

Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Tutto il Mondo and the “Myth of Venice”

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The purpose of this study is to shed new light on Cesare Vecellio’s costume book *Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Tutto il Mondo* (Figure 1), printed at Venice in 1598.¹ Considered the apex of Cinquecento costume book achievement, *Habiti* has traditionally been studied as a source book on sixteenth-century dress. This study seeks to understand the book as an indicator of the late sixteenth-century Venetian social order.

Rather than discussing book production or focusing on the importance of the costume sources, this study proposes a reading of *Habiti Antichi et Moderni* as an embodiment of the “myth of Venice.” Elements of the myth posited that Venice was a city of piety and liberty with an ideal constitution, ruled by a virtuous nobility.² Travellers’ accounts of Venice, which traditionally relayed the ideologies of the myth, presented Venice as a city which garnered a reputation for great beauty and pleasure as well. Further, the myth suggested that Venice was an inheritor of the classical past. Rather than descending from meager fishermen as has sometimes been historically reported, the myth proposed that Venetians were direct descendants of ancient Rome. In fact, Venice saw itself as “New Rome,” the true heir of both the ancient Roman Republic and the Empire.³

The myth relied in part upon outward appearances to demonstrate its ideals. This was accomplished through costume which assigned specific roles to its male and female wearers. In highly public roles, costume for Venetian patrician men suggested civic cohesion and religious piety. Venetian patrician women, with their sumptuous gowns and jewels, cultivated the beautiful self-image of Venice. Vecellio’s costume book both conveys and promotes elements of the myth, and demonstrates

that Venice had a very gender-and class-conscious social order in the late sixteenth century.

Part of the success of this myth is shown in its dissemination throughout Europe. The utopic outward appearance of Venice drew many travellers, especially from England. For Englishmen, at least, were most interested in the essential quality of liberty in Venetian political life. In the sixteenth century travellers, including Fynes Moryson and Thomas Coryat, continued to return to their homelands with tantalizing accounts of life in Venice. The many accounts of Venice helped to establish and perpetuate a kind of “myth fiction.”⁴

The Venetian civic myth tells a powerful story about Venetian male patrician images of themselves and others. The role the myth played as an idealized and ideologically motivated cultural fiction that the Venetian republic adopted itself, repeated and promoted in countless patriotic panegyrics and rhapsodic travel accounts.⁵

Importantly, *Habiti Antichi et Moderni* is an expanded and edited version of Vecellio’s first costume book printed in 1590.⁶ The 1598 edition includes a Latin translation along with an edited version of the original 1590 Italian text. The inclusion of this new translation, in the literary language, confirms *Habiti Antichi et Moderni*’s role in the “myth of Venice,” whether Vecellio was aware of his participation or not.⁷ Latin was important for disseminating the myth in a more active way, as officials were appointed to pen Latin histories that echoed the position of rulership.⁸ The language of humanism (purported

¹ Cesare Vecellio, *Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Tutto il Mondo* (Venice: Giovanni Bernardo Sessa, 1598).

² For a complete discussion on the “myth of Venice” see Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 13–61; Donald Queller, *The Venetian Patriciate: Myth versus Reality* (Urbana and Chicago: UP of Illinois, 1986) 3–28; and Gina Fasoli, “Nascita di un mito,” *Studi storici in onore di Giacchino Volpe* (Florence, 1958) I, 445–479.

³ Queller 24.

⁴ Muir 52.

⁵ Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1992) 15–16.

⁶ Vecellio, *De gli Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Diverse Parti del Mondo* (Venetia: Damian Zenaro, 1590). This edition contained 420 illustrations with Italian texts. See the publisher’s note in Vecellio, *Vecellio’s Renaissance Costume Book* (New York: Dover, 1977) and Traci Elizabeth Timmons “*Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Tutto il Mondo* as an Indicator of the Late Sixteenth-Century Venetian Social Order” (M. A. thesis, University of South Florida, 1996) 18–21 and 27–31.

⁷ Moreover, Vecellio’s use of Latin translations in the 1598 edition, *Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Tutto il Mondo*, and not in the 1590 edition, *De gli Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Diverse Parti del Mondo*, suggests that in terms of the “myth fiction,” the 1598 edition played an entirely different role, despite the two editions’ similarities.

⁸ Muir 25.

by Latin texts) had transformed a traditional myth of a holy city protected by Saint Mark, independent from all foreign powers, into a coherent political ideology that was classical in its derivation.⁹

Venice was essentially an oligarchy ruled by the nobility or patrician class, a relatively small group of males. Although the *cittadini* (upper-class men not of the nobility) had several elected roles, their power was relatively minimal. For the rest, the *popolani* and other lower-class males, their participation in the political affairs of the state was basically non-existent,¹⁰ although their public presence was necessary for demonstrating the amiable coexistence of the different classes the myth suggested. Gasparo Contarini, writing in 1551 likened the Venetian class structure to a perfected human body:

the nobility (patrician male class) were the eyes, seeing all and directing the actions of the body; the *cittadini* and *popolani* were the lower, more menial limbs, following the orders of the eyes. Yet there was reciprocity: the eyes and the limbs depended on each other for survival.¹¹

In his illustrations of male patrician dress, Vecellio demonstrates that dress defines office, rank or age. Through dress Vecellio reflects the ideologies of the myth: a regal presence, authority, decorum and gravity.¹² He begins with the *Venetian Generals* (fol. 79v / Figure 2) who wear “the royal cloak of gold that is the true Roman cloak.”¹³ The Roman cloak emphasizes Venice’s *all’antica* ideals and links them to the classical past. By wearing the readily recognized Roman cloak,¹⁴ patrician men became living models of ancient Rome.¹⁵ Further, similar dress among patrician men emphasized social cohesion and order. Vecellio reinforces this idea by illustrating male patricians in the same basic style. In *Habiti Antichi et Moderni*, the ducal dress with the grand sleeves open, also referred to as the “toga,” is used to illustrate the dress of the *Senator* (fol. 80v / Figure 3), as well as that of the *Magistrate* (fol. 81v / Figure 4), several variations of the *Noblemen* (ff. 82v, 83v and 85v), and the *Young Venetian Nobleman* (fol. 84v / Figure 5).

The myth suggests that noblemen were primarily concerned with their duty to the Republic. Vecellio, on several occasions, discusses the public duties of males, describing the responsibilities of those who serve and protect. He describes the security duties of the *Minor Captains* (fol. 88v) for the Doge and the state, saying that “...they walk in front of the [Doge] wherever he goes... and they walk at night outside in the streets of Venice to search for people doing wrong things...”¹⁶

Vecellio establishes that male dress, both patrician and *cittadini*, is open and self-explanatory, clear and meaningful. For the *Heads of the Council of Ten*, Vecellio says:

The dress you see here is of the *Heads of the Council of Ten (Magistrates)* [fol. 81v / Figure 4] who are three and who change every month...they are elected by strength and it is the magistrate who has the greatest, even tremendous authority...they carry the red vest...[he] is strong in life and his character is of great reputation...¹⁷

The *cittadini* are easily distinguished from the nobility by their difference in dress. Vecellio states:

...Many of the *Merchants and Shopkeepers* [fol. 91v / Figure 6] of the city of Venice wear the vest with gloved hands, but for the most part, they wear a short dress of heavy cloak...and they wear tall hats...¹⁸

Dress, as Vecellio illustrates, can also exhibit age, as in the case of the *Noble Venetian Youth* (fol. 84v / Figure 5) who, “until they are between fifteen and twenty years, they carry a short dress...[as they reach a certain age] they carry a long dress...they take the *toga* and induce with it gravity and modesty.”¹⁹ The matured youth’s use of the *toga* reiterates Venice’s adherence to classical tradition, and again, expresses social cohesion because all noblemen dress in the same style.

However, Vecellio’s account of patrician male dress concurrently exposes the inequality of male ranks. Vecellio’s arrangement reveals the social dominance of the noblemen and the subordination of the *popolani* and lower classes. Vecellio devotes sixteen woodcut illustrations and accompanying text

⁹ Muir 26.

¹⁰ For an in-depth discussion on the various ranks of men in Venice, see Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani: The Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987).

¹¹ Gasparo Contarini, *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum libri quinque* (Venice, 1551) 131, translated by Lewes Lewkenor in *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (London, 1599) 146, cited in Muir 41.

¹² Queller 13.

¹³ Vecellio, *Habiti*, fol. 79r.

¹⁴ Vecellio’s description of the cloak is similar to other contemporary accounts of patrician dress

...the forme and fashion of their attire is very auncient,

even the same that hath beene used these three thousand yeares amongst them, and also uniforme. For all of them use but one and the same forme of habite, even the slender doublet made close to the body, without quilting or bombase, and long hose plaine, without those new fangled curiosities...used with us English men...

Thomas Coryat, *Crudities, Vol. I* [facsimile of the 1611 edition] (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1905) 398.

¹⁵ Muir 25.

¹⁶ Vecellio, *Habiti*, fol. 88r.

¹⁷ Vecellio, *Habiti*, fol. 81r.

¹⁸ Vecellio, *Habiti*, fol. 91r.

¹⁹ Vecellio, *Habiti*, fol. 84r.

to dress of the patrician and upper-class males, far more than he devotes to any other male group. He unifies and distinguishes the patriciate by discussing their similarities in dress, reinforcing their maintenance of classical tradition, and divulging their admirable and honest qualities.²⁰ His other illustrations of Venetian males: those of students, soldiers, the servant- and other lower-classes, suggest that the *popolani* played a less important role in the terms outlined by the myth. Their dress is neither similar, nor distinctive, except in its ability to differentiate them from the noblemen. Further, Vecellio's treatment of the non-patrician classes fails to substantially recognize their various class levels, interspersing slaves with soldiers and students. In his devotion to the male patrician class, Vecellio reveals an oligarchic Venetian government and a social order that clearly defined the nobleman as deserving of political power.²¹

For his illustrations of patrician women, Vecellio's characterizations become very different from those used to describe men. Instead of defining women by rank or age, Vecellio defines women by their relationships *with* men: virgins, married women or widows. The Venetian woman's role in the myth was very different from that of the male. She created an appearance of wealth and beauty that was essential in presenting the glorious self-image of Venice.²²

However, women held a paradoxical position tied directly to dress. While concurrently being considered the republic's embodiment of affluence and luxury, the costume and adornments of women were targeted by sumptuary laws which regulated extravagance, initially to save the wealth of the Republic's patrician class.²³ Rather than generally addressing men and women, the underlying ideas of the sumptuary laws narrowed the problem of excess and luxury to women alone.²⁴ This notion was problematic because the material adornments of a woman's body were expressions of the status of the related male.²⁵ The Venetian woman was continually under the auspices of the male—passing from the natal family of her father (as daughter) to the family of her husband (as wife).²⁶ In other words, the dress of noblewomen was restricted by noblemen who continually controlled it, yet it was woman's sumptuous display of patrician male wealth that warranted legislation.

Although costume aligned patrician women with sumptuousness and artifice, Vecellio demonstrates through dress that these women also had a structured and well-guarded visibility. Even though noblewomen's public appearance was tantamount to presenting a magnificent Venice, their appearance in public was very restricted. The *Venetian Virgin* (fol. 95v / Figure 7) provides a good example, as Vecellio describes her noble upbringing:

The practices and institutes for raising the most noble virgins in Venice is in the highest and most notable honesty because they are well-guarded and custodiated in paternal homes so that very often not even the closest relatives could see them during girlhood.²⁷

The virgin's visibility is further controlled by her use in public spaces of the veil "which is very large and covers the face and chest."²⁸

In his illustration of the *Noblewomen Dressed For Public Holidays* (fol. 101v / Figure 8), Vecellio describes the time when women were instructed to be embodiments of display for Venice. During public holidays and festivals, or when an important visitor came to Venice, the sumptuary laws were lifted, giving a false impression of the city's normal conditions.

Noblewomen were invited to be present at spectacles for grand personages as often happened in Venice. To these women it was conceded that they can dress and ornament themselves as it pleases them the most, which they cannot do at other times. So as it was when King Henry III, King of France, was brought...to a superb and marvelous spectacle. With great accompaniment, he was brought to the hall where there were two hundred gentlewomen, who were very beautiful and of high families...and they appeared with such beauty that the king and his following were astonished and stupified...²⁹

For visitors, not familiar with the normal dress codes or the

²⁰ Vecellio describes the *Squire* as having a "certain reputation," and the *Magistrate* as "strong in life [with] a character of great reputation." Vecellio, *Habiti*, ff. 81v and 90v.

²¹ Queller 13. One claim of the myth suggested, "that no other aristocracy had so deserved the power that it held."

²² Anne Christine Junkerman, "Bellissima Donna: An Interdisciplinary Study of Venetian Sensuous Half Length Images of the Early Sixteenth Century," diss., U of California, Berkeley, 1988, 196.

²³ M. Margaret Newett, "Sumptuary Laws in Venice in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in eds. T. F. Tout and James Tait, *Historical Essays* (Manchester: The University Press, 1907) 246.

²⁴ Junkerman 261-262.

²⁵ Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1991) 52-53.

²⁶ Stanley Chojnacki, "'The Most Serious Duty': Motherhood, Gender and Patrician Culture in Renaissance Venice," in eds. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari, *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 141.

²⁷ Vecellio, *Habiti*, fol. 95r.

²⁸ Vecellio, *Habiti*, fol. 95r.

²⁹ Vecellio, *Habiti*, fol. 101r. Also see fol. 99r, *Married Women in Time of the Ascension*, "If ever a time when wives made great effort to be seen as the most beautiful and appear the most ornamented, it was this time [Ascension Week] more than any other during when they are married...Riches are displayed: large pearls and other most precious jewels with which ornament the ears, neck, braids and chest, polished in shining gold and gems all about the shoulders. They are dressed with their most precious and richest details of ornaments which are used among them."

public restrictions placed on women, such events created false impressions of the republic. These impressions suggested economic prosperity even in times of the republic's financial hardships. Further, the use of woman as sumptuous display emphasizes women's position as that of republic embellishment.

Habiti Antichi et Moderni's account of late sixteenth-century Venetian dress demonstrates that costume was a signifier of rank, office or age for the patrician nobleman, and a signifier of sexual status and wealth for noblewomen. Vecellio also suggests that dress aligns its wearers with characteristics implicit in the "myth of Venice." The dress of the noblemen conferred the long-term preservation of the divinely ordained institution and suggested a well-ordered, cohesive society. The dress of noblewomen affirmed the glorious beauty of Venice.

Vecellio's costume book defines the social order of Venice, demonstrating that Venice embodied a very highly structured

social order in the sixteenth century. It confirms that dress was one of the chief signifiers of that order. Through Vecellio's words and images on costume, *Habiti* denotes very different roles for men and women and delineates how dress defined the spaces that each sex could occupy. When examined as an artifact, *Habiti Antichi et Moderni* provides twentieth-century observers with insight into a Cinquecento Venetian male's contribution to the "myth of Venice." Through this highly informative account of Venetian dress, *Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Tutto il Mondo* discloses how costume defined and reflected the late sixteenth-century Venetian social order.

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Figure 1. Cesare Vecellio, frontispiece to *Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Tutto il Mondo*, woodcut, 1598, Venice. Photo by Paul Herrin, courtesy of the University of South Florida Library, Department of Special Collections.



Figure 2. Cesare Vecellio, *Venetian Generals* (folio 79v), woodcut, 1598, Venice. Photo by Paul Herrin, courtesy of the University of South Florida Library, Department of Special Collections.



Figure 3. [above left] Cesare Vecellio, *Senator* (folio 80v), woodcut, 1598, Venice. Photo by Paul Herrin, courtesy of the University of South Florida Library, Department of Special Collections.

Figure 4. [above right] Cesare Vecellio, *Magistrate* (folio 81v), woodcut, 1598, Venice. Photo by Paul Herrin, courtesy of the University of South Florida Library, Department of Special Collections.

Figure 5. [right] Cesare Vecellio, *Young Venetian Nobleman* (folio 84v), woodcut, 1598, Venice. Photo by Paul Herrin, courtesy of the University of South Florida Library, Department of Special Collections.



Figure 6. [above left] Cesare Vecellio, *Merchants and Shopkeepers* (folio 91v), woodcut, 1598, Venice. Photo by Paul Herrin, courtesy of the University of South Florida Library, Department of Special Collections.



Figure 7. [above right] Cesare Vecellio, *Venetian Virgins* (folio 95v), woodcut, 1598, Venice. Photo by Paul Herrin, courtesy of the University of South Florida Library, Department of Special Collections.



Figure 8. [right] Cesare Vecellio, *Noblewomen Dressed for Public Holidays* (folio 101v), woodcut, 1598, Venice. Photo by Paul Herrin, courtesy of the University of South Florida Library, Department of Special Collections.