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Dressing Renaissance Florence Families, Fortunes, and Fine Clothing

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In a famous essay on the tenacity of the Burckhardtian conception of the Renaissance, Johan Huizinga wrote that '[A]t the sound of the word ?Renaissance? the dreamer of past beauty sees purple and gold.' After reading Carole Collier Frick?s engrossing, multi-layered book, Huizinga?s romantic dreamers will have to become far more nuanced in their visual imaginings of the past. Purple, it turns out, might be the colour *pavonazzo*, but there is no consensus in the primary sources, and peacock blue, peahen brown, red violet, blue violet, and a colour 'between blue and black', are all equal contenders for the name.(p. 170) Indeed, whether it is possible to recapture precisely what people wore in this period is thrown open to question in this book when, in the absence of substantial material remains, all we are left with are literary and visual sources, both of which are deficient and often misleading, intentionally or otherwise.

Scholars in recent years have been busily compensating for Theodore Zeldin?s observation, that 'the consumer ? has yet to find an historian'. From Richard Goldthwaite?s analysis of Italy as the locus of the consumer revolution to Lisa Jardine?s exploration of worldly goods and Daniel Miller?s assertion that 'consumption is the vanguard of history', it has become clear that the consumer is finally beginning to be taken seriously by a range of disciplines from anthropology, economics and sociology, to art history and history. Collier Frick draws on all these disciplines and is both empirically impressive and theoretically engaging.

Building on the work of Jacqueline Herald, she provides a comprehensive glossary of fashion terminology that is the most extensive to date and will be of enormous value to historians of costume. This glossary is amplified by fascinating details throughout the book. We hear, for instance, that it took a skilled weaver about six months to weave 50 *braccia* of three-pile brocaded velvet cloth which provided enough fabric for two sleeveless overgowns; or that the cost of two feet of taffeta was equal to one man?s food for a week; or that the production of woollen cloth required at least 27 different processes, whilst silk required only nine; or that by the end of the fourteenth century more than one million pelts of fur came to the West from Russia and Poland. Through detailed analysis of family account books, she quantifies precisely how much of a patrician family?s income was devoted to clothing (a staggering 40 per cent, it turns out); but by tracking expenditure over time she also demonstrates that families were parsimonious in years in which no major event such as a wedding occurred. Marco Parenti, whose expenditure of 560 florins on his bride?s clothing has often been used as an example of foolishly extravagant expenditure, is found to have spent only 37.5 florins the following year and to have averaged only 106 florins annually for his whole family.

But this book is more than a history of costume in Florence. By exploring the world of the artisanal class that created the clothes, Collier Frick seeks to move beyond analyses of Florence that have simply concentrated on the gap between the labouring classes and the patriciate. Her careful analysis of *catasto* records reveals a city in which 900 heads of households declared a craft or trade relating to clothes in 1427. And in a fascinating table on p. 97 she compares earnings by occupation in the city, demonstrating that a weaver of brocaded velvet earned more in a year than the second chancellor of Florence or Brunelleschi, and that a weaver of damask earned more than the average university professor. Collier Frick works exhaustively through all the categories of workers in the clothing industry, from wool beret makers to hosiers, sock makers, silk belt makers, doublet makers, embroiderers, purse makers, straw and felt hat makers, clasp, buckle and brooch makers (to name only a few). She tells us what they made, where they lived, and how much they got paid. Shoemakers for example, the most numerous category of clothier, were rarely paid but seem to have existed on credit.

In Chapter 8 Collier Frick begins to unravel the meanings of clothes in the lives of Florentines. Using Barthes? semiotic categories of technologic, verbal and iconic elements, she emphasises that, apart from a few fragments, the technologic element of the clothes themselves is no longer available for analysis. This leaves the historian with the verbal and iconic elements, both of which prove problematic. In her chapter on the officials upholding sumptuary regulations, a sort of Florentine 'fashion police', Collier Frick?s mastery of fashion terminology leads to all sorts of interesting conclusions about the written descriptions of clothes and the elusiveness of many colours and fabrics. She demonstrates that the static nature of Latin statute vocabulary could not possibly keep pace with the living vernacular, which in turn could not fully encompass the endless varieties of cloth, dyes, and construction techniques. Sumptuary officials, working in official Latin, had to struggle to categorise what they encountered on the streets with frustrating results for enforcing the law.

Collier Frick?s final chapter deals with Barthes? iconic element. This is a self-contained essay on painted clothes that takes up the challenge first posed by Elizabeth Birbari in her *Dress in Italian Painting, 1460-1500* (London: J. Murray, 1975). She argues that frescoes freeze-framed young nubile women (not yet subject to sumptuary restrictions) as objects of honour, while men stood as bearers of the egalitarian ideal. For this reason the clothes depicted in the frescoes served specific functions and on examination were often at odds with the known reality as described in family record books. She concludes that there is no visual source from the Renaissance that can be thought of merely as a clothing illustration but rather that we 'see just what the Florentines wanted us to see.'(p. 10)

I have only a small criticism of this book. By concentrating so exclusively on Florence, Collier Frick concludes that, 'For the first time in European history, it was here in Quattrocento Florence that ?fashion? was fully articulated and became the most widely available form of conspicuous consumption' (p. 178), and in her introduction she marks out Florence as Renaissance Italy?s 'most style-conscious city'. And yet all the towns of central and northern Italy were preoccupied by clothing and its meanings. Indeed, one could argue

that as Florence had many more sumptuary restrictions than other towns, style had fewer modes of expression in Florence than elsewhere. As Collier Frick herself points out, the uniform appearance of Florentine patrician men?s scarlet gowns allowed for variation only in headwear. The work of Rosita Levi Pisetzky on clothing in Milan alone would make one query Collier Frick?s assertions about Florentine primacy. The foppish Sienese gentlemen illustrated on p. 171 also undermines this assertion, and there are other numerous examples that could do likewise. This is, however, a wonderful book, after reading which we will not be able to visualise Renaissance Florence in the same way again.

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