

1560s FLORENTINE VESTE

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INTRODUCTION

The *veste* (pl: *vesti*) is a style of gown worn over the square-necked *sottana* in the second half of the sixteenth century. From the 1540s through the 1560s, the Florentine *sottana*, or underdress, was frequently worn without an overdress or gown (Orsi Landini and Niccoli, *Moda a Firenze, 1540-1580: Lo stile di Eleonora di Toledo e la sua influenza* 77). However, towards the end of the 1550s, the fashion of wearing the *sottana* sans gown diminished with the increasing popularity of the “French-style” *veste*. Featuring a high-necked front-opening bodice with a split front skirt, the *veste* was initially popular with young noblewomen, but appears to have become universal by the 1570s (Orsi Landini and Niccoli, *Moda a Firenze, 1540-1580: Lo stile di Eleonora di Toledo e la sua influenza* 96).

The evolution of this new fashion can be traced through the inventories of Cosimo de’ Medici’s wives, as well as paintings of his family members. In 1555, a member of the Medici family, thought to be Isabella or Maria, was painted wearing the new style of gown (Figure 1), while the inventories of Eleonora di Toledo list a gown in the French-style as early as 1560 (Orsi Landini and Niccoli, *Moda a Firenze, 1540-1580: Lo stile di Eleonora di Toledo e la sua influenza* 95). Eleonora’s gowns, including the French-style *veste*, were primarily made of warmer fabrics for winter wear, but the 1574 inventory of Cosimo’s second wife, Cammilla Martelli, contained both summer and winter weight gowns, indicating that the wear of *vesti* had become more prevalent by this time. Indeed, *Moda a Firenze* indicates that the French-style *veste* seemed to be the gown of choice for portraits from the early 1560s (Orsi Landini and Niccoli 101). As with other noblewomen’s garments in 16th century Florence, *vesti* were made of fine materials and richly decorated to demonstrate status and wealth.

The intent of this project was to construct a *veste* in the style of 1560s Florence using available period-style needles. The *veste* was chosen for this project due to the logical progression of skill building from under-gown to over-gown. Prior to the start of this project, I had no experience with this style of gown, having focused primarily on perfecting the construction of the *sottana* in previous projects. Unfortunately, the period-style needles that I was able to locate were larger in diameter than a modern needle, which caused difficulty sewing through the tightly woven silk. The diameter of the needle left a large hole in the fabric with each stitch. In addition, the needles were not strong enough for the force required to stitch through such dense fabric and the needles bent so easily that it felt like I was sewing with wet spaghetti. About halfway through the construction of the bodice, I noticed pain in my hands, wrists, and arms from the effort of sewing with the soft period-style needles.

INSPIRATION

The design of this project was inspired by two paintings from 1565 (Figure 2, Figure 3). However, as individual paintings do not have enough detail to make a perfect reproduction, it was necessary to develop a period eye by considering and comparing similar elements in artwork from the same time and place.

Early depictions of the French-style veste, including the 1555 painting of a Medici (Figure 1), show a front-closing gown open at the neck and below the waist, with puffed or rolled baragoni at the shoulders. Through the 1560s, the center front opening stays relatively small, showing just a peek of the sottana bodice beneath. Alternately, when worn with a doublet beneath, the veste opening widens towards the mid-section, revealing more of the garment below (Figure 3). While the size of the baragoni remains relatively stable in the 1560s, the design of the rolls becomes more intricate over the decade, ranging from double rolls (Figure 1), to puffed rolls (Figure 4), to braided rolls in the early 1570s (Figure 5). The bodice trim on these vesti generally retains the V shape seen previously in sottane, with additional trim accenting the center front opening and continuing along the skirt opening, as seen in Figure 1, Figure 3, & Figure 4.

The primary inspiration used for this project was a 1565 painting by Santi di Tito of a young woman (Figure 2), which features a center front opening, closed to the top of the sottana neckline, and an unusual style of baragoni that greatly intrigued me. The secondary inspiration painting was another painting dated to 1565, by a follower of Francesco Salviati del Rossi (Figure 3). This painting shows a veste with an opening to nearly the waist, worn over a sleeved doublet. The veste skirt is turned back to reveal a contrasting lining along with the sottana skirt beneath.

Defining the elements of each painting informed the planning process greatly. First, I chose to emulate the trim layout and baragoni design from the primary inspiration painting. Next, I decided to use the larger center front opening seen in the secondary inspiration to increase the number of garments (sottane, doublets, jerkins) that the veste can be worn with in the future. Finally, I incorporated a contrasting lining based on the secondary inspiration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The *Moda a Firenze* series and the *Patterns of Fashion* series are commonly used sources for 16th century Italian fashion, but *The Modern Maker* (volumes 1 & 2) is an up-and-coming series based on 16th century Spanish tailors' manuals. Volume 1 focuses primarily on drafting and constructing men's

doublets, while Volume 2 focuses on the drafting and modification of drafts of various Spanish garments. While *The Modern Maker* is not a direct source for Italian garments, it is useful to study methods used elsewhere to inform the reader about common tailoring techniques of the 16th century. In addition, while garments were not the same from region to region, there is enough similarity in the basic design that many of the garments featured in *The Modern Maker* can be modified for other countries, while maintaining the basic tailoring concepts of drafting, cutting, and construction.

Additional sources for this project were retrieved from academic websites, such as JSTOR, Academia.org and theses databases to supplement the commonly cited sources mentioned above, including more obscure works by the authors of *Moda a Firenze*. In addition, some sources are partially or entirely in Italian, such as *L'abito della Granducessa nel Palazzo Reale di Pisa*, a small book about Eleonora di Toledo's fashion influence and the extant 16th century dresses at the Palazzo Reale, that I received when visiting the museum in Pisa, Italy. While the works cited are informative secondary sources, I recognize that they are not exhaustive. My Italian requires significant improvement to adequately read primary written sources regarding 16th century Florentine fashion, as such, no primary written sources are included in this documentation.

MATERIALS

HISTORIC MATERIALS

As there are no known extant veste in existence, it was necessary to rely on both depictions and written evidence to determine the appropriate materials for this project. In the second half of the 16th century, the preference for the rich, brocaded velvets seen in early paintings of Eleonora di Toledo waned. They were replaced with less expensive fabrics that could be replaced or repurposed to keep up with quickly changing fashions. Satin, taffeta, and sarcenet were now appropriate for all occasions (Currie 51). This is supported by the inventories of Eleonora di Toledo's wardrobe, which show an increasing prevalence of "plain" fabrics from 1550 through the end of her life in 1562 (Orsi Landini and Niccoli 217-35).

With knowledge of the common silk types in use during the 1560s, it was time to examine the inspiration paintings for additional evidence of the best material for this project. Firstly, both inspiration paintings appear to be white fabric. While it is difficult to make an educated guess regarding the type of fabric in the Santi di Tito painting (Figure 2), the second inspiration painting leads me to believe that the white fabric portrayed is taffeta. There appears to be a slight shine to the fabric depicted, but not so shiny as a satin weave would appear. In addition, the draping of the fabric in the painting lends itself

well to the hand of a medium weight taffeta, with sometimes flowing curves and sometimes sharper points. A heavier-weight satin would make smoother, more flowing corners, not the sharp edges depicted in the lifelike painting. Based on this educated supposition and the previous research, silk taffeta was chosen as the most appropriate fabric.

The veste in both inspiration paintings appear to be white, a color which was among the most common colors in Eleonora di Toledo's wardrobe (Orsi Landini and Niccoli, *Images of a New Power: Fashion at the Florentine Court in the Mid Sixteenth Century* 8). Her successor, Camilla, had more white gowns (12) than any other color (Orsi Landini and Niccoli 100). White was especially associated with "joyful celebrations" in 16th century Florence (Orsi Landini and Niccoli 21), such as the baptism of Don Garzia de' Medici, when his mother, Eleonora, dressed in a sottana of white velvet and her attendant ladies were garbed in white satin (Orsi Landini and Niccoli 13). Therefore, white was an appropriate choice for an elevation in the SCA, though that was only a peripheral idea for the eventual wear when the project began.

In her later years, Eleonora's wardrobe consisted of plain fabrics, richly ornamented with "applied decorations" (Orsi Landini and Niccoli 38). The decorations in Eleonora's wardrobe generally matched the garment, accented by variations in texture (Orsi Landini and Niccoli 12). Decorations were applied in bands to garments to enable the removal and reuse, particularly of delicate embroidery and gold or silver accents (Orsi Landini and Niccoli 27).

PROJECT MATERIALS

To construct the bodice of the veste, I used silk taffeta for the exterior, linen buckram and cashmere wool for the interlining support, and silk dupioni for the lining. The garment was constructed with silk thread and decorated with trim made from polyester velvet ribbon, golden cording, and wool roving. While polyester velvet ribbon is not a period accurate material, it was chosen for the stability of its backing, which is closer to 16th century silk velvet than the soft, flimsy backing of today's velvet. Prior to the start of this project, I attempted to fuse modern silk velvet to silk taffeta to create a version of silk velvet that could be cut and handled without disintegrating. Unfortunately, I was unable to hide glue the fabrics together without damaging the face of the velvet. It may be possible to accomplish this endeavor using modern materials, however, the short ply and dense backing of the velvet ribbon was still a closer analog to period velvet. The other substitution is the cording, which is not real gold due to the cost associated with nearly 60 yards of cording.

TOOLS

Every attempt was made to use tools that functioned the same way as period tools. For example, the function of scissors is essentially the same from the 16th century to the 21st century: the handles are used to open and close the blades, thereby cutting the material (Figure 6). Due to the restrictive cost of commissioning period scissors, as well as the failure to locate a smith able to forge period-style scissors capable of cutting silk taffeta cleanly, modern scissors were used with the same essential functionality as period scissors. Other modern, but comparable tools used include a plastic ruler, tailor's chalk, fine silk pins, and a modern iron.

In the late 16th century, the wooden ruler as we know it was invented by a priest named William Bedwell (Wikipedia) for use in the field of geometry. Prior to this, tailors are believed to have used a set of homemade tapes for each client, consisting of custom measurements, such as the client's height, chest, waist, and hip. This is evidenced by the work of Juan de Alcega, a 16th century Spanish tailor whose book *Libro de Geometria, Práctica y Traça* includes garment patterns using custom client tapes as described above. While this work features Spanish garments, a similar manual by Italian tailors, *Il Libro del Sarto*, includes patterns that would presumably be used in a manner similar to the Spanish method. In present day, the "bara tape" method has been popularized by *The Modern Maker* books, the result of study and testing of patterns from period Spanish tailor's books. For this project, a clear plastic ruler was used to ensure accurate lines, while a period 16th century "ruler" or straight edge would have been wooden, or even ivory (Figure 7).

The last, but most important, tool used is the needle. For this project, I sourced "period" needles from Crossman Crafts in England (www.crossmancrafts.co.uk) in various thicknesses of bronze and steel (Figure 8). As mentioned previously, I had plans to sew the entire project using period-style needles, but quickly found that the needles were too malleable and too thick for the fine silk taffeta. I tested another medieval-style needle (Figure 9) that I had on hand that was even thicker than the Crossman needles, but, though this needle was less flexible, it also left behind large holes from the needle's passing. After completing most of the bodice, I noticed pain in my hands, wrists, and forearms from the force needed to push the thick needle through the tightly woven fabric. I decided to use a modern embroidery (sharp) needle for the remainder of the project (Figure 10). I also tested Japanese embroidery needles from the Japanese Embroidery Center (www.japaneseembroidery.com), which are commonly recommended as the closest to renaissance needles. However, without extant examples of fine needles to compare to, it's hard to say definitively what size a fine 16th century needle would have been. Most extant needles are

thicker than modern sewing needles which may indicate that finer sewing needles deteriorated in conditions where extant needles have been found, such as the Mary Rose shipwreck.

METHODS

STITCHES

The garment was primarily constructed using backstitch, running stitch, and whipstitch. These stitches were chosen based on the stitches found on the burial clothing of Cosimo and Don Garzia de' Medici and Eleonora di Toledo. "Sewing Stitches Used in Medieval Clothing" catalogs the stitches used on these garments and others analyzed in *Patterns of Fashion* and other sources (see Appendix C). Running and whip stitch were used in the burial suit of Don Garzia in 1562 (Arnold 53-54), while whipstitch or overcast stitch is also in evidence on the velvet bodies Eleonora was buried in, also in 1562 (Arnold 102). Back stitch was used in a variety of places and times in the 16th century, but is also in use on Cosimo's burial suit in 1574 (Arnold 55-56). Other stitches used included buttonhole stitch, gathering stitch, pad stitch, and tacking stitches, all seen in enough various garments to conclude that these stitches were fairly universally in use across Europe in the 16th century (Carlson). In addition, these stitches are evidenced in garments of Italian origin in the later 16th century and early 17th century, an example of which is the pad stitching of an Italian doublet post-1600 (Arnold 90).

PATTERNING

The bodice was drafted using a doublet pattern from *The Modern Maker Vol. 2* using my custom bara tapes, which I then modified to create the half-open bodice shape. The skirt was based on a conglomeration of *The Modern Maker's* half-fitted gown pattern (Gnagy 207) and Eleonora di Toledo's burial gown skirt pattern from *Patterns of Fashion* (Arnold 104). The fabric of Eleonora's burial gown skirt was approximately 22 inches wide, so I patterned the skirt pieces based on this fabric width. I used the bara method to pattern skirts similar in shape to the half-fitted gown, then cut the pattern into period-width pieces based on Eleonora's skirt design.

FABRIC SEALING

Due to the narrow width of the period fabric, I chose to cut my 60-inch fabric down to 22-inch widths to better mimic the construction of Eleonora's skirts. In doing so, I created a raw edge in places that were selvedge in Eleonora's burial gown. With the incorporation of the selvedge edges in the construction methods of Eleonora's gown, it was not necessary for the 16th century tailors to finish the vertically cut edges of the fabric, however, I had concerns about the durability of my vertically cut edges. After finding a reference in *Patterns of Fashion* to fabric edges sealed with wax to prevent fraying

(Arnold 66), I decided to test various methods of sealing a raw edge to emulate the selvedge construction of the burial gown. I cut strips of silk taffeta and compared sealing the edges with gum Arabic versus modern Fray Block and clear nail polish. Figure 11 shows the results of the test after over a year of handling and storage. The gum Arabic did not hold up as well as the modern methods, but it frayed less than the raw sample, did not affect the color of the fabric, and was not as runny the Fray Block. Upon completion of the initial tests, I applied the gum Arabic to the raw edges of the cut skirt panels using a paint brush.

TRIM CONSTRUCTION

While it was not possible to make a perfect reproduction of the trim due to lack of detail, I created a method of trim construction that was plausible for 16th century Florence. After testing multiple designs, I decided on strips of silk, layered with white velvet ribbon, and edged with golden cord (Figure 12). To construct the trim, I cut bias strips of silk taffeta, turned the edges under and backstitched the velvet ribbon to the center of the trim with a row of stitching on either edge of the ribbon. This allowed me to use wool roving and a large eyed needle and thread the roving through the channels to create a piping effect. I whip stitched two rows of cord on either seam line, hiding the edge of the ribbon and smoothing the transition from velvet ribbon to silk piping. The trim was then backstitched to the garment in the channel beside each row of gold cord.

CONSTRUCTION

For this project, I first padstitched the layers of wool and linen buckram together to create the bodice interlining support, including the shoulders, collar, and center front reinforcement. Then, I basted the interlinings to the exterior silk and turned the center front openings to the inside and basted them in place. I used a heavy silk thread to backstitch the major seams, including the side back and center back seams.

After pressing everything smooth, I used white tailor's chalk to mark the trim location on the outside of the bodice. I used very fine silk pins to attach the trim to the bodice before stitching the trim down. Taking a break from the painstaking (and painful) work of stitching the trim onto the bodice, I stitched hooks and eyes to the inside of the center front opening using a buttonhole stitch.

After the trim was applied to the bodice, I began cutting and constructing the gown skirt. The skirt was made from 8 pieces, sewn together with a backstitch and silk thread. The front section of the skirt was shaped by laying the bodice front onto a piece of paper and tracing the lower edge. I added seam allowance to the edge and cut the paper to form a template for the cutting the skirt waist seam. The

back of the skirt was gathered and center front trim applied before backstitching the skirt to the bodice. Next, the skirt lining was attached the same way, sandwiching the bodice edge. The seam allowances were pressed down into the skirt interior when turned right side out, aiding the puff of the skirt away from the bodice. The center front of the skirt lining was pressed and whip stitched in place and then the skirt was hemmed short enough to reveal the sottana beneath, with the train sweeping out behind.

The baragoni went through several evolutions, including the “final” version which was ultimately removed and reconstructed prior to completion of this project. The final baragoni consisted of strips of trim sewn to the silk taffeta. The piping strip was stitched to the linen buckram lining, then the exterior and lining were stitched right sides together at the bottom edge. The baragoni were then flipped right sides out and the top edge basted together. The trim was then tacked in place through all layers at about a half inch from the upper and lower edges to create the puffed appearance. Lastly, the baragoni were sewn to the bodice armscye using a backstitch, and seam allowances were whip stitched to the interior bodice.

Next, the back lining was sewn together and basted into place, with the waist edge and armscyces turned under and whipstitched into place. The front lining was assembled next, with the side-back, waist, and armscye turned under and stitched. The front edge was positioned over the hooks and eyes and also whipstitched into place. Lastly, the collar seam allowances were turned under and sewn down, completing the lining of the garment.

CONCLUSIONS

After the trouble and pain of using the period-style needles, I’m forced to conclude that 16th century needles would necessarily be finer than the reproductions available today, closer to a modern sewing needle. The period-style needles were not appropriate to the task of sewing fine silk and I learned an important lesson that if one is struggling with their tools, one must reevaluate to determine if it is the appropriate tool for the job.

Ultimately, the project was only partially successful, as the period-style needles were so poorly suited to the needs of the project that they had to be replaced with modern needles in order to complete the gown. However, the resulting garment is one that I am very satisfied with and the overall success of the veste encourages me to explore the style further in the future.