

# “E poi se piglieno per mano”

## A brief study of hand holds in 15th- and 16th-century portraits.

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“And then they take hands” – a simple enough injunction! But one which, where 15th- and 16th- century dance is concerned, gives rise to much speculation and diverse opinion. From the often bawdy implications (or indeed practices) of the peasant dancers of, for example, Bruegel or Dürer, to the curiously stilted and more stylised poses seen in portraits of the nobility, it would appear that the laissez-faire conduct of the village green may well be accurately recorded while, even at court, no one fashion prevailed. The manner of holding a partner within the dance seems as diverse as the number of couples portrayed doing it. Several early treatises afford us a variety of examples; from the demure trio who grace the Paris Guglielmo MS to those severe figures which inhabit the volumes of Negri and Caroso. Unfortunately for the 20th-century historian there is, throughout the entire corpus of early descriptions of dance, one recurrent theme; this is that since everyone knows how to take hands it is not necessary to describe in any detail the manner of performance of such an action.

For these dancers, as perhaps no longer for us, the joining of hands in the dance must have seemed quite natural. Daily practice in the social graces, which include the art of dancing, obviously precluded the necessity of separate instruction in such a simple matter. But even a cursory glance at the various portrayals of these people in the (presumed) act of dancing reveals several anomalies. Hands are joined in many and various ways and at many and various levels; much variety in the manner of contact, be it finger, hand, arm, shoulder or even sleeve or kerchief is also recorded. Setting aside the now unanswerable question as to whether or not these figures are indeed dancing, what can be observed about the ways in which they perform this simple act of holding hands?

Since it appears to be an isolated case, take first the miniature of the demure trio in the Paris Guglielmo MS<sup>1</sup> already mentioned (see illus. 1). The gentleman's hands, held at shoulder height, clasp the **little fingers** of his two ladies. The position of his arms confirms that his is the supporting role; their arms are more outstretched. But what of their free, outside arms? Many have commented that, of the two, only one – the left arm of the lady on the gentleman's left – can be in opposition to the right-foot-forward position adopted by all three. There are several possible explanations; one of them is that recurrent bugbear to the 20th-century observer – artistic licence. Our appreciation of the accurate portrayal of dress in many Italian Renaissance paintings does not permit us to presuppose a similar accuracy in the artistic presentation of the moving figure. But is it unnatural, especially since her left hand is held in the shoulder-high position, that the right arm of the lady on the gentleman's right should move across her body as her right foot moves? It is surely less masculine or athletic than a 'normal' contrary arm-swing. Although one of the ladies holds a handkerchief of the finest gold material, it is not inconceivable, to judge by the length of the ladies' skirts, that the free hands of both ladies are so held in anticipation of, if not already engaged in, controlling those flowing robes. The pose can be compared to the similar stance of several of the ladies depicted on a Florentine marriage coffer of c.1475 (Sharp & Oppé: Plates 11+12), as well as the cover illustration of this journal.

This **little finger hold** appears in slightly different form in the Lorenzetti fresco *The City of Good Government*,<sup>2</sup> where eight dancers, apparently engaged in a farandole, join hands by their little fingers alone. Other portraits of line and circle dances reveal such **variety in hand holds** that it would appear that informality within the dance inspired individuality in performance. A further illustration of this freedom can be seen in the Morisco wood-cut<sup>3</sup> attributed to Dürer where at least one man has **both**

**his hands above** those of his female neighbours; this wood-cut is also the basis of the logo for Nonsuch (History & Dance) Ltd (see illus. 3).

A second trio of unknown provenance appears on the record sleeve of *Dance Music from Europe – Early 17th Century* (Arion: Arn 38316). To judge from the costumes however, this picture should be placed considerably earlier, perhaps even in the 15th-century. This trio, a woman between two men, must surely be dancing; musicians stand on each side, interestingly, a woman among them. The dancers' **hands are joined in the low position**, the woman's right hand in front and her left hand behind those of her male companions. Is there any significance in this order?

By way of an answer, let us look at some more formal portraits of couples in procession. Whether they are dancing may well be arguable even where there are musicians present, but one is immediately struck by the prevalence of what must seem to us, from our post 18th- if not post 16th-century view-point, an unusual hand hold. The **man's hand**, and occasionally his fore-arm, is frequently shown **in front** if not **on top of his lady's**, when hands are held waist high. Three well-known 15th-century pictures show this very clearly: the *Adimari cassone*<sup>4</sup> by an unknown Florentine master of 1420, the *Dance of the Daughter of Herodias*<sup>5</sup> by Israhel van Meckenem, and the *Bal à la Cour du Roi yon de Gascogne*<sup>6</sup> also known as the *Branle de la Serviette* from the *Roman de Renaud de Montauban* MS. Whether these couples are in fact dancing may be questioned, but in all three paintings, be they Italian, German or French, the **man's-hand-on-top** hold is unambiguous.

Also in doubt must be the nature of the activity in the Flemish portrayal of a carole in the *Roman de la Rose* MS<sup>7</sup> – a festival procession, certainly, since the gentleman wear, or carry, elaborately feathered hats and the man second in line bears a fantastic costume. One couple, albeit the most stationary in appearance, shows this same **man's-hand-on-top** hold, while the final pair use what might be termed a **normal** hold (see illus. 4). The first three men, however, have their hands tilted backwards at the wrist and therefore appear to be supporting their ladies' hands on their thumbs.

That this same divergence – or individuality – is not unknown in the 16th-century may be deduced from a painting (c.1580) by an unknown Venetian (Taibert p. 61) and assumed by Taibert to represent a pavan. While the leading couple use the **normal** hand hold the one immediately following reveals the **man's hand** to be **in front**. Despite the uniformity of opinion shown throughout the volumes of Negri and Caroso, this is not an isolated case. Again three paintings can be cited which depict the same hold: the portrait by François Clouet of the *Bal du duc de Joyeuse*<sup>8</sup> (1581), the picture (opposite p. 17 in Wildeblood's translation of de Lauze) of a couple dancing at a court ball, and, last but not least despite its size, the de Bry engraving<sup>9</sup> of six couples enjoying (to judge by the position of one couple) a pavan. No less than three of de Bry's couples, possibly four, show the **man's hand foremost** – quite the reverse of what we have now come to accept as correct.

What conclusions may be deduced from this **diversity of hand hold** within the otherwise regulated formality of the court dance? To work backwards through history may encourage many pre-conceptions. However, if we agree that much of our formal dance thinking has its origins firmly in the 18th-century, then we are immediately presented with a very clear picture, whichever authority we turn to, of the manner in which a man should present his hand to a lady. Courtesy and elegance, not unassociated with man's self-conscious awareness of his natural superiority (after all this was the Age of Reason), speak to us in every conscious movement.



## 1. LITTLE FINGER HOLD

Drawing based on pictorial reference 1.



## 2. LITTLE FINGER HOLD

Drawing from Life.

Continuing our journey backwards through the Restoration and the many excesses then considered quite natural, we become aware of a highly practised refinement. Grace and elegance infuse every gesture. No matter that underneath the gallantry, as underneath the clothes, lie many flaws: appearance is all. No matter that woman is often regarded as a chattel; the niceties prevailed – at least within the ballroom.

In the 16th-century, we have the fine anomaly that, although a woman's place is well down the legal scale, there is an extremely dominant woman on the English throne, a second (in name at least from her prison cell) Queen of Scots, a third the power behind the throne of France. Women, however much apparently subservient to the male, seem always to have maintained a prominent authority within the higher echelons of society. May it not be a part of man's consciousness of his (assumed) natural dominance that he can afford, with good grace, to pay compliment to the fairer weaker sex? Woman's position remains unchanged; vide the advice of Arbeau to Capriol on how to ask a woman to dance, and his surprise that one so honoured might contemplate refusal.

Earlier still was the period of 'Amour Courtois', chivalry par excellence, where the woman was admired, loved, even revered – but only from afar. That this was predominantly a literary phenomenon, bearing little relation to a society where the cream of manhood – or, more bluntly, the majority of able-bodied men – were absent from home for months at a time, does not preclude the fact that they were also alive to the enjoyment of dancing. The MSS of this period are frequently adorned with beautiful miniatures of musicians and dancers.

Yet somewhere in the passage of those 400 or 500 years, the overt politeness of the post 18th-century **proffered hand** has been lost. The earlier the period the more frequent the evidence of a hold apparently indicative of male dominance. Certainly a more aggressive masculinity is manifest in the dance of the 16th-century – in galliards and canaries for instance – yet this is precisely when the **man's-hand-on-top** hold is no longer paramount. Can we assume that, before this period, life within cultured society throughout Europe was so naturally male orientated that, despite the attention given to the acquisition of social graces, this one aspect was never considered? People took or touched hands in the dance, but not for long and never for a complete dance. Obviously the taking of hands is commonplace in country dancing be it danced in the country or at court, but only at specific moments and for specific movements. Yet this taking of hands would appear to be done rather for convenience in a particular figure than for any significance it might add to the dance. In 15th-century Italian *basse danze* and *balli*, on the other hand, the taking of hands may occur not merely at moments of turning, where it may add impulse and emphasis to the turn, but also at moments of honouring – whether with *continenze*, *riprese* or a full reverence. This implies a far greater consciousness of the inter-relationship between dancers and a deliberate acknowledgement of one's partner, of either sex, than that claimed by and for 18th-century courtesy.

Farandoles and round dances such as caroles and branles, and French and Burgundian *basse dances*, provide an obvious exception to those dances where hand holds are rare. But one picture of a group dancing a carole from a French MS of the *Roman de la Rose*<sup>10</sup> to be found in the Bodleian Library encourages further speculation. Should these dancers break up into couples, each man retaining the woman on his right – a relationship about which there seems little debate – the **man's-hand** would automatically be **-on-top**. Compare this possibly accidental transference of a hand hold into the couple dance with the frequent direction to be found in the dances of Domenico, Guglielmo and Cornazano that one of the dancers should find him- or her-self *di sopra*, or, more particularly, **mano di sopra**. This must surely be interpreted as implying a change of place in such a way that the dancer in question is to take the leading or dominant position. Can there be any merit in the suggestion that, from this simple accident of an already accepted hand hold, there comes a direction which has much intrigued modern interpreters of 15th-century Italian dance?

Interestingly, this **mano di sopra** hold proves to be one which affords easy control over a partner, a remark substantiated by



### 3. MAN'S-HAND-ON-TOP

Drawing based on pictorial reference 3.



### 4. NORMAL HAND HOLD

Drawing based on pictorial reference 7.

Andrea Francalanci, himself an authority on the dances of this period. That this hold also served when two women danced together can be seen in the detail from the fresco *The Wedding of Jacob and Rachel*.<sup>11</sup> Also in this picture is a second couple – intriguing in that they seem to be dancing with considerably less restraint – displaying, in an apparently formal setting, some of the informality more typical of peasant dancers. Yet neither is this an isolated case since, in the *ballare alla gagliarda* of Matteo di Giovanni da Siena,<sup>12</sup> a young couple dance in a very similar pose, **hands joined above**, even behind, the young man's head.

No pictorial evidence has emerged so far to justify the frequently adopted shoulder-high, palm-to-palm touching of hands, nevertheless it is a movement attractive both to do and to watch. In support of the manner of that contact let the final word be with Shakespeare, perhaps no dancer but incontestably an authority on human behaviour and surely not unacquainted with the intricacies of the dance:

“For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,  
And palm to palm is holy palmer’s kiss.”

## Pictorial References

### TITLE

1. *The Guglielmo Trio*
2. *The City of Good Government*  
fresco by Ambrosio Lorenzetti
3. *Morisco dancers*  
wood-cut attri. to Albrecht Dürer
4. *The Adimari cassone*  
unknown Florentine master
5. *Dance of the Daughter of Herodias*  
by Israhel von Meckenem
6. *Bal à la Cour de Roi Yon de Gascogne*  
from *Roman de Renaud de Montaudon*
7. *A Carole from Roman de la Rose*
8. *Bal du duc de Joyeuse*  
attri. François Clouet
9. *Court Dancers* by Theodore de Bry
10. *A Carole from Roman de la Rose*
11. *The Wedding of Jacob and Rachel*  
by Benozzo Gozzoli
12. *Ballare alla gagliarda*  
by Matteo di Giovanni da Siena

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