

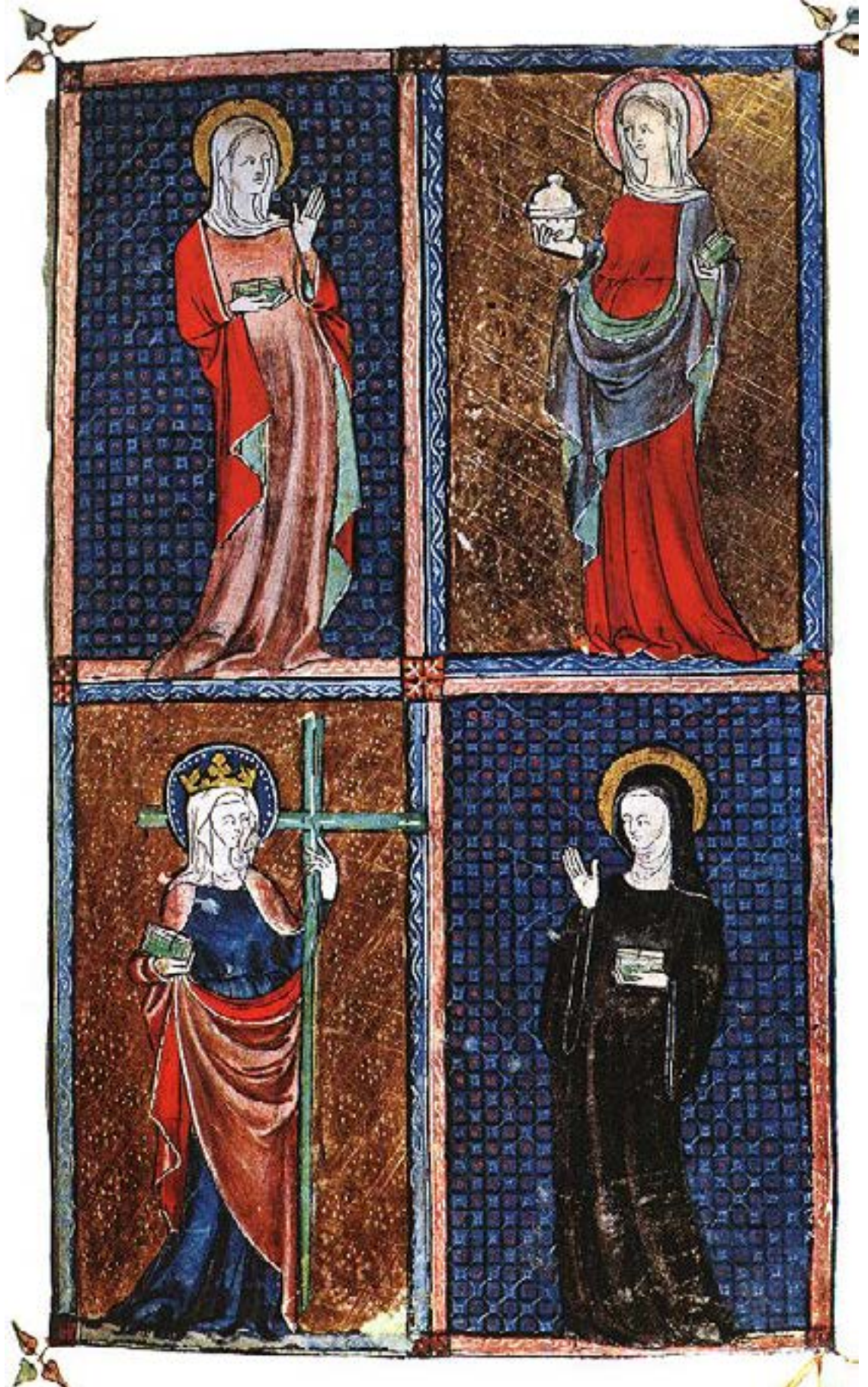
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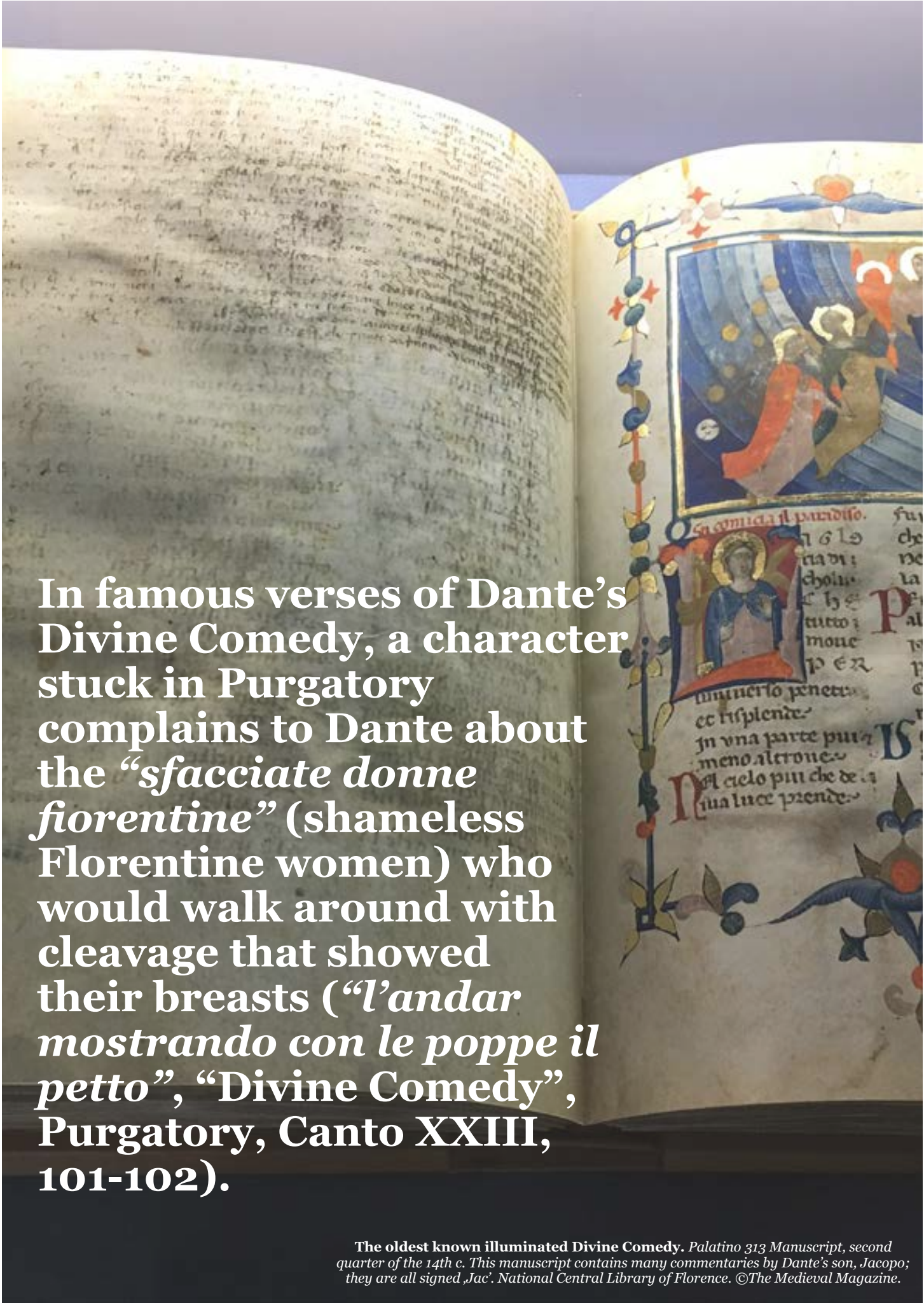


Italian fashion c. 1300, across all levels of society. Albert Kretschmer (1825–1891) was a German painter and costume designer. This image comes from his book, *Costumes of All Nations* (1882). ©Wikimedia Commons

I. Cimabue, in Golden-cress. 2. 3. 7. Men of Rank. 4. Doge of Venice. 5. Petrarcha. 6. 12. Laura. 8. Magistressa. 9. 11. 13. 14. 15. 16. Women of Rank. 17. 18. 19. Women of the Middle and Lower Classes.

“Sfacciate donne fiorentine”: Sumptuary Laws in Florence in the Middle Ages

By Tomas Creus



In famous verses of Dante's Divine Comedy, a character stuck in Purgatory complains to Dante about the "*sfacciate donne fiorentine*" (shameless Florentine women) who would walk around with cleavage that showed their breasts ("*l'andar mostrando con le poppe il petto*", "Divine Comedy", Purgatory, Canto XXIII, 101-102).

The oldest known illuminated Divine Comedy. Palatino 313 Manuscript, second quarter of the 14th c. This manuscript contains many commentaries by Dante's son, Jacopo; they are all signed „Jac“. National Central Library of Florence. ©The Medieval Magazine.

The preoccupation with the way women dressed was constant in Florence during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, so much so that in almost every decade some new legislation would appear trying to respond to the new fashions that were becoming popular in town.

The first sumptuary laws enacted in Florence with the official purpose of restraining excessive luxury date from 1281. While the laws affected both men and women, they were mostly concerned with women's clothes, as most of the laws were related to what women could wear. In fact, the officials charged with prosecuting offenders were informally known as the *Ufficiali delle Donne*, or "Officials of Women".



Detail from the Allegory of April - Triumph of Venus (1470). Francesco del Cossa (1430–1477). This image depicts the popular parti-coloured hose worn by fashionable Italian noblemen.

WOMEN AND SUMPTUARY LAWS

Sumptuary laws affected all women, either married or maidens, and applied to what they could use, not only outside, but also inside their homes. They could be extremely detailed regarding what could or could not be worn. Common restrictions applied to certain colors, such as golden or silver dresses, to certain types of fabric or animal fur, even up to the number of rings that a woman was allowed to wear in each hand. Buttons were also severely limited in type and in number. For instance, the text of the sumptuary laws published in 1356 declares:

“No woman, or female or girl, should dare to use in the city of Florence, at home or outside the home, any type of button, enameled or glazed, to any garment, on which there is any decoration with pearls or precious stones.” –*“Legge suntuaria fatta dal comune di Firenze l'anno 1355 e volgarizzata nel 1356, da Ser Andrea Lancia”*.

Buttons were a relatively recent invention, having become popular in Europe only in the twelfth century, but by that time, they had become an important status symbol in Florence, especially if made of gold or silver, or decorated with pearls and precious stones. To have a dress with a large number of expensive buttons was certainly a way to call attention to one's wealth or social position.



Idealized Portrait of a Lady (Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci as Nymph, 1480). *Simonetta Vespucci (1453–1476) was considered one of the most beautiful women in all of Northern Italy. In this painting by Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), you can see the delicate pearl beading in her hair, her large gold necklace, and the intricate silver trim along her dress, all of which denoted her noble status, and the ability to afford and wear such fashions. Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie. Google Art Project, ©Wikimedia Commons.*



Portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino (1472–1475). *This painting also demonstrates the popular styles worn in Italy by the nobility. Note the elaborate hair style and jewellery worn by the Duchess. Her gold sleeve also shows detailed designs. The Uffizi Gallery. ©The Medieval Magazine.*

But sumptuary laws were not always obeyed, and it was not easy to make women comply, as they would use the occasional vague wording of the laws to find loopholes that would allow them to wear what they wanted. In a satirical novel by the contemporary Florentine writer Franco Sacchetti (1335–1400) (*Novella CXXXVII*), he mentions how women were able to avoid the penalties of sumptuary laws by shrewdly discussing with the officials. For instance, an official approaches a woman wearing an excessive number of buttons on her dress, but is rebuked by the lady:

Ye cannot wear those buttons,' and she answereth, Yes, Messere, I can, for these are not buttons, they are beads, and if ye do not believe me, look at them; they have no hanks, neither have they any button-holes.' –Franco Sacchetti, "Novelle".

In another episode in the same novel, a lady is cited for wearing what appears to be ermine, but she replies that it is not ermine but "lattizzi", an imaginary animal, which of course was not covered by the law as it did not exist. Such discussions explain why the laws had to be constantly updated with further details.



Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement (1440). *Fra Filippo Lippi (1406–1469), Italian.*

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PROSTITUTES AND THE POOR: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Besides their official intent to reduce luxury and extravagance, which were at the time naturally associated with vanity and therefore a sin, and of course with the idea of promoting Christian modesty among women, sumptuary laws had other, more prosaic objectives. One of them was economic, to limit the use of expensive items that would only enrich foreign merchants. But also to clearly mark social distinctions.

Laws could be more severe towards maids or servants, who would be more limited in what they could wear. In the aforementioned laws of 1356, servant women were not allowed to wear most types of hats, high heeled shoes, or any button beyond the elbow. If they disobeyed the law, and could not pay the hefty fines, they would be publicly flogged naked through town. Interestingly enough, the same laws make an exception to that rule for “public prostitutes who grant their body to luxury for pecuniary purposes”.

In many Italian cities during that time, prostitutes were forbidden to wear jewels or bright colors. In other cities, however, they were allowed to use them, the intention perhaps being to associate jewels and excessive decoration with whores so that honest women would keep away from them. While prostitution was not exactly well-regarded, in practice, it was tolerated as being a necessary evil that could prevent worse sins such as sodomy.



Textile, silk, gilt thread. 14th c. Italian. ©MET

Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore, Firenze.

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In Florence, the attempt to entirely ban prostitutes from the city failed, so eventually they were allowed in, but only on certain days of the week. Sumptuary laws also affected them, and, in 1384, they started to be forced to wear bells on their hats, gloves and high heeled shoes so that they could be immediately recognized by the public.

Eventually, sumptuary laws became a bit more lax and it was even possible for certain women of higher social standing to avoid their limitations entirely by paying what could be called a “frivolity tax”, which would allow them to wear what they wanted. It was, in a way, a win-win situation for all parties: rich women could flaunt their status with beautiful and expensive clothes, and the city government could increase its revenue from such contributions.

Further Reading:

Alighieri, Dante. “Divine Comedy”, Purgatory, Canto XXIII, 101-102.

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The Sixteenth Century Journal, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), pp. 273-300.

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Guimbard, Catherine. *Appunti sulla legislazione suntuaria a Firenze dal 1281 al 1384*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tomás Creus is a writer and filmmaker, as well as a PhD in Comparative Literature, interested in several themes related to history and art.