

Bathing Costume in Renaissance Europe.

Doug Strong

If you asked most people in the SCA what did people wear when they bathed they would tell you that like the bathers at the Pennsic "swimming hole," renaissance men and women bathed nude. This however, is only partly true. Many of the bathers at the public baths of the renaissance wore only their birthday suits, but all of the people at these baths were apparently not comfortable bearing all in public. By examining 16th century woodcuts we can see what some of the fashionable bathers wore at this time.

Men's bathing costume

The majority of woodcuts showing male bathers do not reveal much of their bathing costume. This is because people were usually portrayed in waist high water. However, a few woodcuts show men in saunas, entering or leaving the pools or servants near the baths. These pictures reveal what many bathers may have had on beneath the waves.

Two articles of clothing seem to represent the height of fashion for male renaissance bathers. The first of these articles of clothing is a tight "speedo®" style swim suit. This suit covers only the genitals and sometimes the buttocks. Some were so small that they were little more than pouches connected by thongs. The second article of clothing that was an absolute necessity was a hat. Nearly half of the men portrayed in bathing pictures wear some form of headdress. Some of these appear to be typical of the type of hat being worn at that time, while others have a turban like appearance.

Women's bathing costume

Women are generally pictured naked in the baths. Whether this is simply male artists looking for an excuse to draw naked women, or the custom at the time, one cannot say. Nevertheless, some women are shown wearing clothing in the baths. Once again two articles of clothing are commonly found in woodcuts of the period. These two articles of clothing serve the same functions at the male bathing costumes, namely, to cover the head and the reproductive organs. Like the men, women are usually portrayed wearing some form of hat, either in the fashionable form of the day or a turban. Women can also be found wearing an unusual type of chemise that begins just below the breasts and continued downward to the floor. As curious as it may sound from our vantage point, women in the renaissance seemed to have no compunction about showing their breasts in public yet they seemed to be reluctant to show their legs.

Bibliography

Wright, Lawrence. Clean and Decent. New York: Viking, 1960.