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PLATE I

GIOTTO. DETAIL FROM "ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM," SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA, 1305, SHOWING THE DRESS OF SECULAR CHARACTERS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 14TH CENTURY. GIOTTO IS NOT ONLY AN ACCURATE RECORDER OF ALL ITEMS OF DRESS, BUT HIS PENETRATING OBSERVATION OF SIGNIFICANT GESTURE MAKES HIM OF PARTICULAR INTEREST TO THE STUDENT OF COSTUME. HERE THE PROCESS OF REMOVING THE OUTER GARMENTS TO LAY UNDER THE FEET OF CHRIST REVEALS BOTH THE CUT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CLOTHES.

THE STUDY OF COSTUME AS AN AID TO THE DATING OF ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PAINTINGS

by

STELLA MARY PEARCE *

THE STUDY of the costume of the past is not a study which can be picked up for the sake of dating a painting and then dropped. It demands the same detailed research, background knowledge, and acute observation, combined with imaginative insight, that are essential to the study of art history. It cannot be undertaken without a specialised training, nor can it be successfully carried out except by those who are sensitive to clothes; and it involves the devotion of as many lifetimes of work as are involved in the study of art history. Furthermore, the study of the history of costume is only just beginning.

Many an art-historian, unable to date the painting which is the object of his investigation on documentary or stylistic grounds, has attempted to arrive at a date from the evidence of costume, but there are also those who refuse to admit the significance of design in clothes, and regard changes of fashion as being arbitrary and illogical and painters as being free to escape from the *Zeitgeist* as it is expressed in dress. Until the history of costume has been worked over with the same thoroughness and scientific care as is nowadays directed to the history of art, the art-historian can be neither helped nor converted by the historian of clothes.

It is not by accident that I myself have chosen the costume of the Italian Renaissance as a field of study. The tremendous production of painting and sculpture during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, combined with the peculiar sensitivity of the Italian people to changes in the design of clothes, has made it possible to discover, from the careful examination of works of art bearing undisputed dates, exactly what men and women looked like and how often they changed their ideas as to how they should be dressed. Only in periods when firmly dated works of art are scarce does it become impossible to find the precise pattern of these changes in detail, and it is for this reason that it is difficult to

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date the paintings of both Pisanello and Veronese, two painters who, curiously enough, even among painters of the Italian Renaissance were remarkable for their interest in the clothes they painted.

An immense amount of work still remains to be done on the costume of the Italian Renaissance, but from the research I have been able to carry out during ten to twelve years I am satisfied of three major facts which can be proved, but proved only by the examination of a host of minor discoveries.

The importance of these three facts cannot be overestimated. They are as follows:

During the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy, *a.* fashions in clothes and hairdressing changed as quickly as they do today (Plate 1), *b.* no painter resisted the pressure of contemporary fashion (Plate 2), *c.* no character appearing in any painting was entirely unaffected by fashion (Plate 3).

Once the validity of these three facts is accepted it must be recognised that, where sufficient firmly dated works of art can be found to serve for comparisons, any painting which contains clothed figures (or even unclothed figures with dressed hair) can be dated to within a narrow time-limit. The time-limit varies with the amount of comparative material available, but at most periods during the Italian Renaissance the margin can be narrowed to within five years.

In so short an essay it is naturally impossible to discuss a large enough number of works extending over a long enough period of time to establish the first assertion I have made above—namely, that fashion changed quickly during the Italian Renaissance. It must also be realised that to the untrained eye changes are not always easily perceptible. Most sensitive to alteration in fashion and most obnoxious when out-of-date are the style of dressing the hair and the position of any emphasis at the waist. It frequently, and most naturally, happens that a change in design in the dressing of the hair is accompanied by a change in the shape of the neck-opening. Thus, a raising of the neckline of women's dresses accompanied a simplification of the dressing of the front of the hair in the early 1560s, evidence of which can be collected from dated paintings by Tintoretto and his contemporaries, while in the first decade of the fifteenth century the building of a high upstanding collar on the tunics of men led to a cutting away of the hair at the nape of the neck. In the first instance the change was aesthetic, in the second functional. This functional practice opened out, however, new aesthetic vistas, and once the idea of shaving away



PLATE 2

GIOTTO. DETAIL FROM "LAST JUDGMENT," SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA, 1305. THIS HEAD OF ENRICO SCROVEGNI IS YET ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF GIOTTO'S GENIUS FOR ACCURATE RECORDING OF THE WAY THINGS ARE MADE. THE DRAWING OF THE WHITE LINEN BONNET-LIKE "COIF" WORN UNDER THE HAT COULD SERVE AS A MILLINER'S MODEL.



PLATE 3

GIOTTO. DETAIL FROM "THE WASHING OF FEET," SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA, 1305. THE CAREFUL DRAWING OF THE SANDALS SHOWS EXACTLY WHERE THE SOLE JOINS THE UPPER, AND THE METHOD OF FASTENING THE STRAP. ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE CARE THIS GREAT ARTIST TOOK OVER DETAILS OF DRESS.

areas of hair on the head was accepted, fantasies of haircutting were introduced. Women's foreheads were shaven and men's hair was shaved away above and behind the ears. By this time the high collar was once more lowered in order that the newly designed head might be fully appreciated — raised aloft on an uncovered neck.

When the underlying aesthetic or psychological idea of change or development of style of this kind has been grasped, it is not impossible to find an approximate point at which to place an undated painting even if it falls within a period when practically no comparative material can be found, since the rhythm of development has been established. There is, moreover, no decade during the Italian Renaissance which does not contain *some* dated works of art which can guide the historian of clothes; the graph of development and mutation from the beginning of the fourteenth to the end of the sixteenth century can be drawn with remarkable clarity, and there is no moment at which an undated painting cannot be placed to within ten years.

The second fact which I regard as being completely established — that no painter during the Italian Renaissance resisted the pressure of contemporary fashion — can be seen much more easily by an eye unaccustomed to examining paintings for the evidence of costume. It has often been considered that the greatest artists are unaffected by current details of fashion: that they draw generalised rather than particularised clothes: that they dress their characters in clothes which are imaginative inventions: or — and this is a most popular theory — that they are successful in painting clothes which, while they are not purely imaginary, belong to an earlier day than their own. That all these theories are psychologically unsound need not be discussed here. It is only necessary to examine some of the works of some of the greatest painters to see that, during the Italian Renaissance at least, every painter, even when he was determined to dress his characters in clothes which could be thought of as either belonging to the past or as “outside time,” kept the current fashion sufficiently near the surface to satisfy the unconscious visual demands of both himself and his public. In spite of the recurrent indignation of conservatives and moralists there is a fundamental belief that the present, at whatever moment it occurs, marks the end of progress, and that what has just been accepted represents the ultimate norm. It is for this reason that painters and sculptors, even when they are deliberately using an archaic form of dress because they consider it suitable to their subject, are incapable of producing an objective reproduction of the clothes of

antiquity, but must always record beneath the clothes of the past the taste of their own day.

Donatello, consumed with admiration for Roman reliefs and determined to reproduce the general sense of fluttering Roman drapery in a most unfluttering age, nevertheless dresses his Salome, in his Siena font relief, in the cut of the second decade of the fifteenth century. It is merely the texture which he changes. Salome's dress with its long train which has to be held up behind, its sleeve fitting at the wrist but bulging into a "peascod" shape at the elbow, bears only the most superficial resemblance to what is meant to be a Roman prototype. She wears the haircut of 1425.

The youth with his back turned to the spectator in Masaccio's *Tribute Money* (Carmine, Florence) wears the dress of the period: the girls in the background of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (Pitti, Florence) are most carefully represented in the dress of their time. These are the obvious guides to the student of costume. But more important, because apparently more obscure, are the Christs and Apostles, the Madonnas and Saints, the Venuses and Nymphs, who are seemingly dressed in clothes which are either outside time or which belong to the past but who really reflect their own period.

Mantegna, for instance, was a student of the antique. He worked in his youth for Squarcione, who collected Roman reliefs, statues, pottery and coins and sold them to the local aristocracy, and who was, in fact, as much antique dealer as painter. Mantegna, too, was a collector; he was caught by the fashionable passion for classic antiquity, and yet scarcely a figure in his *Triumphs of Caesar* (Hampton Court, London) (Plates 4 and 5), for all his scholarly care, succeeds in concealing the current silhouette. The long heavy hair-cut, the sleeve puffed a little above the elbow, tight below — such details are continually hinted at and are not concealed by the authentically Roman flavour of the soft monochromatic drapery (Plates 6 and 7).

Like Mantegna, Raphael, especially in his Vatican Stanze and his tapestry cartoons, seemed to use correct antique dress, but a comparison between his preliminary studies, usually made from studio models wearing their everyday clothes, and the final version of the paintings, reveals his ingenious and quite evidently deliberate method of maintaining a constant reference to the actual clothes which he had recorded in his first drawings in his "classic" draperies. The cut of his tunics is the cut of the shirt of the early sixteenth century. His "togas" are heavily bunched to give bulk to the outline in places where the current outline was bulky,



MANTEGNA. DETAILS FROM CARTOONS "THE TRIUMPHS OF CAESAR," HAMPTON COURT PALACE, LONDON. (BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION OF H. M. THE QUEEN.) END OF THE 15TH CENTURY. TWO YOUTHS WEARING WHAT PUR-
 PORTS TO BE CLASSICAL ROMAN DRESS. BUT COMPARISON WITH PLATES 6 AND 7 SHOW THAT THEY WEAR THE
 FASHIONABLE HAIRCUT OF THE ARTIST'S OWN DAY AND THAT THEIR SLEEVES AND THE CUT OF THEIR TUNICS,
 INCLUDING THE NECKLINE, REFLECT THE CURRENT FASHION.



PLATE 6

CARPACCIO. DETAIL FROM THE "LIFE OF ST. URSULA," ACCADEMIA, VENICE, 1490-1496.
FOR COMPARISON WITH PLATES 4 AND 5.



PLATE 7

CARPACCIO. DETAIL FROM THE "LIFE OF ST. URSULA," ACCADEMIA, VENICE, 1495.
FOR COMPARISON WITH PLATES 4 AND 5.

and they are treated with a molten fluidity which reveals the thigh and calf, although the garments reach the ground, since the eye of the early sixteenth century insisted that men should show their legs (Plates 8 and 9).

To say, therefore, that no artist is uninfluenced by current fashion is to say, as my third fact asserts, that no character in any painting is uninfluenced by current fashion. But before passing on to a discussion of the treatment of individual personages in Italian art it is important to realise that there were multitudes of characters who were regarded as being suitably dressed when they wore the clothes of the artist's own day, even when they appeared in biblical scenes or stories from classical mythology. There are, of course, the portraits of real people — donors, for instance — who were naturally portrayed wearing garments chosen from their own wardrobes, but there are also the secular characters of the story, such as the crowds who listen to the preaching of San Bernadino of Siena in fifteenth-century Sienese painting, and the pages and attendants on the Magi, the young girl nurses at birth-scenes, and the onlookers at the Crucifixion, who invariably wear "modern" dress. It is these characters who prove the extreme sensibility of Italian painters to the tailoring, dressmaking, millinery, shoemaking and hairdressing of their own day.

The Italian painter, not concerned, even in the latest phase of the Renaissance, with the effect of the play of light on surfaces *at the expense* of construction, was always conscious of the way things are made, and always explicit when he painted craftsmanship. Faked Renaissance pictures or repainted details can be detected from the fact that the construction of the clothes has not been understood by a later painter who, because he had not actually fastened the strings or buckles or buttons of the clothes he is painting nor experienced their stresses and strains (nor witnessed his wife's handling of her clothes), cannot paint with the conviction which we instinctively recognise in the painter who is recording his own period.

A step-ladder, or a pair of field-glasses in the Arena Chapel, or a magnifying-glass and a good reproduction at home reveals Giotto's intimacy with a bonnet such as Scrovegni wears (Plate 2). The slight puckering of the stuff where it is held in by the firm binding round the edge is no generalisation: it is the result of scrupulous observation. The fantastic dress of Pisanello's day can no longer be regarded as a product of Pisanello's imagination when one notices in his drawing No. 2509 v. in the Louvre the two buttons at the nape of the neck and the seam down the back of the stockings — details which the designer of imaginary cos-

tume does not trouble to, indeed cannot, invent. The turban round the head of Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* could be reproduced on a living model, the cloak held out to receive Botticelli's *Venus* could be copied by the modern tailor, and when worn it would be the fashionable collared mantle of the 1480s. Enough paintings bearing similar dates have survived to provide undisputable evidence that the painters of the Italian Renaissance were so conscious of current fashion that never, unless they wished to underline the out-of-date character of some particular person or group of persons, did they fail to use not only contemporary dress but the latest version of contemporary dress. Naturally working-class people were kept behind the fashion, and so were old men and women, who are almost always conservatively dressed, but this careful selection of slightly unfashionable clothes for certain characters in the story only serves to emphasise the painters' clothes-consciousness.

In comparing, for instance, Ottaviano Nelli's *Madonna Belvedere*, painted in Gubbio in 1403, with a Visconti MS. dated 1402 from Milan (Paris Bib. Nat. MS. Lat. 5888) it can be seen immediately that the girl donor in the *Madonna Belvedere* and some of the female saints on fol. l.r. in the MS. wear exactly similar clothes. Both are painted with equal precision of detail and both show the same fashion. Again, if the series of frescoes by Domenico di Bartolo in the *Pelegrinaio* in Siena be compared with the frescoes of the life of Queen Teodolinda by the Zavadari brothers in the *Duomo* at Monza which bear the same date, 1444, it is quite clear that the same stage in fashion has been reached, although the painters differ widely in their styles of painting: the Siena frescoes are flowing and exuberant: those at Monza are stiff and naive: but the artists are painting the same clothes.

Careful study shows, in fact, that artists who differ as profoundly from each other stylistically as Carlo Crivelli, Giovanni Bellini and Botticelli, or as Pisanello and Masolino, or as Tintoretto and Baroccio, are nevertheless unanimous as to current fashion, and that great painters such as Giotto or Raphael, and pedestrian painters such as Ghirlandaio or Federigo Zuccaro, are equally interested in the clothes and hairdressing of the people they paint. Often they deliberately archaize the clothes of their characters, and, in fact, a table of forms of dress suitable to each character and each scene in which the character appears can be drawn up.

Christ and the Apostles were regarded by all painters as being so sacred that they could not — as could the Saints — be openly dressed in the current fashion, and it is for them that a dignified archaic dress was



PLATE 8

RAPHAEL. CARTOON FOR TAPESTRY "FEED MY SHEEP," VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON. BEGINNING OF 16TH CENTURY. (BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION OF H. M. THE QUEEN.)



PLATE 9

RAPHAEL. PREPARATORY STUDY FOR THE CARTOON "FEED MY SHEEP," WINDSOR, ROYAL LIBRARY. BEGINNING OF THE 16TH CENTURY. (BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION OF H. M. THE QUEEN.) IN THE CARTOON RAPHAEL HAS TRANSLATED THE CURRENT FASHION INTO A SEMBLANCE OF CLASSICAL ROMAN DRESS, BUT THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE DRESS OF HIS OWN DAY ARE STILL VISIBLE, PARTICULARLY IN THE DRAPERY OVER ST. JOHN'S SHOULDER WHICH SUGGESTS THE HUGE PUFFED UPPER SLEEVE ACTUALLY WORN BY THE MODEL IN THE DRAWING. THE NECKLINE OF ST. PETER'S SHIRT, THE FULLNESS OF ITS CUT AND THE SET OF THE SLEEVE OF THE YOUNG BEARDED APOSTLE IN THE FOREGROUND INTO THE SHOULDER SEAM, ARE ALL CARRIED OVER FROM THE PRELIMINARY DRAWING INTO THE CARTOON.

reserved. In the Middle Ages this dress was the long tunic and over-mantle actually worn by the upper and leisured classes during the Romanesque and early mediaeval periods. As the Renaissance proceeded this mediaeval dress naturally took on a somewhat Roman or classical form. The bands of embroidered trimmings which had too mediaeval a flavour to be acceptable were suppressed. The tunic was shaped, as a rule, on the model of the undershirt fashionable at the time of the painting, and either lengthened or, more often, with the hem-line concealed by the mantle. As I have pointed out, this archaic dress could be varied in appearance as fashion demanded.

The figure of Christ is always represented with long hair but the arrangement of the hair follows, very discreetly, the fashionable line, and is then, in short-haired periods, extended to the shoulders. Tradition with regard to St. Peter's actual appearance was so strong that at all periods his hair is cut short, whereas the hairdressing of St. John the Evangelist, a younger man and a most sympathetic character, follows the fashion as, for example, in the Raphael cartoon *Feed My Sheep* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) (Plates 8, 9 and 16).

The Madonna, holding a very special and peculiar position in the hearts of the Italian people, was not dressed in a similarly archaic way. Although she almost invariably retained the blue mantle, red dress and white veil laid down by Byzantine tradition, all these articles of dress were very flexible in their character so that, instead of being removed into the past, she could exist in an affectionately intimate relationship with her worshippers. Only during two moments in the story of her life is she dressed at the height of fashion, and those are the moments when she is often shown without her traditional veil and mantle — at her Marriage (Plate 10) and at her Coronation in Heaven (Plate 11). As a Virgin Bride she cannot wear the Byzantine veil nor a mantle (a garment forbidden to unmarried women) and as the Queen of Heaven she is evidently thought of by some painters as having discarded them.

On the majority of occasions the Madonna is not depicted in the clothes of a young girl or of a princess, but the details of her dress, the neckline, the waistline, the sleeves, the trimmings still reflect contemporary taste. They are neither so new in style as to appear frivolously *chic* nor so far behind the fashion as to seem dowdy. They express the current fashion at its most acceptable stage — familiar enough to the eye as to seem beautiful, yet still new enough to be faintly stimulating. Extraordinary skill is shown in compelling the traditional features of her dress to



PLATE 10

GIOTTO. DETAIL FROM THE "MARRIAGE OF THE VIRGIN," SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA, 1305. IN SCENES OF HER MARRIAGE THE VIRGIN IS USUALLY PAINTED WEARING THE CLOTHES OF A YOUNG GIRL OF FASHION.



PLATE I I

FRANCESCO DI GIORGIO. DETAIL FROM THE "CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN," ACCADEMIA, SIENA, C 1475. IN SCENES OF HER CORONATION THE VIRGIN IS USUALLY PORTRAYED IN FASHIONABLE RATHER THAN IN TRADITIONAL DRESS.

reflect this transient moment of beauty. Lippo Lippi's Virgin Annunciate in the Frick Museum, New York, wears a veil which is not draped over her head but over a turban-like headdress which, though it does not show, completely alters the characteristics of the veil (Plate 12). Headdresses were then so familiar that a smoothly fitted head would have looked either depressing or comic, and there was no painter of the decade who did not devise some means of removing the veil of the Blessed Virgin from the threat of dowdiness (Plate 13). Fra Filippo also most skilfully contrived the drapery of her mantle with the result that it seems to contain a reference to the wing-like falling sleeves of the prevailing fashion — yet no sleeves are there at all. Throughout Renaissance painting the clothes of the Madonna were gently aligned with fashionable dress; to the contemporary eye they must have seemed gracious and without the least trace of eccentricity. This refusal to archaïse a beloved figure is of course invaluable to the student of costume.

The clothes of angels and saints including those who, like St. John the Baptist and St. Roch, wear their own recognisable costumes, were all brought into contact with current fashion — angels often by various ingenious devices such as the introduction of a long skirt beneath the fashionable short male tunic seen in Plates 14 and 15. In an age of rapidly changing ideas only the vestments of the clergy remain almost stationary, though even they, by the patterns of their brocades and damasks and the designs of their orphreys and amices, are made to move in a stately measure with the times.

To say, therefore, that no painter and no character in any painting is unaffected by current fashion is true. Naturally this does not mean that any conscientious student of Italian Renaissance dress can date every undated work of art at a glance from the evidence of the costume it contains. There are paintings in which the exact distance that the Madonna is kept behind the extravagances of the newest fashion is difficult to assess to within three or four years, and if such a Madonna is supported only by, say, two saints, one a bishop and one wearing the university gown of a doctor, the problem is not minimised. Such pictures are rare. Most paintings contain plenty of evidence, and the difficulty of dating them lies in the interpretation of the evidence they contain.

The ability to read costume as one reads handwriting is comparable to the art-historian's ability to read brush-strokes. It is a skill which can be acquired only by long experience, and then only by those who are sufficiently sensitive to clothes to understand their nature as clothes. Such



PLATE 12

LIPPI. THE "VIRGIN ANNUNCIATE," FRICK MUSEUM, NEW YORK. MIDDLE OF THE 15TH CENTURY. THE VIRGIN WEARS WHAT APPEAR TO BE THE GARMENTS TRADITIONAL TO HER, BUT, IN FACT, HER MANTLE IS DRAPED TO RESEMBLE THE HUGE HANGING SLEEVES OF THE CURRENT FASHION, AND THE SWELLING LINE OF HER VEIL REVEALS THE SILHOUETTE OF A FASHIONABLE TURBAN-HEADRESS WORN BENEATH. HER HAIR IS SHAVED AWAY FROM THE FOREHEAD AS WAS THE CURRENT PRACTICE AT THIS DATE.



PLATE 13

GIOVANNI DI PAOLO. DETAIL FROM THE "PARADISE," METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK. MIDDLE OF THE 15TH CENTURY. THE DRESS OF THESE TWO FASHIONABLE WOMEN CAN BE COMPARED WITH THAT OF LIPPO LIPPI'S "VIRGIN ANNUNCIATE" WHEN IT WILL BE SEEN THAT THE VIRGIN WEARS THE SAME FASHION IN A SLIGHTLY MODIFIED FORM.



PLATE 14

SALIMBENI BROTHERS. DETAIL FROM "ST. JOHN BAPTISING THE MULTITUDE," S. GIOVANNI, URBINO, 1416. ST. JOHN IS PORTRAYED WEARING A TUNIC OF SKINS OF THE FASHIONABLE LENGTH (COMPARE WITH THE PAGE IN THE FOREGROUND), WITH THE FASHIONABLE V-CUT NECKLINE: THE MODISH SERRATED EDGE OF THE TUNIC IS REFLECTED IN THE HANGING POINTS OF FUR.



PLATE 15

CARLO CRIVELLI. DETAIL FROM THE "VIRGIN AND SAVIOUR CROWNED BY THE ALMIGHTY," BRERA, MILAN, 1493. ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST WEARS A TUNIC OF SKINS, LEATHER SIDE OUT, OF THE FASHIONABLE LENGTH. THE LENGTH OF HIS HAIR IS OF THE LATEST STYLE, AS IS THE FRINGE ON HIS FOREHEAD. HIS SANDALS ALSO ARE FASHIONABLE.



PLATE 16

TURINO VANNI DI RIGOLI. DETAILS FROM "MADONNA AND SAINTS,"
S. PAOLO IN RIPA D'ARNO, PISA, 1397. HEAD OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
COMPARED WITH THE HEAD OF THE OTHER SUPPORTING SAINT WHO
WEARS THE CURRENT FASHION. THE SILHOUETTE OF THE HAIRCUT IS
THE SAME, BUT ST. JOHN'S HAIR HAS AN ADDED LENGTH TO CONFORM
WITH TRADITION. ST. JOHN ALSO WEARS THE FASHIONABLE HIGH
NECKLINE.

people do not fall into the error of regarding clothes as painted shapes on canvas; to them clothes have weight and volume, and mechanisms which allow them to be put on and taken off. The characters of clothes, as they vary from period to period, are revealed in the postures and the gestures of the people who wear them. The student of costume, reading gesture as well as dress, imagines himself restricted by the tightness, weighed down by the heaviness, or released by the amplitude of the period he is studying, so that, in sympathy with the artist who was himself subject to the same conditions, he can see, objectively, beneath the artist's interpretation of the subject, the fashion of the day.



PLATE I

BRIDE WEARING CEREMONIAL WEDDING HUIPIL. QUETZALTENANGO, GUATEMALA. THE SCARCELY VISIBLE HEAVY, WHITE BROCADING IN THE LOWER PORTION LENDS A DELICATE, SUBTLE CHARM TO THESE GARMENTS AS MAY BE SEEN ALSO IN THE HUIPIL SHOWN IN PLATE V.

TWO GUATEMALAN WEDDING HUIPILS

by JUNIUS BIRD

THROUGH the centuries, wherever marriage has involved some formality or ceremony, a woman's wedding dress has been something to cherish. As a possible symbol of a universal hope for happiness in marriage it will more often than not represent the best that is available to the person who wears it. The care in its preparation and decoration, the quality of the materials used and the styling often make it the finest dress a woman may own in her lifetime. Where everyday costume or dresses for other occasions may show individuality, there is apt to be far greater recognition of tradition in the wedding costume. Even in our own society where great effort is directed toward individuality within the limits of current style, we still make some concession to tradition for a bride. In a culture where costume is strongly standardized by tradition, though there may be less to set the wedding dress apart, it still shows greater care in workmanship, greater effort to make it attractive. Thus if it were possible to assemble a collection of wedding dresses from different ages and different lands it would be uniquely interesting. Only a comparable collection of fabrics used in religious or royal ritual would surpass it in quality, but with these there could not be the same bond of common, almost universal, experience which is such a part of their interest.

In a special exhibit prepared for the members of the Needle and Bobbin Club at the American Museum of Natural History last January, two unusually fine wedding huipils from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, were shown. These are part of the remarkable collection of Mrs. Elsie McDougall, which was featured; a collection primarily of Mexican and Central American looms and fabrics. Though there are no precise data on when the huipils were made, Mrs. McDougall considers them to be 19th Century products. Coming as they do from a region where every girl was trained to spin and weave, where pride in these crafts was highly developed, where tradition in design, techniques and costume was strongly established, they merit careful study. We can expect to see in them the best work their makers were capable of, and this lends added interest.

For these reasons we feel that a few comments on them are worth recording.

The huipil has been classed as a blouse. This may be misleading if we do not at the same time recognize that it perpetuates one of the really ancient untailed types of costume, the rectangular tunic or poncho-shirt. As a common feature of a woman's dress in highland Guatemala it may now be worn with the lower portion drawn together and covered by a skirt. Where local custom dictates a short length, it may be worn with the lower edge hanging free at or above the waist line. Large ceremonial ones may be worn still differently with just the face showing through the head opening and the lower portion hanging outside the skirt well below the waist line (Plate I). It has been suggested that this strange way of wearing the huipil arose in colonial times as a means of complying with the requirement that a woman's head be covered in church. This might well be the explanation if the women then lacked a formal or otherwise suitable type of head covering.

In some sections of Central America the huipil may be made of a single loom product folded at the shoulder line and seamed down the sides below the arm openings. Others are made of two or three complete lengths, or sections of cloth joined together to provide greater width. The ones shown here fall into the latter category and appear to have been made by cutting one long strip of material into three sections of equal length and sewing them together to form a large rectangle. At the exact center a small circular head or face opening was cut, its edges embroidered with a collar-like ring. By folding transversely on the center line and by sewing the side edges, a sack-like tunic results. Designs are identical front and back and must be woven so the details match evenly after the sections of cloth are joined together. To do this on looms which are little more than an assemblage of a few wooden sticks, though dignified by the term backstrap loom, calls for great skill and careful planning.

The specimen shown in Plate II, unpatterned and seemingly simple as it registers in a black and white photograph, is remarkable for its texture and the method in which color is used. The warp yarn is fine, single, Z spun cotton, with crêpe twist, handspun with the simple prehistoric-type spindle and probably reworked to impart the desired degree of crêping. The same yarn is used as weft in regularly repeated stripes of plain or tabby weave, but on it at frequent intervals red and gold silk floss has been wrapped (Detail of Plate II). As the weave is loose and the fabric almost sheer, these colors are readily visible and the added bulk of the silk

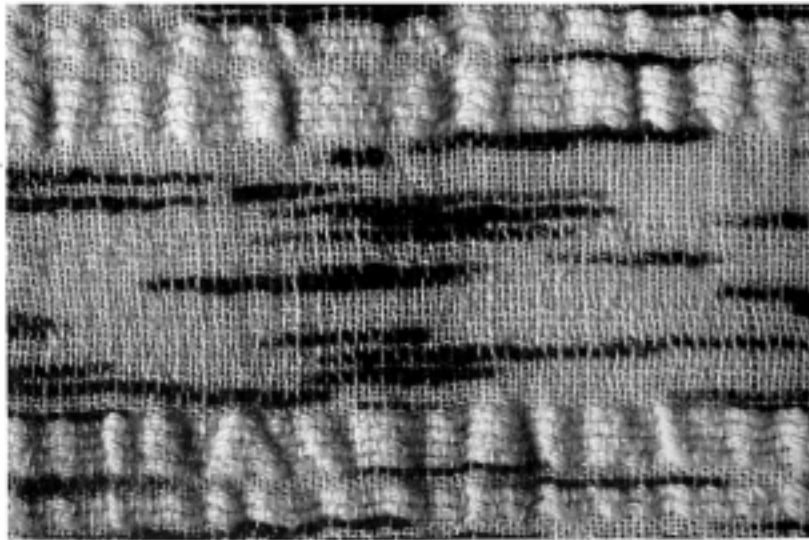


PLATE II

NINETEENTH CENTURY WEDDING HUIPIL FROM QUETZALTENANGO, GUATEMALA,
39" WIDE X 42" HIGH, WITH DETAIL SHOWING SILK FLOSS WRAPPED ON
WEFT, AND CRÊPED WEFT STRIPES.

varies the texture. Between the plain-weave, color-flecked areas are heavily ribbed weft stripes created by meticulously laying in either paired or quadrupled weft yarns of different quality with no tension applied to them as they are passed through the warp. As with many textiles, an attempt to portray verbally what was achieved not only fails to convey the desired picture but is both confusing and boring. Perhaps if we remember that the wefts in the plain weave stripes measure about 13 inches from selvage to selvage, while the adjacent crêped stripes have paired, soft-spun cotton singles measuring approximately 17 inches in length between the same selvages, we can more easily appreciate the problem of construction. Any hand-weaver will realize what this involves, but at the same time will be puzzled by how it is accomplished. The explanation lies in the most important difference between the simple backstrap loom and modern mechanical or semi-mechanical looms; the fact that the former permits the weaver to vary the warp tension at will.

Actually, this crêped stripe is not a rare thing in Central America and is often seen alternating with areas of leno or gauze weave. How ancient the practice may be is still unknown. As it is a non-European technique, there is scant reason to consider it anything but pre-Spanish. Unfortunately, conditions in Central America are such that virtually no prehistoric textiles have survived. Apart from a series of fragments from the sacred well or cenote ¹ at Chichen Itza in Mayan territory and a few from dry caves, nothing is available. In this totally inadequate sample none of this type of striping technique has been reported. In Peru only a very few instances of the same thing have been found, all, as far as one can trust the records, from the central coast area. As all can be considered late in terms of the total Peruvian textile chronology, perhaps 16th Century, there is a possibility that the idea may have been introduced into Peru by the native allies or troops recruited in Central America by the Spaniards. The records that such people, both men and women, were brought to Peru are clear and positive, but nothing is known of their ultimate fate nor of their possible influence on native Peruvian culture.

The principle of wrapping additional lint or floss on restricted sections of yarn for texture or color variations is a far rarer feature. With modern mechanical spinning equipment this is no problem and nub yarns are commonly used to produce an effect comparable to what we see in this

¹ Sacred Well of Chichen Itza in northern Yucatan where, according to old Mayan tales, sacrificial victims were cast in times of drought or disaster to propitiate the angry gods who lived in its depths. (Ed.)

specimen. With yarns spun on a hand spindle, however, the application of additional fibers must have been an exceedingly painstaking and laborious process, for the colored fibers are loosely twisted around the outside of the yarn and are not integrated with it. The rarity of examples of this technique in other Guatemalan fabrics and the fact that in this instance it was employed for a garment of unusual importance may reflect the difficulty of the task. As there is nothing to prevent the colored fiber from slipping, it is surprising that some Guatemalan fabrics are said to have it on warp yarns. The string heddles² used on the backstrap looms create strong friction on the warps, so the colored fibers must have been added to the sections of the warps between the heddle and the weaver as the work progressed.

For data on the antiquity of this technique in America we must turn again to Peru. There, too, it is extremely rare and only a few examples are known. The oldest, dated at about 900 B.C. by the Carbon 14 method,³ were found by the author while excavating material of the Cupisnique or Chavin horizon in the Chicama Valley. The use of these names to designate cultural material does not mean that we know who the people were or whence they came. We do know that they brought maize to Peru and if, as some evidence now indicates, maize diffused from Central America, they had at least some contacts in that direction. The same people also introduced new weaving techniques into Peru, among which we find this system of wrapping additional fibers on warp yarns during weaving.

As used by them it was not a method of adding color nor of achieving a pleasing variation in texture, but it served to create clearly defined patterns and designs in plain weave fabrics. Unfortunately, the fragments recovered are too incomplete to identify or reconstruct the figures. They show (Plate III) little more than that such figures were achieved by materially increasing the diameters or thickness of the warp yarns at certain intervals after the warps were set up in the loom. The result is that, in relatively loosely woven fabrics, figures of seeming compactness are produced. In southern Peru, after the use of dyes was mastered, we find dyed fibers used to make such patterns more distinct and pleasing. The finest known example of the technique is to be seen in the famous Paracas period fabric displayed at the Brooklyn Museum (Plate IV). This specimen, dating perhaps from the third century B.C. is noted for

² Cords hanging from a stick which, by an action of the hand, cause half the warp yarns to be raised to form an opening for the shuttle.

³ See the *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1953, pp 23-26.

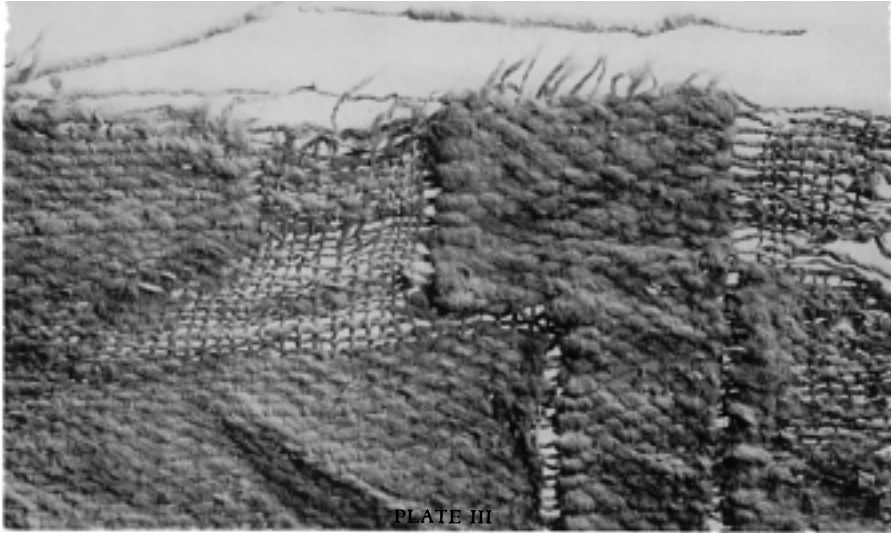


PLATE III

DETAIL OF MONOCHROME WARP WRAPPED FIGURE, C. 900 B.C., PERU.



PLATE IV

PARACAS TEXTILE. WARP WRAPPED FIGURE AT RIGHT, NEEDLEWORK BORDER AT LEFT.
3RD(?) CENTURY B.C., PERU. BROOKLYN MUSEUM 38.121—A.

the beauty and complexity of its elaborate needle-worked border. Attention has been focused almost entirely on this, and the importance of the almost sheer central area has been overlooked. Mrs. McDougall was the first to point out and to identify correctly the method used in creating the colored figures in it. Though only a plain weave, great care and effort were obviously required in its production.

A few other examples of this patterning method have been found. One is definitely of the Nazca period and might have been made between 600 and 900 A.D. Another could be from a later period, but knowledge of the method seems to have been lost long before the Spanish Conquest.

To return to the huipil; there are a few other details which are evidence of the special care and attention given to it. Across both the front and back of the central area are weft stripes of gold and cerise silk, and three of a light purple cotton in which the number of weft passages have been counted off to achieve perfect matching. The purple yarn, which is the same as that used for the seam stitching, has been dyed laboriously, an inch or two at a time, with a fluid obtained from a marine snail, *Purpura patula*, found along the Pacific coast of Central America. As in the Mediterranean area, the shellfish dye was valued both for the quality of its color and its fastness, and possibly because it represented something which was difficult to obtain and hence rare. Cotton yarn with this dye was until recent years, and still may be in a limited way, a valued article of trade. As a luxury item it was widely distributed and was so highly prized during colonial times that the people of one community in Costa Rica sought and received Papal permission to use it for their church altar cloths instead of silk. In checking this particular yarn we note that it is made in a way which is unique among native American fabric yarns, as far as these are known. The spinning direction is Z (counter clockwise); the doubling is opposite to this (S): then two of these two-ply yarns are firmly twisted together in the same direction in which they were doubled. This is a cable twist yarn, and it is difficult to explain why such construction was employed unless it is better suited to the dyeing process. Such data as this may seem like hair-splitting attention to detail, but it might serve to identify some center of dispersal for the Purpura dye, and might help in tracing the distribution of the product.

Each of the weft stripe areas mentioned have two stripes of an "under two over two" twill, with fine silk yarns used as weft. As it is doubtful that the weaver fitted additional heddles to her loom just for these stripes, the only alternative would be hand selection of the warps to be lifted for

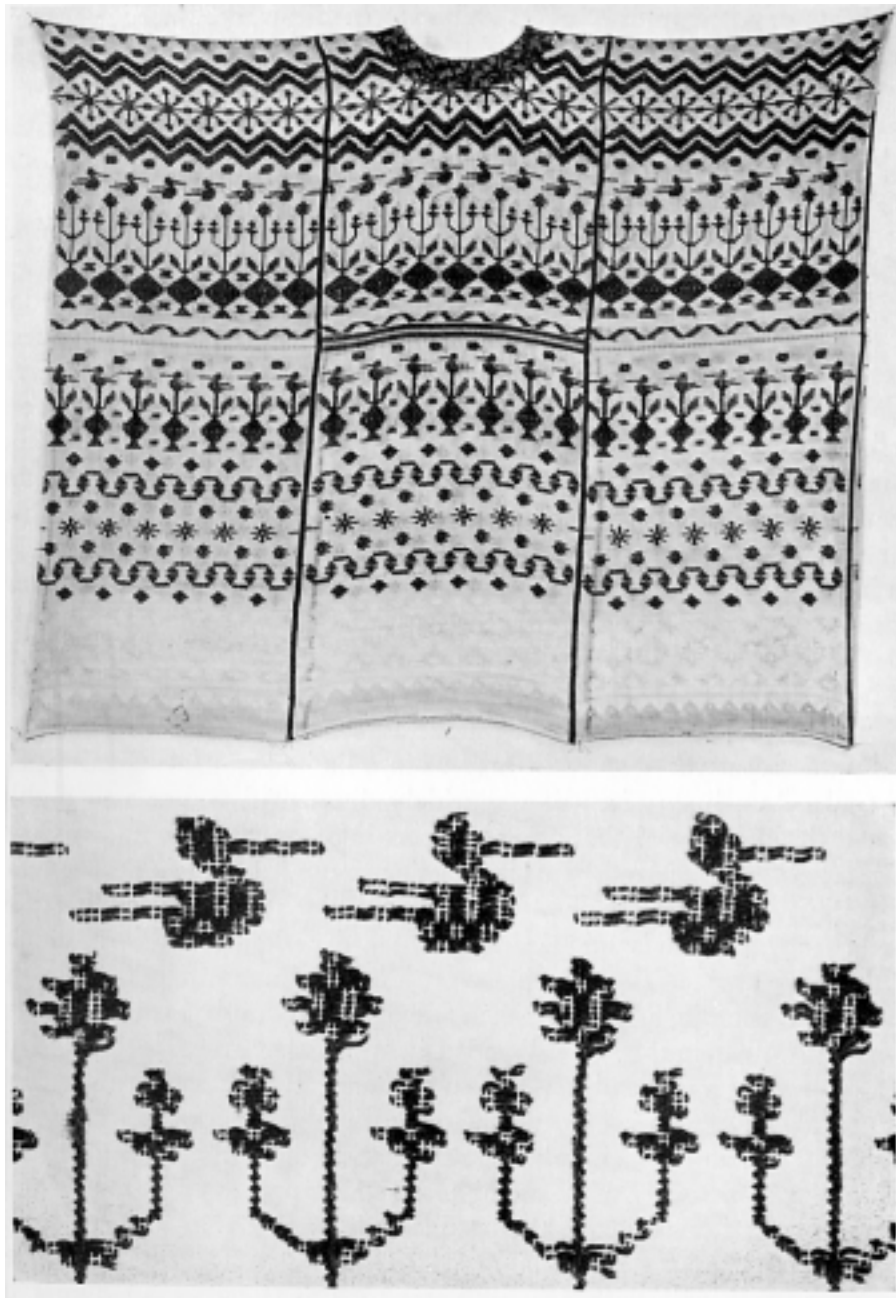


PLATE V

BROCADED COTTON WEDDING HUIPIL FROM QUETZALTENANGO, GUATEMALA.
(WIDTH 46½", HEIGHT 39", A. M. N. H. 65/5297), WITH DETAIL BELOW.

each passage of the weft. Any weaver will agree that this must have been a boring chore, to phrase it mildly.

In Guatemala the weaving of twill on Spanish-type foot treadle looms is not uncommon, but twill weaves from the native-type looms are rare. It is doubtful if this can be attributed to the difficulty of preparing and operating the heddles, for this simple loom can be adapted to any construction the weaver really wishes to produce. In prehistoric times in America there was no lack of knowledge of twill construction, as is proved by a very complex twill fragment from the Chichen Itza cenote and others from Peru and elsewhere. Its use by our native weavers seems to have been quite localized, where interest developed as it did during the Mochica period in northern Peru. It would seem that the technique failed to satisfy the weavers as a challenge to their ingenuity. No economic demand for it developed within their culture, as it has in ours. Only after the Spaniards introduced the foot treadle loom, which could not compete with the native loom for diversity of product, has its use become common. Perhaps its occurrence in the huipil might serve as an example of the native loom operator's attitude; "We can weave it if we want to."

The second wedding huipil (Plate V), like so many articles of native apparel in Guatemala, is brocaded. In size and proportions it is similar to the first, and is also made of three lengths of material with vertical stripes formed by the decorative stitching of the seams. It, too, has horizontal weft stripes, front and back, of silk and cotton, and a circular neck opening embroidered with a floral pattern in bright colored silks. Warp and weft yarn is a slightly heavier handspun single cotton, with less crêpe twist. Four strands of the same yarn are used for the white brocaded figures at the bottom of the garment, and for weft stripes. The rest of the brocading is done with a paired, three-ply purple cotton yarn similar to but of a darker shade than the shellfish dye in the first specimen. This is obviously an attempt to duplicate the rarer product, and it may possibly have been dyed with an aniline product introduced by Germans who knew that the demand for the natural product far exceeded the supply.

The workmanship throughout is excellent. The six repeats of all figures as they occur front and back on each section of the material match almost perfectly. As far as checked, this seems to have been accomplished by counting off the warps and wefts involved in each figure and in their spacing. Again we find that the number of wefts in the horizontal stripes, front and back, are the same. Such variation as is visible seems to be the result of slight differences in the beating in of the weft.

What significance, if any, the figures may have had is not known. Similar ones occur in other Guatemalan fabrics, but there is no way of checking their antiquity. All we can do is to point out that the brocading technique is prehistoric and widespread. Examples were found among the Chichen Itza fragments. Others are known from the southwestern United States, and many have been secured in Peru. Curiously, in that country brocading never became as popular as it did in Guatemala. The oldest examples occur at the same level as the warp wrapping but other methods of patterning were preferred for nearly two thousand years. Then, in the centuries immediately preceding the Spanish conquest, there is evidence that it was becoming more fashionable and common.

The preceding comments will give some idea of what one may find of interest in just two specimens. The evidence of skill in utilization of ancient knowledge, the obvious pride in craftsmanship are pleasing memorials of the two Quiché Indian girls for whom, and possibly by whom, these huipils were made.

BOOK NOTES

LACE AND LACE-MAKING, by Marian Powys.

Charles Branford, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts, 1952. \$7.50.

A new lace book by Marian Powys, whose name is widely known among collectors and amateurs, narrates, with comprehensive text and an abundance of plates, the history and development of this beautiful fabric. Moreover, the style differs distinctly from that of many other books that have been written on this subject.

In original fashion Miss Powys precedes her main theme by what is called a "key," a species of index, made up of clear, detail photographs, nearly a hundred and fifty in number, arranged in order as to period and technique, with descriptive captions. These run from the early drawn and embroidered linens of the sixteenth century to the great needle point and bobbin laces of the eighteenth, continuing with the types used in the century following.

So clear and orderly is this table that it presents to the observer an immediate identification of all classes of lace, and spares to anyone interested what otherwise might prove to be a wearisome search in lace libraries for like information.

As for the book itself the main part is divided into laces grouped according to the purpose for which they were made. First, there are the ecclesiastical laces to which naturally was devoted the highest type of workmanship. Laces for personal adornment relate to both men and women, particularly in ages when royal courts set the example for luxurious apparel. Secular laces include those for domestic ornamentation, though these contain pieces of great beauty; the bed-hangings of Alençon lace made for the Emperor Napoleon, for one, are superb examples. Lastly are the romantic bridal laces of which two veils made for imperial brides are lovely in design and quality.

Finally, as a last main division, fully illustrated, with large plates, are complete instructions for the making of lace for those who may wish to try a hand, as well there may be many.

The book itself, so far as regards its makeup, is a handsome publication, whose clear, fine plates bring together a collection of famous and beautiful laces, many of them of historic interest.



CLUB NOTES

For the first meeting of the season of 1953, members of the Needle and Bobbin Club were invited on Thursday, January twenty-second, through the courtesy of Antoinette Gordon and Junius Bird of the American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West and Seventy-seventh Street, to an exhibition, from three to five o'clock, especially arranged for the Club at the Museum, of textiles recently acquired from Latin America, and together with these a splendid panel of Tibetan work showing characteristic figure subjects skilfully cut and applied to a satin ground. The collection, which filled the Portrait Room on the second floor of the Museum, was as varied as it was interesting and comprised numbers of textiles of intricate and elaborate weave, remarkable accomplishments of a people whose only method of manufacture was the primitive hand loom.

On the afternoon of Thursday, February nineteenth, at the York Club, 4 East 62nd Street, Mr. Carl Schuster, through the kind sponsorship of Miss Harriet Phelps Bronson, spoke on the unusual subject, "Some Little Known Chinese Embroideries," accompanied with colored slides showing often naïve and always entertaining animal, floral and marine subjects varying according to their design and execution in accordance with the difference in the class of the home worker by whom they were made.

The Club's Annual Meeting was held on Thursday, March twenty-sixth, at three o'clock in the Small Ballroom of the Colony Club, 51 East 62nd Street, for which the Club was indebted to the generosity of Mrs. Ansell Ball, Mrs. Reginald Barclay, Mrs. Montgomery Hare and Mrs. J. Barstow Small. After a short business meeting, Mr. Alan J. B. Wace, distinguished English archeologist of Cambridge University, England, and an old friend of the Needle and Bobbin Club, spoke delightfully on "Some Selected Greek Embroideries," showing by means of actual examples and colored slides the various types of beautiful work once done

in the Greek Islands familiar to the speaker through archeological work carried on in these regions.

A happy occasion was the luncheon to which Mrs. Joseph E. Davies generously invited members of the Club on Thursday afternoon, April sixteenth at one o'clock at her home, 3029 Klinge Road, Washington, D. C., to view afterwards her collection of Russian art. Mrs. Davies' hospitality was greatly enjoyed and admiration was expressed regarding the beautiful objects acquired in Russia at the time when Mr. Davies was the American ambassador to that country.

For the autumn meeting on Wednesday, November eighteenth, the Club was indebted to Mrs. L. Earle Rowe who kindly invited the members to visit the new Yale Art Gallery in New Haven to see the Hobart Moore Collection of Textiles newly installed in these galleries. There was general appreciation of the quality and extent of this important collection, and interest was shown in the modern type of screen background employed throughout the galleries whose flexibility permits the creation at will of new rooms of any type or size.

The last meeting of the year, held through the courtesy of Mrs. Franklin M. Chace and Mrs. Frank B. Rowell on Friday, December fourth, at three o'clock in the Small Ballroom of the Colony Club, 51 East 62nd Street, was marked by the appearance of the distinguished English speaker on costume, Stella Mary Pearce, in private life Mrs. Eric Newton, and a member of the staff of the National Gallery in London, dating, through her expert knowledge, the paintings in that great institution. The speaker took for her subject the fascinating theme of "The Court of Lodovico il Moro and the 'Paradise Ball' with costumes designed by Leonardo da Vinci," and gave a stirring talk on the colorful figures of that period which met with an enthusiastic response from her audience.

THE NEEDLE AND BOBBIN CLUB

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