

## Renaissance Consumerism

MARY HOLLINGSWORTH



### The Business of Art: Contracts and the Commissioning Process in Renaissance Italy

MICHELLE O'MALLEY

Yale University Press £22.50 \$50.00  
358 pp. 219 col/mono illus  
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### Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400–1600

EVELYN WELCH

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Consumption is a fashionable topic, and one that has finally persuaded scholars of Renaissance art into a long overdue collaboration with historians of other cultural and economic fields of the period. Two books, written by the driving forces behind one of these collaborative ventures, the Material Renaissance Project (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the Getty Grant programme), illustrate the fruits of this new approach. They also illustrate two very different methods of dealing with the data that survive to chart the complex relationships between supply and demand in Renaissance Italy. Yale University Press must be congratulated for producing two such high-quality books, both beautifully designed and lavishly illustrated.

Michelle O'Malley's *The Business of Art* is an in-depth study of the relationship between clients and artists, and the process of commissioning artworks in Renaissance Italy, based on a rigorous analysis of the formal documents, largely

published, relating to 238 commissions for altarpieces and frescoes, starting in 1285 with Duccio's *Rucellai Madonna* and finishing in 1537 with Sodoma's altarpiece of the *Virgin and Child with Saints* in the chapel of the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena. A broad sweep by any standards, the book covers a period of remarkable stylistic development but, as O'Malley points out, 'the way in which painters and their clients interacted did not change dramatically from the late thirteenth century to the early sixteenth' – a refreshing reminder that the Renaissance was not all about innovation.

Central to O'Malley's thesis is the contract: 'a fundamental tool of Renaissance economic life', drawn up to define the mutual responsibilities of both client and painter. As this book makes clear, however, hidden behind the legal jargon there is a wealth of information to be extracted about the decision-making process involved in the creation of an altarpiece, and about attitudes to art, its price and its value in Renaissance society. O'Malley's precise and painstaking analysis of these notoriously dry documents is to be commended, as is her refusal to impose a uniform interpretation on documents that reflect the very different requirements of each individual commission. The result is a comprehensive account of the relationships between artists and clients, which were as diverse and complex as the culture in which they originated.

The book is divided into three sections, preceded by an introduction which provides important economic background material and a useful discussion on the money of the period, in particular the complexities of the double-standard monetary system that operated in each of Renaissance Italy's many states: gold, the currency of wealth, and sometimes of contracts, and silver, the currency of bread, meat and everyday life, which steadily lost value against the gold florins and ducats.

In 'Materials and production', O'Malley considers the identifiable fixed costs involved in the manufacture of an altarpiece. Starting with an analysis of the various terms used in contracts to describe an altarpiece, she discusses the ornate wooden

frames surrounding the paintings, a key feature frequently mentioned in contracts (and often ignored by art historians), the use of expensive gold and blue pigments, and even the installation of the finished altarpiece in its church or chapel.

O'Malley then moves on to 'Estimation of worth', the less tangible costs that affected both the value and price of altarpieces. The attitudes of both patron and artist are considered – how clients evaluated proposed works, made their decisions and hired painters, how painters accepted commissions and how the price of their finished work was assessed. The diversity of attitudes, as well as the difficulty of analysing price and value, is immediately apparent. Two corporate commissions in Pistoia, over a century apart, recorded the deliberate choice of an expensive Florentine painter, while other committees voted to spend as little as possible. And there were clever ways of cutting costs: in choosing an artist for a small panel destined for the Sala dell'Udienza in 1502, the governors of Prato opted for Filippino Lippi, a Florentine painter who had been born in Prato, recording that Lippi agreed to accept the commission because of his attachment to the town and that he would 'make himself accessible' in terms of money. Some painters, including Fra Angelico, Andrea del Sarto and Rosso, donated their altarpieces 'for the love of God'.

One of the striking points of this book is that it shows just how widely costs varied. While 'most people considered the worth of any altarpiece of any size, of any subject, made at any time, with the painter undertaking an number of duties, to be 100 florins or fewer' (Filippino Lippi was paid 30 florins for his Prato altarpiece), there were some spectacular exceptions to this rule – Sassetta's *San Francesco* altarpiece cost 510 florins and Raphael's *Transfiguration* cost 1,079 ducats.

Both these paintings were large and full of figures, the traditional explanations for cost. These were important factors, but not the only ones: 'the prices of commissioned altarpieces do not form a natural series, like the cost of two-inch nails: each object is distinct'. O'Malley discusses

painters' fees, picture size, figures, region and time, before contextualising fees in terms of demand and production, honour and reputation, and the value of intangible pricing factors. Price, she suggests, reflected 'a collection of often contradictory elements that operated in the marketplace', in particular, the pricing of 'desirability' or talent.

Under 'Pictorial matters', O'Malley gives a fascinatingly detailed discussion of subject matter, and its development in the use of contract drawings and models. Contracts rarely contained more than a cursory description of the intended subject matter and O'Malley analyses not only how this was chosen but, more significantly, how it was developed by both client and artist. Sassetta, in the contract for his San Francesco altarpiece, agreed to paint 'those stories and figures as will be declared to him by the Guardian and the friars of San Francesco in Sansepolcro'. Other examples suggest that finalising subject matter often involved prolonged discussion and negotiation between client and artist, with both parties making significant input to the appearance of the finished work.

One of the more controversial aspects of this book is O'Malley's analysis of the trends in prices, in which she calculates that the prices of Central Italian altarpieces rose dramatically in the first half of the fifteenth century before declining in the second half and into the sixteenth century, a pattern she argues that holds true in both gold florins/ducats and in their silver equivalents. Given the patchy nature of the documentation, the uniqueness of the object involved and, not least, the 'contradictory' elements of the market, this is not an easy task. It is to O'Malley's credit that she does at least recognise the difficulties, citing Suzanne Kubersky-Piredda's work on Tuscan altarpieces from 1300 to 1550, which has produced entirely different conclusions (Kubersky-Piredda found that, when calculated in gold, the prices were fairly uniform but, when translated to silver, they rose over the period). It is hard to reconcile the two conclusions – but, as O'Malley says, altarpieces are not 'two-inch nails', and perhaps the task of assessing price trends is simply not possible. Despite this controversy, O'Malley's meticulously researched book is a major contribution to our understanding of the complexities of the client–artist relationship and forms a



significant advance in our understanding of what art meant in Renaissance Italy.

In *Shopping in the Renaissance* Evelyn Welch examines less formal relationships between purchaser and supplier, drawing on a wide range of archival documents and literary source material. In contrast to O'Malley's minutely detailed approach, this is a book of the broad stroke, anecdotal rather than analytical, which provides a fascinating picture of life in the streets of Renaissance cities, in particular, Florence and Venice: the architectural settings, the noise (aural geography) and, above all, the people.

As the title suggests, this is not a book about the financial aspects of commerce (she is very brief on currency) but about the social, political and cultural complexities of trading in Renaissance Italy. Welch starts with an account of the marketplace in literary and visual descriptions of the period, contrasting the peace that accompanied times of plenty with the collapse of social order that inevitably developed when food supplies were disrupted by famine or war. Indeed, the contrast between order and disorder is a theme which underlies the whole book, not least in the wealth of characters that populate her pages: frugal men doing the daily food shopping, others drinking and gambling in taverns, or searching for prostitutes; the tidy interior of an apothecary's shop and the itinerant charlatans noisily selling their miracle cures on the streets; the hard-working women of the countryside who came into town to sell the produce of

Giovanni Michele Braneri, *Drawing of the Lottery Piazza delle Erbe, Turin 1756*, The John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art, The State Art Museum of Florida, SN 195. From *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400–1600* by Evelyn Welch.

their gardens and the less honest ones 'loitering, standing on street corners and deliberately attracting attention' to sell fruit and vegetables they had not grown – inappropriate behaviour in a society 'which generally expected respectable women to either remain indoors or to move throughout the city with deliberate purpose'.

The marketplace and its deliberate exploitation of sensory temptation infuriated the moralist Franciscan preacher, St Bernardino, and he blamed the spread of sodomy on innkeepers who corrupted young boys with wine and shared beds, and on apothecaries who sold them sweets and marzipan: 'your conscience cannot rest easy', he thundered, 'unless you have no sense of guilt in turning boys bad'. He also harangued against the tactics of the profit-hungry traders: 'I say to you, it is absolutely not licit to sell the same thing at a higher price to one person than another'. His degree of anti-materialism was exceptional – few traders were going to miss the opportunity of fleecing a rich foreigner, or offering discounts to friends and family.

Order in the marketplace was a prime concern of Renaissance governments, for whom civic unrest was a very real threat to their political authority. While they did not go as far as St Bernardino, they did repeatedly attempt to regulate trade. In Venice



Anonymous Draper, 1500 fresco, Castello di Issogne, Val d'Aosta From *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400–1600* by Evelyn Welch.

the prices of fish, meat, oil and even a barber's shave were set by officials; in Milan prices were fixed for different types of shoes and stockings; butchers in Rome were threatened with a fine and three lashes if they disobeyed the official price list.

In the 'Geography of expenditure' Welch shows how governments also regulated the time and place of shopping. She strikes a surprisingly modern note in her discussion of Sunday shopping, disapproved of by the Church but the only day for workers to shop for the following week. Sunday trading in Modena was limited to sellers of fruit, vegetables, medicines, butter and bread – barbers could 'medicate, cup or bleed', but not shave, while butchers could only sell early in the morning and after lunch 'until the start of vespers'. Shopping hours were strictly regulated. Welch gives a lucid account of the incredibly complex time systems in use in Renaissance Italy, where the 'hours' changed according to the season, and the ringing of bells to open and close the shopping day added another dimension to the aural geography of the city.

In her analysis of the location of shopping, Welch discusses the range of buildings where the activity took place – shops, warehouses, market stalls, homes –

as well as the fixtures and fittings of various shopkeepers. Some of these were substantial enterprises: she describes a Florentine apothecary whose stock was stored in over 350 jars, bottles and boxes, a goldsmith in Siena with over 131 pieces of jewellery for sale, a second-hand clothes dealer in Bologna with a selection of stockings, doublets, corsets, detachable sleeves and 'a torn Flemish dress', and another in Venice whose stock of clothes included 93 masks that he rented out for Carnival.

There were also the less regular, and more exciting, opportunities for shopping – fairs, auctions and lotteries. Welch devotes a chapter to fairs, in particular to the annual Ascension Day fair in Venice (the *Sensa*), and to its regulation by the government. Auctions, announced by bells, trumpets or town criers, were regularly held by civic authorities to sell goods seized for non-payment of taxes or debts. In Milan, the Ambrosian Republic staged auctions in the Broletto every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, except feast days, to raise cash to finance its armies by auctioning the personal possessions of the dead Visconti Duke, including not only his jewellery but also the bricks from his fortresses. It also offered substantial lottery prizes drawn from the *borsis ventura* or 'bag of fortune'. Welch's intriguing description of lotteries shows that, by the middle of the sixteenth century, they had become a highly popular way for individuals to raise money, and a threat to public order. The Venetian government

tried, unsuccessfully, to ban them, issuing an edict stating that 'under no circumstances will we tolerate this new game . . . which is called Lotto'. Aretino satirised the new fashion, and its gullible followers: 'this new game is really the invention of Lady Luck, who's a mare, and of Mistress Hope, who's a cow'.

In the final section of her book, Welch turns to the consumers, with a series of case studies based on surviving account books of the Castellani family in Florence, the Priuli family in Venice and finally, that inveterate shopper, Isabella d'Este. It is here that a real sense of shopping emerges. Unlike northern Europe, where the daily shopping was usually done by the senior woman in the household, in Italy it was done by the men. The Venetian ambassador to England was astonished by the number of women on the streets of London – and an English visitor to Venice was equally amazed at the number of men out and about. Isabella d'Este rarely did her own shopping in the marketplace, but she was certainly, by her own admission, an avid consumer: 'goods are more dear to us the faster we can have them', she wrote to a courtier about to leave for France. Famous for her love of novelty, luxury and antiquities, Isabella, according to Welch, 'maintained her seriousness as a skilled and passionate purchaser'. Acting through a network of agents, family and friends, she bought sweets and biscuits in Ferrara, the city where she had spent her childhood, amber, books and fur linings in Venice, glassware in Murano, antiquities and gloves in Rome: a notoriously fussy shopper, she returned several pairs of these gloves, which were not exactly what she wanted.

Despite being, by her own admission, someone who 'hates to go shopping herself', Welch has managed to convey both the excitement and the tedium that this activity can induce, and to portray not only the sights and sounds of the Renaissance marketplace but also its human geography – the greedy and the gullible, the hard workers and the crooks. This is a memorable book, easy to read and often entertaining, which gets right to the heart of what life was like on the streets of Renaissance Italy.

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