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JANE BRIDGEMAN

**Nobelmente adornati: textiles, identity and status in quattrocento Italy**

One of the easiest, and fastest, way of signalling status apart from owning a very expensive car, luxury yacht, or private plane, is a display of bespoke couture fashion and lavish textile furnishings. Around five hundred years ago in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, expensive textiles were also a clear signifier of status for a small ruling elite. For special occasions woven silks such as velvets and damasks brocaded in gold and silver; imported tapestries and rugs emphasized the formality of ceremonial as well as inducing admiration, awe and a collective sense of celebration. Textiles were used as interior and exterior hangings, for street decorations, carpeting and canopies. Such secular usage had been established since at least late Antiquity, and even by mid-ninth century a plentiful supply of (imported) silks could be used to decorate the streets of Amalfi to celebrate the return of the relics of Santa Trofimena, a local saint, and similar uses were not unusual elsewhere (Treppo e Leone 1977: 146-7).

By the fifteenth century the Italian states produced their own costly silk weaves, many of which were used for ceremonial purposes. The Church was one of the greatest patrons of textile production, whether woven or embroidered, but secular rulers and wealthy aristocrats alike favoured the use of textiles for a variety of purposes both personal and public. By the fifteenth century the larger Italian cities had typical populations of around forty thou-



Fig. 1

A portable baldachin ornamented with armorials held above a sacred reliquary. Gentile Bellini (c. 1429-1507), *Procession in Piazza San Marco Venice* (detail), 1496, Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice.

sand, with a high frequency of close-knit extended family clans amongst the ruling elite. Personal anonymity of the sort usual today in most large cities was almost unknown in these communities, especially when office holders fulfilled varied, multiple, but interdependent roles in the same environment.<sup>1</sup> As a result, rather than individuality it was essential to identify status through distinctive clothing, special insignia, armorials, and in formal situations in a recognizable context, appropriate ambient furnishings coupled with a specific protocol. Thus the attire of a duke, a doge of Venice, a knight or a university professor provided immediate visual identification of an individual's social role. This was particularly necessary in diplomatic circumstances when the features of rulers

<sup>1</sup> Venice with an unusually large population of over 100,000 was an exception, and the most populous city in Europe (Chambers – Pullan – Fletcher; 1992: 6, nt. 4).



Fig. 2

The Bishop of Brindisi holding the monstrance rides a white horse under a portable baldachin. Procession of the cavallo parato (vested horse) on Corpus Domini, Brindisi 2016.

were not necessarily familiar to those outside their small social circle. Visiting foreign dignitaries and visitors would not have been able to recognize a ruler unless they had met them previously or just possibly, seen a portrait.

Encounters without any customary and reliable visual guides such as those provided by appropriate dress and textiles clearly caused miss-understandings and embarrassment. In December 1461 the members of a Florentine embassy on its way to Tours unexpectedly came across a group of about thirty horsemen a few miles outside the city. None of the three ambassadors recognized the French king Louis XI (to whom their embassy had been sent in order to congratulate him on his accession) because the king was apparently not in any way distinguishable from his companions. Fortunately for the ambassadors one of their entourage was able to identify him. Louis was clearly much less concerned with protocol than were the ambassadors – their secretary described them,



Fig. 3

A celebratory baldachin for the Holy Roman Emperor, the king of France and Alessandro Farnese Cardinal a Latere, with the armorials of the Emperor, French King and the Farnese. Taddeo Zuccari (1529-66), *The Emperor Charles V, Francis I of France and Cardinal Alessandro Farnese entering Paris in 1540*, c. 1559-1566, Villa Farnese, Sala dei Fasti Farnese, Caprarola.

after a brief and unexpected conversation with him, as: "mezi stupefatti, et maxime perchè non pareva molto a ordine, chè ancora non s'era assettato la brigata all'entrare, intendendo 2 miglia più là rivestirsi meglio". The ambassadors had been taken by surprise: they found themselves in an unexpectedly informal situation with the French king and were dressed in inappropriate travelling clothes. Both were considered a breach of normal diplomatic protocol (Cecchi 1865: 24).

Contemporary Italian eye-witness accounts of public ceremonies contained in ambassadorial dispatches and private correspondence frequently contain a wealth of minute detail relating to dress and textiles that, at the time, was considered noteworthy. Lavish public attire and decorative textiles were always understood to have their particular visual vocabulary and the environment of display was always intended to be, and was understood as, allusive. To dress splendidly and appropriately according to status was, of course, both an obligation and a privilege of high rank. In addition fine garments and appropriately festive textiles honoured an occasion, indicating both courteous deference and appropriate celebration. When, for example, Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, made his formal entry into Mantua for the Congress convened by Pope Pius II in February 1459, the splendour of his attire and of that of his retinue was interpreted both as an indication of the wealth and power of the Milanese state, and as a visual homage paid by the Duchy to the Papacy. Hence the unusually fulsome praise for the Milanese ruler which Pius II recorded in his memoirs:

Era accompagnato da un numeroso e nobile seguito di dignitari fra i quali non si vide nessuno le cui vesti non luccicassero d'oro e non splendessero d'argento. Durante il suo ingresso si sentiva un gran parlare della dignità e della gloria della Santa Sede. La gente diceva: quanto è sublime ed elevata l'autorità e la maestà del Presule Romano! Ecco, un principe tanto potente è venuto a baciargli il piede! (Piccolomini 1972-6: Vol. II, Lib. III, 257)

Contemporary texts rarely reveal any criticism of the use of very costly textiles. As one writer noted:

Li instrumenti circa la persona del Signore in publico et in privato vogliono sopra tucta essere magnifici, politi et splendidi, quale representino una certa auctorità et reverentia, perciò la dignita deli signori se manifesta per quelli a chi li vede [...] (Anonymous 1932: xv, 24).

Very occasionally, and in a specific context, overly splendid clothing might be perceived as inappropriate to the occasion. When a Florentine embassy was sent in November 1492 to congratulate Pope Alexander VI on his accession, there was considerable criticism of its rather too lavish appearance. The embassy was led by Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici wearing a necklace worth 200,000 florins. He, his five colleagues including the Bishop of Arezzo, and their entourage were described as dressed with "apparato molto superbo e quasi regio". In the Florentine Republic citizens wearing in public what was considered princely attire were regarded with suspicion and as ideologically suspect, although, in this case, in Rome the appearance of the Florentines was much admired.<sup>2</sup>

A state visit to any city from a Pope, an Emperor and other rulers followed a well-established protocol, and required the decoration of streets along a processional route, as well as of public buildings and churches. Textiles were also used to enhance formal ceremonies such as the induction of office-holders, the visits of embassies or of political and military allies. After a customary formal welcome was completed at a city gate, it was usual for guests of princely rank to ride under a canopy in an entry procession to the most important church and to their lodging. The canopy was usually of velvet or cloth of gold, lined with silk or costly fur, and adorned by the rider's armorials. It could be held over the guest by knights, eminent citizens, government officials, or university pro-

<sup>2</sup> (Rossi 1786: 280); (Guicciardini 1967: I, 67). Two years later Piero was forced to leave Florence remaining in exile until his death in 1503.



Fig. 4

A rostrum decorated with woven textiles in celebration of the announcement of special indulgence for all pilgrims visiting the chapel of Porziuncola. Frate Ilario di Viterbo (c 1375-1393), Altarpiece Santa Maria degli Angeli in Porziuncola (detail), 1393, Assisi.

fessors.

In February 1419 when Pope Martin V (Oddone Colonna) came to Florence to consecrate the new cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore he was met, as was customary for a Papal visit, a few miles outside the city walls by knights carrying a canopy or *baldaquin* of figured silk lined with vair under which he rode towards the city gates accompanied by the knights and followed by his entourage.<sup>3</sup> There, after an official welcome from various dignitaries including the clergy carrying precious relics, he was positioned for the formal entry procession under a second *baldaquin*. This was more lavish than the first being cloth of gold lined with white vair and embellished with streamers bearing both the armorials of the

<sup>3</sup> Vair or *vaiò*, the white stomach fur of red squirrels. "Dressed squirrel skins and furs" (Veale 2003: 228).



Fig. 5  
Spectators viewing a tournament from windows decorated with small carpets. Anonymous artist, cassone (Florence), c.1450, National Gallery, London (4906).

Church and his own:

[...] uno standardo di drappo afigurato, foderato di pancie di vaio...e alla porta i Signori missono il S. Padre sotto loro standardo, il quale era di drappo d'oro, foderato di pancie di vari, con drapelloni dell'arme della Chiesa e del Papa, cioè l'arme de' Colonnese. Andarogli incontro tutte le regole di frati con loro reliquie e parati (Corazza 1894: 256-7).

Not only were the streets decorated with textiles, but for his visit to the cathedral a platform had been constructed at the foot of the steps land as Pagholo Petribuoni reported, the Pope: "[...] cavhalcho insino palchetto fatto appie delle schale et della detta chiesa coperto tutto di tappeti e smontato andò all'altare maggiore et per terra coverando era tutta coperto di panni lani bianchi sicchè



Fig. 6  
A room decorated with silk hangings and with rugs for a formal presentation. Girolamo Mangiaria presents his book to Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan. Gerolamo Mangiaria, *De impedimentis matrimonii*, Paris Bibliothèque Nationale MS. Lat. 4586, f. 1r; c. 1475. Anonymous artist.

con piè non poteva toccare la terra", (Cronica di Pagholo di Matteo Petribuoni, 1293-1495). On other occasions the fabrics used for public decoration might fulfil a dual role: they could subsequently be used for clothing. When Pope Pius II came to Viterbo in September 1462 for the feast of Corpus Christi the streets of this small city were decorated at the expense of the Cardinals in the Papal retinue:

Quindi il cardinal di Arras coprì la strada, che va dal ponte di pietra (che congiunge le due parti della città) fino alla piazza della cattedrale, con quella stoffa che aveva fatto venire da poco da Firenze per rinnovare il guardaroba dei suoi famigli, di lana inglese, e di colore fra il rosso e il bruno [...]. Nella notte che precedette la festa, alzatosi un gran turbine di vento, sbattendo e tirando qua e là le funi, lacerò in più punti la stoffa e ridusse, non senza danno dei servitori, il numero



Fig. 7

The ducal family and courtiers in an environment festively hung with costly gold-brocaded dark blue and crimson silk velvets. Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), *The Gonzaga Court*, 1471-4, north wall Camera degli Sposi Palazzo Ducale, Mantua.

delle vesti per cui era destinata (Piccolomini 1972-6: Lib. III, 140).

In contrast, and not unusually, the Priors (elected governors of the city) had been provided (at public expense) with new garments for this event:

Martedì a dì 30 di detto mese, a ore venti papa Pio sopraddetto venne a Viterbo partendosi da Montefiascone, e li signori priori della città tutti vestiti a mantelli di paonazzo di grano fatti novo per la detta venuta a spese del comune e del Papa. Costò ducati dieci d'oro per l'uno [...] (Tuccia 1852: 81).

Ten ducats was a considerable amount of money, approximately a year's salary for a domestic servant.

The extensive use of costly textiles for ceremonial purposes is very evident from descriptions of the welcome given in Florence to the Emperor Frederick III in January 1451. The Emperor, accompanied by an enormous entourage of three thousand people, was on his way to Rome where he was to be married to Eleonora of Portugal and crowned by Pope Nicholas V. Eight miles from Florence he was met by twenty citizens with an escort of more than three hundred, richly dressed, young men and their attendants in livery, riding beautifully caparisoned horses:

Mandoglisi incontra venti eletti cittadini con ogni genere d'ornamenti, e con numero assai di giovani riccamente vestiti con cavagli nobelmente adornati, e famigli assai con belle divise, in numero più che 300 [...]. Dove palesarono alla imperial maestà con quanto amore e benignità e giocondità d'animo fusse el suo avvenimento alla nostra città ricevuto (Filarete - Manfidi 1978: 71).

At the San Gallo gate the Emperor was formally welcomed by members of the Florentine government, and by the Archbishop and clergy accompanied by sacred relics. The gate itself was decorated with tapestries and other furnishings including carpets, and the seating provided was covered with fabrics. According to Filippo Rinuccini, this visit from 30th January until 6th February cost the Republic of Florence around 20,000 florins (Rinuccini 1840: lxxv).

It was usual to suspend sumptuary laws during a state visit, since the welcoming crowds were expected to wear their finest clothes and jewellery. For this kind of occasion dressing as well as possible was perceived as a necessary and obligatory response to the honour of hosting such a visit. It was also calculated to impress visitors with the wealth and splendour of the host city. The success of this type of strategy is evident from a letter the fifteen year old Galeazzo Maria Sforza, count of Pavia, wrote to his mother the duchess of Milan enthusiastically describing his reception in Florence on 17th April 1459:

[...] ultra la infinita multitudine che con mi era, trovay tanta frequentia de cittadini, et in onorevole et digno apparato de donne e vecchie et giovane bellissime, con onoratissimi vestiti, fogie di testa et di capelli, quale ornate di perle et quale d'oro et de altre legiadre [...]. Tuti li luochi per i quali io passavo erano si ripieni, no dico de vile greze persone, ma de cittadini, done e fanciule de dignissimo aspecto et vestiti di grande valore, che uno grano di miglio non si seria potuto spandere. Et fenestre de pallazzi et case con li loro tecti, di li quali

et de incredibili alteza et beleza ne ho visto mirabile numero che con ornamenti di tapezaria che era da ogni canto (Magnani 1910: xii-xiii).

For such visits even horses and baggage mules were covered in costly materials. When Costanzo Sforza, lord of Pesaro arrived in Florence at the beginning of October 1481 to be inaugurated as the general in command of Florentine forces he was preceded by sixteen baggage mules covered with horsecloths embroidered with his armorials. His formal entry procession into the city with his soldiers included twenty to thirty armoured officers, and between twelve to fourteen squires wearing tabards of silk or cloth in his livery colours. The Ferrarese ambassador, Antonio da Montecatini, reported that Costanzo was dressed in a crimson cloth-of-gold tabard and rode a horse with "German style" furnishings of crimson velvet ornamented with gilded discs. At the inauguration ceremony a few days later he was presented with the Florentine standard of white silk emblazoned with the red Florentine lily, and a helmet covered with crimson velvet brocaded in silver, ornamented with a crest of a lily and a gilded silver garland of lion's heads.<sup>4</sup>

Ambassadors always wore travelling clothes for their journey which might mean riding in good or bad weather for several hours a day. Nearing their destination they were provided with lodgings in a monastery or castle a few miles distant, where they would spend the night. The following morning they dressed in appropriate garments for a formal reception and procession. Emisaries leaving on an important mission occasionally might be provided with more expensive clothing than usual, in which case they would parade through the streets to display their finery before departing. The sixty-two members of a (large) Florentine embassy

<sup>4</sup> The lions' heads were those of the *marzocco* or heraldic lion of Florence. "Notizie tratte dai carteggi diplomatici degli oratori estensi a Firenze" (Cappelli 1863: 255-258).



lavishly attired at public expense, paraded through the streets before their departure to Lombardy to see Pope Martin V in the autumn of 1418:

Il comune di Firenze vestì tutti gl'imbasciatori e giovani e famigli alla spese del comune, gl'imbasciatori di velluto cremisi, i giovani di rosato, i famigli di scarlattino, e tutti benissimo a cavallo fummo 62 cavalli e 12 muli colla soma, che mai si vide simile inbasciata, tanti vestimenti di seta e tante perle quanto noi giovani avamo indosso (Rinuccini 1840: iv).

All were dressed in red, but the eye-witness description notes very different qualities of fabric and dyestuffs. The ambassadors were dressed in crimson silk velvet, their pages in scarlet cloth, and the servants wore a cheaper red-dyed wool (*scarlattino*). This was quite appropriate and similar differences were expressed in the quality of any gifts an ambassador might receive during an embassy. At the wedding of Paolo Guinigi the ruler of Lucca in April 1404 Jacopo Salviati a knight and the senior Florentine ambassador, received the gift of a crimson figured velvet gown: “velluto figurato tinto in cremisi, e chiamasi zetani velutato”: his fellow ambassador Jacopo Gianfigliazzo was given a gown of plain mulberry coloured velvet, “[...] velluto piano, tinto in grana di colore quasi fra paonazzo e tanè [...]”. Both gowns contained thirty-two braccia of fabric or 18.5 metres, which would have been approximately 58 cm wide (Salviati 1784: 264). The value of such a gift also depended on the occasion and the political importance of the state represented. An imperial ambassador would receive a more lavish present than his counterpart from England or France, while a French ambassador would rank higher than an English one.

Gifts of textiles were often sent with ambassadors or special couriers from one ruler to another: they could be as modest or lavish as the occasion demanded. In June 1466 three months after becoming duke of Milan, Galeazzo Maria, then age 22, sent a



Fig. 8  
Gold brocaded silk velvet with asymmetrical motif of branches ('a griccia').  
Last quarter of 15th century Museo del tessuto, Prato.



Fig. 9

Depiction of a banquet with damask (silk) wall hangings, a table carpet covered with a linen tablecloth, and portable chairs. *Bartolomeo Colleoni's banquet for King Christian of Denmark in 1474*, attributed to Girolamo Romanino (c.1484-1559) or to Marcello Fogolino (1510-48), Malpaga Castle, Cavernago, Bergamo.

tabard by special courier from Milan to the seventeen year old Lorenzo de' Medici. It was to arrive in time to be worn at the wedding of Lorenzo's elder sister Nanina to Bernardo Rucellai. It was evidently emblazoned with the Sforza armorials and devices since in his letter of thanks Lorenzo promised Galeazzo that he would wear Galeazzo's devices not merely on his shoulders, but in his heart (Medici 1977: 21). Several years later, in celebration of the marriage of his infant daughter Bianca Sforza to duke Philibert I of Savoy, Galeazzo Maria sent the latter in January 1474, "[...]

xxxv brazze de brochato d'oro cremosino [...]". Thirty-five braccia is about twenty metres. It would have been about 60 cm wide (Simonetta 1951-2: 165). This might well have cost around thirteen to fifteen ducats a *braccio* and was probably sufficient to make a long gown, although gold brocaded crimson was a rather modest gift as far as Galeazzo Maria was concerned.<sup>5</sup> Four months previ-

<sup>5</sup> A *braccio* varied according to location of manufacture from 58 cm in Florence to 63 cm in Venice. In March 1474 cloth-of-gold cost eighteen and a half ducats a *braccio* (Monnas 1983: 106).

ously he had presented Pope Sixtus IV's nephew, Cardinal Pietro Riario, with bed furnishings of white cloth-of-gold costing four thousand ducats, and members of Riario's household with silks worth two thousand ducats.<sup>6</sup> The value of this gift of fabrics worth six thousand ducats was extraordinary even by contemporary standards. In comparison, two years earlier in June 1472, Sixtus IV had paid two thousand and seventy-two ducats for 112 braccia (approx. 64 metres) of cloth of gold to be made into vestments for the Basilica of St Anthony at Padua (Monnas 1983: 106).

The cost of furnishings for princely apartments could be remarkable. In 1463 Borso d'Este marquis of Ferrara, purchased, "[...] Cinque cortine de veluto alexandrino recamate tute a oro e arzento filato e seda, cum una istoria nominata la Istoria de Romanzo della Ruosa". Made in Bruges, they had been purchased in Venice and came complete with special leather carrying cases. They cost a total of 9.000 ducats:

Each one would have cost twice as much as the cost of decorating the Sala dei Mesi in the Palazzo Schifanoia. These were almost certainly the hangings described as occupying almost the entire wall of the Sala Grande at a ball in 1481, and as the wall was 125 feet long (38.1 metres), each cortina would have measured 25 feet (10 metres). (Tuohy 1996: 225)

To put this in context, Francesco Sassetti (1421-90) when general manager of the Medici Bank spent 12,000 florins or more on building, in about 1468, a villa at Montughi outside Florence on the via Bolognese (Roover 1966: 362; Wackernagel 1981: 265-6). This was about the annual average salary of a mid-ranking condottiere such as Costanzo Sforza, who when employed by the Pa-

<sup>6</sup> "[...] il prefato illustrissimo signore ha donato al dicto Cardinale uno paramento da lecto col capocello de drapo d'oro, rizo, biancho de valuta de ducati IIII mila et tanti altri drapi de seda alla famiglia sua che montano ducati II mila" (Simonetta 1950: 167).

pace in May 1470, was paid about 10,000 ducats – in eight instalments (Canestrini 1851: 190).

A description of an apartment assigned to Eleonora d'Aragona, duchess of Ferrara and her ladies in June 1473 at Palazzo Colonna in Rome, confirms the extraordinary level of furnishing display sometimes provided for guests of state. Eleonora, the eldest daughter of Ferdinand I, King of Naples, on her way to Ferrara with a large entourage was hosted in Rome by Pietro Riario, Cardinal San Sisto, who, only a few months later when visiting Milan, was to receive a gift of sumptuous bed furnishings from the duke (Simonetta 1950: 167). In a letter to Naples Eleonora described the furnishings of the various rooms in the apartment in some detail, noting that all were hung with tapestries and every floor was covered in rugs. Her own room was clearly the most lavish:

Dallà sì intrammo ad mano destra in un altra camera la quale era l'ultima deputata per nuy, dove erano duy lecti, uno delli quali ha duy mataraczi de damaschino byanco, con capitali et coltra de taffetà byancha, coltra de inbroccato d'oro cremosino, spreveri de damaschino byancho con lu cappello sopra, duy cossini inbroccati d'oro cremosino, la porta dello spreveri et un altra lixta in mezo ad torno de broccato byanco ben riccho et largo uno palmo et mezo, et le arme dello dicto cardinale sopra la porta. Ne l'altro lecto grande puro mataraczi et capitali de seti cremosino, coltra de taffatà byancho et socto quisto lecto è una carriola con mataraczo de seti verde, duy coltre de taffatà cremosino, et coperta de inbroccato d'oro violato, duy sedie de inbroccato d'oro cremosino con duy predole de belluto cremosino, quactro altri cossini de imbroccato d'oro, celo et capolecto de taffatà byanco foderato de boccassino con una frangia doro, cossini de damaschino byanco et altre sedie de diversi colori in quantitate. Era in questa camera una tabulecta de noce coperta de belluto cremosino con frange d'oro et seta in torno et sopra ipsa uno scheccho chyuso ad modo de conecta (uno specchio chiuso ad modo d'icona). Tucta la camera era torneyata de damaschino byancho broccato. Era ancora in quista camera uno retrecto ad modum

de tribuna de altare dov'erano parecchi schecchy de odori de avolio et uno scheccho de aczaro grande quanto uno bacile de valvero, et una cassa con orinale et cantarello de argento (Corvisieri 1887: 646-7; Bridgeman 2017).

The luxury appropriate to a princess was clearly in Matteo Bandello's mind when he included a description of a room in his third *Novella*, written in Milan (c. 1506-25). This fictional bedroom, which recalls that of Eleonora d'Aragona in Palazzo Colonna a couple of decades earlier, very clearly reflects the contemporary use of costly silks, embroideries and other high quality furnishing fabrics in aristocratic and courtly circles, as well as Bandello's very personal appreciation of paintings by Leonardo da Vinci:

[...] un'altra camera ricchissamente apparta dentro a cui era un letto che sarabbe stato onorevole per ogni gran signore. V'erano quattro materazzi di bambagio, con le lenzuola sottilissime tutte trapunte di seta e d'oro. La coperta era di raso carmesino tutta ricamata di fili d'oro, con le frange d'ognintorno di seta carmesina, meschiata riccamente con fila d'oro. V'erano quattro origlieri lavorati meravigliosamente. Le cortine di tocca d'oro carmesine, (drappo di seta e d'oro), di preziose liste vergate, circondavano il ricco letto. La camera, in luogo di razzi, era di velluto carmesino maestrevolmente ricamata tutta vestita, nel mezzo de la quale v'era una condecante tavola coperta d'un tapeto di seta, ed era alessandrino (blu scuro). Vi si vedevano poi otto forsieri fatti d'intaglio molto belli, posto intorno a la camera. V'erano anco quattro catedre di velluto carmesino, e alcuni quadri di man di mastro Lionardo Vinci il luogo mirabilmente adornavano [...].<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> (Bandello 1990: 106-107). As he writes in his introduction to *Novella LVIII*, as a boy Bandello had watched the artist painting the *Last Supper* (1495-7) in the refectory of the Dominican Priory of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan where his uncle Vincenzo was the prior.

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