. They would then be sieved for size and strung onto hanks.

Bead embroidery is a relatively simple form of needlework, requiring no specialized knowledge beyond a basic ability to sew with needle and thread. Beads were sewn onto fabric, leather, and in the case of ecclesiastic garments, heavyweight parchment. The design is transferred onto the fabric using a "pouncing," the same technique used to transfer a pattern onto fabric. Beadwork was considered to be one of the crafts that every girl should be able to do. It came into her needlework curriculum just after the polychrome and white embroidery samplers. The main type of beadwork used was bead embroidery and beading directly onto canvas much in the same style as needlepoint.

## 7. JEWELRY AND ACCESSORIES

As if the costume weren't enough, a Florentine gentlewoman during the 1560s was well accessorized. Although jewelry tended to be limited to small personal devotional items and hoop earrings, they were crafted with the highest quality gems the family could afford. The Art Institute of Chicago cites these items as being investments as good as stocks and bonds are now. Long strands of semiprecious gems and pearls were also popular, though these were usually embroidered onto the gowns rather than worn as a separate necklace (see previous page).

Women wore a version of the pantoffles, an elegant slipper-like shoe (right). Some had ties on the front. Shoes were embellished with slashing, embroidery and beadwork and could be made of fine leather, brocades, or embroidered velvets. Cork was used to thicken the sole, which could be up to 6" high.



Throughout Shakespearean times, the "purse" or "Escarelle" was a relatively common accessory. Iago comments on a number of occasions to an acquaintance to "keep money in thy purse" in order to win over Desdemona, already by that time Othello's wife. At the earlier point of the 1560s, however, the purse was mainly held by



men and also only rarely used as an object of adornment. Although frame purses appear as early as the 1400s, generally purses were drawstring (above), and only rarely

embellished. A rare set of examples of two late 16<sup>th</sup> century purses shows them embellished in glass bead, each with an acorn design and legend. A century later, the drawstring bag was a status possession. Paintings of that era show flat bags gathered by tasseled strings. By the end of the century, however, fashion went undercover, as women preferred to wear their pouches under their skirts.

Other accessories included a whole range of folding fans from Asia, fountain of feathers (basically a handle with feathers) fans and hard silk fans stretched into a framework. These were often worn hanging from a belt. Hankies, pomanders, mirrors and boxes were also worn hanging from the belt or girdle.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Costume throughout the history of man, can denote a number of social standings, including religion, authority and, most important for this paper, the power and wealth of the Medicis. Much of the work depicted in portraiture was of the wealthy rather than "common" folk. Costume is an expression of social caste and material possession.

Puff and slash was the perfect visual image and metaphor for 16<sup>th</sup> century Florence. The society was bursting at the seams with technological advances and ideas while still retaining the rigid political and social problems that had plagued it throughout the earlier Renaissance.

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## 10. WEB PAGES

Because web pages are by nature a still-new and ever-changing source of information, the web pages listed are not the primary sources of research for this paper. They do, however, become invaluable to check facts and obtain photographs.

The Accessory Web Page

<http://www.accessoryweb.com/history.html>

The Costume Web Site

<http://www.costumes.org>

History of the Spanish Farthingale

<http://www.dnaco.net/~aleed/corsets/farthingale/history.html>

WORD COUNT: 4,563