

The Costumes of the Moresque Dancers in Munich

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Abstract:

The ten Moresque Dancers, a group of wooden sculptures, range among the most famous works of art ever produced in Munich. They were created by sculptor Erasmus Grasser between 1477 and 1480 for the ballroom of the town hall in Munich. Grasser depicted the figures' clothes in great detail so it was possible to analyse the costumes. This has led to a new interpretation of these sculptures from a dress-historical point of view.

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The History of the Sculptures

A group of ten wooden sculptures from the late fifteenth century has been preserved in the Münchner Stadtmuseum (Munich's City Museum). They were created by the sculptor Erasmus Grasser in Munich between 1477 and 1480. The sculptures, which depict male dancers, are extraordinary in their liveliness and their body expressions in movement. In German they are called *Moriskentänzer*, in English *Moresque dancers*. The name of the *Moresque dance* derived from the *morisco*, a dance peculiar to the Moors in Spain. So in the beginning the Moresque dance was a Moorish dance, expressing the struggle of the Moors and Christianity. Later it became a very popular dance, with usually several men dancing around a maiden and making the most grotesque movements to impress her. It was performed by professional dancers and was in fact the dance most frequently mentioned in the fifteenth century. A later form of this dance is the well-known English Morris dance.

Originally the sculptures of the Moresque dancers were installed in the ballroom of Munich's town hall, today's old town hall, which was built between 1470 and 1480. The iconography of this room is a heraldic program on the ceiling with coats of arms showing the genealogy of Albrecht IV, then duke of Bavaria-Munich, through four generations. Little stars are placed all over the ceiling, and at the extreme ends there are the representations of the sun and the moon. A frieze at the bottom of the ceiling shows the coats of arms of major cities of the Holy Roman Empire. In between these coats of arms there are niches where the Moresque dancers were placed originally. They were the last artworks produced for the ballroom and were delivered in 1480. Today only few traces of the original paint can be found on the sculptures, due to several restoration campaigns. What is still there from the fifteenth century is the gilding on several figures and the red bole. But the original colours of the garments were red, green, blue and gold.

From 1931 onwards the Moresque dancers have been displayed in the city museum, while the old town hall of Munich was severely damaged in the Second World War. Throughout the centuries these wooden sculptures have become emblems of the city. And in fact, they range among the most unique works of art ever produced in Munich.

Analysis of the Clothes Worn by the Moresque Dancers

There have been various interpretations as to the significance of the sculptures in the ballroom. As dress is an essential element of the composition of each Moresque dancer this paper tries to analyse what kind of costumes are depicted in the sculptures to suggest an interpretation from a dress historical point of view.



Fig. 1: Erasmus Grasser, Moresque dancer with cloak, c. 1477-1480, Munich, Münchner Stadtmuseum. © Münchner Stadtmuseum, Sammlung Angewandte Kunst.

Nine of the ten dancers wear fashionable doublets and tight hose complemented by a cloak or a tunic as outer garments. A doublet and hose formed the everyday outfit of a man. And these garments were also worn for laborious activities. One of the dancers is dressed according to the latest fashion around 1480 (fig. 1). His long hair and also the chaplet he wears on his head, characterise him as a young, unmarried man. The dancer's doublet is provided with short skirts, under which the hose are fastened with points. The standing collar of the doublet is tied with fashionable laces. Except for that the doublet is wide open in the front so that the white linen shirt worn underneath would be visible. With the lack of the original paint this is not so clear today. The cut of the doublet with wide open fronts seems to have been immensely popular in the second half of the fifteenth century. With the hose the dancers are wearing poulaines. Erasmus Grasser depicted even the details of the garments like the vertical back seams of the hose, which were sewn from supple leather or from cloth cut on the bias. When a fabric is stretched diagonally, one ends up with pointed ends automatically. This corresponds very well to the pointed shape of the poulaines: the pointed ends of the hose fitted perfectly into those shoes. So it is not at all surprising that the two types of garment became popular at the same time. As outer garment the dancer is wearing a short cloak that is fastened in the front with a clasp. A man's complete outfit demanded either a tunic over the doublet or such a cloak, which was especially popular in the late fifteenth century.

Another dancer (as well as all the other eight dancers) has put on a short tunic over his doublet and hose to complement his suit (fig. 2). This tunic is provided with long, straight sleeves. At the shoulders big puffs are visible under the sleeves, which are caused either by the puffed sleeves of the doublet that was worn underneath, or by pads that are mentioned in literature. The tunic is rather tight at the waist, and the side and sleeve seams are visible. It is not a wide outer garment that is belted at the waist to produce the pleats. Instead these pleats are sewn and probably stuffed. The cone-shaped cap was rather popular and widely worn by men in the late fifteenth century, so it has been transmitted in various depictions.



Fig. 2: Erasmus Grasser, Moorsque dancer with cone-shaped cap, c. 1477-1480, Munich, Münchner Stadtmuseum. © Münchner Stadtmuseum, Sammlung Angewandte Kunst.

The small turban worn by another dancer seems to be oriental only at first glance (fig. 3). Of course headwear like this originated in the East and was brought back to Europe by the crusaders or was maybe adopted from the Moors in Spain. But by the fifteenth century these headpieces had become fashionable caps and bonnets throughout Europe. However the tunic of the dancer is definitely a dancing costume. It has a wide cut and a richly decorated, deep neck-opening so that it can be put on by pulling it over the head. The short hanging sleeves that fall down over the arms can be used effectively while dancing. A small belt is tied around the waist.



Fig. 3: Erasmus Grasser, Moorsque dancer with small turban, c. 1477-1480, Munich, Münchner Stadtmuseum. © Münchner Stadtmuseum, Sammlung Angewandte Kunst.

Also four other dancers wear tunics, the cut of which is based on fashionable garments of the time. But they are more richly decorated than everyday clothes and provided with large neck openings and wide sleeves. Additionally they are trimmed with small bells. So they are designed to create special visual and acoustic effects. One could say that all the different parts of these tunics are designed to show movement. On almost all of Erasmus Grasser's dancers the headwear is fastened with veils or pieces of fabric. The waving veils are not simply accessories intended to enhance the visual effect of the costumes, but the practical reason is that they secure the caps and hats on the dancers' heads when they perform their boisterous jumps. So they express once again that these clothes are dancing costumes.

A further dancer is dressed like a peasant from tip to toe (fig. 4). He is wearing a frock-like tunic, comfortable breeches and worn-out top boots. The same dress style can be seen in various depictions of peasants from that time. And some of them also have put on turban-like pieces of cloth wound around their heads. So the Moresque dancer is not wearing an oriental turban but the everyday headdress that marks him as a peasant.



Fig. 4: Erasmus Grasser, Moresque dancer as peasant, c. 1477-1480, Munich, Münchner Stadtmuseum. © Münchner Stadtmuseum, Sammlung Angewandte Kunst.

Interpretation of the Costumes

Fanciful dress and elaborate headwear are known from depictions of biblical events in late Gothic art, especially in Passion scenes. Here the exotic garments are intended to make it clear to the beholder that the people who wear these garments are the agents of the Old Covenant or adversaries of Christianity. Oriental figures are mostly dressed in flamboyant, fanciful costumes that are not harmonious. This becomes obvious especially in their proportions but also in many details. In contrast to this the clothes and headpieces of the Moresque dancers are not so far from what was actually worn in everyday life then.

Additionally they are rather convincing as being real clothes, even in the smallest details of their cut. This means that the fancy dress of the dancers is completely different from the depictions of the exotic or oriental in biblical scenes of the late fifteenth century. The oriental origin of the Moresque dance was preserved in the costumes to the extent that some of the dancers wear fanciful tunics and caps. But the dancers themselves are definitely men dressed in the fashions of their time. They only have put on dancing costumes over their everyday attire. They mirror reality, in clear contrast to the Passion scenes.

It has been argued that the garments of the Moresque dancers are intended to make them look ridiculous and consequently make the beholder realise that only fools wear clothes that are above their social status. From a dress historical point of view this doesn't seem quite coherent. For doublets, hose and poulaines were not *per se* clothes of the upper classes. The real disguise of the dancers can be seen in their fanciful tunics, trimmed with fringe and bells. But they don't wear the representative gowns of the burghers or the nobility. So the costumes are not to be understood as insolence, but as their professional garb. After all, the sculptures were produced to decorate a ballroom.

To sum up one could say about the Moresque dancers that there is no discrepancy between appearing and being. In fact the dancers appear in their dress as what they really are: They are jugglers, jesters, or acrobats who entertain and delight their audience with their performance – up to this day, obviously.