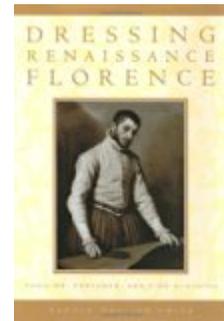


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carole Collier Frick. *Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes and fine Clothing*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. 347 S. \$45.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-0-8018-6939-6.

Reviewed by Sandra Sider (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University)
Published on H-Italy (June, 2004)



Pole-Cat Linings and Wildcat Trim

Divided into three sections of “Guilds and Labor,” “Family Honor,” and “Fashion and the Commune,” the ten chapters of this fascinating book discuss tailors, specialty craftspeople, patronage systems, patrons, costs, wedding outfits, the trousseaux of two sisters, details of clothing, sumptuary legislation, and fashion in Ghirlandaio’s family chapel portraits. Using Barthean analysis, Frick looked at both the “iconic,” or image of the garment, and the “verbal,” or written descriptions. As the author herself pointed out, much of the evidence for her arguments was necessarily drawn from studies in the history of costume and from literary themes of clothes and society, along with an impressive amount of research in the Archivio di Stato of Florence. Other primary sources included the “Census and Property Survey of Florentine Domains in the Province of Tuscany, 1427-1480”; Renaissance works by Alberti, Barbaro, Machiavelli, and Vecellio; and letters and diaries from the fifteenth century.

Before delving into the text, we might as well mention the illustrations so as not to end on a negative note. For a book on costume, John Hopkins University Press might at least have provided a few illustrations in color, especially the frontispiece depicting Giovanna degli Albizzi wearing a luxurious gold and pink dress in Ghirlandaio’s *Birth of John the Baptist*. Reproductions of entire paintings, with robed figures in relatively small scale, suffer here from a muddy and sometimes blurry black-and-white treatment. Illustrations of individual costumes fare better, but a few images of textured details are partially obscured because the darker

tones are lost. Finally, the cover image of the dust-jacket depicting G. B. Moroni’s *Il Sarto* (*The Tailor*) from c. 1560 is misleading. This book pertains to *quattrocento* Florence and has almost nothing to do with the sixteenth century. None of these criticisms, however, detracts from Frick’s rigorous scholarship or the intrinsic value of the book to costume specialists, students of women’s history and material culture, and even today’s fashion designers, who might be inspired by the decorative details and fine fabrics of upper-class clothing in the Florentine Renaissance.

The author’s goal was to “slice vertically through the rich layers of Florentine society to understand issues of class relations, identity, and the honorable self-representation of the elite by studying the complexity of just getting dressed” (p. 6), with the hope that we might better understand “what drove its traditional society” (p. 10). Her method involved not only looking at examples of Renaissance fashion, but also “reading” these designs in their cultural context to determine their origins and effect.

Tailoring, officially, was man’s work in Florence during the latter fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The last date when a woman was listed on the tax lists as a tailor was 1378. Women worked as embroiderers and made buttonholes, veils, slippers, caps, and belts. Although they also worked as tailors during the Renaissance, such women were not in the guild system and were only permitted to do piece work for master tailors. The increasing demand for clothing as luxury goods during the fifteenth

century “marginalized the female needleworkers, professionalized the garment trades into a male-dominated enterprise, and made many artisans rich” (p. 222). Costume was controlled almost exclusively by men of the elite class, who not only paid for the ensembles, but also involved themselves very closely in the entire production process, from fabric selection to fitting. Brides essentially were pawns, with the trousseau from their own family reflecting the wealth and power of their fathers, balanced by the counter-trousseau provided by their husbands for the wedding procession and associated public events. Funds from the bridal dowry often were used to finance the husband’s expenditure for the counter-trousseau.

Frick’s research has revealed some interesting facts pertaining to costume in Renaissance portraiture. The outwardly drab robes of Antonio Pucci in the Sassetti Chapel, for example, were valued at fifty florins—an amount that would have been sufficient to support three individuals for a year in Renaissance Florence. The *cioppa*, a garment of velvet, silk, or wool, was lined with soft fur from the underbelly of squirrels. Although seemingly modest in appearance, the *cioppa* was actually a very expensive garment. Frick argues convincingly that Pucci and his confederates purposefully had themselves portrayed in such robes to project the egalitarian ideal of Florentine republicanism. These men owned other, elaborately ornamented outfits of which we have no visual record. Pucci himself had a dozen gowns in several colors and two helmets encrusted with pearls. Rather than the male family members, the family’s unmarried young women were highlighted in Ghirlandaio’s frescoes, in finery that usually was pawned or sold after the wedding

festivities.

Sumptuary laws did not apply to women age sixteen and younger, and brides were exempt during their weddings and for fifteen days thereafter. Except for younger women and brides, females were accosted on the street by the “fashion police” who handed out fines. Elaborately ornamented sleeves and necklines were special points of attention. As Frick points out, the detailed descriptions of neckline prohibitions in sumptuary law must have been responding to current offenses. Women decked out in gold trim, for example, were fined 100 lire, and the craftspeople who sold it to them were fined 200. Although women were the targets of most sumptuary legislation, the law of 1472 also included restrictions on male clothing.

Frick’s beautifully written text is enriched by the addition of tables, appendices, and a glossary. The tables provide information on the changing affiliations of tailors; clothiers and the seven guilds that controlled them c. 1415; tailors’ demographics; estimated annual earnings; Lorenzo de Medici’s wardrobe expenditures in 1515; pelts used for linings, borders, and sleeves; and overgowns and linings. The appendices list currency and measures, categories of clothiers, the amount of cloth required for selected garments, and the contents and value of trousseaux for the two Minerbetti sisters (bride and nun). The glossary contains some two hundred words in Italian pertaining to cloth, fur, ornamentation, hats, shoes, and the other myriad components of fifteenth-century Florentine fashion. Frick’s thorough treatment of Renaissance costume has set a new standard of excellence for scholars working on costume of any age.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

Citation: Sandra Sider. Review of Frick, Carole Collier, *Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes and fine Clothing*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9483>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.