

Renaissance Dress Code: Sumptuary Laws and Social Class

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Faculty Introduction

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Abigail's paper interrogates the existence of the so-called sumptuary laws in early modern Europe, which regulated the type of clothing women and men were allowed to wear based on their class. It is a thoroughly researched interdisciplinary project, which argues that the laws' goal was to enforce gender norms and thwart the social mobility of wealthy citizens who were not of noble birth. Abigail compares case studies from Italy and Germany, and persuasively demonstrates the need to include legal, visual, and other artistic sources in historical scholarship. In engaging with the issues of class and gender, it is highly relevant for us today.

Abstract

Renaissance fashion came with all sorts of extravagant fabrics and accessories, but at what cost? City governments created laws that strictly regulated clothing, called sumptuary laws, to restrict specific groups of people from spending on, wearing, and owning lavish clothing. The history of sumptuary laws is sparse but evidence of it is still seen in various legal documents, paintings, and theatrical plays, which this paper will discuss. By examining its history, we can learn about the moral and religious anxieties of Renaissance societies. Furthermore, the paper will analyze the social and economic motivations of sumptuary laws while examining the effectiveness of these laws across various cities in Italy (Bologna, Florence, and Siena) and Germany (Nuremberg and Leipzig).

The Duchess of Urbino, Battista Sforza, gets ready for her portrait: her hairline and eyebrows are freshly plucked to widen her forehead, her bleached blonde hair is folded with expensive fabrics, and her outfit is decorated with fine accessories. The famous painter Piero della Francesca captures Sforza in all her glory in the famous profile portrait, in which she is shown next to her husband, the Duke of Urbino Federico da Montefeltro (see Fig. 1). To understand Renaissance fashion, we need to look at paintings from that time, and della Francesca's work is an excellent example. Completed around 1473-75, and now housed in Uffizi Gallery in Florence, this piece helps teach us how clothing expressed political, economic, and even religious messages.

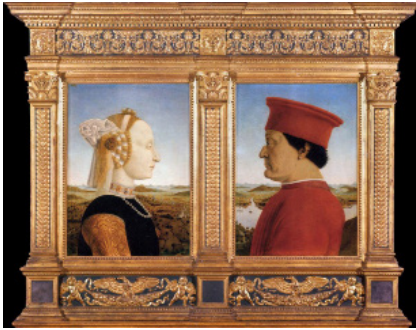


Fig. 1 Piero della Francesca, *Double Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, ca. 1473-75, oil on wood, each panel 19 in × 13 in, Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

In the painting, we see Sforza is facing away from the viewer with a landscape in the background, and we notice her extravagant apparel. She wears a textile patterned dress, most likely made of black velvet with golden embroidered sleeves. Her wavy blonde hair is pulled back and woven in a spiral with a white cloth. Two golden accessories complimented with pearls and gems decorate her hair. Her neck is lined with two sets of pearl necklaces, while a heavy jeweled brooch is resting on her chest. The purpose of this fine display is not to gloat to others about her wealth. Rather, each item in her extravagant attire is charged with meaning. This portrait alone tells us from which family and to which social class Battista belongs. Most importantly, it tells us that she is not required to follow the sumptuary laws of the time.

Sumptuary laws were regulations aimed at restricting specific groups of people from spending, wearing, and owning lavish clothing. The history of sumptuary laws is not well documented and not much is known about their enforcement throughout the Renaissance. Still, by examining the phenomenon of sumptuary laws, we can learn about the socioeconomic, moral, and religious anxieties of Renaissance societies.

Sumptuary laws tell us that even during the time of cultural “rebirth,” significant social hierarchies and classes were still used to label groups of people. This paper analyzes the social and economic motivations of sumptuary laws while examining the effectiveness of these laws across various cities in Italy (Bologna, Florence, and Siena) and Germany (Nuremberg and Leipzig). As we shall see, while sumptuary laws pertained to clothing, their goal was to enforce gender norms and thwart the social mobility of wealthy citizens who were not of noble birth.

The Reasoning Behind the Laws

While each Renaissance European city invoked different reasons for introducing sumptuary laws, we can identify three main arguments across Italy and Germany. The first one was to classify and make conspicuous each citizen’s social status. The law introduced by Cardinal Giovanni Bessarion, a papal legate¹ in Bologna, is an example of this. This sumptuary law was mostly concerned with sustaining existing class systems through clothing restrictions. It specifically targeted women, as many sumptuary laws did at the time, defining which outfits were acceptable for each class of women in

the city. Women related to knights were allowed luxuries such as six bejeweled rings, velvet

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fabrics, four costly dresses, and dresses with trains that were two-thirds in length. Moving down a rank were the nobles, doctors, and bankers. The women from these households were allowed three costly dresses, half-length trains, and four jeweled rings. Next were households of chemists (pharmacists), butchers, wool workers, and merchants. They were allowed one dress of velvet, trains one-third-long, and two jeweled rings. Women related to carpenters or shoemakers were allowed one dress of a rose color cloth and two jeweled rings. Right at the bottom of the social rank, peasant women were not allowed any dress of red-colored cloth or any jewelry with more than eight ounces of silver (Killerby 1999). By maintaining the way each social rank could dress, it was easy to recognize in day-to-day interactions who was at the top or the bottom of the hierarchy.

¹ A papal legate was a representative of the pope for the Catholic Church.

In addition to making one's social rank visible, sumptuary laws were also meant to stop citizens from wearing certain cuts or styled clothing that was considered to threaten good morals. In Nuremberg, Germany, the city government feared that its citizens would be corrupted by jewels and fabrics imported from Italy (Rublack 2011, 131). The luxury items and fashion trends introduced to the city from Italy were feared to encourage vanity and greed, which were considered deadly sins by the Catholic Church. In 1593, the Nuremberg council passed an order that Italian men living in the German city were to be reprimanded if they wore golden buttons, silken stockings, or velvet 'breeches' (Rublack 2011, 253). But while the city wanted to preserve the virtuousness of the German people, it was only a matter of time before German men adopted Italian fashion and began wearing the dreaded colorful silk stockings and velvet fabrics. One trend among Nuremberg men was to wear long baggy 'breeches' that went down to their feet. Not only was this questioned by moralists, but this type of clothing used too much material. The council ordered that 'breeches' should reach above the knee, so the council restricted the trade of expensive fabrics from Italy. However, there were also other types of moral concerns. Although the laws were not as strict for men as they were for women, the shift in clothing style among European men was questioned by city governments. Clothing fabrics were tailored to show off the physique of a man's body, and in the early fourteenth century, men's garments became shorter and tighter. The older generation considered this new fashion distasteful, while some younger people thought it enhanced masculinity. The change was significant enough for one of the authors of *Grandes Chroniques* (ca. 1344-50)² to comment on the new outfits as revealing parts of the body that should remain hidden: "Some wore their clothing so short that it hardly covered their rumps, with the result that when they bent down to serve their lords they showed their *braies*³ as well as what was inside them to those who stood behind" (Rublack 2011, 16).

Sumptuary laws took hold in Europe because of the rising cost of dowries (property or money a bride brings into a marriage). Concern was that the lavish spending on clothing could threaten the population and

² *Grandes Chroniques* was a collection of manuscripts written by aristocrats and other people in power in Europe during the 1300s.

³ Braies were a type of trouser or undergarment worn by European men during the Middle Ages, knee-length or mid-calf.

wealth of the cities, because fathers would face difficulty paying for pricey dowries. Pricey dowries could also put off young men from marrying at all (Tinagli 2015, 51) and young women could not get married without a dowry. The Italian city Siena thought this would lead to a decrease in marriages and might reduce their city's population. In order to stop this from happening, sumptuary laws were in place to refrain people from buying expensive items for their dowries. The concern about dowries was that the rising prices of certain textiles were proving too expensive, even to the highest-ranking individuals who were allowed four costly dresses.

Sumptuary Laws: Violations and Fines

In sum, sumptuary laws were informed by social, economic, and moral considerations. But what happened when a person broke the law? Each city had its own consequences when a citizen refused to follow its sumptuary laws. Nuremberg women were classified into three types of groups according to their marital status: “married women, maidens, and widows.” Women who were married or widowed were forbidden to wear any “reisen,” a kind of headdress, except for a cheap grade. Their husbands would be liable for the payment of a five-pound fine. If the husband was deceased, then the widow or the person whom she was financially reliant upon would pay the fine (Rublack 2011, 238).

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The situation was similar in Italy: the type of clothing a woman was allowed to wear depended on her marital status; the fine would be paid by her closest

male relative, as most women in the Renaissance relied financially entirely on their male family members. If a man trespassed against regulations that forbade wearing certain types of Italian clothing, he himself typically had to pay a fine.

Since fines did not seem to have been effective in stopping people from breaking sumptuary laws, the city of Bologna introduced an extreme form of punishment: excommunication (Killerby 1999). Excommunication in Renaissance Europe was considered the harshest of punishments because it excluded one from all religious practices, sacraments,

and a Catholic burial. All of this meant that an excommunicated individual's soul would be sent to eternal damnation, which at the time meant a great deal for the God-fearing Catholics. This form of punishment was also introduced by the Venetian government after suffering badly in a war in 1437. The law was devised by the head of the Venetian diocese, Lorenzo Giustiniani, to end the vice of luxury and increase charitable offerings. However, his plan backfired, leading to an excessive number of individuals being excommunicated. Those affected sent petitions to the pope to receive absolution and have their excommunication revoked. Cristina Corner was one of the women documented to have sent a petition to the pope informing his holiness that while she indeed owned fine fabrics, she wore them to honor her noble parents, her own noble birth, and that such clothes were common in Venetian dress culture before the new law was introduced. Corner and several citizens who made petitions used the same argument and begged the pope for absolution. Although the government of Venice would grant clemency to excommunicated individuals who confessed, it did not remove the sumptuary laws and excommunication as one of the possible punishments.

Response and Protests

Although few sources documenting public objections to sumptuary laws have survived, they show us that residents of Italian and German cities were not happy about the laws, fines, and punishments associated with them, and tried to find loopholes to get around them. A Siense woman named Battista Berti Petrucci is a good example of this tactic. Petrucci was an educated woman whose sole responsibility was to welcome important visitors to her city and make Latin orations. Emperor Frederick III was so impressed by her work that he offered her anything she wanted. She asked for the women in Siena to be exempted from sumptuary laws (Jackson 2010). The request made by Petrucci demonstrates that she considered them to be an instrument of gender discrimination. Petrucci sought to not only free herself from these restrictions, but other women who felt the same way. Petrucci took a sense of pride in her role at the court and for being literate and she wanted to display that in her dress. Sadly, her request was only granted for one day and, based on extant evidence, it is not possible to tell how she was dressed that day.

begins with two brothers who were promised that they would wed orphan girls if they looked after them. Each brother has a different opinion on clothing and how to treat a wife. One brother is more lenient on how his wife expresses herself through clothing and gives her freedom. The other brother believes that clothing only serves a function rather than a way to express oneself and wants his wife to always remain indoors. Lisette, the wife of the lenient brother, is given a voice to defend why women's clothing is important to show political and social status. She gives an interesting warning in the play, "Yes, all these stern precautions are inhumane. Are we in Turkey, where they lock up women? It's said that females are slaves or worse, and that's why Turks are under Heaven's curse... It's dangerous, Sir, to underrate our gender. Our honour likes to be its own defender" (Rublack 2011, 275). This play details how restrictions on women's clothing are a form of oppression.⁴ While the play was first written and performed in seventeenth-century France, it presents the very same cause that Nicolosa and Petrucci fought for when challenging Italian sumptuary laws: that women's clothing was a way to express honor and virtue.

Renaissance men were not silent about sumptuary laws either. A Siense citizen Giorgio Sensi was condemned for wearing a silver brocade doublet (a shirt manufactured of heavy brocade fabric with cap sleeves and a button front adorned with antiqued buttons) at the entrance ceremony welcoming the duchess of Ferrara to the city of Siena. His father-in-law came to defend him by giving evidence that his son was appointed as an official to accompany the duchess into the city (Jackson 2010). According to one of the city's laws, Sensi should have been exempted from regular law because he was doing official business for the government by guiding a noble. The reason why this subsection of the law existed was that cities like Siena still wanted to appear honorable to foreigners and important visitors. Sensi wore his silver doublet to appear respectable in the duchess's presence. There was a clear confusion on who was or was not dismissed from these laws. Authorities should have known about this part of the law, so why didn't they? This question raises a larger issue of the effectiveness of sumptuary laws, on which I will focus next.

⁴ During this time there was a decline in the Ottoman Empire. The play advocates that this was a form of punishment by God because they did not hold the honor of women.

The Effectiveness of Sumptuary Laws

We may ask if any of these laws influenced the cities where they were introduced. It seems like many citizens were more outraged than supportive. Did these laws improve moral virtue? Did they increase the number of marriages or help identify social classes? Monitoring different social classes was one of the main reasons why these laws took place. Cardinal Giovanni Bessarion's sumptuary laws' primary focus was to distinguish among social classes. Nonetheless, citizens from wealthy families or those related to elites were exempted from these laws or found ways to get around them. They used their money to buy a license to wear certain types of clothing. If a woman wanted to wear silk dresses, a

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license would let her wear those pieces in public for a month or two and they could renew the license repeat-

edly. There was also the matter of fines. They had little effect on the wealthy. In Florence, wearing clothing that was embroidered with gold or silver carried a 50-florin penalty, and the woman wearing the offending clothing was required to have her husband or close male relative pay the fine. Given that most of these women were married (or related) to men of power and the offending clothing cost 400 florins or more, a mere 50-florin fine would not have been concerning (Bridgeman 2017). The fact that wealthy, powerful people were able to buy these licenses limited the sumptuary laws' effectiveness while the laws were in fact superfluous when it came to lower classes of craftsmen and peasants who, even if they wanted to purchase luxury clothes, could not afford them; an annual laborer's salary at the time was 37 ½ florins. (Bridgeman 2017) Some scholars believe that the true purpose of licenses was not to restrict clothing but to impose a hidden tax on the wealthy; indeed, it seems as though citizens of Florence were encouraged to buy licenses to enable them to avoid but not entirely evade the law.

With the growth of trade, merchants began to grow in wealth, rivaling nobles and other high classes. They strove for power by using their new-found wealth to achieve the status of politicians and lawmakers. They established laws that would benefit them like trading with foreigners and non-Christians. This was seen as a threat to the local economy of many

European cities. Meanwhile, they abolished laws that only benefited nobles like the confiscation of goods (Siddiqi 1992). An example of this is the rise of power of the Medicis, a powerful Italian banker family. By working in the textile trade, they gained more wealth that they used to finance their banks and partnered with government officials. These connections helped them get politically involved in their cities. Government positions could be easily accessible if you surround yourself with the right people (Burke 2013). This calls into question what could have been another purpose of sumptuary laws. Were these laws a way to combat the rise of the merchant class? It could be that governments were afraid of the power merchants held and wanted to restrict their growth because they threatened the social structures that they tried so hard to maintain. For nobles, it was frightening to see that a lower-ranked class was becoming more powerful than them. This is an example of new money versus old money, a practice that has been seen before throughout history. New money means that a person's wealth was recently earned while old money means someone's wealth was passed down from generation

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to generation. People who were labeled new money were always looked down

upon by those who inherited theirs. They were afraid that these people would overpower them. City governments made laws to make sure that no matter how much money the merchant class made, they could never dress or rise to power like nobles or knights. The restricted dress let the public know that they were labeled a middle-class merchant.

Another flaw of sumptuary laws was that there were too many of them. Laws were constantly updated and changed to keep up with the latest fashion. There were more than 300 laws passed in Italy alone and some laws varied from city to city (Killerby 1999). They simply became too complex for citizens to keep track of and there were bound to be some complications. Complications soon did arise with the case of Messer Lorenzo di Antonio. He was charged for his wife wearing a silk velvet dress in public on two separate occasions. He argued that his father had received knighthoods for himself and his two sons. He knew that knights and their wives were exempt from these laws, so he believed his wife was exempt as well. His case was then appealed after evidence

revealed that he was in fact a knight and his wife was not subjected to law (Jackson 2010). There were many cases like Antonio's where they had legitimate justifications and proof. Even authorities in charge of keeping order were just as confused by the laws.

Keeping up with fashion trends hindered these laws. In the city of Leipzig, Germany, the council could not control the regulations of sumptuary laws because fashion was constantly changing. Leipzig council stated, "What people wear changes almost every year among the German Nation and from one to the other." After trying to reinforce the laws in 1628, they again claimed, "not a month that went by without a new fashion" (Rublack 2011, 267). The restrictions of these laws led people to find ways they could alter their clothing. Garments that the law approved of were already considered old-fashioned. People would change the style or cut of their clothing to get around the restrictions. The city council would catch on and make new laws to combat those alterations. However, this happened constantly and authorities that tried to maintain order could not keep up with the change. Adding more laws to combat the citizens who altered their clothing led to more confusion since there were just so many laws.

Conclusion

Sumptuary laws were a unique phenomenon which reveals how Renaissance lawmakers and city councils tried to curb ongoing socioeconomic changes, including social mobility and gender expectations. We see this with the establishment of Cardinal Giovanni Bessarion's sumptuary laws. Additionally, cities wanted to lower the prices of dowries and foreign imported goods. Consequences for breaking the law were usually fines, and women were required to have their fathers or husbands pay it. In some places like Bologna and Venice, citizens would face excommunication which was considered the harshest of punishments. Civilians decried sumptuary laws. One of the main arguments was the importance of virtue. A women's outer appearance connects to her civic pride and political virtue since women could not participate in politics as men did at the time. Nicolosa argued that the city of Bologna was oppressing women by depriving their ornaments. Men would wear expensive clothing in the presence of nobles out of respect. However, sumptuary laws were not successful in keeping the order of citizens' clothing. Wealthy

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individuals who were not knights could acquire a license that allowed them to wear forbidden items for a few months. These laws were also a way to restrict the merchant class who were slowly overshadowing the nobles. We know now that sumptuary laws were too confusing for even authorities to keep up, and many people were mistakenly arrested because authorities thought they were breaking the law. The history of sumptuary laws has shown us that clothing has always been used for more than just its practical functions. Even more importantly, sumptuary laws prove that the history of fashion can provide us with important insights into the cultural, social, economic, and gender expectations and anxieties experienced by past societies.

Editor's Note: This paper was written in an art history class, which is housed in the College of Arts and Media at SHSU. However, the subject fits our mission in highlighting work completed in a humanities field and we are proud to reproduce it here.

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Student Biography

Abigail Gonzalez is a junior majoring in animation and minoring in graphic design at Sam Houston State University. As a member of SHSU's Honors College, she was assigned to create a contract with one of her professors. She decided to use this opportunity to do her own research on aspects of art history, a subject she was beginning to love. Her research was to answer questions that were not further discussed in class; what people wore in Renaissance Europe and how women used it to exercise power. She worked together with her art history professor Dr. Kaminska who provided insight on what aspects of her research to improve on and what subjects to explain further. Abigail submitted her work to *The Measure* after Dr. Kaminska informed her about the journal and its mission. Gonzalez will graduate in spring 2024 and plans to pursue a career in the animation industry.