2. Setting up House

Artisan Women's Trousseaux in Seventeenth-Century Bologna¹

Joyce de Vries

Abstract
From linens and clothing to furniture and utensils to jewelry and devotional items, artisan brides brought a plethora of goods to their marriages. The many items were practical in one sense or another, serving utilitarian and social goals. The goods listed in trousseaux suggest details of women's activities, interests, and agency, demonstrating their impact in constituting new families, residences, and livelihoods. This essay considers both aggregate and specific data from 60 dowries in seventeenth-century Bologna to reveal a rich realm of female agency in everyday life in the early modern era.

Keywords: trousseaux inventories; artisan dress; material culture; gender roles

In 1632, the young Bolognese woman Giacoma Guglielmini married Giulio Rossi, a spinner who may have worked in one of the city's textile mills. Like many of her peers, Guglielmini had a substantial dowry: L. 500 in cash and L. 263.15 in goods, including a bed, some sheets and blankets, two chests, several dresses, camici (‘undergowns’), tablecloths, handkerchiefs, veils, and aprons.² Marriage contracts enumerated the dowry, listing the funds

---

¹ This essay is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Ruth Berg de Vries (1930–2018) and Rimmer de Vries (1929–2020). At the end of their lives, they still used many of the items that they had acquired upon their marriage in 1958.

² ASBo, Notaio Giulio Drusi, dowry dated 2 September 1632. All monetary figures in this essay are in lire bolognesi: L., followed by figures for lire, soldi, and denari. Twenty soldi was worth a lira, and 12 denari was worth one soldo.

Wiesner-Hanks, M.E. (ed.). Challenging Women’s Agency and Activism in Early Modernity. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021
doi: 10.5117/9789463729321_CH02
given to the husband for his wife’s needs during the marriage, and the corredo (‘trousseau’), the goods the bride brought to her new household. Guglielmini’s trousseau also featured two pairs of shoes, two rings, a fox fur handwarmer, a mirror, lengths of cloth, some spun hemp, a sack with four pounds of raw wool, several pillows, a sewing cushion, and a large barrel half-full of wine, among other things. Would the luxurious fur muff have warmed the same hands that spun wool or wove hemp? Possibly. The textile work would have been completed in the semi-private space of the house, but the fur would have been an item meant for public display, worn outdoors to show the status of family. From linens and clothing to jewelry and devotional items, from beds and chests to bed warmers and chestnut pans, brides like Guglielmini brought numerous goods to their nuptial homes, items tailored to the circumstances of the families involved as well as the brides’ needs and skills. All the goods were practical in one sense or another, serving utilitarian and social goals. This essay explores the items in women’s dowries in the seventeenth century, drawing upon information in official marriage contracts from the State Archives of Bologna. Specifically, it focuses on data from artisan women, a group still underrepresented in the scholarship on family life and society in the early modern era.3

Because marriage contracts were drawn up for couples from all echelons of society, dowries are a significant archival source for learning about women, and especially non-elites. In general, there are few archival sources that offer access to the lives of ordinary early modern women, typically just baptismal, marriage, and mortuary records; more might be available for women involved in legal disputes or elite women, whose letters and other papers might be integrated into family archives. With such sparse documentation for much of the early modern female population, scholars glean as much information as they can from the limited empirical sources. By considering seventeenth-century Bolognese dowries with classic social history methods along with insights from the recent material turn, we can see what artisan women possessed at a pivotal moment, but can we also get a sense of their lives beyond their nuptials? Can we gain an understanding of their ongoing agency by examining women’s dowries? This essay suggests that we can. Artisan women’s trousseaux consisted of clothing, linens, and jewels with which they constructed their outward appearance and social

status. Furniture, kitchen items, household utensils, fabrics, fibers, and foodstuffs reveal the practices that informed their daily lives and tasks, while the occasional painting or book of hours indicates their aesthetic and spiritual interests. An analysis of the goods recorded in dowries thus reveals a rich realm of female agency in everyday life in the early modern era.

Although dowries were inevitably estimated, notarized, witnessed, and controlled by men, women nonetheless had some say when amassing their trousseaux. The husband indeed had legal jurisdiction over both dowry funds and the trousseau; it was his duty to oversee them as investments to provide for his wife over her married life. In practice, however, the trousseau was a wife's domain. Many trousseau items were for the bride's personal use, and brides played a role in selecting, making, and embellishing at least some of the goods that they brought to their marriages. Whether seen as useful items for daily life or commodities, or both, the goods were investments that ensured productivity in one way or another for many years. Indeed, women oversaw the material assets of the entire household, a domestic duty repeatedly outlined in prescriptive literature. Juan Luis Vives (1524), for instance, places many domestic material goods—linens, furniture, tableware, clothing—under women's purview. Brides would have used their trousseau goods possibly for years, whether clothing, which could be adapted as necessary, or sturdy furniture and kitchen utensils. They also could sell or pawn items. An inventory might have documented what a bride possessed at one point in her early life and her youthful status, but it also provides hints regarding her ongoing life: her skills, duties, and interests.

The foundations of every artisan woman's trousseau were labor and agency. A woman's status upon marriage was inseparable from her productivity, both social and economic, as indicated by her clothing, linen, jewels, and cooking, cleaning, and sewing utensils, and her capacity to reproduce, implied by beds, linens, and perhaps even baby clothes. To understand this process, this essay first outlines the social and economic context of early modern Bologna. It proceeds to analysis of the aggregate data drawn from 60 dowries to establish general trends, and then concludes with a discussion of specific case studies, which demonstrate the wide variation of artisan women's situations. There were certainly consistencies among dowries and trousseaux goods, which underscore how women constructed their public and more private identities and lives via material goods. At the same time, a close look at individual dowries demonstrates wide variations

4 Vives, De Institutione Feminae Christianae, p. 79.
from the averages, revealing the nuances of women's lives and the ways their possessions gave them an important realm of influence in the early modern household.

Artisan dowries and social distinctions in seventeenth century Bologna

A study of artisan dowries provides unique insights into the goods and practices that informed social distinctions in early modern Bologna. Social stratifications had been codified since 1453 in the city, with the nobility and scholars in the first and second tiers, followed by three levels of artisans: the highest echelon included the lucrative fields of notaries, bankers, haberdashers, and silk merchants; the next, slightly less prestigious, included spice merchants and goldsmiths; and the lowest rank of artisans were the still quite prosperous skilled laborers such as cobblers, furriers, tailors, dyers, spinners, weavers, and so on. At the bottom of Bologna's social scale were contadini (‘peasants’). The material used and product made also affected the status of skilled laborers; goldsmiths, for example, ranked over textile workers, who in turn were socially higher than those who worked the land. Devised to avoid unnecessary spending and to maintain the social order, sumptuary laws dictated what people in each tier could wear. While the laws can tell us what artisan women should not have worn, their dowries tell us what they had, both defining and pushing the limitations of social rank.

The artisan dowries examined here were largely for women from the third tier of artisans, by birth or marriage. Notaries often recorded the profession of the bride's father and the groom, and the occupations in the selected records includes the makers of mattresses, saddles, and weapons, along with bakers, butchers, carpenters, and textile workers. Some of the highest value dowries of the group were for the daughters of booksellers, printers, shoe- and bootmakers, and ironsmiths; the lowest was for a daughter of a carpenter who married a farmworker, a step down the social hierarchy. Finding dowry records for artisan women can be difficult and not every dowry indicated occupations, so the data here includes twelve examples that lack the fathers' or grooms' profession. In these cases, the value of the dowries closely coincided with those that were clearly identified as artisan households already in the pool.

---

6 For laws in Bologna, see Muzzarelli, ‘Ricami e pizzi’, pp. 3–262.
Standards of living in seventeenth-century Bologna were rising largely due to proto-industrial developments in the use of hydraulics in the production of grain, paper, lumber, and most importantly textiles, mainly silk, but also linen, hemp, and wool. For elites this expansion of production techniques meant ownership and increasing profits; for the lower classes, it manifested in more stable work opportunities and higher incomes via jobs in shops, mills, at home, or in the fields. The dowries underscore the growing number of families who found their main source of employment in the booming textile sector. One third featured either a father or husband involved in the textile industry on some level, whether working with raw materials as spinners or weavers, or making things like stockings or rope. Evidence in the trousseaux suggests that many artisan women were engaged in textile work as well, whether as part of their regular domestic duties or in a more professional capacity. Some Bolognese brides brought lengths of cloth; sewing or lace-making cushions; and baskets of needles, thread, and trims to their new households. Most women were handy with a needle, as mothers taught their daughters these basic skills. Women might have increased the visual impact and value of their textiles by adding embroidery, and some artisan women had acquired the more highly skilled lace-making techniques that had become popular by the seventeenth century in Bologna. At minimum, we can imagine the women wearing the garments listed in their trousseaux, updating and adapting them for years of wear, pawning or trading them to obtain other goods, and passing them along to others for further adaptation.

But some artisan women also engaged in the vibrant cottage industry fundamental for textile production. While silk was spun in mills to increase durability and attain a distinctive texture, the steps before and after spinning—pulling the floss from silk cocoons by hand and weaving the thread into fabric—were largely done at home by independent contractors, often women. Nine of the women's dowries included one or two looms. Relatively inexpensive, and thus a great investment, the looms were typically described by the fibers employed or the final product. Most of those listed were for silk, perhaps for the exquisite voile that was the apex of Bolognese textile production, but one was for canvas and two were for rope. If looms only appeared in 15 percent of the dowries, the presence of floss or fibers was

8 For sixteenth-century examples of this, see Robinson, ‘The Material Culture of Female Youth’, pp. 235–254.
9 Muzzarelli, ‘Ricami e pizzi’; Ciammitti, ‘Fanciulle Monache madri’.
10 Campigotto, et.al., Prodotto a Bologna, pp. 10–45.
more common, in 40 percent. Measured by the pound, floss might have been already spun, sometimes onto spools, ready to be woven into fabric and made into lace, or unspun, awaiting carding or spinning; a few trousseaux listed fiber carding or combing tools. If there was an abundance of floss or fibers in the trousseau, but no loom, perhaps there was already one in the house. But the presence of cloth, fibers, and looms in a dowry did not necessarily mean the bride would be working the materials herself—the loom may have been a contribution to a domestic shop run by her husband. Caterina Castri, for instance, had two silk looms when she married Girolamo Paggi, a spinner, in 1616. The plan might have been for him to supply his wife with the spun silk that she and others would weave on the looms. The dowers do not explicitly state if or when women worked in the cottage textile industry; only women employed as servants had their work identified. Even so, a bride's potential for paid labor might have affected her dowry, as Caroline Murphy suggests for the painter Lavinia Fontana. We can assume that wifely duties for most of the artisan brides included cooking, cleaning, and bearing and raising children, as this adhered to centuries of traditional female roles. By extrapolating from the items in the trousseaux, we can see that artisan women also engaged in textile work, some of it for pay.

With this rising standard of living, many citizens from the third tier of the artisan class, just up from the bottom of Bologna's social ladder, were quite prosperous. In Bologna in the seventeenth century, a small, but sufficient dowry was about L. 100. A very good dowry for an artisan woman, judging from archival records, was about L. 800 or more. The average artisan in Bologna earned about L. 150 a year, with more skilled, successful artisans earning around L. 500. If several family members were working, household income expanded accordingly. Even so, a dowry of several hundred lire was a significant amount, and required diligent saving, often through the Monte del Matrimonio, an institution set up for this very task. The clothing and jewels in the trousseaux were outward markers of status when worn, but all such items were also good investments. They were practical, held their value, and were easy to liquidate if cash was needed, whether by the bride's family before her wedding, or later by the couple during their marriage. Socially, a highly valued dowry helped a woman make a more advantageous marriage, and potentially boosted her and, by extension, her family's status.

---

11 ASBo, Notaio Giulio Drusi, dowry dated 18 August 1616.
12 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, pp. 43–44.
14 Carboni, ‘The Economics of Marriage’. 
Thus non-elite families often put their savings into their daughters’ dowries, and especially into clothing, jewelry, and household goods like furniture and utensils. Indeed, textiles were the most prominent component of the artisan women’s possessions and, together with household goods, comprised the vast majority of items within the trousseaux.

**General data from artisan women’s dowries**

Dowries, if they included detailed trousseaux, are excellent sources of information on how women planned their future lifestyles and livelihoods via material culture at the moment of their weddings. On a social level, a woman’s goods were a means to construct her new identity as wife, in the home and more publicly. As some of the items, like linens and furniture, were to be shared, her trousseau also shaped the couple’s status as a family. Notaries, who wrote up the legal documents, worked with professional appraisers, and the level of detail depended on their working style as well as the couple’s situation. There were different ways of recording and valuing a trousseau—it could have been written in a long list with individual items valued, or the items, whether listed in detail or not, could have been valued together in a lump sum. Here, I explore only dowries that featured itemized and individually valued trousseaux, the goods grouped into general categories in my analysis. A bride entered her marriage with at least the basic items she would need as wife: some clothing, personal linens, furniture, utensils, raw materials like floss and cloth, and perhaps some jewelry, artworks, or food.

The aggregate of the data drawn from 60 dowries in Bologna from 1600 to 1700 provides an overview of artisan women’s trousseaux. The average total value of the dowries in the pool is L. 633.17, with amounts ranging from a low of L. 110.15 to a high of L. 1957.10, and a majority (69 percent) between L. 250 and L. 749 (see Table 2.1). As a point of comparison, women from merchant families received L. 2000–6000 or more. Noblewomen’s dowries were higher still, with Camilla Dolcini’s dowry of L. 24,000 an extreme example. Elite dowries often featured real estate that produced

---

15 See, for instance, ASBo, Notaio Achille Canonici, dowry dated 5 March 1632, for Vittoria Fantetti for L. 5598.5.7; or dowry dated 17 December 1632, for Isabetta Anselmi for L. 2800.
16 ASBo, Notaio Giovanni Lorenzo Muzzi, document dated 5 September 1647 for Dolcini. See also ASBo, Notaio Cornelio Berti, dowry dated 26 August 1653, for Orsola Premarani dall’Oca for L. 7119.10.
rent or other income, and the trousseau, even though it typically featured higher quality items, was a smaller portion of the total dowry than those of women from lower social groups. Only three of the dowries in the 60 artisans’ records included the use of living quarters, but none estimated the value of this privilege. In these cases, though, the dowries were relatively modest, a total of L. 400 for two women and L. 769 for the third. On average, just under half the total amount of the artisan dowry, or L. 309.15, was paid in cash. The rest of the dowry, on average L. 324.2, was transmitted in goods, the woman’s trousseau.

Table 2.1 Sixty dowries in Bologna from 1600–1700 (All figures in lire bolognesi)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dowry components, with the number of dowries that feature at least one item in the category</th>
<th>Average values from 60 dowries</th>
<th>Domenica Magnani 1648</th>
<th>Maria Ursina Capelli 1689</th>
<th>Domenica China 1600</th>
<th>Vittoria Cavazzoni 1650</th>
<th>Angela Alboni 1634</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total dowry, including trousseau</td>
<td>633.17</td>
<td>640.10</td>
<td>654.5</td>
<td>110.15</td>
<td>1957.10</td>
<td>1307.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowry cash or assets, separate from the trousseau inventory (51/60)</td>
<td>309.15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1450</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total trousseau</td>
<td>324.2</td>
<td>640.10</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>85.15</td>
<td>507.10</td>
<td>507.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Linens (59/60)</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>183.9</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>38.15</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing (59/60)</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.10</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture (53/60)</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>65.10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32.10</td>
<td>225.6</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewelry (41/60)</td>
<td>30.18</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utensils (35/60)</td>
<td>17.15</td>
<td>55.17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12.10</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth and fibers (35/60)</td>
<td>15.14</td>
<td>42.14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash or investment (8/60)</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works of Art (9/60)</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foodstuffs (8/60)</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adhering to long-standing traditions that associated women with textiles, the two types of trousseaux goods with the highest values were personal linens and clothing, together about one-third of the average dowry or almost two-thirds of the trousseau alone. Worth on average L. 107, personal linens (biancheria) included white textiles that came in close contact with the body, related to hygiene: household linens like sheets, pillowcases, tablecloths, napkins, and towels; as well as worn linens like aprons, veils, and kerchiefs. While clearly some were for the bride’s use, many linens were to be shared by the couple, serving as the foundation of their daily lives and intimacies. Personal linens of some sort appeared in all but one dowry, and while the
individual items might not have been worth much, there were a lot of them. Made from a range of fabric qualities, whether local hemp or linen, or, in more elite dowries, finer linens imported from Holland or France, these items were often trimmed with embroidery or lace. The professional appraisers in Bologna, a textile town, often described these items in detail, indicating the quality, whether they were new or used, and even the placement and style of embellishments. They understood the nuances of fabric and style and their role in constituting value as well as status.

Relatively easy to launder, the many personal linens could be changed frequently to maintain a clean bed, table, and body. The most popular item was the *camicia*, a long white gown worn under a dress. *Camicie* appeared in 59 dowries, with numbers ranging from two to 50 items, or an average of fifteen per dowry. Aprons and kerchiefs were also common, in 55 and 51 of the dowries, respectively. Like the *camicie*, there was a wide range in what women possessed: one to 28, or an average of eight, aprons per dowry, and three to 40, or an average of twelve, kerchiefs. Bedsheets were in 37 of the dowries, with an average of two per dowry. Brides often provided the bed and bedclothes for the marriage, and sheets, made from hemp or linen, were thus traditional components of the trousseau. Veils, usually made of finer fabric, covering the head and sometimes extending down onto the shoulders or torso, were less common. They were found in only 27 of the trousseaux, with numbers ranging from one to 22, an average of five per dowry. Very fine silk organza veils were one of the specialties of Bolognese textile production, but only a few of the artisan women’s dowries specified veils made of silk. Caterina Castri, mentioned above, had one used silk veil among her goods. Most often the records described veils as made of linen and cotton. Artisan women could also have used kerchiefs or scarves as head-coverings. The variety of worn personal linens supported and protected the more costly clothing, the *camicie* absorbing bodily fluids and smells, the aprons and kerchiefs shielding the body and dress from the dirt generated by daily chores—cleanliness in itself a marker that set artisans apart from day laborers or peasants.

As the most important sign of a woman’s status, clothing unsurprisingly was the second highest group in valuation, worth an average of L. 91 among the dowries. These more costly items, like dresses, overdresses or gowns, mantles, bodices, sleeves, and other components of clothing and accessories such as the infrequent pairs of shoes or gloves, appeared in smaller numbers than linens. Most often noted in the dowries as made of wools and less expensive types of silk like satin or taffeta, these garments were more tailored to the body than the voluminous *camicie* or the easily adjustable
aprons. Many of them were valued under L. 10–15, indicating they were likely basic dresses, made for daily wear; some were used, probably frocks that the women had been wearing for a while. But a bride's clothing could be quite fancy and expensive, with dresses made with multicolored silks worth L. 40 or more peppered throughout the pool. A dress of some sort appeared in 59 of the dowries, with a range of one to fourteen in each of those, or an average of five per woman. Shoes were listed much less frequently, and appeared in only nine of the trousseaux. Ordinary people usually just had the one pair of shoes that they wore, which would not necessarily be valued in a legal inventory. The high level of description often provided by the appraiser is an indication of the economic importance of clothing and its details; it suggests, too, how people ‘read’ materials and styles not just for economic but also social information. The ribbons trimming a sleeve, for example, added to the value of the garment and augmented the appearance and status of the wearer.

Similarly, the furniture that many women brought to their marriages, on average worth L. 49, had both practical and social meanings. Women stored their clothing and linens in chests, which usually came as a pair, to keep them safe and separate from other goods in the household. If almost all the dowries (52) featured at least one chest, only about half (29) listed a bed of some sort. Some bedsteads were quite elaborate among this group, underscoring the privilege of relative wealth. The dowries show that beds of prosperous artisan couples were stacked with several mattresses made of different qualities of feathers or straw, several pillows, blankets for summer and winter months, and draperies that hung from four corner posters. Some were more basic: a woman's contribution to the marital bed could also have been simply a mattress that would have presumably been placed atop a bedframe already owned by her husband. The bed was loaded with meaning, a site of the couple's ongoing intimacy, births, and eventually deaths. The marriage was legal once consummated; dowry legalese dictated that the dowry and trousseau would only be distributed after that pivotal moment. Thus the bed, and even the tables, chairs, armoires, credenzas, shelves, and chests of drawers, which also appeared in the inventories albeit in lower numbers, were material indicators of the physical and spiritual union of the couple. Some of those objects, which were often described in the inventories as used, might be imbued with memories of a bride's natal family, but they would gain a new patina of associations soon enough.

The women in the sample less often—in just over half of the 60 records—supplied their new homes with practical utensils. Some brides entered established households and so brought only a few items in this category. The new couple might have occupied a room or two within the husband's family residence, already outfitted with basic implements. Judging from the wide array of utensils in their dowries, other brides seem to have been setting up a new or independent living situation. With an average value of about L. 18, the utensils in the inventories were mostly things necessary for cooking and eating, like fire chains, pots, frying pans, mortars and pestles, graters, cutlery, and plates, their material typically specified—copper, brass, majolica, or terra cotta. Artisan kitchens featured some specialized items indicative of the expanding economy, such as skillets specifically made for roasting chestnuts, an early modern staple protein. There were also candlesticks, bed warmers, laundry basins, storage barrels, and the looms and sewing paraphernalia discussed above. Several trousseaux featured long lists of utensils, each relatively inexpensive, but nevertheless important to everyday life. The most valuable item in this group was quite banal: a wooden cart, with wheels and steps, estimated at L. 55, worth over ten percent of Margherita Brizzi's dowry of L. 469.9 when she married a carpenter in March 1647. She also had some iron tools to cut hemp (L. 2). The various utensils facilitated daily life for the brides, allowing them to cook, clean, make and mend textiles, and complete chores, all the while contributing to the productivity and assets of the family.

Related to the utensils associated with textile work were the lengths of cloth and floss or fibers that appeared in 35 of the dowries, on average worth about L. 15. Cut fabric was slightly more prevalent, appearing in 25 of the trousseaux, compared to 24 that had raw fibers; seventeen of those featured both. The brides with cloth often had only a few pieces, but the servant Sabadina di Bernardo had eleven lengths of different fabrics in her 1619 dowry, along with 23 pounds of hemp and linen. These materials, valued at L. 80.3, comprised about 24 percent of her dowry of L. 333.15. Sabadina's case was the exception, as fabrics and fibers were worth four percent of the average dowry. Valued quite low because of their unfinished nature, these materials, as with the looms and sewing baskets, speak to women's engagement in textile production.

Practical goods dominated the trousseaux, but artisan women also brought jewelry and other items fashioned from precious or semi-precious...
materials into their marriages. Jewelry could embellish a wife’s outfit and reflect the status of the family; these compact and portable investments, equally important, held their value and could be easily sold or pawned in times of financial need. While extensive lists of jewelry and luxury goods dazzled elite trousseaux, artisan women possessed fewer of these types of items, worth an average of L. 31 overall, or about one-twentieth of the total dowry. Two-thirds of the women’s dowries here listed something, mostly jewelry, in this category. Associated with marriage, gold rings, sometimes set with gems, appeared in 23 of the dowries, with numbers ranging from one to six, an average of one per woman overall. It was not just the women with the most elegant dowry goods who had jewelry: Margherita Brizzi, whose wheeled cart and hemp knives were noted above, also had two enameled gold rings set with stones of some sort (together worth L. 20). In addition to the rings, and gold or coral necklaces, these artisan brides less often owned crystal mirrors, silver rosaries and crucifixes, and books of hours with silver clasps. Only two books of hours appeared in the pool, for instance; probably few artisan women could read. Perhaps there were other devotional items they could engage with in their new houses.

Art had an important and growing presence in people’s lives in the seventeenth-century, and artisan women sometimes turned to religious works of art in their spiritual practices. A center of artistic production, Bologna saw a rise in the domestic display of art, and especially religious images, in the Counter-Reformation. Artistic production expanded to include more easel paintings, prints, and finished drawings that made art accessible to a broader audience. Even so, works of art comprised a small portion of the selected trousseaux, valued at an average of L. 4 per dowry. Only eight dowries included works of visual art; another featured a spinet (worth L. 30), factored into this category as it served the performing arts and was more specialized than other utensils. The visual works were sometimes described by their mediums (works on paper, paintings, reliefs) and subjects (all religious, mostly devotional images of saints, but also biblical narratives). The valuations were as low as L. 2.10 for ‘diversi quadri di pittura antichi et moderni’ (‘various old and new paintings’) in Violante Sacchetti’s 1646 trousseau and as high as L. 57 for twelve artworks in Vittoria Cavazzoni’s, explored further below. 20 While only a few women supplied their new homes with art, it is difficult to generalize who they were—it was not just those with high dowries. Some women with modest dowries, of about L. 300–550, had several works of art; only two of the women with artwork

20 ASBo, Notaio Bartolomeo Bocchini, dowry dated 22 February 1646.
had dowries over L. 1000. Angela Caramelli, the owner of the spinet, was among the most elite of this group, a daughter of a bookseller who married another bookseller with a dowry of L. 931.21 The religious images and objects certainly aided in spiritual nourishment, and it seems likely that, if women did not bring their own works of art, there were likely others in the home for them to view as part of their devotional practices.

Quite different from the material objects examined above, the two final categories of trousseau goods were cash and food. Cash, or a notice of investment, averaged about L. 11 per dowry, but it was included in the inventories of just eight brides. In six cases, these funds were in addition to the payments made directly to the husband in the dowry and might have been added to top up the worth or replace goods that had once been planned for the trousseau but not realized. For the other two, there was no additional cash in the dowry and it seems like everything was included in the trousseau inventory to simplify the transaction. The husband received both the dowry and trousseau, so either way, the funds were at his disposal. But one wonders if the cash in the trousseaux of the six whose husbands received other funds offered the women any advantage in determining how the money was spent. Food items are perhaps easier to understand. Appearing in only eight of the trousseaux, these were mostly staples like wheat or wine, valued on average L. 1 per dowry. A widow, Margarita Padroni, had 35 pounds of cheese and a barrel of vinegar, together worth L 10.15, to contribute to her new marriage in 1683.22 These bulk items, which would presumably be shared, remind us of how the dowry goods likely benefitted not just the bride, but the collective household.

The aggregate data suggests a real emphasis on linens, clothing, and practical items, whether furniture, fabric or fibers, utensils, food, and cash. Jewelry, luxury items, and works of art were not as prominent among artisan women. A bride brought to her marriage what she needed to be decently clothed, to keep a tidy house, and to complete daily tasks. In the amassing of her trousseau, one imagines the bride with her natal family making and collecting items over time, anticipating marriage. If the bride’s clothing aided her transformation into wife and allowed her to uphold social expectations of hygiene and self-presentation, so too did the other items. The chests protected her goods, and allowed her some autonomy within the house. The bed, sheets, and mattresses facilitated intimacy and reproduction. The cookware yielded nourishment. The looms, sewing baskets, and lengths of

21 ASBo, Notaio Bartolomeo Bocchini, dowry dated 11 September 1652.
22 ASBo, Notaio Giulio Cesare Bignardi, dowry dated 26 January 1683.
cloth and floss were fundamental in clothing members of the household and possibly generating income. All were predicated on women's labor, marking out a space of activity organized and maintained in large part by the women themselves.

Specific women's dowries: the varieties of distinction

While the overview above provides a general picture of the goods included in artisan women's trousseaux, individual examples suggest how dowries were tailored to a woman's needs and skills, her family's ability to provide for her, and the situation she was entering—namely, how well equipped her husband's house was. Beyond the general statistics, examining specific dowries opens a window onto the remarkably complex, individualized lives and possessions of early modern Bolognese women. Furthermore, those goods reveal details of women's daily activities, interests, and agency, demonstrating their impact in constituting new families, residences, and livelihoods.

The dowries of Domenica Magnani and Maria Ursina Capelli demonstrate two extremes in the range of possibilities for a trousseau. (See Table 2.1) While each woman had a dowry that was close to the average of the sample, the details were quite different. Magnani married Silvio Alberti, a weaver, in 1648 with a dowry of L. 640.10, but her husband received no cash. Instead, all of the dowry's value was in the trousseau goods. With a wide range of items that suggest Magnani and her husband were setting up a new household, the trousseau featured a bed with mattresses, covers, and a bed warmer; chests, chairs, a table, a buffet, a chest of drawers, a stool, and an armoire; tools for the fireplace and kitchen, such as fire grates and chains, cooking pots, a frying pan, a chestnut pan, a rolling pin, a grater, a scale, basins for laundry; brass candlesticks, four knives, four forks, and two spoons. Magnani also had an array of personal linens and clothing, including five bedsheets, sixteen camicie, aprons, handkerchiefs, tablecloths, napkins, six dresses, stockings, and slippers. She also had linen to make six more camicie, over 48 pounds of different grades of linen fibers, two pounds of cotton fiber dyed yellow, and a new silk loom. Her luxuries included five gold rings, a necklace of black gems strung with gold and pearls, a brass crucifix, and a large crystal mirror. Perhaps the families agreed that the dowry would consist entirely of the goods the couple needed for their new life together; if the husband had gotten cash, he might have spent it on the same items. Perhaps the new couple planned that Magnani would join her husband in
weaving or textile work, supplying income to make up for the lack of cash in the dowry. Her husband might have already had a loom for linen, ready to weave the fibers Magnani brought to the marriage; perhaps he wanted to expand his (or her) work into the more lucrative silk industry with the new loom. This speculation aside, it is clear from her trousseau that Magnani had the goods to keep a comfortable, efficient household, and the clothing and jewelry to present herself well.

In contrast, Maria Ursina Capelli’s material goods were much sparser. Capelli married the stocking-maker Pietro Trippi in 1689 with a dowry worth L. 654.5; most (L. 600) was paid in cash to her husband. Her goods totaled L. 54.5: one dress, six camicie, seven aprons, ten handkerchiefs, six pairs of stockings, two lengths of cloth (one linen and one hemp), sewing items, and a pair of walnut chests. She did not have any other furniture—no bed or mattresses—and no kitchen utensils; perhaps she was entering a well-furnished house. She brought some basics to her marriage, and presumably her husband was going to provide what she needed with the dowry funds he had received. Clothing her was now his responsibility and she represented his family with her appearance. Capelli and her husband probably would have discussed how much to spend, perhaps choosing together the cuts and fabrics, and she could have used her sewing cushion to mend, adapt, and embellish her clothing, new and old.

Magnani brought many goods to her marriage, items that she may have associated with her natal family and that she collected with their help. She might be using them on a daily basis, but they might be sold if she and her husband needed funds for something else. Capelli brought just a few items from her natal home, but more cash for her husband to purchase necessary items. Which situation—Magnani’s or Capelli’s—was better for a bride? As in cases like Magnani’s, did the bride do better by negotiating her trousseau goods with her family, rather than with her new husband? Or, as a wife, did a woman have more leverage to ask for what she wanted? How attached was she to these things in her trousseau, some of which were likely imbued with emotional content, but were all ultimately commodities or investments to be pawned or bartered if the need arose? These questions are difficult to answer, but the possibilities suggest the varied modes of women’s agency.

The dowries of Domenica China and Vittoria Cavezzoni provide two other types of extremes—the lowest and the highest valued dowries in the pool. China, the daughter of a carpenter, married Giovanni Francesco Mariani, a farm worker, in 1600.23 Along with L. 25 in cash, she brought a bed and two

23 ASBo, Notaio Pietro Zanettini, dowry dated 3 March 1600.
sheets, two simple dresses, four camicie, some linens, one chest, a tub, and two storage vessels, together worth L. 85.11. With so little allocated for her support during her marriage, China was likely going to work on the farm, although her meager goods covered more bases than Capelli’s. She provided the marital bed, some practical items, and modest clothing and linens.

At the top of the economic scale here, Vittoria Cavezzoni had a wider range of items in her 1650 dowry, valued at L. 1957.10, or L. 1450 in cash and L. 507.10 for the trousseau. Her inventory included an elaborate bed and lots of furniture, including a credenza, a prie-dieu, shelves, chairs, benches, and more, which suggests that she was entering sparsely furnished quarters. But she had relatively few personal linens to put in her four chests (worth L. 70). She had the basics, like two camicie, two bedsheets, and several tablecloths and napkins, among other items, and twenty braccie (‘feet’) each of linen and hemp, perhaps destined for more linens to fill out her supply. Cavezzoni’s inventory listed only three dresses: one green silk (L. 40), one black brushed wool (L. 20), and one in plain green cloth (L. 5). The handful of kitchen items she brought with her were inexpensive, except for two iron-encircled barrels valued at L. 31.10. She had no jewelry, but her collection of twelve works of art perhaps took its place, worth L. 57. While the inventory did not record the artists of these works, it did list the subjects, which were all religious, including a relief of the Madonna of the Rosary, two paintings of Jesus, and paintings of the Flagellation, the local Madonna della Vita, St. Anthony, St. John, and a six-part life of the prodigal son. The art spoke to her spirituality, but also perhaps to the couple’s interest in artistic display. Cavezzoni might have been related to the painter Francesco Cavezzoni, although a connection is difficult to trace. Regardless, she was marrying a printer, Giovanni Battista di Alessandro Zoli, who may have worked with artists to reproduce their works. Akin to jewels, these small, portable works of art attested to the couple’s status and were probably stable assets. Perhaps augmenting a collection of art owned by her husband, the works demonstrated the couple’s artistic connections and erudition, qualities that could enhance his business. With the array of items in her dowry, Cavezzoni had a significant impact on her new household.

Angela Alboni, a maid for the noble Allamandini family, had a remarkably substantial dowry for her wedding to a shoemaker, Domenico Maria Chechi, in 1634: L. 800 in cash and L. 507.5 in goods. How did a servant amass such a large dowry, one well above the average of the pool? The inventory offers

---

24 ASBo, Notaio Cornelio Berti, dowry dated 9 September 1650.
some clues. Antoni possessed the highest number of camicie in the selected records, a total of 50, worth L. 100, noted as used, some for men, some for women. In addition, along with a length of fine green cloth and spools of thread, she had 52 braccie of fabric specifically destined for more camicie, worth L. 30. The dowry does not elaborate, but her tasks for the Allamandini might have been to make this type of garment and other linens, clothing her employer’s family; she might have had plans to continue to work in this sector after marriage. As a skilled worker, she might have earned enough to save the money in her dowry, but she also might have been paid in goods, which was not uncommon. Beyond all those used camicie, Alboni possessed fourteen dresses, described as new, used, or rotte (‘broken’ or ‘worn out’); the two finest ones were together worth an impressive L. 110. While used items were common in the selected dowries, rotte was a rare qualifier; brides probably did not want to bring worn-out goods to their marriages. But Alboni’s three decrepit dresses were still worth L. 4. All goods had value, and perhaps she planned to refashion them into something new. She also had three pairs of sleeves, six chests, a bedstead, mattresses, five blankets, a dozen sheets, some pillowcases and other linens, and several kitchen utensils, including a skillet, a knife, and eight spoons. The dowry was drawn up in the Allamandini household and no one from the bride’s family was present, which suggests that she might have been an orphan and that her employer sanctioned her departure. Alboni’s dowry reminds us the trousseau was an investment. Those camicie made for men could have been a gift to her husband’s family, or were meant to be sold or bartered for other goods. Moreover, her dowry shows that someone who worked as a servant was not without the means to marry quite well.

Conclusions

Marriage was a fundamentally transformative event in a young woman’s life. We can imagine that emotions were likely mixed when a bride left her natal family and joined her husband: sadness as she left what was familiar, excitement on becoming a wife and potentially a mother, fear of complications from pregnancy, hopes that she would have a happy and prosperous marriage, apprehension about getting along with her husband and his family, and much more. The goods a bride brought with her to her marriage ensured some continuity with the past and provided a material base for the future. Finding further documentation on these women is difficult, so we need to extrapolate whenever possible to understand their lives. As those
who work in archival sources understand, only occasionally can one find the same artisan name in records. An example of this rarity underscores the precarity of women’s lives. Ursula Francesca Tiarini married in July 1668 and died in December of the same year, her dowry and her last testament documented in the same notary’s records. 26 Tiarini’s trousseau featured goods to sustain her, whether through sewing, weaving, cooking, cleaning, or simply looking well. Upon her death, those goods, once imbued with hope and now associated with loss, were returned to her natal family.

From this pool of 60 sources, we have seen that there are distinct constants in artisan women’s dowries in seventeenth century in Bologna, alongside individual variations and a few surprises. Personal linens and clothing, the basic components of dress, were prioritized, and these items were relatively valuable. Furniture and kitchen utensils facilitated women’s activities and filled out the house and offer ample evidence of women’s contributions to its management. During this period of increasing industrialization of textile production, only a few women’s dowries mention looms and sewing kits, but the greater presence of cloth and fibers suggests some sort of textile work in their futures. The cooking and other utensils speak to their control of everyday resources. From their dowries, we can get a sense of the work these women likely performed in their new situation—cooking, cleaning, weaving, sewing—but it was not all utilitarian drudgery. Even artisans could afford some small luxury, whether it was a rosary, a necklace, a painting, or a fur muff, which could strengthen their spiritual life or display their prosperity and status. Despite the limited documentation on artisan women in seventeenth-century Bologna, a study of their dowries provides unique insights into many aspects of their daily lives, allowing us to understand how the world of goods they brought to their marriages anchored a rich and nuanced realm of female agency in early modern Italy.

Works cited

Manuscripts and archival documents

Archivio di Stato of Bologna (ASBo)
Notarial archives (Notarile)
Notaio Bartolomeo Albertini, 1646–1649

26 ASBo, Notaio Ippolito Miglioli, documents dated 3 July and 4 December 1668. Tiarini’s goods are not a part of this study since her trousseau goods were not individually valued.
Notaio Bartolomeo Serafino Betti, 1699–1700
Notaio Cornelio Berti, 1650–1659
Notaio Giulio Cesare Bignardi, 1660–1672
Notaio Bartolomeo Bocchini, 1636–1674
Notaio Achille Canonici, 1629–1635
Notaio Giulio Drusi, 1614–1646
Notaio Marco Antonio Fasanini, 1619
Notaio Giuseppe Magnani, 1670
Notaio Giovanni Cesare Manolesi, 1647
Notaio Ippolito Miglioli, 1665–1668
Notaio Giovanni Lorenzo Muzzi, 1646–1647
Notaio Lorenzo Pellegrini, 1631–1685
Notaio Antonio Pettinari, 1679–1683
Notaio Ludovico Salani, 1683
Notaio Domenico Sandri, 1665–1670
Notaio Antonio Maria Tedeschi, 1689–1690
Notaio Pietro Zanettini, 1555–1605

Printed works

Hohti, Paula, ‘Dress, Dissemination and Change: Artisan “Fashions” in Renaissance Italy’, in *Fashioning the Early Modern: Creativity and Innovation in*


Muzzarelli, Maria Giuseppina, Guardaroba Medievale (Bologna: il Mulino, 1999).

Muzzarelli, Maria Giuseppina, ed., La Legislazione Suntuaria secoli XIII–XVI: Emilia Romagna (Bologna: Ministerio per i beni e le attività culturali Direzione generale per gli archivi, 2002).


Niccoli, Ottavia, Storie di ogni giorno in una città del Seicento (Rome: Laterza, 2000).


About the author

Joyce de Vries is a professor of art history at Auburn University. Her research focuses on gender, material culture, patronage, and collecting in early modern Italy. She is the author of Caterina Sforza and the Art of Appearances: Gender, Art, and Culture in Early Modern Italy (Ashgate, 2010).