

Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1400–1600. *By Evelyn Welch.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. ix + 403 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-300-10752-8.

Reviewed by Francesca Polese

In her book *Shopping in the Renaissance*, Evelyn Welch addresses a topic of increasing importance to historians, namely, the role and influence of consumers in preindustrial Europe. Drawing from an array of sources that span the visual arts, literary works, private letters and diaries, criminal records, lists of auction prices, and statutes, Welch has reconstructed the consumer cultures that thrived in the urban centers of northern and central Italy during the Renaissance. Relying on her familiarity with a wide body of archival sources and on her sound knowledge of the copious secondary literature on the subject, the author paints vivid descriptions of the colorful scenes that were typical of the markets, shops, fairs, lotteries, and auctions in Italian towns during this period. The close study enables her to gain an in-depth understanding of the functioning mechanisms of Renaissance “shopping” while producing accurate descriptions of Renaissance consumers and their environs. On this basis Welch constructs her central thesis, which is that shopping and expenditure in preindustrial times—although economically and socially important—differed radically from consumerism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the first section, “Seeing Shopping,” Welch surveys the diverse, sometimes contrasting, approaches to the marketplace that characterized Renaissance culture. The differences, she claims, stemmed from “a series of assumed stereotypes with a long history” (p. 23). In some localities, the market was viewed as synonymous with opulence and fertility; in other regions, the market was an indicator of how well a town was administered. Some towns on the contrary condemned the markets as dangerous places that threatened the social order and undermined citizens’ morality. In contrast to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, authorities generally paid a great deal of attention to the markets, issuing strict regulations and enforcing norms in order to guarantee fiscal

control over economic activities and protect innocent consumers from predatory practices.

In order to prevent fraud, which was often linked with commercial exchange, institutions cooperated to provide their own distinctive forms of oversight. Town governments, for example, fixed standards for measures and coins, and guilds set quality standards and regulated production processes.

In Part Two, “The Geography of Expenditure,” the author examines the impact of market exchanges on the spatial organization of Italian urban centers. Controlling commerce meant requiring that the sale of goods occurred in a public space, thus ensuring that the rules were respected by both sellers and customers and facilitating the ability of the authorities to collect taxes.

Chapter seven, “Places,” takes up the appearance and physical functioning of Renaissance commercial environments, which were affected by factors like shop ownership—which often belonged to institutions that loaned them temporarily to individuals—and urban and guild statutes.

In addition to open markets and individual shops, there were more ephemeral types of commerce, which are described in Part Three, “Acquisition and Excitement.” Most typical of this group were the fairs, which were carefully organized by local authorities. The fairs represented an important source of income for urban governments as well as occasions for people to purchase exotic goods and for merchants to extend credit and collect on it. More interesting, perhaps, were the lotteries and auctions, a topic that has not received much notice in the historical literature, which Welch describes as widely diffused instruments of commercial exchange during this period.

In Part Four, “Renaissance Consumers,” Welch explores the characteristics, behavior, and expectations of Renaissance consumers, who comprised men and women of all social classes, from members of the court to grocers. In describing the expenditures and attitudes toward shopping of two Italian families (the Castellani in Florence and the Priuli in Venice), she reveals not only the mechanisms of commercial exchanges but also the social networks that developed among people engaged in shopping. She points out that by encompassing individuals of various classes, the networks bound “different levels of society together in mutual interdependencies” (p. 235).

In the final section, Welch describes two distinctive markets, antiques and indulgences, which she identifies as “dramatic challenges to contemporary notions of market value and to the concept of commodification itself” (p. 15).

Shopping in the Renaissance is a richly detailed, thorough, and intelligent account of the material, cultural, and economic dimensions of consumerism in the Renaissance period. The author has succeeded in the difficult task of demonstrating the economic and social importance of shopping in preindustrial centuries while at the same time distinguishing it from the modern forms of consumerism that began during the Enlightenment and are still visible in contemporary societies.

Francesca Polese is assistant professor at the Institute of Economic History of Bocconi University in Milan, where she studies Italian business history and the history of the fashion business. She has recently published “In Search of a New Industry: Giovanni Battista Pirelli and his Educational Journey through Europe, 1870–71,” in Business History (July 2006); “Big Business Performance in the Twentieth Century: Italy,” with C. Brambilla et al., in Essays in European Business Performance in the Twentieth Century, edited by C. Brautaset (2005); and Alla ricerca di un’industria nuova (2004).