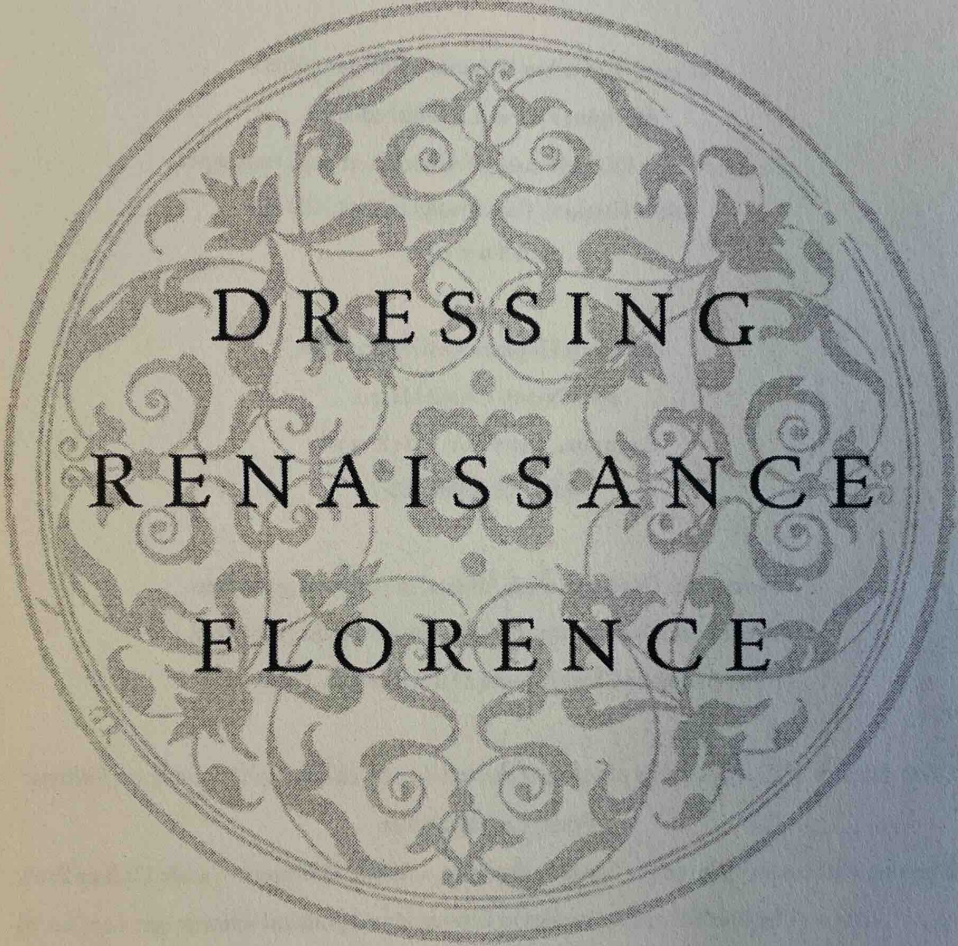


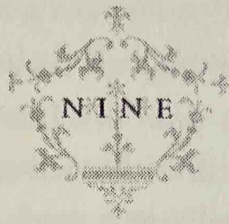
CAROLE COLLIER FRICK



DRESSING
RENAISSANCE
FLORENCE

Families, Fortunes, & Fine Clothing

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SUMPTUARY LEGISLATION AND THE "FASHION POLICE"

SOCIETAL ORDER

The strict external ordering of garments using sumptuary restrictions for policing who was allowed to wear what seems to have been most rigid where hierarchy did not rest on birthright; where it was literally believed that clothes made (or could make) the man.¹ The colors, shapes, and dimensions of the garments worn by the inhabitants of Renaissance Florence displayed a complex and multivalent vestimentary code, which expressed their values and beliefs. Simply put, clothing made social place a visual reality. Filarete (ca. 1400–ca. 1469) expressed his concerns regarding the appropriate clothes in his *Libro architetonico*, writing that in fifteenth-century society, the idea was widely accepted that a person's rank (or *qualità*) in society should be reflected not only in the structure of his abode but also in his mode of dress; larger and finer homes and clothing defined "larger and finer" men.² *Il libro del sarto*, a compilation of clothing styles and patterns printed in Venice in the 1580s, took this notion into the pictorial realm, attempting to illustrate some sort of natural sartorial hierarchy. Here, all "respectable" ranks of society were represented, from mounted knights to high-born women. Paulo Getrevi writes that in this first printed visualization of Italian high society, "every costume marks the single person of the scene in

a definite gradation of the social scale, but speaks continually with the preceding and the following."³

In pursuit of the proper clothing, we have seen that the hundred or so tailors in Florence at any given time had lists of debitori that ran into the hundreds and constituted a roll call of the rich and powerful. Furthermore, by dressing the females of their families in a competitive dazzle of fabric design, boldly contrasting colors, surface embroidery, and family jewelry for important events, Florentine oligarchs were able to demonstrate to their families, friends, and neighbors a certain nonchalant largesse at one remove—on the bodies of their women. Inventories of personal possessions showed an inordinate portion of their total wealth was spent on clothes; 40 percent, as we have seen, was not unheard of. The communal government expended continual energy to rein in the extravagant fluidity of dress with its repeated passage of sumptuary legislation, but, flurries of statuta notwithstanding, fashion-consciousness did overwhelm the city, and clothing became, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, ever more difficult to control.

FIRST SUMPTUARY LAWS

The first mention in Florentine records of a phenomenon called "fashion," of the need to constantly change and update one's (still-wearable) clothing, is probably to be found in Villani's early fourteenth-century *Cronica*. In lauding the wide-ranging sumptuary legislation passed in April 1330 (which he believed was much needed), Villani also warned that sumptuary laws seemed to spur fashion into being. "But in spite of all these strong ordinances, outrages remained; and though one could not have cut and figured cloth, they wanted striped cloth and foreign cloth, the most that they could have, sending as far as Flanders and Brabant for it, not worrying about the cost," he writes.⁴ This was not the first sumptuary legislation the Commune had passed. Ronald Rainey puts that initial law (now lost) in 1281, and the first laws specifically regarding women's garments in the *Consulte* of 1290, which refers only to the registration of clothes.⁵ In Florence, right from the beginning, concern to control clothing, and thereby properly mark social place, was played out through the women.⁶ Fiscal concerns seem to have led to the early communal practice, which continued throughout the fifteenth

century, of allowing men and women who wanted to dress elaborately to buy licenses from the city by paying a tax on their forbidden clothes, gemstones, precious metal ornaments, and pearls.⁷ There was also an attempt on the part of the popular government to register any offending clothes that had been made before the laws had gone into effect and tag such garments with a communal lead seal (making them *vesti bullati* or *vesti timbrati*), which would force owners to have new, less showy attire made. This was tried first in Florence in 1290, according to Catherine Killerby, and required the advice and assistance of the craftspeople of the Florentine marketplace who had the expertise to make an accurate assessment of grades of fabric, qualities of dyestuff, weight of precious metals, and clarity of gemstones. They were drafted, however unwilling some may have been, into the service of communal officials.⁸ Further sumptuary laws were enacted in 1299 and every few years thereafter.

Whereas the sumptuary laws of northern European courts were aristocratic in origin, Diane Hughes notes, the impulse to restrict splendor in clothing had a distinctly republican mien in Italy. Florentine sumptuary legislation started out as an anti-aristocratic move by newly empowered major guildsmen to restrict the sartorial power of the newly outlawed magnate families.⁹ This impulse, of course, changed over time with the increasing display of the new "aristocrats," and in fact, as Marco Parenti remembered (p. 78), the popular Commune attempted to marshal its citizens' attire into its service whenever it suited the city's designs. Even early on, whereas the Commune acted aggressively to rein in individual display within the upper reaches of society, certain signs of luxe (jewels, pearls, gold, silver, exotic fur trim) could still be worn by some magnates (mounted knights) and selected professional orders (doctors of law, doctors of medicine, and their wives). On these occasions, clothing served to aggrandize not the individual but rather the community controlling the display. Here, dress assumed an entirely different function, as a splendid collective uniform. Trexler writes that while sumptuary laws were not suspended during the Feast of San Giovanni, for example, they also "were not enforced during celebrations; indeed it was a mark of honor to the personage being honored that the normal rules of dress were waived."¹⁰ Individuals and even family groups were both temporarily submerged in this communal identity on these occasions.¹¹

COMMUNAL STATUTES OF 1322-1325

In 1322, the commune of Florence made its first large compilation all existing laws in the Statuti of 1322-25, which produced a sweeping list of restrictions on women's attire, setting limits on headgear and jewelry design, the numbers of gowns (four), types and amounts of fabric, quality of dye, and types of ornamentation allowed.¹² The woman's father or husband, who had bought the offending item, was to be fined 100 lire, but the tailor or seamstress who had made the gown was fined *double* that amount: 200 lire.¹³ Officials could also search the shops of goldsmiths and tailors for restricted ornaments or garments.¹⁴ It has also been pointed out, however, that any fine paid out for a woman by her father or a kinsman, no matter if she were married or unmarried, could later be taken out of her dowry funds either at the time of her marriage or at the restitution of her dowry upon the death of her husband. This put the burden of the sumptuary fine ultimately on the woman herself.¹⁵

Five years later, the Statuti of 1322-25, however wide-ranging their scope, were roundly trumped by the 1330 law so fervently endorsed by Villani. This piece of legislation was apparently the first attempt to put out a virtual firestorm of fashion activity and imposed the most extensive list of restrictions specifically on women's clothes.¹⁶ In this early period, communal sumptuary legislation labored in vain to stem the influence of foreign styles, often tagged in contemporary sources as from "beyond" ("alla di là"), which had been unwittingly allowed to enter fourteenth-century Florence through the clothes worn by the wife of the first French podestà, hired in 1326, and also the second, in 1342.¹⁷ We do know that regional styles could easily be distinguished in clothing from their descriptions in trousseaux inventories and letters of the time. Women write of "le camicie maschili a modo di Firenze," "fogia mantuana," "le vesti alla milanese," "le vesti alla romana," and even "le borse alla ferrarese e alla genovese."¹⁸ Foreign influence could be detected especially in the design of a garment's sleeves, which would come under increasing scrutiny by sumptuary officials.¹⁹

THE UFFICIALI DELLE DONNE

In response to these foreign styles, on April 1, 1330, the Commune banned all ornaments for Florentine women, and proceeded to create the first tellingly

named fashion police, the *Ufficiali delle donne*, which was charged with enforcing these bans. Six citizens were chosen to elect a foreign notary for the job, who was to have a salary and a staff from the communal government for his six-month term of office, during which he was to patrol the streets, bridges, and piazze of the city, on the lookout for women, children, and men whose garments were suspected of violating current laws.²⁰ Apparently, this duty was so undesirable that in 1333, the Commune decided to have the bishop of Siena appoint the foreign official, further distancing Florentine males from this job of policing their own.²¹ From the autumn of 1343, we have the names of fifty-one women harassed and apprehended by the roving officials in only three days' work at the end of October. The records also contain elaborate descriptions of their clothes.²² Six years later, a set of documents from 1349, undoubtedly representative of many more, details the vicissitudes of another *Ufficiale delle donne*, one Ser Donato di Piccolo di Giovanni of Monte Ramucino, who had set about his work after having had the required public proclamation of current sumptuary restrictions made in all the usual places.²³ Not only did he encounter evasive tactics on the part of some women, but active resistance from their male companions. If a woman ran into a church, she had sanctuary, and the official had to wait outside until she reappeared, no law enforcement official being allowed to enter the sacred space in pursuit of an offender.²⁴

The sumptuary officials could be found doing their rounds in many areas of the city; locations noted in their logbooks included the churches of San Lorenzo, Santa Maria Maggiore, and the Cathedral, as well as the area near the Ponte Vecchio, the loggia of the Tornaquinci, and in various other streets and piazze of Florence.²⁵ Writing their descriptions in the required official Latin, however, the officials struggled to describe what they were visually encountering on the streets with the limited written language of the formal (and by then already inadequate) sumptuary legislation itself. This disjuncture of language would prove to be a key factor in the development of fashion innovation. In clothing, there would be new styles, new ornaments, new *everything*, to keep one step ahead of being the target for the clothing categories available to the sumptuary police.²⁶

These officials focused their work on the excesses of female finery but could catch other offenders in their nets as well. Men, although rarely cited, could be written up for clothing excesses if their garb was deemed to be too

feminine. For example, while we have no written records of citations for men wearing extremely short or figure-revealing tunics and codpieces, or hose partially unlaced (even though we have visual records), we *do* have arrests for the wearing of platform shoes or ruffles and pleats.²⁷ Even improperly ornamented children in Florence could be stopped and their parents fined.²⁸ The Ufficiale Ser Donato himself also kept a special section for craftspeople who were apprehended for selling goods and services for more money than was allowed by communal statute.²⁹ Tailors were, of course, particularly in the line of fire of sumptuary officials, as perceived co-conspirators in producing luxe; a tailor was apprehended in 1377 for having fashioned a prohibited item, another in 1397, one Biagio di Pace, for having produced a cloak with sleeves that exceeded the limit set for cloth yardage per sleeve.³⁰ This points to the problems of attempting to enforce prohibitions at odds with the very basis of the Florentine economy itself.

EXPANSION OF MAGISTRACIES

But the intrusive Ufficiali were not the only vehicle for the policing of excess in fifteenth-century Florence. Accusers could secretly place their written denunciations of suspected wrongdoing in one of the many denunciation boxes (*tamburi*) available in communal offices around the city, inside Orsanmichele and San Piero Scheraggio and in one of the columns of the Cathedral itself.³¹ Andrea Zorzi writes that in fact around 50 percent of the cases prosecuted by various magistracies at the beginning of the 1430s originated in a secret denunciation.³² Among guildsmen, artisans also operated as spies, giving their accusations to the magistrates of the Arti.³³ Not content with anonymous tips, however, throughout the later Trecento and into the Quattrocento, the Commune expanded its concern with dress by creating new official bodies of citizens to oversee sartorial practice. Not only was the dress of the body of the "honorable" woman their focus, but also as Hughes has shown, the control of less desirable marginalized groups within the community by the marking of their costume.³⁴ Sumptuary legislation turned from an earlier focus on fiscal matters and anti-aristocratic bias, shifting instead to a moral stance. As early as 1384, the Commune had made an effort to sartorially link prostitutes with the Old Testament passage from Isaiah that

excoriates vain women with "wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling sound with their feet," by requiring prostitutes to cover their eyes with veils (while wearing platform shoes and bells on their heads) to act the part of biblical whores.³⁵ Certainly, in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the short stories of Sacchetti, Sercambi, and other *novellisti*, many plots turn on the deception of a woman of base worth and easy virtue masquerading in beautiful clothes as an honorable matron.³⁶

The Ufficiali dell'onestà | In 1403, the Commune, in what has been seen as a response to a generalized fear of potentially disruptive sexual activity, created the Ufficiali dell'onestà, the first city police force specifically for the regulation of the prostitute population.³⁷ This magistracy, unlike that of the Ufficiali delle donne, was not composed of foreigners, but rather of eight Florentine citizens, two from each of the city's four quarters, who were chosen from the *borsa* of citizens eligible for civic office, and served for terms of six months. These Ufficiali were paid no salaries from the Commune, however, but rather got a percentage of the registrations and fines collected from those they managed and arrested. There were at least ten other citizens involved in the Onestà; a notary, treasurers, secretary, and six messengers to run errands.³⁸ This agency had a conveniently central location in the city, inside the church of San Cristofano, where the Piazza Duomo now feeds into Via Calzaiuoli.³⁹ Of course, over time, it not only dealt with the clothing of prostitutes but with their sexual and social practices as well. Prostitutes had to be licensed, marked by special clothing signs, which changed over time, segregated into specific bordello areas, which also changed over time, and were forbidden certain sexual acts considered too lascivious.⁴⁰ As John Brackett has shown, official agencies proliferated in Florence in an attempt to control this potentially dangerous element (even if many of the women involved in prostitution were of foreign origin) and other segments of the city population that were deemed a cause for concern.⁴¹ For example, in 1421, the Commune created the new Conservatori dell'onestà dei monasteri, which was assigned oversight for the morality of convents.⁴²

Officiales super ornamentis mulierum | The creation of this magistracy was followed six years later in 1427 with a new sumptuary police board, the

Officiales super ornamentis mulierum. This board, elected from the ranks of Florentine citizens like the Ufficiali dell'onestà, not only was responsible for enforcing existing sumptuary laws but had the power to amend those laws, subject to the approval of communal officials.⁴³ The enforcement of the laws proved so difficult, however, that the Commune could find few citizens willing to serve, and in the years between 1421 and 1439, the board's duties were often assigned to other official agencies.⁴⁴

The Ufficiali di notte | The communal government seems to have first conflated control of sumptuary excesses in dress and prostitution in 1439, after the creation of the Ufficiali di notte in 1432. Officially, this new magistracy was assigned the job of controlling prostitution (female *and* male) and other suspicious activities occurring at night, but seven years into its existence, it was also charged with enforcing sumptuary laws relating to women in general, no matter what their occupation.⁴⁵ Many men complained that it was hard to tell honest women from whores, and that clothing was the culprit, as the popular preachers of the time stressed in their sermons to the masses. There is a general consensus among historians that the stance of the Church on sumptuary excesses was distinctly misogynist. The sin of *luxuria* was particularly threatening to the weak nature of women, and the popular Franciscan preachers of the early Quattrocento continually link women, depraved sexuality, and come-hither clothes. Hughes quotes San Bernardino preaching to the women of Siena: "You are not as you used to be. I see a widow today . . . with her forehead bare and her cloak drawn back to show her cheek. And how she shapes it over her brow! That is a prostitute's gesture."⁴⁶ Brackett cites the case (undoubtedly one of many) of a Vicenzia Sereni, a Roman woman working in Florence, who was not only charged with living outside one of the areas designated as a bordello district but also with wearing fine clothes of gold and silver, with necklaces of pearls and gemstones, in defiance of sumptuary restrictions on prostitutes.⁴⁷ The linkage between overdressed women, prostitutes, and Jews was not accidental in Florence, because communal officials deemed it necessary for each of these groups be clearly marked.⁴⁸ It was in the same year that the Ufficiali di notte assumed responsibility for sumptuary enforcement that the city's Jewish population were required to be marked for the first time.⁴⁹ The moral state of the city's

convent population was also a concern. The role of Franciscan Observant friars in fanning fears of the potential moral depravity of all these groups has been shown by Hughes.⁵⁰ In fact, as early as 1433, the Conservatori dell'onestà dei monasteri, which had only been in existence for a dozen years, had been joined to the Ufficiali di notte.⁵¹ By the sixteenth century, these officials (along with the Ufficiali dell'onestà), operated from rooms that were centrally located off the Piazza dei Tre Re between Orsanmichele and Via Calzaiuoli but semi-hidden in the tiny back lane, renamed the Vicolo dell'Onestà, in order better to apprehend anyone out and about at night who was in violation of the sumptuary laws, whether honorable or not.⁵²

The larger communal oversight board for sumptuary laws in the Renaissance period would become the Conservatori di leggi.⁵³ This body's main duty was the prosecution of official corruption, but in 1459, it was also assigned the job of monitoring sumptuary excesses. Now, they took on the responsibility for publicizing the dress restrictions and actively enforcing the ever-changing sumptuary codes, as well as punishing all manner of irregular behavior, including gambling, blasphemy, and crimes committed at night.⁵⁴ Again, as with the earlier *Officiales super ornamentis mulierum*, the additional duties and structure of the office of the Conservatori made it problematic; officials resigned and salaries often were not sufficient, but regulations were periodically adjusted and concerns addressed, and it would stand into the sixteenth century as the primary communal office of sumptuary enforcement.⁵⁵

THE QUATTROCENTO

The first large-scale compilation of sumptuary law in the Quattrocento was included in the Statuta of 1415 and regulated all "*ornamenta mulierum*."⁵⁶ The earliest sumptuary law, in the Trecento, had concerned itself mainly with materials (yardage, fabric type, quality of dye, and ornamentation) and, as we have seen, women had often successfully evaded it by paying a tax on the prohibited feature.⁵⁷ By the end of the fourteenth century and certainly into the early years of the Quattrocento, there was little letup in the desire to curb luxury ornamentation on women, but the focus changed to curbing the burgeoning fashion innovations. That there was a runaway problem is elo-

quently evident in the number of laws and official boards that were created to deal with it. But what began as very harsh in the first decades of the 1400s, seemed to ease at midcentury. Brides proved extraordinary sumptuary cases everywhere, but they seem to have been especially visible in Florence, which was given to less obvious flash in everyday dress than other Italian cities. The families of the ruling oligarchy splendidly dressed these primary players in their marriage alliance strategies, as has been discussed. While fourteenth-century weddings were controlled by sumptuary laws on every front, restrictions specifically concerning the dress of the bride were absent.⁵⁸ In the fifteenth century, brides were even less regulated, being free to receive and wear multiple rings at their weddings and for fifteen days thereafter.⁵⁹ It was critical for the elite of Florence to allow important weddings to proceed with little sartorial interference. In the Medici family, for example, as Dale Kent has shown, power was consolidated by some twenty-two marriages with families of their "parenti, amici e vicini" between 1400 and 1434 alone.⁶⁰

After the deaths of Cosimo and his son Piero in the 1460s, sumptuary legislation does in fact, seem to have tightened up again, with a flurry of laws attempting to keep up with the fashion of the moment.⁶¹ Rainey has concluded that sumptuary laws do not seem to have been a viable political tool that was easily manipulated by the faction in power, and that overall, "there is no evidence in the legislative documents to suggest that the lawmakers of this period identified sumptuary legislation as either a pro-Medicean or anti-Medicean policy."⁶² There was a profound ambivalence toward display among the Florentine elite, even as they all participated to a greater or lesser degree in wearing the products of their own luxury marketplace.

SUMPTUARY "AVOIDANCE" LANGUAGE

The virtual explosion of terms surrounding clothing and ornament is clear testimony to harassment by Florentine sumptuary officials, a phenomenon that did not go unnoticed by Franco Sacchetti (ca. 1330–ca. 1400) and has been noted by scholars of sumptuary law. Names for fashion elements proliferated; neologisms tested the patience of the most determined communal officials.

Lattizi | In one of Sacchetti's short stories, *Novella CXXXVII*, a sumptuary official confronts a woman on the street and begins writing her a citation for wearing what looks like ermine. She protests that it is not ermine but "lattizi," adding vaguely, "E una bestia."⁶³ The term *lattizi* translates as "milky," but pelts of what creature is unclear. This "mystery fur" of Renaissance documents may have started out as a female strategy to evade late Trecento sumptuary laws, with the name in time becoming a commonly used designation for a pricey fur of indeterminate origin. And in fact, we do not know precisely the type of fur to which *lattizi* referred, for this invented avoidance term became, over time, a commonly used designation. It was still being used by men in their personal family *ricordanze* some sixty years later, far from the prying eyes of any communal sumptuary official. Marco Parenti among others, records the lining and trimming of his bride Caterina's wedding *giornea* (of silk velvet dyed with kermes) with such *lattizi*, which in 1447 cost him 6¾ florins per 100. It took almost 200 of these small furs to complete Caterina's sumptuous sleeveless day gown, undoubtedly luxurious to wear.⁶⁴

Ornaments | The highly ornamented necklines of Renaissance gowns have already been noted. Necklines were the site of some concern to sumptuary officials; their detailed descriptions in legislation undoubtedly signaled an interest in controlling their shape, style, and coverage. The Statutes of 1322–25 had prohibited these neckline ornaments, and goldsmiths and tailors who sold them were to be fined 200 lire. Wearing them carried a 100-lire fine.⁶⁵ But apparently officials were not the only ones looking at décolletage, because the variety of ornaments created by craftspeople and bought by the rich to decorate necklines mushroomed in the fifteenth century. Goldsmiths and their often female workers (*lavoratrici*) produced metallic (usually copper) ornaments with many names, including *scaglie*, *tremolanti*, *maspilli*, and *piannette*, which were gilded, silvered or color-enameled into many shapes such as leaves, flowers, or stars.⁶⁶ Figure 9.1 shows neckline ornaments on a gown in a detail of a profile portrait by Antonio Pollaiuolo (ca. 1450). Also involved in the creation of these metallic ornaments were the artificers (*armaiuoli*), who fashioned buttons, studs, and other clothing ornaments. In addition, gold beaters, and tinsel makers (*orpellai*), who could be women, contributed to the production of luxury ornaments with their gold leaf, gold wire, and sheets of

silver and gold, used both in jewelry and in the weaving of luxury silks. There were at least a dozen names for the glittery ornaments sewn onto the borders or necklines of gowns and into the designs of headgear in Quattrocento Florence, which can be clearly seen in many contemporary profile portraits, and sumptuary officials were apparently either unable or unwilling to cope with this jumble of terminology. As a new clampdown on ornamentation again developed in the late 1460s and 1470s, fashion consumption continually evaded legislation, as especially attested by the rubrics of the laws themselves, such as: "clarification about pearls," October 6, 1472; "clarification about buttons," December 23, 1472; "clarification about wearing chains," June 20, 1483; and "tailors forbidden to make prohibited ornaments," December 20, 1475.⁶⁷ It would certainly have proved difficult and awkward for a male official, already staring at a woman's neckline on the street, to identify and write down in his logbook the ornament displayed thereon by its exact technical name.⁶⁸ The law of 1472 did contain new restrictions on the clothing of young adults, however, forbidding men and women under the age of thirty extravagant use of gold, silver, furs, and jewels. These clothing prohibitions were unusual in that they made explicit limitations in dress for men.⁶⁹ Even Alberti began to rethink his earlier pronouncements regarding the utility of fine garments. Baron noted that in Alberti's *De Iciarchia*, he writes of noticing the decadent dress of the youth while visiting Florence in the late 1460s. In particular, he comments on the moral decline implicit in "the wearing of ever more expensive clothing for men as well as for women."⁷⁰

FASHION INNOVATIONS

Fourteenth-century Florentine fashion called among other things for trains (code), horn-shaped head pieces (*corne*), and belts (*cintole*), which were broad, bold and metallic, embroidered and enameled. Communal officials not only grappled with creating laws to control fashion but also sought to demonize it, and trains and stiffly shaped headwear both became fourteenth-century fashion flashpoints. San Bernardino linked trains with bestiality, saying they made a woman look as though she were dragging a tail.⁷¹ The Trecento horned headdresses also occasioned devilish comparisons with women's inner natures, and hairdos were likened to owls.⁷² Communal officials approved new