



PLATE 1

GIOTTO. DETAIL FROM "ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM," SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA, 1305, SHOWING THE DRESS OF SECULAR CHARACTERS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 14TH CENTURY. GIOTTO IS NOT ONLY AN ACCURATE RECORDER OF ALL ITEMS OF DRESS, BUT HIS PENETRATING OBSERVATION OF SIGNIFICANT GESTURE MAKES HIM OF PARTICULAR INTEREST TO THE STUDENT OF COSTUME. HERE THE PROCESS OF REMOVING THE OUTER GARMENTS TO LAY UNDER THE FEET OF CHRIST REVEALS BOTH THE CUT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CLOTHES.

THE STUDY OF COSTUME AS AN AID TO THE DATING OF ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PAINTINGS

by

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THE STUDY of the costume of the past is not a study which can be picked up for the sake of dating a painting and then dropped. It demands the same detailed research, background knowledge, and acute observation, combined with imaginative insight, that are essential to the study of art history. It cannot be undertaken without a specialised training, nor can it be successfully carried out except by those who are sensitive to clothes; and it involves the devotion of as many lifetimes of work as are involved in the study of art history. Furthermore, the study of the history of costume is only just beginning.

Many an art-historian, unable to date the painting which is the object of his investigation on documentary or stylistic grounds, has attempted to arrive at a date from the evidence of costume, but there are also those who refuse to admit the significance of design in clothes, and regard changes of fashion as being arbitrary and illogical and painters as being free to escape from the *Zeitgeist* as it is expressed in dress. Until the history of costume has been worked over with the same thoroughness and scientific care as is nowadays directed to the history of art, the art-historian can be neither helped nor converted by the historian of clothes.

It is not by accident that I myself have chosen the costume of the Italian Renaissance as a field of study. The tremendous production of painting and sculpture during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, combined with the peculiar sensitivity of the Italian people to changes in the design of clothes, has made it possible to discover, from the careful examination of works of art bearing undisputed dates, exactly what men and women looked like and how often they changed their ideas as to how they should be dressed. Only in periods when firmly dated works of art are scarce does it become impossible to find the precise pattern of these changes in detail, and it is for this reason that it is difficult to

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date the paintings of both Pisanello and Veronese, two painters who, curiously enough, even among painters of the Italian Renaissance were remarkable for their interest in the clothes they painted.

An immense amount of work still remains to be done on the costume of the Italian Renaissance, but from the research I have been able to carry out during ten to twelve years I am satisfied of three major facts which can be proved, but proved only by the examination of a host of minor discoveries.

The importance of these three facts cannot be overestimated. They are as follows:

During the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy, *a.* fashions in clothes and hairdressing changed as quickly as they do today (Plate 1), *b.* no painter resisted the pressure of contemporary fashion (Plate 2), *c.* no character appearing in any painting was entirely unaffected by fashion (Plate 3).

Once the validity of these three facts is accepted it must be recognised that, where sufficient firmly dated works of art can be found to serve for comparisons, any painting which contains clothed figures (or even unclothed figures with dressed hair) can be dated to within a narrow time-limit. The time-limit varies with the amount of comparative material available, but at most periods during the Italian Renaissance the margin can be narrowed to within five years.

In so short an essay it is naturally impossible to discuss a large enough number of works extending over a long enough period of time to establish the first assertion I have made above—namely, that fashion changed quickly during the Italian Renaissance. It must also be realised that to the untrained eye changes are not always easily perceptible. Most sensitive to alteration in fashion and most obnoxious when out-of-date are the style of dressing the hair and the position of any emphasis at the waist. It frequently, and most naturally, happens that a change in design in the dressing of the hair is accompanied by a change in the shape of the neck-opening. Thus, a raising of the neckline of women's dresses accompanied a simplification of the dressing of the front of the hair in the early 1560s, evidence of which can be collected from dated paintings by Tintoretto and his contemporaries, while in the first decade of the fifteenth century the building of a high upstanding collar on the tunics of men led to a cutting away of the hair at the nape of the neck. In the first instance the change was aesthetic, in the second functional. This functional practice opened out, however, new aesthetic vistas, and once the idea of shaving away



PLATE 2

GIOTTO. DETAIL FROM "LAST JUDGMENT," SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA, 1305. THIS HEAD OF ENRICO SCROVEGNI IS YET ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF GIOTTO'S GENIUS FOR ACCURATE RECORDING OF THE WAY THINGS ARE MADE. THE DRAWING OF THE WHITE LINEN BONNET-LIKE "COIF" WORN UNDER THE HAT COULD SERVE AS A MILLINER'S MODEL.



PLATE 3

GIOTTO. DETAIL FROM "THE WASHING OF FEET," SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA, 1305. THE CAREFUL DRAWING OF THE SANDALS SHOWS EXACTLY WHERE THE SOLE JOINS THE UPPER, AND THE METHOD OF FASTENING THE STRAP. ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE CARE THIS GREAT ARTIST TOOK OVER DETAILS OF DRESS.

areas of hair on the head was accepted, fantasies of haircutting were introduced. Women's foreheads were shaven and men's hair was shaved away above and behind the ears. By this time the high collar was once more lowered in order that the newly designed head might be fully appreciated — raised aloft on an uncovered neck.

When the underlying aesthetic or psychological idea of change or development of style of this kind has been grasped, it is not impossible to find an approximate point at which to place an undated painting even if it falls within a period when practically no comparative material can be found, since the rhythm of development has been established. There is, moreover, no decade during the Italian Renaissance which does not contain *some* dated works of art which can guide the historian of clothes; the graph of development and mutation from the beginning of the fourteenth to the end of the sixteenth century can be drawn with remarkable clarity, and there is no moment at which an undated painting cannot be placed to within ten years.

The second fact which I regard as being completely established — that no painter during the Italian Renaissance resisted the pressure of contemporary fashion — can be seen much more easily by an eye unaccustomed to examining paintings for the evidence of costume. It has often been considered that the greatest artists are unaffected by current details of fashion: that they draw generalised rather than particularised clothes: that they dress their characters in clothes which are imaginative inventions: or — and this is a most popular theory — that they are successful in painting clothes which, while they are not purely imaginary, belong to an earlier day than their own. That all these theories are psychologically unsound need not be discussed here. It is only necessary to examine some of the works of some of the greatest painters to see that, during the Italian Renaissance at least, every painter, even when he was determined to dress his characters in clothes which could be thought of as either belonging to the past or as “outside time,” kept the current fashion sufficiently near the surface to satisfy the unconscious visual demands of both himself and his public. In spite of the recurrent indignation of conservatives and moralists there is a fundamental belief that the present, at whatever moment it occurs, marks the end of progress, and that what has just been accepted represents the ultimate norm. It is for this reason that painters and sculptors, even when they are deliberately using an archaic form of dress because they consider it suitable to their subject, are incapable of producing an objective reproduction of the clothes of

antiquity, but must always record beneath the clothes of the past the taste of their own day.

Donatello, consumed with admiration for Roman reliefs and determined to reproduce the general sense of fluttering Roman drapery in a most unfluttering age, nevertheless dresses his Salome, in his Siena font relief, in the cut of the second decade of the fifteenth century. It is merely the texture which he changes. Salome's dress with its long train which has to be held up behind, its sleeve fitting at the wrist but bulging into a "peascod" shape at the elbow, bears only the most superficial resemblance to what is meant to be a Roman prototype. She wears the haircut of 1425.

The youth with his back turned to the spectator in Masaccio's *Tribute Money* (Carmine, Florence) wears the dress of the period: the girls in the background of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (Pitti, Florence) are most carefully represented in the dress of their time. These are the obvious guides to the student of costume. But more important, because apparently more obscure, are the Christs and Apostles, the Madonnas and Saints, the Venuses and Nymphs, who are seemingly dressed in clothes which are either outside time or which belong to the past but who really reflect their own period.

Mantegna, for instance, was a student of the antique. He worked in his youth for Squarcione, who collected Roman reliefs, statues, pottery and coins and sold them to the local aristocracy, and who was, in fact, as much antique dealer as painter. Mantegna, too, was a collector; he was caught by the fashionable passion for classic antiquity, and yet scarcely a figure in his *Triumphs of Caesar* (Hampton Court, London) (Plates 4 and 5), for all his scholarly care, succeeds in concealing the current silhouette. The long heavy hair-cut, the sleeve puffed a little above the elbow, tight below — such details are continually hinted at and are not concealed by the authentically Roman flavour of the soft monochromatic drapery (Plates 6 and 7).

Like Mantegna, Raphael, especially in his Vatican Stanze and his tapestry cartoons, seemed to use correct antique dress, but a comparison between his preliminary studies, usually made from studio models wearing their everyday clothes, and the final version of the paintings, reveals his ingenious and quite evidently deliberate method of maintaining a constant reference to the actual clothes which he had recorded in his first drawings in his "classic" draperies. The cut of his tunics is the cut of the shirt of the early sixteenth century. His "togas" are heavily bunched to give bulk to the outline in places where the current outline was bulky,



MANTEGNA. DETAILS FROM CARTOONS "THE TRIUMPHS OF CAESAR," HAMPTON COURT PALACE, LONDON. (BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION OF H. M. THE QUEEN.) END OF THE 15TH CENTURY. TWO YOUTHS WEARING WHAT PUR-
 PORTS TO BE CLASSICAL ROMAN DRESS. BUT COMPARISON WITH PLATES 6 AND 7 SHOW THAT THEY WEAR THE
 FASHIONABLE HAIRCUT OF THE ARTIST'S OWN DAY AND THAT THEIR SLEEVES AND THE CUT OF THEIR TUNICS,
 INCLUDING THE NECKLINE, REFLECT THE CURRENT FASHION.



PLATE 6

CARPACCIO. DETAIL FROM THE "LIFE OF ST. URSULA," ACCADEMIA, VENICE, 1490-1496.
FOR COMPARISON WITH PLATES 4 AND 5.



PLATE 7

CARPACCIO. DETAIL FROM THE "LIFE OF ST. URSULA," ACCADEMIA, VENICE, 1495.
FOR COMPARISON WITH PLATES 4 AND 5.

and they are treated with a molten fluidity which reveals the thigh and calf, although the garments reach the ground, since the eye of the early sixteenth century insisted that men should show their legs (Plates 8 and 9).

To say, therefore, that no artist is uninfluenced by current fashion is to say, as my third fact asserts, that no character in any painting is uninfluenced by current fashion. But before passing on to a discussion of the treatment of individual personages in Italian art it is important to realise that there were multitudes of characters who were regarded as being suitably dressed when they wore the clothes of the artist's own day, even when they appeared in biblical scenes or stories from classical mythology. There are, of course, the portraits of real people — donors, for instance — who were naturally portrayed wearing garments chosen from their own wardrobes, but there are also the secular characters of the story, such as the crowds who listen to the preaching of San Bernadino of Siena in fifteenth-century Sienese painting, and the pages and attendants on the Magi, the young girl nurses at birth-scenes, and the onlookers at the Crucifixion, who invariably wear "modern" dress. It is these characters who prove the extreme sensibility of Italian painters to the tailoring, dressmaking, millinery, shoemaking and hairdressing of their own day.

The Italian painter, not concerned, even in the latest phase of the Renaissance, with the effect of the play of light on surfaces *at the expense* of construction, was always conscious of the way things are made, and always explicit when he painted craftsmanship. Faked Renaissance pictures or repainted details can be detected from the fact that the construction of the clothes has not been understood by a later painter who, because he had not actually fastened the strings or buckles or buttons of the clothes he is painting nor experienced their stresses and strains (nor witnessed his wife's handling of her clothes), cannot paint with the conviction which we instinctively recognise in the painter who is recording his own period.

A step-ladder, or a pair of field-glasses in the Arena Chapel, or a magnifying-glass and a good reproduction at home reveals Giotto's intimacy with a bonnet such as Scrovegni wears (Plate 2). The slight puckering of the stuff where it is held in by the firm binding round the edge is no generalisation: it is the result of scrupulous observation. The fantastic dress of Pisanello's day can no longer be regarded as a product of Pisanello's imagination when one notices in his drawing No. 2509 v. in the Louvre the two buttons at the nape of the neck and the seam down the back of the stockings — details which the designer of imaginary cos-

tume does not trouble to, indeed cannot, invent. The turban round the head of Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* could be reproduced on a living model, the cloak held out to receive Botticelli's *Venus* could be copied by the modern tailor, and when worn it would be the fashionable collared mantle of the 1480s. Enough paintings bearing similar dates have survived to provide undisputable evidence that the painters of the Italian Renaissance were so conscious of current fashion that never, unless they wished to underline the out-of-date character of some particular person or group of persons, did they fail to use not only contemporary dress but the latest version of contemporary dress. Naturally working-class people were kept behind the fashion, and so were old men and women, who are almost always conservatively dressed, but this careful selection of slightly unfashionable clothes for certain characters in the story only serves to emphasise the painters' clothes-consciousness.

In comparing, for instance, Ottaviano Nelli's *Madonna Belvedere*, painted in Gubbio in 1403, with a Visconti MS. dated 1402 from Milan (Paris Bib. Nat. MS. Lat. 5888) it can be seen immediately that the girl donor in the *Madonna Belvedere* and some of the female saints on fol. 1.r. in the MS. wear exactly similar clothes. Both are painted with equal precision of detail and both show the same fashion. Again, if the series of frescoes by Domenico di Bartolo in the *Pelegrinaio* in Siena be compared with the frescoes of the life of Queen Teodolinda by the Zavadari brothers in the *Duomo* at Monza which bear the same date, 1444, it is quite clear that the same stage in fashion has been reached, although the painters differ widely in their styles of painting: the Siena frescoes are flowing and exuberant: those at Monza are stiff and naive: but the artists are painting the same clothes.

Careful study shows, in fact, that artists who differ as profoundly from each other stylistically as Carlo Crivelli, Giovanni Bellini and Botticelli, or as Pisanello and Masolino, or as Tintoretto and Baroccio, are nevertheless unanimous as to current fashion, and that great painters such as Giotto or Raphael, and pedestrian painters such as Ghirlandaio or Federigo Zuccaro, are equally interested in the clothes and hairdressing of the people they paint. Often they deliberately archaïse the clothes of their characters, and, in fact, a table of forms of dress suitable to each character and each scene in which the character appears can be drawn up.

Christ and the Apostles were regarded by all painters as being so sacred that they could not — as could the Saints — be openly dressed in the current fashion, and it is for them that a dignified archaic dress was



PLATE 8

RAPHAEL. CARTOON FOR TAPESTRY "FEED MY SHEEP," VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON. BEGINNING OF 16TH CENTURY. (BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION OF H. M. THE QUEEN.)



PLATE 9

RAPHAEL. PREPARATORY STUDY FOR THE CARTOON "FEED MY SHEEP," WINDSOR, ROYAL LIBRARY. BEGINNING OF THE 16TH CENTURY. (BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION OF H. M. THE QUEEN.) IN THE CARTOON RAPHAEL HAS TRANSLATED THE CURRENT FASHION INTO A SEMBLANCE OF CLASSICAL ROMAN DRESS, BUT THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE DRESS OF HIS OWN DAY ARE STILL VISIBLE, PARTICULARLY IN THE DRAPERY OVER ST. JOHN'S SHOULDER WHICH SUGGESTS THE HUGE PUFFED UPPER SLEEVE ACTUALLY WORN BY THE MODEL IN THE DRAWING. THE NECKLINE OF ST. PETER'S SHIRT, THE FULLNESS OF ITS CUT AND THE SET OF THE SLEEVE OF THE YOUNG BEARDED APOSTLE IN THE FOREGROUND INTO THE SHOULDER SEAM, ARE ALL CARRIED OVER FROM THE PRELIMINARY DRAWING INTO THE CARTOON.

reserved. In the Middle Ages this dress was the long tunic and over-mantle actually worn by the upper and leisured classes during the Romanesque and early mediaeval periods. As the Renaissance proceeded this mediaeval dress naturally took on a somewhat Roman or classical form. The bands of embroidered trimmings which had too mediaeval a flavour to be acceptable were suppressed. The tunic was shaped, as a rule, on the model of the undershirt fashionable at the time of the painting, and either lengthened or, more often, with the hem-line concealed by the mantle. As I have pointed out, this archaic dress could be varied in appearance as fashion demanded.

The figure of Christ is always represented with long hair but the arrangement of the hair follows, very discreetly, the fashionable line, and is then, in short-haired periods, extended to the shoulders. Tradition with regard to St. Peter's actual appearance was so strong that at all periods his hair is cut short, whereas the hairdressing of St. John the Evangelist, a younger man and a most sympathetic character, follows the fashion as, for example, in the Raphael cartoon *Feed My Sheep* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) (Plates 8, 9 and 16).

The Madonna, holding a very special and peculiar position in the hearts of the Italian people, was not dressed in a similarly archaic way. Although she almost invariably retained the blue mantle, red dress and white veil laid down by Byzantine tradition, all these articles of dress were very flexible in their character so that, instead of being removed into the past, she could exist in an affectionately intimate relationship with her worshippers. Only during two moments in the story of her life is she dressed at the height of fashion, and those are the moments when she is often shown without her traditional veil and mantle — at her Marriage (Plate 10) and at her Coronation in Heaven (Plate 11). As a Virgin Bride she cannot wear the Byzantine veil nor a mantle (a garment forbidden to unmarried women) and as the Queen of Heaven she is evidently thought of by some painters as having discarded them.

On the majority of occasions the Madonna is not depicted in the clothes of a young girl or of a princess, but the details of her dress, the neckline, the waistline, the sleeves, the trimmings still reflect contemporary taste. They are neither so new in style as to appear frivolously *chic* nor so far behind the fashion as to seem dowdy. They express the current fashion at its most acceptable stage — familiar enough to the eye as to seem beautiful, yet still new enough to be faintly stimulating. Extraordinary skill is shown in compelling the traditional features of her dress to



PLATE 10

GIOTTO. DETAIL FROM THE "MARRIAGE OF THE VIRGIN," SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA, 1305. IN SCENES OF HER MARRIAGE THE VIRGIN IS USUALLY PAINTED WEARING THE CLOTHES OF A YOUNG GIRL OF FASHION.



PLATE I I

FRANCESCO DI GIORGIO. DETAIL FROM THE "CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN," ACCADEMIA, SIENA, C 1475. IN SCENES OF HER CORONATION THE VIRGIN IS USUALLY PORTRAYED IN FASHIONABLE RATHER THAN IN TRADITIONAL DRESS.

reflect this transient moment of beauty. Lippo Lippi's *Virgin Annunciate* in the Frick Museum, New York, wears a veil which is not draped over her head but over a turban-like headdress which, though it does not show, completely alters the characteristics of the veil (Plate 12). Headdresses were then so familiar that a smoothly fitted head would have looked either depressing or comic, and there was no painter of the decade who did not devise some means of removing the veil of the Blessed Virgin from the threat of dowdiness (Plate 13). Fra Filippo also most skilfully contrived the drapery of her mantle with the result that it seems to contain a reference to the wing-like falling sleeves of the prevailing fashion — yet no sleeves are there at all. Throughout Renaissance painting the clothes of the Madonna were gently aligned with fashionable dress; to the contemporary eye they must have seemed gracious and without the least trace of eccentricity. This refusal to archaïse a beloved figure is of course invaluable to the student of costume.

The clothes of angels and saints including those who, like St. John the Baptist and St. Roch, wear their own recognisable costumes, were all brought into contact with current fashion — angels often by various ingenious devices such as the introduction of a long skirt beneath the fashionable short male tunic seen in Plates 14 and 15. In an age of rapidly changing ideas only the vestments of the clergy remain almost stationary, though even they, by the patterns of their brocades and damasks and the designs of their orphreys and amices, are made to move in a stately measure with the times.

To say, therefore, that no painter and no character in any painting is unaffected by current fashion is true. Naturally this does not mean that any conscientious student of Italian Renaissance dress can date every undated work of art at a glance from the evidence of the costume it contains. There are paintings in which the exact distance that the Madonna is kept behind the extravagances of the newest fashion is difficult to assess to within three or four years, and if such a Madonna is supported only by, say, two saints, one a bishop and one wearing the university gown of a doctor, the problem is not minimised. Such pictures are rare. Most paintings contain plenty of evidence, and the difficulty of dating them lies in the interpretation of the evidence they contain.

The ability to read costume as one reads handwriting is comparable to the art-historian's ability to read brush-strokes. It is a skill which can be acquired only by long experience, and then only by those who are sufficiently sensitive to clothes to understand their nature as clothes. Such



PLATE 12

LIPPI. THE "VIRGIN ANNUNCIATE," FRICK MUSEUM, NEW YORK. MIDDLE OF THE 15TH CENTURY. THE VIRGIN WEARS WHAT APPEAR TO BE THE GARMENTS TRADITIONAL TO HER, BUT, IN FACT, HER MANTLE IS DRAPED TO RESEMBLE THE HUGE HANGING SLEEVES OF THE CURRENT FASHION, AND THE SWELLING LINE OF HER VEIL REVEALS THE SILHOUETTE OF A FASHIONABLE TURBAN-HEADDRESS WORN BENEATH. HER HAIR IS SHAVED AWAY FROM THE FOREHEAD AS WAS THE CURRENT PRACTICE AT THIS DATE.



PLATE 13

GIOVANNI DI PAOLO. DETAIL FROM THE "PARADISE," METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK. MIDDLE OF THE 15TH CENTURY. THE DRESS OF THESE TWO FASHIONABLE WOMEN CAN BE COMPARED WITH THAT OF LIPPO LIPPI'S "VIRGIN ANNUNCIATE" WHEN IT WILL BE SEEN THAT THE VIRGIN WEARS THE SAME FASHION IN A SLIGHTLY MODIFIED FORM.



PLATE 14

SALIMBENI BROTHERS. DETAIL FROM "ST. JOHN BAPTISING THE MULTITUDE," S. GIOVANNI, URBINO, 1416. ST. JOHN IS PORTRAYED WEARING A TUNIC OF SKINS OF THE FASHIONABLE LENGTH (COMPARE WITH THE PAGE IN THE FOREGROUND), WITH THE FASHIONABLE V-CUT NECKLINE: THE MODISH SERRATED EDGE OF THE TUNIC IS REFLECTED IN THE HANGING POINTS OF FUR.



PLATE 15

CARLO CRIVELLI. DETAIL FROM THE "VIRGIN AND SAVIOUR CROWNED BY THE ALMIGHTY," BRERA, MILAN, 1493. ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST WEARS A TUNIC OF SKINS, LEATHER SIDE OUT, OF THE FASHIONABLE LENGTH. THE LENGTH OF HIS HAIR IS OF THE LATEST STYLE, AS IS THE FRINGE ON HIS FOREHEAD. HIS SANDALS ALSO ARE FASHIONABLE.



PLATE 16

TURINO VANNI DI RIGOLI. DETAILS FROM "MADONNA AND SAINTS,"
S. PAOLO IN RIPA D'ARNO, PISA, 1397. HEAD OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
COMPARED WITH THE HEAD OF THE OTHER SUPPORTING SAINT WHO
WEARS THE CURRENT FASHION. THE SILHOUETTE OF THE HAIRCUT IS
THE SAME, BUT ST. JOHN'S HAIR HAS AN ADDED LENGTH TO CONFORM
WITH TRADITION. ST. JOHN ALSO WEARS THE FASHIONABLE HIGH
NECKLINE.

people do not fall into the error of regarding clothes as painted shapes on canvas; to them clothes have weight and volume, and mechanisms which allow them to be put on and taken off. The characters of clothes, as they vary from period to period, are revealed in the postures and the gestures of the people who wear them. The student of costume, reading gesture as well as dress, imagines himself restricted by the tightness, weighed down by the heaviness, or released by the amplitude of the period he is studying, so that, in sympathy with the artist who was himself subject to the same conditions, he can see, objectively, beneath the artist's interpretation of the subject, the fashion of the day.