

## Shopping in the Renaissance. Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400–1600

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**Reviewer:**

Claire Judde de Larivière

Evelyn Welch's *Shopping in the Renaissance. Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400–1600* is a fascinating study which turns a common social practice into a compelling subject of research. The author's ability to employ different historical approaches at the same time confirms that cultural, social, economic and art history can enhance each other. This attractively illustrated volume is far more than a monograph on shopping activities in Renaissance Italy. It could be defined as a social history of Italy seen from the angle of shopping practices during a period of transition, between the Middle Ages and the early modern era. Focusing on diverse aspects of these practices – the people and the institutions involved, the time and the place of shopping, the different types of sale and shopping – Evelyn Welch offers a wide and lively picture of urban communities in Renaissance Italy.

As the author argues, 'Renaissance buying practices were a multiplicity of interconnected events and acts, dependent as much on time, trust, social relations and networks as on the seemingly impersonal issues of price, production and demand' (p. 303). Consequently, different aspects of shopping are taken into consideration: cultural and social meanings, political implications, and, obviously, economic significance. This wide-ranging interest requires the use of varied methods, from micro-historical approaches to art historical analyses.

Renaissance shopping 'was a key moment that brought people of different status, religion and sex together' (p. 303). The actions of selling or displaying food and negotiating prices were embedded in assumptions and beliefs. If ever we needed it, we have here another proof that economic practices have to be related to their social and cultural relevance. Welch's analyses are, from that point of view, particularly rich. By setting shopping practises in their social and cultural context, she reveals their multiple dimensions.

Consumption and material culture are topics which fit particularly well into recent historiographical evolutions. They reveal the importance of taking into account social actors and the meaning and implications of their individual and collective actions. This book takes its place within the recent bibliography on consumption, production and producers, sellers and shoppers, quality, and price. (1)

Considering the developments that took place at the end of the Middle Ages, the author questions the idea of a Renaissance consumer revolution, and attempts to show the continuities from the Middle Ages to our modern society of mass consumption. Welch nonetheless accepts that the years between 1400 and 1600 represented a period of change, with sharp demographic changes, the increasing demands of a growing population, a consequent augmentation of supply, and the transformation of civic behaviour imposed by the Council of Trent. As the subtitle indicates, the study focuses on Italy, although some comparisons are made with other countries, particularly England and Holland. The biggest Italian cities such as Venice, Florence, Milan and Rome constitute the base of the survey, although smaller cities, such as Verona or Bologna are also studied. The examples chosen from these different places cover a wide array of questions: the influence of gender, the social level of shoppers and sellers, the frequency of shopping, the location of the activity and the time at which it took place, as well as the problems of quality and value.

The diverse and excellent sources and illustrations are one of the great merits of the book. Manuscripts, engravings, frescoes, paintings and photographs make the reading even more lively. The use of literature and poetry as source material adds force to the arguments. The author has used published documents – some of which are famous, such as the Florentine catasto of 1427, while others have previously been little studied. Primary archival records have also proved a rich source of information, notably coming from the archives of Bologna, Florence, Milan, Prato and Venice. Finally, a useful and impressive bibliography gathers the most recent studies of the economic and social history of Italy. The book is divided into four parts: seeing shopping, the geography of expenditure, acquisition and excitement, and Renaissance consumers. Each of them is focused on a particular aspect of the topic, although the logic of the progression and the plan are not always evident.

The first part of the book is an attempt to analyse the cultural background and legal framework of the market. Regarding 'the market as metaphor', Welch demonstrates the importance of good market regulation in late medieval Italian cities, often identified with good government. Economic equilibrium was conditional to maintaining an 'unspoken social contract' between the governors and the governed (p. 26). The metaphor of the market was also broadly related to 'seduction' – so important for the shopping/selling activity, as revealed, for example, by the connection often made between prostitutes and saleswomen. Mountebanks and peddlers, and their noisy performance, constituted another group in need of supervision. Markets and shopping areas were places which logically implied control and surveillance. It was assumed that 'false weights and measures, fraudulent goods and cheating merchants' (p. 72) were part of the exercise. Those of the elite who avoided the marketplace still needed protection and supervision for their servants or intermediaries in charge of shopping. Therefore, labels, price-lists, values, measures, money and credit were always strictly controlled.

The second part shows that the study of time and space are essential to understanding the connections between consumption, shopping and power. For the local or central authority, deciding and instituting legal frameworks was a way to impose its power and influence more firmly on the people. The planning of the year, the week and the day in different cities shows the multiplicity of times still employed in the Renaissance. The setting of market days and the regulation of holidays were particularly reflective of the competition between urban secular power and the church. The problem of medical emergencies is revealing. For example, in 1444, the government of Venice forbade the apothecaries on the mercerie to open their shop on feast days, 'with the exception of a single shop that must not show what they have on display except for medications' (p. 112).

Apart from the moment or time at which shopping occurred, location was also highly relevant. The fifth chapter offers a detailed study of different kinds of shops, focusing on fixtures, display of merchandise and protection from burglars, always with abundant illustrations. Welch contrasts street markets and shops in many ways: sounds and silence, exterior and interior, ephemeral and permanent. But even more than these differences, it was the dialectical relationship between the market stalls and the shops that was relevant. Furthermore, the vast typology of places discussed, ranging from the shop to the workshop to the warehouse, demonstrates clearly that the material place was essential to define the nature of the activity. Welch concludes that the antagonistic link between a late medieval open-air market and an early modern shop is less important than previously thought. In her view, the generally accepted pattern of a transition from the former to the latter has to be rethought.

The third part of the study brings the reader even closer to the excitement of shopping. The fair, situated halfway between a permanent and a temporary institution, would be one of the best places to sense this excitement, but unfortunately, as the author points out, little is known about Italian fairs. They usually lasted between 15 and 30 days, and occurred with regularity in almost every region across Italy. The well-known *Sensa* in Venice, connected with the feast day of the Ascension, is a compelling example. The event took place after one of the most important Venetian ceremonies, the marriage of the Doge with the sea, an ancient ritual that symbolised the strong link between Venice, the sea and maritime trade. It opened a two-week period of fairs on the Piazza San Marco, with the appearance of many stalls, selling both basic and luxury products. The fair boosted the reputation of Venice, and visitors as illustrious as Isabella d'Este purchased goods there. In a letter written to Jacopo Malatesta in 1529, she told him to be 'persuaded that some beautiful new vases will be in the shops of the glassmakers this Ascension tide', and requested 'up to ten or twelve drinking vessels that are different in style, cups and glasses that have thin white filaments without gold' (p. 181).

Alongside established shops and fairs, a less predictable and riskier practice was highly popular: bidding and gambling. By the thirteenth century at least, Italian cities made frequent use of auctions, considering them as a fair and equitable method of selling goods. Welch highlights the ephemeral and oral nature of these events. The resulting lack of documentary evidence and information makes the study of this kind of practice difficult. Nonetheless, they remain fundamental to understanding the political and economic organisation of Renaissance Italy, especially with regard to pawn and pledge auctions, regularly organised by public authorities. Lotteries were obviously an inheritance of this tradition and by the sixteenth century, the phenomenon became particularly important in cities such as Genoa, Venice and Rome. Aretino's opinion about the practice is quite clear when he wrote, in 1537: 'This new game is really the invention of Lady Luck, who's a mare and of Mistress Hope, who's a cow [...]. I see swarms of people in this delirious state, suffocating and trampling on each other as they jostle for their tickets.' (pp. 205–6).

Finally, in the fourth part, the book focuses more closely on people present in the marketplace, and especially on the buyers: the way they bought and paid, and the things they wanted to acquire. One of the peculiarities of Italy, and especially of Venice, was the fact that even patricians frequented the market. The testimony of foreigners shows their surprise at noblemen shopping side by side with servants. In the early seventeenth century, Thomas Coryate remarked: 'I have observed a thing amongst the Venetians that I have not a little wondered at, that their Gentlemen and greatest Senators, a man worth perhaps two million of duckats, will come into the market, and buy their flesh, fish, fruites and other things as are necessary for the maintenance of their family' (pp. 22–3). On the other hand, when the Venetian ambassador Alessandro Magno went to London in the late sixteenth century, the number of women seen in London's markets and streets astonished him.

Patricians vs. commoners, women vs. men: perhaps it would have been interesting to pursue this line of enquiry further. As Welch argues, bargaining in public could compromise one's reputation, and patricians had to behave in a specific way. Many intermediaries were consequently involved, particularly servants. How did their presence in the marketplace or at the fair redefine their identities, their rights and their social functions? It seems clear that places and practices were a determining factor in defining identities, especially

in the case of shopping. These analyses are particularly interesting, and one regrets they were not further developed.

Lastly, account books, family records and diaries are an important source for the study of the daily practice of consumption. A detailed survey of the Castellani family in Florence, from two detailed zibaldone (a combination of domestic accounts and familial diaries), shows family habits in the fifteenth century. A similar document, the well-known books of the Venetian family Priuli, brings us towards the sixteenth century, revealing the place of hidden consumers who were mostly women.

The last chapter of the book is devoted to women, and especially to the wives, mothers, daughters and sisters at the Italian Renaissance courts. The court woman Isabella d'Este is the leading figure of that final part of the study. Welch insists on the peculiarity of the court life: a letter from the Marquis of Mantua's major-domo, in 1488, talks about '500 mouths to feed on ordinary wages and with the expense of forage for the horses, of whom your lordship has more than 650' (p. 246). Many officials were involved in the control of expenses and the supervision of supplies. Thus, by the late sixteenth century, 'consumption had become an institutional as well as an individual concern' (p. 249). In Isabella d'Este's case, her letters, which have been carefully preserved, give detailed information on her expenditure and her expenses, on the quality of items, her interest, her use of intermediaries and her methods of shopping (by mail for example).

Like other courtiers, Isabella also acquired antiquities. The book concludes with an interesting sketch of the role of the antique in Renaissance culture and the market for antiquities, art and manuscripts. This is another promising field of research occupying the crossroads between economic and cultural history that Welch has previously studied. But this practice, like many others discussed in the book, was obviously the privilege of the elite. There are still many questions left to ask about the shopping activities of the poor. Did the poor go to the same places and at the same times as other members of society? Did they buy the same items? How did their needs and choices differ?

To conclude, Welch's book is a cogently argued and convincing study, which manages to conceal an analytical approach beneath a pleasant and entertaining style. It will be a very helpful tool for scholars and students of Italian Renaissance society. From that point of view, it is disappointing that the index does not seem reliable and complete. Some places and people studied have not been indexed and cities such as Venice or Bologna are discussed much more frequently than it appears in the index. Yet, the full immersion it offers into the smell and the taste, the sound and the cries, the gestures and the clothes, as well as the stalls and the shops, leaves the reader with the feeling of having taken a delightful trip into the depths of Italian Renaissance cities.

## Notes

1. See for example John Brewer and Roy Porter eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (1993); Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300–1600*, (Baltimore, Md., 1993); Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance*, (1998); Craig Clunas, 'Modernity, Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West', *American Historical Review*, vol. 104 (1999), pp. 1497–1511. See also the website of the collaborative research project 'The Material Renaissance', [Back to \(1\)](#)

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