

Extant Dresses in Pisa: Updates on sewing and construction techniques from the Costume Colloquium 2008, Florence.

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On November 6-9th, 2008 the *Costume Colloquium: A Tribute to Janet Arnold* was held in Florence. This was promoted by *Fondazione Romualdo Del Bianco* and *Associazione Amici della Galleria del Costume*. Details can be found at www.textiles-costume.com

The “Red Pisa Dress” of a Tuscan Lady and the wool/linen dress are housed at the *Laboratorio Centro Restauri Tesseli*, Pisa where a mini colloquium was held as an adjunct to the main Costume Colloquium in Florence. We were lucky to have both Thessy Schoenholzer Nicholson (Adjunct Professor of Costume Studies and Design, Polimoda, Florence and Moira Brunori (Conservatore di *Tessuti e Costume*, Pisa) for discussion.



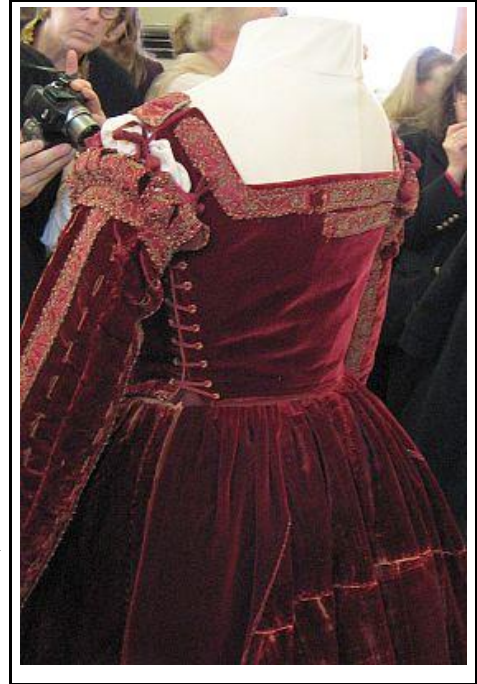
Three dresses were presented here; two were from the late 16th century. The third is from the early 17th century with a very dropped and rounded front waistline to the bodice. It is of a bright green cut velvet, as seen in figure 1.

Red Velvet Dress: Lady in the Court of Pisa.

The Red dress of a Lady of Pisan court can be seen in *Moda a Firenze* and was found on a wooden effigy at San Matteo convent, seen in pictures 2 and 3. It had been said to belong to Eleanora d' Toledo as it is very similar in construction technique and style. Recently it has

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been suggested that it did not belong to Eleanora but belonged to an unknown Lady of the Court of Pisa (*Una Veste da Duchessa*- Costume Colloquium session VIII). It has been suggested previously, in *Moda a Firenze* (p 74), that it could have been donated by Eleanora herself or have belonged to one of Eleanora's 'ladies in waiting'. The same authors state the 'ladies of waiting' to have often been dressed in similar fashion, colour and material as Eleanora. They also state that similar dresses, worn by the 'ladies in waiting', were made by



Eleanora's tailor Mastro Agostino (*Moda a Firenze*, p75). Conservator Thessy Schoenholzer Nicholson suggested that the construction and tailoring techniques of both Eleanora's burial dress and the red velvet dress are similar.

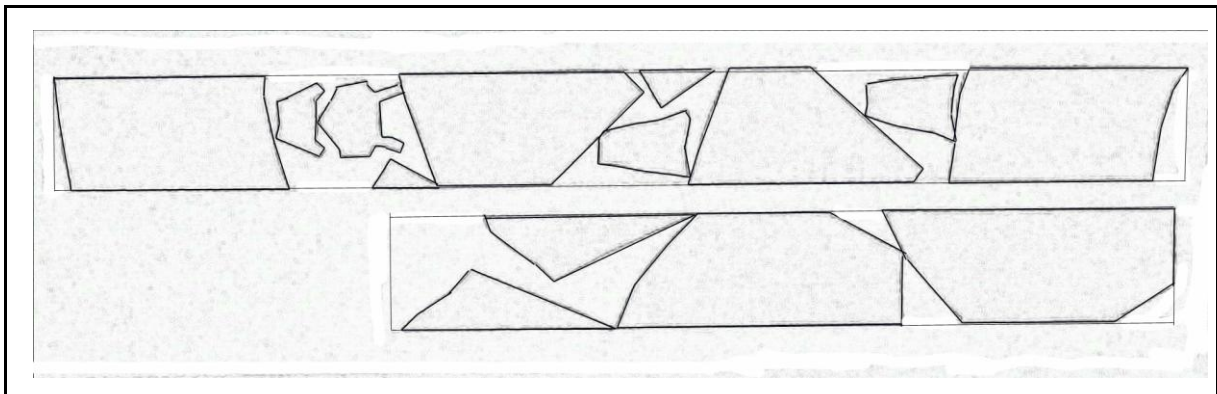
The 'Red dress' is of silk velvet in varying condition. Several alterations had been made before it came to the conservators who had to piece it back together. Some sections had been missing in the skirt and were replaced during conservation. Luckily, the sleeves are present unlike Eleanora's burial dress. This can be seen in Figures 2. Figure 3 shows the back of the dress.

Pattern:

The following p

attern, redrawn in Figure

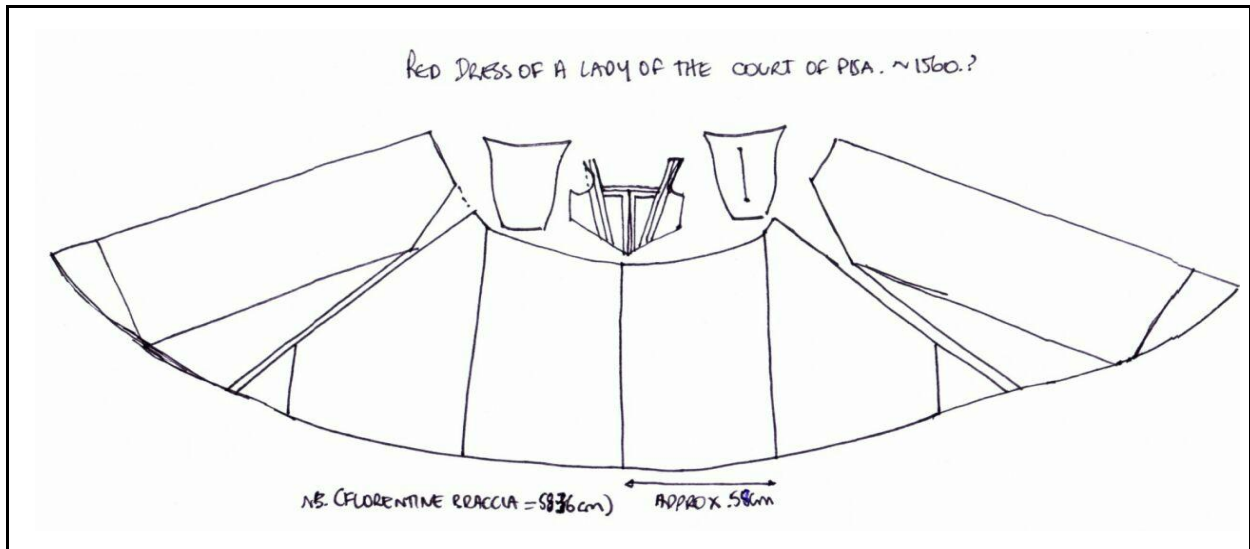
4, is based on the construction of Red dress and is based on the pattern supplied by the



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conservators in *Laboratorio Centro Restauri Tessili*.

This is also discussed by Moira Brunori, in her lecture *Una veste da Duchessa: l'abito di corte di una Madonna pisana - A Gown of a Duchess: the Court Dress of a Madonna in Pisa*. Ms Brunori also proposed the fabric layout seen in Figure 5.



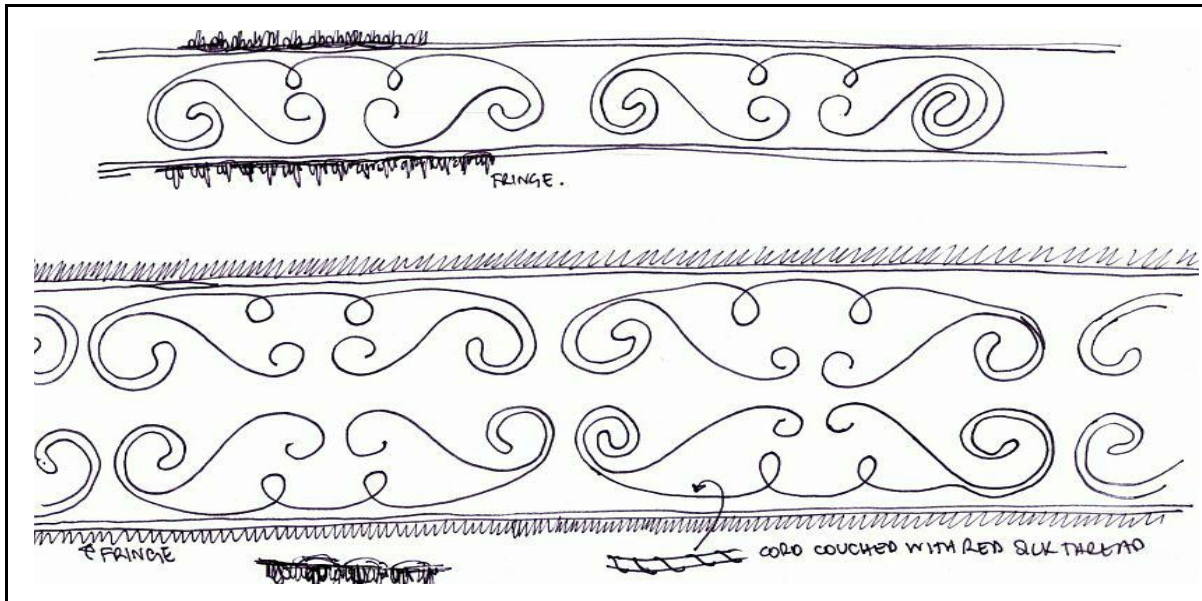
Decoration

Trim: The trim decoration on the Red Pisa dress is in a similar position to that of Eleanora d'Toledo's burial dress. The trim itself is gold 'cord' couched onto red satin with red silk thread and a fringe on both edges as in Figures 6 and 7



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The hem pattern (bottom) is redrawn in Figure 8. The front imbusto (bodice) trim is two rows of a narrower pattern seen redrawn (top) in Figure 8.



The stitching used to sew the trim onto the bodice can be visible through the lining in figure 9. This confirms that, at least in this case, the embroidery was done after the dress was constructed.



Hem: During the Florence mini-colloquium, Thesy Schoenholzer Nicholson confirmed that there is still debate on whether the fold/ pintuck, around the hem (using 5-6 cm of material in the fold) of the Red Pisa Lady's dress which can also be found on Eleanora's burial gown, is purely decorative or functional. Other sources have suggested it to be for lengthening (for pianelle/ chopines), for hem stiffening (I personally find it does help in practicality to stiffen the hem)

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or decoration. She confirmed that the trim does not line up without the pintuck in place. A close of the lower skirt can be seen in Figure 10.

There is a clipped edging on the hem of the Red dress which is part of the bias strip hiding the wool felt hem stiffening. This was discussed in Moira Brunori's lecture *Una veste da Duchessa: l'abito di corte di una Madonna Pisana - A Gown of a Duchess: the Court Dress of a Madonna in Pisa* and my previous article: *Tailoring Techniques of Medici Florence, 16th century.* (Cockatrice #33)

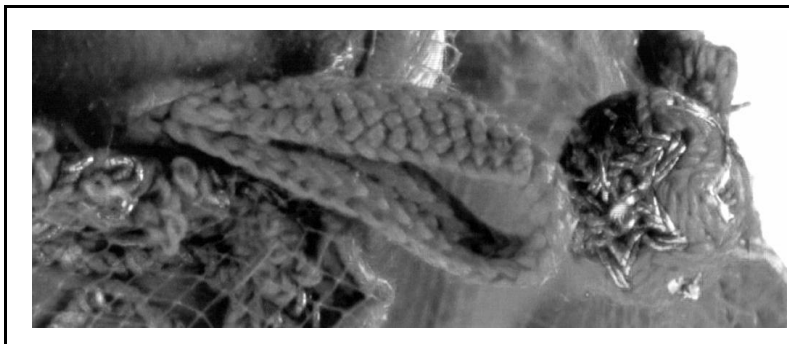


Sleeves:

The sleeves are narrow and have 4 vertical pieces trim with 14 vertical slashes in between. The slashes are actually cut on the straight grain. The tightness of the weave itself have helped to reduce fraying. The button closure is a simple loop as seen in Figure 11. The button is of red and gold thread sewn over a base creating a star pattern. Janet Arnold also documents a silk thread 'wrapped' button, over a '7/8 inch diameter' wooden base, in Cosimo d' Medici's outfit (1574) in *Patterns of Fashion*, pp 55-56.

Wool/Linen Dress of A Lady

The 'everyday dress' is of a wool/linen weave in a white and green diamond pattern, probably from around 1550 (*L'Abito della Granduchessa*, p15), can be seen in figure 12. This dress is incomplete with only the front imbusto and skirt remaining. There were no sleeves remaining on this dress to study.



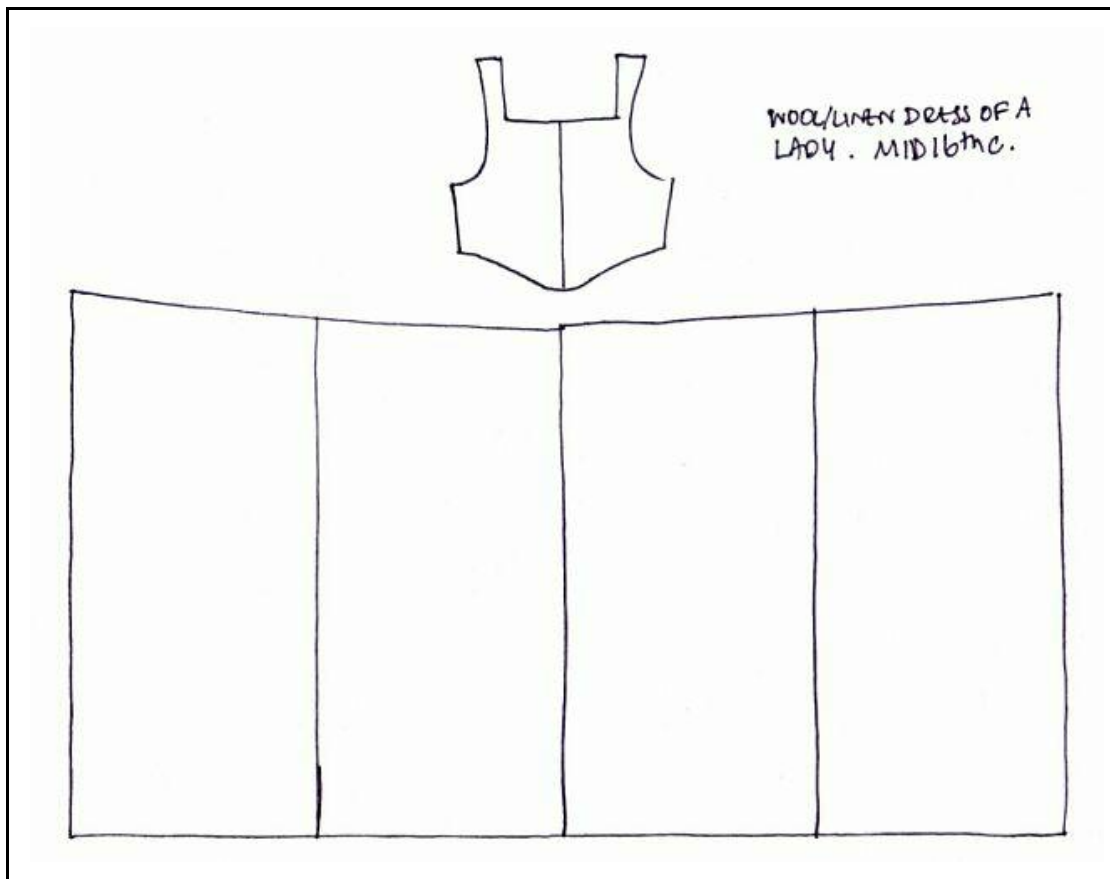
Moria Brunori commented, in her lecture at the 2008 *Costume Colloquium*, that this type of dress is more common for non-noblewomen or worn at home. This is supported by the fact that the dress is much simpler in design, decoration and construction..



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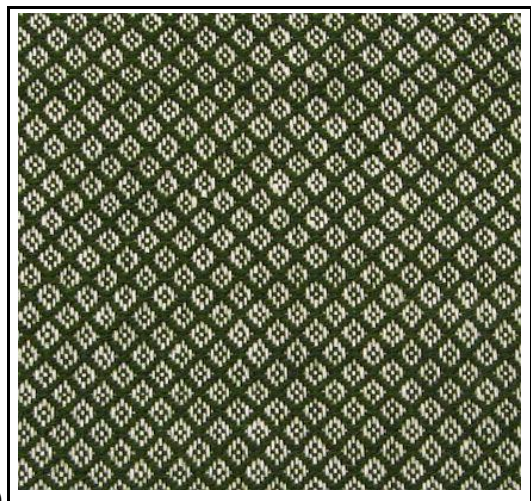
Pattern:

Unlike the Red dress and Eleanora's burial gown, the skirt is made from rectangular pieces which are pleated onto the waistline, which is slightly curved and dropped at the front. The bodice has a centre front seam. This makes the construction much simpler, quicker and easier to make. The shoulder strap seam is not on top of the shoulder but towards the back of the body. The hem did not have the felt 'lining strip' as in the Red dress. Instead, it had only a blue linen strip sewn to the inside of the hem. The following is a diagram of the pattern construction placement.



Decoration:

The dress is woven in a white diamond pattern on a green background as seen in Fig 14. There is little added decoration left on this dress. There is a lighter 'band' on the existing material, around the hem, suggesting a previous trim that has either been removed or disintegrated. Thessy Schoenholzer Nicholson confirmed this and showed me a very small (1 cm or so) remnant of pale, coffee coloured (discoloured?) lace. Further studies are apparently planned.



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Pleats:

A close up of the waistline pleats of the wool/linen dress can be seen in figure 15. These pleats are flat with a central unpleated area and face towards the back on each side. It appears that the skirt top is finished as a separate item and then sewn into the waist of the bodice with a line of stitching visible on the outside of the skirt. However, this could just be a remnant of a later reconstruction and is not consistent with the other dresses or pictorial evidence.



Sewing Techniques.

Stitching and Seam Allowances:

Wool/ Linen Dress:

It is difficult to find information, detailing the type of sewing stitches or seam allowances, of the wool/linen dress. To date, the only publication discussing the construction of this dress, is *L'Abito della Granduchessa; Vesti di corte di Madonne nel Palazzo Reale di Pisa*.

The hem of the wool/linen dress, as seen in Figure 16, appeared to be sewn with angled hemstitch. The hem was not reinforced with wool felt, as seen in the Red dress. The hem 'lining strip' is in blue linen (*L'Abito della Granduchessa*, p 67) which appeared to be sewn along the lower/ joined edge with running stitch. Figure 16 shows the hem of the wool/linen dress with that of the Red Pisa dress, in figure 17, as contrast. Figure 17 also shows evidence of reconstruction.



Red Pisa Dress & Wool/ Linen Dress:

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Luckily, at the *Laboratorio Centro Restauri Tesseli*, we were able to view the Red dress and the wool/linen dress and further discuss this with Thessy Schoenholzer Nicholson on She advised me of the following:

- seams are done in back stitch. The stitch length varies depending on the material used in construction. eg. The stitches on the wool/linen dress are smaller than on the velvet dresses.
- both flatfelled and open seams were used. They did not appear to be tacked down with either running or hem stitch. An example can be seen in figure 17
- Most seam allowances were approximately 7mm

Both *L'Abito della Granduchessa; Vesti di corte di Madonne nel Palazzo Reale di Pisa* and *La Moda a Firenze* discuss the Red Pisa dress. The Red dress is also discussed in detail in Moira Brunori's lecture *Una veste da Duchessa: l'abito di corte di una Madonna Pisana - A Gown of a Duchess: the Court Dress of a Madonna in Pisa*.

Eleanora's Burial Dress:

As part of the *Costume Colloquium*, we also had access to the Medici clothing in the Pitti Palace Museum where Eleanora d' Toledo's burial dress is currently housed. Eleanora's burial dress is only visible in low lighting. It is difficult to ascertain the seam construction. However, it appeared that the seam allowance could have been under 10mm, from the overlap in some of the partially remaining sections of the skirt. Janet Arnold (*Patterns of Fashion*, p 104) reports the seam allowances varying from 13-14mm, including the selvedges which vary from 9-11mm). Some seams included the selvedges, some had raw edges.

Janet Arnold discusses Eleanora's burial gown in *Patterns of Fashion 3*. It is also discussed in *La Moda a Firenze*, *L'Abito della Granduchessa* and *Moda alla Corte dei Medici, gli abiti restaurati di Cosimo, Eleanora e don Garzia*.

Other Extant Medici Clothing:

Patterns of Fashion details other extant Medici clothing, detailing 5mm wide seam allowances on the front neck seams of doublet of Cosimo d'Medici (p55-56).

Jennifer Carlson has compiled a summary of different publications mentioning sewing stitches used on extant garments in *Sewing Stitches Used in Medieval Clothing*. However, there is no details on the actual seam allowance or stitches for structural seams.

The following stitches are listed from 16th century Florence on Cosimo d'Medici's outfit, Eleanora's burial dress and stays and the outfit of Don Garzia:

- Cartridge pleating (1562), tops of panes on Cosimo Medici's trunkhose (*Patterns of Fashion*, pp 53-54).
- Cord whip stitched to edge (1562), Edge of Cosimo Medici's trunkhose (*Patterns of Fashion* pp 53-54).
- Dart tucks (1562), Don Garzia d'Medici's velvet bonnet (*Patterns of Fashion*, p55)
- Eyelet: overcast stitch (1562), Eleanora d'Toledo gown (*Patterns of Fashion*, p102) and doublet of Cosimo Medici (*Patterns of Fashion* p 53-54) and in 1574 in Cosimo d'Medici's breeches waistband (over copper rings).
- Gathering stitch (1562), lining of Cosimo d'Medici's trunkhose (*Patterns of Fashion*, pp53-54)

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- Hem stitch. (1562), turned edge of panes on Cosimo d'Medici's trunkhose). (Patterns of Fashion, pp 53-54) and the dress and stays of Eleanora d'Toledo (both slanted and upright). in Patterns of Fashion, p102. Upright hemstitch was also found on Eleanora d'Toledo's stays. (Patterns of Fashion, p102), in the lining of Cosimo d'Medici's outfit (1574) (Patterns of Fashion 2, pp 55-56),
- oversewing on patching - possibly overcast stitch (1562), on the doublet arm of Cosimo d'Medici (Patterns of Fashion, pp 53-54)
- Stab stitch (1562), on the edge of the centre front of Cosimo d'Medici's doublet (Patterns of Fashion, pp 53-54)
- backstitch is mentioned (1574) in the collar and front of the doublet, to sew down the buttonhole reinforcing strip) of Cosimo d'Medici (Patterns of Fashion 2, pp 55-56)
- buttonhole stitch (1574) with square ends in the doublet of Cosimo d'Medici. (Patterns of Fashion 2, pp 55-56)
- running stitch (1574), holding seam turnings in the collar and front neck seam turnings in Cosimo d' Medici's doublet (Patterns of Fashion 2, pp 55-56)

Threads used:

The conservators confirmed that most of the research on these dresses, so far, has been on the textile, weaving, pattern and reconstruction and has not concentrated on the sewing, stitches or sewing threads. Further funding is required to research and publish more information on the wool/linen and Red Pisa dress.

Types of thread used for stitching is listed in Patterns of Fashion 2 (p53-54) as 2-ply silk in Cosimo d' Medici's outfit and on his trows in 1574 (Patterns of Fashion 2, pp 55-56) and on the wooden base buttons in the doublet of the same outfit.

Interlining and Layers:

In *Moda a Firenze* (p 74, 84), Roberta Orsi-Landini and Bruna Niccoli reported the layers to be as follows:

1. outer layer
2. felted wool
3. stiffened linen
4. lining

However, it is not clear whether the wool layer, used for stiffening, was either felted wool or woven woollen material that was fullled or felted. Further discussion at *Laboratorio Centro Restauri Tesseli*, with regards to the imbusto (bodice) construction revealed:

- the woollen layer was mostly felted wool but could have also been woven woollen material that was fullled or felted.
- This layer was 3-6mm thick but more commonly 6mm. This layer was usually quilted in varied patterns. Sometimes it was quilted through the linen layer.
- This felted wool can also be seen as stiffening, on the hem treatment, under a layer of bias material that is used to decorate the hem. This is seen in figure 9. *Patterns of Fashion* states that the wool felt is 38-44 mm wide.

The conservators admitted that they hoped that a book, based on the more recent work at the Laboratorio Centro Restauri Tesseli and detailing all three dresses at Pisa, will be pulished in 2009, as *L'Abito della Granduchessa; Vesti di corte di Madonne nel Palazzo Reale di Pisa* is

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out of print and apparently will not be reprinted. This depended on funding available and has not as yet been published.

Photos of the restoration and conservation of Eleanora's burial dress, Cosimo and Don Garzia's clothing are not digitally archived and will be housed at via the Pitti Costume Galleria. These are available online at the *Digital Archive/Photographic documentation Conservation of the Medici Burial Clothes* and are accessible by all interested parties and not just official institutions and scholars.

Photos: taken at the Textile Colloquium, Florence, 2008 by K. Carlisle.. Drawings by K. Carlisle. If you wish to have a larger version, of the pictures or wish to use them, please contact me.

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Books:

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2. *L'Abito della Granduchessa; Vesti di corte di Madonne nel Palazzo Reale di Pisa.* Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Reale, Pisa
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4. *Moda alla Corte dei Medici, gli abiti restauranti di Cosimo, Eleanora e don Garzia,* Firenze : Centro Di, 1993. Description: 107 p. : ISBN: 8870382389

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3. *Sewing Stitches Used in Medieval Clothing:* (Jennifer Carlson) <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/stitches.htm>
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