

Welch, E

Introduction

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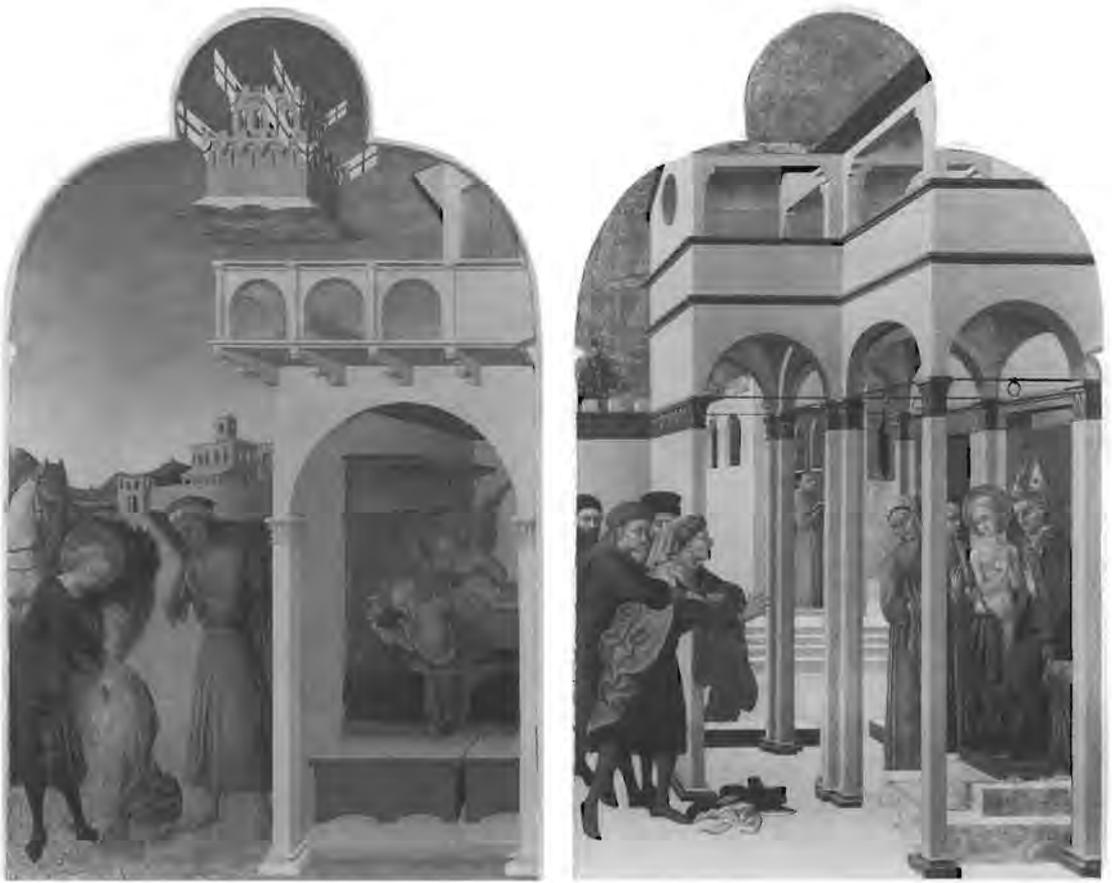
1 Michael Landy, *Breakdown*, performance in the disused C&A department store, Oxford Street, London. Car seat on a conveyor belt and shredded remains of Landy's possessions. Commissioned and produced by Artangel, 2001, photograph by Hugo Glendinning.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In February 2001 the British artist Michael Landy took over an empty department store in central London. Before a fascinated and occasionally distraught audience of friends, fellow-artists and strangers drawn in from the streets, he and his assistants placed all his personal possessions on a conveyor belt. Looping round the complex, mechanised route, Landy's furniture, record collection, clothing and even his car were first inventoried and then systematically dismembered, divided and shredded.¹ The work attracted considerable press attention and provoked a powerful public response. Landy's emphasis on destruction was seen as a challenge to the champions of consumerism and as a strong commentary on the seductions of acquisition and ownership. The setting, the bare interior of a store stripped of its lighting, counters and displays, was central to the work's meaning (Figure 1). As shoppers moved on from the performance into the still-functioning department stores and shops nearby, they were invited to reflect on the ultimate purposelessness of their purchases.

Commenting after the event, Landy described his surprise when a number of onlookers equated his actions with those of a holy figure or a saint. Yet the disposal or dispersal of possessions has been a fundamental part of religious asceticism since early Christianity. But unlike the powerful image of Saint Francis of Assisi giving away his cloak to a beggar before stripping off all his clothes in order to refuse his father's wealth, Landy had no intention of forming a new religious order (Figure 2). Landy's attack on human attachment to material possessions was a secular act of artistic performance, a



2 Sassetta, *St Francis of Assisi Giving his Cloak to a Beggar* and *St Francis Renouncing His Earthly Father*, The San Sepolcro Altarpiece, 1444, tempera on panel, The National Gallery of Art, London.

counterpart to contemporary celebrations of affluence and prosperity. As such he was, and is, part of a growing debate. Today, shopping, the process of going out to special sites to exchange earnings for consumable objects, is seen as both a force for good (consumer spending is saving Western domestic economies) and as a danger to society (consumer spending is destroying the environment and local diversity).² Given its current importance, such behaviour has been closely scrutinised by anthropologists and sociologists who have often argued that the purchase of mass-produced items is a defining characteristic of modernity.³ In their turn, economists have looked for rational patterns of consumer spending, while an equally weighty literature has grown up to evaluate the emotive and psychological impulses that lie behind modern consumerism, culminating in a focus on the 'shopaholic' or kleptomaniac, usually a woman who, for complex reasons, is unable to control her desire to either buy or steal from stores.⁴



3 Michael Charles Fichot, *Le Bon Marché Store*, second half of nineteenth century, engraving, Bibliothèques des Arts Decoratifs, Archives Charmet, Paris.

Following in this wake, historians and art historians are using concepts such as the emergence of a public sphere and the agency of the consumer to map out a new narrative linking this changing social behaviour to the development of new architectural spaces.⁵ Some have found the origins for contemporary shopping practices in the American malls of the 1930s or in the opening of the first department stores, such as Whiteley's in London in 1863 or the Bon Marché in Paris in 1869 (Figure 3).⁶ These purpose-built buildings, with their fixed prices and large body of salaried personnel radically changed the nature of shopping. Buying became a leisure activity as well as a chore, one that women were increasingly able to enjoy. But while some have insisted that this was a distinctive feature of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, others have pushed back the transformation to the coffee-houses of eighteenth-century London, the mercers' shops of eighteenth-century Paris, or to the market halls and commercial chambers of seventeenth-century Amsterdam (Figure 4).⁷ As new social rituals developed, such as reading the paper, listening to public concerts or discussing scientific innovations, so too did a demand for new products such as coffee, tea, chocolate, porcelain and printed chintzes. Here bow-shaped glass shop windows, with their displays of exotic, imported goods are thought to have tempted buyers, sparking off a capitalist revolution and eventually liberating women from the home.⁸

In the search for the first modern shopping trip, these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments are often set against the backdrop of an undifferentiated late medieval past. The story of temporal progression requires more distant periods to be perceived as lacking in sophistication. The pre-industrial world is presented as having had a relatively limited access to a smaller range of regionally produced goods and a



4 An Early London Coffee House, signed A.S., c.1705, watercolour on paper, Department of Prints and Drawings, The British Museum, London.

minimum of disposable income.⁹ Most of a family's earnings would have been spent on food. Little was left over for non-essentials, and most goods were produced within the home itself.¹⁰

These assumptions have meant that while many studies have looked for a growing mass-market for consumer goods in the eighteenth century, Renaissance scholarship has focused on elite patronage or international trade.¹¹ Recently, however, there has been a tendency to argue that the supposed consumer boom of the enlightenment period started much earlier and that this revolution took place, not in London or Paris, but in fifteenth-century Italy.¹² In 1993, for example, the economic historian Richard Goldthwaite argued that, 'the material culture of the Renaissance generated the very first stirring of the consumerism that was to reach a veritable revolutionary stage in the eighteenth century and eventually to culminate in the extravagant throw-away, fashion-ridden, commodity-culture of our own times'.¹³

But the question arises whether the Italian Renaissance consumerism was really the embryo of contemporary expenditure, a defining moment in the transition from the medieval to the modern.¹⁴ Does the detail from the 1470 Ferrarese frescoes of Palazzo Schifanoia depicting elegant shops with their customers represent a new form of activity or an ongoing tradition (Figure 5)? Is it in any way, however marginal, indicative of, or evidence for, a new form of consumer behaviour? While there will be much in this book that seems familiar, such as the pleasure that teenage girls took in trips to the market, there is a great deal that is very different. Indeed, far from pinpointing the start of 'ourselves' in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florence, the experience of the Italian



5 *The Month of June*, detail from lower register showing merchants in their shops, c.1470, fresco, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara.

Renaissance challenges rather than reinforces a sense of linear transfer from past to present. In particular, it threatens some basic assumptions concerning the connections between architecture and consumer behaviour. In the English language the links could not be closer. A standard dictionary defines shopping as, 'the action of visiting a shop or shops for the purpose of inspecting or buying goods'. A shopper is, 'one who frequents a shop or shops for the purpose of inspecting or buying goods'.¹⁵ But this correlation has no parallel in other European languages where there is little, if any, verbal connection between 'the shop' and the activity, 'shopping'.

This is an important distinction because the impact of this assumed association between the architecture of commerce and modernity goes far beyond semantics. Early twentieth-century sociologists and economists who defined concepts of consumption relied on models of social development that considered shopping in stores as a far more sophisticated form of exchange than gift-trade or administered-trade. The latter were

only phases that societies went through before finally emerging as fully developed (and hence more effective and efficient) market economies.¹⁶ This was not simply a theory. It was put into practice in countries such as Italy which only became a nation in the 1860s. From that point onwards, defining an Italian city as a modern urban society involved constructing new commercial and social spaces, particularly those modelled on the more seemingly advanced English and French examples. The so-called ‘Liberty’ or Art Nouveau style was adopted for some shop fronts while glass and iron proved popular for new shopping areas (Figure 6). When in 1864, for example, the city of Florence began demolishing its walls, gates and medieval market centre, it was to mark the town’s transformation into the first capital of the new nation (Figures 7 and 8).¹⁷ Florence was not to stop, as one protagonist put it, ‘in the lazy contemplation of our past glories but fight gallantly on the road to progress’.¹⁸ In 1865, it was even suggested that the entire market areas of the city centre should be transformed into a glass gallery on the model of the English Great Exhibition Hall before it was agreed to tear it down and rebuild the densely packed centre in a more piecemeal fashion.¹⁹

Likewise, in 1864, the city of Milan marked its entry into the Italian nation with major urban renewal plans. This included a galleried arcade, whose construction contract was awarded to the British-based ‘City of Milan Improvement Company Limited’.²⁰ As the first King of the united Italy, Vittorio Emanuele II laid the foundation stones of the Galleria, the new glass and iron mall was presented as a symbol of the new country’s future prosperity and a rejection of its backwards past (Figure 9).

But these nineteenth-century debates reveal a more complex and contradictory set of attitudes than a simple embrace of British engineering. Photographers using advanced technologies for the period captured the emptied spaces of the old Florentine market while graphic artists produced post-card images of what was to be destroyed. Londoners who had visited the city wrote to *The Times* to decry the destruction of the old town centre and city walls.²¹ A sense of the need to preserve an attractive ‘local’ culture for the tourist market vied with the political desire to be accepted as the equal of the economically advanced countries of Europe and the United States.

The issues raised by the Milanese Galleria and the destruction of Florence’s old market centre have resonances that go far beyond the



6 F. Scarlatti Flower Shop, Via Tournabuoni, Florence, 1902, silver salt photograph.



7 (*above left*) View of the Mercato Vecchio, Florence, with a butcher's shop and other vendors, photograph taken before 1883.



8 (*above right*) View of the Mercato Vecchio, Florence, following the demolition of central shops and prior to the complete destruction of the market, photograph taken before 1883.



9 Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Milan, 1872–80, albumen photograph. Fratelli Alinari Museum of the History of Photography, Malandrini Collection.

Italian peninsula and the nineteenth century. The competing values of preservation and nostalgia versus modernity and progress continue to have serious consequences today. Planners eager to impose change have tended to describe developing countries as having 'medieval' types of exchange. Open markets in Africa and Asia, systems of barter and supposedly informal networks of credit, have been presented as either backwards, or, conversely, as more romantic and natural than contemporary North American and British supermarkets and shopping malls.²² As in nineteenth-century Florence, seemingly unregulated and potentially unhygienic markets have been driven from city centres in places such as Hong Kong and Singapore by officials hoping to exclude elements perceived as old-fashioned from their growing economies.²³ In contrast, highly developed urban areas such as New York and London, have re-introduced 'farmer's markets'. These evoke traditional street fairs in order to reassure customers that produce sold from stalls and served up in brown bags is somehow more genuine than shrink-wrapped goods removed from a refrigerated cabinet.

SHOPPING IN THE RENAISSANCE

Given this context, it is difficult to step back and assess how men and women actually went out to shop in the past without falling into a narrative of either progress or decline. This is particularly acute for the Renaissance. During the period between 1400 and 1600, the daily business of buying and selling was an act of embedded social behaviour, not a special moment for considered reflection. While international merchants' manuals do survive both in manuscript and in print, the ordinary consumer's ability to assess value, select goods, bargain, obtain credit and finally to pay, was learnt primarily through observation, practice and experience rather than through any form of written instruction.²⁴

This means that any study of Renaissance buying practices, where exchanges were transitory and verbal, has to rely on scattered and often problematic evidence. The images, literary sources, criminal records, statutes, auction and price lists, family accounts and diaries used in this book all had their own original purposes and formats. Their meanings were rarely fixed and the same item might be perceived in different ways in different times and places. For example, a poem such as Antonio Pucci's fourteenth-century description of the Mercato Vecchio in Florence, might carry one meaning for its audience when heard during a time of famine and yet another when read in a period of prosperity. But despite its slippery nature, it is still important to set such 'soft' evidence against the seemingly more stable facts and figures that make up grain prices and daily wage rates.

This book takes, therefore, the approach of a cultural historian in an attempt to gain an insight into the experience of the Renaissance marketplace. While some of the material goes over the immediate boundaries of the title, the book focuses primarily on central and northern Italy between 1400 and 1600. This is, in part, because of the wealth

of documentation available for this period and region. Venice, an entrepôt whose retailers served both an international and local clientele, was exceptional in its commercial sophistication and specialisation. But the entire northern and central Italian peninsula, with its multiplicity of large and medium-sized towns and distribution networks of ports, canals and roads that reached far into the countryside, was much more urbanised than the rest of Europe. Unlike England where the inhabitants of villages and hamlets gravitated to larger market towns to buy and sell produce, even the smaller and more isolated of Italy's rural and urban communities housed permanent shops and regular markets.²⁵ For example, sixteenth-century Altopascio, a Tuscan mountain village with a population of 700 inhabitants had five shoemakers, two grocers and a ceramic seller, a *bottegaio di piatti*, as well as a blacksmith.²⁶ The slightly larger Tuscan town of Poppi in the Casentino had a population of 1,450. In 1590, its inhabitants benefited from nine grocery stores, two bakeries, two butchers, three drugstores, a mercer's shop, a barber, a tailor and a shoemaker along with workshops for wool, leather and iron as well as kilns producing ceramic wares.²⁷ These amenities served the wider locality as well as the small town, a relationship noted when the municipal council allowed complete immunity for debtors on market days, 'for the good and benefit and maintenance of Poppi, considering its location on a dry hill and in need of being frequented and visited by other men and people'.²⁸

Of equal importance was the diversity and competition between these urban centres, both large and small. Italy's political fragmentation had considerable cultural consequences. By the mid-fifteenth century power on the peninsula was roughly divided between the Kingdom of Naples, the Papal States, the Duchy of Milan and the city-states of Florence and Venice. By the end of the century, however, the fragile balance had been disrupted as the growing powers of France, Spain and the Habsburg empire attempted to gain control. After 1530, Italy's two major territorial states, Lombardy and Naples, were ruled by viceroys who drew on local urban structures but answered to Spain. These multiple boundaries – local, regional and international – allowed for the coexistence of legal systems as well as for the circulation of different forms of currencies, dress, codes of conduct, gesture and language. The diversity had real material meanings. Velvets permitted to butchers' wives in Milan might be forbidden to those in Venice; hats that seemed desirable in Naples may have been rejected in Genoa. Although the costume books from the second half of the sixteenth century such as those of Cesare Vecellio and Pietro Bertelli often exaggerated the differences, the fashions forged in Rome were quite distinct from those in Mantua or Ferrara (Figures 10–12). Even women living under the same jurisdiction, such as those in Vicenza and Venice, might wear different garments (Figures 13–14). This created issues around novelty that were very different from those of nation-states such as France and England where the major contrasts were between a single capital city like Paris or London and the provincial towns and rural communities.

Alongside the political and geographic variations described above, the standard historical narrative points to a period of collapse in population after the Black Death in



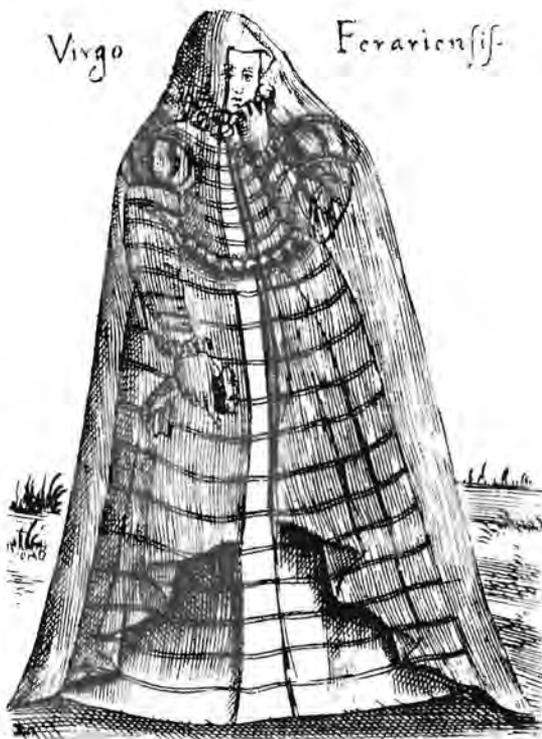
Mulier Romana,

28



Nobilis Matrona Mantuana.

Virgo Ferrariensis.



10 (above left) Pietro Bertelli, *Diversarum nationum habitus*, Padua, 1594-6. engraving, 'Mulier Romana', Biblioteca Riccardiana, Florence, St.12886, figure 28.

11 (above right) Pietro Bertelli, *Diversarum nationum habitus*, Padua, 1594-6. engraving, 'Nobilis Matrona Mantuana', figure 19, The British Library, London.

12 (left) Pietro Bertelli, *Diversarum nationum habitus*, Padua, 1594-6, engraving, 'Virgo Ferrariensis', figure 20, The British Library, London,



13 (above left) Cesare Vecellio, *De gli habiti antichi, et moderni et diverse parti del mondo libri due*, Venice, 1590, engraving, 'Venetiane per casa', Wellcome Library, London.

14 (above right) Cesare Vecellio, *De gli habiti antichi, et moderni et diverse parti del mondo libri due*, Venice, 1590, engraving, 'Vicentina', Wellcome Library, London.

1348 and a resulting increase in living standards as salaries rose. Following a sudden jump in wages in the second half of the fourteenth century, scholars have noted that there was considerable stability for much of the fifteenth century.²⁹ There was a new wave of population growth beginning in the sixteenth century, one that was partially halted by disease and famine in the 1570s and 1580s before recovering again.³⁰ This was accompanied by increasing levels of inflation, whose causes remain controversial.³¹ Finally, the impact of professional printing which began in the 1460s, the increasing awareness of the Americas and Asia and the Reformation movement are only some of the most dramatic of the many formidable challenges that occurred over this period. In particular, the Catholic response to the religious attacks of Martin Luther and others,

as embodied in the Council of Trent (1545–63), had an important impact on civic behaviour. Tridentine regulations, supported by the new inquisitorial and civic groups responsible for preventing heresy, prompted a tightening of social and religious strictures that impacted on everyday behaviour as well as on the Church and its liturgy.³²

The shifting social and political backdrop of this two-hundred-year period encourages an emphasis on change. Indeed, there were very important signs of innovation in the economy, particularly towards the end of the second half of the sixteenth century. For example, in Venice there was increasing sub-specialisation and the development of new types of shops such as the *vendecolori* who sold pigments to the city's painters.³³ There were also a rising number of patents issued in cities across Italy. These provided monopoly rights to manufacture and distribute a wide range of new products and import substitutes. These included new materials such as the cheaper fabrics that imitated more expensive silks and velvets; glassware that mimicked porcelain; stucco that could simulate bronze; paste gems and pierced pearls that suggested expensive jewels. Hydrolics, milling, the soap and silk industries, and the print trade were only some of the activities that benefited from patents issued in Venice, Florence, Genoa and Mantua during the late sixteenth century.³⁴ The language used in these documents suggests that producers were increasingly stressing novelty and innovation when appealing to potential buyers. In 1577, the Milanese bookseller Ambrogio Lanfranco was granted a patent giving him a lifetime monopoly on the manufacture and sale of printed fans bearing the emblems of the King of Spain and the Pope along with poems in praise of each, a privilege that was awarded because they were 'new products' that had been devised through Lanfranco's 'ingenuity, industry and expense'.³⁵

These designs, which, as these surviving late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century versions demonstrate (Figures 15–16), allowed buyers to cut out and decorate their own fans, were only one of many novelties that were available to consumers. Inventories and other evidence for ownership similarly suggest an expansion in the number and type of objects owned by householders over the same period. There was more linen in the boxes and chests that orphaned children inherited, more paintings on the walls of the wealthy and moderately well-off families who fought over inheritances, and more maiolica and glassware in the cupboards of widows who took over their husband's estates.³⁶ The documentation of ownership is reinforced by evidence of importation and regional distribution. For example, the goods arriving at the customs dock in early fifteenth-century Rome were rich both in their number and in the diversity of the items that were unloaded. As an example, a single consignment from one ship arriving at the docks in the mid-fifteenth century contained 58 bone inkwells and caskets, a chessboard, 65 glass vials, a case of coloured crystal glass, 2 barrels of glass rosaries and 5 portable altars. About the same time another Aquilean merchant imported 300 'volti santi', saints' images like the single sheet produced in Florence featuring Saint Catherine of Siena which were sold by licensed picture vendors who had stalls on the Portico of the Vatican (Figure 17).³⁷ Other imports, particularly by German merchants bringing in small-scale metal wares such as dishes, pins, needles, scissors and glittering gilt



fringes for garments along with paternoster beads and prints are documented for fifteenth-century Bologna and other cities whose custom records have survived for the period.³⁸

This evidence could be multiplied while work such as that of the historian Duccio Balestracci indicates that this increase in supply was not limited to the demands of an urban elite but was integrated into rural lifestyles lower down the social scale.³⁹ The account book of his mid-fifteenth-century Sieneese peasant farmer shows that this illiterate sharecropper (he had his clients and suppliers write down his records for him) used a

15 Agostino Carracci, *Sheet for making a Fan*, c.1589–95, engraving, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence, 17010 st.sc. The sheet is inscribed, 'August. Carazza inv e fe'.



16 Macerata, Anonymous artist, c.1625, *Sheet for Making a Fan*, Civica Raccolta delle Stampe A. Bertarelli, Milan, Cassetta Ventole, Artistiche-1. Both images are printed on the reverse with a poem entitled, 'modo per pigliare il santissimo giubileo dell'anno santo in Roma e in Macerata per il Salvioni 1625'.

range of credit arrangements and payments in kind to acquire an expensive bed, red stockings and gold and silver buckles and ornaments. The Florentine sumptuary law of 1475 forbidding peasants who worked the land and their wives and children from wearing any form of silk, velvet or belts that had silver, gold, gems or pearls in them indicates that owning such clothing was considered a possibility.⁴⁰ This suggests that the demand for luxuries could cut across social boundaries and that credit was flexible



17 Baccio Baldini (atr.), *Saint Catherine of Siena*, c.1465–75, engraving, Department of Prints and Drawings, The British Museum, London.

enough to permit the satisfaction of both needs and wants. This has been reinforced by recent work on the second-hand trade and the rental market in goods in both Venice and Florence which has shown how important it is to shift attention away from the 'new' to the 'nearly new' in order to fully understand issues of acquisition and demand.⁴¹

Goldthwaite has suggested that this range of evidence demonstrates a Renaissance consumer revolution, one that prefigured the developments in eighteenth-century London or Paris. But is this really the case? The perspective, of course, depends in part on the evidence involved. Patents will always emphasise innovation while legal statutes were usually anxious to stress tradition. But the past is not simply a shadow of the present and although there was an increase in certain new types of sales, such as lotteries and stage performances by charlatans during this period, most forms of retailing remained remarkably constant. When, for example, major reform campaigns concerning commercial behaviour were initiated in Rome and Bologna in the 1580s, earlier fourteenth-century legislation was revived, often word for word, before being reissued in a new format as a printed leaflet. When offenders came before the magistrates in the late sixteenth century, their excuses similarly mirrored those of two centuries before.

The products they were accused of counterfeiting, adulterating or on which they had failed to pay taxes may have changed, but the language with which buyers, sellers and magistrates described the processes had not. From this perspective, the creation of department stores in late nineteenth-century Florence and Milan becomes more, rather than less challenging to traditional modes of salesmanship in Italy. The new buildings and Art Nouveau shop fronts were exciting and potentially alienating imports, not gradual evolutions from indigenous practices that had slowly changed over time. But at the same time, the stability with which Italian cities managed their consumption practices does not necessarily reflect an impoverished response to transition. Familiar modes and methods could be overlaid with new meanings and adapted to meet changing needs. Selling new goods in 'old-fashioned' ways that relied on personal contact, credit and trust may have made them more, rather than less acceptable to a wider customer base.

Behind the theoretical concerns and interpretations lay practical problems that need investigation. How did men and women of different social classes go out into the street, squares and shops to buy the goods they needed and wanted on a daily, or on a once-in-a-lifetime basis during the Renaissance period? When and where could they shop? Did they send servants, or were deliveries made to their doors? How did they know how much something cost? Could they return items that weren't satisfactory? How did they know when they were getting good value or when they were being cheated?

To answer such basic questions, the book opens by exploring the long-standing metaphors and stereotypes that were to describe the experience of participating in the marketplace. Part Two then looks at the impact these attitudes had on the developing urban geography of Renaissance cities before, in Part Three, turning to the more transient forms of fairs, auctions and lotteries. An examination in Part Four of the consumers themselves allows us to ask how these mental, verbal and visual images shaped the business of buying and selling. Who actually undertook the different types of shopping required by a Renaissance household? How did life cycles, lifestyles and the rhetoric of honour, familial dignity and pride affect the way provisioning and purchasing were undertaken? Finally, the book finishes by exploring two seemingly very different types of commodities: antiquities and indulgences. Despite their diversity, both posed dramatic challenges to contemporary notions of market value and to the concept of commodification itself.