

1580's Venetian Ensemble

First worn & displayed at 2018's Atlantian Twelfth Night



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This Project is...



A women's ensemble as might be worn in 1580's Venice, inspired by portraiture and paintings of the era.

The ensemble consists of a camica, a sottana, a partlet, a stomacher, and a gown with matching sleeves.

It is one of my earliest attempts at a full, historical ensemble and was first worn & displayed at Atlantian Twelfth Night, 2018. It has some elements I am incredibly proud of, even today - and others I would go back in time and revise if I had the option to do so.

Many of the items are hand-sewn or hand finished. Specifically, the sotanna and gown were mainly hand-sewn with machine used for long seams in the skirt. The

smock mentioned in the documentation is not the one on display, however the display smock is hand-finished and is a basic renaissance non-gathered smock.

A note about this documentation

The first few pages of this documentation - the basic description and the reference images - were written in preparation for Kingdom Arts and Sciences Festival 2023. The rest were prepared in 2018, soon after construction of the garments was complete. As such, some links referenced for certain sites - specifically those from the Realm of Venus - may no longer function. In addition, the documentation reflects an earlier understanding on the part of the author of how to effectively document projects. She's learned quite a bit since then.



Inspiration & Reference Images

In researching for this project, I was inspired by a number of historical images as well as modern recreations of the garments. Among them:

Portrait of a Woman, Francesco Montemezzano.



Originally attributed to Veronese and now ascribed to his assistant Montemezzano, I was inspired both by the panned sleeves and rather different and seemingly nontraditional partlet. Though I did not end up with stars on my garment, I did borrow the gold-edged and otherwise plain look of this partlet - especially after my first attempt to create a braided mesh ended up failing and generally looking Not Right.

This portrait can be viewed in detail on the website for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it is not currently on display.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/>

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Portrait of a Woman Holding Gloves, Paolo Caliari



Interestingly, this portrait argues for a under-dress as an option, with a patterned fabric displayed beneath the laces of the outer garment. I drew on this image both to justify my two-layer approach and the bright red and gold color palette I chose for my own project.

Portrait of a Venetian Woman, Paolo Caliari



This image was another inspiration for me, in particular for a longer-lined bodice and single - or mostly single - color rather than intense embroidery in the trim. It also served as an example for the different widths that might be seen in the front gap of the gown - some small, some large.

Portrait of a Young Woman, Moretto de Brescia



This garment in particular lent its idea of stripes decorating the edge of the gown.

Next Steps for this Style

I'm curious about the layers for this garment. As I built this one, I leaned rather heavily on comments that it needed additional structure underneath - that a bodice or sotanna must be hidden under the gown, and the gathered pleats visible in the front gap of the gown must be a false front of some kind, a partlet or perhaps second smock worn over the supportive underdress.

However, I wonder: what if that's not the case?

What if this garment - from Venice, the city in Italy most likely to play fast and loose with the more formal layers of clothing earlier in the century - was an experiment in how few layers could be worn and still be fashionable?



What if all these fancy folks are wearing is a camica, partlet, and gown? If that really is their camica we see as ruffles in the front of the garment? How comfortable would such an outfit be? How light? Would it be suitable for wearing at an event like Pennsic, or would the layers feel stifling?

So... that is likely my next endeavor in this style. To make a garment or garments with the intent of rotating them in with my usual Roman attire, possibly for wearing at Pennsic. We'll see how that goes.

The Individual Garments

What follows is my early documentation for these pieces, with a few recent photos added.

The Camica (aka Smock)

The Camica, or smock, is an undergarment of fine linen worn against the skin to protect the more expensive outer garments from sweat and body oils. They would generally be made of the finest linen the wearer could afford, often what we would today call “handkerchief-weight” linen.

Smocks were worn under clothing by women at all levels of society, but as this smock was built for a high-status garment, it can be assumed that the smock would be worn by an individual of high status as well.

There are few extant Venetian camicae from the renaissance era available today, so much of what is known is drawn from extant English examples and a few artworks from the era. “Cesare Vecellio's *De gli Habiti antichi et moderni di Diverse Parti del Mondo*, 1589-90, is our only truly reliable pictorial source for a Venetian camicia. It is reliable because it originated from the hand of a Venetian artist who lived in Venice all his life, and shows the camicia in its entirety.” The camica in the woodcut has wide sleeves, multiple horizontal seams - probably with some decorative embroidery - and appears to be ankle-length.

A camica in this era would likely be constructed of very fine white linen, with (likely blackwork) embroidery on seams and the neckline. It would be hand-sewn (naturally). As with English smocks, the current research seems to suggest that basic geometric shapes were used to build a smock, with cutting patterns that resulted in little to no waste. They likely had embroidery on the seams and hems, both as decoration and reinforcement.

This camica is made to be worn with a 1650's Venetian Gown, but as it is a very simple example, it could reliably be worn under multiple early-to-mid Renaissance garments from England, France, and Italy.

Construction Process

I began the smock by drafting a pattern using Drea Leed's Elizabethan Smock Pattern Generator and my own measurements. I modified the pattern, changing the sleeves from a shape that narrowed to a pure rectangle to keep the pattern simple and give the sleeves fullness.

On all seams, I sewed the seam and then finished the hem with a felling stitch. Seams used 5/8 allowance.

I sewed the gussets to the sleeves, then the sleeves to the long body strip. Next I attached the side gores. I sewed up the two sides. Then I sewed on the facing, pinning it in place and sewing on a pre-traced line for accuracy. I trimmed the inside of the facing out, leaving roughly half an inch of seam allowance, then pressed the facing to the inside and stitched down the edge. Finally, I hemmed the sleeves and the bottom of the smock.

Tools: White Linen fabric, White cotton thread, “Between” hand sewing needles, Sewing Machine.

Period Construction Methods & Materials

In period, shirts were likely something made in the home, rather than purchased from a tailor or garment maker. This may hold even at the highest levels: there is an oft-quoted note in the records of Eustace Chapuys, Ambassador from Spain to King Henry VIII’s court, that Queen Katherine made the King’s shirts (sometimes translated to mean she embroidered them).

Shirts and smocks would be made of the finest linen that could be afforded by their wearer. They might be plain, or heavily embroidered.

The tools and materials used in period would be quite simple: Linen fabric of suitable weight and quality, thread, possibly beeswax to make the thread slide smoothly through the fabric, and a sewing needle.

Concessions to Modernity

Fabric Choice: As this garment was intended to be worn and used regularly, I chose to use a slightly heavier linen than might traditionally be used. This choice was in part to make sure the garment could be machine-washable.

Sewing Technique: I chose to machine sew this garment, due to time constraints.

Embroidery: I did not embroider the garment. Again, this was a choice made due to time constraints and a low likelihood that the chemise would be worn or inspected separately of the rest of the ensemble.

Sources/Bibliography

<http://realmofvenus.renaissanceitaly.net/library/campportrait.htm>

<http://www.elizabethancostume.net/chemise.html>

<http://realmofvenus.renaissanceitaly.net/library/camicia.htm>

The Kirtle (aka Sottana)

The Sottana was a dress worn beneath the overgown, which likely provided support and shaping in both the body and skirt of the ensemble. Depending on the wearer's class and style, it could be made of wool or silk in varying colors, patterns, and weights. It was generally sleeveless, with a defined waist and attached skirt. It could be worn on its own, or with an accompanying gown. Sleeves could be tied to the undergown or to the gown.

This Sottana/Kirtle/Undergown is intended to be worn in late-period Venice circa 1580's. As such, it is fairly constricting and flattens the bust, and has a sharp pointed front. It is side-laced, as is seen in portraits of the era. The trim is simple, as it is mainly intended to be worn under the fancier gown.

A garment such as this would be worn by an upper-class or wealthy Venetian woman - it is made of silk and dyed a deep blue, both of which would be likely signs of status.

Construction

Tools and Materials:

- Heavyweight linen
- Wool Melton
- Dark Blue Silk Taffeta
- Red velvet ribbon, likely polyester
- Handkerchief linen for lining garment
- Cotton Thread
- Silk Thread
- Sewing Needles
- Sewing Scissors
- Thread Snips
- Buttonhole thread
- Lacing Cord
- Sewing Machine (Long seams only)

Process

I drafted my sottana pattern using the Bara techniques described in *The Modern Maker Vol. 2*. While these techniques are based on late-period tailor's manuals from Spain, it is reasonable to assume that Spanish and Italian tailors would be using and modifying similar techniques to achieve the various silhouettes of the era. I modified the basic draft to allow for closures on the side seam and an appropriate sized point in the front.

I cut out all of my fabric pieces. The bodice pieces were all cut in heavy linen, light linen, and silk taffeta. A section of the front bodice was also cut in 2 layers of wool and an additional layer of linen. I then stacked the front bodice pieces alternating linen and wool, then progressively trimmed the bodice pieces by ~1/2 inch to minimize bulk.

I basted, then pad-stitched the bodice front pieces on a tight curve. The front pieces were pressed flat, creating vertical ridges resembling bones. These pieces offer support without the rigidity of later-period English stays.

I basted the silk to the front of the garment, applied a stay tape to the armhole to reinforce & shrink it (creating a pocket for the chest), basted the lining fabric in place, and bound the upper edge and armholes. The lining was left shy of the areas where eyelets would be placed, and hand-stitched down.

I machine-sewed the long seams of the skirt. I then gathered the pleats of the skirt to a self-waistband of silk, padding them with some thin red wool. I attached the waistband to the inner foundation of the bodice, then felled the skirt to the bodice front on the outside.

I steamed strips of wool to give them a curve and wrapped them in the skirt hem. A strip of red velvet ribbon went on top of that seam. I then took a tuck (a period technique!) in the skirt to bring it to the correct height for its wearer.

Period Construction Process

The period construction process may very well have mirrored my own, with the exception of hand- rather than machine-sewing the skirt seams. While we do not know what stiffeners were used in late-period Venice, inspection of the portraits seems to imply there was some kind of shaping garment, and this technique appears to yield relatively comfortable clothing that give the desired silhouette.

Concessions to Modernity

Side seam lacing vs Side-back lacing: I drafted the garment to lace on the side seams. Further investigation leads me to believe that it would have been more accurate to use side-back lacing and cut the front to include the side until that back-side seam.

Machine Sewing on Long Seams: I chose to use a machine to sew the long skirt seams and the hem of the garment. This was choice made due to time: in period they'd likely use a running stitch or running backstitch.

Trim Material: The trim material is from my stash, but likely a polyester velvet rather than silk velvet or cotton velvet, as would have been used in period. This is due to availability of materials.

Sources/Bibliography

NYC Tailoring workshop with Matthew Gagny, May 2017

The Modern Maker Vol. 2

Realm of Venus Wardrobe images (period paintings): <http://realmofvenus.renaissanceitaly.net/wardrobe/wardrobe.htm>

Realm of Venus Showcase: <http://realmofvenus.renaissanceitaly.net/yourgarb/showcase.htm>

Ladani, R. O. (2007) *Moda a la Firenze: Lo Stile di Eleonora di Toledo e la sua influenza*. Edizioni Polistampa; Bilingual edition

The Partlet

The partlet was worn for fashion, and possibly sun protection. It was a thin silk layer with decorative braid applied or embroidered on. Different partlets are seen in different regions and dates throughout Italy: they seem to have been one clear sign of the changing whims of Fashion.

This partlet was originally designed to fit a 1580's style Venetian gown, however the initial version's braid proved thicker than was practical, so it was scrapped for a simple partlet of silk with gold braid on the edges.

Silken partlets are seen in portraits of Venetian ladies of high status or wealth, and indeed in portraits of women throughout Renaissance Italy. (Modo di la Firenze, Realm of Venus)

Construction

Materials

- Silk Organza
- Gold braid of various weights
- Silk Thread
- Sewing Needle & Thimble

Process

I began by drafting a basic partlet pattern using my measurements & simple rectangles. I mocked the garment up in muslin to check fit before cutting my silk organza layer.

In version 1 of the garment, I layered two types of silk braid and cut lengths to create an overlapping grid to lay on top of the silk base. I hand-stitched the braid to the silk organza as machine stitching seemed to damage the braid surface.

Once the braid was secured, I prepared to finish the edges and realized I had a problem: The neckline edge would be too thick where the braid lay. Far, far too thick. Additionally, when I put it on, the braid felt heavy and large, far more Florentine than Venetian.

I went back and re-cut a second partlet. This time, the only trim was applied to the neckline. Simple ribbon ties finished the bottom edge, holding the garment in place.

Period Construction Process

This garment's construction process is rather unclear, and my research did not seem to indicate that any period garments survive to this day. This is a reasonable assumption, as the gold and gems used make it likely that any examples would have been broken down and their materials re-used in later pieces as time marched on and style and fashion evolved.

It is possible that braid would have been sewn directly to the silk. It's also possible that the braid was more like fishing net made from gold twine, with or without a silken backing. It may have been tied, or pinned to the garment.

One portrait which I rather like has golden stars embroidered or appliquéd to the partlet.

Concessions to Modernity

Sewing Process: I machine sewed the trim to the partlet, as well as the ribbons, due to time constraints - especially as I had to re-make the garment.

Ties vs Pins to fasten: It is not clear if Italian partlets of the era were fastened with ties or pinned to the sottana. I chose to use ties, as I did not want to continually pierce my sottana with dress pins and risk it being ripped as I move through the world in a decidedly non-period fashion. Ladies of the era would hardly be carrying their own suitcases, after all!

Sources/Bibliography

Ladani, R. O. (2007) *Moda a la Firenze: Lo Stile di Eleonora di Toledo e la sua influenza*. Edizioni Polistampa; Bilingual edition

Realm of Venus

The Stomacher

The stomacher is a stiffened piece of fabric which is placed between the gown laces and the underdress, giving an appearance of the smock continuing across the front of the garment.

We do not have extant stomachers from the period, however there is definite use of them in England in-period (Mikhaila), and a study of portraits of the era (Modo, Realm of Venus) leads me to believe there was some kind of shaping garment worn under the gown and an accompanying placket or stomacher to give the appearance of the smock continuing across the lacing.

Specifically, I look to Francesco Montemezzano's 1570 Portrait of a Woman, which depicts a woman who is generous of figure and appears to be well-supported in her garments. The laces do not look to be pressing into the fabric as I expect they would be without some form of support.

In addition, the style of tiny, perfect pleats beneath the lacing seems highly unlikely to be the result of hours of fiddling to get it just so - it seems far more plausible that it was sewn to /look/ like the smock was showing.

Construction Process

I created a pattern based on my own body and the gap in the front of my gown (which was completed before the stomacher), along with the pattern for the sottana worn underneath the gown. I cut that pattern out in two layers of heavy canvas.

I sewed channels into the canvas and inserted plastic reeds, leaving a space for a wooden busk pocket in the center of the garment. I bound the edges of the pocket in the same red silk as the gown.

I then hemmed and gathered a strip of linen and pinned it to the edges of the stomacher, trimming it to fit the shape of the garment.

Sources/Bibliography

The Tudor Tailor

Ladani, R. O. (2007) *Moda a la Firenze: Lo Stile di Eleonora di Toledo e la sua influenza*. Edizioni Polistampa; Bilingual edition



The Gown & Sleeves

A Venetian Gown of red silk with gold silk trim & guards in the style of the 1580's. This gown was inspired by the paintings of Paolo Caliari, Tintoretto, and Francesco Montemezzano. The gown is ladder-laced in the front, with pointed sleeves that are pinked at the wrists.

Given the materials, this gown would likely be worn by a relatively high class Venetian woman.

Construction Process

I patterned the bodice based and using the same techniques as for the self-drafted bodice of the sottana worn beneath the gown. I modified pattern to make it front-lacing and added a small point in the back, as seen in some Venetian gowns of the era.

The foundation was cut in heavy linen. Boning tape was used to create channels for a bone in the center back and the two lacing edges. The fashion silk was basted to the foundation, and the side seams and straps were hand-sewn together. The lining was laid in and hand-sewn along all edges except at the bottom.



I hand-sewed lacing rings to the inside center front of the bodice, and added tips to purchased cord to be used in lacing the garment. I hand-sewed eyelets to the shoulders for future attachment of sleeves.



I cut a shaped skirt, machine sewed the long seams, and added a wool stiffener to the hem. I pleated it to a self-waistband of silk and set the waistband into the bodice between the foundation and top fabric. This was basted, then solidly stitched, and the bottom of the bodice was sewn to the skirt. The lining was then fastened down on top of the skirt, covering the area where the skirt emerged from the bodice.

I added bias-cut silk strips as a guard and as trim, hand sewing them to the bodice and skirt.

I drafted sleeves based on a pattern I'd previously used, which

originally came from a Truly Victorian pattern. I added extra fabric at the top width, sewed along the outside of the slashes I'd be making, then slashed the sleeves. The sleeve heads were then turned right side out and hand-stitched together. Strips of contrasting silk were added to the cuffs and pinked for a decorative finish. Finally I added eyelets for points.

Six lucet cords in red cotton with gold tone tips act as points to hold the sleeves to the gown.

Period Construction Process

It is possible that many of my construction techniques would be recognizable in-period. The largest differences would be hand-sewing the seams. We also do not know exactly how venetian gowns were laced - I could not find a reference to a surviving example of a ladder-lace front gown from the era. Paintings don't seem to show lacing holes, but also don't show the odd pulling that occurs when laces are attached to the lining layer and not the top layer.

In future garments, I would like to try permanently lacing the garment (sewing the laces into the garment), and creating standard eyelets in the foundation & lining but not in the top silk. This might create an odd pucker where the laces draw across the front, but I believe it would lie nicely. Re-lacing, if ever necessary, would involve picking the threads holding the top fabric to the garment.

Concessions to Modernity

The only concessions were:

- The use of zip-ties in place of other boning (either reed, which is brittle especially in modern SCA wearing & storage, or baleen, which is of course a controlled material). This is an economical alternative to synthetic whalebone.
- The use of a sewing machine to finish long seams in the skirt. In-period, these would have been finished by hand using a running stitch or a running backstitch.

Sources/Bibliography

<http://realmofvenus.renaissanceitaly.net/wardrobe/Coccina1571.jpg>

Ladani, R. O. (2007) *Moda a la Firenze: Lo Stile di Eleonora di Toledo e la sua influenza*. Edizioni Polistampa; Bilingual edition