

# Veils and Veiling in Early Modern European Costume Books

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When Saint Paul addressed the Corinthians in his famous passage directing women to veil their hair, veiling was described as an act: it was to be a gesture that would honour God, as well as a signal of subservience to male authority. But crucially, the first-century apostle did not give any guidance on how this veiling was meant to be achieved on a material level. In the Christian tradition, female veiling has consequently been a highly mutable practice embracing all manner of textiles and forms, achieving variable results. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to which this chapter is dedicated, veils and veiling practices fluctuated from region to region, as this near universal garment – if indeed, it can be categorised as such – was incorporated into local fashions. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the costume books of the period. Such works, produced in manuscript and print, were the collaborative outcomes of travellers, artists, and humanist researchers, and burst onto the visual media scene in the first half of the sixteenth century. Filled with illustrations of representative costume figures, these comparative projects defined the typical sartorial habits characterising the territories of Europe and further abroad, effectively offering a global view of dress customs and cultures.

Veils and veiling emerge as a subject of tremendous consequence in early modern costume books, which offer rich sources for understanding the material idiosyncrasies and affective possibilities of the veil. Within these works, there is a habitual assumption of figures' public visibility. The veil becomes a tool to negotiate passage through different social spheres which, due to its unique and varied material properties, can engender a range of movements and gestures, and correspondingly elicit highly socialised responses. It will be argued that veiling is shown to be a materially-activated form of social engagement – a practice relying on the tactility of cloth, and the gesture and sensorial perception of the wearer and observer. The dual agency of the object and the wearer is especially perceptible in Cesare Vecellio's *Degli abiti antichi et moderni...* (On Clothing, Ancient and Modern..., Venice: 1590). The author fastidiously records the types of textiles women's headdresses were made from (for example, transparent silks, cambric linens, and wool-blends). Combined with active verbs describing the arrangement and aesthetic outcome of the veil, the agentive properties of the fabric and the creative agency of those who shaped and wear it, come to the fore.

When considering the veil as part of a costume figure's characteristic ensemble, it would be easy to fall into a mode of enquiry that prioritises treating the depicted

garment as an icon. Insofar as costume figures are paradigmatic archetypes of social character, their contents have customarily invited cultural-semiotic analysis; that is, they have been 'read' as sign-symbols of cultural ideals surrounding gender, social rank, age, religion, profession, ethnicity, and nationality. This chapter pushes past the boundaries of iconography to seek the material, affective realm, which is not quite as concealed as might first be expected. It keeps in mind that veils were objects of incredible malleable functionality; and consequently, that veiling was a creative, expressive art-form connecting cultures of fashionability. As pieces of cloth, they maintained the inherent plasticity of woven (or knitted) textiles. But unlike tailored garments, cut into precise shapes and sewn into restrictive forms, many veils were customarily re-draped, and re-formed using temporary fixtures such as pins, starch, and removable under-structures, meaning that each new wear provided a novel opportunity for innovative constructions and aesthetic outcomes. As early modern costume books demonstrate, veils were a remarkably fluid object with a great capacity for gestural fluency and social communication – a point that will be analysed in tandem with the diverse cultural, political, and economic milieus of the societies represented.