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«All That is Solid Melts into Air, All That is Holy is Profaned»: The Secular Modernity of Rosa Genoni

Il mio intervento prende le mosse dal saggio sulla modernità di Marshall Berman *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (*Tutto ciò che è solido svanisce nell'aria*). La sua definizione inclusiva di moderno come “il tentativo di uomini e donne di farsi soggetto e non solo oggetto di modernizzazione” e il suo progetto pionieristico di colmare il divario tra modernizzazione (politica ed economica) e modernismo (culturale) offre lo spunto per la mia lettura modernista dell'opera di Rosa Genoni (1867-1954). Andando oltre il generico apprezzamento per la modernità e la lungimiranza delle creazioni di moda di Genoni, la mia lettura dei suoi scritti vuole portare l'attenzione sul vero e proprio avanguardismo artistico del suo approccio alla moda e sottolineare lo spessore intellettuale della sua visione dell'abbigliamento femminile senza precedenti. Straordinariamente secolare se non addirittura apertamente sacrilega, Genoni ha dato vita a uno stile prettamente italiano saccheggiando il patrimonio artistico e religioso del passato. Trasgressivi, ironici e molto simili al ready-made dell'avanguardia, i modelli paradossalmente moderni di Genoni volevano scioccare il pubblico non diversamente dalle serate futuriste. Lungi dall'essere un'opera strettamente di sartoria o un'impresa commerciale o nazionalista, la proposta di Genoni per una moda italiana chiede di essere interpretata nel più ampio contesto artistico e intellettuale. Scrittrice, insegnante e femminista oltre che stilista di moda, Genoni, la cui lunga vita ha coinciso con i cento anni che ci sono voluti perché nascesse il Made in Italy e le donne guadagnassero diritti politici, si è adoperata per plasmare e potenziare – oltre che vestire – le donne dell'Italia moderna così che potessero competere sulla scena mondiale. Contrastando il monopolio francese nella moda, Genoni ha cercato di promuovere una visione della donna come intellettuale in aperta polemica con i modelli ipersessuati venduti dagli stilisti francesi. Sfidando la normatività opprimente dei manuali di condotta, Genoni esalta l'individualità delle donne. Non solo veste le dive del momento ma invita le donne a partecipare alla vita pubblica e a comunicare con l'abito il desiderio di cambiare il mondo che cambia.

My article begins with a discussion of Marshall Berman's "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air". His inclusive definition of modernism as "any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization" and his pioneering work bridging the divide between (economic and political) modernization and (cultural) modernism provide the impetus for my modernist interpretation of the work of Rosa Genoni (1867-1954). Surpassing a mere generic appreciation of the modernity and foresight of Genoni's fashion designs, my close reading of her work intends to draw attention to the artistic modernism and true avant-garde of her approach to fashion and emphasize the unprecedented intellectual scope of her vision of women's wear. Strikingly secular if not deliberately sacrilegious, Genoni crafted a distinctively Italian style by ransacking the world's artistic and religious heritage. Transgressive, ironic and reminiscent of avant-garde ready-made, Genoni's paradoxically modern designs were intended to shock audiences not unlike futurist events. Far from being a narrowly sartorial, commercial or even nationalistic enterprise, Genoni's proposal of an Italian design demands interpretation in the wider artistic and intellectual context. A writer, a teacher, and a feminist as well as a fashion designer, whose long life spanned the century it took for the Made in Italy label to be born and for women to gain political rights, Genoni labored to shape and empower—rather than simply dress—the women of modern Italy so that they could compete in the world arena. Countering the French monopoly in fashion, Genoni aspired to further a vision of women as intellectuals in open polemic with the oversexualized models sold by French designers. Challenging the oppressive normativity of manuals of conduct, Genoni emphasizes women's individuality. Not only did she dress the divas of the time but she invited women to take part in public life and to communicate with their dress their wish to change a world that is changing them.

Marshall Berman provides the most inclusive definition of modernism as «any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization».¹ Seeking to return to individuals «the power to change the world that is changing them» (p. 16) while simultaneously acknowledging their «terror of disorientation and disintegration of life falling apart» (p. 13), Berman identifies modern sensibility with a keen sense of paradox and contradiction. Although his timeline extends all the way to «the contradictory forces and needs that inspire and torment us» today, the spotlight of his book is on the «dynamic and dialectical modernism of the nineteenth century» (p. 35), the 1840s in particular, which were a decade of unprecedented political instability and economic and social change. Most importantly, in an effort to establish relationships between (economic and political) modernization and (cultural) modernism, his critical method advocates an «open and expansive way of understanding culture» (p. 5). Hence his reading of the *Communist Manifesto* as the «archetype of a century of modernist manifestos and movements» (p. 89) and his choice of Karl Marx as representative literary modernist. Berman specifically lingers on the bravura with which Marx renders the experience of modernity as shaped by the bourgeoisie. Thanks to his close reading of Marx's «intense and extravagant» (p. 19) images we can fully appreciate the «rhythm and the drama of bourgeois activism» (p. 92) as well as the «desperate dynamism» (p. 95) and «delight in mobility» (p. 96) that are inherent in the most often quoted passages of the *Communist Manifesto*: «The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every activity hitherto honored and looked up with reverent awe. [...] All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned».² «Luminous» and «incandescent» (p. 91) Marx's prose most effectively conveys the bourgeoisie's profound irreverence for the sacred and the modern secular desecration of the halo that shielded with religious terror the past institutions of power.

Berman's inclusive, empowering and imaginatively compelling vision of modernism was capacious enough to encompass both the political economy of Marx and the poetry of Goethe and Baudelaire. Following Berman in seeking to bridge the divide between modernization and modernism, in this paper I would like to make the case for a modernist interpretation of the work of Rosa Genoni (1867-1954). A fashion designer, an entrepreneur, and a feminist – as well as a labor organizer, a peace activist, an antifascist, a philanthropist – whose long life coincided with the first hundred years of Italy's existence as a modern nation, Genoni is remembered primarily for her sustained effort to promote a made-in-Italy fashion industry but, before being national, the Italian fashion industry that she hoped to foster was truly «modern». At a time when fashion was dominated by French designers, Genoni

¹ Marshall Berman, Marshall, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, London, Verso, 1983, p. 5.

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, edited by Gareth Stedman Jones, London, Penguin, 2002, pp. 222-223.

succeeded in giving unprecedented, if only momentary, visibility to Italian designs. A writer and a teacher as well as a dressmaker, she articulated her vision for the future of women's fashion in several publications that both complemented and subverted the idea of a made-in-Italy style that her designs furthered, adding unprecedented intellectual depth to the conversation about fashion.

Surpassing a mere generic appreciation of the modernity and foresight of Genoni's fashion designs, my close reading of her work intends to draw attention to the modernity of her approach to the fashion industry and to the presence of women in society as well, while also underlining the artistic modernism and true avant-garde of her vision. My analysis highlights Genoni's investment in – and advancement of – fashion as a vehicle of empowerment and emancipation. When women had no political rights and were confined to the private sphere by constraining norms of conduct, Genoni imagined a truly public female presence for women and articulated a vision of Italianate fashion as emancipator of both the garment industry and women in Italy.

Genoni's work occupies a special place in the longer history of a made-in-Italy fashion style. Although a specifically Italian fashion industry would only become commercially viable in the aftermath of World War II, at the height of the Cold War – and as a direct result of its politics – efforts to establish a made-in-Italy fashion industry as an agent of modernization and international aggrandizement date from the nineteenth century. As early as 1871, Francesco Dall'Ongaro argued that «i figurini contano più dei cannoni e che ad essere indipendenti nel mondo bisogna cominciare dal creare una moda nazionale: una *Moda Italiana*».³ In her detailed study of manufacturing during the first fifty years of the nation's history, Manuela Soldi has drawn attention to the many entrepreneurs and intellectuals, institutions and initiatives, who were strong advocates, both before and after Italian unification, for institutional support of the industry, among them Luigi Tenca, Emilia Bossi, Paola Orvieto, Giuseppe Visconti di Modrone, the Società per l'Emancipazione della Moda Italiana (1872), the Industrie Femminili Italiane (1903) and the Comitato per le Mode di Pura Arte Italiana (1908). But, as Eugenia Paulicelli has argued, Italian fashion began to be taken seriously only under Fascist rule, when Mussolini's declaration that «[u]na moda italiana non esiste ancora: crearla è possibile, bisogna crearla» had resulted in the state sponsorship of institutions such as the Ente Autonomo per la Mostra Permanente Nazionale della Moda (1932) first and the Ente Nazionale Moda (1935) later. These were also the years when fashion, as with the later Made in Italy brand, was promoted «not only as a fundamental component of the Italian economy, but also a powerful and appealing vehicle of the process of modernization and the

³ Manuela Soldi, "Mani italiane. Lavorazioni tessili e industrie artistiche in Italia, 1861-1911", tesi di dottorato, Parma, 2014, p. 384. See also her *Rosa Genoni: moda e politica: una prospettiva femminista fra 800 e 900*, Venice, Marsilio, 2019, 3.

projection both domestically and abroad of “new Italy” and “new Italians”».⁴

In this context, Genoni’s reputation as the «founding mother of Italian fashion»⁵ is linked primarily to her prize-winning participation in the 1906 Milan Fiera Internazionale del Sempione, a celebratory event to mark the completion of the Simplon Pass, which, as Paulicelli recalls, was itself intended to «decouple Italy from the image of backwardness and romantic nostalgia for primitivism and naturalism that many foreign visitors came home with».⁶ That was the venue where, in a display dedicated just to her, Genoni exhibited outfits inspired by the Italian Renaissance, two of which are now housed in the permanent collections of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.

The relative permanence of the new location of Genoni’s designs should not obscure the precariousness of an Italian style of fashion at the turn of the century. When Genoni began her campaign for made-in-Italy fashion designs, the phrase *moda italiana*, despite the passionately expressed need for an Italian manufacturing industry following unification, denoted a concept that literally needed to be put in quotes, as in a rare interview with Genoni that Paola Lombroso conducted in 1911, five years later in which she references «l’idea ardita e quasi accettata di una “Moda italiana”».⁷ As history has it, the showcase of this industry almost never came to be. The research by Paulicelli, Soldi and, before them, Pierluigi Zenoni offers insight into the urgency and fragility of Genoni’s participation in the event.⁸ She bore the financial burden of the exhibit as the prestigious Haardt firm for which she was working had feared that sponsoring designs that so prominently featured an original Italian style would damage its image of purveyor of French fashion models. In fact, Haardt ended up profiting from Genoni’s new visibility while Genoni herself temporarily lost her job. Not only was the exhibit self-funded, but Genoni also had to sustain the expenses for two displays, since the first iteration of her display was lost in a fire that destroyed the entire decorative arts pavilion.

In the annals of fashion history, Genoni’s 1906 victory for Italian fashion has rightly gained an almost mythological status. Yet to be fully articulated, however, is the paradoxical modernity of a forward-looking fashion style rooted in the past combined with the truly unprecedented intellectual scope of her vision of women’s wear. Far from being a narrowly sartorial, commercial or even nationalistic enterprise, Genoni’s proposal of an Italian design demands interpretation in the wider artistic and intellectual context.

⁴ Eugenia Paulicelli, *Fashion under Fascism: Beyond the Black Shirt*, Oxford, Berg, 2004, p. 51.

⁵ Eugenia Paulicelli, *Rosa Genoni: La Moda è Una Cosa Seria: Milano Expo 1906 E La Grande Guerra; Rosa Genoni: Fashion Is a Serious Business: The Milan World Fair of 1906 and the Great War*, Milan, Deleyva, 2015, p. 223.

⁶ Eugenia Paulicelli, *Italian Style: Fashion & Film from Early Cinema to the Digital Age*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 31.

⁷ Soldi, *Rosa Genoni*, cit., p. 229.

⁸ Pierluigi Zenoni, “Rosa Genoni: artifice di moda, di pace e di umanità”, «Nuovi argomenti», 8-9, 2015, pp. 30-39.

This interpretation of Genoni's forward vision should fully consider her looking back onto the early modern Italian imaginary. The artistic Italian past was front and center of the image of a distinctly Italian fashion style that Genoni put on display at the 1906 Milan International Fair. Not generically inspired by Italian art, the specific artworks «from which» Genoni's outfits were «taken» – works by Botticelli, Veronese, Titian, and Bramante, among others – were clearly identified for the visitor in both the cartouches placed at the bottom of the mannequins and the single-page leaflet she distributed [see figure 1]. The second single-page leaflet, which she prepared after the fire, lists the eight artworks that she had exhibited in the «Mostra distrutta» and the six more that she prepared «Nella mostra presente espone».⁹ Her prize-winning Botticelli-inspired ballgown, for instance, was referred to in the cartouche as «Dalla Primavera del Botticelli» and in the one-page leaflet as «Abito da ballo – dalla Primavera del Botticelli». The artworks were also discussed at length in the longer pamphlet «Al visitatore» where, with almost pedantic accuracy, Genoni told her readers where in Italy the originals could be admired: «L'abito da ballo, è ispirato dalla *Primavera* del Botticelli, che si ammira nella Galleria degli Uffizi a Firenze»; «l'amore sacro del Tiziano che si trova nella Galleria Borghese di Roma»; «L'abito da visita è tolto dalla S[anta] Cecilia di Raffaello che si ammira alla Pinacoteca di Bologna».¹⁰ Located on and off the beaten path of the Gran Tour, Italian artifacts suggested an itinerary that included the famed destinations of Venice, Florence, Rome, Bologna and Milan but also less visited cities like Genova and Prato. Above all, artifacts demanded to be admired independently of Genoni's adaptations in her fashion designs as it is apparent in this long digression on Titian's *Amore sacro* to which I will return: «Le rose, che nel quadro sono pensosamente sfogliate dalla bellissima figura di donna, si stendono, s'allacciano, s'inerpicano, serpeggiano coi loro rami e le loro corolle lungo la sottana del vestito» (p. 7). If we take these clothes at face value, we might be tempted to interpret their art-historical halo as signaling a desire to root the Italian modern fashion industry in an uninterrupted tradition stretching from the fifteenth century to the present. We might sense deference, reverence or nostalgia towards the past; we might even view her Renaissance-inspired outfits as profoundly anti-modern. But Genoni spoke for her dresses at length in the pamphlet «Al visitatore» where, in sharp contrast with the timeless solemnity of her display, she emphasized rupture over continuity with the past and showcased her desire to shock the spectator with the modernity of her vision. There, she made sure that her proposal for a made-in-Italy fashion style be understood as an urgent solution to challenges being presented by the French fashion monopoly on the arts, on national pride, on women and on individual agency. Progressively modern are both the overt feminism of her designs and her vision of the textile industry and its almost belligerent economic competitiveness. Her references to the anxieties over cultural homogenization in an increasingly globalized world

⁹ Soldi, *Rosa Genoni*, cit., p. 19.

¹⁰ Rosa Genoni, Pamphlet «Al visitatore» [1906], pp. 6-7.

were topical, resounding the sustained reflections by her contemporaries Georg Simmel, Søren Kierkegaard and Frederick Nietzsche on modernity's perceived onslaught on the individual. But just as she was topical, she was also truly avant-garde in the ecumenical inspiration of her designs and the creative destruction and irreverence of her approach.

This longer pamphlet opens with a patriotic and almost bellicose call for the emancipation of Italian women's fashion from its subjection to the French. Since the exhibit sought as much to promote Italian fashion style as it sought to demote the French, the first part of the pamphlet is taken up with a forceful critique of French designs. French sartorial creations are disparaged as «contorte, arabesca e bizzarre creazioni» and their hairstyles ridiculed as «ardite e stravaganti acconciature» (p. 2). Dress and hair styles are jointly blamed for giving women the appearance of a «frivola bambola» (*ibidem*). The tone turns from patriotic to bellicose when Genoni invokes the specific Francophobic slogan that King Carlo Alberto of Savoy coined in 1848 as he declared war with Austria-Hungary: «ed allora perché imitare e riprodurre servilmente le acconciature d'oltralpe, quando l'Italia può tentare di fare da sé e molto meglio?» (p. 3).

While her reference to outdoing the French was surely popular, given the broad Francophobic sentiment of the Italians at a moment of fierce economic competition with France in North Africa and with strained diplomatic relations between the two nations, what Genoni is really battling here is the visual monotony and the apparent levelling of individual difference enforced by the sartorial primacy of the French. Cumbersome, frivolous and puerile, French fashion styles were above all culpable for contributing to the cultural homogenization that so painfully plagued the experience of modernity by imposing onto the world «uniformi ed oleografici modelli» (*ibidem*). The issue was acutely felt in post-unification Italy, where fears of «levelling» were blamed on the joint effects of unification and modernization.¹¹ Just as Italian ethnographers, photographers and writers had scurried through the peninsula seeking to preserve local color, so too did Genoni pitch Italy's varied cultural identity as the antidote to the greying of the world by French dressmakers. In sentences that even syntactically seek to associate Italy with multiplicity and France with asphyxiating uniformity, Genoni pleaded for Italy to find in itself «tante tradizioni, tanti elementi, tante attitudini» to emancipate itself from the «uniformi ed oleografici modelli, che rivestono indistintamente le signore di tutti i paesi, di tutte le razze, di tutti i climi, di tutte le latitudini, di tutte le condizioni morali, dalla gran dama, alla *cocotte*, dalla sartina alla *chantueuse*» (*ibidem*).

¹¹ For a fuller discussion, see Maria Grazia Lolla, "Local Colour and the Grey Aura of Modernity: Photography, Literature, and the Social Sciences in Fin-de-Siècle Italy" in *Stillness in Motion: Italy, Photography, and the Meanings of Modernity*, edited by Giuliana Minghelli and Sarah Patricia Hill, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2014, pp. 67-96, p. 67; and Maria Grazia Lolla, "Photographing Averages: Photography, Statistics and Literature in Fin-de-siècle Italy", in *Photography as Power: Dominance and Resistance through the Italian Lens*, edited by Marco Andreani and Nicoletta Pazzaglia, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019, pp. 37-77.

Though couched in patriotic and nationalistic language, an Italian fashion style was even more broadly furthered as modern. For Genoni, the style of French fashion – foreign, average and unreasonable – was simply not new enough. Genoni took issue with «le *solite* forme cosmopolite della moda parigina» (p. 2), «coi suoi *soliti* motivi più appariscenti che lussuosi» (p. 3, emphasis mine). Her goal was to defeat the fear of the new by exemplifying innovative designs: «le DAME, gli ARTISTI, le SARTE ITALIANE devono collaborare nel proficuo sforzo, per vincere il misoneismo» (p. 4). She tautologically insisted that her unprecedented designs were intended to launch a fashion suited to modern times: «creare le novissime ed elettissime forme di una moda, che sia la vera espressione estetica dell’arte, della società e dei tempi moderni» (p. 5).

The display itself was intended to be a vehicle for the shocking modernity of her vision, beginning with the mannequins: «avrebbe potuto, con minore studio e più facile effetto, drappeggiare i suoi vestiti sulle *solite* figure di cera, che riproducono i noti tipi di peturbanti ed artificiose bellezze alla moda, colti nelle fiere internazionali del lusso e dell’eleganza, e che si contano in una decina di esemplari, perfettamente identici, in tutte le Esposizioni, nelle vetrine del riparto moda, od in quelle del riparto parrucchieri e bustaie. Si vollero avere, invece, speciali modelli, creati appositamente» (p. 8). The window dressing was also intended to look unprecedented: «Non si volle nemmeno la solita vetrina Bianca, filettata d’oro, che tanto piace per l’effetto chiassoso al volgo. Fu creata una vetrina d’angolo, tutta di mogano, dalle linee movimentate, snelle, leggere, dalle colonne agili e flessuose, lontana dagli eccessivi e stravaganti effetti come dalle dozzinali edizioni di vetrine, che si seguono e si rassomigliano» (p. 9).

Far from a beggar for the blessing of the past, not unlike the organizers of the *serate futuriste*, Genoni delighted in the anticipated shock of her audience: «lo stesso pubblico troverà bruttissime ed antipaticissime le figure modellate con tanta coscienza dalla Ditta Folli di Roma; [...] tutto quanto si è tentato, per molti sarà un demerito, e verrà giudicato una audace presunzione» (pp. 9-10). Rebellious against the establishment and conventions was her declared motivation for launching a made-in-Italy style. Asked by Paola Lombroso to explain «come è nata e maturata in lei l’idea ardita e ormai quasi accettata di “moda italiana”», Genoni responded: «in verità, credo di aver sempre avuto fin da ragazza un istinto di ribellione contro le cose stabilite e convenzionali».¹² As we gaze upon her display of Renaissance-inspired outfits we must see that what led Genoni to study the arts of the past was not nostalgia but instead her wish to explode a conservative status quo.

There was nothing antiquarian about Genoni’s support for the creative destruction of the artworks of the past. She showed no reverence for the inviolability of works of art when she wrote: «Ma si noti ancora che, questa armonica fusione, si potrà poi ottenere ugualmente, non soltanto ispirandosi per ogni vestito ad un solo capolavoro, come ha fatto l’espositrice, ma anche cogliendo i diversi particolari ed aspetti delle

¹² Soldi, Rosa Genoni, cit., p. 229.

varie opera d'arte, ed armonizzandole e fondendole in un tutto assieme».¹³ Indeed, she holds no special allegiance to the masters of the Renaissance. Even as she conjures the spirit of Botticelli, Veronese and Raphael, she made clear that these Italian artists were chosen from the infinite possibilities offered by the arts and the crafts of all times and places: «ed in seguito, non solo ai capolavori del pennello e dello scalpello, l'artefice di moda dovrà ispirarsi, ma potrà anche attingere ai mille tesori di bellezza, che offre la natura nella sua infinita ed inesauribile tavolozza di forme e di colori, come puranco ai preziosi motivi che sono racchiusi nelle popolari fantasie delle antiche e moderne vesti, indossate dalle donne del popolo e della campagna» (p. 5). The visible *tout court* became «treasures of beauty» to be dislodged from their stable encasements and mined freely by fashion designers in their quest for the appropriate dress of modernity.

Genoni's ecumenical «quiet avant-garde» is even more apparent in her ambitious *Storia della moda attraverso i secoli*, the three planned volumes of which only include the first, published in 1925, when Genoni's career as a teacher came to an abrupt end after refusing to sign the required oath of allegiance to the Fascist regime.¹⁴ Based on a tool that she used in teaching classes at the Società Umanitaria in Milan, the survey promised to showcase ornaments, costumes and hairstyles from the Ice Age to the present. Here too Genoni spelled out her allegiance to present and future generations, making clear that the book was written for the benefit of the moderns. An experienced designer of theatre costumes, Genoni addressed the book to «gli artisti che servono con la loro opera ai modernissimi orizzonti dello scenario e del costume teatrale, che non vogliono limitare alla riproduzione pedissequa del documento storico [...] ma che vogliono ricostruire pel nostro gusto moderno e la nostra diversa sensibilità la sensazione estetica stessa di allora».¹⁵ Genoni's focus was on the *modern* presentation of the past: «troveranno nel libro qualche spunto per la nuovissima iniziativa d'arte decorative, in cui lo sforzo della fantasia creatrice di disegno e di colore dell'artista di oggi, darà la chiara nota della realtà dell'epoca di ieri» (p. vii). Ever oriented towards the future, she aligned her endeavor with an experimental synesthetic approach – «una nuova euritmia tra colori, stati d'animo e d'ambiente» (*ibidem*) – pioneered in Geneva which made her exclaim: «Questo è il campo sconfinato dell'arte dell'avvenire» (*ibidem*).

But we must pause to note that the four hundred images assembled in the first volume alone were drawn primarily from the sacred art of the civilizations of the past. Although in her interview with Paola Lombroso Genoni declares her eclectic method was applied «senza profanazione»,¹⁶ we cannot not notice that the halo is somewhat stripped from religious art, as Genoni leads aspiring designers through a mixture of

¹³ Genoni, «Al visitatore», cit., pp. 4-5.

¹⁴ See Danila Cannamela, *The Quiet Avant-Garde: Crepuscular Poetry and the Twilight of Modern Humanism*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019.

¹⁵ Rosa Genoni, *La storia della moda attraverso i secoli (Dalla preistoria ai tempi odierni)*, Bergamo, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche [1925], p. vii.

¹⁶ Soldi, *Rosa Genoni*, cit., p. 230.

photographs, drawings and lavishly illustrated plates to notice «l'acconciatura del capo di Osiride» [see figure 2] or «la veste di Iside» that was «strettissima e completamente ricamata» or Hammurabi's dress: «assai originale è la veste del dio del Sole con gonna a campana con volani sovrapposti» (p. 41). Some of the drawings allow for a slight manipulation of images so that Native Americans, Egyptians or Assyrians are made to look as if they are posing: they tilt their heads and cross their legs in dance moves that show off their clothes and ornaments [see figure 3]. And since the arts of the ancients were reproduced with the sole purpose of providing inspiration for modern dress, the book comes with several patterns: for the Nike of Samothrace, the Babylonian kandis, the Egyptian kalasiri and some Ionian robes [see figure 4a and 4b]. Truly ecumenical in her playful approach to religious representations – when she is not also playfully ironizing religious discourse, as in her recollection that «[a]i miei tempi il “dogma” era il modello parigino»¹⁷ – Genoni will treat Christian art no differently. One of her most famous designs was inspired by a fourth-century bas-relief of a Christian woman in prayer.

Gazing at Egyptian and Greek deities, as well as angels and praying women from throughout Christian tradition, graciously posing as if they were flaunting their outfits, cannot but recall Giacomo Leopardi's 1824 *Dialogo della moda e della morte* which staged a philosophizing fashion addressing death with undue familiarity: «io sono la Moda, tua sorella. [...] Mia sorella? [...] Sì: non ti ricordi che tutte e due siamo nate dalla caducità».¹⁸ The eerily prescient kinship Leopardi imagines between fashion and death results in both the de-sacralization of death and the elevation of fashion to the new deity of an age dominated by rapid consumption.

But Genoni's irreverent approach to the sacred arts of the past also resonates with Marx's rendering of the bourgeoisie as the class that aimed at dissolving the ossified social relations by quashing the sanctity of «every occupation hitherto honored and looked up with reverent awe».¹⁹ Genoni, like Marx, belonged to a modern world that, as Gareth Stedman Jones remembers, was «not simply identified with destabilization and exploitation but also with a liberating power, the power to release people from backwardness and tradition-bound dependence» (p. 6). The same irreverence that Genoni demonstrates towards the sacred institutions of the past can be found in her willful disruption of the social relations that ultimately deprived women of political rights, confining them in the private sphere.

Recontextualizing Genoni's dense and evocative plea for made-in-Italy fashion alongside her feminist activism invites the interpretation that for Genoni more important than the objective of disrespecting patriarchal institutions for the sake of an Italian fashion industry was the objective of weaponizing fashion to emancipate women. Her creative destruction and experimentation with the sacred art of the past

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 219.

¹⁸ Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette morali*, edited by Mario Fubini, Turin, Loescher, 1985, p. 80.

¹⁹ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, cit., p. 222.

millennia was aimed at dissolving the bonds that had ensconced women in their homes, frozen into subjection to men.

Portions of the pamphlet she wrote for the 1906 Milan World Fair were used for the speech she delivered at the 1908 Women's Congress in Rome which she published as *Per una moda italiana*.²⁰ The generic resistance to the new that was mentioned in the earlier pamphlet is here more narrowly qualified as an endorsement of modern women: «è nella moda, che la donna dovrà lottare [...] contro il misoneismo» (p. 8). As she encouraged women to «aspirare alla vita pubblica» and «esercitare anche un'influenza sull'indirizzo della vita politica e sociale del paese» (p. 7), she enjoined women to choose designs «che si ispirino ai capolavori dei nostri grandi pittori e scultori» (p. 10). In contrast with contemporary manuals of conduct that scripted women into invisibility by reminding them what they could *not* wear, Genoni's modern woman was to take charge of her public appearance by guiding their dressmakers instead of being guided by them: «guidare e consigliare le loro sarte» (p. 12). Women, as she articulated more clearly in her *Storia della moda attraverso i secoli*, were to guide their dressmakers to deliver outfits that broadcast to the world their chosen identity «guidare la propria sarta a foggiarle delle vesti, in cui vedrà affermata l'impronta della propria personalità» (p. v). Seeking to empower the women of today, she did not hesitate to bring the example of powerful women of the past to remind them of their agency: «Beatrice Sforza, Lucrezia Borgia, Renata d'Este, Caterina de Medici [...] ma è tempo che la nostra donna se ne ricordi finalmente, e si convinca che è ad essa riservata una efficace e decisiva azione nella risurrezione di questo importantissimo ramo dell'arte decorativa» (p. 13). Looking back at the 1906 pamphlet, it becomes clear that the target of her polemic was less the French fashion industry than the degraded image of woman that French designers furthered when they betrayed modern women by turning «la donna moderna in una frivola bambola» (p. 2). Women in made-in-France fashions were «tondeggianti bambole, adorabilmente sorridenti dalle capigliature lussureggianti, e dalle pettinature architettonicamente sapienti, dalle labbra incredibilmente vermiglie, dagli occhi smisuratamente grandi, inquadrati da ciglia e palpebre inverosimili» (p. 8). To this oversexualized French model Genoni opposes the «sdegnose smorte emaciate misteriose ieratiche figure» (p. 9) of the made-in-Italy woman. Women's appearances in her designs are deliberately de-sexualized and spiritualized to give visibility to women's intellectual identity: «un tipo più fine, più ideale, più mistico, più italiano» (p. 8). Genoni advanced a look that would project women's intellectual force. It was because at the dawn of Christianity woman «assurge alla dignità di sposa e compagna spirituale dell'uomo» that her presentation for the women's congress began and ended with the serious look of the Christian praying woman.²¹

²⁰ Rosa Genoni, *Per una moda italiana: Relazione al Congresso nazionale delle donne italiane in Roma Sezione letteratura ed arte*, Milan, Balzaretti, 1908.

²¹ Rosa Genoni, *Per una moda italiana* cit., p. 20.

Armed with a very sophisticated understanding of the role that clothes play in shaping our identity, Genoni saw «la veste» as «seconda pelle»²² and, more importantly, as «l'indice rivelatore della sua intellettualità» (p. 11).²³ Both her 1906 pamphlet and 1908 end with this word – «intellettualità». We must remember that when Genoni exhibited her work at the Milan fair she had just taken the job of *premiere* for the prestigious Haardt and also the job of instructor at the Società Umanitaria in Milan. As Paola Lombroso writes: «ella non è un temperamento commerciale [...] ma un temperamento artistico [...] la possibilità di accumulare una fortuna non l'allettava tanto quanto il piacere pieno di ardimento e di ansia di lanciare l'idea ch'era nello stesso tempo patriottica ed estetica di una “moda italiana”».²⁴ And as Genoni herself put it, when she appealed to the jury to consider the circumstances of her participation: «la scrivente non ha esposto per alcun movente economico e di speculazione. Essa non ha né ditta né negozio in genere di mode. Ha presentato le due mostre – la distrutta e l'attuale – essenzialmente diverse, per affermare la sua idea: e si è sobbarcato [sic] solo per questo alle fatiche, alle ansie, ai sacrifici [sic] di un lavoro, che le riuscì ben più difficile mancandole l'organizzazione di un esercizio di sartoria, che già funzionasse. Si tratta dello sforzo di un privato, d'una persona sola: non del lavoro d'una azienda, d'una ditta, né del prodotto di energie collettive».²⁵ Far more than a posthumous discovery, the intellectual thrust of Genoni's vision of fashion was clear to her contemporaries. On reviewing Genoni's exhibit at the Fiera Internazionale del Sempione, Genoni's colleague at the Umanitaria Gemma Cenzatti praised her effort to turn «una ricerca generalmente frivola» into «il perseguimento di un'idea di valore altamente intellettuale». Cenzatti notes that «attraverso la scelta dell'abito si veicola la conoscenza dell'arte».²⁶ Similarly, the vignette chosen to represent Genoni's participation at the women's congress in Rome on the *Giornale d'Italia* – which Soldi prominently displayed on the cover of her new book – also focused on Genoni's reading.

Although Genoni's vision might have inspired the 1980's Made in Italy brand to come which exploited the icon of Italy to add value to merchandize, for Genoni women's knowledge of the history of art was the ultimate goal. Genoni's Renaissance-inspired outfits were to signal women's competence and intellectual curiosity. Women were to communicate their delight in knowledge and thoughtfulness. In light of Genoni's non primarily commercial vision of a made-in-Italy fashion style, the detailed descriptions of paintings that she incorporated in the 1906 pamphlet to the visitor cease to perplex us. As she discussed Titian's painting *Amore sacro*, Genoni digresses: «Le rose, che nel quadro sono pensosamente sfogliate dalla bellissima figura di donna, si stendono, s'allacciano, s'inerpicano, serpeggiano coi loro rami e le loro corolla, lungo la sottana del vestito; e nessuno

²² Rosa Genoni, *Storia*, cit., p. v.

²³ Rosa Genoni, “Al visitatore”, cit., p. 11.

²⁴ Soldi, *Rosa Genoni*, cit., p. 231.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 226.

²⁶ Ivi, pp. 115-116.

penserebbe che ognuno di questi leggiadri fiori è opera di mirabile, lungo e paziente lavoro tecnico, in cui la sarta volle riassumere tutti i *punti possibili* della sua arte» (p. 7). Going beyond a scholarly acknowledgement, Genoni lingers on the painting. She remarks that the woman looks beautiful and her pose is pensive as she plucks the rose petals. Her syntax moves seamlessly between Titian's painting and the dress that she herself had made: in one moment, she is describing the woman in the next she is praising her own craftsmanship as a dressmaker. But advertising the exquisite craft is not the only goal – or not the most important one – of Genoni's ekphrasis here: as she lingers on the vine of roses that stretch and creep and get entangled with each other, she seems to ask wearers to adorn themselves in «dreams», to paraphrase Elizabeth Wilson, just as much as they do in clothes. Or better still, in thoughts. T. S. Eliot's reference to metaphysical poets who had felt «their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose» come to mind when contemplating one of the many pensive women mentioned by Genoni. What might appear as a digression is in fact the very center of her made-in-Italy vision for women's fashion. Women were encouraged to «know» what they wore and to wear what they knew.

Worlds away from the bellicose politics of the Futurists, Genoni found an unlikely ally in Mario Morasso whom she quoted at the end of her pamphlet. Paradoxically modern like Genoni herself, Morasso wrote passionately about the car in *La nuova arma la macchina* (1905) – which was among the sources of Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto – and in support of the Venetian lace industry. Similarly, Genoni's modern designs offered a range broad enough to encompass both a Botticelli-inspired gown and an aviator dress. The preoccupation with transportation, which requires practical and comfortable close-fitting clothing, does figure in her vision of the woman of the future. Fashion designs had to be versatile enough for women to live fully in the present, just like their male companions. Occasionally androgynous, Genoni's designs are imagined so the woman of the future could be returned the intellectual power of a world that was changing them. Not unlike Marinetti's man blending with his car, Genoni's women, empowered by their clothes, were modern centaurs ready to take on the public arena.

Genoni's life spanned the hundred years it took for made-in-Italy fashion to be born and for women to gain political rights. Armed with a sophisticated understanding of both the power of clothing to forge identity as well as the power of the imaginary to advance the fashion industry, Genoni pioneered an Italian fashion style that – as with today's Made in Italy brand -- was modern even as it appeared to honor the past. Creatively destructive in her outlook on the past and unapologetically exploitative of the world's artistic heritage, Genoni's fashion was truly avant-garde in spirit. Though trimmed with Francophobic sentiment, the fashion style she advocated was modernist and feminist simultaneously but before being Italian, a simultaneity that reveals both her investment in exploding the «fast and frozen» social relations of the past responsible for women's invisibility in the public arena and also her suggestion that women approach fashion as a vehicle of emancipation and empowerment. Designing

clothes for powerful women and very visible silent movie actresses, at a time when women had no political rights and were afforded only scant presence in public, heavily scripted by normative manuals of conduct, Genoni labored in her commitment to have women become the subjects as well as the objects of modernization – to give them «the power to change the world that is changing them» (p. 16).

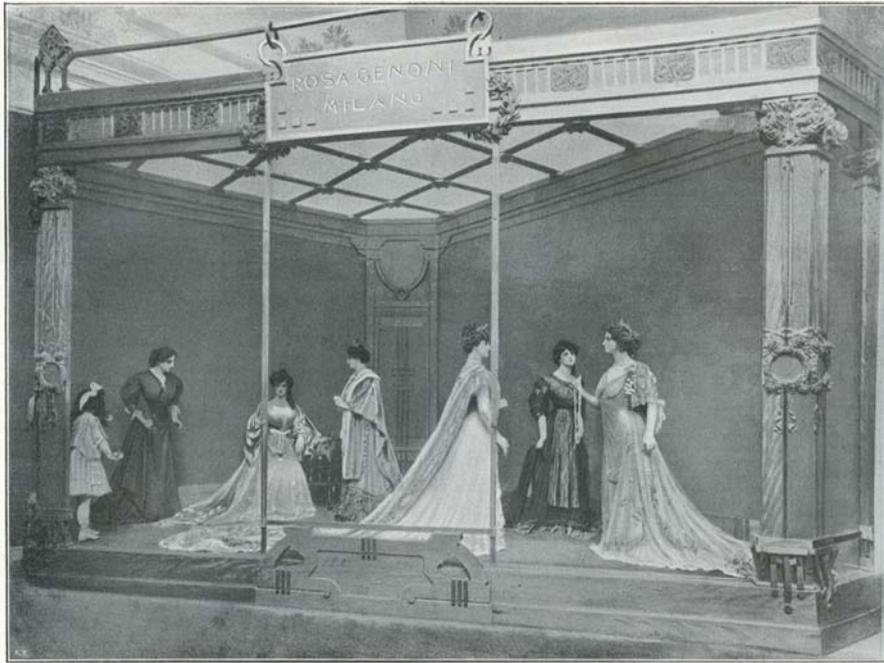
Illustrations

Figure 1. Rosa Genoni's display at the Esposizione internazionale di Milano, 1906. *Milano e l'Esposizione Internazionale del Sempione*. Milano: Treves, 1906. Credit: <https://amshistorica.unibo.it/321>

Figure 2. "Horus presenta ad Osiride il Re Sethos I. From Rosa Genoni, *La storia della moda attraverso i secoli: dalla preistoria ai tempi odierni*. Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche [1925], Table I. Copyright: Copyright © Podreider. Credit: <https://amshistorica.unibo.it/321>

Figure 3. "La Kalasiris nell'antico Regno Egizio". From Rosa Genoni, *La storia della moda attraverso i secoli: dalla preistoria ai tempi odierni*. Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche [1925], p. 20. Copyright: Copyright © Podreider. Credit: <https://amshistorica.unibo.it/321>

Figure 4a and 4b. "Modello della Vittoria di Samotracia e sua confezione tecnica". From Rosa Genoni, *La storia della moda attraverso i secoli: dalla preistoria ai tempi odierni*. Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche [1925], Table X. Copyright: Copyright © Podreider. Credit: <https://amshistorica.unibo.it/321>



La Mostra distrutta dall'incendio del 3 agosto.

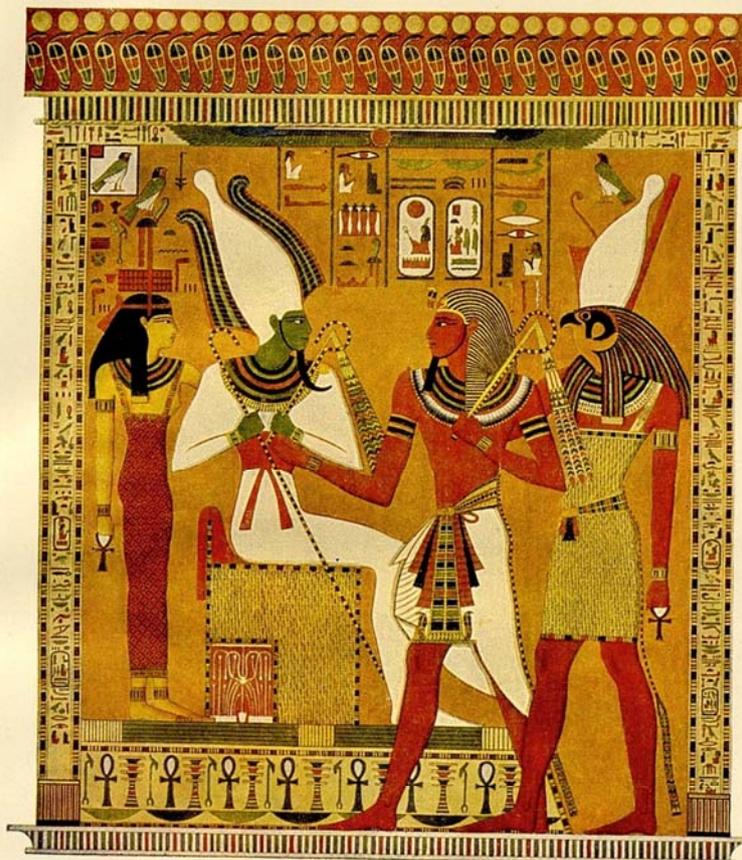


La Mostra nuova.

NELLA MOSTRA DELLE ARTI DECORATIVE RICOSTRUITA. — La « Moda storica italiana » di ROSA GENONI.

Figure 1

TAV. I.



HORUS PRESENTA AD OSIRIDE IL RE SETHOS I.

(Da: ERMAN, *Religione Egizia*, I. I. A. G., Bergamo).

Il corpo di Horus e Sethos sono tinti in rosso (colorazione in rapporto col culto) quello di Osiride in verde e quello di Iside in giallo (colore che ottenevasi con lo zafferano ed il rosso con l'henné). Iside indossa la stessa veste ricamata descritta alla Tav. II. Osiride è avvolto in una specie di guaina simile a quella delle mummie poichè egli è il simbolo della morte temporanea, sia del sole col tramonto (vedi ERMAN, *Religione Egizia*), sia dell'uomo con la morte fisica e la reincarnazione (vedi STREINER, *Scienza occulta*, Laterza).

L'accennatura del capo di Osiride è l'atete con alta tiara bianca simbolo di sovranità sull'alto Egitto, egli porta l'*hoshkh* (vedi descrizione fig. 124, 126), come il re Sethos, il *flagellum a laniera* simbolo di protezione dell'agricoltura ed il *pedum* simbolo del comando.

Il re Sethos indossa la *skhrutis* bianca con cintura e pendaglio in orfeceria smaltata. Ha un *khaft* rigato fissato sulla fronte dall'*uroeus* e ripreso nella nuca in modo da formare una appendice rotonda, che scende nel dorso.

Horus è rappresentato con la testa di falco, l'animale a lui consacrato. Porta lo *pschent* completo (simbolo di sovranità sull'alto come sul basso Egitto), cioè casco rosso, mitria bianca e *litus* (la spirale che compare fra i due). Indossa una *kalasiris* corta con cintura e falsetture a ricami. Su tutte le figure braccialetti in oro con smalto o pietre a vari colori.



Figure 2

LA KALASIRIS NELL'ANTICO REGNO EGIZIO

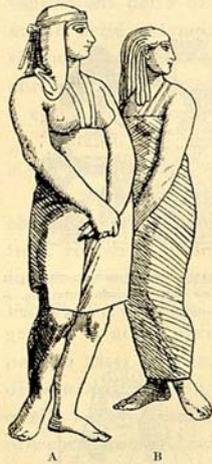


Fig. 89 — Donne del popolo. - Nella nostra visione della moda attraverso ai tempi osserveremo che le persone del popolo indossano quasi sempre vesti semplici e corte per non essere inceppate nelle loro occupazioni.

A - Ha il *klaft* in tessuto, tenuto sul capo da una striscietta di uguale stoffa annodata dietro.
B - Ha una *kalasiris* come alla fig. 87 ma il tessuto è usato in isibico, onde renderla più elastica. I capelli cadono in piccole ciocche sulle spalle.

Fig. 90 — Veste di una regina. - Anche le più alte personalità indossavano sovente delle vesti semplicissime. Il mantello egizio consisteva in un telo di tessuto fissato al petto da una agganciatura in metallo e fermato alla cintola.



Fig. 91 — Veste di una dama. - *Kalasis* con falsatura ricamata. Treccioline cadenti con un cerchio d'oro. Perché le donne egizie potessero camminare con vesti tanto aderenti come uavasi nell'antico regime, dovevasi impiegare tessuti elastici crespati od a maglia, simili a quelli che vedremo alla Tav. VII dell'epoca greca. (BELLINZONI, *Usi e costumi*).



Fig. 92 — *Kalasis* lunga che incrocia da un lato.

Fig. 93 — Gonna con lungo *schentis* che annoda davanti. (HOTTENROTH, C. H.).



Fig. 94 — Serventi del re Mehenkwtet. Statuette in legno colorato. (Metropolitan Museum, New-York). (J. HAMMERTON, *Wonders of the Past*, Londra).

A - Veste fatta apparentemente in maglia, a colori rosso mattone, verde chiaro, bianco e bleu.
B - Veste rigata orizzontalmente color azzurro, croco, bleu, e pagliarino con alta balza rigata a scannellature verticali color azzurro.



Fig. 95 — Stele funeraria rappresentante un uomo che prega innanzi ad Osiride. La dea Iside, tiene le ali aperte in segno di protezione.



Fig. 96 — Una delle sei regine Cleopatre. (Racinet). - La *kalasiris* strettissima, rigata e chiusa nel mezzo davanti da una striscia di ricamo, finisce con uno svolazzo dello stesso tessuto, che dà l'ampiezza necessaria per fare il passo. La croce che tiene nelle mani e l'acconciatura del capo colle alte piume, sono le caratteristiche della più alta sovranità.

Fig. 97 — La dea Mout sposa di Ammon-Ra. (Statuetta, al Louvre). La figura porta in testa lo *pschent* completo (fig. 137, Tav. I). Due grandi ali di tutte le sfumature del pavone si incrociano per due volte davanti, fasciando la strettissima *kalasiris*. Questa decorazione derivata dalle ali di Osiride nascondeva probabilmente al basso qualche apertura della gonna per agevolare i movimenti.



La veste simbolizzante le ali protettrici di Iside.



Figure 3

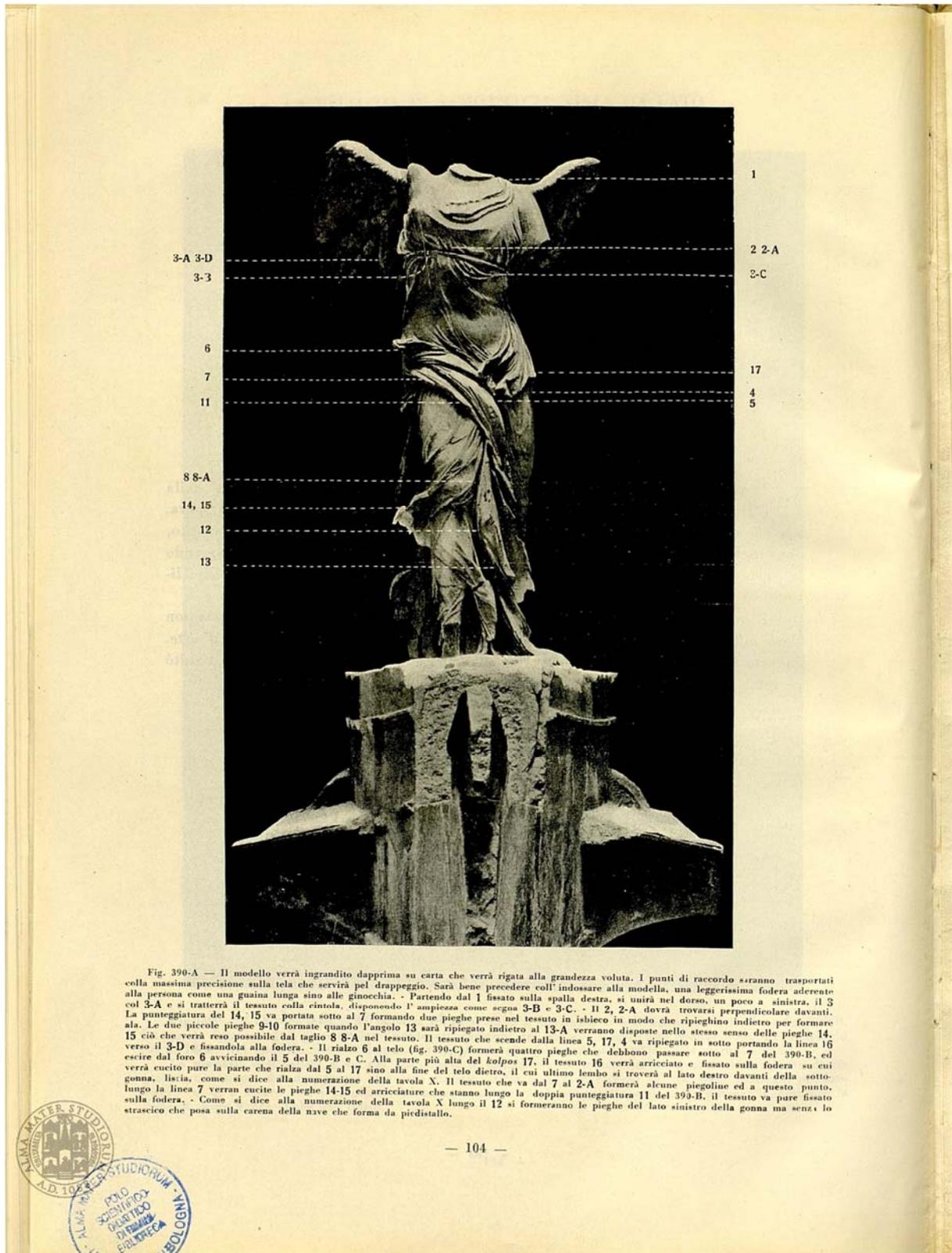


Fig. 390-A — Il modello verrà ingrandito dapprima su carta che verrà rigata alla grandezza voluta. I punti di raccordo saranno trasportati colla massima precisione sulla tela che servirà pel drappaggio. Sarà bene precedere coll'indossare alla modella, una leggerissima fodera aderente alla persona come una guaina lunga sino alle ginocchia. - Partendo dal 1 fissato sulla spalla destra, si unirà nel dorso, un poco a sinistra, il 3 col 3-A e si tratterà il tessuto colla cintola, disponendo l'ampiezza come segna 3-B e 3-C. - Il 2, 2-A dovrà trovarsi perpendicolare davanti. La punteggiatura del 14, 15 va portata sotto al 7 formando due pieghe prese nel tessuto in isbieco in modo che ripieghino indietro per formare ala. Le due piccole pieghe 9-10 formate quando l'angolo 13 sarà ripiegato indietro al 13-A verranno disposte nello stesso senso delle pieghe 14, 15 ciò che verrà reso possibile dal taglio 8 8-A nel tessuto. Il tessuto che scende dalla linea 5, 17, 4 va ripiegato in sotto portando la linea 16 verso il 3-D e fissandola alla fodera. - Il rialzo 6 al telo (fig. 390-C) formerà quattro pieghe che debbono passare sotto al 7 del 390-B, ed uscire dal foro 6 avvicinando il 5 del 390-B e C. Alla parte più alta del kolpos 17, il tessuto 16 verrà arricciato e fissato sulla fodera su cui verrà cucito pure la parte che rialza dal 5 al 17 sino alla fine del telo dietro, il cui ultimo lembo si troverà al lato destro davanti della sottogonna, lascia, come si dice alla numerazione della tavola X, il tessuto che va dal 7 al 2-A formerà alcune piegoline ed a questo punto, lungo la linea 7 verranno cucite le pieghe 14-15 ed arricciature che stanno lungo la doppia punteggiatura 11 del 390-B, il tessuto va pure fissato sulla fodera. - Come si dice alla numerazione della tavola X lungo il 12 si formeranno le pieghe del lato sinistro della gonna ma senza lo strascico che posa sulla carena della nave che forma da piedistallo.

Figure 4a

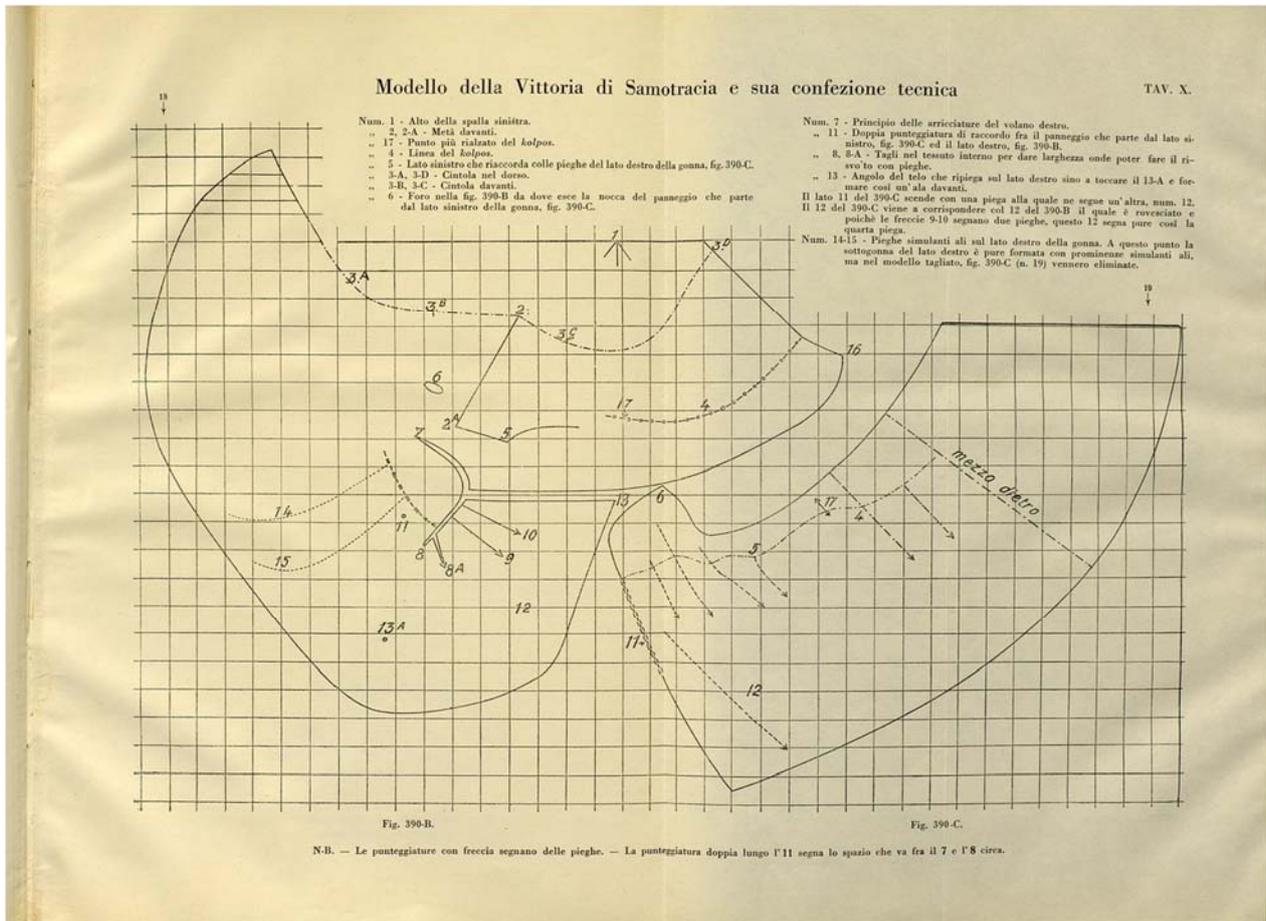


Figure 4b