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Knitted Silk and Silver: those mysterious jackets

By Deborah Pulliam

This is a preliminary consideration of the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century gilt and silk knitted jackets, based on close examination of seventeen examples held in various collections in North America and Europe. Little is known about them, so that mostly speculation has been published as fact. They have been identified as jackets for men, created on knitting frames and on knitting machines, and in the past, were almost always identified as of Italian origin or manufacture.

My argument, having closely examined seventeen, is that

- they were in fact handknitted: the technology¹ simply did not exist in the early seventeenth century for two-color knitting, nor for reverse stockinette and garter stitch, nor were the frames capable of knitting with the metal - covered yarns. Too, a few of the jackets have sleeves knit in the round, also impossible in frame knitting in the seventeenth century. The range of gauge in this sample is 13 to 20 stitches to the inch. Knitting frames were limited to no more than eight stitches to the inch until well into the seventeenth century, and ribbing attachments were not invented until the 1730s.²

- they were made for women. The largest one I've examined is from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [AC 1995.1.1], which has a 36 inch chest. The average of twelve jackets is 30 inches. The smallest has a 27 inch chest, from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts [06.2397], but the garments are not easy to measure in hard and fast terms. Despite the small circumferences, most have long sleeves and bodies, and would not suit children.

- More importantly, the cut of most of the jackets follows ladies' fashion of the period much more than that of men.

- At least some were made in England. Although they are often referred to as Italian, I would argue this is based on the fact that many of the floral patterns are Italianate, which were readily available in the popular pattern books all over Europe. There is at least one jacket in a Scandinavian collection with an English export seal, according to Santina Levey. Many of the motifs, including those in Scandinavia, appear on the sixteenth century Burato sampler from Little Morton Hall.

- They were independently made by different people, although the knitting of the majority was done in consistently the same fashion: a rectangle for the back, two narrower rectangles for the fronts, and two rectangles for the sleeves, all knitted flat and sewn together. All shaping was done in the construction; by taking larger seam allowances, folding under edges, etc.. There are very few similarities in actual construction: i.e., one is fully lined, one has lined sleeves, another has only lined cuffs. It's possible that separate elements of one garment were made by different knitters, and

¹ William Lee, about whom almost nothing is known, invented a crude knitting frame in 1589. However, it appears he never managed to make his invention into a functioning model, or viable commercial endeavor. Sometime after the turn of the seventeenth century, and presumably his death, others adapted it for use in creating stockings.

² Eric Kerridge, *Textile Manufactures in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 1985), 135.

assembled by another. This might account for the flat knitting, as it would allow more people to work on one garment, and possibly speed up production.

As mentioned above, a few have sleeves knit in the round. Some fasten with buttons in buttonholes, others have various types of loops. Some have no apparent fasteners, and made have been simply pinned shut. One, in the Museum of Costume at Nottingham [#22], has paper, printed with medieval black letter type, as the interlining of the button band.

- So far, none have been found made with gold - covered thread. All are silver foil wrapped around either grey or white silk thread, or for a gold effect, around yellow silk. There are two possible explanations for this: either real gold thread was never used, or any examples with real gold were unraveled during the eighteenth century, when “drizzling” or unraveling gold threads, was a popular activity as a means of salvaging gold from old embroidery and clothing. The silk used for knitting is the same in all the examples: bundles of four to eight two-ply yarns, knitted as one element. The individual two-ply yarns are slackly plied, and may have been originally intended for embroidery.

- I would also argue that the jackets were quickly and cheaply made; and are not luxury goods in the traditional sense. In closely examining seventeen, I’ve discovered there appear to be two different quality ranges. There are also a few different “styles”, which I believe were made for specific markets.

In terms of quality, some are well designed, in the layout of the main floral design and the borders. These tend to be made with better quality yarns, particularly the silver-covered silk, as in a coral and gold one from the Boston MFA [1940.22 43.877] A purple, silver and gold one from the Victoria and Albert Museum [346.1898] is also an excellent example.

Others seem to have been made with no sense of design, from poorer quality silver thread, like one of the examples from the National Museum of Scotland [1973.29]. In these examples, very little silver covers the silk core.

There are also a few that have a more specific “masculine” motif, like one from the Metropolitan Museum of Art [TSR 14.134.18] which was originally identified as being Balkan. It is very similar to one from LACMA [AC 1995.1.1] and another from the MFA [43.869].

The Metropolitan’s initial identification was later changed to Spanish or Italian. This style may have been made in another area, for a different market.

A very handsome model, also rather masculine in character, is in the museum of fashion & textiles in Paris [UCAD #996.68.1]. Although I have not been able to examine this example, I doubt the “silhouette” or construction technique is original, as it was completely dismantled during the course of conservation, and later reassembled.

There have been some obstacles in discovering more about these jackets, including:

- So far, none have been found with any provenance. Most seem to have come on the modern market by way of dealers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The only ones that can be dated with any certainty are two used in the burial of two royal

children in Denmark in the 1620s. Interestingly, these adult-sized jackets were not new when they were used as burial clothes. Marta Hoffman dates them at about 1600.³

- So far, none have been found in any kind of graphic. Janet Arnold probably looked at more portraits, paintings, engravings and drawings than anyone in the field (and had assembled her own library of over 100,000 images from public and private, and very obscure, collections) and had never found one in her many years of research.

- Most have been repaired, often extensively, and in some cases, heavily reworked. The example from the Burrell Collection in Glasgow [29/126] was taken apart and rebuilt to suit 1620s fashion, with a flared skirt, tight waist and lowered neckline. The purple and gold one in the V&A [346.1898], began as a beautifully designed and executed model using both silver and gold threads on purple silk. At some point, however, the pieces were dismantled and the rectangles reassembled as a small cape. My impression is the fringe is nineteenth century. It is possible the piece was reworked for medieval fancy dress, popular during the Victorian era.

At least one, at the Metropolitan [TSR 46.156.117], has had its sleeves removed, possibly by a dealer, and identified as a “vest”. I’ve no doubt it originally had sleeves like the others.

- In other collections, there are detached sleeves and at least one or two samples, like that in Boston’s MFA [95.501], 10.5 inches square. These pieces may have been disseminated for knitters to work from. They were made in a period when most people were functionally illiterate, especially craftsmen. What we know as knitting patterns today were not created until the nineteenth century, with an increase in women’s literacy and the advent of women’s magazines like *Godey’s*. Until then, knitters generally learned new techniques and adapted ideas by looking at other work.

And a few conclusions:

Many knitters especially like to compare these jackets with other knitting, in particular, the blue “vest”, what Americans would call an undershirt, worn by Charles I to his execution in 1649, and now owned by the Museum of London. It is knitted entirely of silk, as a pullover, and is clearly the work of a master craftsman.

There really doesn’t seem to be much connection, especially from the point of view of a knitter: the technique is quite different, as well as the end use: Charles’ shirt was used for warmth, while the gilt jackets were clearly outerwear. Charles’ shirt may well have been imported: it is almost identical to the popular “nightshirts” worn in Norway in the seventeenth century. Hoffman insists these were not made in Scandinavia but were imported, possibly from Germany. Charles’ shirt lacks the elaborate embroidery worked on the Norwegian examples, as well as the “pile” or plushing worked into the interior, both features which are worked after the knitting is complete. As mentioned above, all of the silk and gilt jackets were knit flat and sewn together, while Charles’ shirt, and other similar examples, were knit in the round.

³ See Marta Hoffman, “Of knitted nightshirts and detachable sleeves in Norway in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Opera Textilia Variorum Temporum*, edited by Inger Estham and Margareta Nockert (Stockholm, 1988), 131-144.

The gilt and silk jackets seem to be much closer to the embroidered polychrome jackets that were so popular in the sixteenth century, and which disappeared by about 1630. The cut of the garment is similar, and the knitted jackets could have been worn in much the same way as Margaret Laton's [V&A, T.228.1994]. Laton's jacket was made in about 1610, and altered a few years later, as evidenced in her portrait, painted in 1620 [V&A E.214.1994].

Brenda Rosseau, of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, has done extensive research on the embroidered jackets, and has closely examined about two dozen of them. She has also found about fifty images showing the jackets being worn. Her conclusion is that the jackets were an element of masque dress, and were popular in the late sixteenth century, up to about 1625. By 1630, they were only being used by servants, usually worn-out cast offs. The earliest portrait depicting one is dated about 1590.

The gilt and silk knit jackets appear to have had the same relatively short span of popularity, as well as following essentially the same silhouette as the embroidered jackets. However, the difference in quality is remarkable. While the embroidered jackets appear to be of the highest quality, the knitted jackets in general are sloppily made and crudely assembled, possibly for consumers who wanted a colorful and flashy garment but who could not afford the work of skilled professionals.

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