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### Love for Fabric... Death by Cloth

It can be easy to take for granted our ability to document current fashion and textile trends. Of course, with the lack of modern technology, style trends were not always as easily documented. Furthermore, there are very few physical remaining pieces of fabric. Even the material that does still exist may not be a real representation to the trends; the fibers have deteriorated and dyes have faded.<sup>1</sup> This can make studying textiles incredibly difficult. Paintings, luckily, have a similar ability as modern technology and digital cameras do today to capture history.<sup>2</sup> For fashion trends, many paintings are mixed with varied historical styles but the textile inspiration is more likely to be from that current era. Paolo Veneziano's 1354 altarpiece, Virgin and Child with Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint John the Baptist, Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Anthony of Padua, exemplifies popular surface designs of the 14th century.

This tempera painting on wood is not very large; the entire altarpiece is only 100 cm by 60 cm.<sup>3</sup> The Virgin Mary takes up the majority of this painting. She is not only the largest figure but also is on the center panel of this triptych and wears the most interesting attire. Even Christ, sitting in her lap, is wearing a simple silky gown compared to Mary's exquisitely patterned dress. While other artists in Veneziano's time were trying to create naturalistic depictions of cloth, the print on Mary's gown makes her lack volume. The dress pattern does not bend or shape to match the curves of Mary's body. The Christ Child has the most volume of the subjects with his chubby limbs, shown with creases and color modeling. Christ's belly protrudes through his gown, unlike the other figures with a lack of volume beneath their clothing.

The figures also lack depth as there is no real description of the space. This instantly flattens the image. The only way to know the figures reside in the same space is because of the simple gold

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<sup>1</sup> *History of Textile*, Antique Textiles, (Woven Treasures: <http://www.textileasart.com/weaving.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor B Saxe, *Notes on Mediaeval Textiles* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin), Vol. 20, No. 9 (Sep., 1925), pp. 220-225

<sup>3</sup> Erich Lessing and Vincent Pomarède, *The Louvre: All the Paintings*

background and green floor. Another reason for the lack of depth depicted in this painting may partly be due to the difficulty to layer and add depth with egg tempera painting techniques. Yet, painting technique has nothing to do with the total abstraction of the human body for the Saints. With less realistic forms, Veneziano isn't trying to make the figures anything more than two dimensional flat forms. It is as if the frame was made first and then the figures had to be painted to fit within the preexisting shape. The Saints proportions are similar to current day fashion drawings. They are tall and thin with abnormally long legs.

To the left of Mary, Saint John the Baptist stands awkwardly with a scroll. His odd proportions are even more obvious as he is the only saint with his calves and forearms visible. Along with his wonky proportions, Saint John the Baptist is wearing an odd furry brown frock beneath his hunter green cape. Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Anthony of Padua flank each side of the altarpiece wearing floor length, loose, brown robes. The two figures are both holding red bound books with gold patterns similar to the fabric behind Mary. Saint Francis of Assisi is also holding a gold cross. Saint John the Evangelist stands to the right of Mary. He is wearing a light cobalt blue gown with a bright red cloak with a deep green lining wrapped around him. His head is tilted down as he glances at an open book he holds with both of hands.

As many of the characteristics of this painting seem stylized and unique, Mary and Baby Jesus enthroned with Saints flanked by their side was a common image painted by Paolo Veneziano and other artists at this time. Mary was an especially popular subject in Venice, where Paolo Veneziano spent most of his life (except, during the plague he moved to Dalmatia).<sup>4</sup> During the 1300's, Mary was often used to illustrate Venice's triumph and harmony.<sup>5</sup>

Venice was very stable politically and economically in contrast to many other cities in Trecento Italy. Venice's busy port was a key part to the success of the city. In the 14th century, a variety of

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<sup>4</sup> Michelangelo Muraro, *Paolo Da Venezia*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Michelangelo Muraro, *Paolo Da Venezia*, 93.

textiles, sugar, spices, pearls, carpets, velvet, wood, and other luxury items were traded daily.<sup>6</sup> Local artists were constantly being inspired by worldly influences. Some say Venetian art does not even have its own unique style because it has been inspired by so many other places. Venice was the melting pot of Italy, as, Michelangelo Muraro wrote in his book, “Even that which was not Venetian became Venetian.”<sup>7</sup> Without the links to China, India, Egypt, and the Islamic world, Venice would not have thrived to the degree it was able to.

One crucial item, of Venice’s trade history, was that of fabric dyeing materials.<sup>8</sup> Some of the most popular items included, brazilwood, iac and indigo.<sup>9</sup> In a way to appreciate the luxurious goods, many artists, including Veneziano, payed close attention to the patterns and textures of cloth. Brazilwood was crucial for making the rich red dyes; similar to the shade of Mary’s backdrop, underdress, and Saint John the Evangelist’s cloak in this altarpiece. The color red often was used in Virgin Mary’s clothing by many artist’s during the medieval ages.<sup>10</sup> The color signifies wealth.<sup>11</sup> Indigo was also a common color of the clothing of Virgin Mary. Unlike red, this color dye no longer symbolized wealth as it once had; blue dye was cheaper, more accessible, and even the 14th century poor had blue in their clothing.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, this was a way to show how Mary is humble at the same time as being holy.

Another particularly intriguing element of this painting, is the pattern design on Mary’s gown, that exhibits many of the common 14th century surface design trends. For example, the influence of eastern art, and the increase of floral and naturalistic patterns.<sup>13</sup> Also, many other textile prints at this time use a

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Covington, *East Meets West in Venice* (Saudi Armaco World: <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200802/east.meets.west.in.venice.htm>), 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Michelangelo Muraro, *Paolo Da Venezia*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Lady Siobhan NicDhuinnshleibhe, *A BRIEF HISTORY OF DYESTUFFS & DYEING* (Online <http://kws.atlantia.sca.org/dyeing.html>), 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Lady Siobhan NicDhuinnshleibhe, *A BRIEF HISTORY OF DYESTUFFS & DYEING*

<sup>10</sup> Melinda Walt. *Renaissance Velvet Textiles*. In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/velv/hd\\_velv.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/velv/hd_velv.htm) (August 2011)

<sup>11</sup> Melinda Walt. *Renaissance Velvet Textiles*

<sup>12</sup> Melinda Walt. *Renaissance Velvet Textiles*

<sup>13</sup> “Eastern Influences on Textiles” (Online: <http://venice.umwblogs.org/exhibit/early-modern-venetian-clothing/eastern-influences-on-textiles/>), 2008.

dropped repeated pattern type.<sup>14</sup> The central blossoming plant in Mary's gown, has similar attributes of the popular pomegranate patterns. Pomegranates, in China, were the symbol of immortality and fertility.<sup>15</sup> Both of those traits are applicable to the Virgin Mary.

While the Virgin Mary was always a common figure in paintings, she began to show up more frequently after the plague of 1348.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on the Virgin Mary began because many people believed that God was punishing humans for their lack of devotion to her and to religion in general. Not only is Mary connected to the plague, but also fabric is one of the key components for the spread of the Black Death. The plague's actual cause is still being debated, but most historians agree that people became infected by flea bites.<sup>17</sup> Once bitten by an infected flea a victim would usually die within three days.<sup>18</sup> Symptoms included chills, pain in limbs, headache, vomiting, slurred speech, and boils on armpits as well as the groin.<sup>19</sup> As soon as someone showed symptoms they would be quarantined. However, the sick were even more infectious prior to any of showing any of these symptoms.<sup>20</sup>

Some worried that the plague was spread simply by looking at an infected person.<sup>21</sup> As the fleas often stayed in the seams of clothing it had little to do with the cleanliness of the person since the fleas were rarely visible. Worst of all, since there was such a coveting of textiles and wish to recycle materials, clothing of the dead was often reused.<sup>22</sup> There were even sumptuary laws, regulating consumption and increasing the need to recycle goods.<sup>23</sup> These laws were partly in hope to decrease trading, yet, the infected fleas often still resided in the repurposed attire, thus, it actually helped to spread the plague within

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<sup>14</sup> Christa C. Mayer Thurman, *European Textiles* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Press), 2001.

<sup>15</sup> "Eastern Influences on Textiles" (online)

<sup>16</sup> Louise Marshall, *Manipulating The Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy* (University of Chicago Press: Renaissance Quarterly), Vol. 47, No. 3, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel K Cohn Jr, *4 Epidemiology of the Black Death and Successive Waves of Plague* (Online: Cambridge Medical History Journal) 2008.

<sup>18</sup> CJ Duncan and S Scott, *HISTORY OF MEDICINE What caused the Black Death?* (Postgrad Med Journal), 2005.

<sup>19</sup> CJ Duncan and S Scott, *HISTORY OF MEDICINE*, 317.

<sup>20</sup> CJ Duncan and S Scott, *HISTORY OF MEDICINE*, 312.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel K Cohn Jr, *4 Epidemiology of the Black Death*,

<sup>22</sup> Cathleen S. Hoeniger, *Cloth of Gold and Silver...* 154

<sup>23</sup> Cathleen S. Hoeniger, *Cloth of Gold and Silver...* 154.

a city.<sup>24</sup> During the span of three years, 40% of the European population died.<sup>25</sup> Even once the plague was over, like many cities, Venice struggled up until 1353 due to lack of population and a struggling economy.<sup>26</sup>

The plague was devastating on so many levels; the Venetian population searched for a reason and clung to the Virgin Mary for support. Paolo Veneziano created several works with similar styles to this painting in response to the demand for more religious art from the population of Venice.<sup>27</sup> While a single image is not enough to extrapolate about a whole decade, the history of the port, the plague, and the multitude of paintings with these elements tell a lot about Venice in the 14th century.

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<sup>24</sup> Samuel K Cohn Jr, *4 Epidemiology of the Black Death*.

<sup>25</sup> CJ Duncan and S Scott, *HISTORY OF MEDICINE*, 312..

<sup>26</sup> Michelangelo Muraro, *Paolo Da Venezia*, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Michelangelo Muraro, *Paolo Da Venezia*, 24.

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