

Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Belfanti, Carlo Marco, and Daniela Sogliani, eds.

I Gonzaga e la moda tra Mantova e l'Europa.

I Gonzaga digitali 4. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2019. Pp. xx, 162 + 36 ill. ISBN 978-8-8935-9348-9 (PDF) €28.80; 978-88-9359-347-2 (paperback) €36.60.

This slim volume is one of the I Gonzaga digitali series that publishes the work of conferences on the Gonzaga archive. This archive, partly available online, contains various document sources regarding the Gonzaga court in Mantua (1328–1707). The book under review analyzes these archival materials to clarify the impact of fashion within the context of the Mantuan court, especially during the sixteenth century.

The volume consists of seven essays. The first (1–8), by Daniela Sogliani, is developed around a crucial theme: fashion as a highly powerful means of non-verbal communication (2; “una potentissima forma di comunicazione non verbale”). In fact, most recent studies on fashion focus on this specific aspect. Clothes and accessories can be investigated with regard both to their stylistic features and to the meanings they were intended to convey. Every essay in this book follows this approach. As Sogliani highlights, clothes mentioned in the Gonzaga archive can be studied from different points of view; economic, social, and political themes recur throughout. Another aspect that emerges in this first essay and in those that follow is the dialectic interchange between global and local in the production and consumption of fashion items during the Renaissance.

Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli's chapter (9–16) is devoted to a topic usual for other disciplines but relatively uncommon in fashion studies. The author analyzes the evolution of historical studies of fashion in their aims and results, with particular regard to the Italian context. Roberta Orsi Landini (17–32) investigates the international language of Renaissance fashion, with a focus on garments used to convey political messages. Luxury items are an obvious medium for showing economic power; at the same time, they can communicate cultural status, personal taste, and awareness of the social rules. Landini's essay highlights the crucial role of expensive accessories, such as *aigrettes* (egret's feathers), that became a symbol of social prestige.

The fourth chapter (33–50) looks at similarities between the art and fashion markets. Federica Veratelli's exploration demonstrates how clothes were believed to reveal the identity of the person who wore them. Elisa Tosi Brandi (51–74) discusses the figure of the broker in the Renaissance fashion market. Brokers facilitated the supply and demand between tailors and buyers. Theirs was considered an important and prestigious duty—and not an easy one. Elites wanted clothes that were both fashionable and unique. Bruna Niccoli (75–92) analyzes international models for meeting the requirements of social occasions—such as mourning and public ceremonies—while discussing Gonzaga's distinctive fashion preferences. The final essay (93–110), by Barbara Bettoni, is entirely focused on buttons. These small accessories shared some features with jewels and were frequently crafted from precious stones and metals. As with other costly accessories, buttons were sometimes pawned or given as diplomatic or sentimental gifts.

Together, the seven essays contribute to our understanding of the pivotal role of fashion within the Gonzaga court. Two themes stand out. The first is the importance of archival sources, and the value of consulting other sources, such as paintings, in their interpretation. (It would have been helpful, on this point, if references to the thirty-seven colour illustrations included in the book had been highlighted in every essay.) The second theme is the constant tension between local manufacturing and international trading. What emerges is a kaleidoscope of small, highly specialized productions that provided distinctive luxury goods to European courts. Within this context, the Gonzaga family attached great importance to wearing garments both informed by international taste and representative of personal and class identity.

Aspects that have been neglected by previous studies emerge vividly in this book: the working method of fashion brokers, the role of mourning clothes, the use of descriptions of garments in the search of wanted criminals, to name just a few. A solid methodology and the wide range of topics make this book ideal not only for fashion historians but also for people interested in studying Renaissance social and economic structures, politics and court life, and letters and archival documents.