



Isabella Campagnol

CHE BELLA!
CURVES AND
CONTOURS

A Journey through Italian Ideals
of Fashionable Beauty from
the Renaissance to Today

Fashion and Personal
Style Studies

Collection Editor

JOSEPH H. HANCOCK II

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Abstract

This book traces how Italian ideals of female beauty have shifted from the Renaissance to today, oscillating between curvy, full figures and slimmer, even androgynous silhouettes. While the 1950s icons like Sophia Loren epitomize the “Italian” curvy ideal, historical sources and fashion magazines reveal long periods dominated by rigidly corseted or diet-driven slim bodies. Fascism reintroduced curviness as a symbol of fertility, and these sinuous feminine shapes persisted after World War II, declined in the 1960s to the 1970s, and reemerged in the 1980s to the 1990s with models like Monica Bellucci and brands such as Elena Mirò and Marina Rinaldi. Despite recent efforts to broaden Italian beauty ideals, these still often coexist with lingering forms of curvy-washing.

Key words

Belle Époque Bodies

Body Ideals

Curvy Fashion

Fascist Aesthetics

Italian Beauty

Maggiorate

Mediterranean Curves

Miss Italia

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Content warning

This volume includes scholarly discussions of historical and contemporary representations of the body in Italian culture. Several chapters examine concepts such as fatness, slimness, curviness, obesity, and anorexia as culturally and historically constructed categories. The text also addresses dieting practices, body discipline, and behaviors associated with disordered eating. These topics are analyzed through a critical, historical, and sociocultural framework; yet, they may be sensitive or triggering for readers with experience of body image issues or eating disorders. The volume also analyzes the fascist regime's biopolitical control of the body and its construction of femininity, fertility, and national identity. Brief references are made to Italian racial theory and eugenic discourse under fascism; these materials are presented critically and solely for historical contextualization. Please be aware that references to potentially distressing topics occur frequently and throughout the book.

Some of the illustrations in this book are extremely rare and, although every effort has been made to obtain the highest-quality reproductions, in a few cases this was not possible. Nevertheless, they have been included because of their historical and documentary significance.

Le donne, come i sogni, non sono mai come tu le vorresti.
“Women, like dreams, are never as you would want them to be.”
Luigi Pirandello, *Ciascuno a suo modo*, 1924

Introduction

A few years ago, while conducting research for my book on Egyptomania and fashion,¹ I came across a 1920s Lane Bryant advertisement promoting fashionable Egyptianizing styles, the latest craze of the moment, “for stout women.” The accompanying text enthusiastically proclaimed that:

Never has there been a springtime so rich in new inspiration for artists in costuming. The subtle influence of ancient Egypt is felt in every new garment... so becoming to stout women. Lane Bryant has made it possible for the large woman... to lead, not follow, the prevailing mode.

(Campagnol, 2022, p. 88)

This discovery intrigued me, as I could not recall ever having encountered a comparable advertisement in Italian fashion magazines of the same period or, in fact, of any period at all. I had never seen promotional material aimed explicitly at women whose silhouettes diverged from mainstream ideals. Perhaps I had simply not been paying attention?

Driven by this question, I embarked on a systematic investigation, combing every Italian fashion periodical from the early twentieth century onward that I could access and searching specifically for

advertisements or editorial content addressing “stout” women and their relationship with fashion.

I began with my own archive, today comprising several hundred issues of Italian women’s magazines spanning from the early twentieth century to the 1990s, before extending my research to libraries in Venice, Florence, Milan, and Rome. Eventually, however, I had to acknowledge that comparable references simply did not exist, at least not before the mid-1980s. None of the magazines I examined featured garments explicitly designed for women “out of size” or that did not conform to the dominant silhouette and larger bodies appeared to be entirely absent, an omission likely connected to the systematic use of artisanal dressmaking in Italy, which, at least until the 1960s, remained the prevailing mode of producing women’s clothing. What I did find, instead, was that from the late 1890s onward, Italian magazines were saturated with advertisements for corsets, girdles, sartorial advice, and an astonishing array of “slimming” treatments, ranging from teas and diets to creams and vaguely described “reducing” procedures, all promising to sculpt the ideal silhouette.

If body diversity was nowhere to be seen, body conformity was everywhere.

This realization prompted a broader inquiry about how ideals of feminine beauty had been constructed, negotiated, and transformed in Italy over the centuries, and what role had bodily curves played within these shifting aesthetic frameworks. My aim was to understand how beauty standards defined the “ideal” female body at different historical moments and how curves either enhanced, complicated, or contradicted these definitions. Equally central was the question of how Italian fashion responded to these ideals and

how women navigated, adapted to, or resisted prevailing canons. Historically, did fashion accommodate a diversity of silhouettes, or did it reinforce restrictive norms? And how did women, through dress, posture, styling practices, or dieting, express compliance or dissent in relation to dominant aesthetic expectations?

The resulting project, *Che Bella! Curves and Contours. A Journey through Italian Ideals of Fashionable Beauty from the Renaissance to Today*, traces the evolving relationship between feminine beauty and bodily curves across five centuries of Italian cultural history. Throughout this period, while ideals oscillated between the suppression and the celebration of curves, the female silhouette was usually shaped, constrained, or exaggerated through artifice, only rarely accepting the body's natural form. Instead, they were continually molded to reflect the aesthetic, social, and cultural priorities of each historical moment.

Chapter 1 opens by examining Renaissance foundations of symmetry, proportional harmony, and the belief in the correspondence between external beauty and inner virtue. In this context, slenderness or curviness mattered less than the harmonious relationship among body parts, which was understood as a visible manifestation of moral excellence. The discussion then moves to the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, when fashion and its structural underpinnings increasingly dictated female silhouettes. Corsets, panniers, bustles, and crinolines radically reshaped women's bodies, marking a progressive shift from natural harmony to aesthetic artifice, eventually culminating in the exaggerated "S-shaped" silhouette of the Belle Époque, though not without exceptions, such as the reformist visions of Rosa Genoni and Mariano Fortuny.

The analysis continues in Chapter 2 focusing on the modernist silhouette of the roaring twenties which rejected traditional femininity in favor of slender, angular forms associated with speed, youth, and urban mobility, a short-lived aesthetic abruptly reversed under fascism, when fuller, statuesque bodies were promoted as embodiments of health, productivity, and, above all, fertility in accordance with demographic ideology. Paradoxically, the same prosperous curves that had been associated with popular and “fascist” femininity in earlier decades would later define the fashionable silhouette of the *maggiorate*, celebrated as national icons throughout the 1950s.

The subsequent decades of the 1960s and 1970s have not been intentionally examined in this study. While these years were marked by profound cultural and social transformations, in Italy they did not constitute a decisive shift in the appreciation of bodily diversity. Instead, fashion during this period largely continued to promote standardized silhouettes that closely adhered to dominant trends and age-specific ideals rather than articulating a plural or inclusive understanding of the female body.

By contrast, the 1980s, examined in the first section of the third chapter, represented a critical turning point for the purposes of this analysis. During this decade, Mediterranean curviness increasingly emerged as a recognizable cultural marker, disseminated through television, advertising, and the fashion industry, and framed simultaneously as a national trait and a commercial asset. At the same time, the rise of specialized brands explicitly addressing curvy bodies signaled an important moment of sartorial inclusivity within the Made in Italy system. Rather than representing a mere stylistic shift, the 1980s functioned as a moment

of rupture in which the boundaries of acceptable bodily form began to expand, allowing for the coexistence of contrasting silhouettes and bodily ideals.

The final section turns to the contemporary period, examining ongoing twenty-first-century debates on body diversity and media representation as well as the tension between genuine inclusion and the phenomenon of “curvy-washing,” reflecting on how contemporary aesthetics simultaneously challenge and perpetuate long-standing Italian beauty paradigms.

The research underpinning this volume has adopted an interdisciplinary methodology combining fashion history, visual culture, media studies, and discourse analysis. Central to this work has been the examination of Italian fashion and women’s magazines, primary sources that capture the unfiltered values, anxieties, and aspirations of their time. Particular attention was given to the most influential titles that represented each decade, such as *La Donna* (1905–1968), *Lidel* (1919–1935), *Arianna* (1957–1973), *Sovrana/Grazia* (1927–), *Amica* (1962–), *Elle Italia* (1987–), and *Novità/Vogue Italia* (1950–), among others. Visual materials, including photographic spreads, advertisements, illustrations, and fashion plates, were analyzed through semiotic tools, while written sources such as editorial commentary, beauty advice, medical discourse, and political propaganda were interpreted through critical discourse analysis.

Some methodological limitations necessarily apply: not all periodicals have survived; magazines reflect editorial perspectives more than everyday realities; and national publications do not always account for regional diversity, limitations that nonetheless do not compromise the broader validity of the findings.

This book is therefore not only a history of shifting silhouettes, but also a history of the cultural meanings assigned to women's bodies. By tracing how curves have been celebrated, disciplined, erased, or reclaimed, it seeks to illuminate the deeper social forces that shape ideals of beauty. Most of all, it invites readers to reconsider the politics of the "ideal body" in Italy across time and into the present.

Note

1. Campagnol, I. (2022). *Style from the Nile. Egyptomania in Fashion from the 19th Century to the Present Day*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword.

Learning objectives

1. Describe the key aesthetic features that defined Italian ideals of feminine beauty from the Renaissance “Belle Donne” to the Belle Époque and compare how these ideals evolved across distinct historical periods.
2. Discuss how political, cultural, and social forces, including Modernism and Fascism, shaped and redefined constructions of the female body in Italy between the 1920s and the 1950s.
3. Evaluate the role of media, cinema, and public competitions such as *Miss Italia* in constructing postwar beauty paradigms and assess the cultural significance of the *maggiorate* in that context.
4. Explain how notions of Mediterranean femininity and curviness were formulated and disseminated in the 1980s and 1990s, and appraise their impact on Italian fashion and body politics.
5. Discuss the emergence of contemporary models of beauty in the twenty-first-century Italy and distinguish between genuine inclusivity and forms of “curvy-washing,” reflecting on how current debates challenge or reinforce traditional Italian aesthetics.

1

The concept of Italian beauty from the Renaissance to the Belle Époque

1.1 The *Belle Donne* of the Italian Renaissance

*Et come che dolci sieno molte cose,
Le quali tutto di miriamo, pure dolcissime
sopra tutte l'altre, che vedere si possano
per occhio alcuno giamai, sono le belle donne*

Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, Venezia, 1525, p. 64¹

The conceptualization of ideal female beauty in Renaissance Italy is inextricably tied to a broader discourse on the theory of beauty, which increasingly incorporated philosophical and moral considerations. Throughout the century, numerous Italian writers, among others Mario Equicola (1501), Galeazzo Flavio Capra

(1525), Ludovico Dolce (1545), Lodovico Domenichi (1549), Federigo Luigini (1554), and Lucrezia Marinella (1601), delineated the attributes deemed essential to the ideal woman, such as modesty, humility, piety, constancy, charity, obedience, and, above all, chastity, virtues that stood in complete opposition to those traditionally associated with the Renaissance concept of masculinity, like heroism and courage (Grieco, 1991).

Physical beauty was also usually included in the list, and was not at all secondary in the discussion. According to Marsilio Ficino, the leading theorist of Neoplatonism, the dominant philosophical current of the Italian Renaissance, external beauty was not simply an aesthetic concern but a quality that alluded to the order and perfection of the universe and a bridge to divine love.

It also represented the visible sign of an invisible, inner beauty, an idea that reflected the Classical notion of the *kalokagathia*, meaning that beauty and virtue were inseparable: "Insofar as God is the Act of all things and causes them to grow, He is called Goodness; and insofar as He makes them distinct, lively, sweet, and pleasing, according to their capacities, and as spiritual as they can be, He is called Beauty" (Ficino, 1934, p. 27). In Renaissance thinking, therefore, feminine beauty and virtue were so intermingled with each other that being "beautiful" became a social expectation (Ferino-Pagden, 2019), even an obligation, while ugliness was by contrast linked not only with a lower social status but also with moral depravity (Eco, 2007).

As Grieco (1991) formulates, the definition of female beauty followed a strict framework which had been established during the late Middle Ages by Francesco Petrarca in his *Canzoniere*, and that

essentially did not change throughout the early modern period. The specific characteristics of every physical detail were meticulously codified by various Renaissance treatises (Ferino-Pagden, 2019, p. 36), as exemplified by a doggerel poem published in 1536 that delved into the description of the physical attributes of female beauty by enumerating the “thirty-three perfections” that belonged to the ideal “bella donna,” each one of them focused on a distinct bodily feature.

Among these “perfections,” listed in groups of three because as Ficino explains, “Three parts in everything considers any Platonist Philosopher” (1934, p. 22) were: “Three long: hair, hands, and legs; Three short: teeth, ears, and breasts; Three wide: forehead, chest, and hips; Three narrow: waist, knees, and where nature places all that is sweet” (Matthews-Grieco, 1991, p. 98).

The effort to define the key traits of ideal feminine beauty is also the focus of Agnolo Firenzuola’s *Dialogo delle Bellezze delle Donne* (*On the Beauty of Women*), a fictional dialogue, first published in 1548, between a young gentleman, Celso, the literary alter ego of Firenzuola himself, and four “Madonne,” upper-class women from the Tuscan city of Prato, whom the author only identifies with the pseudonyms of Lampiada, Amorrisca, Selvaggia, and Verdespina. During the conversation, while the ladies were busy commenting—or rather gossiping!—about the looks of a common acquaintance, Celso, invited to express his opinion, managed to redirect the discussion toward the universal ideal of beauty and to how, according to Neoplatonic theories, it could bring man closer to the divine:

Beauty and beautiful women, and beautiful women and beauty deserve to be praised and held dear by everyone;

because a beautiful woman is the most beautiful object that can be admired, and beauty is the greatest gift that God gave to the human creature; because through her virtue we direct our soul to contemplation and through contemplation to the desire for the things of heaven.

(Firenzuola, 1552, p. 9 recto)

Beauty was then cast as an agent that elevated the soul toward higher truths, and consequently, female beauty was not solely something to be admired or casually discussed, but represented a powerful force that could inspire philosophical reflection and motivate spiritual ascent.

Celso also explained how beauty was ultimately synonym of harmony, because “Beauty is nothing other than an ordered concord and almost a harmony, occultingly resulting from the composition, union and commission of several different members [...] well-proportioned” (Firenzuola, 1552, p.12 recto).

Celso’s theory about the importance of good proportions echoes another belief previously enunciated by Ficino and used to elucidate the concept of beauty in Pietro Bembo’s *Asolani* (1966, p. 93). Emphasizing the moral dimension of beauty, summarized in the phrase “beauty and chastity, sweet harmony,” Bembo asserted that physical beauty arose from the harmonious proportions of bodily parts, just as spiritual beauty derived from the harmony among moral virtues: “for just as that body, is beautiful, whose members maintaining proportion among themselves, so is that soul beautiful, whose virtues make harmony among themselves; and both participate in beauty all the more, the more complete and full is that grace which I speak in their parts and their suitability” (Bembo, 1966, p. 145).

It appears therefore that in the early sixteenth century, harmony was the key principle used in the definition of both moral and physical beauty; should the criterion be met, even a woman who was “a little more stout or thin than what is reasonable” could still be counted among the “different types of beauty,” mentioned by Baldassarre Castiglione in the portrayal of the ideal woman in his posthumously published *Il libro del Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*, 1528, III, VIII, p. 154).

The mention of “stoutness” is particularly interesting, and by reading Firenzuola, it seems that while a certain roundness did not automatically exclude a woman from the number of the “beautiful” ones, gracefully carrying a “fat” body around was not something that everybody could easily do. Celso cited to one of his interlocutors, Madama Selvaggia, the example of a common friend, Madonna Hiblea Soporella, who, while being “very fat, she is nevertheless a well-favored damsel, and carries herself so well, so uprightly, so nimbly, so gracefully, that in truth, it is a pleasure to behold her gait,” but stressed how:

these are graces which few possess, nor it is thus with all women. This one hath a certain majesty of person; such seemliness in her looks, such grace in her face, such grandeur in her gait, that it might seem that her fatness had bestowed on her the beauty and the elegance which in other cases it takes away.

(Firenzuola, 1552, p. 34 verso)

Celso’s example was further substantiated by the reference to Madonna Amorrisca, whose body “between lean and fat, round and juicy” was however blessed by “the right proportions”

(Firenzuola, 1552, p. 35 recto), which Celso illustrated by comparing female silhouettes to four differently shaped vases (Figure 1.1), the second of which appears to be the most harmonious, echoing:

the bust of a woman that rises up on her hips; and the more those hips protrude, the more beautiful and graceful the bust becomes and the less belt is needed to tighten it [...] similar to the second are those that are well-hipped, the principal beauty of shapely naked women and of graceful, slender and well-proportioned bust.

(Firenzuola, 1552, p. 44 recto)

From these descriptions, it becomes clear that the beauty of the Renaissance *bella donna* resided in a graceful, however full, body. When ideal proportions were maintained, a healthy look of prosperity was regarded as a marker of beauty, just as thinness was usually associated with illness or poverty (Eco, 2007). This aesthetic ideal helps explaining the numerous Renaissance portraits depicting ladies that Niccolò Franco would have described as “not fat, but fleshy” (1542, p. 32), such as Titian’s “La Schiavona” (1510, London, National Gallery) defined by Stella Mary Newton as a “handsome, well-fleshed-out woman” (1988, p. 47), probably, as Hope suggests, a realistic portrait of a relative of the artist (2019, p. 46), Lorenzo Lotto’s, “Portrait of Lucina Brembati” (1518), Bergamo, Accademia Carrara, or Francesco Montemezzano’s “Portrait of a Lady,” New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1570c (Figure 1.2).

Given the cultural importance of conforming to the ideal of the *bella donna*, it is unsurprising that in the sixteenth century, there were a considerable number of “beauty manuals” published, texts that, amid a heterogeneous array of content

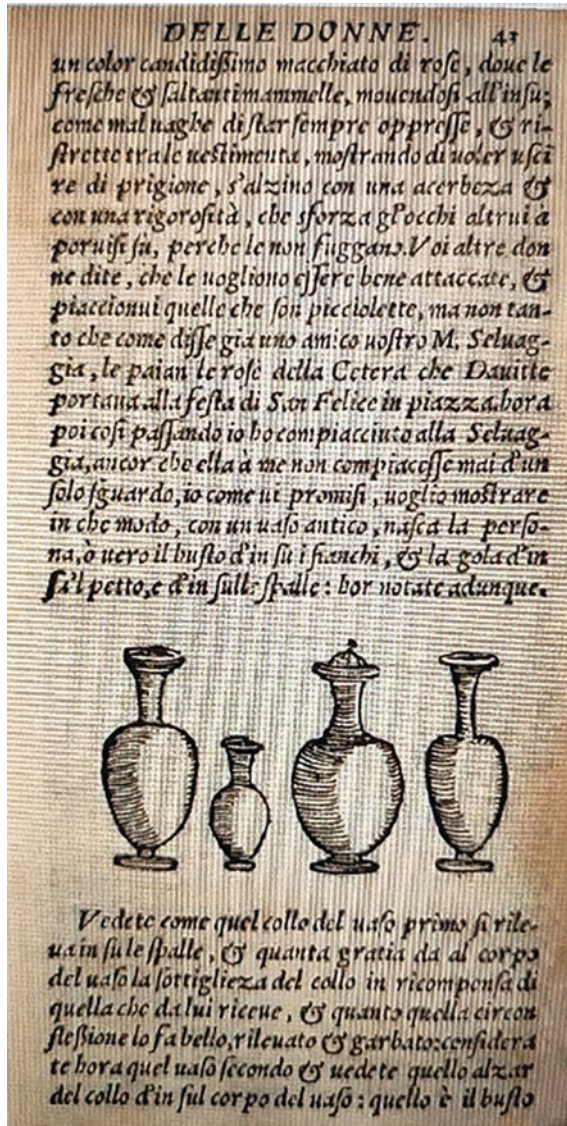


Figure 1.1: Firenzuola, (1552) *Dialogo delle Bellezze delle Donne*.

Venezia: Giovan Griffio, p. 44 recto. Open access.



Figure 1.2: Francesco Montemezzano, *Portrait of a Lady*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1570c. H.O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929. Open access.

ranging from kitchen recipes to textile dyes, from perfumes to “magical” potions, included a wealth of tips and tricks promising to support women in attaining the elusive standard of ideal beauty. Among these so-called “books of secrets,” several of which are so successful that they will be reprinted numerous times, the most notable are Caterina Sforza’s *Experimenti* written

between 1490 and 1509, Giovanventura Rossetti's *Notandissimi Secreti de l'arte profumatoria* (1555), Isabella Cortese's *Secreti de la signora Isabella Cortese: ne' quali di contengono cose minerali, medicinali, arteficiose, & alchemiche, & molte de l'arte profumatoria, appartenenti a ogni gran signora: con altri bellissimoi secreti aggiunti* (1565), and Giovanni Marinello's "Gli Ornamenti delle donne tratti dalle Scritture d'una Reina Greca" (1562).

Marinello's work is particularly remarkable because, beside suggestions about how to cure mange or even leprosy, it promised to explain to women how they could "acquire beauty," keeping in mind that neither "fatness or thinness are required to form a beautiful body" (Marinello, 1562, p. III). According to the author, the secret, in fact, lay on a well-proportioned body and, "sometimes, a fat woman is much better than a thin one." To achieve the "proportions of beauty," he then provided guidance on how, depending on individual circumstances, a woman could become fatter, thinner, or anything in between (Marinello, 1562, p. 23 verso). To gain weight and therefore literally to come to embody the ideal of the "sweet and soft" "bella donna" proposed by Federigo Luigini (1925, p. 21), women were advised to avoid salty or acidic foods (Marinello, 1562, p. 23 verso), favoring instead a diet based on fresh eggs, wheat, rice, cheeses, dried fruits, figs, fattened capons, and other rich meats. Gentle physical activity such as dancing, games, and singing was suggested to promote relaxation as well as scented baths. Marinello then provides a further seven pages, up to folio 27 recto, of various concoctions intended to promote weight gain of the entire body, followed by other recipes meant to fatten specific body parts (p. 27 verso), such as the face, or for "broadening the chest," a feature

Firenzuola praised for lending majesty to the figure (Firenzuola, 1552, p. 24), or the arms that, according to Luigini (1925, p. 47), were supposed to be “slightly plump and soft to the touch,” while for Firenzuola-Celsus they needed to be “fleshy and muscular, but with a certain softness” (Firenzuola, 1552, p. 47). However, since fatness could also cause deformity, apoplexy, malignant fevers, death, and, worse still, sterility or complications during pregnancy, Marinello proposed also treatments to lose weight, from bloodletting to herbal macerations, such as a diuretic infusion to assist with urination (p. 29 verso).

An ulterior method to achieve the desired bodily proportions lay in the ingenious use of appropriately chosen garments. According to Castiglione, it was essential for a woman to master the art of “discerning what those garments are that enhance her grace and are most appropriate to the exercises wherein she purposes to engage at the time, and to wear them” (Castiglione, 1528, III, VIII, p.154). Firenzuola suggested, when needed to rely on the skill of a talented tailor or to resort to cleverly placed padding to shape the body (Firenzuola, 1552, p. 44 recto). The use of strategic “stuffing” is mentioned also by Cesare Vecellio, who, in his description of the “*Matrona nobile siciliana* dressed for public festivities,” writes how the garments worn by the lady “make a slight belly on the bodice, which is not displeasing” (Vecellio, 1590, p. 261 v.-262 r.). The padding is a reference to the fashion, more common in France than in Italy, of the “*panse*” or “*panse-ron*” (Levi Pisetzky, 1978, p. 210), in which the lower part of the abdomen was enhanced by a thick lining. Curiously, in Vecellio’s engraving, the final part of the bodice does not look at all as if it had been somehow cushioned (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3: Cesare Vecellio, *Matrona nobile siciliana ornata per andare a feste publiche* (Noble Sicilian lady dressed to participate to public festivities), *Costumes anciens et modernes Habiti antichi et moderni di tutto il Mondo di Cesare Vecellio*, Paris, Firmin Didot Frères Fils & Cie, M.DCCC.LIX (1859–1860) [1590], p. 261 v.-262 r. Open access.

Until the mid-sixteenth century, the concept of beauty was primarily expressed through the description of the ideal body, dressed with clothes carefully chosen to convey a “natural” effect (Castiglione, 1528, I, XXVI, p. 43), according to the *sprezzatura*, the art of appearing effortlessly graceful (Paulicelli, 2019, p. 103). From the second half of the sixteenth century onward, the reverse happens and the body is shaped to serve the clothing, with structures such as the corset, or *busto*, becoming the definers of feminine beauty. Vecellio mentions corsets (*cassi*) “with certain iron blades inside” that women used to conform to the then fashionable

fitted and “V”-shaped waistline. The habit had caused so “many abuses in pregnant women” that it had been prohibited in Venice by the Magistrato alle Pompe (Vecellio, 1590, p. 93 recto). But despite the efforts of the government, the desire of women to “parere più attillate” (to display a slenderer silhouette) maintained the *cassi* in use, in Venice, but elsewhere in Italy as well, until as late as 1590, when Vecellio explains that the “maidens of Turin” still shaped their waists with “extremely narrow (corsets) and pointed far down toward the navel” (Vecellio, 1590, p. 203 verso).

In the late sixteenth century, the Renaissance ideal of the natural, well-proportioned female body gave way to a concept of beauty molded by clothing and foundation garments, while the cultural archetype of the “bella donna,” the woman whom Federigo Luigini praised as “more beautiful naked than dressed in purple” (Luigini, 1554, p. 25), began to fade, along with its moral connotation of virtuosity.

In the centuries that followed, as fashion evolved through the Baroque, the Rococo, and beyond, beauty increasingly became an artificial construct, shaped more by dress than by nature. The female body itself was progressively concealed, reshaped, and subordinated to changing sartorial frameworks that redefined the aesthetic standards of Italian femininity.