Securing Femininity: The Life of a “Belt for a Lady’s Dress”

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Securing Femininity: The Life of a “Belt for a Lady’s Dress”

By the late medieval period, the European economy was flourishing as never before. As a result, a consumer culture emerged in which Europeans had access to a wider variety of handmade objects. This development was especially significant in terms of medieval fashion. Previously, most Europeans did not think about their clothing and accessories beyond their functionality. With the increase in choice came a reevaluation of what it meant to wear something on one’s body. At markets, Europeans could consider what combination of materials, colors, fabrics, and patterns most aligned with their personal tastes. Of course, personal taste reflected the values and social status of the wearer. Additionally, like any other material objects, clothing and accessories also carried with them implicit narratives regarding cultural beliefs around gender. Such is the case with the object I am examining. Titled “Belt for a Lady’s Dress,” this accessory is from late fourteenth-century Italy. Its current owner, the Cleveland Museum of Art, dates it to c. 1375-1400 and approximates its location to Siena, a city in northern Italy. Its rich materials and overall elegance indicate that it belonged to a wealthy woman. The “Belt for a Lady’s Dress” demonstrates that material objects played a crucial role in constructing late medieval notions of femininity. As an article of clothing, a symbol of status, a gift, and an instruction manual, this belt reveals the many ways in which upper-class women participated in rituals of courtship.

A brief visual tour of this belt provides insight into the original owner’s status and gender. The belt’s base is made out of silver thread. This long strip of fabric is entirely covered by silver plaques decorated with enamel, which are secured by silver rivets. The specific enameling technique used on this belt is called basse-taille. In basse-taille, the silver is engraved

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1 Janetta Rebold Benton, “Secular Clothing: Fit for a King and Queen,” in *Materials, Methods, and Masterpieces of Medieval Art* (Santa Barbara: Bloomsbury, 2009), 211.
in low relief and then covered in translucent enamel. This technique was most likely invented in Siena in the late thirteenth century and remained popular in Italy for centuries.\(^2\) There are twenty-one large square plaques, which are surrounded on either side by three smaller plaques, each with a quatrefoil at their center. The square plaques depict mythical animals or individuals playing instruments. The images on the small quatrefoils are mostly busts and floral motifs. At one end of the belt is the buckle and the chape—the rectangular case of metal that joins the buckle to the rest of the belt. The buckle is in the form of a woman holding a tambourine. It is not a closed shape; only one bar connects the figure to the hinge. The chape consists of two oblong plaques that depict a woman and a man playing instruments. Between the sixth and tenth large square plaques, each group of three quatrefoils has two holes through which the buckle prong can pass. After the twelfth large plaque, the enamel scenes are oriented to match the verticality of the dangling end. Attached to the end of the strip of fabric is a series of three metal pieces hinged to one another. The largest scene in the first piece shows a man and a woman having a conversation while sitting close to each other. The second piece shows an individual adjusting a headpiece. The final piece shows a couple in a moment of physical intimacy. An elaborate pendant hangs from the end, tapering off the belt with a motif that evokes natural flora.\(^3\) Every aspect of this object’s craftsmanship exudes luxury. The costly materials, the painstaking basse-taille enameling, and the scenes of courtly love place this belt squarely in the realm of Italian nobility. Both men and women wore belts, but at nearly eight feet long, this belt would have hung down to the hem of a garment, which indicates that it was meant to be worn by a woman.\(^4\) An analysis of this belt reveals that it most likely belonged to an upper-class woman.

Even from a distance, observers could form an opinion about a woman wearing this belt based on medieval beliefs connecting the female body to irrational lust. Because the primary function of a belt is to fasten tightly around an individual’s midsection, it inevitably alters the silhouette of the wearer. The “Belt for a Lady’s Dress” is no exception. The tighter the wearer cinched it around her waist, the more she could accentuate the curves of her hips—a body part traditionally associated with fertility and sexuality. With wide hips came the appearance of a small waist, which is a quality that art historian Janetta Rebold Benton claims was popular with fourteenth-century women. Benton also notes that earlier in the medieval period, garments tended to hang loosely and obscure the body. She suggests that this was to discourage lust. By the end of the Middle Ages, it was much more common for clothing to cling to one’s figure. This is not to say that ideas about the carnal nature of the human body disappeared. In his discussion of medieval belts and girdles, art historian Michael Camille calls attention to the medieval idea of the “rational human above the waist and the animal lust that drives what was described euphemistically as ‘below the waist.’” By physically dividing the body, belts no doubt highlighted and played off of this notion. In the case of the belt in question, the remaining length that hangs down to the garment’s hem directs the observer’s gaze to the lower half of the wearer. In wearing this belt, a woman would position herself as both an object of justified desire and of dangerous temptation.

Another aspect of the belt that would have garnered attention is its luxury, which conveyed the high status of the wearer. Belts were a common accessory for Europeans of all classes. They are analogous to modern pockets in terms of functionality. From belts hung drawstring purses or pouches, holding whatever the wearer might need to carry with them in

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6 Ibid, 211.
their daily lives. What set the belts of upper-class individuals apart was that they represented an additional layer of meaning to which the wearer’s wealth granted them access. Money bought expensive materials, detailed imagery, and peace of mind. Historian Susan Mosher Stuard speaks to the latter point when she asks, “Who else but the most affluent could afford to carry their riches about their hips?” From the jewels on their belt to the contents of their richly embroidered pouches, upper-class Europeans broadcasted their wealth through the language of fashion. Sumptuary laws further encouraged the stratification of fashion into identifiable groups based on class. Camille notes that such laws “were aimed especially at regulating lower-class female bodies from becoming objects of fascination through their excessive fashion and at the same time keeping certain textiles, furs, and jewels as the exclusive symbolic property of the nobility.”

The inverse, of course, was that upper-class women were encouraged to use fashion to communicate their wealth. Expensive materials and sumptuary laws elevated this belt from a utilitarian object to a signifier of the wearer’s status.

The owner of this belt most likely acquired it as a gift of courtship. At all points in the courtship process, gifts were essential in symbolically binding lovers together. Until the 1390s, richly decorated belts were one of the most common jewels given as a present to brides. Although it is unknown at what point in the courtship the owner received the “Belt for a Lady’s Dress,” its significance as a symbol of the partnership would not have changed. In his book The Medieval Art of Love, Michael Camille examines material culture as a window into medieval beliefs and practices surrounding courtly love. As he succinctly states, “Both in matrimony and

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11 Ibid.
12 Lightbown, Mediaeval European Jewellery, 306.
as a prelude to it, gifts were fundamental to the courtship process.”

Medieval Europeans understood physical objects as carrying a multiplicity of deeper meanings. In the context of courtship, Camile notes that gifted objects were meant to “[represent] the body and its parts” and “[serve] as social as well as sexual conduits of desire.”

By giving his lover the belt in question, the suitor would have communicated many different intentions. First, any gifted material object would have acted as a physical reminder of the intangible concept of love. Second, the female recipient would have been wearing a literal piece of her lover on the outermost layer of her clothing. She might have even imagined the belt to be a substitute for her lover’s embrace. The gift would have introduced an air of intimacy into the wearer’s day. Finally, as previously discussed, belts drew attention to the parts of the body most associated with sexuality. The sexual connotations of the belt as an accessory would have hinted at the man’s desire to know his lover carnally. Examining the belt as a product of courtship highlights the intricacies of medieval upper-class communication regarding romantic intentions.

The detailed scenes on the belt lend credence to the argument that this belt was part of an upper-class courtship ritual. As mentioned in the visual analysis, immortalized in basse-taille enameling are scenes of courtly love. In the plaques with humans, men and women sit both separately and together. They play instruments or gaze longingly into the distance. The final plaque depicts a couple sharing a kiss. It is reasonable to assume that these scenes are examples of expressions of love in upper-class courtships. In gifting an accessory that details specific acts of romantic performance, the suitor encourages his lover to adhere to the existing social scripts about courtship. This messaging is further supported when one considers that the small size of the scenes indicates that they were meant for the enjoyment of the wearer, not observers. Only

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14 Ibid, 51-52.
the object of desire would be privy to the full range of meaning that the belt carried. Interestingly, most works made with enamel in the Middle Ages were associated with religious rituals. However, by the late medieval period, romantic love was a common subject of basse-taille enamel works. In his extensive analysis of all known surviving pieces of medieval jewelry, art historian Ronald Light suggests a possible explanation for this shift. He posits that the frequent depictions of romance in enamel works coincided with the popularity of verse romances in France, Germany, and England. Both mediums aim to reenact and perpetuate the rituals of courtship. The enamel scenes encouraged the wearer to identify herself as an active participant in traditions of courtly love.

The “Belt for a Lady’s Dress” highlights the importance of material objects in fashioning femininity in late medieval Italy. From its physical properties to its symbolic meanings, it aided the owner in conforming to the traditions of upper-class courtship. When a woman wore this belt, she altered her silhouette in a way that evoked deeply rooted perceptions about the sexual nature of the female body. If one assumes that the owner of this belt was romantically involved with suitors, she might have welcomed these associations. As an upper-class woman, the owner of this belt would have viewed the accessory less as a utilitarian object and more as a statement of her wealth. Her class enabled her to understand the many layers of meaning present in the belt. As a gift, it represented her connection to her suitor, as well as his cruder desires. As a collection of enamel artworks, it provided a guide for following the social scripts of courtly love. The belt allowed the wearer to fashion herself as both a passive receiver of desire and an active participant in upper-class courtship rituals. An analysis of the “Belt for a Lady’s Dress” reveals

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15 Janetta Rebold Benton, “Enamel: Cloisonne and Champleve,” in Materials, Methods, and Masterpieces of Medieval Art (Santa Barbara: Bloomsbury, 2009), 149.
16 Lightbown, Mediaeval European Jewellery, 72.
17 Ibid, 313.
that it would be inaccurate to characterize upper-class women as static objects of desire. To a certain extent, they were encouraged to take action in a courtship. By studying material culture, historians gain an additional perspective into the past. It encourages them to imagine the daily lives of people who left records not in words but in objects.
Bibliography


