

Fashion through History

Fashion through History:

*Costumes, Symbols,
Communication
(Volume I)*

Edited by

Giovanna Motta and Antonello Biagini

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INTRODUCTION

FASHION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

GIOVANNA MOTTA

The history of fashion, apparently a history on the small-scale, is, in fact, closely connected to the social, political, and religious history of every period and every country. At the beginnings of humanity, people covered their bodies to protect themselves from the cold or, on the contrary, to shelter from the heat, using various materials to hide their nakedness. Soon, even in primitive societies, they used signs to distinguish themselves from each other to whom they intended to communicate their social, sexual, and identitary status. From grave goods that still preserve vestiges of clothes, along with more or less valuable objects, one can decipher the social structure of buried civilizations; resurfacing after millennia, we can use these objects to interpret the specific importance of a person, whether a man or a woman, and the role that they had in their community—leader, priest, warrior, queen or slave.

In the diachronic theories of political, economic, social, and anthropological history, every sign serves to indicate a change. Each change, in a dynamic perspective, alters our perception of reality, taking on new forms and assuming new meanings. Thus, every epoch, through its self-images, tells of the values in which people believed, their codes of behavior, and the symbols through which their identities were made. The intrinsic meaning of fashion, even if difficult to define, can be contemplated in its literal meaning of *modus*—of manner, rule, and norm—which directs every periodic change of style to an extent that even George Darwin (son of Charles) studied it, considering it a manifestation of the evolution of men (although for others it was a negative sign expressive of triviality).

The transformation of society can be marked in different ways, one can look at political forms or economic data, but it can also be followed through the evolution of clothes: used by the ruling classes to affirm the image of their power and by the emerging ones to indicate the

achievement of their social position. From the Nobles of the Sword who presented themselves to others through their blazon to the new “bourgeois” signs of merchants marked on their bales of clothes to make them recognizable on the road (and for ease of retrieval in case of accident), later used as a sign on the walls of their mansions; social mobility—even if in some areas very limited—describes the course of the emerging classes as they rose alongside the ruling ones, creating, between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, new realities. Aristocrats, nobles, and sovereigns were joined by merchants, bankers, physicians, and judges—a varied bourgeoisie that adopted models and colors to indicate their social and professional roles. Clothing (and everything connected to it), become a way of expressing human typology. In a period that saw the rise of a globalized economy, with its structural changes and acceleration of commercial flows, widespread improvement in living standards and increasing consumer demand stimulated commercial activity and caused a significant growth in exchange. In this context, it was increasingly important to openly express, and even accentuate, one’s social role through clear, immediate, and easily decrypted messages. These signs revealed, through precise modes of dress, whether one was a pilgrim, traveler, knight, priest, merchant, magistrate, or physician. The conceptualization of clothes offers an ideal model of an epoch, which, in the constitutive elements of clothing, expresses the rules of a world through a combination of fabrics, colors, and sizes, and, in its artistic, technical, philosophical, aesthetic, political and economic concepts, indicates definite virtues and qualities. It could be said that in this case “clothes make the man,” since clothes reveal social membership, economic status, and cultural standing, as demonstrated through the use of valuable materials and an increasingly refined style.

The new bourgeoisie

During this transition from the old to the new order, the emergent classes were ready to take on the indications of modern thinking and to assume codes stratification. But what was the theoretical-conceptual model to which they appealed? This was the moment in which humanistic and Renaissance thought advanced beyond that of the Middle Ages, no longer placing God at the center, but replacing him with man. This new thinking was affirmed and consolidated and could not but subvert the order of society—the individual wished to stand out, distinguish himself from others, and show off their political, economic, and artistic personality. To choose one type of clothes instead of another was part of a

new psychological dimension that induced new perceptions of the other, encouraging thinkers and artists to become interested in clothing and what it meant. It was a new language, born of the Renaissance, which aimed at representing novel political doctrines and scientific thought, and the new dimension of a society developing in an urban context—the ideal city—in contrast to the previous agrarian context in which the distribution of property represented the old economic differences and hierarchies. The new city expressed itself in architecture, art, and model aesthetics; it provided the background to novel political subjects, the new “entrepreneurs,” the classes of merchants and bankers, social categories for which the choice of clothes was of great importance.



Figure 1. Queen Elizabeth.

Material life only caught the interest of historians later and it only acquired a scientific value once attention had shifted to social and economic history and material culture, which opened up new research horizons. Notarial records, marriage contracts, dowries, testamentary bequests, and property inventories of various kinds have all given new leads to research and offered new suggestions. The extremely analytical descriptions that these artefacts report demonstrate very different ways of life—between the ruling classes and the common people—and the momentous occasions of marriage and death well represent the gap between classes that clothes highlighted, signaling diverse realities in relation to social categories and local custom. For important families, it was not just about affirming their economic standing, but also about demonstrating their excessive attention to valuable and/or unusual objects, as attested to by primary sources that give every detail of clothes regarding

their origin or rarity. In marriage contracts (and also in death registers), the detailed descriptions of goods highlighted the need to give the best guarantee to the contracting parties, especially in the event of a woman's death—and the legal restitution of the dowry—which often gave rise to decades-long feuds.



Figure 2. King Louis XIV of France.

In addition to the linen for the house and bed, attention was given to clothes, often richly decorated with golden and silver embroideries, with shirts of different shapes and in different colors. From this a true and proper model of life emerges that demonstrates not so much the everyday necessities (as clothing was generally modest), but above all one's social obligations at public events during which people at the top of the social hierarchy were expected to display themselves to others. As such, in the most formal dowries the inventory for clothes for celebrations and events continues over several pages with accurate descriptions of bonnets, coats, hats, bags, gloves and combs—hand-woven, lined, and embellished, with fringes, images, initials and coats of arms. Rich clothes intended for the upper classes were necessary for social activities. Valuable silk and wool, linen from Holland and voile of different origins and in different colors are enumerated and described (Motta 2013) with great precision highlighting the rank of an important spouse—for her family or for the family of the

man whom she is about to marry. From the ruling classes down to the petty bourgeois, dowries—and the garments that they contained—reflected the status of the contractors and their families in a game of alliances aimed at the preservation of power or the achievement of a higher social status. The institution of the dowry testified to the transfer of assets from one family to another and could, in one single act, renew the destiny of an ancient impoverished family through the acquisition of a fortune by marriage to a rich bourgeois spouse. In the medieval and modern periods, women, on whom society imposed marriage as the only solution to status outside the monastery, were used as a means of connecting groups of relatives interested in consolidating their political and economic power—dowries and clothes reveal their stories.

Textiles and colors

International trade, starting in the sixteenth century, provided supplies of fine goods and curiosities that could satisfy the most demanding consumers. During the Renaissance, certain countries began to emerge as leaders in production and were able to offer quality products at the international level, enriching exchanges between different markets and across great distances. The world economy created new categories of consumers who, thanks to an overall improvement in living conditions, stimulated production, dividing it into a wide variety of sectors—from fine fabrics exchanged on the markets of Antwerp and Southampton to the many types of textiles that filled local markets. From the sixteenth century onwards, a great variety of clothes existed between Flanders and the Mediterranean. There was an enormous differentiation of commodities by country and region: Catalan, Tuscan, English, and Flemish fabrics; satin and damask from Venice; velvet from Genoa; voile from Arezzo and Messina; and linen from Holland and Brabant, to name just a few. In every city merchants brought all kinds of goods and clothes, including shirts, bonnets, slippers, socks, belts, hoods, caps, *scarselle* to go around the waist and hold coins, and fur from Northern Europe (of wolf, fox, marten, sable, ermine). In the markets of the modern era, different types of fabrics circulated, including linen, silk, and cotton, for a vast public with limited economic possibilities who still, however, desired to imitate the ruling classes of the past as much as possible, all of which influenced the spread of fashion and the transition from individual to collective consumption.

Based on the documentation of the Archive Datini of Prato, Federigo Melis has reconstructed the entire cycle of wool production, from the

purchase of wool—before shearing—to the final fabric, passing through every working phase of the system of trading-banking agencies:

“Documenti sulla mercatura ... ne troviamo a decine e decine negli archivi toscani, che non sono mai stati considerati ... essendosi preferite le cronache o altre fonti, mentre tutti i problemi tecnici ... possono trovare soluzione soltanto in questi documenti commerciali, i quali ci trasmettono tutti i particolari delle operazioni realmente concrete” (Melis 1974).

A vast sector of economic history studying the origins of textiles opens up here, especially with reference to those periods in which the manufacture of fabrics constituted an important stage in the development of production, becoming “industrial” in the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern period with the introduction of new “machinery.” Wool and silk became ubiquitous in many cities in the north of Italy, and in the north of Europe where the seeds of this new capitalism (proto-capitalism) grew, from which, in the following centuries, the industrial revolution started. On the Italian Peninsula, the regions of the North that saw the development of production were Tuscany—already by the Middle Ages clothes were being produced in Florence, Lucca, and Prato—the Republic of Venice, and that of Genoa. In Europe, England and Flanders were the first to set up “factories” with mechanical looms preceding the more advanced machinery that would come later. The process of production went through a series of phases necessary to create a final product, and the more serious and competent these passages were, the better the final product. Wool fabrics constituted the final point of a long and complex process of work where each stage was necessary for attaining high quality finished material. For this reason every city (or state) had specific regulations covering the technical aspects of the working phases, upon which ever growing controls were exerted. Workers were divided according to their skills and belonged to guilds, rigidly divided between *Arte maggiori* and *Arti minori*. These workers included weavers, silk weavers, tailors, makers of caps and socks, embroiderers, in short, a myriad of craftsmen that included every segment of production and the sale of both textiles and clothes. The guild system did not develop in the same way and at the same time in the different countries of Europe, but from the first establishment of trading guilds, the system expanded to other sectors, assuming control and political power. The main task of the guilds was to protect the quality of products through the oversight of raw materials and the techniques of production, as well as through a monopoly over the profession. The competent authorities imposed precise regulations and taxes on the production process, which grew ever heavier, and to

escape this state of affairs, Flanders, for the first time in the sixteenth century, “invented” what is today called de-localization, i.e. moving the production from the cities—that imposed stricter rules on production—to smaller towns located in rural areas where control was less severe. It was an example soon followed by others and increased the number of products by introducing less valuable fabrics into the system, purchased primarily by local consumers.



Figure 3. The Sword Nobility.

There were many products and the movement went from north to south; factories emerged in the north in those areas where the first structural changes in production were made, being able to offer a better final product (Motta 2003). Raw materials came from the south: the best wool—*merinos*—from Spain (Mallorca) and raw silk from Sicily, which exported Calabrian products from port of Messina. Between the Middle Ages and the modern period, guilds established clear rules. In Florence, the *Arte dei Tintori* rigidly defined the categories of artisans for dyeing according to color; those who belonged to the *Arti maggiori* could dye in any color, others from the *Arti minori*, however, used red, and those from the *Arte del Guado* blue. The products for dyeing were of animal origin, such as cochineal for red and mollusks (murex) for purple, or of plant origin, such as grasses, flowers, fruits, leaves, and roots. They brought in a

fortune to their places of origin, such as the Hanseatic city of Erfurt, which became rich thanks to the export of *woad*, a plant from which the blue color used for dyeing the most valuable textiles was extracted:

“a tintura la si fa co’ colori vegetali de le piante e de le radici... il guado e l’indaco danno la colorazione azurra, lo zafferano gialla, la robbia rossa... il colore va poi trattato con la cenere e fissato con l’allume” (Tuccio Fioravanti, 1526).

Equally esteemed were *indigo*, which gives a dark blue color (especially the particular shade of indigo blue from Morocco); *madder*, the root of a perennial herb from Southern Europe used for red; *kermes* (*coccus ilici*), a scarlet color obtained from an oak parasite of the Mediterranean Basin—Sicily, Sardinia, Southern France, North Africa, the Middle East—(Macina); *Brazilwood*, a tree that yields a red dye, also present during the Middle Ages. Regarding other colors, ivy and nettle were used for green; pomegranate for orange; broom and saffron for yellow; the husks of nuts, coffee and chestnut for darker colors. Blue could also be obtained from some minerals, including lapis lazuli—from Iran and Afghanistan it was highly sought after and extremely expensive—and Azurite, extracted in Germany and Bohemia. With the increase of sea routes to the New World, new products were brought for dyeing, so *kermes* used for obtaining a crimson color was replaced by *cochineal* from Mexico, also of animal origin, because of its superior dyeing capacity. With scientific development, chemical dyes were introduced. Some dyeing materials were already known in ancient times and were often hidden as “secrets” of dyers who jealously guarded their knowledge. Due to the movements of populations and certain categories of workers, most of that information spread across Europe, mixing together the knowledge of ancient peoples—Egyptians, Phoenicians, Etruscans, Greeks, Romans, Chinese, and Indians. As with dyeing, weaving also attests to traditional craftsmanship, technical advancements and scientific knowledge involved, but its development is more closely linked to the dictates of fashion. In the course of the production process, dyeing is the last operation— in the Middle Ages it was often performed by Jews (Muzzarelli 1999)—which required great skill and knowledge in the use of colors of plant or animal origin. Every epoch and country shows preferences for one color or another, ascribing different meanings to them, as evoked by the writings of merchants who accurately wrote down the prices of fabrics, the price and number of which were higher or lower depending on the dye—the color of clothes, as with furniture and paintings, speaks its own language, communicates messages and refers to symbolic content that can only be

understood by looking at codes of communication and cultural standards, which change over time and space. Colors “open up” another large sector of research, compelling and seductive, in which technical and symbolic paths, not always easy to interpret, are disclosed, not limited to a specific area of production, but becoming a means of social and cultural expression.



Figure 4. A merchant with his products.

Colors hide remote meanings, superstitions, and ancestral beliefs: in Europe, black instills fear and connotes fierce, terrible and potent meanings; yellow, is considered a warm color representing wealth and cheerfulness; brown, is considered depressing; blue, which today is preferred in the West had a very weak social role in ancient times, when for the ancient Romans it was considered the color of barbarians and therefore had negative connotations (Pastoureau 2010). In Europe, during the modern era, when the end of Spanish influence removed the prevalence of black clothes with large white ruffs, the new fashion trend, which turned towards France, introduced a lot of colors, both soft and bright. The latest specialized historiography has highlighted the important role of colors in clothing. This is demonstrated, for example, by the ban on certain colors for clothes in theatre performances: in France green was banned because that was the color worn by Moliere before his death in his last performance, *The Imaginary Invalid*; in Italy, purple, as it referred to

the days of Lent during which performances in theatres were prohibited in the Middle Ages (they could only take place on the streets and squares). Generally, black is the color of mourning, symbolizing the pain of an individual and of a community. In China white is obligatory, in Japan yellow, and in India red.

Texts and manuals of fashion

The Commercial Revolution—with its increase of available goods, the improvement of living standards, and greater wellbeing enlarging the body of consumers—contributed to the creation of preconditions for the spread of new clothing trends. Between the first and second half of the sixteenth century, these created, in a more systematic manner, the first fashion. This started from the ruling classes, who were born with the propensity to choose new clothes without having worn out those already in their possession. This was dictated by the need to give a strong image of distinction, to stand out in society, and to dominate in politics. Attention to detail was considerable and well matched the Renaissance ideals of beauty and perfection. Individual taste was important, but trends were also formed thanks to special treatises that dealt with the topic and were the result of early knowledge regarding fashions and costumes of different countries, as well as the moral principles of the time. The authors, who represented the avant-garde of this new way of approaching the canons of fashion and who aimed at regulating symbols and styles according to what they meant in a society that was differentiated into categories increasingly marked by the participation of the “high,” “medium,” and “low” bourgeoisie, are worth mentioning. The texts that they wrote describe the different ways of dressing depending on the country, Western or Eastern, and showed the need to include the world of fashion in a system of recognized and recognizable rules that already demonstrated the complexity of its articulation. The chapter *De veste et ornamenti* of the book *Libro del arte de la mercatura e del mercante perfetto*, starts “La prima veste fu trovata in paradiso terrestre, di pele semplice del montone, per coprire li pudibundi.” This is a treatise that the author, Benedetto Cotrugli (1416–69), dedicated to the large commercial sector and the merchant (Motta 2000). Outlining the profile of the latter, the author specified his characteristics and functions and could not avoid recommending suitable clothes for the exercise of the profession aimed at offering to customers and colleagues the right image to give by choosing an appropriate way to dress. It provides us with important evidence of the mentality that governed the mercantile world, to which “work” was central; a “full”

merchant had to dress well to instill confidence in his buyer, but at the same time he had an obligation to be moderate, choosing appropriate, not exceedingly luxurious clothes.

“Et per cierto vedete uno plebeo o una plebea bene et ornate vestita, pare che quelli vestiti l’acusano et quanto à più preçiose veste tanto più pare scimia amantata. Et vedete uno gentiluomo in uno semplice manteleto o una gentildona in dobleto; judicarai per aspecto la nobiltà et pare come alla plebea piangeva l’ornamento, così in costor ride l’umile. Et però multo sono da eserno ripresi multi mercanti, li quali hanno posto usança discrete in multe terre e maxime in Italia, che ogi vesteno con tanta sumptuosità che non dico ad uno conte basterebe, ma ad uno re.”

To sustain his assumptions, Cotrugli (accredited in Naples as the consul of the Dalmatian republic) recalled how King Alfonso of Aragon was moderate even if wearing clothes of “fine fabric.” His example of moderation and sobriety was to be followed by every gentleman who conformed to that model by adopting knee-length clothes, giving an image of modesty.

“Alfonso, re d’Aragona et cetera... usava vestiti di pano fine di lana... et rarissimo veluti, ma lo suo comune vestire era panno de lana, la qual cosa induse in consuetudine non solo la città felice di Napoli, ma in toto regno et in gran parte de Italia, che mi pareva una sobrietà vedere quelli gentilomeni con certi gonelecti et ciopate asetate et di sopra mantelli di pano fine et presertim quelli che erano in moderata longença. Non dico di certi ciervelli ligieri che excedevano mensura tanto ierano curti. Lo divo re sempre socto lo ginocchio che mi pareva cierte una humanità, mansuetudine, urbanità et modestia...”

In other cities—the merchant reported—the manner of dress was very different and many people wore very long clothes and very large sleeves. The advice that followed was that clothes should not be so long as to hamper the movements and therefore should be maintained “until the knees.” The use of luxurious fabrics was also to be avoided—silk lined with fur (both of marten and sable), *taffeta*, *zendati*, in short very expensive and pretentious fabrics.

“Lungo vestire de manto che non exceda modo, cioè a meça gamba e la vesta sotana destra chel a te sia sença graveça e importunità, che tu signorigi (governi) la veste e non essa te ... In alcune città il culto del vestire difforme da ogni maniera et costume economico né politico, cioè ogni gente, tanto li gintilhomini quanto manualii et ministralli, vestire fin al talo et non bastando lor questo, dui maniche vi agiungono altro tanto

longe aperte. Et questi vestiti sono di pani fini, ovvero drapi di seta, frodate di martore, çebelini, vari damaschi, tafeté, çendati et altre frode sumptuosissime. Et dicoti che pesa multe dicine de libre et poi si mecte quelle maniche in sciu le spale, che apre uno portatore a modo di Firence o fachino a modo di Vinexia o bastagio a nostro modo o venditore di robe de done, però che le donne portano simili vestimenti et sono a loro più acti et meno desdicien loro la vanità e le sumptuositate ... Mercante, guardate del vestire di seta ... (devi) vestire puramente, pienamente, urbanamente, che certamente dui cose exteriori dimostrano intrinseco del animo (l'esteriorità) ... ogni volta che tu vedi uno vestire colori vani o divise o frappe frastagliati, così lo animo suo è devastato e frastagliato ... et per contrario, quelli li quali vesteno moderatamente così sono de animo moderato...

Baldassar Castiglione (1478–1529), a humanist and man of letters, worked as a diplomat in the Papal States, Mantua and Urbino. His experience at the Gonzaga led him to publish *Il libro del cortegiano* (1513–24), a true manual, almost a practical guide, which falls fully within the context of sixteenth-century culture, establishing the most appropriate behavior for a true gentleman of the court or a perfect lady. The work represents the reality of the court, which was a place of power and also a place in which that same power was concealed by political mediation, and conflict resolution practiced through the use of conversation, highlighting its “civilizing” function. Persons who moved in these scenarios, needed to conform to precise rules, also with regard to clothing. The style that was followed at the court, Castiglione wrote, was not easy to define and in fact he admitted his difficulty in identifying a prevailing one because what he observed was rather a multiplicity of styles, which every person tried to adapt based on their own choice.

“Non saprei dar regula determinata circa il vestire, se non che l’omo s’accomodasse alla consuetudine dei più.... chi veste alla francese, chi alla spagnola, chi vuole parere tedesco, né ci mancano ancora di quelli che si vestono alla foggia dei turchi...”

Cesare Vecellio (1521–1601), a cousin of the great Tiziano, published in Venice one of the first texts on the subject *Degli abiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del mondo. Libri due fatti da Cesare Vecellio e con discorsi da lui dichiarati* (1590), in which he collected 420 Italian and foreign illustrations and costumes from the middle of the sixteenth century. The work is a testimony to the styles used in the sixteenth century, drawing on the the Italian tradition—with illustrations related to Ancient Rome, medieval Venice and other areas of the peninsula—and the history

of Europe, including France, Spain, Germany, the Nordic countries, and eastern Europe up to the Ottoman Empire, and shows how the latter, even though it was often opposed to the Christian powers, belonged to the broader history of the Mediterranean (the treatise in fact contains, among other things, a *gravure* that shows a very elegant woman, probably Roxelana—Hürrem—the wife of Suleiman the Magnificent). Another part of the book shows dresses of various non-European peoples, enriched with details gathered from pieces of information reported by travelers who, depending on the city and the court that they had visited, spoke of the many forms and styles they had seen. The goal of Vecellio was not only to offer a collection of images, but to make a historical, philologically accurate reconstruction of fashion, explicitly specifying that “la cosa degli abiti non conosce stato né fermezza” (Nofri).

Agostino Lampugnani, the author of *Della carrozza da nolo, overo del vestire e usanze alla moda* (Monza 1666), at the beginning of his work, which had numerous editions, asked himself:

“che monta tanto fantasticare intorno al vestire della moda se non se ne fa il cimento della speranza? A guisa di buon medico, cacciatevi, signori, i guanti dalle mani e tochiamo con le dita della considerazione il polso a questi febrificanti della moda... alla nobil fiera che fatta si è ne' borghi di Bergamo, in quella bella pianura, fra i luoghi più frequentati, c'è la contrada che dicono de' milanesi per la molteplicità delle merci e delle curiose mercatantie ... trovandomi sul tardi in una bottega vidi... far leggera pompa di se stessa una manica di giovinotti di diverse parti d'Europa vestiti, come oggidi s'appella, alla moda.”

Lampugnani, a theologian and scholar of copious output, used all his critical spirit to argue against those who went too far in following fashion and against the natural tendencies of women, and also of men, who were obviously also attracted to the new trends. He was not the only one! Against the inclination to exaggerate, sumptuary laws were introduced that for centuries sought to limit, prevent, and punish those who enjoyed luxury in an unrestrained manner, as happened especially at court, where, however, there were many formal occasions during which it was necessary to show off one's attire in the latest fashion. In the legislation of city statutes, specific prohibitions fought against this tendency, which dragged society towards modernization, finding new forms of freedom, recognized even in clothing, which assumed aesthetic, social, and moral meanings. Between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, sumptuary laws intervened to limit excesses in different ways depending on local conditions. They were more or less permissive, but they did not have great impact in their

prohibitions, which rigidly measured the quantity and quality of fabrics, jewelry, lace, and even buttons. The demand for luxury conquered the society of the *ancien régime*—first the aristocratic classes and then the middle classes that imitated them—and especially in the period of the Renaissance attention was focused on details affirming in every way an ideology of beauty. For this reason, sumptuary laws intervened constantly to limit excessive ostentation and prohibit shapes that were considered improper; Florence and Venice, as well as Naples and Palermo, and the Church agreed, calling for more moral behavior, while political authorities hoped to prevent people from spending too much money just to show off and fall into debt. Women were especially accused, denigrated and criticized for their use of expensive clothes. Provocative necklines, especially in the period of the counter-revolution, were censored by the Church, which seemed able to assert a certain moderation. Soon after, the Baroque of the seventeenth-century reversed this process, inciting the aversion of thinkers and philosophers who strongly denounced the negative influence of fashion on women—a further confirmation of the misogyny with which the society of men was imbued and of the parallel course taken by the history of the costume and the history of gender.

Lampugnani despised many particularities, disapproving of excessive make-up, shoes with exaggerated heels, and bulky hair; every detail seemed inadequate to him, in a kind of game in which the sexes were mixed up, with women who ceded to men “womanish” behavior, obtaining from them “liveliness and boldness.” Maybe, he suggested, these characters were more typical of the French than of “modanti” Italians, because it “spropositato vestire che nella gioventù si è avanzato ... le sregolate usanze ... la bizzarria nell’addobbari.” This was supported by one of the first tailors in Bergamo, Master Leonardo, Lampugnani cited his words, who complained of the situation created in tailoring and accused the French of coming to Italy “a guastar drappi” imposing their symbols on a country that had always excelled in quality manufacturing: “Hora è tempo che, chi più sgraziatamente strapazza la nostra arte e fa il peggio che sa, quegli è il più valente sarto alla mod.”



Figure 5. The Arnolfini Portrait by Jan van Eyck.

To express oneself through clothes

As it is possible to infer from the cited authors, related to the cultural context of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, every epoch is consigned to posterity through the representation of its own ideological model, by which it also affirms its aesthetic taste. Until Leonardo, the painter “runs as much as he can from the clothes of his age” to focus on the emotional construction of figures—their faces, smiles, and looks—and in that way express their personalities. Over time, literary interpretations and, even more so, pictorial ones, give figures whose clothes significantly contribute to shape the characters of such subjects, important for their political and social roles, or significant from a human point of view. Depictions by painters, almost photographic—such as those of Bronzino, the ‘portraitist’ of the Medici court and one who excelled in portraying textiles—reveal details that enable modern analysis of handwoven and colored fabrics, often embellished with golden threads of wool or silk, and enriched with ‘reserves,’ whose decorations changed according to the epoch (*palmette*, floral motifs, *rocailles*, feathers etc.). Thus a “realist” description of clothes is achieved, showing all their glory: brocades, damasks, velvets, light voile, golden *reticella* that “encaged” the hair of ladies, excessively puffed sleeves, often gathered and cut, the so-called “fenestrella,” to show white shirts (the most appropriate example may be the Portrait of Eleanor and Her Son, 1545). All contributed to emphasize the importance of the

subject in a painting, but clothes, especially, took on a central role in their minute description through which the most prestigious artists added emotional tensions, making of characters and their clothing a *unicum*, precisely because of that individual ideal that the Renaissance had introduced.

The history of costume, the literature that describes it, the painting that reproduces it, and the theatre that stages it, interpreting personalities and roles, are all important pages that attest to the values, ideologies, and symbols of all ages; through the armor of a warrior, the velvet *palandrana* of a bourgeoisie, the fur-lined cloak of a banker, they, in fact, display the strength of their subjects political and economic power. Art, in all its expressions, often refers to the shape or color of a dress that strengthens the look of a loved young girl: the gold of her hair and the silk dress worn for a special occasion. And, as well, to the red gown of a magistrate, the black clothes of a doctor, or to an equally dark Venetian *bautta*. The variety of images refers to a reality characterized by a large abundance of commodities, with diverse textiles and models that both commercial production and distribution—following the “first revolution” in the manner of production—made available to every market with products of different qualities and prices. In every epoch, clothes express the prevailing aesthetic concept; thus, in the sixteenth century, they were centered on a rigid outline, made with harmonious, symmetrical proportions and conforming to pre-established rules—the same rules required an orderly and balanced decoration of fabrics with a regular arrangement of patterns. Around the middle of the sixteenth century, rules aimed at differentiating clothes for different occasions started to be introduced, distinguishing clothes for a gala from travel or city clothing (Levi Pisetzky 1978). Not surprisingly, in the same period, military fashion started taking shape. This came from France and was affirmed in Italy thanks to writings (*Regole militari sopra il governo e servizio particolare della cavalleria* of Lodovico Melzo, 1611) that introduced the first uniform: designed to make a comrade in arms more recognizable when compared to the enemy and to make soldierly actions easier (such as coats that opened at the sides and back to facilitate access to flasks of gunpowder). In the seventeenth century—a time when the scientific revolution brought into question the centrality of the earth in the system of the universe, social revolts inflamed Flanders with the aim of taking it from the Spanish Monarchy, and religious wars marked the area of the Protestant Reformation—the Renaissance categories of beauty, symmetry, and harmony were no longer sufficient for this new reality, and the Baroque triumphed. Bizarre, grotesque, absurd, perhaps even a

manifestation of a growing fragility, the Baroque turned towards decay and was expressed in many ways. In so doing, it overcame Renaissance composure, with its fomenting of disorder, sloppiness, excess, and, in the creative activities of performances, parties, and games, to which other means of expression, voice, gestures, movements of the body and clothes, were added. Clothes displayed, seduced, and somehow even associated people of different social classes in order to represent them. Everything that was extravagant, exaggerated, disproportionate, and sometimes of bad taste, prevailed; the imagination of poets was manifested in new expressions of virtuosity, while historians marked the century out as one long period of crisis—demographic, economic, and social. In fact, contradictory tendencies coexisted and, if on the one hand, signs of change were noticeable, which would actually be realized in the following century with the cultural revolution of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution in England, on the other hand, wars and famines caused a decrease in agricultural and industrial activity, weakening, in every way, the productive sectors. The theme of decadence, economic issues, and social disintegration fostered a debate that was dealt with in the famous journal *Past & Present*. It was later compiled into an anthology, edited by Trevor Aston, in which eminent authors confronted each other over the concept of crisis, disagreeing about its historiographical interpretation. With an introduction by Christopher Hill, Hobsbawm, Trevor-Roper, Mousnier, Goubert, Elliot and others analyzed the economic and political crises and the relationships between religion and society with different suggestions, enriching the studies in this field and offering a comparison of the events in different countries that changed the course of history in Europe (Trevor Aston 1968).

According to some, this crisis contained elements of future transformation; this potential engaged progress and thus, despite the undisputed centrality of the economy, gave rise to revolutionary social change. Other historians and economists—Italian and French, contrary to the Anglo-Saxons—introduced another consideration—in times of crisis luxury becomes the real engine of the economy, reaffirming the role of the “superfluous” that, in satisfying the rising classes, becomes a “need”—fashion conditioned by social demand. In the Middle Ages, according to Giovanni Reborà, “l’economia europea ha fondato le sue fortune sulla propensione al lusso.” With the spread of consumption, it came to be seen “en termes de luttes symboliques entre les classe sociales, avec leur stratégies de distinction et d’ostentation de la part des dominants,” as Lipovetsky claims, but, the author also asks, “cette interpretation est-elle encore valable?” The complexity of social history discourages clear answers; perhaps it can be

affirmed that, although luxury represented a means of discrimination between classes, when an increase in consumption affords market access to a greater number of consumers, the distance between them is somewhat reduced; but it is not erased altogether and it is very unlikely that the bourgeoisie, although enriched, could ever have competed with a distinguished client such as Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence or Federico of Montefeltro in Urbino, symbols of the Italian Renaissance. It could be said that as long as the basic nucleus of the established order was found at court, the place of centralized power, the symbolic value of clothes was in the projection of power through displaying oneself to others; of representing oneself through the choice of clothing—from the “uniform” of the emperor or of prince (which bore signs indicative of their sacredness) to the wealth and taste of courtiers—which became an integral part of the role of everyone in society.

Between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the symbolism of clothes was manifested in the theatre, a place of allegory and metaphor, both in religious and profane dimensions, which was very popular. Lope de Vega, in the Spanish Golden Age, introduced representations including *auto sacramental* and *comedias de santos*, interpreting, in a popular and national tone, the actions of the Church of Rome during the Counter-Reformation. In England, in the theater of Shakespeare, varied themes were expressed with great skill—the love of Romeo and Juliet, Othello's jealousy, the unrestrained ambition of Macbeth—without giving much significance to clothes, which were often unrelated to the characters of the time and, with some exceptions, were usually Elizabethan in style. This was, however, not an absolute rule, and sometime between the second half of the sixteenth century and the seventeenth century, the English theatre “adjusted” its costumes in order to be understood by the public at different cultural levels. Even in this case, however, clothes assumed relevance; for example, an actor wearing the clothes of a prince could not be arrested even when municipal authorities accused him of insolence—the clothing, even in theatrical fiction, carried the sacred symbols of a sovereign who had received his investiture directly from God. This norm reaffirmed the centrality of the monarchy and this power was often underlined in theatrical representations through the costumes used. In France, intense activity flourished in a series of theatrical types introducing the genre of tragedy, mostly addressed to an educated public in the work of Corneille and Racine, and the genre of comedy with Molière, which was generally more popular. In both cases the clothes used were Baroque, which had replaced, perhaps as a reaction, the severity of the lines and color of Spanish clothing during the Counter-Reformation. In Baroque clothes,

curvilinear motifs were used with a bodily form that accentuated the curved lines of the bust and the skirt, resting on a farthingale—a structure built of concentric rings (iron, wood, bones) of increasing size—which women used to keep their skirts lifted and inflated. Criticized as excessive, despite being modified and adapted, it was worn for a long time—more or less from the second half of the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century. It was often an object of scorn used to deride women, displaying the strongly misogynist tendencies of society under the Ancien Régime. The description given by Lampugnani in describing a meeting with a lady, can be applied more broadly:

“Vestiva costei stravagante invoglio che davanti e d’ogni intorno, le faceva smisurato ingombro, coperto di gonnella di seta di vario colore, trinciata e tagliuzzata per ornamento. Con tale ingombramento, sembrano fanciulline nelle ceste di salice o di castagno.”

Despite the criticism of conformists and their irony, “modanti” took the upper hand. Increasingly, clothes became the undisputed protagonists at civic and religious ceremonies and weddings; and at carnivals, during which costumes added various formal aesthetic symbols, breaking for that brief moment ordinary social conventions (Stefani 1974).

Between the end of the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century, fashions changed frequently, indicating different stages depending on the year. From the Baroque to Rococo to Neoclassicism, the modification of taste marked the time and manner of change, accepting the hegemony of French fashion, which triumphed everywhere, as was the case with Italian fashion during the Renaissance. The new image of women’s clothes was represented by a bust tightened by a bodice and a petticoat still resting on hoops, which became lighter and less over the top giving a softer, lighter figure in the model and the fabrics. Marie Antoinette, wife of Louis XVI, added “weight” to this appearance; clothes, accessories, and hairstyles became important elements of seduction. The towering wigs, invented for her and prepared by her legendary *coiffeur* Léonard, spread rapidly from France to Italy—so much so that Queen Carolina, the sister of Marie Antoinette and wife of Ferdinand of Bourbon, demanded Léonard go to Naples to teach this art to her hairdressers. The artist covered his own works with ointments and powder, making them rich and eye-catching, with ribbons, feathers, flowers, jewelry, and perfumes, and scents of rose, amber, and musk. Due to this trend, the use of perfumes spread; they had long been used throughout history, from the Egyptians to the Arabs and the Greeks to the Romans. The origins of perfume lie somewhere between history and mythology, religious practice,

magic and the art of medicine, evoking the supernatural, the imaginary, and, increasingly, individual sensuality (Maderna 2009).



Figure 6. Eleanor of Toledo.

After the penitent and intransigent Middle Ages, between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century, the production of perfumes developed in Italy—Florence and Venice—and Caterina de’ Medici exported its use taking her perfumer, Renato, with her from Florence. Between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, the first commercial products, like the *eau de cologne* of Gian Maria Farina, and centers of production, such as Grasse, emerged; southern Italy exported raw materials, such as the Calabrian bergamot orange, which had an essential place in the *bouquet* of every perfume until the development of modern chemistry. At Versailles, even more so than at any other court, perfume became an additional element of seduction and completed the elegant *toilette* of a lady, and of a gentleman too. There days passed with games of chance, theatrical performances, and nights of scandal, which were spoken ill of at court where the queen stood out on frivolous occasions, surrounded by her young friends and perhaps also by attractive and dissolute lovers. Her *marchande de modes*, Rose Bertini, created clothes and accessories for her, which became the very image of that court and saw her defined as “the minister of fashion.” She spent huge sums of money to ensure the satisfaction of the queen’s every whim, exceeding the annual amount destined for her clothing (for each season she ordered 36 dresses—for galas, fantasies, and ceremonies—as