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Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy  
1400-1600 (review)

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(Review)

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Evelyn Welch. *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400–1600*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. x + 404 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$45. ISBN: 0–300–10725–8.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of studies in consumption to the extent that, while Theodore Zeldin could, in 1973, regret the fact that “the consumer . . . has yet to find an historian” (Theodore Zeldin, *France, 1848–1945* [1973]), by 1987 Daniel Miller could assert that “consumption is the vanguard of history” (Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* [1987]). The level of debate among historians in this area continues to be lively and challenging as is evidenced, among others, by the large number of projects and contributions on the Cultures of Consumption Research Programme’s excellent website ([www.consume.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk)). Evelyn Welch has been at the forefront of the new vanguard, being one of the researchers in the collaborative AHRB and Getty Grant Program funded research project The Material Renaissance: Costs and Consumption in Italy 1300–1650 (2000–04). While superficially it might appear that Welch is concerned simply with the materiality of consumption — what was consumed, by whom, and for how much — the subtitle of her latest book, *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400–1600*, with its emphasis on cultures in the plural, indicates the broader analytical framework with which she approaches Renaissance consumption. Indeed her book would seem an answer to the recent complaint of John Brewer that, in the main, the “empirical richness” of the new studies “has been met with conceptual poverty” (John Brewer, “Ego in the Arcades,” *TLS*, 2004).

Taking her reader through the variety of ways of purchasing goods in minute detail, and using an impressively broad range of subject material, Welch covers both the most mundane purchases to those that, though given a price, were literally priceless such as antiquities and eternal salvation. Few activities escape the broader category of consumption: buying at market, auctioning goods, the distribution of charity, gambling, the regulation of time, of money, and of holy days. Establishing who shops, where they shop, how they shop, and from whom they shop is not a straightforward matter, and Welch’s painstaking analysis of often quite disparate archival and visual evidence is quite masterful.

In what is an engaging, illuminating, and wide-ranging book, Welch positions herself within consumption studies and challenges some of the present approaches. In particular she takes issue with those who, in trying to pinpoint the origins of the modern consumer society, whether to the Enlightenment or further back to the Italian Renaissance, have assumed that consumer practices in the past were part of an unbroken continuum to the present. Welch cautions her readers to be prepared for different ways of operating altogether and throughout tries to unravel and understand practices in their own terms. Isabella d’Este with her well-known “insatiable desires” (258), for example, is presented through detailed analysis not as a prototype of a modern-day shopaholic, but rather as a woman who saw shopping as “an act of clientage” (262) and whose “purchases were part of an

economy of friendship that was designed to protect both herself and her family from political harm" (269). The network of courtiers, ambassadors, producers, and other middlemen who lent, borrowed, sold, and ran errands for those at court are revealed as participating not in "impersonal acts" but rather in "connections that bound different levels of society together in mutual interdependencies" (235). By the end of the book Welch convincingly demonstrates that Renaissance shopping "was not a simple act" but involved "a multi-layered set of deeply embedded assumptions and beliefs" (303). Her conclusion argues for a multivalent consumer whose world was highly complex: "Renaissance buying practices were a multiplicity of interconnected events and acts, dependent as much on time, trust, and social relations and networks as on the seemingly impersonal issues of price, production and demand."

The book is also a visual feast with the use both of familiar images in new contexts and of others which are quite unfamiliar. The fresco cycle in the castle of Challant in Issogne in the Val d'Aosta, with its detailed depiction of different shops, was a revelation. Fascinating too, were the enlarged details from images that revealed auctioneers at work, and the prize drawing of a lottery. Beautifully produced in almost every respect, my only criticism with the book's production is the surprising number of typos that have slipped through the proofs. If the book goes into a second edition, it is hoped that these could be addressed.

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Stephen D. Bowd, ed. *Vainglorious Death: A Funerary Fracas in Renaissance Brescia*.

Trans. J. Donald Cullington. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 310. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006. lxx + 232 pp. index. append. \$48. ISBN: 0-86698-355-4.

Medieval and early modern city governments enacted sumptuary laws to control spending on luxury, to protect local trade, and to maintain social order. Statutes not only prohibited excess in dress and jewelry, they also targeted ostentation at weddings and funerals. In the case of funerals, legislators aimed at preventing huge and showy processions that displayed the wealth and power of the family concerned: therefore, weeping too loudly, wearing costly mourning dress, lighting too many candles, and providing sumptuous wakes came under the scrutiny of government legislators. The documents indicate that although city governments took their laws very seriously, they were constantly being undermined by citizens who took pride in outwitting the sumptuary police.

In 1505 the Brescian government reenacted earlier sumptuary legislation regarding funerals, resulting in a "funerary fracas" when the conventual Dominicans published a pamphlet accusing the oligarchic government of infringing on their ecclesiastical liberty. The city was facing an increase in the number of funerals due