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The art of artisan fashions

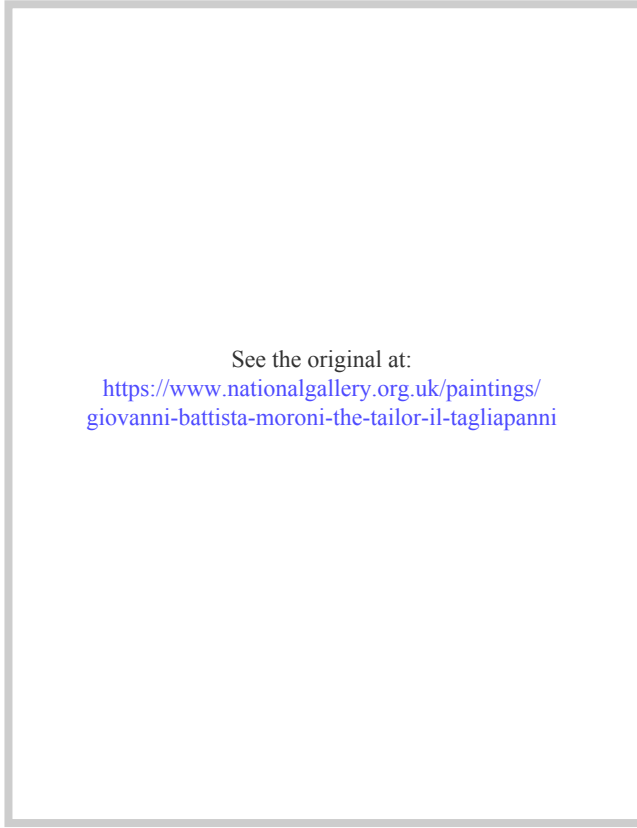
Moroni's tailor and the changing culture of clothing in sixteenth-century Italy

Paula Hohti Erichsen

The portrait of a tailor, painted by Giovanni Moroni in the late 1560s, is the first known surviving portrait of a skilled craftsman engaged in manual labour (Figure 9.1).¹ The tailor is depicted in a self-confident pose, wearing a fine, pinked ivory doublet which is tied into his crimson red breeches, as well as a sword belt and a golden ring. This portrait is unique in the way it connects the tailor with the visual culture of the elites (Figure 9.2). It is fundamentally different from the usual depictions of artisans, such as the work scene in a print by Jost Amman, which shows a tailor at work in his workshop with apprentices sitting at the table stitching (Figure 9.3). In Moroni's portrait, by contrast, the tailor looks straight out at the spectator and seems to stand up for his dignity through his clothes and his pose.

Although Moroni was celebrated already in the seventeenth century for his striking ability to capture his sitters' looks, some scholars simply cannot believe that this is the picture of a real tailor.² Tailors were not poor, but their association with manual work meant that they occupied a relatively modest economic position in society. In Siena, on which most of my research is based, tailors were assessed in the city's tax records just a little above the average wealth of all the city's artisans, at 220 lire, while the level of wealth of their betters – the political governors, merchants, bankers and manufacturers who were the owners of substantial property and consumers of luxury goods – often amounted to several hundreds or even thousands of lire.³ In addition to this sizeable economic gap, tailors, like other artisans, were socially and politically marginalized. Craftsmen and modestly prosperous traders did not have surnames, which were a precondition for full citizen rights and political office.⁴ Would Moroni really paint someone working with his hands in sumptuous and costly clothes, some may ask, and are his crimson hose, belt, gold ring and silk doublet not too fine for a man of his social status?

In material culture scholarship, there is an underlying assumption that men and women at artisanal levels dressed primarily in functional and durable clothing that tied their roles to their work. The reason is not only that textiles and clothing were



See the original at:

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-battista-moroni-the-tailor-il-tagliapanni>

Figure 9.1 Giovanni Battista Moroni, *Tailor*, 1565–70, oil on canvas, London, The National Gallery. Reproduced by permission of The National Gallery.

costlier than any other category of household goods, including the ‘high arts’, but also that sumptuary laws, issued all over Italy and Europe, imposed strict social restrictions on dress. In the second-half of the sixteenth century, the Sienese commune, for example, issued several sets of new laws, in 1548, 1576, 1588 and 1594, to make sartorial distinctions more clearly visible in society.⁵ The most elaborate materials, such as garments made of velvets and brocades, and delicate fashion novelties like thin silk veil, lace-trimmed and perfumed gloves, feathers in hats, gold belts, braid ornaments, perfume, velvet slippers and high platform shoes were reserved exclusively for the high-ranking citizens.⁶ Special attention was paid to textiles and colours that were considered the most visible markers of elite status, such as the sumptuous black, crimson and purple (*pavonazzo*), all of which were associated with civic garments and, therefore, with power and authority.⁷

The laws were meant to be strict. In 1548, the local office *Quattro Censori*, the legislative body responsible for the enforcement of sumptuary legislation that year, ruled that all men and women should bring their garments into the office within thirty

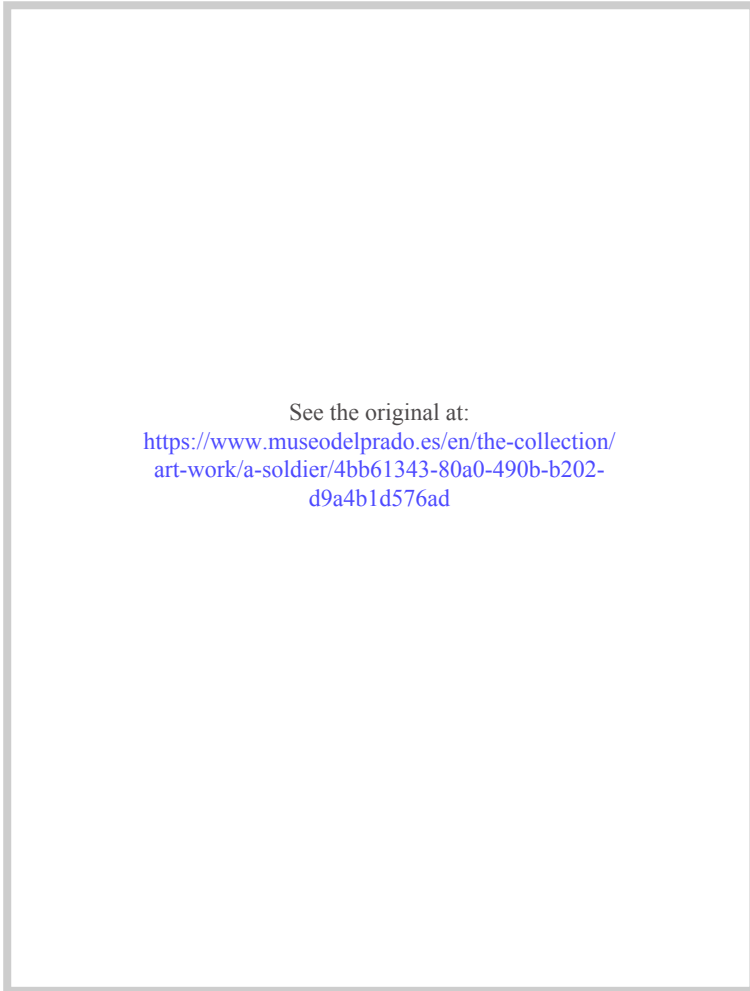


Figure 9.2 Giovanni Battista Moroni, *A Soldier*, ca. 1560, oil on canvas, Madrid, Museo del Prado. Photo: Alamy.

days of the publication of the law, and have them inspected. The notary recorded all items in the register, and once the owner had paid a fee of three *quattrini*, the officials marked the dress by attaching a lead seal to the hem of the garment. This gave the owner a permission to wear the dress for three years.⁸ The *Quattro Censori* also established a system of controlling the appearance of citizens on a day-to-day basis, by encouraging all Sienese to record offences against sumptuary law. Anyone above twenty years old could anonymously report violations of sumptuary legislation, by placing a secret denunciation in the wooden box that was attached next to the Sienese Palazzo Pubblico on the central Piazza del Campo (Figure 9.4). If the offender was found guilty, s/he was given a heavy fine of 25 *scudi*.

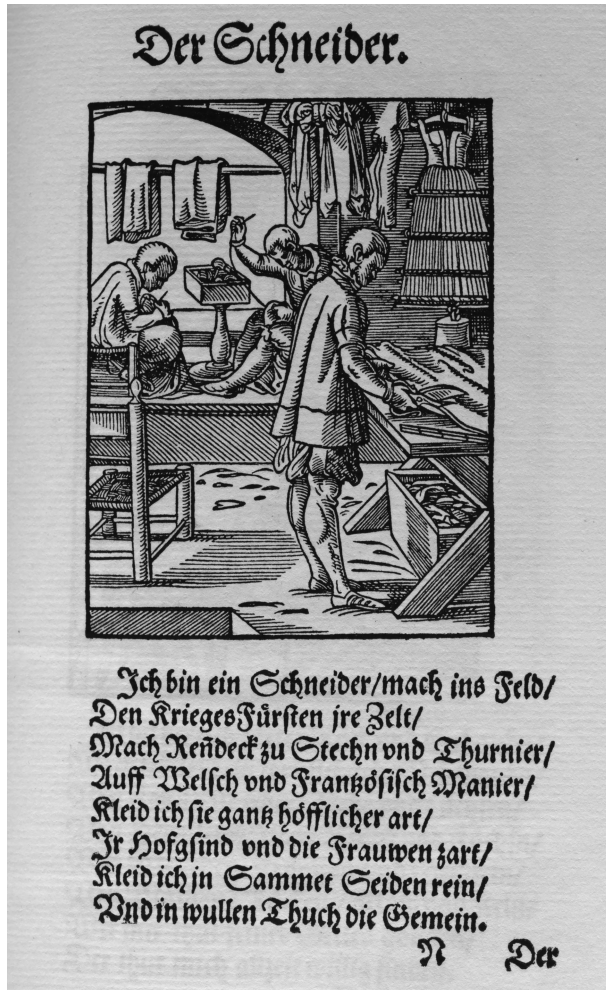


Figure 9.3 Jost Amman, *Tailor*, 1560, woodcut, nineteenth-century facsimile from Hirth, *Stände und Handwerker mit Versen von Hans Sachs* (Munich, 1884). Image: Wellcome Collection.

The emphasis on difference, exclusion and social control creates an image of striking visual and material differences between the dress of the ruling elites and that of the lower ranking ordinary Italians. This is reinforced by visual evidence, which regularly shows lower-class women in worn-out or patched clothes (Figure 9.5).⁹ Yet, a close study of sumptuary regulations demonstrates that, although rules and regulations favoured the elites, the laws in reality allowed a great deal of flexibility and luxury in ordinary people's costumes, including the possibility to wear silk, which has been traditionally regarded as a sign of elite status and distinction. Evidence from Siena, for example, shows that, just like Moroni's tailor (Figure 9.1), the laws of 1548

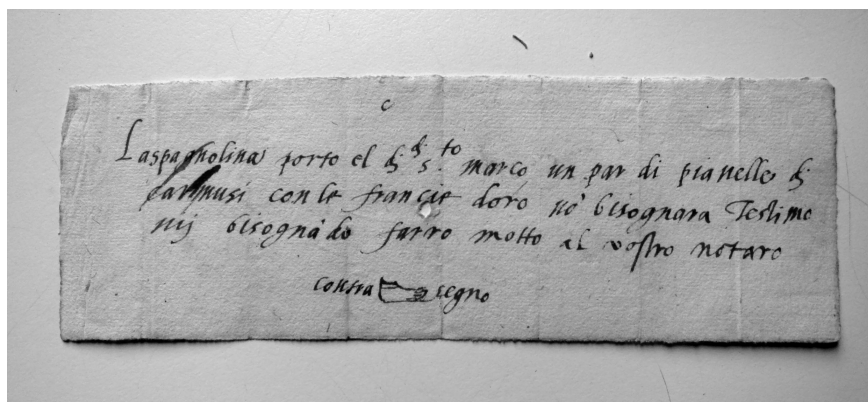


Figure 9.4 Anonymous sumptuary law denunciation (*Denunzia*), 1548, Siena, Archivio di stato. Photo: author.



Figure 9.5 Domenico Ghirlandaio (workshop), *The Buonomini take inventory after the death of the head of a household* (detail: women in patched garments), late fifteenth century, fresco, Florence, San Martino del Vescovo. Image out of copyright (The Warburg Institute, Photographic Collection).

allowed ordinary men, including barbers, bakers, shoemakers, tailors and all common people below them, to complement their woollen breeches with doublets of silk. Their garments, furthermore, could be finished with silk buttons, silk and velvet trims, and belts that included a silver buckle, and on their heads, men could wear a beret that was made from real velvet.¹⁰ Later in the century, in 1576, the statutes became even more flexible, and allowed especially the lower part of the male outfit to become more elaborate. This made it possible for artisans and other lower ranking citizens to complete their outfits with fancy breeches that were made from or lined with a range of coloured silks, such as damask, grosgrain, and satin, including silk died with precious crimson, and decorate their legwear, doublets and jerkins with slashing and pinking.¹¹

Surviving sumptuary law registers from 1561 show that that male artisans had a particular taste for slashed clothing. Sieneese men, from barbers to tailors, continuously obtained licences to wear paned or slashed taffeta-lined silk breeches that were decorated with silk trims and ribbons.¹² In 1576, the Sieneese tailor Giovanbattista di Girolamo Fideli, for example, took two pairs of breeches that were forbidden by law to the office of the *Biccherna*, the chancellery of finance, in order to have them registered. These included two pairs of woollen breeches, white and black, the latter of which was paned and ornamented with decorative strips.¹³

The emphasis on the decorative character of the lower body connected male artisan fashions to the broader tastes of the period. Tuscan courtly male fashions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries showed that, young courtly men, like artisans, shared this taste, especially for colourful and ornamental slashed breeches, which were usually combined with much plainer silk doublets (Figure 9.2).¹⁴ Furthermore, evidence demonstrates that Italian artisans continuously disrespected the sumptuary laws by wearing garments that were prohibited. The *Pratica segreta*, a wonderfully rich document recording prosecutions of dress in Florence at the start of the seventeenth century, shows that the state officials often caught artisans at taverns, market places, in the *piazza*, and at the entrance of the Duomo, for wearing ruffs that were too large, and jewellery that exceeded their allowance, and literally tore items that were prohibited from people's necks and arms.¹⁵

This excess of dress extended also to artisans' wives. In 1548, for example, the Sieneese shoemaker Girolamo di Bartolomeo Salvestri appeared in before a court hearing that took place in the office of the *Quattro Censori*, on charges of breaking sumptuary laws, because his wife had worn an elaborate golden hairnet and a head frontal, both of which were forbidden to women of her social status. On 10 November of the same year, Girolamo was ordered to pay the crippling fine of 25 *scudi*.¹⁶ In 1562, the same shoemaker returned to the office for clothing regulation in order to obtain a licence for some of his wife's prohibited garments. These included three fine purple and pink women's gowns, which were decorated with silk ribbons, and a pair of purple silk-lined sleeves.¹⁷

While this evidence suggests that class boundaries based on dress were never obvious or clear, these boundaries became further contested during the sixteenth century, as the markets were flooded by cheaper goods that were more adaptable to the increasing pace of change in dress fashions, such as light silk fabrics, gloves, hats, trims and silk buttons. These new trending items became essential parts of the fashionable

look and indicators of the wearer's rank. Mildly ostentatious materials, such as taffeta and tabby silks, embellished with elaborate surface decorations, such as applied braid and slashing, became acceptable even in public.¹⁸ The lower prices of the new products that were on offer in the local shops made fashion much more accessible to the lower social groups. Shop records demonstrate that ready-made items, from woven ribbons and lace veil to light dress silks, were available, at varying prices and qualities, to a wide range of consumers in local fairs and markets. At the same time, cheaper imitations of the desired items, such as foiled gems, fake gold and false pearls, appeared on the market, and turned what had once been rare into familiar aspects of appearance.¹⁹

This context of intensified fashion change generated a new interest in fashion and appearance across social classes. One manifestation of this development is the first known book of fashion, studied in detail by historians Ulinka Rublack and Maria Hayward.²⁰ This collection of fashion plates consists of over 130 watercolour illustrations, commissioned between 1520 and 1560 by a German accountant named Matthäus Schwartz, who was the son of a wine merchant; the images record his appearance and dress at different stages of his life, up until he was sixty-three years old. In the colourful pages of this manuscript, we can see Schwartz posing in different styles of outfits, shown front and back. What is remarkable about this source, as Rublack notes, is not just the accountant's fascination with dress and changing fashions but also how he explored his clothing in relation to his body. His appearance is idealized in many images, and in one, he even recorded his waist measure – a mere sixty centimetres. Later on, it appears to have preoccupied him that he put on weight. At the age of twenty-nine, he had himself depicted nude, and wrote an inscription next to it stating, 'That was my real figure from behind, because I had become fat and large.'²¹

If Italian artisans felt similarly about their bodies and their clothing, it suggests a growing degree of intimacy in their relationship with clothing and fashion over the course of the sixteenth century. Artisan inventories from the second-half of the century confirm that bakers, barbers, shoemakers, tailors and others of their rank had a greater access to fashion than ever before. The number and variety of dress items and accessories among local urban artisans and tradesmen increased considerably during this period.²² This changing social and cultural context of clothing may have inspired some artisan groups, such as tailors, to experiment with fashion, to explore their relationship with other people and the surrounding culture in new ways, and gain prominence through real and painted clothes.

This may have been particularly important for men such as Moroni's tailor (Figure 9.1), because the tailor's profession was an artisan occupation that was being redefined in the sixteenth century. Although tailoring continued to be associated with the mechanical trades, master tailors were eager to separate their profession from the purely artisanal craft status by associating themselves with the intellectual aspects of 'design'.²³ As Elizabeth Currie has shown, some tailors gained new prominence in society, assuming relatively powerful roles within the retail sector in the second-half of the sixteenth century, selling second-hand clothing as well as linings, sewing silks, buttons and braid, instead of merely collecting such items from merchants and mercers on behalf of their customers.²⁴ Such mercantile activities could translate into relative wealth and prosperity. One tailor in sixteenth-century Siena, Pietro Sarto Fideli (d.

1549), who lived next to the church of Sant'Onofrio in the neighbourhood of San Donato in the district of Kamollia, owned a share in a cloth shop that was located on the Piazza del Campo, the most central and prestigious location for a shop, which he ran in partnership with another tailor, Camillo di Biagio. His success in the trade is indicated by the fact that his taxable wealth was assessed at a level above that of the average artisan, at 300 lire, in 1548.²⁵

Moroni's portrait suggests that his sitter was a master tailor at the higher end of the economic and professional scale. The black fabric in front of him that he is about to cut indicates that the clothes he made were for high-ranking clients, such as the gentlemen portrayed in Moroni's later portraits, all dressed in black and standing against broken, grey marble columns.²⁶ Although the tailor is depicted with scissors – the attribute of his craft – his dignified pose and relatively valuable clothing seem to suggest that he claims a new status and worthiness through this clothing. The artist has recorded the quality of the fabrics and various details of the construction of the garments with great precision, including the pinking of the cream-coloured silk doublet, the fine frills of lace that peek out at the collar and cuffs and the red tone of the breeches, which is so deep and rich that it could have been obtained only by dyeing the fabric with expensive red dyestuffs.

Even if Moroni's portrait were to be a fictional representation of a tailor, evidence suggests that this portrait was not the only one of its kind. The Venetian poet Pietro Aretino, for example, hinted at the fact that portraits gained popularity among artisans and traders in Venice in the sixteenth century. This development did not please him, as until then, only the upper classes had had their images painted, and the mere existence of a portrait had been a sign of high status. 'It is a disgrace of our age,' said Aretino, 'that it tolerates the painted portraits even of tailors and butchers.'²⁷ Research across artisan inventories in early modern Siena confirms that portraits begin to appear in artisan homes at the beginning of the seventeenth century. For example, the Sienese shoemaker Giovanni di Pavolo had a painted portrait of himself in the bedroom of his home in 1637.²⁸

This gradual 'democratization' of portraits in the sixteenth century suggests that, whether Moroni's tailor was a real or a fictive image, artisans became more acutely aware of their appearance and the fashion they displayed themselves in during the second-half of the sixteenth century. Thus, Moroni's portrait stands for a revolutionary trend. The ability to express themselves not only through actual garments but also through painted clothes, provided a dramatic new way for men of artisanal rank to explore themselves and their status in relation to the surrounding world, to try out new roles and to communicate to others how they wanted to be seen, understood and remembered.

Chapter 9

- 1 The research for this article has been carried out as part of the 'Refashioning the Renaissance' Project. The project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 726195).
- 2 See Charles Eastlake, in Angela Maddock, 'Folds, Scissors and Cleavage in Giovanni Battista Moroni's *Il Tagliapanni*', in *The Erotic Cloth: Seduction & Fetishism in Textiles*,

- ed. Alice Kettle and Lesley Millar (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 25–36, esp. 28.
- 3 Archivio di Stato di Siena (henceforth referred to as ASS), Lira 111–113 (1509).
 - 4 For the economic and social status of Italian artisans, see Paula Hohti, ‘Conspicuous Consumption and Popular Consumers: Material Culture and Social Status in Sixteenth-Century Siena’, *Renaissance Studies* 24, no. 5 (2010): 654–70, esp. 657; and of tailors, Paula Hohti Erichsen, *At Home with Italian Renaissance Artisans* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming 2020), Chapter 3.
 - 5 For the sumptuary laws of 1548, see ASS, *Quattro Censori* 1, ‘Statuti degli sforgi e altre provvisioni’. The subsequent laws are found in ASS, *Balia* 830, ‘Libro dei bandi’, c. 246r- (1576), c. 321r- (1588), c. 326r- (1589), and in ASS, *Regolatori* 76, c. 99 v- (1594).
 - 6 See, for example, ASS, *Balia* 830, 246r (1576).
 - 7 In 1588, a ban was issued against the use of *pavonazzo* and black with purple undertones by anyone who did not belong to the governing class (*uomini di reggimento*). See G. Calvi, ‘Abito, genere, cittadinanza nella Toscana moderna (secoli XIV–XVII)’, *Quaderni Storici* 110 (2002): 477–503, 501, note 28. The law was repeated in 1599: ‘Il color nero o almeno il pavonazzo pareva da proibirsi in tutto alle donne non riseduti o non marinate a riseduti’, ASS, *Balia* 830, 342r (1599).
 - 8 For transcription, see Renato Lugarini, ‘Il ruolo degli “statuti delli sforgi” nel sistema suntuario senese’, *Bullettino senese di storia patria* 54 (1997): 403–22, at 416–17.
 - 9 See the discussion in Carole Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes and Fine Clothing* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 149–57.
 - 10 See the statutes of *Quattro Censori* of 1548, transcribed in Lugarini, ‘Il ruolo degli “statuti”’, 414–18.
 - 11 ASS, *Balia* 830, 246r- (1576).
 - 12 ASS, *Biccherna* 1082, ‘Marcatura dei vesti’ (1561).
 - 13 Giovanbattista di Girolamo Fideli, designated as *sarto* (tailor), is found in ASS, *Biccherna* 1084 (1576), 55r. For his economic level and background, see ASS, *Lira* 132, Città (1548) and ASS, *Lira* 243, *Denunzia*, c. 1784–85 (1548).
 - 14 Elizabeth Currie, *Fashion and Masculinity in Renaissance Florence* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).
 - 15 Calvi, ‘Abito, genere, cittadinanza’, 492–5; Paula Hohti, ‘Dress, Dissemination, and Innovation: Artisan Fashions in Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century Italy’, in *Fashioning the Early Modern: Creativity and Innovation in Europe, 1500–1800*, ed. Evelyn Welch (Oxford: Pasold and Oxford University Press, 2016), 143–65, esp. 157.
 - 16 The case is recorded in ASS, *Quattro Censori* 2, c. 119r: ‘La moglie di Girolamo Salvestri calzolaro a san Marco per haver portato un rete con frontale doro filato e rosetta contra la forma della legge si domanda del quattro’.
 - 17 ASS, *Biccherna* 1084 (1562), 61v.
 - 18 Elizabeth Currie, ‘Fashion Networks: Consumer Demand and the Clothing Trade in Florence from the Mid-sixteenth to Early Seventeenth Centuries’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 39, no. 3 (2009): 483–509.
 - 19 Evelyn Welch, ‘Art on the Edge: Hair and Hands’, *Renaissance Studies* 23, no. 3 (2008): 241–68; Timothy McCall, ‘Material Fictions of Luxury in Sforza Milan’, and Paula Hohti, ‘Cheap Magnificence? Imitation and Low-Cost Luxuries in Renaissance Italy’, in *Luxury and the Ethics of Greed in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Catherine Kovesi (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming January 2019), 239–76 and 277–97.

- 20 Ulinka Rublak and Maria Hayward (eds), *The First Book of Fashion: The Books of Clothes of Matthäus & Veit Konrad Schwartz of Augsburg* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).
- 21 Ulinka Rublak, *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 22 Hohti, 'Dress, Dissemination, and Innovation', 152–8. See also the forthcoming ERC-Refashioning the Renaissance database, recording artisan dress from Siena, Florence and Venice, 1550–1650 at <http://refashioningrenaissance.eu>.
- 23 Elizabeth Currie has argued that tailors began to propose new styles actively rather than simply making garments according to models provided by their clients in the sixteenth century. See Elizabeth Currie, 'Diversity and Design in the Florentine Tailoring Trade, 1550-1620', in *The Material Renaissance*, ed. Michelle O'Malley and Evelyn Welch (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 154–73, esp. 163–5. For a discussion of the status of artisans in early modern Europe, see also Margaret Pappano and Nicole R. Rice (eds), 'Medieval and Early Modern Artisan Culture', *Special Issue, Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43, no. 3 (2013): 480–1.
- 24 Currie, 'Diversity and Design', 157–8; Monica Cerri, 'Sarti toscani nel seicento: Attività e clientela', in *Le trame della moda*, ed. Anna Giulia Cavagna and Grazietta Butazzi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1995), 421–33, 423.
- 25 For his inventory and shop, see ASS, *Curia del Placito* 733, no. 273 (1549). His wealth is recorded in ASS, *Lira* 132 (1548), 82v. For discussion, see Erichsen, *At Home with Italian Renaissance Artisans*, Chapter 3.
- 26 By the end of the sixteenth century, black had become the most important colour of rank and power. For a discussion of black, see Currie, *Fashion and Masculinity*, 98–108; and for the different types of black and their creation and meanings, Susan Kay-Williams, *The Story of Colour in Textiles: Imperial Purple to Denim Blue* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 27 Cited in Patricia Fortini Brown, *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 1997), 149.
- 28 ASS, *Curia del Placito* 279 (1637), 109v: Inventory of the shoemaker Giovanni di Pavolo.