

# A *Gamurra/Camora*, or 15<sup>th</sup> C. Italian Gown

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## *WHAT, WHERE and WHEN:*

- A *gamurra* (or *camora*), a gown worn as the middle of three garments (over the *camicia*, or chemise, and under the *cioppa* or *giornea*, which were types of overdresses).
- Worn in many parts of what is present-day Italy. The examples this gown was based on are from Florence.
- Examples are found throughout most of the Quattrocento, or 15<sup>th</sup> century, and into the beginning of the Cinquecento, or 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## *MATERIALS:*

- Cotton velveteen
- Linen lining and interlining
- Thread

## *PROCESS:*

- Adjust existing bodice and sleeve patterns to conform with Florentine style
- Cut bodice and sleeve pieces from fashion fabric, lining and interlining
- Sew sleeve and sleeve lining together
- Baste bodice and interlining pieces together, sew to lining
- Pleat skirt and sew to bodice.
- Stitch eyelets in bodice for lacing
- Hem skirt
- Stitch sleeves to shoulder of bodice

## *SOURCES:*

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The *gamurra*, or *camora* (the latter is the word used by Isabella d’Este in her abundant correspondence), is a rather ubiquitous garment worn by most women during the Quattrocento (15<sup>th</sup> century) in Italy. It is the basic piece of clothing worn over the chemise, and its lines and construction remain largely the same in different areas and across class divisions. It consists of a fitted bodice, lacing up the front and/or sides, sleeves, either sewn or pinned on, and a skirt, pleated or gathered to the bodice. Variations were in the details and in the fabric used. Lower or middle class women undoubtedly wore *gamurre* made of wool, while wealthy women wore gowns of finer quality wool, velvet, silk or brocade.

The majority of evidence for the style and construction of *gamurre* is pictorial, as there are no extant garments that I know of. Numerous examples can be seen in the art of the time, from portraiture to frescoes. Domenico Ghirlandaio, an artist active in Florence in the 1470’s and 80’s, depicts women of different classes wearing *gamurre* in his Saint Fina fresco cycle, painted in 1473-1475, and the frescoes in the Tornabuoni chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, painted in the early 1480’s. Sandro Botticelli, a contemporary of Ghirlandaio’s, shows a very good example of a *gamurra* in his *Portrait of a Young Woman, or La Bella Simonetta* (1475). Other examples can be seen in the works of Francesco del Cossa of Ferrara, Carlo Crivelli of Venice, and Piero della Francesca, who worked in many cities throughout the country.



*Death of Saint Fina*, Ghirlandaio, 1473-75



*Portrait of a Young Woman, or La Bella Simonetta, Botticelli, 1475*



*Allegory of March: Triumph of Minerva, Francesco del Cossa, 1476-84.*

The *gamurra* itself is a fairly simple garment. It consists of a fitted bodice, sleeves that could be either sewn into the armscye completely, sewn in partially or pinned to the shoulder of the bodice, and a skirt that was pleated onto the bodice. It was commonly laced up the front,

though side lacings are occasionally seen as well. The cord or lace was passed through eyelet holes or rings sewn to the bodice. The sleeves are usually seen with the seam open to the elbow, with the *camicia* sleeve showing through. The edges are held shut by either lacing or a button or hook and loop arrangement.

As Giuliana would have been an upper class, wealthy young woman, her *gamurra* would have been made of velvet, most likely silk. I cannot afford silk velvet, so I've used a good quality cotton velveteen. Velvets in period had a shorter pile than modern rayon velvets, so I felt this was a good approximation of the weight and feel of the fabric that Giuliana would have had access to. The colors I used were dictated largely by the fact that I was given the velveteen as a gift - but fortunately, I thought the colors went together well and were plausible for use in Florentine clothing. The range of colors used to depict clothing is enormous, and based on the art of the time, bright colors were certainly in vogue during the Quattrocento. Jacqueline Herald lists different dyes and their costs in *Dress in Renaissance Italy 1400-1500*. One such dye (or combination of dyes, actually) makes a color called *morello*, or a sort of mulberry color, which describes the color of the dress pretty accurately.

It is also quite common to see sleeves in a different color from the dress itself, thus it was appropriate to use the plum colored velvet for the sleeves. The color is close to one that is very commonly seen in frescoes. I used a medium-weight linen to line the bodice, and a heavier weight to interline it in order to give it more strength and body. The bodice is, of course, under the most strain and I wanted to make sure it would provide enough support to wear comfortably.

I started the outfit by modifying patterns I had drafted for other projects. One was a basic bodice pattern, suitable for a 16<sup>th</sup> century gathered kirtle. I moved the seams from the side back (SB) to the side, directly under the armseye, rounded the neckline, and moved the bottom of the bodice up from my waist to my last rib. These adaptations make the bodice consistent with those seen in the works of art of the time. I also adjusted a sleeve pattern that I had drafted for a 14<sup>th</sup> century cotehardie by making seam straight at the forearm, (rather than tapered to fit my arm) and tighter. The edges of the seam don't quite meet, thus leaving a gap for the *camicia* to fashionably show through.

It was at the drafting stage that I made an error that caused me to have to re-do the entire bodice. I made a simple, yet crucial, mistake - I forgot to add seam allowance. Oops. I had finished most of the dress when I tried it on and found that the bodice was too small. I decided that I did not want to take a chance on losing enough weight by the time of the competition, so I had to pretty much start over. I went back to the original pattern, added in seam allowance and cut out the pieces again. I decided that since I had had such success and enjoyment in hand-sewing another project, I would try it again. This is why the majority of the dress is done by hand, but the sleeve and skirt seams are machine-sewn.

Once I had my bodice and sleeve patterns, I cut them out of the velveteen and linen. I sewed the sleeve lining to the sleeve, leaving the lower half finished but not sewn together. Then I hand-stitched the lining to the sleeve at the sleeve cap, to be stitched onto the shoulder of the bodice later. I basted the pieces of the interlining to the pieces of the bodice and then treated both layers as one, sewing them together at the back and side seams. Then I sewed the

lining pieces together in the same way, and sewed the lining to the bodice. I measured out how much fabric I would need for the skirt based on the measurement of the bodice edge, and the kind of pleats I planned on. I decided to box-pleat the skirt to the bodice, as I wasn't entirely certain that cartridge pleats were in use at that time, though some of the frescoes appear to depict them. It is also easy to see in *La Bella Simonetta* that the lady's skirt is in fact box-pleated. I multiplied the bodice waist measurement by three, added an inch for seam allowance and cut that amount of fabric for the skirt. I pleated the skirt and pinned the pleats in place, then sewed the skirt to the bodice.

Once the skirt was sewn on, I tacked the bodice lining down. Then I stitched lacing eyelets in the bodice and laced it up to check the fit. The last steps were to hem the skirt and stitch the sleeves to the shoulder of the bodice. Working class women would have had their skirts about ankle length; all the better for working in the home or fields. However, wealthy women like Giuliana would have their skirts floor-length or a little longer. I hemmed my skirt so it touches the floor, but no longer, as I'm not fond of tripping.

I used linen thread in most of the sewing, though the parts that were sewn by machine were sewn with regular poly-cotton sewing thread (linen thread will not go easily through my sewing machine). The stitches I used were straight out of the Museum of London book on clothing and textiles. I used a back stitch for the main construction seams and a running stitch to tack down seam allowances. A French seam is a simple way to finish the raw edges of fabric at the seam, so that is the method I used on the skirt. I didn't finish the other seams because they are inside the lining and unlikely to fray. I used a small, close running stitch for the hem, as that is quicker and easier on the hands than a hem stitch or whipstitch. I'm not happy with the way it looks, though, so next time I'll take the time to do a hem stitch.