

The Cloth of Honor

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If you have ever glanced at 15th century paintings or illuminations depicting the noble life, you must have noticed their clothing. Even out hunting, the nobility did not want to blend in with natural coloring. The cloth was bright and colorful, patterned with stylized animal and floral motifs, trimmed with jewels. It spoke volumes about the wealth and power of the person within.

But the importance of luxurious cloth did not end with clothing. Fifteenth century art frequently depicts persons of the highest ranks arrayed before a Cloth of Honor, setting them still further apart from the others.

The frequently seen "Cloth of Honor" is a long, suspended panel of rich fabric located behind the painting's most important person, male or female. This reflects the popular use of luxurious fabrics in courtly settings, to drape thrones and to form baldachins over the powerful. In this way, they would constantly be seen against a backdrop of lavish textiles, imprinting the image of wealth, power and beauty still more firmly in the eye of the beholder. Most often, the fabric is carefully painted in a color contrasting to the honoree's clothing. In The Madonna and Child Crowned by Angels, for example, Mary wears a brilliant red gown and mantle and is portrayed before a gold brocade green and black cloth.

If you closely examine many of these paintings, you might begin to notice that a great percentage of them depict a very similar fabric. There are two reasons for this. First, from the 12th century through the late 15th century, the most sought-after luxury fabric in all of Europe was silk brocade from Italy. Already a frequently used and much demanded pattern for clothing and other uses in noble households, the first half of the fifteenth century saw Italian silk design become almost completely dominated by the motif of the pomegranate. Thus the pomegranate fabric was most often seen as the Cloth of Honor in the famous illuminations to come from 15th century Burgundy. Second, the artists' workshops had ready access to pieces of this cloth, using the scraps as models for painting after painting, changing only the colors.

The Cloth of Honor elegantly framed a living masterpiece for all to admire. It turned real life into a work of art.