

Veils in the Western World: a Thousand-Year History

by Francesca Canadé Sautman

Men and women have been wearing veils for over a millennium in the West. Nicole Pellegrin shows that, far from always being a response to religious or moral precepts, head coverings also tell us about the aesthetic experiences of a Western world hungry for transparency.

About: Nicole Pellegrin. *Voiles. Une histoire du Moyen Âge à Vatican II*, Paris, CNRS Éditions

In 410 erudite pages, Nicole Pellegrin offers up a magnificent historical, cultural, psychological, sociological and anthropological exploration of the forms, practices and uses of veils worn and represented in a Western context, and more specifically in France, from the Middle Ages to the 1960s. The covering of one's head using one or several pieces of fabric long remained a key element in a person's clothing and occupies both private and public spaces through its strong aesthetic and symbolic presence. Examining veiling within the framework of both lay and religious rituals means coming into contact with displays of mourning, with the expression of emotions, with the affirmation of secrecy, of nobility, of social hierarchy, of separation, of appearances—all experiences which are not the exclusive province of women, but whose persistent association with women doubtless is of interest in terms of gender history and theory.

N. Pellegrin underlines, unravels and examines the plurality of head coverings, these “supple and unsewn pieces of clothing that cover the upper part of the body,

and in particular the head”, “objects that are fascinating, since they are material and poetic, allegorical and heavy” (p. 5-6). She reminds us of the meanings that have been attached over the centuries to these simple textile artefacts that crystallise tensions in our globalised, post-colonial world. Her book shows how we are nothing less than transparent, visible and legible.

A Multiplicity of Realities and Meanings

From the start, N. Pellegrin makes clear her desire to “disorient or at least decentre herself”, to attempt to establish “insightful series” of images that do not oppose “dreams” to “knowledge”, to let herself be guided by experts in some areas while also not hesitating to “dislocate time” (p. 9 and 11). Her essay, which is broken down into 5 chapters and accompanied by around a hundred illustrations ends with a rich bibliography including the most recent publications on specialized aspects of the history of clothing, of textile practices and their representations, and of veils in art or in Islam.

While it does not shy away from the violent controversies that have surrounded the wearing of Islamic headscarves for the past thirty years (particularly in France), *Voiles* does not take a relativist approach. The book avoids this well-intentioned but restrictive perspective which, by juxtaposing head coverings from different regions, cultures and religions, claims to be able to draw a clear transcultural truth from this proximity. One of the things that makes this work original is that it starts with shared Western models in the cultures of Antiquity and the Middle Ages before focussing on France from the *Ancien Régime* through to the contemporary period, during which this country, due to the major role played by Republican secularism or *laïcité*,¹ no longer makes room for wearing a headscarf. In so doing, it examines the more shadowy areas of familiar cultural realms—through explorations of the veils of communicants (Chapter 3), of nuns and nurses at the start of the 20th century (Chapter 4) or the history of regional costumes (Chapter 5).

An examination of the ambiguities of male covering provides a strategic opening for the book. It highlights the complexity of messages and practices, from the blue men of the Tuareg country to the sculptures of male weepers in Burgundy in the

¹ Translator’s Note: *term* referring to the strict separation of church and state in France, according to which the public sphere must be kept free of signs of religious affiliation.

15th century: men tend to cover their faces above all, a location in the body that arouses particularly virulent conflicts from a Western perspective. In fact, Western women who would cover their faces in the Middle Ages and in the early years of the modern era were often suspected of doing so in order to cultivate amorous liaisons without being recognised. Veils have thus not always been signs of piety, modesty and chastity.

In her analysis of representations of the life of the Virgin Mary and of the Crucifixion (Chapter 2), N. Pellegrin looks at the colour ranges of veils and highlights the relationships, which are known but always insufficiently explored, between the *perizoma* of Christ (a piece of cloth signalling the truth revealed in Christ and the theological mark of his humanity) and his mother's veil (p. 130).

As the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance, this parallel also offered artists an opportunity to explore ways of giving an impression of transparency. These images' narrative programmes encourage us to perceive the sacredness of the veil as an artefact of worship and a spiritual instrument which goes far beyond notions of modesty. The author takes an original position by examining the striped cloth sometimes worn by Mary (pp. 142 and 152), which has a long history as a regional garment in the Mediterranean region. By suggesting that the way in which the art of sewing replaced a stretch of uncut cloth—the veil or scarf—with a constructed and assembled object may have led to one-upmanship in the representation of the sacred, and therefore of the Virgin and female saints (p. 74), N. Pellegrin also stresses the role played by technology in ideological developments.

Paul and Virginal Modesty

Yet, in the West, it is difficult to distinguish veils from their association with prescriptions dating back to Saint Paul, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian—the latter of which in fact made a connection between transgression, sin, guilt and women covering their head. At one extreme, the veil is connected to the idea of modesty, and by extension of chastity, which is required of women only; and because the Epistle to the Corinthians invokes women's obedience, these two injunctions become conflated. At the other extreme, the veil is a sign of separation, of protection of purity and sacredness, and, at the secular level, of social hierarchies. As an item of clothing, it adorns the most honourable part of the body: the head. Paradoxically, when the veil attracts attention, it is to this place of honour—a concept anchored in Roman Antiquity

and evident in medieval examples (be they literary or drawn from contemporary anecdotes), in which a head covering is ripped off a woman's head to humiliate her.

The Paulinian text is constantly referred to in discussions of the head coverings worn by Christian women, but we too often forget that the injunction concerns the clothing of women in religious situations and is separate from the apostle's ideas on the social and familial inferiority of women, which he asserted later (pp. 75-81). For a long time, this text was read as instituting the obligation for women to cover their head, but people are too hasty in drawing the conclusion that the head covering and obedience were permanently established from this point onwards—until (after the Second World War, or later depending on the country) total visibility became the dominant imperative. The fact that this imperative has become an imposition of the gaze on the whole body suggests that the gendered hierarchy of the gaze has shifted but remains complete—an aspect of the question that is too often forgotten when people are inveighing against veils. We might in fact benefit from drawing a connection between the visibility of the body and the long struggle of women in France for the right to wear trousers...

In story 32 of Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*, an adulterous woman appears with a shaved head, because "the veil is no fitting garment for an immodest woman". The modesty that the head covering is meant to protect does indeed imply the sexualisation of the body, as is underlined by the etymology of the word itself in French: *pudeur*. While the idea of *pudeur* seems to accompany any discussion of veils, it provides an unstable foundation, for it is a term that contains very different ideas. The meaning of the word "*pudeur*" is not obvious in itself; it does not, for example, have the same etymology as the English "modesty" (*modestia* in Italian). And we are certainly not dealing with the same thing when we refer to the Quran, which many Western commentators have the unfortunate habit of doing based on translations, and without sufficient knowledge of the Arabic language. It would for example be useful to pay attention to the considerably varied vocabulary that commentators in different languages attribute to the Prophet's words on the issue. A very different perspective is provided by the examination of the meanings attributed to the *'awrah* (relationship to the body, clothing, exhibitionism, voyeurism) in texts by Muslim jurists. Furthermore, Jean-Claude Bologne has attempted to historicise the discourse around *pudeur* and to draw a distinction between *pudeur* as shame and *pudeur* as respect, or between *pudeur* and decency, in order to rehabilitate *pudeur* without shame. This attempt refocuses the discussion beyond clichés, but the history of *pudeur*, even if we

only examine the period of the Renaissance,² is so complex that it is difficult to confine it to a single chapter.

From Headscarves to Headdresses

The obligation to cover one's head in the West has a non-linear history, of which N. Pellegrin retraces the various digressions. The medieval model of the monastic-looking veil, to which was added a wimple covering the bottom of the face, was neither universal nor timeless. It is complicated by the idea that queens did not have to wear a veil, like the bareheaded Virgins, but that they are nevertheless often depicted as wearing a head covering. And what should we say about this image, common in medieval manuscripts, of naked women going to bathe with their lovers, but with their heads covered? With the rise of fashion in the 14th century, women's hair, braided and rolled up, was visible around their head, and their head covering was a small piece of transparent cloth floating behind the hair. When these bands were rolled up inside increasingly ornate hairnets, becoming lavish *templières* attached to a mount, they mutated into horns which riled the moralists of the early 15th century—the bejewelled rolls of Isabeau of Bavaria. In the 15th century, they turned into towers, sugar loafs and conical forms—perhaps as a form of resistance to the control exerted by the authorities on individuals through extravagant laws and moralising discourse, since in Italy, during the Renaissance, women's head coverings had varied and even contradictory meanings. In France and in England, in the early 16th century, aristocratic women wore a heavy hood made of serge or velvet that fell down to their shoulders, displayed sumptuously ornate strata and was no longer transparent but rather thick and dark. This fashion was short-lived, since the dividing line between hair and headdress kept receding further, and, under the impulse of Marguerite de Valois, women wore a cap quite similar to that of men—a fashion her admirer Brantôme referred to as “adonising”.

Regional headdresses, which were still worn in some places in the 20th century, adorned the head with unwieldy scaffolding or revealed forms of veils. These are the object of a particularly interesting chapter in *Voiles* in which the author examines collections of costumes in France in the 18th century and proves how old they are. The

² See Dominique Brancher, *Équivoques de la pudeur – Fabrique d'une passion à la Renaissance*, Droz, 2015. (<https://booksandideas.net/Immodest-Modesty.html>)

examples she mentions—the Pyrenean *capulet*, or the lace sugar loaf of the Bigouden headdress, the mantle with a pointed hat that was still being worn in the Bresse region in the 19th century, the Genoese *mezzaro* worn in Corsica—all illustrate this. Of course, these headdresses are a reflection of patriarchal traditions, but they do not only aim to repress; they are rooted in community practices, and women thus publicly display their own identity. No longer a mere head covering, the headdress becomes a head object that gives the woman wearing it a clear visibility.

Spaces

Voiles also examines the more general meaning of the veil as a screen, curtain etc. The veil hides but does not make invisible: it makes things opaque, impossible to decipher and to soil through contact, including eye contact. *Comment le voile est devenu musulman (How the Veil Became Muslim)*, by Bruno Nassim³ explains this meaning of the term *hijab* in its sacred and architectural use: the thickness of the *hijab* protects mortals from the power of divine rays, just as a veil protects the people from the sight of the sovereign in the Orient—a sight that is unbearable because it is sublime. The veil is also part of the Christian notion of the sacred: thus, the veil of the Temple is never open or pulled to the side but is torn during the Crucifixion. Its presence, material and metaphorical, is indispensable: the liturgical veil around the divine presence divides the sacred space—as is the case with the closing of the Byzantine sanctuary, where the main gate often has a veil. The same applies to the veil given by Mary and signalling the fast in a tale of a Beguine, an embroidered piece of cloth that hangs in front of the sanctuary door during Lent as a sign of repentance.

Even if the action of covering oneself up has a different meaning depending on time and place, and does not reflect a single truth or experience, the individuality of this gesture is negated because the figure of the woman wearing a veil becomes a metonymy for entire cultures and religions, and the Western world remains obsessed with the idea of transparency, of the necessity of lifting the veil. Paradoxically, those who denounce headscarves in the name of the dignity of women obstinately refuse to recognise any kind of agency⁴ among the women who actually choose to wear them,

³ Bruno Nassim Aboudrar, *Comment le voile est devenu musulman*, Flammarion, 2014, p. 178-180.

⁴ See Amélie Le Renard, “Lectures et usages féministes de l’islam”, *La Vie des idées*, 31 January 2013 (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Lectures-et-usages-feministes-de-l.htmlaux>).

or to hear their voices, even though they may have expressed themselves clearly on the subject.

Despite the connection, since Antiquity, between women's head coverings, a gendered hierarchy, and unequal moral standards, we cannot ignore the fact that the veil carries other meanings articulated around the opposition between private and public, sacred and polluted, revealed and hidden, but also around a material relationship with the textile artefact, and that this artefact is a form, either rigid or falling into folds, that inhabits our visual culture. *Voiles* beautifully sums up these contradictions in the following phrase: let us try to

“understand the violence and beauty of all veils, whether worn or fantasised about, in the “Western world”. Violence-and-beauty, two terms that are inextricably linked” (p. 12).

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