

Reading the Language of Dress in Renaissance Art

Background Notes

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'Dress' is a fascinating topic for art historians, textile historians and even for social historians, because it tells one so much about the period in question. Whether acting as a benchmark for the state of the prevailing economy, or as an adjunct to understanding a given social milieu, or the mores of the day – a study of costume is most informative. Of course, in addition, it conveys something of contemporary ideals of beauty; and all the above is without even giving any thought to what might be seen as the rather fluffier subject of 'fashion'!



But in fact, fashion turns out to be much more than just looking at pretty clothes, since it entails a consideration of what fabrics were available at a given moment in time and what dyestuffs were used. It also communicates something about the degree of importance given to cut and shape. Furthermore fashion does not stop at clothing but also involves jewellery, and other forms of self-adornment.

Portraits, one of the principal sources for historians interested in dress, are of course not quite the same sort of evidence as photographs, in that the former had to reconcile how patrons wished to be represented and at the same time, what artists sought to depict, which was not always the same thing!

In two hours, one can only scratch the surface of such a huge subject, when one considers the time span and the diversity of regional differences in the Italian Renaissance. Such differences are evident from a letter from one of the Medici, during the family's exile to Venice in 1434. Writing to a relation back in Florence, this fellow commented on how in Venice 'one had to cut a distinguished figure, so that I have had to have my outer garments made of silk, whereas in Florence they had been of woollen fabric.'

So, rather than trying to cover thinly all these differences, I have focused my attention on a very finite period and also, for the first part of the talk, on a specific case study, in order to be able to ask particular questions and to draw some conclusions, since, otherwise, a talk of this nature could easily become a commentary on a list of pretty pictures.



Short Bibliography

E Birbari, Dress in Italian Painting 1460-1500, London, 1975
(a good basic description of clothing in 15C Italian painting)

S M Newton, The Dress of the Venetians, 1495-1525, Aldershot, 1980

J Herald, Renaissance Dress in Italy 1400-1500, London, 1981



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