

Lord & Tailor: Fashioning Images of Jews in Renaissance Italy

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Among the splendid testimonies of Jewish life and culture in Renaissance Italy are elaborately decorated manuscripts. Lavish Hebrew *mahzorim* (prayerbooks) and *Haggadot* (books for celebrating the Seder), illuminated with expensive gold and silver leaf, were commissioned by the wealthiest Jews. The *Sefer Minhagim* (book of religious customs), written in Yiddish and directed toward a more modest audience, was also profusely decorated. Such diversity of illustrated books affords fascinating insight into Jewish customs and costumes. The books also reveal how Italian Jewish communities chose to represent themselves, for their own images often differed dramatically from the way Christians chose to portray them—both in art and in life.

The saying “clothes make the man” was as true then as now. However, fashion “statements” in late medieval and Renaissance Italy were also legal mandates—official dress codes (known as “sumptuary laws”), carefully inscribed in city statutes. Cities saw fit to legislate how much jewelry might be worn and which fabrics were appropriate to each social class, even the cut of a dress or a sleeve or a shoe. Clothing was an extremely expensive commodity, and extravagant apparel, it was believed, not only drained the economy but bred the worst excesses. Therefore, it was imperative, according to Christian theology and societal conventions, to fashion a visual order patterned on the divinely ordained design of heaven and earth. Of crucial importance was the issue of Christian-Jewish relations: the unquestioned belief in Christian legal and social superiority over Jews needed to be given material form.

Rules regarding dress had been long established in Jewish law and tradition. For example, Jewish males were commanded to wear *tzitzit* (tasseled fringes affixed to the four corners of one’s garment) and *tefillin* (small leather boxes strapped to the head and arm containing several excerpts from the Torah), although by the Renaissance these were probably not displayed in public. With the abandonment of the “four-cornered” toga-like garment of the classical world, Jews had adopted the practice of attaching the *tzitzit* to a piece of white woolen fabric that covered the head and the body—the *tallit*. However, this was no longer an item of everyday costume but a male garment of prayer. Jewish communities also imposed self-restrictions in times of trouble at least back to Roman times, mostly, it seems, to avoid creating envy by extravagance and ostentation. Most Jewish sumptuary laws were aimed at women, as were their Christian counterparts.

Although Lev. 18:3 proscribes imitating non-Jewish customs, when it came to daily dress, Italian Jews chose to clothe themselves indistinguishably from their Christian neighbors. Wealthy men and women alike aspired to dress in the high fashion of the upper classes—rich, fur-lined brocades, well-tailored jackets, tight-fitting bodices, sleeves

slashed to reveal silken tunics and laced with velvet ribbons. Illustrations from Hebrew manuscripts, mostly Northern Italian from the second half of the 15th century, portray

Jewish men, women, and children of all ages splendidly arrayed in imported styles *alla fiamminga* (in the Flemish manner) or *alla francese* (in the French style) as they celebrate joyous festivities such as weddings, Sukkot, and Purim.

The normalcy of Jewish dress and diversity of Jewish occupations in Italian cities had made daily interaction between Christians and Jews unexceptional. Nevertheless, the Church frowned on such relationships and had sought to limit Jewish-Christian social interaction through a variety of measures. One significant stipulation, decreed by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, initiated official church policy on distinctive dress for Jews, although the wording did not specify what that should be. Over the course of the following centuries, secular and local ecclesiastical authorities enacted a wide range of provisions, for the most part adopting the color yellow for Jews and heretics. In 1218, England seems to have been the first kingdom to comply with the decree by adopting a badge, a depiction of the two tablets of the Law. Although diverse shapes for the badge were legislated throughout Christendom, the most common was a yellow circle or ring. It could be made of parchment, felt, or linen, with some localities legislating specific measurements.

Badges were not unique in medieval life: various professions and confraternities wore them, as did pilgrims. However, the Jews' badge was understood by Jews and Christians alike as a special mark of ignominy—redressing the individual with all the negative stereotypes of “Jewish-ness” culled as much from elevated theologians as from superstitious conventional wisdom. If a Jew found favor in the service of a ruler or civic government, the first thing he requested or tried to negotiate was exemption from the requirement to wear the badge. Penalties for non-compliance varied from fines and lashes to other sanctions. Exemptions—at great expense—were given to practicing physicians and communal leaders. Only in 1798, when the French troops entered Rome, was wearing the yellow badge abolished, then reinstated by the Nazis in 1939 in the form of the Star of David.

Despite proscriptions about dressing too similarly to non-Jews, found both in biblical injunctions and Christian laws, Italian Jews tried to clothe themselves like their neighbors—even as the growing hostility toward Jews in the late 15th century led Italian cities and towns to insist on the thorough application of the badge laws and to add new ones. The exquisitely illuminated manuscripts produced during this turbulent period bear witness to the creative impulses that remained central to the Jewish experience. The manuscripts capture Jewish visions of their own lives and aspirations in

highly idealized representations. Therefore, it is both surprising and disturbing to find a few depictions of the yellow badge. For example, in an elaborately illustrated Hebrew treatise on regulations pertaining to women, copied in Padua around 1477, the badge is depicted on the bridegroom's mantle (see illustration on previous page). Scholarly explanations range from attributing the image to a Christian artist, rather than a Jewish workshop, to the patron's having insufficiently inspected the final manuscript. Yet such elite patrons were themselves among the select Jews permitted to forgo wearing the hated

badge, so why allow its inclusion? Answers still elude the modern viewer.

The splendid manuscripts testify to the rich visual culture of the Italian Jewish communities even under increasing duress. Ritual objects made of precious metals, delicately embroidered cloths to drape sacred Torah scrolls, and finely carved and gilded holy arks provide treasured glimpses into religious and ceremonial practices of Italian Jewry. Still more vividly, the exquisitely illuminated books fashion remarkable images of the very fabric of Renaissance Jewish life.

<https://zamir.org/wp-content/notes/pdfs/2003/Wisch.pdf>



Above: Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law, Rothschild Mahzor, fol. 139r (Florence, 1492). Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York. Reproduced in The Rothschild Mahzor (New York, 1983), pl. VII.



*Celebrating Sukkot and Purim, Mishne Tora of Maimonides, fol. 85v (Northern Italy, c. 1450).
Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. Reproduced in Thérèse and Mendel Metzger, Jewish Life in the
Middle Ages (New York, 1982), fig. 372.*



Jewish marriage ceremony, Padua, 1477

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