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“Lest we be shamed”: Italian Renaissance Taste for Textile Ensembles

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During the second half of the fifteenth century, lavish displays of luxurious textile ensembles became obligatory on grand occasions in Italian courts and city states. Such displays demonstrated the political and cultural power of persons, families, and governments. Among the courts of northern Italy, competition was so keen that rulers and their spouses personally took charge of new purchases, and temporary loans from family and friends. Voluminous correspondence documents the quantities and qualities calibrated to the occasion. For example, in 1468, Duchess Bianca Maria Sforza of Milan assembled the hangings for the wedding of her son Galeazzo Maria at the family castle in Pavia. The platform for honored guests in front of the castle had to be completely covered, and the ducal barge and towns through which the family and guests would pass had to be richly decorated, in the duchess's words, "lest we be shamed."¹ In 1506, Elisabetta Gonzaga della Rovere, Duchess of Urbino, asked her sister-in-law, Isabella d'Este Gonzaga, Marquise of Mantua, to loan furnishings for Pope Julius II's second visit like those sent in 1505 for his first: bed-hangings of silk and cloth-of-gold, carpets for the table and floor of his bedroom, canopies, and other things "to satisfy our honor as much as possible." Isabella replied that she could only send two bed-sets of gold brocade and damask since she needed the rest to honor the pope's retinue of cardinals.² I will outline how the taste for ensembles of wall-hangings, curtains, and carpets represented by Mantegna in the Gonzaga's castle in Mantua between 1465 and 1474 evolved, and how it affected and was influenced by trade, production, and aesthetics.

Paintings show a long tradition of suspending curtains across the lower walls of important sacred and domestic spaces. Those represented in the Cathedral of Aquileia (1180s), and a residential Vatican tower (ca.1200-1250) were probably locally made, with simple decoration painted on cotton and embroidered on linen.³

Later decorations in the Upper Church of San Francesco in Assisi show new possibilities arising as luxurious silks from Islamic Spain, the Near East, and Asia swept across Italy during the thirteenth century.⁴ The fictive hangings on the dados, however, create an aesthetic ideal that was not achievable with the imports then acquired piecemeal through trade and donation. The matched hangings around the transept (1280s) have roundels of Central-Asian-style foliated interlace that moved west across the Islamic world to Byzantium. The nave hangings (1290s) imitate the silks with geometric interlace from

¹ An illustrated version of this presentation is forthcoming in print. These notes cite only the documents and principal

² Alessandro Luzio and Rodolfo Renier. *Mantova e Urbino (1471-1539): Isabella d'Este ed Elisabetta Gonzaga nelle relazioni familiari e nelle vicende politiche* (Bologna, 1976), pp. 171-172.

³ Thomas E. A. Dale, *Relics, Prayer, and Politics in Medieval Venetia: Romanesque Painting in the Crypt of Aquileia Cathedral* (Princeton, 1997), pp. 66-68. Guido Cornini and Anna Maria De Strobel, "La torre di Innocenzo III prima dell'intervento dell'Angelico: funzione e decorazione pittorica," in *Il Beato Angelico e la Cappella Niccolina: storia e restauro*, ed. Francesco Buranelli (Novara, 2001), pp. 27-33.

⁴ Elvio Lunghi, *The Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi* (Florence, 1996), pp. 49, 63, 71, 92-93.

Islamic Spain that predominate in the narrative paintings above. The panels differ slightly along the nave, but match across it, creating a sophisticated harmony.

The narratives set in papal bedrooms more accurately represent both the Hispano-Moresque imports and their assemblage in furnishings: mostly single lengths of different fabrics, but the curtains of several matching pieces sewn together. The 1295 inventory of the papal collection taken shortly after the accession of Pope Boniface VIII, comprising what he inherited plus his early additions, confirms aspects of this picture. Among the Hispano-Moresque pieces yet-to-be-made-up are two pairs which could be similarly sewn together, and four singles. However, the majority of Spanish pieces were sets featuring the arms of Castile and Leon, probably gifts from the Christian monarchs.⁵

The pope's more numerous pieces of gold-brocaded so-called Tartar cloths imported from Central Asia and Persia show a striking taste for accumulating sets which could be made into ensembles of furnishings or liturgical garments. Two-thirds were pairs, or groups of three, four, or six matching pieces.⁶

Even more striking is the predominance of armorial sets in the furnishings of Italian silks from Lucca: a pair and a set of eight with the Savelli family shield of Pope Honorius IV (1285-87), and a trend-setting twenty-nine pieces in two sets with the Gaetani family shield of the new pope Boniface VIII. Only three sets with standard Lucchese figural patterns are listed.⁷ Simone Martini's posthumous representations of Boniface with a heraldic cloth-of-honor and throne cover in the predella of the Saint Louis altarpiece, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (ca. 1317), accurately reflect his taste.⁸

The inventory of the papal collection that reached Avignon in 1311 after the schism lists scores of wall-hangings, curtains, and bedcovers with Boniface's shield in the field and/or across the top.⁹ Decorations in a cardinal's residence in Avignon (1316-1320) echo Boniface's preference for sets of armorial wall-hangings.¹⁰ Through the Renaissance, heraldry was prominent in domestic furnishings of the ecclesiastical and secular elites, affecting both the rising Italian silk and Franco-Flemish tapestry industries.

There is little reliable evidence for textile furnishings in fourteenth-century Italy. By 1300, Venice produced silk and linen samites about 125 centimeters wide and two-to-three times as long that would have been suitable for sets of curtains and wall-hangings. The surviving examples known to me, however, were used singly as burial cloths and tomb wrappings.¹¹ Secular decorations would suggest that the taste for vair wall-hangings, sewn from dark backs and white stomachs of squirrels, soared in mid and late fourteenth-century Italy.

⁵ Émile Molinier, *Inventaire du trésor du Saint Siège sous Boniface VIII (1295)* (Paris, 1888), pp. 110-111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

⁸ Cecilia Jannella, *Simone Martini* (Florence, 1989), p. 44.

⁹ *Inventarium Thesauri Ecclesiae Romanae ad Perusium asservati iussu Clementis Papae in Registri Clementis Papae V... cura e studio Monachorum Ordinis S. Benedicti, Appendices I* (Rome, 1892), pp. 430, 433-440.

¹⁰ *Roma, Napoli, Avignon: arte di curia, arte di corte 1300-1377*, ed. Alessandro Tomei (Turin, 1966), p. 61.

¹¹ Marta Cuoghi Costantini, "Le linceul du Bienheureux Giacomo Salomoni," *Bulletin du CIETA* 70 (1992), pp. 111-115; Doretta Davanzo Poli, *Basilica del Santo: I tessuti* (Rome, 1995), pp. 19-21, 59-61.

While the preferred German blue pelts predominate in northern Italy,¹² native gray pelts are common in Tuscany and Umbria. Paintings in central Florence show vair suspended beneath garden views, covering the entire wall, and lining matching textiles.¹³ Such hangings would have been totally impractical and unhygienic against cold damp walls in winter, because the fur tends to disintegrate in moisture and smoke. Like the scenery or narratives commonly represented above the hangings, they create a fictional environment.

Similarly, the matched wall-to-wall textiles depicted in fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century bedrooms, as in the heavily restored Palazzo Davanzati, Florence, represent fashionable ideals rather than actual practice.¹⁴ For the 1409 visit of Duke Louis of Anjou, the rich international merchant Francesco Datini of Prato, who could well have bought or commissioned the real thing, had the walls the room repainted with fictive textiles with his guest's insignia.¹⁵ Unfortunately we do not know what the cotton-based fustions produced across northern Italy during the fourteenth century looked like, since they would have been suitable due to their size—up to thirty meters long—strength—usually mixed with linen or hemp threads—and cost—cheap. Certainly taste for such ensembles stimulated the Italian industry to produce luxury silks that could be readily coordinated in color or design.

The best surviving representation of mid fifteenth-century Italian domestic furnishings is Mantegna's illusionistic *Camera Picta* (*Painted Chamber*), where the marquis of Mantua slept, conducted business, and received visitors.¹⁶ It shows matched and alternating Italian textiles, and similar Turkish carpets. On the east and south walls, fictive cloths-of-gold hang from rods between pilasters. The bed was in the corner. Seven hooks on the walls and one in the ceiling indicate that it was furnished with a suspended tent-shaped canopy and curtains undoubtedly coordinated with the bedcover. On the west and north walls, fictive curtains are pulled back for stage-like views of courtly activities. Though Mantegna's representation is certainly idealized, the particular textiles, their usage, and coordination are realistic for the time of execution, between 1465 and 1474.

Cloths-of-gold were the most costly and elite fabrics. The Gonzagas certainly had a set of cloth-of-gold bed-hangings by 1505, when they were loaned to the Duke and Duchess of Urbino for the first visit of Pope Julius II. Mantegna showed two textile patterns, one floral and the other geometric, probably hung in alternation as on the south wall which is in better condition. The floral pattern is the hallmark Renaissance undulating pomegranate design. The geometric pattern features islamicising strapwork interlace then popular in various media. At the time of the paintings, both cloths-of-gold and brocades with "infinite knots" were made in Milan for the Sforza court, with whom the Gonzagas had close ties. In 1477 the Gonzaga's ambassador in Milan informed the marquise that she could no longer purchase cloth-of-gold there—implying that she had in the past.¹⁷ The pulled-back curtains are also of two types.

¹² Anne Dunlop, *Painted Palaces: The Rise of Secular Art in Early Renaissance Italy* (University Park, Penn., 2009), Figs. 108-109, 160-161.

¹³ *Federigo and the Angeli Workshop: Dream and Reality*, ed. Rosanna Caterina Proto Pisani and Francesca Baldri (Livorno, 2009), pp. 30-31, 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-59.

¹⁵ Dunlop, *op. cit.*, Figs. 18, 49, 88.

¹⁶ Rodolfo Signorini, *La più bella camera del mondo: La Camera Dipinta di Andrea Mantegna detta "degli Sposi"* (Mantua, 2002), pp. 103, 109, 118-119, 137.

¹⁷ Franca Leverotti, "The Organization of the Sforza Court and Silk Production," in *Silk Gold Crimson: Secrets and Technology at the Visconti and Sforza Courts*, ed. Chiara Buss (Milan, 2009), pp. 18-20.

On the west wall is an endless knot repeat in dark blue, red, and probably gold brocade. The classic undulating pomegranate pattern on the north wall is woven in dark blue velvet and gold.

Though it was certainly possible and desirable to display such rich textile ensembles, few could yet afford it. Competitive decorations completed by 1467 in the also-called *Camera Picta* in Federico Montefeltro's new palace in Urbino show fictive cloths-of-gold hanging behind standing men-of-arms, who celebrate the duke's fame as a condottiere. Over the fireplace, putti raise the hangings to display his coat-of-arms.¹⁸ The duke of Milan planned to hang new reception rooms in the Castello Sforzesco entirely in costly velvet in 1469, but ended up painting their walls with fictive heraldic hangings.¹⁹ During the sixteenth century, increasing wealth and silk production enabled elites to furnish such rooms with matching or coordinated velvets, damasks, or taffetas.

Ludovico Gonzaga's keen attention to the acquisition of harmonious furnishings is especially noteworthy regarding objects just becoming fashionable: upholstered furniture and Turkish carpets with geometric designs.²⁰ In late 1472, he ordered his agent in Venice to have two chairs made with upholstery of crimson velvet to match almost finished curtains. The *Camera Picta* shows his faldstool covered in gold brocaded blue velvet matching the curtains. In March 1459, Ludovico instructed his treasurer in Venice to ask the Milanese ambassador where the Sforzas had bought the carpets he had seen in the duchess's bedroom the previous summer. Ludovico assumed them to be a set custom-made to lay around a bed. He wrote: "Where they met at the corners, their medallions were so similar that they appeared made to shape in one piece. And on the benches of the bed, they appeared folded over, or half under and half beside the bed." If the bed was in a corner like Ludovico's, a pair would be needed. Due to the apparent consistency of the field medallions, they must have been the type dubbed 'Small Pattern Holbeins,' which has offset rows of medallions and quatrefoils that are quite constant in scale. A few days later, the treasurer reported that the Sforza's rugs had been found by chance, brought to Venice by an Indian and made in India. Also in March, Ludovico requested four more carpets of a specific size for his study—a large nearly 4 by 3 meters. It took the treasurer three weeks to follow up. No carpets were available in that size, but he'd keep looking. Regarding the bed carpets, he hoped to bring a two-piece set with the same sized medallions, therefore again Small Pattern Holbeins. The following day, he reported that the large carpets would have to be custom-made in Turkey. The two carpets represented in Ludovico's chamber twelve to fifteen years later are both probably the newly fashionable Holbeins with similar kufesque main borders. The left carpet is too short for a bed, unlike the right one

The four Holbein carpets depicted by Mantegna differ, and all are shown horizontally. Only the earliest in the San Zeno Altarpiece, Verona (1456-1459) has a peculiar main border running across the side rather than the fringed ends.²¹ In the *Camera Picta*, the right carpet's outer guard stripe has alternating S-shapes and diamonds like the San Zeno, but in regular alternation not an unusual mirror-reversed arrangement. Because of Mantegna's exacting accuracy, peculiarities in his carpets seem to be due to

¹⁸ Pietro Zampetti, "I pittori camerinesi e Giovanni Boccati," in *Urbino e Le Marche prima e dopo Raffaello*, ed. Maria Grazia Dal Poggetto and Paolo Dal Poggetto (Florence, 1983), pp. 37-39.

¹⁹ Evelyn Samuels Welch, "The Image of a Fifteenth-Century Court: Secular Frescoes for the Castello di Porta Giovia, Milan," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 53 (1990), pp. 166-168.

²⁰ Rodolfo Signorini, *Opus Hoc Tenue: La Camera dipinta di Andrea Mantegna*, *letteratura storica iconografica iconologica* (Parma, 1985), pp. 250-251, 305 n. 545.

²¹ Ronald Lightbown, *Mantegna, with a Complete Catalogue of the Paintings, Drawings, and Prints* (Oxford, 1986), Pls. 37 and 96 (*San Bernardino*, ca. 1460s, Brera, Milan).

their early date rather than his artistic misunderstanding or license, documenting a developing phase in what became a standardized production.

The left carpet is a two-compartment ‘Large Pattern Holbein’ with the corner pieces joined in the center, and stopping short of the motifs in the octagons called “wheels” in European inventories. Like a very early, perhaps thirteenth-century, Anatolian wheel carpet in the Vakıflar Museum, Istanbul,²² Mantegna’s carpet retains some features of older Persian carpet-making tradition: notably interlace woven over-and-under, and partial corner solutions in the main border.

Late fourteenth-century Persian illuminations commonly show turned kufesque borders with saw-tooth outer guard stripes like Mantegna’s. Its visible field interlace is in two colors woven over-and-under like the quatrefoils on a probably mid fifteenth-century Small Pattern Holbein fragment in the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum, Istanbul.²³ Such intricacy is already breaking down by the time of Ghirlandaio’s 1482-1483 altarpiece in the Uffizi.²⁴

We don’t know whether Ludovico Gonzaga acquired matching beside carpets, but he did get Turkish Holbeins with harmonious colors and features. His agents’ concerted searches in Istanbul in 1459 for the bedside pair and four of the same size certainly alerted merchants there to an Italian demand for ensembles. Their communications with producers in the interior may well have contributed to the increasing standardization of the Small Pattern Holbein design. The many surviving examples show astonishingly minimal variations in the field patterns and range of colors; differences are mainly in overall dimensions, distribution of colors, and details of secondary motifs. Europeans may have regarded carpets close in size and coloring, such as larger-than-average examples in Berlin and Philadelphia with counter-changing red and blue grounds, dateable several decades after Gonzaga’s orders, as pairs.²⁵

Documents show that early on some Italians did manage to acquire ensembles of carpets. Among the twenty-seven carpets listed in the 1457 inventory of Cardinal Pietro Barbo are two pairs, and another two “of the same work and craftsmanship” but different sizes.²⁶ Heading the list of sixty carpets in the 1483 estate inventory of Cardinal Federico Gonzaga, Ludovico’s son, are nine pairs of floor carpets. Three pairs with roundels were presumably Small Pattern Holbeins; the rest are unidentifiable.²⁷ A 1518 Vatican inventory mentioning carpets bequeathed to the papal collection by Innocent VIII (d. 1492) indicates that he acquired ensembles from different production centers. One pair with three large wheels and smaller ones were probably Turkish Large Pattern Holbeins with a staggered format. Among the seventeen called *damaschini* (Damascene), the most surprising were huge floor carpets with a central medallion which were divided in two “where they join together.” Five, in ten pieces, had Innocent’s arms in the corners. Six more in twelve pieces were old.²⁸ Contemporary documents use the terms *damaschini* and *caireni* (Cairene) interchangeably. At least some of the huge floor carpets must have

²² Walter B. Denny, *The Classical Tradition in Oriental Carpets* (London, 2002), p. 23.

²³ *Hali* 6, no. 2 (1984), p. 156.

²⁴ Ronald G. Kecks, *Domenico Ghirlandaio* (Florence, 1998), p. 221.

²⁵ Friedrich Spuhler, *Die Orientteppiche im Museum für Islamische Kunst Berlin* (Berlin, 1987), p. 145; Charles Grant Ellis, *Oriental Carpets in the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (Philadelphia, 1988), p. 13.

²⁶ Eugène Müntz, *Les arts à la cour des papes pendant le XVe et le XVIe siècle*, vol 2 (Paris, 1878), pp. 285-287.

²⁷ David Sanderson Chambers, *A Renaissance Cardinal and his Worldly Goods: The Will and Inventory of Francesco Gonzaga (1444-1483)* (London, 1992), pp. 153-154.

²⁸ Eugène Müntz, *Les arts à la cour des papes Innocent VIII, Alexandre VI, Pie III (1484-1503)* (Paris, 1898), pp. 287-288.

been Cairene Mamluks. In June 1489, Innocent's purser paid an astonishing 1,224 gold ducats for seven large carpets plus shipping from Cairo "where they are made."²⁹

The correspondence between Innocent's five armorial carpets and examples with Mamluk blazons, the huge fragmented one made in two separate halves in the Bardini and the Textile museums, and a smaller one with a single medallion in the Metropolitan,³⁰ support the majority opinion that Mamluk carpets were developed in Cairo for Sultan Qaitbay (r. 1468-96). Furthermore, the partial medallion carpet in Paris Bordone's *Return of the Doge's Ring*, Accademia, Venice (1534),³¹ could be a vertical half of a large two-piece Mamluk laid out horizontally.

Complications arise, however, because inventories of Borso d'Este, duke of Ferrara, list fifteen large floor carpets, each in two pieces, purchased between 1459 and 1466—before the rule of Qaitbay.³² Without more information they are a mystery.

Certainly, Innocent's purchases alerted the Cairo industry that catering to European taste, such as for large armorial carpets not found in Turkey, could be profitable. During the sixteenth century, Cairo factories produced square, circular, and cruciform table carpets for commercial export, and welcomed orders for carpets made to measure, in pairs, and with heraldry. Frescoes by the Moretto School in Brescia (by 1543)³³ demonstrate that the commercial production of square carpets accommodated the taste for ensembles.

Sixteenth-century Italian inventories, paintings, and surviving carpets show the popularity of two Turkish types that lent themselves to harmonious ensembles: the Lottos and the prayer rugs. Like the Small Pattern Holbeins, the Lottos have a standardized repeat that is quite constant in scale and easily produced in varied dimensions in response to market demands. For example, the numerous small examples three-plus quatrefoils long measuring about 170 by 110 centimeters are suitable for desks and tables.³⁴

The similarity in size and format of the rugs "with one mosque," as Cardinal Gonzaga's 1483 inventory describes them, undoubtedly contributed to their continuing popularity despite their early acknowledged connection to Muslim ritual. Like the small Lottos, their average size, about 170 by 125 centimeters, was suited to desks and tables. Four of the identifiable carpets festively displayed in the reception room of Antonio Costabili, a prominent Ferrarese courtier, are prayer rugs. The fifth is a Small Pattern Hobein similar in size and predominant red. The Garofalo School's representation (ca. 1507-1508)³⁵ is supported by the quantity of prayer rugs owned by Venetian nobles who would have entertained as lavishly: nine of seventeen in the 1521 inventory of Agostino Badoer, and ten of seventeen in the 1584 inventory of Lorenzo Correr.³⁶

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³⁰ Carlo Maria Suriano, "Mamluk Blazon Carpets," *Hali* 97 (March, 1998), pp. 74-75.

³¹ Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art 1300-1600* (Berkeley and London, 2002), p. 92.

³² Nello Forti Grazini, *L'arazzo ferrarese* (Milan, 1982), pp. 225-226.

³³ Mack, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 89; Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

³⁵ Anna Maria Fioravanti Baraldi, *Il Garofalo: Benvenuto Tisi pittore* (Rimini, 1993), Pl. IV.

³⁶ Pompeo Gherardo Molmenti, *La Storia di Venezia nella vita privata dalle origini alla caduta della repubblica* (Bergamo, 1928), vol. 2, pp. 477, 486.

I suggest that the European taste for carpet ensembles documented in Italian inventories beginning in the mid fifteenth century influenced the early Safavid Persian production, developed by Shah Abbas as an economic asset. Some of the earliest miscalled ‘Polonaises’ with heavy use of metal thread were made for Europeans. Among the shah’s diplomatic gifts to the doge of Venice was a unique pendant pair in the Treasury of St. Mark’s, probably delivered in 1622.³⁷ With grounds of tapestry-woven silk and gold, they are the most sumptuous of the few Polonaises with textile-inspired designs. The alternating rows reverse the direction of the palmettes vertically, and shift the alternation of blossom colors horizontally. Certainly they were commissioned to please Venetian taste for cloth-of-gold and color play.

³⁷ Kurt Erdmann, “Opere islamiche,” in Il Tesoro di San Marco, ed. Hans R. Hahnloser (Florence, 1971, vo. 2, pls. 110-111.