

1545 Italian Courtesan Clothing

by Baroness Briana Etain MacKorkhill

When we think of Italy, we should remember that in the period we are discussing, 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.

A new role for women

Against this tumultuous background, there arose a new role a woman could assume, that of the “honest” courtesan. Giovanni Burchard, the chronicler of Alexander VI (Borgia) was perhaps the first to use the phrase “*courtesanae honestae*” making explicit its derivation from the papal curia. He differentiated between them and common prostitutes, offering some piquant accounts of some of the games played at social affairs. And in Rome, according to a document in the *Archivio di Stato Fiorentino* the “honest courtesan” held the first of 3 classes of prostitutes. They were the “regents and goddesses” from nearly the beginning. An honest courtesan was independent, strong-willed, well-educated, liberated and often elevated to be an aristocratic companion. She was frequently fluent in several languages, achieved prominence in the arts – as poets, musicians, etc. – and would use her knowledge of classical literature to enhance her image. She was at once, companion, lover, confidant, and even advisor in matters both political and economic. “Continual dualism of free and yet bound”, best describes the balancing of a courtesan’s life.

This all in a time when women had very little freedom otherwise. There were few options open for their future: wife, nun, washerwoman/maid servant or, now, courtesan.

To become a wife meant a life locked away from the eyes of the world. Noble wives were jealously guarded and the marriages often were loveless, arranged

for political alliances to strengthen family standings. Their main duty was to provide children to carry on the family line. Those of poorer families did not even have this option. The dowry value to marry escalated to such a level that the state finally instituted a ballot lottery system for “women at risk”. This allowed these poorer women an opportunity to have a suitable dowry to be married.

Joining a religious order also led to a life locked away from society, usually dedicated to charitable works. From some of the contemporary accounts, the conditions in the religious houses varied so widely that there wasn't even an assurance that it would be a safe haven for anyone.

A servant's life was never easy and, depending on what position was obtained, even hazardous. Even being a servant in a noble's house was no guarantee of fair treatment.

The emergence of a courtesan role

With these other choices, emerged the new choice of becoming a courtesan. Now most people automatically think that courtesan equaled prostitute. Not true. Although both accepted money for sexual favors, the similarity ended there. The courtesan was expected to stimulate all the senses not just the erotic ones. They lived in extreme luxury, (supported by the generosity of their lovers), were expected to be witty, cultured and possessed superior intellect. They were often praised for their beauty and demeanor and were escorted to all the banquets, parties and entertainments that the wealthy and noble class would hold. (A wife would never be allowed to be exposed to such events).

Rome had always had prostitution. Men outnumbered women and female companionship was always in demand. Being the seat of Papal power as well as located in a powerful city, officials, merchants and minor nobles all jockeyed for position. Many entertainments blossomed to provide opportunities for bribes, favors and the like. The new class of courtesans established themselves at the center of that tempest. They were accorded with such a rise of status that they were treated as aristocracy. As this new class became established, they embraced the arts and even political and economic situations with a passion that men began to find equally alluring. Hence, the courtesan became someone who they

could rely on for advice and solace.

After 1527, the atmosphere changed in Rome. The clergy, in general, were less tolerant of the courtesan population and many fled to Venice. As a Republic, Venice offered a safe haven for these refugees and the Golden Age of Courtesans began.

Life as a courtesan

A lot of our information comes to us through many letters, plays and novellas by writers, historians, even disgruntled ex-lovers. All have slightly different views on their subjects, but together give us a multi-faceted insight on this phenomenon. One of the more fascinating and revealing contemporary works being the account of a fictional courtesan, Nanna, written by Pietro Aretino. In his *Dialogues*, Nanna is trying to decide the life she wants to give her daughter Pippa, that of a nun, wife or courtesan. She describes her adventures in each category and finally decides on courtesan for Pippa. She then starts to instruct Pippa on the various techniques and behavior expected. While his perspective is rather prejudiced, the details of everyday life, surroundings and even table settings and food served, is wonderful. This major treatise on the courtesan was a social satire written with deliberately peppery and plebian language.

Another important series of imaginary letters to sixty courtesans was written by Andrea Calmo. Calmo was one of the founders of *commedia d'arte*. These letters offered a unique view of a courtesan's life. They also have great importance since they offer a glimpse of plot sketches that were utilized and formulated into some of the first monologues of Pantaloon, the old Venetian merchant foolishly in love with young girls.

From the various contemporary accounts we glean the names of the most famous courtesans: Beatrice of Ferrara, Imperia of Rome, Angela del Moro, Camilla of Pisa, Tullia d'Aragona, Alessandra of Florence, Gaspara Stampa and, of course, the most famous, Veronica Franco. Each of these remarkable women has a wonderful and interesting personal story.

Many of the portraits that we gather information from depict the popular courtesans of the day. A great majority of the paintings depicting myths, biblical

stories, etc. utilized courtesans as their models because a noble respected woman could not and would not pose for a painter, especially when partial or full nudity was to be painted. This explains why so many paintings appear to have the same women in them.

Characteristics of style

They wore what the nobility wore, most often what their noble patron provided for them. There was no separate dress style for them. The only difference might be a preference toward more flamboyant and showy gowns and many more party or court dresses because they attended them regularly. In later years, sumptuary laws were written (and ignored) to try and restrict what they could wear. Georgina Masson the author of *Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance* wrote that sumptuary laws:

“specifically stated that it was a public shame that prostitutes were to be seen in the streets and churches, and elsewhere, so much bejewelled and well-dressed, that very often noble ladies and women citizens [of Venice], because there is no difference in their attire from that of the above-said women, are confused with them; not only by foreigners, but by the inhabitants [of Venice], who are unable to tell the good from the bad...therefore it is proclaimed that no prostitute may wear, nor have on any part of her person, gold, silver or silk, nor wear necklaces, pearls or jewelled or plain rings, either in their ears or on their hands .”

There are even accounts that some paid the fines gladly for the publicity/notoriety. It was good for business.

- Low square or rounded neck. Décolletage very characteristic.
- Tight-fitting bodice now comes down to near waistline and as the century advances, comes to a point in center front, dropping lower and lower. The closings are at the side-back on both sides using spiral lacing to close. Sometimes the bodice is split down the front and laced or tied up. Often when the bodice is open it doesn't quite meet, displaying the chemise through the lacings or ties.
- Full cartridge, box or knife pleated skirts. All were employed equally.

- Sleeves are elaborate and usually full at some point. Many different styles were employed. All offer yet another opportunity to display wealth and prosperity.
- Corsetry, so popular in the northern countries of Europe, begins to be utilized by some. Others choose to merely stiffen their bodices without the extra layer that a corset requires. It is often theorized that because Italy is a more southern location, the extra warmth provided by the corset is unnecessary and hence unwanted.
- A bum roll is often added as a compromise to wearing a farthingale. This allows the skirts of the gown to be suspended from the roll instead of a farthingale to achieve a desired silhouette. These grow in size toward the end of the century.
- The chemise is varied as well. Some retain the low square yoke or drawstring-gathered neck popular previously. As the century draws to a close, others assume the higher neck and, later, sport a small ruff at collar and wrists. Ruffs never achieve the width or exaggeration of those in the north.
- 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 highly prized and 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, most especially reds and crimsons. Metallic threads were utilized in abundance.
- Lace begins to appear on garments and quickly becomes highly desirable.
- Courtesans often wore men's garments for outings. This style became especially popular in Venice. Short knicker-like pants known as Venetians are often donned.

The most important aspect that many overlook when endeavoring to capture an overall look 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 worn indoors
- b. Chopines (pianella) worn outdoors. High platform shoes.
- c. Boots (when wearing men's garments)

2. Jewelry ensembles

- a. Necklace – often pearls, precious and semi-precious stones, gold and silver beads. Central pendant fairly prevalent. Very symmetrical in design.
- b. Jeweled girdle – large stones, beads and fine metal work, usually ending in a pomander or large pendant.
- c. Earrings – usually matches the necklace and utilizes the same materials.
- d. Rings – very popular and numerous. Older rings tended to have cabachon stones, newest fashion incorporated the new “faceting” of a stone. Unlike the faceting of today, the table was extremely broad and had very short sides.

3. Head covering had varied styles

- a. Veils – transparent, translucent and opaque all were used.
- b. Netted cap, hair net or caul.
- c. Turbans were still quite popular
- d. Elaborately braided hair with ribbons and/or transparent veiling
- e. Venetian twin horns hair style. This hair style became most popular in the last quarter of the century.
- f. Caps with feathers
- g. “Mens” hats also were often worn.

4. Fans

- a. flag – fixed square on a dowel.
- b. feather – often with very full over-sized feathers from exotic birds.

5. Other accessories

- a. small writing tablet (perhaps wax)
- b. small book of poetry or prose
- c. small pouch
- d. any small items that might suspend from the girdle, (perhaps a rosary, keys, or scissors)

Methodology

In my initial research to start this project, I kept coming across descriptions such as this from Niccolo Martelli to a contemporary and friend Bernardo Buongirolami:

“With the rich and honored lady courtesans, one sees at once what they have to offer, and as it is their métier to give pleasure, they lay great store in doing so. Also because they have not only one lover and they know that any gaffe would cost them dear. The royal way in which they treat you, their graceful manners, their courtesy and the luxury with which they surround you, dressed as they are in crimson and gold, scented, and exquisitely shod – with their compliments – they make you see another being, a great lord, and while you are with them you do not envy even the inhabitants of heaven”.

I also found references in a 16th century dyers handbook referring to crimson as the most expensive dye, so I knew that my dress would have to be crimson and gold. And as a successful courtesan, also have an abundance of pearls. When I discovered the fabric for my dress at an extremely reasonable price, it was settled. It certainly didn't hurt that it also incorporated in its design the wonderful netting echo of the partlet. It is purported to be a silk/cotton blend and was pretty easy to work with. My original plan had been to make some more bobbin lace for trim but ran out of time to get that done. However when I found the current trim offered from Master Andrixos, the project was saved. And as I was planning to embellish the lace with pearls, I just transferred that plan to the current trim. And there again was that wonderful echo of the partlet.

I have to admit that the whole dress came about because of that partlet. And this dress also set my dress' date to around 1545-1546. Once I started on the dress, there were challenges I had never faced before. When I had constructed my Tudor style gowns, all the lacings were center back with only one opening. The bodice was cut on the straight of grain at the front and the back was attached through the shoulders in one piece and therefore angled off so that the back was actually cut on the bias. It worked great, because the shoulders never fell off or sagged from the weight of the sleeves. They were stretched by the bias cut and never went any further.



When I examined several books discussing the cut of the bodice for this dress, I discovered to my delight that the shoulders seemed to angle off again. But the huge difference was the back was cut on the straight of grain and the side back lacing was on either side of center and angled. So the back part had to be a



separate piece. Janet Arnold depicts Eleanor of Toledo's funeral dress (1562) in her book *Patterns of Fashion*, and her drawing indicates that the back is a separate piece with the shoulders attached at the top of the back. While this dress is inspired from a slightly earlier time period, 1545, the side-back lacing would have been approximately the same. I drafted my pattern accordingly. After several adjustments and slopers, I settled on the current



pattern. It definitely has a canted lacing but not quite as angled as I would have liked due to my body shape. It just didn't work



at any steeper pitch. The bodice is fully lined with

a matching colored denim to help provide I have staggered the spiral lacing method



cotton and has a stiff interlining of extra support for the outer fabric.

I have staggered the spiral lacing method as was noted in Janet Arnold's brass rings hand covered with handmade using a lucet. (These

notes. The lacing rings are closed four-ply thread. The cording was

are my first attempts making cords. They were fun to make but I used a #5 weight cotton embroidery thread and next time will use something with less fuzzyness to it.)

The placement of the trim is also inspired by Arnold's notes and other portraits of the 1530s and 1540s. The strip of trim on the center front was omitted because I did not come across that in the other portraits and I wanted to emphasize the wonderful pattern in the fabric. The sleeves are finestra or strip sleeves mimicking those of Eleanor



of Toledo's painting done by Agnolo Bronzino. Her strips are joined by buttons with stones in them - I chose to use large pearls. Another chance to flaunt a disregard for the sumptuary laws of 1533. Many courtesans received their "payments" in jewels and pearls. They certainly would have used that bounty to decorate their lavish costumes. Conspicuous consumption was considered a sign of success and prosperity, and expected from a courtesan's noble patrons.

Ribbons tie the sleeves to the bodice and they are ended with metal aiglets or points. By the use of ties, a bodice might have several sleeves that could be worn with it and also gave the wearer to option to remove the sleeves if desired. I have placed a single stitch in each bow knot so that they will not come undone, often a period practice.

The skirt is a separate piece from the bodice. It was constructed with large rolled box pleats attached to a wide waistband that fastens in center back. Unlike the layout of the 1560's skirt that Janet Arnold depicts in her sketch, the skirt still retains consistent pleats all around the waistband. Although not completed for this project, I intend to make a pair of Venetians as an accessory to this bodice, hence I would need the bodice to be separate from the skirt.

The chemise chosen to wear with this gown is one that I had previously constructed for another project. It has a gathered drawstring neckline and extra full sleeves with pleated cuffs. The material is a very fine, semi-transparent silk. The chemise also could have been made of linen or cotton. In one of Calmo's "letters" written to a courtesan by the name of Madame Lucida, he describes his belongings, bragging to her that one of his dressing gowns is made of such fine cotton as to fit in a nutshell.

The small corset that accompanies this garment has been adapted for my use. I cannot wear a full corset any more due to medical conditions. However, I have constructed this one to provide the support so necessary for the overall look of the garment. With this development, I will now be able to wear this and other "court" dresses more often.

The underdrawers are also from a previous project. Actually one of the first large projects I ever made (read 18 plus years ago). They are constructed from a cotton muslin that approximates a linen weave that would have been used. I intended to replace these with some made just for this project but ran out of time. (See example of a set from Venice).



The slippers are a very short-cut black velvet. I ordered them from Pillaged Village. Because of foot health problems, I don't often make shoes. I also had plans to make chopines but didn't want to rush their construction. I would not have worn them much at all because of the foot problems.

No gown is complete without appropriate jewelry. By this time, jewelry is now coordinated for a particular gown or color of gown. I have completed my ensemble with a suitable suite of jewelry. The pearl necklace with the pendant pearl accompanies the long rope of large pearls. I made my earrings from some drop pearls and I have included various rings to coordinate with the rest of the ensemble. My pearl and gold girdle belt with elaborate pearl tassel completes this ensemble.

Veronica Franco was said to have had a rope of 51 pearls that were confiscated under one of the sumptuary laws. She did file suit against her cook when a prayer book and other small valuables turned up missing. The complete details are well documented in the Venetian court documents of the time.

I have also acquired a feather fan to complete the effect. Cosmetics were lavishly used as well as perfume. Many period sermons were delivered against the evils of such things saying that women should be content with what God had given them.

Head coverings by this time varied widely, sometimes women wore elaborate turbans but more often minimal with perhaps a hair net or transparent veil was worn. Hair became the central focus and was elaborately crimped, curled and braided often incorporating strings of pearls and gems.

Selected Resources

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Visual References



Eleanor of Toledo, Agnolo Bronzino, 1544-45.

This is the dress that inspired the whole project. Note the partlet, jewelry, sleeve construction, pleated skirt.

La Bella, Titian. 1536.

Note the full pleated skirt, the low-wide neckline and what looks like a gathered neckline chemise. Her jeweled girdle is also evident.



Portrait of a Young Girl, Agnolo Bronzino, 1541-45.

Note the sleeves and the application of trim on the bodice. Also characteristic of the time is the low wide neckline. Jewelry matches the gown.



Portrait of a Lady , Moretto di Brescia, 1535.

Note the full box pleated skirt and the gathered drawstring neckline chemise. Also of interest is the placement of the trim. It is not mitred like we would work it modernly. She also has a metal girdle at her waste. Also note her hair is braided and has not discernible head covering.



Portrait of a Lady, Unknown Artist of the Venetian School, 1525?

Note the placement of the trim, the lovely jacquard fabric in the bodice's center. Unfortunately we can't see much of her sleeves to know how they were cut.

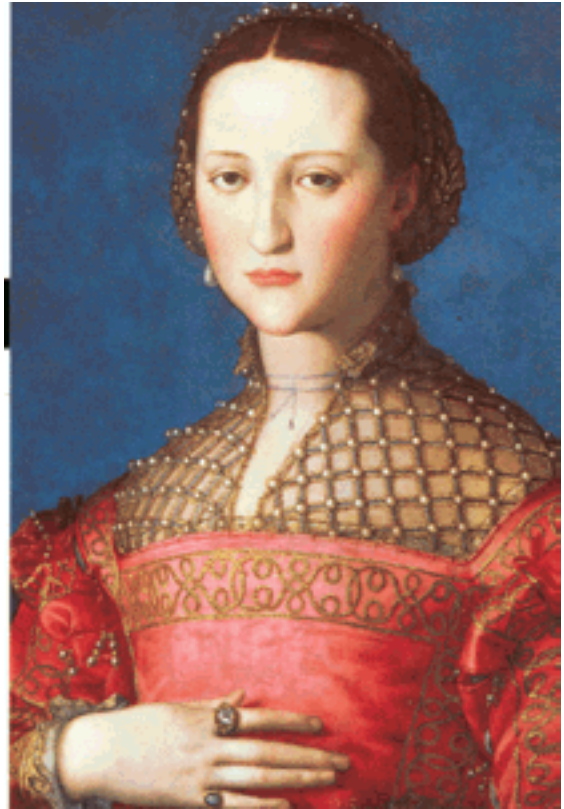
Portrait of a Woman, Bernardino Licinio 1533

Note the lovely crimson color, unusual partlet, and jeweled belt. Her pearl necklace with a pendant is also characteristic of the period. She has a beautiful turban style headdress on. Her skirt is evenly pleated.



Eleanora di Toledo, Agnolo Bronzino, 1550's.

Note that she still loved the idea of the lattice worked partlet. Though this one is of much different construction. Her couchwork embellishment on the bodice is in the same pattern as that used on my dress. It also appears that the sleeves are made similar to her black and white dress. She have had the couchwork carried through onto the sleeves. At the left side you can see that she has gold and pearl points for the ends of her ribbons.



Unknown Artist, 1540's

Note that the bodice has the low wide neckline and her partlet fills the opening. Her hair is elaborately braided and she holds a book which was often associated with a courtesan. Her pearl necklace is barely visible through the partlet and her jeweled girdle also is visible at the waist. Her skirt is evenly pleated around her waistline.