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Anne Kraatz, *Mode et philosophie ou le néoplatonisme en silhouette, 1470-1500*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2005. 368 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 2-251-42024-X.

Review by Donald Gilman, Ball State University.

Ideal and individualism characterize Renaissance dress. In the second book of his dialogue, *Il Cortegiano* or the *Book of the Courtier* (1507), Baldesar Castiglione describes appropriate dress as “sober and restrained rather than foppish” (p. 135).<sup>[1]</sup> Although lively colors and exuberant attire may be suitable for holidays or games, sobriety is preferred; for “external appearances often bear witness to what is within” (p. 135). In spite of this principle, dress varies according to nationality. Further, the courtier must adhere to concepts of neatness and refinement but, within these limits, determines his particular style and “the man he wants to seem” (p. 136). Two countervailing but interdependent forces, then, define tastes and trends: the principles of decorum and restraint that reflect the ideal qualities of dress; personal freedom that affords individual desires and dispositions. In relating Renaissance fashion to Neoplatonic currents, Anne Kraatz probes the intellectual premises and cultural contexts that explain the emergence of a late fifteenth-century archetype reflecting Ficinian aesthetics, extending to the visual arts, and popularized throughout Europe by the dissemination of printed books. Both the subject and methodology break new ground, and bring attention to the significance of this study that introduces avenues of important inquiry.

Historians of Renaissance dress have centered attention upon aspects of material culture, surveying shifts of design, varying uses of fabrics, differences of style between domestic life and state occasions, and descriptions of embroidery, doublets, hats, hose, colors, and shoes. Kraatz takes this work into account; but, in delineating the theoretical tenets that influence these changing trends, she employs this empirical evidence to examine the historicity of fashion and its relation to philosophical paradigms. Approaching the problem phenomenologically, she draws upon premises proposed by Barthes and Merleau-Ponty (pp. 14-22). Facts and ideas coalesce; the material culture of fashion becomes a manifestation of intellectual currents and sociological correlations. Kraatz identifies her area of study as Europe, 1470-1500, and she supports her thesis through reference to painting, sculpture, architecture, and philosophical texts. This study, then, sets forth a significant, innovative aim: a view of Renaissance dress that reflects Neoplatonic currents. However, in reconciling the concrete with the abstract, she also presents a model of analysis applicable to other verifiable phenomena both during this period and in other historical moments.

Two currents converge in Europe around 1470: (1) an elaboration of Neoplatonism that combines the world of *sensibilia* (e.g., modes of dress) and the visualization of supernals (pp. 21-22); (2) a change of fashion that rejected Gothic tastes, and that extended throughout Europe (p. 25). Shapes distinguish former triangularly-contoured fashion from emerging rectangular designs. Such a difference explains changes in the geometric modes of dress depicted in Jean Fouquet’s *La Vierge à l’enfant* (1455) and the fashion presented in the six panels of the anonymous *La dame à la licorne* (1495-99). Finally, since numerous printed books with illustrations became accessible in France at this time, both textual and visual evidence indicates French and, by extension, pan-European assimilation of Neoplatonism and its material manifestations.

Thematically, this study can be divided into three sections: (1) an identification of Neoplatonic principles that apply to dress design; (2) a description of late fifteenth-century fashion that reflects Neoplatonic aesthetics; (3) the incorporation of this form in France. In reviewing Neoplatonism and its classical and medieval antecedents, Kraatz stresses the role of spirituality that enables the soul to transcend the earthly. Parallels in Petrarchism suggest the importance of this intellectual aspiration recorded by lyric poets and this moral perfection exemplified by Petrarch's and Boccaccio's portrait of Griselda. An angelic appearance expresses this Neoplatonic idea, reducing sexual distinctions to androgyny, extolling child-like semblance and chastity, and resembling the human nature but divine spirituality of the Virgin Mary. According to Anne de France (1504), clothes must be neither too tight nor too thin; and, in engendering and nurturing children, mothers must rise above the sexual and assume angelic aspects (pp. 94-97). Ghirlandaio's representation of the funeral of St. Fina (1475) supports this style that blurs the masculine and the feminine (pp. 122-123). Whereas triangular shapes characterize fashion prior to 1470, rectangular dimensions become the defining form that suggests this angelic representation and recalls Neoplatonic precepts.

In detailing the qualities of Neoplatonic dress, Kraatz establishes the parameters of analysis. Fashion, she contends, exists at a particular moment in culturally different environments: men's short and tight garments that reflect Gothic tastes appear, for example, in the Bayeux tapestry and resemble a similar style pictured in Salomé's dress in St. Mark's in Venice (pp. 144-149). She argues that style also dissolves social distinctions. Both aristocrats and peasants select the same form; only cloth, color, and accessories differentiate rank. Fashion, moreover, seems to conform to ideas theorized by thinkers and conveyed in literature and the visual arts. Christianity is associated with the number three that calls to mind the Trinity, and that reflects triangular shapes of style preferred during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Pythagoreans and Neoplatonists, though, designated four as the golden number that evokes the rectangle. In his painting, the *Birth of Venus* (1485), Botticelli adheres to Neoplatonist concepts and portrays the goddess in a rectangular framework (pp. 184, 215). Alberti, too, sees the rectangle as an expression of a spiritual ideal; and, in his *Della famiglia* (1434-40), he notes the uses of this form in clothes to illuminate beauty and to reflect virtue (pp. 184-186).

Subsequent chapters illustrate this distinction. The Gothic style, popular prior to 1470, conforms to a triangular configuration that calls for close-fitting clothes for women and tight hose for men. Such a style appears in triangularly-shaped dresses and immense hats that Fouquet and Roger van der Weyden depict in their paintings (pp. 202-206). Rectangularity, on the other hand, evokes an asexuality that shifts focus to chastity and spiritual insight. In contrast to Gothic styles, tunics, page-boy haircuts, and round hats identifying this new style obscure the contours of the body and divert attention away from sensual attractions and earthly concerns. An analysis of *La dame à la licorne* supports this assertion; and, in portraying the five senses and free will, these visual representations parallel thoughts formulated by Marsilio Ficino, Symphorien Champier, and Francesco Colonna (pp. 227-228). The use of heavier cloth worn by the nobility implies a power associated with angels, prophets, and saints. Finally, illustrations in incunabula (e.g., Jacques de Voraigue's *Legenda aurea*, various books of hours, and Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*) reinforce the presence of angelic emulation that is conveyed by rectangular shapes (pp. 248-255). In fact, the figures of Adam and Eve in Guillaume Tardif's *Le livre de bien vivre et de bien mourir* (1498) appear almost identical, reflecting an asexuality associated with spirituality, and suggesting the influence of Neoplatonic aesthetics (p. 258).

French students at Italian universities, Italian merchants and bankers in France, and Florentine diplomats at the court of France stimulated a cultural interaction between the two countries, facilitating the popularity of Neoplatonism in France and, by extension, its expression in Renaissance fashion. Pavia, Ferrara and Bologna, and Padua were centers of learning for civil law, Greek, and medicine respectively. In particular, Piero della Francesca incorporated Pythagorean and Neoplatonist principles into his paintings that French students must have admired (pp. 270-272). Numerous Italian merchants

traveled to France during this period. Francesco Sassetti, a humanist who managed a bank for Lorenzo de Medici in Lyon, interacted with French aristocracy; and, commissioning the Neoplatonist artist Ghirlandaio to complete frescoes, he promoted this aesthetics in late fifteenth-century France (pp. 280-282, 285-291). Finally, almost all Florentine ambassadors were members of Ficino's Academy, thereby assuring a propagation of Neoplatonic ideas and, indirectly, knowledge of this new Renaissance style of dress (pp. 291-295).

In focusing attention on the interrelation between Neoplatonic concepts and Renaissance dress, Kraatz argues informatively and persuasively for a philosophical impulse that imbues art, architecture, and material culture. Like Elizabeth Birbari who has deduced the style of dress through analysis of fifteenth-century Italian painting, [2] Kraatz relies primarily upon art and philosophical texts to support her thesis, thereby employing a sound methodology that combines correct observation with perceptive insight. In the end, though, Kraatz is describing an ideal that, though practiced for approximately thirty years, is eventually reduced to thought and theory. Rabelais, for example, envisions a paradoxical but unrealistic picture of dress in his utopian Abbaye de Thélème (*Gargantua*, chap. 56 [1534]). Ficinian concepts and Petrarchan themes shape the substance and form of Pléiade poetry, and Claude Le Jeune attempts to capture in music the Neoplatonic elements of Jean-Antoine de Baif's lyric verse. Theory, moreover, is not always effectively actualized and sustained. The twentieth-century art historian André Chastel has noted a change in fashion around 1500-1510 (p. 302); and, according to Castiglione, manners differentiate the sexes and are reflected in the style of dress (p. 302). In fact, the form-fitting doublets, tights, stockings, and style of shoes of the sixteenth-century French gentleman [3] present a striking contrast to the asexual designs of late fifteenth-century Italy and, in many respects, resemble the fashion of the knights represented in the Bayeux tapestry. Kraatz, then, is subtly proposing a complementary volume that examines the dissolution of the interconnection between Neoplatonic theory and Renaissance fashion. Cross-cultural influences, social stratification, availability of affordable textiles and accessories, and a desire to distinguish the sexes may offer additional avenues of exploration.

In sum, Kraatz has successfully examined a short-lived phenomenon that demonstrates an attempt to reconcile universal ideal with social practice. In presenting the configurations of this aesthetic reflected in Renaissance dress, she invites others to advance her thesis or to study anomalies to this trend. She has also produced a model of scholarship that can be applied to other moments and movements. Nonetheless, like all good books, this study raises pertinent questions on the viability of this delicate balance between ideal and reality. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne, in his *Des lois somptuaires* (*Essais*, 1.43 [1580-88]), decries the distortion and decadence of appropriate appearance that results in extravagance, effeminacy, and vulgarity.[4] Similarly, in late fifteenth-century Italy and France, the authority of Neoplatonic theory may call for angelic, asexual fashion, but earthly influences and human aspirations cannot be discounted and, in fact, can inspire change. Clothes do not always make the man, but dress does disclose revealing aspects of cultural currents and intriguing perceptions into the relationship between ideal refinement and individual taste.

#### NOTES

[1] Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1967). All subsequent quotations from Castiglione's text refer to this edition.

[2] Elizabeth Birbari, *Dress in Italian Painting, 1460-1500* (London: John Murray, 1975).

[3] W.L. Wiley, *The Gentleman of Renaissance France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 77-82.

[4] Michel de Montaigne, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 261.

Donald Gilman  
Ball State University  
dgilman@bsu.edu

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