



1495 Florentine Women's Italian Renaissance Ensemble

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During the period that we study, Italy was not as it is now. It was divided into various duchies, princedoms, Papal states and even a Republic. Such divisiveness contributed to the political intrigue and economic situations that kept such territories in a state of flux and contention with each other. Each state not only vied for economic advantages, but also scrambled for Papal sponsorship and favor.

Florence established itself as a textile production and trade center with the assistance of a variety of factors. First, the emerging middle class, merchants and tradesman, aided by advancing technology, now had disposable income with which to purchase increasingly more beautiful and luxurious fabric and decorative goods. The silk road connection was now very well established and lucrative providing both buyers of textile goods and also sellers of goods produced in far away places. And finally, the political climate encouraged a regional pride to develop, spurring on new and more competitive venues to emerge. All of these factors contributed to a booming and prosperous trade everywhere in Italy.

As a natural extension of the development of regional pride, the ruling noble of a region was expected to represent their territory with the best and most opulent of goods, everything from clothing to household goods. The right clothes literally made the man more powerful. To wear anything less was viewed as an insult to their people and signaled to other nobles that they were poor and hence weak. As a result, large quantities of money were spent to keep up with the most current styles, employing the best and brightest of their local guilds to develop and produce exceptional clothing and accessories. For the ruling nobles, these clothes became a way to display their personal honor.

One of the more classic uses of heraldry came out of this strong regional sentiment. What better way to identify someone with a



particular ruling family than the use of elements of that family's arms. This was an extremely popular way of expressing that allegiance and the elements were referred to as an *impressa*. Most of the heraldic usage was of an allusive type, using an element of a device, rather than trying to incorporate the whole device into their garb as in previous centuries. Allusive heraldry takes perhaps a color or symbol from the overall device and uses those in their ornamentation of a garment. The Italians loved to incorporate elements of their arms into their state occasion wear. There are many references to this. Consider this passage in *Dress in Italian Painting* about a letter from Isabella d'Este to her husband Francesco Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua.

“Isabella’s brother-in-law, Ludovico Sforza, (husband of her sister Beatrice d’Este), the Duke of Milan, sent her to a silk merchant who showed her his stock. On being asked to choose a dress as a present, she chose a gold and silver tissue embroidered with one of the Sforza personal devices, the twin towers of the lighthouses in the port of Genoa. Ludovico praised her excellent taste and gave her 15 yards, enough she says to make a camora (the usual term for a gown at that time).”

Or this one from *Women in Italy 1350-1650*, a report from Isabella d'Este's agent concerning the gown of Beatrice d'Este upon her entry into Ferrara:

“The duchess was wearing a gown of crimson washed silk, embroidered with the lighthouse of the harbour, and one each sleeve were [embroidered] with two towers, two more on the front and two on the back. On each of these towers was a large balas ruby. On her head she was wearing a cap with very large pearls, as large as your Ladyship’s largest ones, with five more very beautiful balas rubies.”

And lastly from *Dressing Renaissance Florence*.

“The latticework motif corresponds to what some scholars of family coat of arms have identified as one of three Tornabuoni devices, which was a square divided into four quarters transversely”



The use of heraldry was not limited to clothing but also was reflected in jewelry and other accessories. Here are a couple of examples from *Women in Italy 1350-1650*. Listed below is a description of some jewelry given by Ludovico il Moro to his niece Bianca Maria Sforza for her upcoming wedding to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian and its recorded value.

“A necklace made in the shape of the device of house leeks, with six large balas rubies, twenty-four diamonds of various types, six emeralds, fourteen large pearls and thirty-six small pearls ducats 9,000.

A jewel in the shape of the device of the bean, with a large table-cut balas ruby, a large faceted diamond above, and large pendant pearl ducats 4,000.”

Characteristics of Style

- Low square or rounded neck. Décolletage very characteristic.
- Tight-fitting bodice with what we would think of as an “empire waist” or slightly lower. With the beginning of the 1500s, the waistline would start to drop down to near waistline. The closings are at the sides or sometimes the bodice is split down the front and laced. Often when the bodice was open at the front it did not quite meet, displaying the camicia through the lacings.
- Box, stacked box, knife or cartridge pleated skirts distributed evenly around the bodice. All were employed equally.
- Sleeves are elaborate and usually displayed the camicia between lacings at some point. They often were removable and interchangeable. Many different styles were employed. All offer yet another opportunity to display wealth and prosperity.
- The giornea or overgown has a low v-neck that extends almost to the bottom of the bodice, displaying the gamurra or undergown. It is fitted at the top and under the arms but then flares out to display great vertical folds on the sides created by adding gores of fabric on both the front sides and the back sides. This garment has the versatility of being either open down the front and closed on the sides or closed down the front but open on the sides.



- The camicia or chemise is varied as well. Some have a low square yoke or the very popular drawstring-gathered or fixed-gathered neckline.
- Fabric is elaborate and rich in both content and pattern. Brocades of silk, linen and wool are common. Cotton also takes its place as a commonly utilized material. Embellishment consists of braids, gimps, embroidery, couching, pearls and beading. But the embellishment usually is employed to highlight the richness of the fabric.
- Bold rich colors were favorites. Metallic threads were utilized in abundance.

Many overlook the most important aspect when endeavoring to capture an overall look. That is accessorizing. Accessories complete the garment, turning it from good costuming to “stepping out of a portrait” appropriate clothing. These include:

1. Shoes

- a. slippers
- b. simple sandals

2. Jewelry ensembles

- a. Necklace – often pearls, precious and semi-precious stones, gold and silver beads. Central pendant fairly prevalent. Very symmetrical in design. Also popular in the period is a simple black cord with a pendant suspended from it.
- b. Earrings – usually matches the necklace and utilizes the same materials.
- c. Rings – very popular and numerous. Older rings tended to have cabochon stones, newest fashion incorporated the “faceting” of a stone. Unlike the faceting of today, the table was extremely broad and had very short sides.

3. Head coverings of various styles

- a. Veils – transparent, translucent and opaque were all used.
- b. Netted cap, hair net or caul. Some were worn with a small ribbon placed on the forehead and ran horizontally around the head. These ribbons frequently bore jeweled settings.
- c. Elaborately braided hair with strings of pearls or ribbons.



d. small round caps, sometimes referred to as “juliet caps” .

4. Other accessories

a. handkerchief

b. small pouch

c. flag fan – fixed square on a dowel – often highly decorated

Methodology

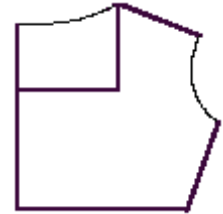
This ensemble was created for Mistress Jadwiga’s Pelican ceremony. She loves and often wears Italian clothing from this period, so it was only natural that when she was announced at Kris Kinder and she chose Clothier’s for her elevation that we would make that style for her.

She had indicated that she would like to have her garb reflect her heraldic device: *Lozengy Or and gules ermined Or, on a chief indented Or, a cat couchant purple*, especially since her Pelican was for service as a herald. After remembering some references to heraldic garb in some of my research of this period, we went shopping. It was a day of disappointment. I had a vision of what I wanted but we were only able to find suitable fabric for the bodice of the underdress. It is a nice jacquard lozengy pattern in a good heraldic gold color. And the pattern of the fabric was just perfect for embellishment. We picked up 3 yards for the bodice and sleeves. But we still lacked the fabric for the skirt, other parts of the sleeves and the overdress. And since time was such a factor, we really had to scramble. Then I remembered Denver Fabrics’ online store. I wanted dupioni silk for both the red for the skirt and purple for the overdress. They carry dupioni year round and had exactly the colors we wanted. I placed an order for 10 yards of each. When it arrived it was awesome and we were ecstatic. Then we shopped for the cotton lining fabric and we were set. By this time in Italy, cotton lining (*valescio* in Italian) was regularly used, according to *Dressing Renaissance Florence*. There were now two reliable sources for cotton cloth, that imported from the Levant and that from Sicily. It was a staple for everyday underclothes, linings and bed things. There are even accounts in some of the inventories listing cotton gowns.



Gamura, Camora or Underdress

I drafted a pattern for her and then fitted a sloper for the more precise fitting. See example of the general shape of the bodice to the right. Adjustments were marked while on her and then once removed, I made those change to the sloper. I transferred those changes back to a paper pattern and used that to cut out all the layers. The bodice



was a breeze to put together. I used an inner lining of lightweight canvas to give it a little extra body. The front and the back were constructed and lined separately and then joined at the shoulders. That way, each piece can be turned and all the inner seams are protected. Once sewn, the shoulder seams are pressed opened and whipped down to finish them. I then placed the lacing rings on for



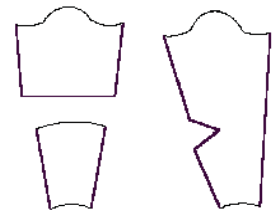
a conventional double lacing. (See period example at left.) The lacing rings are closed brass rings hand covered with three-ply embroidery thread. Because embroidery thread has a wider selection of colors than regular sewing thread, I can more closely

match my fabric when I need to have the thread show, as in this case. Next, I used some black & gold trim that I had bought at Calontir Trim to trim the edge of the neckline of the bodice and also down the front, to create a center area on the front of the bodice. Then I bought some small red glass beads and beaded the center of each diamond of the pattern of the fabric. The cording for the lacing was handmade using a kumihimo disk. Working with the lucet made my hands hurt and I was not pleased with how the lacings turned out. I even tried doing finger-braiding but that experiment ended when my hands started cramping up. (I guess I have just enough arthritis from typing for a living that it is not an option.) Then I learned kumihimo braiding from a class at the Northshield Clothiers session. Here was something that created really nice cord and didn't make my hands hurt. So I make all my cording with my portable disk. I have also heard recently that there have been disks discovered in Europe that have been theorized as being used for making cording. Because Venice was one of the premiere trading centers of the world at that time, it is certainly possible that this kind of cording was available to purchase in period.



I then took 6 yards of the red silk and the lining for the skirt and laid them out together. Just after being cut, all the silk pieces were edged to reduce any loss due to fraying. I carefully measured the distance from the bodice to the floor and added an inch. I then marked it and with right sides together sewed the two pieces together. I turned them and then pressed it flat. This became the hem. Once done, I joined the top together and then treated it as one piece of fabric. But even with edging any open cuts, I took more precautionary steps to make it both durable and long-lasting. Step one was that I enclosed the hem at the bottom to keep the silk from fraying and then box pleated it onto the bodice. Precaution two was that I left the lining of the bodice free so that I could then enclose the top of the pleats to protect the silk edges. I must admit, this silk was the easiest silk I had ever worked with. It stayed where I pinned it and didn't slip around when it was being sewn. Next, I sewed up the sides and finished the seams, leaving about six inches down from the bodice open for ease in getting in and out of the gown.

Now came the sleeves. I had several avenues that I could pursue. Sleeves varied widely in this period and gowns often had several pairs of sleeves that they could use to make their dress look different. This was because they were usually tied or buttoned in the armhole. However, I kept returning to the idea of making lozenge sleeves to allude to her heraldry. I had done one other dress with diamond sleeves so I had some idea how to do it. I used the gold fabric for my pattern. I made sure that I followed the diamond pattern and cut out diamonds so that 3 full diamonds in the pattern would be on each side after sewn and turned. I cut out about 20 of them and then used one cut gold one as my pattern for the red silk ones. Once the surface material was cut, then came the lining fabric for all of them. I got them all cut and sewn leaving a space open in order to turn them. Since time was so short, I initially thought to leave the gold ones un-beaded, but temptation got the better of me, and they got beaded anyway. Now I am glad that I did because I really like the look of them. Once they were turned, the diamonds were pressed and the openings were closed by blind hemming. They were then laid out and arranged so that they would alternate on the arm. This was the difficult part because I wanted the camicia to puff out at the elbow as in many of the portraits of the period, so I didn't make them attach continuously around the arm.

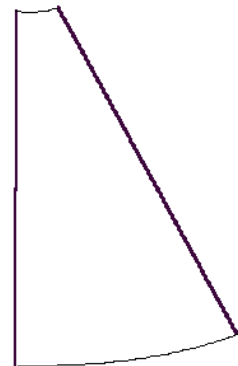
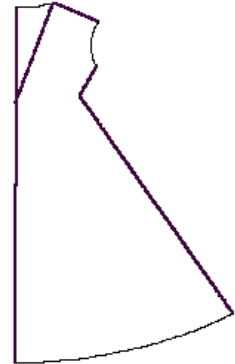




I connected all the diamonds with white pearls and put ties on the open points to tie them to the bodice and/or to each other.

Giornea or Overdress

This layer was yet another opportunity to display the wealth and hence the power and personal honor of the wearer. The giornea was mainly used for formal occasions and it was sleeveless and not usually heavily decorated, a simple trim or embroidery was all, allowing the material itself to be the highlight. The purple silk was awesome to work with. It was a little lightweight to be used alone but with the cotton lining fabric it worked just perfect. The pattern is slightly fitted at the top around the bodice area with a low v-neck but quickly flares out to the full width of the fabric at the bottom. Then gores are added on the front and back side pieces. This gives the fullness at the sides without the added material impeding the wearer's ability to walk. We chose to have it open in the front on this particular ensemble so that the underdress could be seen but it could have closed at the front and opened at the sides using the same pattern. The whole garment was sewn and then turned through an opening along the open straight edge so that all seams would be protected from fraying. The shoulder seams were opened flat and whipped down in place. The front closure was purchased at Lilies and is placed at the join. I found and bought some wire "bobbin-lace" trim that I hand-stitched around the full opening of the overgown.



Camicia

I used a lightweight cotton fabric for the fixed neck camicia, I had all but the yoke and cuffs done and ran out of time to do it myself. Lady Mirabel Wynne came to our rescue and finished the yoke and cuffs for me.





Accessories

The hat we chose for her cap of maintenance is a small Italian “Juliet cap”. It is covered in red silk with white felt and ermine spots painted on the felt. The cap was made by Jadwiga because she wanted to contribute to her own garb.

Her medallion was constructed in a very Italian style for this period. White freshwater round pearls were interspersed with tiny gold beads and at the front, red glass teardrop beads were included with the center pendant, a purchased amber Pelican medallion.

Simple red, gold and pearl earrings complete the ensemble.



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Visual References



Domenico Ghirlandaio
Birth of St John the Baptist (detail)
1486-90
Fresco
Cappella Tornabuoni, Santa Maria Novella,
Florence



Domenico Ghirlandaio
Birth of Mary (detail)
1486-90
Fresco
Cappella Tornabuoni, Santa Maria Novella,
Florence



Domenico Ghirlandaio
Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni
1488
Tempera on wood, 76 x 50 cm
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid



Domenico Ghirlandaio
Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple (detail)
1486-90
Fresco
Cappella Tornabuoni, Santa Maria Novella,
Florence



Domenico Ghirlandaio
Portrait of a Lady,
1480
Williamston, Massachusetts: Sterling and
Francine Clark Art Institute



Domenico Ghirlandaio
Birth of Mary (detail)
1486-90
Fresco
Cappella Tornabuoni, Santa Maria Novella,
Florence



Domenico Ghirlandaio
Resurrection of the Notary's Son (detail)
1479-1485
Florence: Santa Trinita, Sassetti Chapel

Domenico Ghirlandaio
Giovanna Tornabuoni
1490
Tokyo: Fuji Art Museum



Domenico Ghirlandaio
Visitation (detail)
1485-1590
Florence: Santa Maria Novella

Domenico Ghirlandaio
Birth of St John the Baptist (detail)
1486-90
Florence: Santa Maria Novella,
Cappella Maggiore

