

# NOTES AND GLEANINGS / NOTE E CURIOSITÀ

## VEILS, CAPS AND HATS: THE LANGUAGE OF HEADGEAR BETWEEN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE

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### **Sommario**

*L'autrice tratta l'uso del copricapo nel Medioevo e all'inizio dell'Età moderna, con continui riferimenti ai testi di San Paolo e alle prediche quattrocentesche dei frati minori dell'osservanza francescana. Viene altresì considerato l'impiego della mantellina, del velo e del piumaggio, tipiche della moda del tempo, in relazione alle norme che disciplinavano il lusso in quel periodo.*

**Headgear as a sign.** Today no one, or almost no one, wears a hat. Hats are worn rarely and only for protection against the elements. The primary significance of headwear is precisely that of covering and shielding the body from external forces as well as the eyes of others. In certain circumstances headgear is also worn as part of a uniform: the dean of a university participating in a solemn ceremony or a magistrate on the occasion of the inauguration of the judicial year.

A subject of uniforms delineates a specific and wide-ranging field which today has become rather limited. Activities which require a uniform are rare: from workers in the transport sector – stewardesses, pilots and railway conductors – to those working in the public sector – guards, policemen – even doctors, nurses, etc. Not all these workers' uniforms include headgear. The covering of one's head is required by law of those who work in the culinary field: cooks, bakers, etc. In this case hygienic reasons are what dictate the obligation.

A separate discussion would be required to fully address the topic of head-coverings for members of the Church, bishops, cardinals and in particular the Pope. Even in this environment head-coverings are less frequent than in the past but ‘taking the veil’ has remained synonymous with becoming a nun and the sisters of all orders still cover their heads<sup>1</sup>.

Today a head-covering is essentially a zero degree and its inexistence signifies an empty space but the accent is more on the ‘space’ than the empty<sup>2</sup> to the point that, today, taking off an imaginary hat is equivalent to paying homage or expressing reverence. Even though a head may be lacking in headgear the memory of the various meanings that its long history brought about have remained<sup>3</sup>. Removing one’s hat as a sign of respect has given way to the expression: “my hat is off to you” which signifies recognition of the merit of a person or choice. “Going hat in hand” is an expression which alludes to a modest attitude on the part of he who plans to humbly request, if not beg, for something. Other idioms allude to what one is starting from what one has on one’s head: in Italian calling a person “*parruccona*” (big wig) or “*codino*” (pony-tail) is equivalent to using an antiquated accusation that dates from the times when people gave up wearing wigs. Analogously, in the Anglo-Saxon world for a long time many people defined the term “whig” (which itself derives from “wig”) as a member of the conservative party. These expressions, which are present in both the Italian and English languages, confirm the fact that in almost all times and cultures that which is worn on the head is very visible and full of meaning<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the head, being the most exposed and visible part of the body, has been interpreted as being the line between nature and culture and an area which lends itself to the exhibition of signs of social status and personal expression.

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<sup>1</sup> Cabiati (2007: 54-5) and Zarri (2014: in press).

<sup>2</sup> Fabbri (1991).

<sup>3</sup> For more general information on the relationship between dresses and History see Roche (1989), Stallybrass and Jones (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Lurie (1981) and Rublack (2010).

**The way to wear it.** Not only the morphology of headgear but even the way to wear it communicated one's social position and attitude: cocking a hat or cap, that is wearing it tilted to one side, was a sign of cockiness, swagger and arrogance. The street urchins of the late 1800s and the rebellious workers of the early 1900s frequently employed this type of non-verbal language. Similarly, today, who knows how unknowingly, the wearing of baseball caps by young people from different countries at all times of the day and night without any connection to sport is a common sight. It is also common to wear it backwards to suggest indifference or transgression. This came about as a result of its associations with the breaking of rules by the American film and music stars of the 1980s. Baseball caps were originally intended to distinguish the players and fans of different teams through their unique colour-schemes and symbols. Today they are one of the most omnipresent articles of clothing in the world, especially among young people and are often used as a vehicle for advertising: the face above the bill displaying the name of a company, slogan or logo.

Today in many parts of America men of different ages wear cowboy hats to compliment elegant suits, work uniforms and to allude to a bygone western age. By contrast in a Jewish context the wearing of large black hats as the final detail of severe dark outfits is a sign of strict orthodoxy.

The women of Europe and the United States who do not belong the Islamic faith and culture move about with their heads uncovered, except perhaps in rare cases when wearing a small veil to accompany a particularly elegant outfit. This has the appearance of shielding the wearer from the eyes of others, but in reality is a form of seduction with any discretion being imaginary. From time to time the collections presented on the catwalks of fashion shows flaunt singular hats and hairstyles which are themselves often throwbacks to past eras that almost no one would wear daily.

As with dresses, headwear has a semiology even in the most simple cases, sending messages that were once clear to almost everyone but today are often contradictory and often not picked up on.

The case of the veil for women in the Islamic world is quite different. Veils are a sign of belonging, heavily used and at the centre

of many discussions<sup>5</sup> when worn in environments where the culture does not require women to cover their heads. For those who choose to ignore history such a use appears exclusive, characterising, exotic and even restrictive to a female's freedom. This is a subject with numerous facets and I would like to shed light on one in particular: the covering of a woman's head is not an element that has historically characterised the Muslim world alone. Such a use is also part of Western, Christian, Italian and Medieval (indeed even Roman and Renaissance) history. The requirement that women cover their heads was both diffused and without exception not only in church but also in public and even at home. For centuries women at all levels and of all ages covered their heads<sup>6</sup>: they did so out of habit and legal obligation. Yet we still tend to forget about this and to identify the veiling of a woman's head and face exclusively with the Islamic culture and religion.

Those norms alluded to, that imposed the covering of women's heads, were the sumptuary laws<sup>7</sup> that from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries were regularly issued in Italy<sup>8</sup> as well as many other European countries<sup>9</sup>. It is worth noting that not only in Europe was appearance regulated<sup>10</sup>. Such laws dictated who could wear what, essentially assigning ornaments, clothes and headgear to every social category.

The goal of this paper is to shed light on the constant and profound attention that has been paid to the covering of the head, especially as

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<sup>5</sup> Ahmed (1992), El Guindi (1999), Lazreg (2009), Vercellin (2000) and Pepicelli (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Welch (2007:379-394); Welch (2009: 241-268).

<sup>7</sup> Hunt (1996).

<sup>8</sup> Kovesi Killerby, (2002) and Muzzarelli (2003:185-220).

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *Disciplinare il lusso. La legislazione suntuaria in Italia e in Europa tra Medioevo ed Età moderna*, a cura di M. G. Muzzarelli e A. Campanini, Roma, Carocci, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Shively (1964-1965:123-164); Zilfi, (2004:125-141); Du Plessis, *Pearls worth Rds4000 or less: Re-interpreting eighteenth century sumptuary laws at the Cape*, paper published on line in 2013, JEL codes N47, N97.

regards women<sup>11</sup> and to note how a process of controlling dress and headwear which lasted for centuries has been almost completely forgotten today. History serves to help the facts and behaviours that lasted for so long re-emerge, along with the reasons for those practices and the forms they took. In order to do this I intend to connect and intertwine the testimonies from three types of sources: sumptuary laws, preaching as well as treatises and iconographic evidence. These sources cover the period of time from the end of the Middle Ages through the early Modern Era when certain phenomena took place<sup>12</sup>, from the diffusion of printing to the widening of geographical perspectives. In that period the roots of many ways of thinking and behaving sprang forth, mentalities and comportments that have influenced how we think about head-coverings today.

Covering one's head was, according to iconographic testimony, a general fact of life for both men<sup>13</sup> and women from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era. In public women's heads were always covered, as frequently were men's. Women often covered their heads at home, even in bed. Perhaps they did so for practical reasons, certainly it was a habit but, as has been stated and as we will see subsequently, it was a legal obligation. All of this created a sort of language that must be decoded in order to understand who had to wear what and what meaning might have been inferred or communicated by this or that hat<sup>14</sup>. It is not certain that the bonnets and caps reproduced in paintings and frescoes perfectly correspond to those indications present in the legal documents and norms of the period in which the pictures were painted. However, it is opportune and useful to know that precise indications did exist at that time. These indications were known to the artists as well as the subjects they represented. They are useful inasmuch as they help us correctly interpret these images and the situations they reconstruct as a part of our history, a history that

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<sup>11</sup> Muzzarelli (2012:67-89).

<sup>12</sup> Frick Collier (2006:103-128).

<sup>13</sup> Folledore (1988).

<sup>14</sup> Signori (2005:25-47).

comes from headwear.

Initially head-coverings were simply made up of one or more layers: a veil or thin piece of fabric with a cloak or hood on top. Thin veils, which appeared simple were in fact precious and in some cases finely decorated, appear on the Madonna's head in the 14th century. In the following century head-coverings became more varied, complex and strangely proportioned<sup>15</sup>.

From the careful representations of dress and accessories found in painted panels and frescoes it is clear that artists attributed the highest importance to them, as did the paintings' buyers. He who was called upon to represent people and situations was well aware of the communicative capabilities of style and fashion, and ostensibly shared the perception of relevance that many attached to clothes and accessories, including headgear. Iconography attests both to the 'making fashionable' of something by artists and society as well as to the feminine interpretations of covering one's head and the resistance to such an obligation. Moreover, precisely because headwear was important it was the subject of control, contestation and resistance. In fact, sumptuary legislation began to occupy itself with headgear from the second half of the thirteenth century. This continued until the end of the thirteenth century. Every possible type of feminine dress was covered, not only to limit luxury and control access to certain clothes and ornaments but also to set rules about what women put on their heads. We shall proceed via significant themes.

**In the name of Saint Paul.** All this, at least in theory, came from a passage from the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians: "For this cause ought the woman to have the power on *her* head because of the angels." (King James Bible, I Corinthians 11:10). It is interesting that in the Italian translation (*la donna deve [...] avere sul capo un segno di autorità*) "power" appears as "a sign authority". Saint Paul defined a woman who prayed with her head uncovered as undignified. From this derives the custom of veiling or covering one's head in church (contrarily a man's head was to remain uncovered). The custom was expanded at the end of the Middle Ages so that almost no woman left

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<sup>15</sup> Gnignera (2010).

her house with her head uncovered even if no one seemed to connect this practice to Saint Paul's passage. In the Early Middle Ages, according to iconography and sumptuary laws, ladies covered their heads even outside of church. Yet to what extent were they covered?

According to the Minor Observant Franciscan Giovanni da Capestrano, author of the *Trattato degli ornamenti specie delle donne* written between 1434 and 1438<sup>16</sup>, the obligation of women to cover their heads applied not only to the interior of churches but everywhere. This was necessary for reasons of subjection as well as to avoid sexual urges. Only a deformed woman could go about with her head uncovered without exciting feelings of lust. The holy brother observed that simply covering the top of the head was not enough but that women had to veil "all parts of the head, even the front, as well as possible, so that only the face can be seen" (Capestrano, 1956:118). His testimony states that the complete veiling of the head, even in front, was suggested if not imposed by Western Christian culture. In reality, Western women almost never veiled their faces. However, between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Era the idea became widely diffused that, in an imprecisely defined Orient (from North Africa to the Far East), women went about completely veiled. This was due, above all, to the advent of printing and the tales of travellers.

The belief in this difference became widespread even if, in reality, it was only partially correct. Over time the fact that women in the West had continuously covered their heads mere decades before, and the reasons for it, passed from memory. This confirms a case of obscuring memory, as well as the mystification of a phenomenon. Effectively, a focus on the doubtless decorative finalities inherent in head-coverings resulted in the forgetting of a substantial obligation analogous to that which still exists in the Islamic world. The difference, or rather the fine line of demarcation, consists in part of those portions of the head that were covered (everything including the face or only the top) and in part of substitution. This came about quite quickly during the Middle Ages and consisted of different head-

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<sup>16</sup> Between 1434 and 1438 the Friar Minor Giovanni da Capestrano wrote the treatise *De usu cuiuscumque ornatus*, edited and translated into Italian with the title *Trattato degli ornamenti specie delle donne* by A. Chiappini, Siena, 1956.

coverings and elaborate hairstyles taking the place of the veil. Fashion overrode regulation, or rather offered an interpretation that was more pleasing to women and therefore 'respect' for those regulations was increasingly affirmed. So it was that women acquiesced to the obligation that they cover their heads, adopting different headgear, from simple veils to pieces of fabric that which could be used in various ways. A comparison between regulation and common practice reveals a sort of dialogue between women and fashion as well as between women and men: about the Church, about their environment and about how that environment was governed.

**Never without.** In church, as noted, women had to cover their heads. This conformed to what Saint Paul had said even if, as we shall see, there were some exceptions. Still, even in the street women were required by law to cover their heads. This can be seen, for example, in a law (*Riformanza*) issued in Terni in 1549 which stated that every woman older than twelve was required to cover her head when leaving the house, "not, however, when going from house to house" (*non però intendendo per transito de casa in casa*). A veil, though not of silk, or a piece of fabric or something else that seemed honest and convenient to a woman could be worn<sup>17</sup>.

Iconography confirms the diffusion of this practice or, perhaps, respect for this norm which was both moral and civil. Iconography further attests to the fact that even at home women rarely had their heads uncovered. Young ladies could do so but their hair had to be up, never down. Iconography does represent Eve and Mary Magdalene with their hair down but these are rare cases, like those of wrath and desperation. Iconography associates uncovered heads with youth, newlywed brides and virtuous young women preparing to embark on lives of piety. A head uncovered but with the hair up was in iconographic terms something akin to a state of innocence. This corresponds to the law which permitted newlyweds and girls between eight and twelve to forgo head-coverings.

**Bans and exceptions.** Sumptuary laws stipulated that all women

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<sup>17</sup> Nico Ottaviani (2005: 851) Terni, *Riformanze*, 1549, gennaio 4.



cover their heads and that ornaments not be valuable. Yet there were exceptions: some could leave their heads uncovered for limited periods and those who belonged to a privileged circle could wear precious headgear forbidden to all others.

Newlyweds were even allowed to have their heads uncovered in church, for limited periods (a normative from 1473 in Orvieto made this concession to girls up to twelve years old and newlyweds for up to eight days after their weddings)<sup>18</sup>. Even the wearing of thin silk veils for the first six months following a wedding was permitted (after which a ban took effect that carried a fine of 100 ducats, excommunication and the confiscation of the object in question which any official could remove from the woman's head<sup>19</sup>). Exceptions aside, in church women were required not only to completely cover their heads but their necks as well (Orvieto, 1471)<sup>20</sup>. The concession made to newlyweds also applied to the street for the same period of six months but in general the rule was that no woman could move about the city without a cloth or veil on her head<sup>21</sup>. To women of the privileged class, the wives of knights and doctors of medicine and the law, concessions existed permitting veils of silk and precious ornaments. Laws were even passed regarding the maximum value of a golden cap<sup>22</sup> and the weight of pearls that could be used for ornamentation.

Iconography regularly represents women of the upper classes with headwear of great value. Apparently these are the wives and daughters of privileged families but also include saints through which the idea of high virtue was to be communicated to the public<sup>23</sup>. How could this be done? By using a language of fashion and representing those holy

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<sup>18</sup> Nico Ottaviani (2005:1042) Orvieto, *Riformanze*, 1473, aprile 26.

<sup>19</sup> Nico Ottaviani (2005:851) Terni, *Riformanze*, 1549, gennaio 4.

<sup>20</sup> Nico Ottaviani (2005:1036) Orvieto, *Riformanze*, 1471 marzo 18.

<sup>21</sup> Nico Ottaviani (2005:603) Gubbio, Capitoli, 1583, ottobre 1.

<sup>22</sup> Nico Ottaviani (2005:556) Foligno, Capitoli (sec. XVI).

<sup>23</sup> Muzzarelli (2013(1):117-144).

women in one of two ways: either in simple yet carefully selected dress that made humility stand out beside the clothes women of the same social class were permitted to wear, or by dressing them in refined and precious garments and head-coverings that transmitted a sense of the exceptional virtue not of their birth but of their life and works. Sumptuary laws hit real women, not those representations of virtuous choices. They limited the extent of luxury enjoyed by the wives and daughters of rich citizens<sup>24</sup> but not the nobility or the saints or the very same Madonna who was often shown dressed as few others in the city could. This indirectly legitimized luxury and reinforced the idea of headgear as fashion.

**The language of the mantle.** Often the Madonna is represented with her head covered in different ways, different aesthetic models of virtue. These go from a mantle worn over a thin, transparent veil or white cloth to elaborate hairstyles consisting of braids, veils and pearls. Between these two are fabrics coiled into turban-like shapes, hoods of golden cloth and so on<sup>25</sup>. The Madonna was not infrequently shown with precious ornaments on her head as well as signs associated with specific categories. The mantle, for example, was a sign of humility often characterizing widows and older women. This was in line with various laws (in 1416 in Perugia, harlots could not wear mantles on their heads, “clamidem in capo”<sup>26</sup>). The right to wear mantles was reserved for widows and women of the Church, though it was later extended to include women over forty and those protecting themselves from rain. Moreover, sumptuary laws also concerned that headwear which, while not precious, was still significant, such as mantles.

Iconography attests to mantles (even to the addition of a *sopralzo* or frame that elevated a mantle above the head) for ladies who were not so young, for whom hoods were also considered proper. Hoods were frequently forbidden by sumptuary laws either because they were too valuable and perhaps worn improperly hanging about the

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<sup>24</sup> Butazzi (2007: 35-43).

<sup>25</sup> Ragionieri (2010: 37-45).

<sup>26</sup> Nico Ottaviani (2005:115) Perugia, *Riformanze*, 1416, novembre 4-5.

shoulders rather than sitting on the head or because if their cover was too complete they risked rendering their wearers unidentifiable. For these reasons in some cases (in Orvieto in 1403 as well as in Gubbio in 1385) laws only permitted their use while riding outside the city walls<sup>27</sup>. Regardless, hoods were regularly present in women's dowries<sup>28</sup> and the Madonna was often pictured wearing them. Political reasons are responsible for prohibitions such as not being allowed to wear headgear of two colours. This was to avoid the divisions resulting from factions which were recognizable by the colours of their hoods, mantles and shoes.

**How to get around bans and be more beautiful: false head-coverings and true hairstyles.** The imposition of having to leave home with one's head covered was interpreted by women in many different ways. Iconography attests to various ways of using simple pieces of fabric sometimes worn over structures that gave them an architectural appearance<sup>29</sup>. Even those who wanted to project an air of measured elegance (like Christine de Pizan) made no less use of relatively elaborate headgear<sup>30</sup>. However, in many cases there was the ostensible use of bands, ribbons, cords and even veils and pearls intertwined in hair with an extraordinary decorative effect. The ban on wearing precious stones and gold often hit this type of hairstyle, not always flashy but certainly valuable. Hairstyles of this type were the least functional of all head-coverings: they fall into the category of bound-braids (*coazzone*) richly decorated and forbidden to harlots in Milan<sup>31</sup>. There were also combinations of real and false hair. These hairstyles demonstrate both a way of interpreting the law and a way of covering the head that was decorative and certainly not what strict

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<sup>27</sup> Nico Ottaviani (2005:1015) Orvieto, *Riformanze*, 1403 agosto 26; Nico Ottaviani (2005:592) Gubbio, *Riformanze*, 1385 gennaio 27.

<sup>28</sup> Merkel (1898).

<sup>29</sup> Gnignera (2010).

<sup>30</sup> Rinaldi Dufresne (1990:104-117); Muzzarelli (2013(2): 259-269).

<sup>31</sup> Verga (1898:5-79), in particular 40-42, 68-70.

moralists had hoped for. In effect, it was an attempt to transform a hard-hitting ban into something positive and shows a sort of resilience.

**Layering.** Iconography gives evidence that various layers often covered women's heads. An invitation to reflect on layering comes from a complaint made by the women of Foligno in 1554. They lamented the obligation to wear a double-layer of fabric on their heads as a sign of mourning for each relative that died. The women of that city made their voices heard in an attempt to obtain permission to wear only a pair of small cloths and no more "in cases of mourning, whether one relative dies or ten, except in the case of the husband's death, when the common practice is observed" (*per corrotto, che ne moia uno, una o dieci di parenti, cavandone sempre la vedovanza di mariti, nel quale si osservi comunemente il solito*)<sup>32</sup>. It is quite clear, looking at the accused, that the "disgraced women" did not sit on the city council so their men did not realize the extent of the inconvenience and the absurdity of women wearing "mourning cloths" (*pannetti per corrotto*) on their heads. If a pair of these was to be worn for every deceased loved-one, the women said, the sheer weight would end up making them "ill [...] crippled, even dead". The request was essentially to have compassion for them and to limit this sign of mourning to a single pair of small cloths.

Except in this case, the trend was to have no pity on women: their bodies bore an enormous load because of the layers of clothes and the double-thick cloth or leather, if not fur, they were made of. All of this significantly altered the form of their bodies in the same way that headwear altered their heads' dimensions<sup>33</sup>. Evidence of this comes from the iconography that causes us to imagine women walking with a slow, swaying, lumbering and almost dangerous gait. Honoré de Balzac, author of *Theory of Walking (La Théorie de la démarche)*, was one of the first to reflect on this phenomenon<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Nico Ottaviani (2005:475) Foligno, Polizze, 1554, agosto 14.

<sup>33</sup> Blanc (1997: 135-153).

<sup>34</sup> De Balzac (1986).

**Exorbitance (alterations and excesses)** Alterations varied and led to wearing the most improper headgear: from feathers to the so-called 'dead-hair' wigs (*capelli morti*), to the point of expanding the dimensions of the head to gigantic proportions<sup>35</sup>. While legislators concerned themselves with feathers, preachers concentrated on the dead-hair wigs but neither the former nor the latter group seemed to take an interest in the dimensions of head-coverings (there was an exception in Bologna defining the maximum height of a headdress).

Fashion had altered the proportions of a female's body much more than a man's, enlarging the dimensions both in length and width. Trains added an 'arm' (a unit of measurement of that age) and slippers added half an arm. The same can be said of headwear that transformed women into giants. Iconography preserves the image, from before the eighteenth century of eye-raising round headdresses and complex architecture above which colourful fabric was wrapped. Social differences were also well represented in the grandiose changes to the feminine form. Swelling, lengthening and widening women's bodies practically transformed them into machines for the exhibition of their families' economic and social privilege<sup>36</sup>. This representation risked crushing them under the bulk and weight of those garments they showcased. If women's bodies were to remain invisible the exact opposite was true of the voluminous layers which were intended to attract and astonish: quite contrary to the result imagined by Giovanni da Capestrano.

**Plumage.** Hennins with horns or feathers were criticized by preachers partly because of their reasoning that these reduced the distance between humans and animals. We know, as is confirmed by iconography, that peacock feathers were particularly prized. Even legislators waded in to prohibit their use in headgear. Feathers were particularly popular during the final years of the Middle Ages but in the sixteenth century lawmakers' interest increased<sup>37</sup>. We know

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<sup>35</sup> See Bellasi, P. & T. Sparagni (eds.), 2006, *Un diavolo per capello. Arte, acconciature, società*. Milano: Mazzotta 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Vincent (2009).

<sup>37</sup> Goretti (2005:149-177).

feathers were in use in the courts of Milan and Ferrara during the 1400s where heron feathers were worn in velvet berets. Iconography also documents the use of peacock feathers in Florence where, in 1388, their use was permitted on garlands but banned on clothes. In 1477 Marco Parenti, who married one of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi's daughters, paid for a hairdo that included more than 100 peacock feathers, golden flowers, pink, blue and silver ribbons and cost almost sixty florins<sup>38</sup>. Iconography gives us both a clear idea of, and allows us to admire, the extraordinary head-covering complete with peacock feathers from Adimari's chest.

Bans on headgear with feathers were constant and quite diffused: in Rome as in Bologna where they were condemned in 1575 and again in 1586 when a proclamation prohibited the wearing of heron feathers in hats or hair either inside or outside the city<sup>39</sup>. Giovanni da Capestrano was also concerned with feathers, condemning their use on the grounds that they were mere displays of vanity and symbols of excess<sup>40</sup>. In fact, women were fond of feathers and continued to wear them despite numerous bans.

**Minimalism (caps: true and false).** In the midst of the 1400s caps were frequently present in iconography, were permitted and in some cases those with golden thread were allowed, as was that of golden hair-nets. Often the amount of gold that could be used was defined.

Giovanni da Capestrano even laughed at caps and threatened terrible tragedies as a consequence of God's wrath for those women who wore improper headwear, mitres placed on their heads by the Devil<sup>41</sup>. His threat came from the words of the prophet Isaiah (King

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<sup>38</sup> Gnignera, *I soperchi ornamenti*, cit.: 39. Regarding the expenses that Marco Parenti incurred in order to dress and beautify his wife, see M.G. Muzzarelli, *Guardaroba medievale. Vesti e società dal XIII al XVI secolo*, Bologna il Mulino, 1999:99-105.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. *La legislazione suntuaria. Secoli XIII-XVI. Emilia-Romagna*, a cura di M.G. Muzzarelli, Ministero per i Beni e le attività culturali. Dipartimento per i beni archivistici e librari, Direzione generale per gli Archivi, Bologna, bandi, 1575, aprile 6-7 e p: 240 e Bandi, 1586, giugno 30: 255.

<sup>40</sup> Giovanni da Capestrano (1956:87).

<sup>41</sup> Giovanni da Capestrano (1956:121).

James Bible, portions of 3:16-23): “Moreover the Lord saith, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes [...] Therefore the Lord will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion [...] the Lord will take away [...] the bonnets [...] and the hoods, and the vails” (in modern English ‘vails’ appears as ‘veils’).

These head-coverings appeared minimal, being of small size. In reality they were masterpieces of artisan work, the work of highly qualified female masters. Florence was a centre for the feminine production of embroidered caps<sup>42</sup>. A cap apparently represented the lowest level of decoration, an essential type of long-lasting headgear for by all ages worn both indoors and outdoors. Iconography tells us that in the same way as with simple pieces of cloth, which were flexible elements decorative in their simplicity and of minimal expense in appearance only, women turned caps into stylish articles<sup>43</sup>. These responded at once to the obligation of headwear, a flair for fashion and a taste for humility and practicality, luxury and seduction.

So far the most attention has been paid to decorative head-coverings, yet there were also those of simple functionality, useful for keeping off rain and sun and keeping out the cold. While working, even indoors, women are almost always represented with their heads covered with simple cloths (*sciugatoi*). Along with their aprons these formed the uniform of women workers. Images of women with nothing on their heads, usually at home preparing a meal, are rare if not inexistent. These cloths constitute the most common type of headgear.

**The veil.** A true veil is characterized by its lightness and transparency. Only when made of silk was it thin and shiny<sup>44</sup>.

The term veil does not crop up often in sumptuary laws and when it does this probably refers to a generic head-covering. For example, a Bolognese norm speaks of veils in regard to mourning: they could be

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<sup>42</sup> Frick Collier (2006:117-124).

<sup>43</sup> Gnignera (2010:103-130).

<sup>44</sup> Gnignera (2010:131-153).

worn for up to a month. A concession of veils of any type and costing up to ten lire was made to widows only<sup>45</sup>. The use of veils and clothes for mourning was permitted for no more than two or maximum three months after the death of a husband<sup>46</sup>. It seems that some excesses were committed in the cases of funerals and “to remove this corruption of veiling so many women” (*per levar questa corrutela d’invelar tante donne*) in 1556 the city of Forlì limited the number of family members who could wear veils<sup>47</sup>. In Faenza as well, in 1574, steps were taken to combat the “excessive expenses [...] in giving so many veils to women” (*eccessive spese [...] nel dar molti veli alle donne*) for the occasion of funeral rites, suggesting instead to “put to more pious and holy use in homage to the souls of departed” (*convertir in più pie et sante opere in suffragio dell’anime de’ defunti*) the sums spent on these objects<sup>48</sup>.

In Bologna the sumptuary laws of 1545 imposed yellow veils on harlots<sup>49</sup>. In 1556 in Foligno a turquoise veil was used to distinguish these women while a yellow one was assigned to Jewesses and a white one to widows<sup>50</sup>.

Iconography attests to the profusion of veils between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: exceedingly thin, almost intangible, brightly-coloured, golden and transparent as doubtless some wore and others dreamed of wearing and as painters represented with some difficulty due to the opaque nature of the materials. It is not easy to determine which types of veils could have been produced during the Middle Ages as none have survived.

The veil is a metaphor, beyond being an object produced, desired

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<sup>45</sup> *La legislazione suntuaria. Secoli XIII-XVI. Emilia-Romagna* Bologna, Statuti, 1376: 104 & 109.

<sup>46</sup> Ivi, Bologna, Statuti 1389: 115.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, Forlì, Consigli generali e segreti, 1556, giugno 30: 331.

<sup>48</sup> Ivi, Faenza, Reforma, ordine et provvigione, 1574, marzo 12: 549.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, Bologna, Bandi, 1545, marzo 28: 190.

<sup>50</sup> *La legislazione suntuaria. Secoli XIII-XVI. Umbria*, cit., Foligno, 1556, giugno 3: 477.



and sold. It is a metaphor in the same way as the covering of one's head as indicated by Saint Paul. A veil is a symbol of submission yet also of lightness and elegance. It is the representation of hiding some without hiding all, of leaving something which is more allusive than demonstrative. In the West, women adopted veils more as ornaments than in obedience to men. They did so in such a way as to avoid the accusation of resistance yet without giving up their desire to have a social life, to have taste and a sense of style and to show off almost the only part of their bodies they could: their faces.

The fact is that the covering of women's heads is a Western tradition that was only abandoned some few decades ago. This should be remembered when making comparisons with other cultures and religions. Cultures and religions influenced each other, and continue to do so, even in the cases of those who unknowingly wear their baseball caps backwards.

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