

16th Century Florentine Sottana
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An Italian sottana based on portraits of Florentine noblewomen from 1540-1560.

For this sottana, I intended to create an outfit that mimics the appearance and methods of mid-16th century Florence, Italy. I used two portraits as my primary inspiration. Picture 1 is of an unknown lady, painted by Agnolo Bronzino around 1550. Picture 2 is also of an unknown lady, by Michele Tosini around 1540.

These two portraits created a base line of fashion which, supplemented by other portraits of noblewomen, allowed me to analyze the changes and similarities in appearance between portraits of the 1540s and the 1550s.

A sottana was an underdress worn on its own or beneath an over dress in 16th century Italy. Typical features of the sottana, as worn by noblewomen in Florence, include a squared neckline, side back lacing, and a full skirt. Skirts were typically box, knife or cartridge pleated to the bodice. The sottana was accompanied by a girdle and jewelry, as well as a partlet to cover the exposed skin of the neck.

In the 1540s, the sottana was either unadorned with an intricate base fabric (see Picture 2), or a solid fabric decorated with trim in a closed 'V' placement (see Picture 3). Girdles worn with the sottana tended to be constructed of large links or simple beads while the neck jewelry consisted of ornate, heavy beads and frequently a thick chain. Hair was slicked or curled to the sides and secured behind the head in a snood or hairnet, adorned with a headband (see Picture 4).

During the 1550s, patterned fabrics were no longer in fashion and the closed 'V' trim was the norm, as well as the beginnings of a split 'V' trim layout, which continued in the 1560s (see Picture 5). Girdles became heavier and more decorative, while simple strands of pearls took the place of the necklace and headband. The snood continued to contain the hair; however, the front edge of the hair began to be twisted to the side, rather than slicked like the previous decade.

The beginning of the 1540s saw the end of the large, puffy sleeve caps, called *baragoni*. The *baragoni* became a smaller shoulder roll (see Picture 3), or a deflated roll (see Picture 2). The shoulder roll can be sewn into the shoulder strap for stability or tied on, with ties and aglets adding a decorative element to the sleeve. During the 1540s, sleeves were laid with trim straight down the arm, a style which extended into the 1550s and 1560s (see Picture 2).

To start my project, I chose a red/black 'changeable' taffeta based on a portrait which appears to depict red/gold shot silk (see Picture 6). Changeable fabric, also called shot silk, is made by weaving two different colors as the warp and weft of the fabric. This produces a colored fabric, which appears a different color depending on the angle of the fabric. Although Picture 6 was

likely painted in the region of Lombardy, Italy, where the artist worked, there are similarities to Florentine styles in the flat fronted bodice, partially open overgown and sleeve caps. It also substantiates the existence of changeable fabrics during the late 1550s, if my interpretation of the portrait is correct.

After I selected my fabric, I turned to my inspiration portraits for trimming ideas. With such a rich fabric, I chose a simple velvet trimming such as in Picture 1 to adorn without overpowering the fabric's beauty. I decided on two lines of velvet ribbon in a typical closed 'V' pattern, as seen in Picture 7.

At this point, I began patterning a bodice. I started by draping over the pattern of my last sottana and adjusting the problem areas I had found during wear. I then compared this new pattern to Janet Arnold's diagram of Eleonora di Toledo's burial gown, found in *Patterns of Fashion*. I made some additional modifications to the shape of the bodice, elongating and pointing the front waist and incorporating side-back lacing. My previous sottana had been side lacing, which is seen in paintings of lower classes and servants. Eleonora's bodice, as well as that of the extant "Pisa" dress are side-back laced, which appears to be the norm for upper class women.

Once I had a pattern, I cut and sewed a mockup for fittings and even more changes. At last, I had a fitting pattern that I used to cut the fashion fabric, lining and interlinings. I used a soft black satin for the lining, with a thick wool felt and one layer of cotton canvas padstitched together for structure.

I used a sewing machine to sew all four layers together where it would not be visible, and hand sewed a whip stitch to close the bottom edge, the corners of the neckline and the tips of the straps. I then stitched the front and back straps together and discovered the straps were a touch too short. The bodice sat high on my chest and beneath my arms, so I took the straps apart and pieced together an insert to extend the straps about two inches. This fitting looked and felt much better.

Once the bodice was completely stitched, I began placing my trim in the closed 'V' layout. I initially whipstitched the velvet ribbon to the bodice, but this method was more difficult for the second line of trim. At that point I switched to a small, hidden running stitch along the edges of the ribbon and proceeded to stitch down all of the trim on the bodice. I set up my lacing holes for spiral lacing and used a satin ribbon with brass aglets to lace the bodice closed. I used grommets for strength and buttonhole stitched over the grommets with embroidery floss.

While the trim work was in progress, I started constructing the skirt of the sottana. I used roughly 6 yards of fabric and machine stitched it into a closed loop of fabric. I then folded over the top four inches of fabric and pressed a line into my cloth to create a channel for padding the pleats. I cut wool felt into three inch wide strips and zigzag stitched the strips end to end. I then placed the strips in the channel butted against the top of the taffeta. I whipstitched a cotton lining to the inside of the skirt and hand stitched two rows of trim to the skirt center front and hem. I chose to attach the skirt by cartridge pleating, as seen in Picture 1. The cartridge pleats were very full because of the multiple layers of fabric and felt, which fit the waistline nicely. I whipstitched the cartridge pleats to the bodice, which completed the main part of the gown.

The sleeves were constructed with a basic bell-shaped sleeve sloper. I hand stitched three lines of trim down the sleeve. I sewed a separate sleeve cap to create the deflated roll appearance of Picture 2, matching the trim placement to the sleeve. I then sewed grosgrain ribbon ties to both sleeves and shoulder straps, to tie the sleeves in place.

My sottana differed from period practice in several ways. Firstly, I used synthetic fabric, trim and ribbon as I was unable to afford silk. A noblewoman of 1550s Florence would certainly have used the top of the line fabric, silk, for the all components of the dress.

Secondly, I used machine sewing in places that would not be visible. I chose to use machine sewing, rather than hand stitching on the bodice, due to the thickness of the fabrics. I used a large zigzag stitch to mimic pad stitching through multiple layers as padstitching can be a painful process sewing through lots of layers, especially of cotton duck. I also used a machine to sew the fashion fabric and lining together in the manner of a bag lining, which I then turned right side out, hiding the machine sewing, and finished the edge with hand stitching.

Lastly, I deviated from period practice while making the skirt. The skirts of the extant Eleonora di Toledo gown and the extant red dress of Pisa are both constructed using triangles and rectangles, to maximize the use of the fabric. This method creates a full skirt with less fabric. I chose to take one large length of fabric and stitch it into a tube. I then cartridge pleated the top of the skirt, resulting in a very full skirt with lush cartridge pleats attaching it to the bodice. This decision was based on personal preference in appearance.

References:

Orsi-Landini, Roberta, and Bruna Niccoli. *Moda a Firenze 1540-1580: Lo Stile di Eleonora di Toledo e la sua influenza*. Mauro Pagliai: Polistampa, 2007. Print.