

**A European History of the Parasol
through the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries**

by Margaret Roe

The earliest history of the parasol is somewhat difficult to trace, and the exact time of its introduction can only be quantified in a broad range. Although the parasol is well over 3000 years old, its introduction to Europe was quite slow and limited. The Greeks adopted it into religious ceremonies sometime around the eighth century B.C., and the Romans inherited it somewhere around the third century B.C. By the fall of the Roman Empire, however, the parasol was largely forgotten in Europe, except for its use in religious services.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the parasol was seen as honorific and symbolic, predominantly used in the religious ceremonies of the church. The earliest record of a parasol in Christian artwork is in an eighth century image of Bishop John of Pavia, showing him followed by a servant carrying an umbrella (von Boehn). The next available image is in the twelfth century frescos of the Donation of Constantine. The frescos show the Emperor Constantine giving one to the Pope Sylvester I (314 - 335). It is unlikely this event occurred, yet it demonstrates the painter was familiar with the parasol (Crawford).



Donation of Constantine

The earliest available written evidence of the parasol is in the eighth century. Pope Paul I (757-767) bestowed a jeweled parasol to Pepin the Short as part of a peace settlement. Not long after, Bishop Aluin of Tours sent Bishop Arno of Salzburg what was likely a parasol as well (Crawford). By the eighth century A.D., the umbrella was firmly established in the church.



Doge of Venice

The one remaining holdout for the parasol in the Middle Ages was in Venice. In 1177, Pope Alexander III bestowed the parasol upon Doge Sebastiano Ziani (Crawford). The Doges of Venice held onto the parasol custom throughout the Middle Ages, and did not release it until the end of the Republic (von Boehn). In a drawing of the Doge from the early Renaissance Period, this umbrella was seen being carried by a man behind the Doge, much like a flag is carried for presentation or in a parade today (Crawford). The umbrella in this drawing is much like one in the collection at Waddesdon Manor in England. According to Matthew Hirst, the current Curator at Waddesdon Manor, it was made for the Doge Domenico Contarini II (born 1581, Doge 1659-1675). Hirst further stated that the umbrella was made by an unknown craftsman in 1666, and it has a crimson brocaded silk damask covering of the

1690s.¹

By the thirteenth century, the parasol had begun to transform into the *baldachinum*, a canopy on four to six poles. Although originally of cloth of purple bedecked with jewels, it eventually turned into a loose cloth draped over the poles. In time, this canopy was carried above both popes and monarchs (Crawford).

By the fifteenth century, the pope was regularly seen abroad, traveling under an umbrella of striped red and gold, the papal colors, with a sphere or cross on top. In particularly important processions, two umbrella carriers, with one open and one closed parasols, which symbolized the spiritual and temporal powers, accompanied the pope (von Boehn).

By the sixteenth century, parasols had spread throughout Italy, into Spain, and had begun to spread further north in Europe. The best pictorial evidence of parasols from this time comes from foreign travelers in Italy and Spain, who often brought back small paintings of Italian costumes. Among the images from these travelers in Italy is one drawing, dated 1587, of "a mounted cavalier shielding himself from the sun by means of a red parasol, green fringed, entitled "Thus one rides in Italy in summer"" (von Boehn). Another image, in the *Album Amicorum of a German Soldier*, shows a gentleman riding a horse, carrying a blue parasol with gold fringe.



Festa in Maschera

In addition to the drawings that travelers took home with them after their travels in Italy, there are several Italian images and accounts. One drawing, from Venice in 1595, shows a small masked group, with a lady beneath a parasol in the right corner. Almost thirty years later, Marchesa Elen Grimaldi was painted standing under a crimson umbrella held by a slave. This painting was likely inspired by oriental paintings popular at the time (Farrell).

Moreover, Princess Anna Catherine Gonzaga of Mantua, had a parasol included in her trousseau when she married Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol in 1582 (Crawford).

In France, there were several authors who wrote about parasols. In 1578, Henri Estiennes mentioned them in *Deux Dialogues du Nouveau Langage François Italianizé*. Fourteen years later, Michel de Montaigne remarks that they seem to be more of "a burden to the arm than a protection to the head" when the ladies of Lucca, Tuscany carry them. Several other French accounts of the later half of the sixteenth century report parasols being taken out on the hunt, but it is unclear whether they were carried by their users, or by servants who procured them during breaks on the chase (Crawford).

Even with these accounts, it is difficult to pinpoint when the parasol arrived in France. It is disputed whether Catherine de Medici brought a parasol with her to France in the 1530's. If in

¹Images of this parasol can be found by contacting Waddesdon Manor, or can be found in: Finch, Karen and Greta Putnam. *The Care and Preservation of Textiles*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., Publishers. 1977. p. 101 - 105.

fact she did, the parasol once in the Musée de L'Hôtel de Cluny in Paris, may have truly belonged to Diane de Poitiers. The Hotel de Sully in Paris at one time also claimed to have had a parasol of blue silk decorated with golden fleur-de-lys, which reputedly belonged to Henri IV of France. Henri's son, Louis XIII, had "five Turkish and German umbrellas for use in the sun" in 1619 (Crawford). By his reign, the umbrella had taken firm hold in France.



Parasol of Diane de Poitiers

The arrival of the parasol in Scotland, however, is more definite, and thereby can place the parasol in France at least by the 1560's. Mary, Queen of Scots, returned to Scotland in 1562 with "a little canopy of crimson satin of three quarters long, furnished with fringes and tassels made of gold and crimson silk, many little painted buttons, all serving to bear, to make shadow for the Queen" (Crawford). Three years later, Servais de Condez, responsible for much of Mary's "movable property," notes in her inventories "ung petit pavillon qui set donbre devan sa majestez lequel est à son cabinet" (Farrell). This translates to "a small pavilion, used as shade in front of her majesty, which is in her cupboard." Farrell points that although this could be a small tent, it likely was not, as it was kept in a cupboard in her apartments, and is described much like the papal umbrella. These parasols likely were made in France, and brought back with Mary when she returned to Scotland, as there is no evidence of the parasol in Scotland before this date.

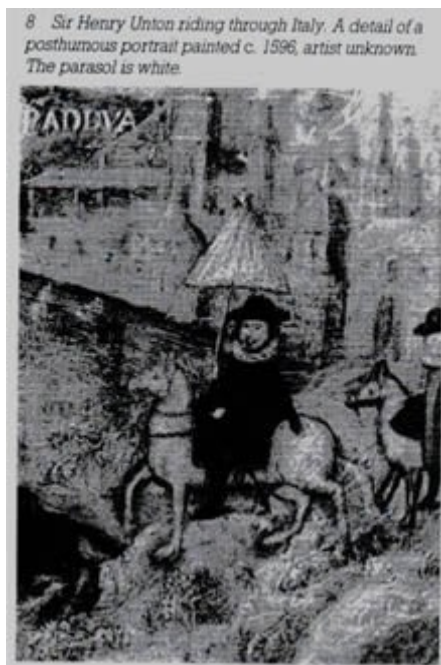
The English references to parasols are much more difficult to acquire, largely because of the variety of words used to name the parasol. No word for the parasol came directly from the English language. Instead, the English imported words from France, Italy and Spain, and took words they already used for similar objects to refer to the parasol. From the French and Italians, the English received *ombrelle*, *ombrella*, *ombriere*, and *umbrella*, which come from the Latin word *umbra*, meaning shade. They also received the French and Italian words *parasol* and *parasole*, from the Latin *parare*, meaning to shield and *sol*, meaning sun (Cotgrave, Florio). Cotgrave defines the French words *ombrelle*, *ombriere*, and *parasol* as "a (fashion of) round and broad fan, wherewith the Indians (and from them our great ones) preserve themselves from the heat of a scorching sun, and hence, any little shadow, fan or thing wherewith women hide their faces from the sun." Meanwhile, Florio defines the Italian words with slight differences. He defines *ombrella* as "a canopy, testern, or cloth of state for princes," or "a woman's fan or ombrell as they use in Italy to ride with over their heads to shadow themselves from the sun." Yet he defines *parasole* as "any thing to keep or guard one from the sun."

The earliest word used in England, however, was *quitasol*, received from Spain. In *A Dictionaire of Spanish and English*, Minsheu defined *quitasol* the same as he defined *tiresol*: "a kind of hat used in China, very broad, which the principal men carry over their heads, with a short pole or staff, like a canopy, to keep off the...sun." This definition clarifies the use of another word used in England for a parasol, *sombrero*.

The words the English choose from their own language become much more logical when

the definition of the foreign words are taken into consideration. One English traveler calls the parasol a "shadow" (Crawford). Additionally, the wardrobe accounts in 1600 of Elizabeth I list "one Canopie of Crimson Capha damaske (to carrie over one) striped with lace of venice golde and sylver the handle Mother of p(ear)le" (Arnold). The English choose words not only to describe the parasol, but that were in line with the foreign words they acquired.

With such a long list of words, it becomes easier to find the parasol in English literature. The earliest references to the parasol come from men who traveled in Italy and Spain. In his travels in the late 1590's, Fynes Moryson noted that in Italy, the parasol was to be carried at an angle behind the head, because to carry it above the head was believed to trap the heat in its peak, and "cast it down" upon the user. (Crawford) Tom Coryate published his book, *Coryate's Crudites*, about his travels in 1608, in which he describes a hooped, leather parasol. What's more, Robert Cocks brought back a "kitesol" given to him by a Chinese man in 1615 (Crawford).



Detail of Sir Henry Unton

In addition to these accounts, the parasol is found in the portrait of Sir Henry Unton. A detail of this portrait shows Unton using a parasol when traveling from the Alps to Padua in the 1570s (Crawford). The parasol in this posthumous portrait indicates that the painter either referenced a parasol Unton brought back with him, or was already familiar with the item, but no evidence remains to indicate his inspiration (Farrell).

Parasols were also referred to in the literature of the early seventeenth century. The first publication using the word *quitasol* was made by Robert Parke in 1588, in his translation of Gonzalez de Mendoza's *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China* (Crawford). John Donne made the first contextual use of umbrella in 1609, but he may have seen umbrellas in his travels as a young man (Crawford). In 1616, Ben Johnson, in *The Devil is an Ass*, declares a woman fell over, "flat-spread as an

umbrella." Eight years later, Beaumont and Fletcher mention the parasol in *Rule a Wife, Have a Wife*: "Is your heart at rest/now that you have got a shadow, and umbrella/To keep the scorching world's opinion/from your fair credit?" To be used in such literature, the parasol must have been familiar to Englishmen of all classes.

The parasol is also mentioned in several inventories and wills. Most notably, Janet Arnold points one out in Elizabeth I's wardrobe accounts of 1600 (Farrell). In his will, Robert Toft bequeathed "an umbrello of perfumed leather with gold fringe about it, which I bought in Italy," in 1618 (Crawford).

While the parasol's existence in Italy was continuous since the Roman Empire, its arrival in

much of Europe is much more difficult to pinpoint. It was slow to appear outside of Italy until the sixteenth century, and the many names by which it was referred make it's migration more difficult to track. In all likelihood, Spain adopted the parasol by the early sixteenth century, and France followed not long behind. It was indisputably in Scotland by the 1560's, and was well known to the English in the early seventeenth century. Although the parasol was slow to arrive in England, by the early seventeenth century, it was known everywhere in Western Europe.

Construction Methods and Materials

There appear to be two distinct styles of parasol frame construction in sixteenth century Europe.

The first style of frame construction, thought to be oriental in origin, is much like the frames are constructed today. In the nineteenth century, the Musée de L'Hôtel de Cluny in Paris (now the Musée National de Moyen Age) had a parasol of this type of construction, which reputedly once belonged to Diane de Poitiers. The engraving of this parasol shows it to have "six ribs, rectangular in section, fitted at one end to a top notch, and at the middle to stretchers, which in turn fit into a notched sliding ring on a stick to open and fold the parasol" (Farrell). Although the provenance may be doubted, it would seem to support the description made by Estiennes. Henri Estiennes wrote in *Deux Dialogues du Nouveau Langage François Italianizé*:

"...have you ever seen what some of the lords in Spain or Italy carry or cause to be carried about the country to defend themselves, not so much from the flies, as from the sun? It is supported by a stick, and so being made that being folded up and occupying very little space, it can when necessary be opened immediately and stretched out so as to cover three or four persons."

These accounts indicate a collapsible frame, but the ribs remain straight, indicating a flat, angled cover.

The second method of frame construction is much more unusual. Tom Coryate's describes this type of frame in *Coryate's Crudites*. He wrote, "...these are made of leather, something answerable to the form of a little canopy, and hooped inside with divers little wooden hoops that extend the umbrella in a pretty large compass." This seems to be a description of a parasol, more "bell-shaped" than those parasols held out by spokes and stretchers (Farrell). The shape seems to be similar to a little farthingale, held out by rows of hoops, and attached to a long handle. Sadly, we have no pictorial evidence that clearly demonstrates this particular style of parasol.

Both styles of parasol frames were often made of hard woods, and quite heavy to carry. Montaigne, when describing them carried by the ladies of Lucca, Tuscany, notes that they "are rather a burden to the arm than a protection to the head." The account of Elizabeth's parasol, listed in the Stowe Inventory, mentions a mother-of-pearl handle. In the early seventeenth century France, the wood frame had begun to be replaced with whalebone, but the frame was still quite heavy. However, John Evelyn wrote in 1644 that Italian parasols were still made of wood, metal and straw, and still had the bell-shaped covers (von Boehn).

The parasol covers lent themselves to much more elegant materials and decorating than the frames. The papal parasols were frequently red and yellow, and greatly bejeweled. Mary, Queen of Scots' parasol was covered in satin, decorated with silk and gold fringe and tassels, and painted buttons (Crawford). Henri IV's was made of blue silk, and Elizabeth I's was of damask (Crawford, Farrell). Coryate describes the parasols he saw as made of leather, and Robert Toft mentioned a leather one in his will. At first glance, leather seems to be a heavy material for a parasol, but Michael Drayton infers that parasols were also used for wet weather, which may give explanation for the use of leather (Crawford). No expense was spared in building, covering, or decorating the parasols of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

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