

The Evolution of the Camicia

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To document the camicia through the 15th and 16th century requires much conjecture and great leaps of faith. There are men's shirts and undergarments dating one to two hundred years earlier. There are men and women's extant chemises dating 100 years later. The inventories and household records generally date from the early part of the 16th century. By comparing this information with pictorial references, a time line of a garment can be deduced. This paper is one artisan's thoughts on how a particular undergarment evolved and changed through a century of fashion.

Documenting undergarments from the medieval and renaissance periods is difficult due to the lack of extant examples. Documenting women's garments is even more complex due to the general lack of non-allegorical portraiture, which normally gives some insight to the garments of the time.

Prior to the mid to late 15th century, women were painted in allegorical settings portraying the Madonna and various Saints. This does not necessarily preclude using the garments depicted in the artwork to help document clothing styles. After all, if you are paying to have yourself or your wife portrayed as a saint, she would of course have to be painted in the latest fashions and in the most opulent of fabrics.

Finding supportive written documentation is also difficult when dealing with undergarments. Inventory records and sumptuary laws are the most common forms of written documentation. Undergarments are rarely included in household records because they seldom have any noted value. The few that have listed associated with them do so because of the expense associated with buying or making them.

Fabrics

The camicie were not gender specific in their description. The term could be used to describe either or male or female garment. Considered a form of under-blouse, it was generally made of fine linen, inexpensive cotton, or silk. Colors ranged from that of the natural unbleached color to fine bright whites (Frick 162). Men had their camicie made for them at the camiciaia, the women were responsible for ensuring that the household linens were made, including the undergarments for the rest of the family (Frick 40).

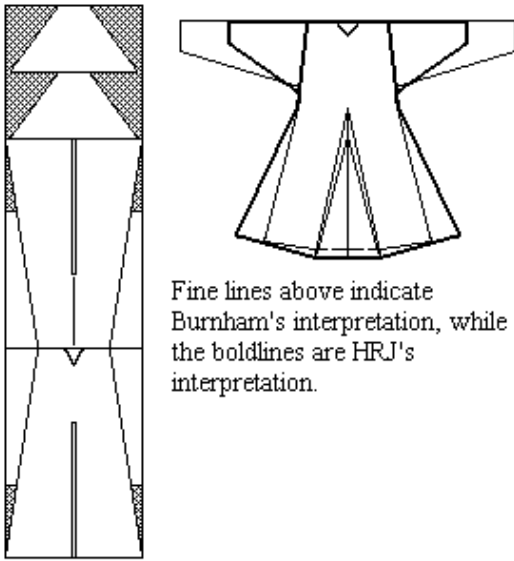
Hints at the amount of fabric required for the camicia come from the letters written by the wives and family of the great families such as the Medici's. Margherita Datini, writing to her husband Francesco in the early 1400's, speaks of a length of linen cloth that she had previously made 8 undershirts for herself and 12 for him (Frick 41). Clarice Orsini, a member of the Medici family writing in the mid 1470's, requests

"twenty braccia (arm's length) of linen cloth so that I can make camicie for these children" (Frick 41).

Wardrobe accounts from the 15th century periodically mention camicia, mainly under listings for personal linens. Among the accounts of items not counted in the dowry of Tessa Guicciardini upon her marriage to Grancesco de Medici in 1433 are 17 chamicie (Herald 243). The household inventory of Puccio Pucci notes 18 chamicie da donna (woman's shirt) valued at 14 fiorini, a price equal to one single gamurra (Herald 245).

Pre-1400's

The undergarments worn during the late 14th and early 15th century were simple square cut construction according to popular theory. There would be little waste in this design. The fabric would have used selvage to selvage in many cases, putting less strain on the seams. The silhouette during that time was slim and form fitting, and the necessary undergarments would need to be minimal in fabric to fit under the outer layers.



Fine lines above indicate Burnham's interpretation, while the boldlines are HRJ's interpretation.

Plate 1: *St Louis Smock*

A garment thought to be worn by St Louis, dating from the 13th century shows the shape of this rectangular construction (Plate 1).

In a drawing by Marc Carlson, he shows two possible layouts for the St Louis smock: one by Dorothy Burnham, from “Cut My Cote” and the bolder lines are from a study done by Heather Rose Jones, after she examined the garment. The patterns are very similar; the main difference is that Ms Jones suggests straight edges on the arms eye vs. a rounded edge and a more angled side profile.

Images taken from a panel painting of the “Fountain of Youth” date from approximately 1415 show two people in full length under-gowns (Plate 2). While the figures are most likely male, it can be conjectured that the silhouette of the woman’s garment would be similar.

These garments appear to be fuller than that of the St Louis shirt but this silhouette would be possible using rectangular construction. Cutting a more acute angle on the line from the shoulder to the hem would allow for increased fullness or draping on these and later garments. Additionally, adding gores to the side panels and increasing the size of the front and back gores would also achieve this result.

The possibility exists that this garment is cut on the bias with wide angled sides. It would increase the amount of fabric used, but these were images of upper nobility and that would not be as much of a concern as it would be for the lower classes. The use of the bias would account for the drape starting at the neckline and would explain the drape of some of the garments in later periods.



Plate 2: *The Fountain of Youth*

Italian Camicia: Mid – Late 15th century (c 1440’s-1480’s)

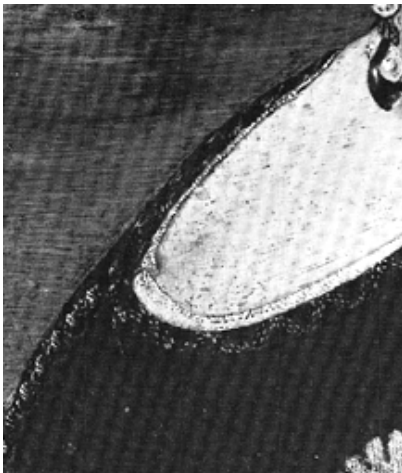


Plate 3: *Young Lady, c1470*

Through the early 15th century, artwork rarely shows women’s undergarments. It is not until about the 1440’s that glimpses of undergarment is seen. While some of the paintings are often allegorical, typically birthing scenes, the garments are in so many paintings by different artists, that it becomes more likely that the depicted clothing from current styles.

When people think of the camici of the Italian renaissance, they tend to think of the full, heavily pleated versions, with fabric puffed out through shoulder and sleeve seams. That version did not become fashionable until the late 1400s when the center-laced gamurra began to open up and expose the undergarments. Until that time, a simple un-gathered version appears to have been worn. It is the authors conjecture that these camici were simply variations of the earlier rectangular constructed garments.



Plate 4: ~ Carnevale 1467

The best indication that the early camici were un-gathered necklines comes from the appearance of small tucks or folds in the neckline on the undergarment. These folds occur when the tighter overdress pulls in the body, which would cause even a close fitted undergarment to loosen.

Even if the camicia fit perfectly with no gaping, as soon as the gamurra is laced over it, gaping would be created and the small pleats would appear. This small pleating is depicted so often in the images that it may have been a fashionable feature of the garment.



Plate 5: Verrocchio ~ 1480's

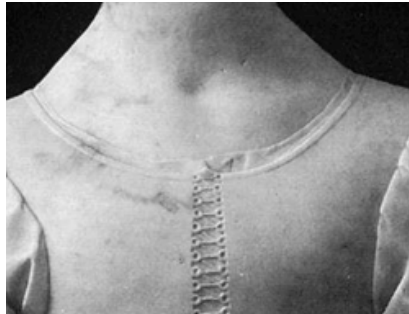


Plate 6: Rossellino c 1460-1470
Portrait Bust of a Lady



Plate 7: Portrait of a Lady
Robbia ~ c 1465

Patterns and Layouts for Mid 15th century Camici

The actual shape of this camicia is unknown. There are no known extant garments of this type. A few images show the shape of a camicia (Plates 8 and 9). The necklines are rounded, the sleeves are still narrow and there does not appear to be excess fabric over the body. In the image by Lippi (Plate 9), the sleeve line and the draping through the neckline and body hint that the garment is possibly cut on the bias.



Plate 9: Lippi ~ c1440

There are a number of possible patterns that can be used to create this garment. The actual layout to use will depend on your body shape, fabric widths and personal preferences.

If you are slight enough in the shoulder and bust it is possible to use a layout in similar to that of the St Louis shirt (Plate 1) in which the top of the sleeve fits at the top of the shoulder or slightly past it.

Moving the sleeve further out from the top of the shoulder will put more fabric in the bust/body and will create some of the “puff” see through the sleeves without having to draw it up from the sleeve itself.



Plate 8: Cossa ~ 1476

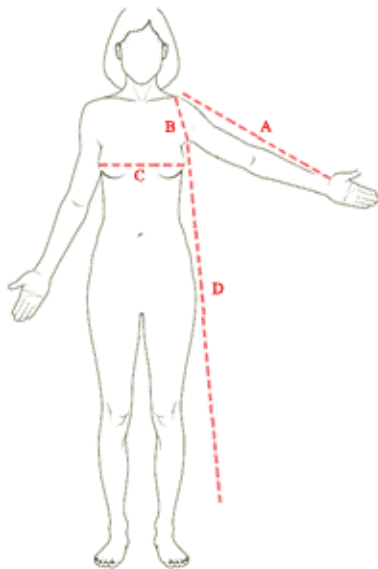


Plate 9: Lippi ~ c1440

A few basic measurements need to be taken into consideration when making this garment:

A : Sleeve length ~ The sleeve length should be from the point of the shoulder for the body of the garment to the wrist. Add in approximately 3-5 inches for extra fabric to create any desired “puff” on the forearm and ease.

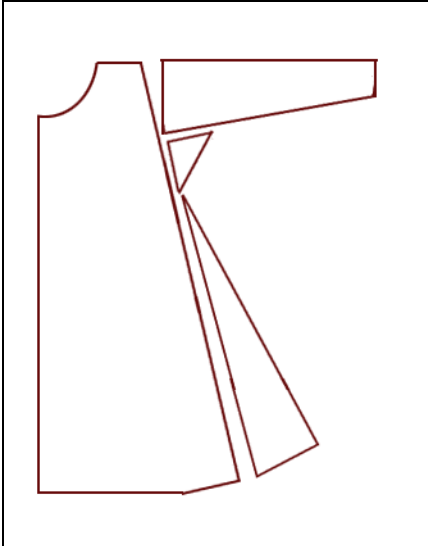
B : Shoulder to Bust ~ This is an imprecise measurement which will be dependent on which version you use. It is the measurement from the top of the shoulder (Point E) to where the bottom of the sleeve needs to be without taking into consideration gussets.

C : Bust ~ Measure this at the widest point.

D : Length ~ Length of garment from top of shoulder to mid calf

E : Point of shoulder

Version 1 : Angled Body Construction similar to the St Louis Shirt.



Fold fabric in half, measure out a length equal to measurement D.

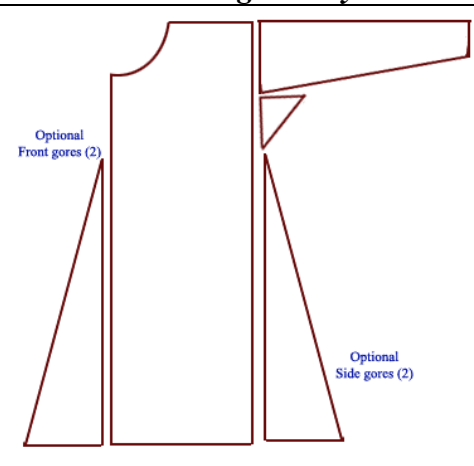
Calculate distance between the tops of shoulders (E). Add ease and divide by 2. Measuring out from the fold at the top of the fabric, mark a spot using this measurement. Draw a straight line from the top of the point on an angle to the full width of your fabric at the bottom. If you assume that available fabrics measured between 22” and 36” or so, this may not leave a lot of room around the bust at C.

Gussets fitted under the sleeve will accommodate some of the required ease. Wider fabric of course allow a steeper angle and thus more room at the bust line.

Side and front gores can be added for additional fullness in the body.

Sleeves at the top of the shoulder (on the fold) should equal B + ease. Sleeve length is A.

Version 3 : Straight Body Construction



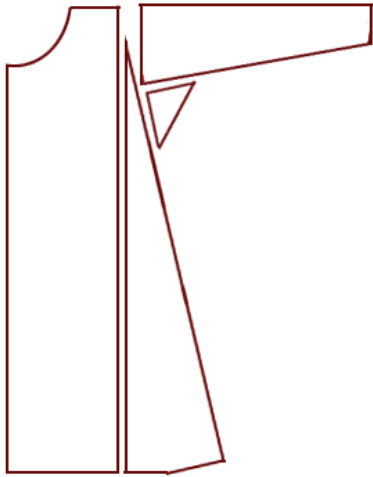
Measure around the rib cage just under the bust, add seam allowances, ease, and divide by 2. This is the width of the front and back panels.

The bottom of the gusset end approx where the rib cage measurement was taken. The sleeve width is the same as for Version 1.

Depending on how much room in the body is required, gores can be set in the sides or the front or both.

This version will cause the shoulder seam to fall down over the upper arm. But this extra fabric can be pulled up through the arm openings. The fabric provides the “puff” seen in the portraits as the sleeves are opened up.

Version 3 : High Body Gore Construction

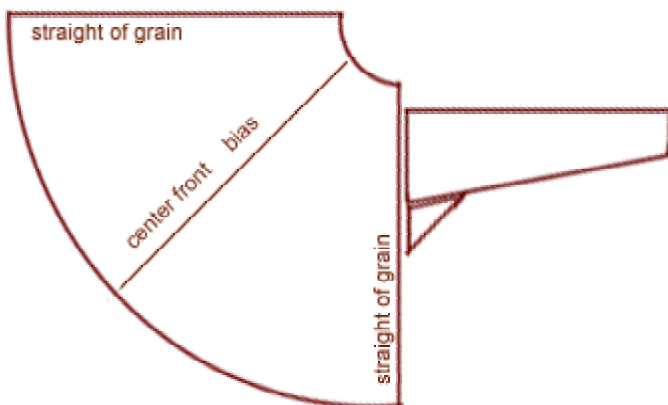


This version is a variation on the layout in version 2. Obtain the width between Pt's E, add ease and s/a. This is the measurement of the front and back body panels. To add additional fabric to help accommodate the bust longer gores are set ifurther up along the side of the body. The sleeve then attaches to both the body and the gore.

This variation, with the gore high up into the body shows up in the camcia's again at the end of the 15th century.

This can also be done to Version 1 to give a fuller garment.

Version 4 : Bias Construction



This version quite simple. It is a bias drape: the front on the 45 degree bias, the sides are on the straight of the grain. The length of the camcia will be limited by width of the fabric.

Cut a small quarter circle for the neckline. Slowly trim away the neckline until desire depth is reached. Allow the fabric to fall to the sides; the sleeves will set in at the created shoulder line.

Late 15th century Camicia ~ c 1470's -1490's

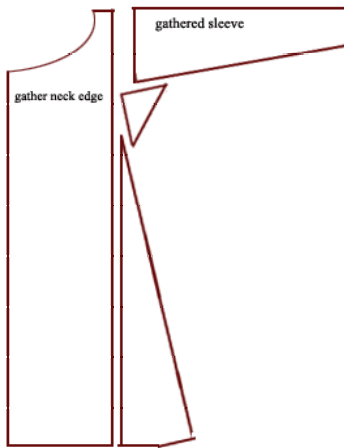
Around the end of the 3rd quarter of the 15th century, there was a shift in fashion. It was a time of relative peace in Italy. The war between Venice and the Turks was ending. The power struggles between the ducal households ruling much of Italy had subsided. As society flourished so did conspicuous consumption. Fashion, of course became a public way to show status. The portraiture of this age reflected that role. These portraits represented a recording of dowry, proof of station, and symbol of possessions.

It was during this time that the shift in the role of undergarments occurred. It was almost as if the loosening of society was reflected in the clothing. The men's garments became shorter, tighter, the undergarments exposed. In the women, the gamurra began to open in the front exposing the camicia beneath it. The opulence of the outer garments now moved to that of the undergarment. There was now more fabric in the camicia as indicated by the fine pleats showing through the lacing of the gowns. The camicia became a fashion garment.



Plate 10: *Ghirlandaio* ~ 1488

The structure of this garment is as much a mystery as the earlier versions. The conjectured patterns can be derived from glimpses of fabrics along necklines and sleeves. The shape that would arise from this garment is one that will carry through the next century with little variation. This garment would seem to be the transition from the un-gathered versions of the 1450's to the fully gathered versions seen in the next century.



Layout 4: 1480's camicia

The neckline of the camicia from the prior decades was already somewhat loose and draped. To create the style shown in Plate 10, it would simply mean increasing the amount of fabric in the body of any of the previous layouts, gather the neckline and increase the amount of fabric in the sleeves (See Layout 4). This change would mean that little additional fabric would be needed to make the garment, yet it would provide enough fabric in the front for the gathers.

One clue to the pattern of the camicia is seen in the painting by Carpaccio done in 1496 (Plate 11). The garment is drawn on an angle, hinting of fullness, caused by either angling the fabric or gores. The sleeves on the garments appear to be of normal length. The long item at the end of the pole does not seem to be part of the first garment.



Plate 11: Carpaccio ~ 1496



late 12: Ghirlandaio ~ 1485

It is the necklines that are of interest during this period. It is the primary area that is seen from beneath the clothing. In the portrait of Giovanna by Ghirlandaio the pleated neckline of the camicia hangs from the top edge of the garment (Plate 10). This look can be recreated by pleating the fabric into a small band and turning it over like a facing.

In another portrait by Ghirlandaio, the top edge of the garment is showing. There is a tiny band of lace like edging on the neckline above the pleats. (Plate 12)



Plates

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