

## **Stella Mary Pearce uses the example of the Renaissance to reflect on the links between interesting times and their fashions.**

A great deal has been written lately about the time spirit as it is reflected in clothes. In the shape of the vaulted roof of the Crystal Palace, for example, it is interesting to discover the crinoline of 1851; and the further discovery that both reflect the materialism, or the piety, or the wealth of their period is bound to produce a warm glow of amused superiority. But materialism and piety, and even wealth, are present at almost every period of the world's history. Works of art, including clothes, can give us far more precise and complex information about the past than easy generalizations of this kind. Like angels on the point of a needle, an infinity of implications can be accommodated in a single pen-stroke by Leonardo, or Rubens, or Rossetti. A sumptuary law passed in Florence in 1356 forbidding servant women to wear buttons above the elbow is a window through which we can examine the state of mind of Florence, not only towards buttons and servant girls, but also towards the highly-complicated phenomenon of emergent humanism.

The clothes of 1851 were already beginning to be recorded for us by the impartial camera. If we wish, on the other hand, to investigate the reasons for Florence's objections to buttons above the elbow, we are compelled to examine, not photographed sleeves, but sleeves presented to us by a Lorenzetti or a Giotto, whose concern was to paint a *Birth of the Virgin* or a *Marriage at Cana*, but who obligingly present us with some information about sleeves "on the side" as it were. What proves so delightful is that, besides being able to gather the information we are in search of, we discover that the Lorenzettis and the Giotto's, who obviously disagree profoundly on esthetics, do *not* disagree on contemporary fashions. Given the tailor's technical knowledge of the behaviour of woven materials, and the art historian's technical knowledge of the peculiarities of painters, the student of costume has no difficulty in distinguishing, beneath the painter's personal mannerisms, the real clothes that he took as his models.

Nothing is more enchantingly revealed by clothes than the Italian fifteenth-century's passion for Hellenic culture, which expanded as the century advanced. Awareness of the classics appeared first, of course, in the literary field. Petrarch set the fashion for unearthing and collecting Greek and Roman manuscripts, and as far back as the middle of the fourteenth century, Boccaccio used pagan themes. But at that period the manuscripts were only curiosities which interested the scholar, or provided raw material for the novelist; and not until Cosimo de' Medici had established the idea that it was an essential part of every gentleman's library, did Greek and Roman literature begin to play a significant role in the cultural life of northern Italy. Even then, only the most advanced architects and artists had reached the same conclusions as to the importance of the visual arts of antiquity. At an earlier period, those arts contain no hint of an interest in classical garments. A manuscript recording the wedding of Gian Galeazzo Visconti in 1406 was ornamented with a vignette of the ceremony in which the Duke, as Anchises, is being married by Jupiter to his bride as Venus. But it is left to their labels to tell us so. Without them

they would form as pleasant a Gothic group, as any medieval illuminator could wish to see. The famous Judgement of Paris, desco da parto of about fifteen years later is equally stylish and equally Gothic (Deschi da parto were round salvers, usually of painted wood, made for presentation on the birth of a child).

But after the middle of the fifteenth century, the design of clothes responded naturally and unconsciously to the new interest in Hellenism; and to us the form of the response is so curious that we may overlook it altogether. The fifteenth-century tailor's imitation of the clothes of antiquity can only be understood if we grasp what classic dress must have meant to the average man of the Renaissance, who had not long been freed from the muffling garments of the Middle Ages. The primary object was to reproduce the idea of a naked body over which loose draperies were hung. For the fifteenth century this did not involve the removing of clothes to expose the body itself—that would not have been possible in a society dominated by the Christian Church—but the evolution of an imitation body hung with outer garments.

This imitation body did not consist simply of a close covering of the figure: an idealized body was implied by carefully-cut clothes. Men's shoulders were broadened, and their waists narrowed: the upper part of the arm was enclosed in a puffed-out sleeve, suggesting muscular development, while the lower arm was tightly fitted. By the end of the 1460s, the idea of padding the chest appeared. The desired effect was achieved by using tights and a close-fitting, padded, long-sleeved waistcoat, to represent the body, and an overtunic, loose in effect, but having, unlike the classic tunic, its fullness carefully arranged in pleats. For it must be remembered that classicism means not merely an imitation of antiquity, but also an admiration for law and order. Perfect examples of the whole achievement can be seen in the paintings which surround the Bonfiglio Gonfalone in the Gallery of Perugia. Painted at the beginning of the 1470s, these little pictures of the Miracles of St. Bernard are filled with men and girls dressed in the height of fashion. The chests of the men are puffed out in pseudo-nobility: their legs, exposed far up the thigh, take manly attitudes: their waists have an athletic tautness: their loose, and diminutive outer-tunics, split up the sides, swing with every movement. In intention they are heroes of ancient Greece. In effect, they are the dandies of Renaissance Umbria.

Fourteen-seventy in northern Italy was a period particularly prolific of painters; and the clothes of the Perugia gallants meet us on the altar-pieces of many towns and villages. To artists this was the contemporary fashion which they used, naturally, to clothe saints and donors alike. But it was not "artistic," nor did it pay the homage to Greece and Rome, which they, visually sensitive to the antique world, would have wished to pay themselves. Artists and sculptors discovered, by studying the statues and sarcophagi which they so passionately admired, new and exciting esthetic ideas. Soft folds of drapery in repose could give the human figure an architectural solemnity: soft drapery in movement could awaken the picture to fluttering life. And then, how beautiful was the classic dress itself, when seen through the eyes of an artist, and not a mere

tailor! How, at a time when convention demanded contemporary dress for all characters in all subjects—and tailors presented him with these absurd manikins—could the artist satisfy his desire to turn Medicean Florence into Periclean Athens?

The artists' solution of the problem may be misunderstood just as easily as that propounded by the tailors. It is wrong to assume that the apparently classic dress, which appears in so much fifteenth-century painting and sculpture, is an attempt to copy the actual clothes worn in antique reliefs. No artist of the age could have got away with what could only have struck his patron as a tiresomely whimsical archaism; for the Renaissance was essentially a "progressive" movement. Artists would have found it impossible to introduce garments which could be mistaken for "chitons" or "togas" into their paintings unless there had existed, in the fashionable wardrobe, either classic features, or else features which could easily be re-interpreted in classic terms; and, apart from the "tailor's classic," which artists found contemptible, both features existed in fifteenth-century dress.

Donatello, in the Herod's Feast relief of 1425-27 in Siena, clothes Salome in a dress of his own period, seen through eyes which have made a close study of classic reliefs. Her sleeve is fashionable—shaped like a peascod, bulging at the elbow and fitting close to the wrist; her overdress is fashionable—entirely open at the sides from shoulder to hem. Two temporary girdles, as worn by women travelling or doing housework, loop up both this and her underdress; but, even so, she is compelled to hold up her skirt at the back, which implies the fashionable long train. Giovanni di Paolo's Salome, in the National Gallery, of about the same period, holds up her fashionable and unlooped-up dress with exactly the same gesture. To say that the folds of Salome's dress in Donatello's relief are treated as though they belonged to an antique relief is true—folds were now seen through classic and not gothic eyes by advanced young artists; but to add that she wears a "chiton" as Meyer-Weinschel claims, is plainly incorrect. Donatello has made an ingenious use of the prevailing custom of looping up the dress for mobility, and the resemblance to a Greek chiton is thereby established; whereas Giovanni di Paolo, not a Florentine, but a conservative Sienese, does not want to look classic—his Salome's dress is unlooped.

In his book on Botticelli (Sandro Botticelli, Yukio Yashiro, Medici Society, 1925), Yukio Yashiro is guilty of the same error as Meyer-Weinschel: "...there is nothing (he writes) so inseparably intimate in our lives as clothes, which embrace the whole expanse of our body our relation is so intimate that we spontaneously project our own senses into them, and they become... an outer skin. This extremely sensuous nature of clothes appealed to Botticelli, and while preventing him from calmly studying their structure enabled him, as a rich compensation, to portray the most charming of subjective garments." Yashiro is here referring to The Three Graces in the Primavera; but a more careful examination of the clothes they wear, together with a more intimate knowledge of their period, would have revealed them to be anything but "subjective."

Botticelli has, like Donatello, taken the clothes of his own day—in this case under-dresses— and infused them with the spirit of the transparent garments Horace loved so well.

An example of the fifteenth-century underdress can be seen worn by the half-unrobed Griselda, in a *cassone* panel of *The Story of Griselda*, at present hanging in the restaurant of the National Gallery. Botticelli's centre Grace has slipped one arm right out of hers; and the hanging empty sleeve mingles with her fluttering skirt. Botticelli shows the fine gathers at the shoulder which would, if it were worn on the arm, make the sleeve puff out modishly, like that of the girl on her right. The sleeves of this centre girl are both unlaced, though a few lacings remain loosely crossed at the top of both sleeves, which are designed to lace from top to bottom. She is clad in the under-dress of the fashionable girl of the day, its sleeves being full enough to puff through the slits which, at this date, her over-dress would be sure to have. In fact, the same painting represents Flora wearing an over-dress with just such a slit sleeve. A collar, exactly like the one worn by the centre Grace, is displayed by the spectacular angel in Benvenuto di Giovanni's altar-piece in the National Gallery. With its edging of white bobbles, it is obviously part of the under-dress, here turned down over the angel's dark over-dress.

Thus, Botticelli has used garments, fashionable in shape and detail, trimmed with ornamental white stitchery to adorn the Three Graces, and was not "prevented from calmly studying" the structure of the clothes he painted, as Yukio Yashiro would have us believe. On the contrary, acutely sensitive to fashion, he could not resist the temptation of making the loose dress of the Grace on the spectator's right cling to the figure at exactly the place where, if she were wearing an overdress, it would be belted. In short, though he embarked on endless, and daring, aesthetic experiments, it did not occur to the fifteenth-century artist to escape from the material equipment of his own day. Botticelli adds delicious trimmings of leaves and flowers, but they are never more than additions to contemporary modes.

One more expression of classicism in fifteenth-century dress remains to be considered. While tailors were reacting automatically and correctly to the time spirit, and artists were seeking for legitimate means of escaping into their dreams of the past, one small section of the community, the dilettantes, were not to be outdone by artists in sensitivity. We find indications that, among intellectuals, there appeared a subsidiary fashion, based on the dress of Roman ladies. It was not very widespread, and it must have carried with it a certain "arty" flavour, rather like the aesthetic fashions that first emerged as a protest against the philistinism of the mid-nineteenth century, and persisted into the early twentieth. An example of this type of classicism appears in that epitome of the spirit of the early Renaissance, the set of frescoes in the Schifanoia Palace at Ferrara. Among the fashionable crowd of onlookers at the Triumph of Venus we see a girl whose dress is as near the dress of a Roman maiden as anything a dressmaker of the fifteenth century could hope to produce. The painting is filled with youths and girls wearing exquisitely fashionable clothes, in which there is no question of draperies copied from antiquity. Nothing flutters, or clings

ostentatiously to thigh or calf; yet this one girl, accepted complacently by her friends, wears a white dress, cross-girdled over the breast, that Madame Recamier herself might have included in her wardrobe. The same sort of dress appears again, worn by the bride in the panels of the *Story of Nastagio degli Onesti*, perhaps by Botticelli. Here, and in other versions of the same subject, the men wear contemporary dress, while some, but not all, the girls affect that subsidiary “arty” fashion which one would expect to find flourishing, if anywhere, at the court of Lorenzo de’ Medici. And there are other examples to show that, in the second half of the fifteenth century, a fashion sprang up that attempted to copy, deliberately and in a scholarly way, though somewhat timidly, the actual clothes of the classical past.

Although it is generally accepted that a painting or a piece of music can be classic without incorporating any actual motifs of antiquity, the idea that clothes can be classic without copying Hellenic dress is less familiar. But between 1450 and 1475, both men’s and women’s clothes in Italy became “classic” as opposed to “romantic,” in the same way that clothes became classic in the eighteenth century. Then powdered wigs imposed a formal visual pattern on society, just as the uniformity of urban squares and terraces imposed a regular pattern upon domestic architecture. At least until the end of the century, there was no attempt to imitate the actual clothes worn by the Greeks and Romans; but the dominant inspiration was classic nonetheless. Fashions in Italy between 1450 and 1475 did contain hints of the dress of antiquity—for the fifteenth century the admiration of the classic was still a new experience; but, so far as the main stream of fashion was concerned, the hints were vague, and real classicism lay in the cult of uniformity, symmetry and simplicity. At the same time, as we have seen, there existed—at any rate, among women’s clothes—a subsidiary fashion which strove to approach more nearly to genuine classic dress. Since it is extremely difficult to appreciate the flavour, of the period in which one lives oneself, artists were naturally unconscious of the classic quality in contemporary dress—though they may have been conscious of the quite unimportant subsidiary fashion; and they therefore struggled to infuse into what they regarded as “normal” clothes the classic spirit they so much revered. It is typical of the cultural richness of the Renaissance that three separate ideas of dress should have appeared simultaneously; and it is no less significant that clothes were able to carry, so gracefully and lightly, the complex implications of so rich a culture.