

# *Italian Women's Clothing 1490 to 1525*

## *Focusing on Regional Differences*

*by Baroness Briana Etain MacKorkhill*

### **A Brief Discussion of Culture & Climate**

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.



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 these factors together contributed to a booming and prosperous trade everywhere in Italy.

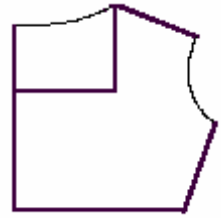
As a natural extension of the development of regional pride, the ruling noble of a region was expected to represent their territory with the best and most opulent of goods, everything from clothing to household goods. The right clothes literally made the man more powerful. To wear anything less was viewed 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 and their allegiance.

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 this allegiance. Most of the heraldic usage was of an illusive type, using an element of a device, rather than trying to incorporate the whole device into their garb as in previous centuries. Illusive 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 of 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 or gamurra (the usual terms 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 on 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 this example, "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" from *Dressing Renaissance Florence*.

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*, a description some jewelry given by Ludovico il Moro to his niece Bianca Maria Sforza for her upcoming wedding to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian. 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. and 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. Most of the rounded neck dresses were phased out around 1500. The square neck started up higher earlier and lowered to show some cleavage by the end of our discussion.
- Tight-fitting bodice with what we would think of as “empire waist” or slightly lower at the beginning. With the advent of the 1500s, the waistline would start to drop down to near waistline by the 1540s.
- The closings of the bodice are at the sides or sometimes the bodice is split down the front and laced. After 1500, often the bodice was open at the front and did not quite meet, displaying the camicia through the ties or 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. Regional differences can be seen as the closer to the Alps and colder climate, many chose to have very voluminous sleeves, while the warmer climates would have the smaller sleeves. 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 open down the front and closed on the sides or closed down the front but open on the sides depending how it is finished.
- The camicia or chemise is varied as well. Some have a low square yoke or drawstring-gathered neck so very popular.
- 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. Wool and linen were often used for the northern areas more frequently, southern city-states preferred to use silk, cotton and linen for their clothing.
- 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.



## Accessories:

1. Shoes
  - a. Slippers - *pianelle*
  - b. flat shoes - *scapini*
  - c. ankle boots - *borzacchini*
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 - *Velo* – transparent, translucent and opaque all were used.
  - b. Netted cap, hair net or caul. Popular in Milan and Lombardian fashion, A broad plait or roll of hair, hanging down the back, often elaborately decorated with strings of pearls or with ribbons and/or transparent veiling and often worn with a *trinziale*, a sort of fine fabric or metallic cap covering the back of the head.
  - c. Large turbans that are richly adorned. Often more favored in the northern areas.
4. Handkerchief
5. Small pouch or pocket - *Saccoccia*. Worn on either the inside or a highly decorated one worn on the outside.
6. Fan – a fixed square on a dowel – often highly decorated or feathered fan.
7. Early partlets, or *colletto*, also be referred to as *gorgiera* or *coverciere*, began to be seen after a 1465 Florentine decree to cover their generous neck openings. Because they used such transparent fine silk, it really had the opposite affect and drew the attention to the chest.
8. Mantle or mantello- for outerwear was common for all regions and classes.

Regional differences mainly derive from climate and neighboring influences. Most of the northern regions were a cooler zone and their most influential neighbors were the Germans who loved the darker, heavier fabrics, furs and woolens, large hats/turbans, voluminous skirts and extra large sleeves with an abundance of lovely embellishments. For the more southern regions, you would see the lighter weight fabrics – silk, linen and cotton, small head coverings with intricate hair braidings and sheer veiling and smaller, fitted sleeves.

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