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On Seventeenth-Century Gowns and Women's Lives An Examination

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to outline future collaborations between material culture researchers and museums in women's clothing and silk textiles in early modern Europe. Case studies from Venetian colonies in the Mediterranean and the Dutch Republic will be used to address the question of the comparability of materials in seventeenth-century garments that have either survived or have been extensively described in archival documents (inventories). Examples like *De Jurk* (exhibited in Texel Kaap Skil Museum) and the '*Venetocretan Silk Gown*' (still being 'locked' in the marriage inventories of Venetian Crete) will set the stage for a discussion around questions relevant to the fields of cultural heritage and material culture. For example: how do we make hidden fragments of cultural heritage, such as the '*Venetocretan Silk Gown*', visible? How do we deal with the gaps in archival documents or fragmentary archaeological finds? How do we give women a voice through the study of their clothing? How do we make similar cases of seventeenth-century European dress comparable? Ultimately, solving the puzzle of female dress and gender in early modern Europe is necessary if we wish to explore what kind of stories can be told about the seventeenth century when we focus on the perceptions of women from different social backgrounds.

Keywords: Venetian Crete, Early-modern Europe, 16th-17th century, Women's history, Material culture, Cultural exchange, Identity formation, Fashion development, Historical dress, Archival sources, Inventories, Cultural heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

When Richard Goldthwaite argued in 1993 that the preconditions for Western consumerism were established in Renaissance Italy, he made an essential connection between identity and material objects (Goldthwaite 1993). Since then, it has become evident that writing Europe's history from a material perspective requires a re-evaluation of women's roles as both producers and consumers of material objects. Our understanding of Renaissance and early modern societies largely relies on primary sources written and assessed by men, resulting in female perspectives being underrepresented in current scholarship.¹ Studying women's roles in social change processes necessitates a close examination of their garments, as clothing served as a significant identity marker. The way garments were worn, the materials and styles used, and the motives behind specific clothing preferences were

¹ For an overview of the study of women's history in the early modern period and for relevant extensive bibliography see Wiesner-Hanks 2008.

all factors of importance². Focusing on women's experiences and preferences sheds new light on the history of early modern Europe; individual stories are viewed from a different angle. In this framework one case study from Venetian Crete and another from the Dutch Republic will be examined to highlight several pressing questions in the research field of material culture and to contemplate necessary future collaborations for the study of historical dress.

2. THE 'VENETOCRETAN SILK GOWN'



Figure 1. Portable icon: Saint George the Dragon killer, (2nd half 16th century), attributed to Georgios Klontzas. Paletaart.com.



Figure 2. The Venetocretan Silk Gown: detail from portable icon, Byzantine Museum of Athens. Paletaart.com

² See, indicatively, Frick 2002; Welch 2005; Welch 2017; in particular about silk fabrics and garments see Monnas 2008.

The first case study pertains to the silk gown of Paulina Priuli, a young woman belonging to the elite social group of the Venetian city of Candia (modern Heraklion), who received this gown as a dowry gift on April 6, 1643. During this final phase of Venetian rule on the island of Crete, known as *The Golden Age* or *Cretan Renaissance* (Markaki 2018, 39-41), numerous inventories have been preserved that document and assess the movable assets in dowries. In one such inventory, written in a mixture of Italian language and Venetian dialect, we encounter the detailed description of Paulina’s gown:

“vestura una da donna di raso brocato nova, fondi carnado con varii fiori de diversi collori con la sua coda e maneghe in tutto brazzi vinti quattro, con una guarnition d’orro, fodrata la coda di ormesin rosso con due balzzanelle, estimado in tutto ducati candiotti 272” (Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Notai di Candia, notary Zorzi Protonotari, busta 222, libro 5, f. 311r).

Paulina’s new silk brocaded *raso* gown in bright red, adorned with various colourful floral designs, trimmed with golden-gilt thread, and featuring a bodice, detachable sleeves and a tail lined with red silk, was meticulously estimated and valued by professional tailors. We have detailed information about the owner and user of the gown, how and when it was worn, its value, and that it was a typical example of the time and place. Therefore, there is ample archival information about this object available. One might expect that a visual representation would be on display as part of a costume collection in a Greek historical or ethnographic museum. However, this is not the case for a couple of reasons. Firstly, there is no physical example preserved, meaning that archaeologists, a crucial group of material culture experts, are not involved in the process of reconstruction. Secondly, although the specific gown resembles one depicted in a portable icon of the era (see figures 1, 2), it does not align with the Greek national canon, which emphasizes Byzantine, Eastern, or regional clothing elements in large museum costume collections. This type of gown – the silk European-styled one - remains ‘locked’ in the archival sources, still hidden from public view.

3. THE ‘DRESS’ (DE JURK)



Figure 3. The Dress (De Jurk uit het Palmhoutwrak). Photo: Frouke Ecomare.

A different, yet simultaneously common, narrative unfolds in the second case study, which transports us to the North-Western part of early modern Europe – the Dutch Republic – during the

same period. *The Dress* (figure 3), crafted from silk satin and adorned with colourful floral designs akin to the Cretan silk gown, is prominently displayed to the public. Its existence is unmistakable, although many aspects surrounding it remain unclear, prompting much speculation³. Unlike the better-documented Cretan case, the Netherlandish example provides less illumination into the user's life. This case comprises a bodice with a pleated full skirt and detachable sleeves featuring loose-fitting ruffles and sleeve caps. Presumably, it was originally of a single color, with silver or gilded buttons implied by impressions in the fabric. A stand-up collar worn around the neckline, making the female figure easily visible from behind and from a distance, would have completed the ensemble. Additionally, the gown would have been adorned with silver and gilded details.

The gown's style closely resembles that of Western European fashion in the early seventeenth century (1620 to 1630), aligning with trends observed in England, the Dutch Republic, and other parts of North-Western Europe. Comparable garments can be observed in contemporary paintings. *The Dress* could have been crafted in one of Europe's renowned silk production centres, then transported and worn elsewhere, perhaps in Northern Europe or the Mediterranean, facilitated by international trade routes⁴. The utilization of expensive materials and the alignment with contemporary fashion trends suggest that the owner was likely affluent and must have belonged to a privileged social group like Paulina.

What the two cases illustrate is that in the seventeenth century, regions across Europe, from the North-West to the Mediterranean, shared more common elements than one might imagine. Flourishing import and export trade, the constant need to renew and to keep up with fashionable trends⁵ as well as communication through diverse channels, facilitated various forms of cultural exchange. Migration of people, ideas and objects was widespread and contributed to cohesion by integrating elements from different cultural systems and facilitating processes of cultural transfer.⁶

4. FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

Several pressing questions emerge when considering the previously mentioned examples. How can we bring hidden fragments of cultural heritage, such as the 'Venetocretan Silk Gown', into the light? How should we address the gaps in archival documents or fragmentary archaeological finds when attempting to visually reconstruct a gown? How can we ensure that similar cases of seventeenth-century European dress are comparable?

If we aspire to give women a voice through the examination of their clothing and thereby recount the story of early modern Europe from a female perspective, it is imperative to turn to comparable situations and cases for reflection. What elements are shared, what sets them apart, and why? By situating the Cretan case on the European map and making it accessible to museum audiences as effectively as the Texel case, we may witness and grasp the interconnectedness of that era through the material objects utilized by women. Luxury items⁷ and articles used for display and distinction, serving as identity markers, could traverse common trading routes, adhere to universal consumption patterns, and unveil unexpected connections.

The reconstruction and visual presentation of fragments of cultural heritage through a 'filling the gaps' exercise can only be accomplished through collaborations among archaeologists, historians, conservators, and museum curators within interdisciplinary working groups. Filling in the missing pieces of the puzzle—whether they are textile fragments or information regarding the dimensions of the gown or the life of its wearer—requires, in both the Cretan and Netherlandish cases, a meticulous examination of shared and divergent practices. The production, marketing, consumption, symbolism,

³ For a brief presentation see Museum Kaap Skil website: <https://kaapskil.nl/en/discover/collection-highlights/the-dress/>

⁴ For the production and marketing of silk fabrics see, indicatively, Monnas 2008, 4-21; Molà 2000.

⁵ For information on clothing innovations across (early modern) Europe see Nigro 2022; Markaki 2022; Molà 2000, 138-214.

⁶ For a concise appraisal of the concepts of cultural exchange and transfer in early modern Europe see, indicatively, Roeck 2007, 1-29; Roodenburg 2007.

⁷⁷ On the concept of luxury in (early modern) Europe see Rittersma 2010.

and appropriation mechanisms surrounding the use of clothing items across early modern Europe must be scrutinized to comprehend how silk gowns connected or differentiated the female population in the seventeenth-century Europe.

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