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The Empire of Things: Consumer Demand in Renaissance Italy

RICHARD GOLDTHWAITE

THE patronage of art in Renaissance Italy is a subject that would seem not to lend itself to economic analysis. Tradition, going back to the Renaissance itself, has so loaded the term with notions about the individuality of patron and artist and about the uniqueness of the work of art that almost by definition patronage defies generalization. Some obvious economic questions—where the money came from, how much art cost, what constraints the patron's financial interests imposed on the artist—have been raised in studies of specific instances of patronage, but the subject has yet to be placed in the larger context of the economic and social life of the times.[1]

Yet, as Pierre Bourdieu has written, art cannot remain isolated on 'a sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane, everyday world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous disinterested activity in a universe given over to money and self-interest'.[2] It too has a price and is acquired, in part at least, as a result of economic decisions. One way to get a broader perspective on the patronage of art, therefore, is to regard it as a form of consumption. In this light, art looks somewhat different from what we are usually told about it—less 'beautiful', perhaps, as something that exists in and of itself on its own terms, but none the less interesting as an aspect of the material culture of its time. In fact, it was only in the course of the

[1] Cf. Francis Haskell in the preface to his classic study of patronage in Italy, *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations Between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (London, 1963):

> I have also fought shy of generalisations ... Inevitably I have been forced to think again and again about the relations between art and society, but nothing in my researches has convinced me of the existence of underlying laws which will be valid in all circumstances ... I hope that the bringing together of so much material may inspire others to find a synthesis where I have been unable to do so.

[2] P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 197.

Renaissance that art created consciously as such emerged as a specific kind of object; and much of the 'art' that fills our museums today never achieved that distinctive status at the time. Indeed, our museums are, in a very real sense, monuments to the luxury consumption of the past—temples, even, where a consumer society pays homage to the passion for spending that gives life to the capitalist system of the West.

As a consumption phenomenon the patronage of art in Renaissance Italy represents something new in the history of art in a quantitative as well as a qualitative sense, for men not only redirected their spending habits according to new canons of taste but they demanded substantially more art and a greater variety of it. Secular architecture came into its own, especially with the house, or palace, and its wider spatial setting, the city as a whole; and with the country house, or villa, and its wider spatial setting, the garden. Sculpture broadened its range to take in everything from miniatures and medals to equestrian monuments for the adornment of all these places, both inside in palaces and villas and outside in gardens and city squares. Furnishings of every kind, from pottery and beds to paintings and frescos, proliferated to fill up interior spaces. In the area of religious art it is difficult to say that the kind of goods changed in any appreciable way during the Renaissance. Churches and their decoration, from paintings and liturgical utensils on altars to frescos on walls, were of course nothing new; but, if the demand for these things in the Renaissance simply continued old habits, now with a taste for a new style, the level of consumption was nevertheless extraordinarily impressive, both in building and furnishing new churches and in rebuilding and renovating older ones.

Apart from stylistic innovation, all this consumption was a notable economic activity. Had palaces and churches, villas and gardens, sculpture and painting, domestic and liturgical furnishings all been produced in the traditional medieval style, we would still be confronted with an abundance and variety of goods that add up to a veritable 'empire of things'. The phrase is from Henry James; and although the world had become infinitely more cluttered by the time he was writing, the consumer society of which he was such a keen observer had its first stirrings, if not its birth, in the new habits of spending that possessed the Italians in the Renaissance. As much as anything else, these habits marked what is new about the Renaissance and what sets Italy off, economically as well as culturally, from the rest of Europe at the time.

The 'empire of things' the Italians built up for themselves in the Renaissance looms large in the economic historian's view of the period —but as a vast wasteland of spending that has repulsed rather than invited exploration. It has been taken for granted that such a massive appropriation of resources is in one way or another to be associated with economic decline, although there has not been much more than casual speculation about whence the money came to financè so much consumption. The nature of this material culture, however, and what gave rise to these consumption habits in the first place, have been remote from the interests of economic historians. We have never been very comfortable with demand: it is generally thought to arise from the psychic depths of personality, the cultural depths of society, or some such abyssal place in the realm of motivations well beyond the economist's pale.[3]

It ought to be possible, however, to make some economic sense out of demand by regarding consumption very much as Henry James did, as a basic economic and social process. Rather than buying goods just for private enjoyment, inspired by his own individual tastes, man fills up his environment to give order to his world, a meaning that justifies his very existence. Man buys intentionally as the result of a deliberate decision informed by the values of his culture; the totality of his consumption, therefore, has a certain coherence. To the extent that the goods man surrounds himself with help establish, and maintain, his relations with other men, consumption involves him in a sort of ritual activity; and even if certain kinds of consumption seem only to satisfy personal pleasure rather than make a social statement, it is nevertheless likely that those pleasures themselves are socially conditioned.[4]

If consumption is regarded in this way, we obviously cannot be satisfied to explain the rise of the Italian 'empire of things' as merely the result of greater wealth, for greater wealth alone does not explain why men wanted new kinds of objects. Nor is it enough to say that 'conspicuous consumption' was a form of social competition motivated by the desire for prestige, for prestige alone does not explain why the particular things men wanted had prestige value. What is proposed

[3] Carlo Cipolla discusses demand in a general way in *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000–1700* (New York and London, 1976); but as editor of *The Fontana Economic History of Europe* he was not able to persuade his contributors to make any breakthrough in dealing with it in specific historical contexts.

[4] See M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York, 1979).

here, in short, is an approach that regards any particular historical configuration of consumption habits as a function of the culture of that moment—and an approach, incidentally, that looks at consumption as a whole, blurring the distinction between luxury goods and necessities, between taste and needs, between, even, art and other kinds of objects.

For art, too, belongs in this context. Considered simply as a consumer object, art is as much an index of culture as the style in which those goods were made and as any of the scholarly, literary, and religious ideas that make up its intellectual content. Whereas we know something about how art eventually achieved its intellectual status in the Renaissance, we do not know very much about why many kinds of art objects came into existence in the first place. In any case, the eventual emergence of an attitude about art as a particular kind of object, consciously endowed with style and with content, is one of the most notable features of the Renaissance; and by the same token the emergence of self-conscious patronage of the arts, in practice and as an ideal, marks one distinctive way consumption habits changed in the Renaissance.

Goods, in short, communicate something about culture; and, since they have value and require economic decisions, the study of preferences in men's spending habits ought to be one way the economic historian can explore the material world in order to reach into the higher realms of cultural history and yet keep his feet solidly on his own ground. In the following discussion some of the evidence about men's spending habits in the private domestic world of Renaissance Italy is organized along these lines in an attempt to propose a hypothesis for further research into the consumer culture which is the context in which the specific demand for art—that is, patronage—can eventually be studied.

The problem, then, is to explain the Renaissance 'empire of things' as a validation of a way of life that was sustained by more and more possessions. The habits of spending that gave rise to this material culture signals something new in the history of the West. The traditional values of medieval Europe found only a limited outlet in the purchase of goods. The religious rationale for private expenditures was obviously limited; and, indeed, for urban residents in the expanding commercial centres of Italy who were constantly reminded that avarice, usury, and cheating were ubiquitous threats to the prevailing moral

order, it was simply better not to spend money at all in any way that would draw attention to the fact of one's wealth.

Feudalism provided the only real secular model for luxury expenditures, but it was an expression of values and attitudes that were remote from the realities of Renaissance Italy. However transformed feudalism had become by the time it reached its 'bastardized' form in England and its 'non-feudal' form in France at the end of the Middle Ages, it still survived in many spheres—in the hierarchical structure of the upper class, in the organization of the social life of nobles around the households of great magnates, in their military ethos, and in their landed interests. At a time when central monarchical government was generally unstable, common interests drew landowners together in 'affinities' or 'alliances' under the auspices of a local magnate who could use his power to offer protection and dispense patronage. The bonds that held these groups together were mutual self-interest rather than contractual obligations of a classical feudal kind; but the system was personalized by the cult of lordship, with its emphasis on service, fidelity, and obedience, and by a sense of class, with a heightened feeling for the solidarity of the lineage—all traditional feudal values.[5]

The chivalric code expressed these very values; and it therefore could still be evoked by the upper class as a rationale for its social behaviour. The model of the knight loomed larger than ever, both for great magnates and kings who needed to inspire loyalty and military ardour, and for the nobility as a whole which needed to sharpen its definition of itself at a time when its ranks were becoming increasingly diversified and its privileges threatened. That the late medieval affinity was no longer primarily military did not weaken the appeal of the chivalric code; as Maurice Keen has written, the greater emphasis that came to be put on nobility of blood rather than on the actual taking of knighthood 'clearly did not, in any significant degree, undermine the conception of the essential role of the secular aristocracy as being a martial one'.[6] Hence, for Keen and for others, the resurgence of

[5] P. S. Lewis, 'Decayed and N on-feudalism in Later Medieval France', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 37 (1964), 157–84; idem., *Later Medieval France: the Polity* (New York, 1968), pp. 175–208; C. Carpenter, 'The Beauchamp Affinity: A Study of Bastard Feudalism at Work', *English Historical Review*, 95 (1980), 514–32; G. L. Harriss, Introduction to *England in the Fifteenth Century: The Collected Papers of K. B. McFarlane* (London, 1981).

[6] M. Keen, *Chivalry* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 152–3. Keen's notes serve as guides to the literature on chivalry, especially for the later middle ages; and his view of the importance

chivalry at the end of the Middle Ages was not, as Huizinga regarded it, an attempt to escape the harsh realities of life into a dream world of play and fantasy. There was no divorce between dream and reality; if anything, chivalry was at its height in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, never stronger as a force shaping attitudes and behaviour because it represented a powerful traditional ideal that aroused men's nostalgia for a model of corporate class behaviour they could still cling to as relevant to their lives in a period of rapid social and political change.

The ideal determined the way men spent their money. Training in arms was expensive; it required outlays for horses and equipment, and continual exercise in tournaments and the hunt. Even more important than military expertise, however, was the assertion of status as, on the one hand, a landlord in the eyes of tenants and, on the other, a member of the hierarchy of nobility. It was above all hospitality, therefore, that marked the noble way of life. Largess was the supreme medieval aristocratic virtue, with strong Christian overtones; by opening his house to all comers—friends, followers, and even men unknown to him—and offering them food, drink, and accommodation, the noble lived up to the highest expectation of his class. Lesser nobles attended the households of greater lords and appeared in their retinue on specific occasions wearing their livery and badges; and the poor noble found honour even in menial service of the most personal and intimate kind in the lord's household. This gregarious life centred on the great hall of the lord's house and was highly ritualized by elaborate ceremony. Consumption was directed to the rounding out of this scenario for the assertion of status. Clothes, plate for the table, and retinues of liveried servants, dependents, and clients dominated expenditures; and most of those precious objects which we consider to be the typical art forms of the period had the function of ceremonial display, either liturgical or secular, 'condensing pomp and circumstances' (in the words of Georges Duby) to something 'which one could clasp in the hand'. For this way of life, conspicuous consumption was a kind of investment in the noble's social position that secured service and paid dividends in the universal recognition of his dignity and status.[7]

of chivalry at that time is reiterated in Georges Duby's review in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 29 June 1984, p. 720.

[7] On the English household, see D. Starkey, 'The Age of the Household: Politics, Society and the Arts *c.* 1350–*c.* 1550', in S. Medcalf (ed.), *The Late Middle Ages* (London, 1981), pp. 225–305. The quotation from Duby comes from his *The Age of the Cathedral: Art and Society 980–1420* (Chicago, 1981), p. 204.

In short, underlying the consumption habits of the landowning class of northern Europe was a coherent social ideology, a concept of nobility that, far from being submerged still inchoate in the subconscious, had long found explicit expression in literary and even (by standards of the time) scholarly writings on chivalry. It incorporated an aristocratic ethos with Christian and military components, and it organized social life around the virtues of service, largess, and pride in ancestry and status. These were all the old values, and this is why traditional material culture remained intact: nothing had changed in the noble's basic way of life that made new functional demands on the kinds of things he surrounded himself with. For all the flamboyance, exaggeration, and even vulgarity that characterized the aristocratic world of goods at the end of the Middle Ages, nobles were spending their wealth in essentially traditional ways.

As the expression of the ideology of a European-wide élite, which had in addition the full sanction of the church, chivalric culture also took root in Italy, even though feudalism as a legal and political system was stunted in its growth in much of Italy by the emergence of towns as the centres of political and economic power. Feudalism had its presence in the person of the German emperor, the nominal overlord of much of the peninsula, and in the various royal houses in southern Italy, so that nobles who were attracted into the northern towns did not lose sight of the chivalric model. Indeed, in the potentially threatening environment of urban life they may have looked to it all the more intensely to maintain their class identity as landowners who clung to their independence, as knights who fought for the commune, and as an élite who found strength in family unity and a sense of lineage. Amidst the turbulence of communal political life these nobles established corporate groups of relatives, followers, and hangers-on of other kinds—like the *consorterie* in Florence and the *alberghi* in Genoa—that were probably not very different from the affinities in northern Europe. And it is very likely, too, that they used their wealth in the traditional ways of the feudal nobility: they asserted their presence in large palaces, notable more for their dominating towers than for any other architectural feature, and they directed their consumption to satisfying their gregarious instincts as public figures, both as heads of family clans and of client groups and as magnates active in civic life.

Ultimately, however, the chivalric model was bound to become unrealistic for the urbanized nobles of Italy. On the one hand, they

saw their independent basis of power in the countryside slowly eroded by the extension of communal authority over the countryside, and meanwhile they had no feudal authority around which to rally outside the city, once it was clear the imperial cause was lost. Within the city, on the other hand, nobles had to confront the fact that urban residence required adjustments. As a sense of public authority gradually asserted itself against the amorphous corporatism of the earlier commune, the nobility found its room for independent behaviour more constricted and its idiosyncratic ways curbed; and it eventually lost what had been its unique contribution to the commune with the increasing recourse to professional soldiers in the fourteenth century. Inevitably nobles joined in the life of the city, investing and participating in capitalist enterprise and marrying into the new entrepreneurial class, so that it became increasingly difficult to identify them in economic and social terms. By the fifteenth century in Florence, where this process of assimilation went as far as anywhere else, magnate status was little more than a category for those who had lost their right to participate in political affairs; it hardly referred any more to a social élite with traditional rights and a distinctive life-style.

Even with the assimilation of the nobility into urban life, the feudal model—precisely because it was the only fully legitimated model for secular behaviour—continued to have its appeal to common city folk, as the popularity of chivalric literature in Italy testifies. It became increasingly clear, however, that this kind of public display of status was not appropriate to city life. The proliferation of anti-magnate legislation to curb behaviour and of sumptuary legislation to limit display, especially during ceremonial festivities, was symptomatic of the growing disenchantment. So too was the declining expenditure of the urban classes on ostentatious military gear. It is prominent, for example, in Florentine inventories as late as the second half of the fourteenth century; but thereafter account books do not record many new acquisitions and we can infer from later inventories that older, inherited equipment of this kind was not even kept around. Nor did public office in republican Florence require much of a show. If a Florentine was called into highest government service on the *Signoria*, he joined the others in the same simple garb and lived confined to a dormitory in the Palazzo Vecchio for the duration of his tenure, one of the number even having to scribble away at daily accounts to keep track of purchases for the table. If he took a more conspicuous office in the countryside, as a vicar, captain, or *podestà*, where he had to

make a ceremonial entry as the representative of central government and to keep up a conspicuous presence, he took along, to be sure, a helmet, shield, sword, standard, and other such feudal trappings of office; but many men did not personally possess such objects and so had to borrow them, apparently unbothered by taking charge of a new post decked out in gear bearing the arms of some other family. Florentines still enjoyed playing at jousts throughout the fifteenth century; and some of them paid a great deal for the sake of putting on a good appearance. They were not prepared, however, to bear the cost of real armour and the attendant expenses of keeping fit through continual exercise and of maintaining the staff and stable required to play the real game. Venetian nobles enjoyed it as much—but as a spectacle organized by their professional military captains which they watched from a healthy distance, without incurring the personal expense of participation.[8]

By the end of the Middle Ages, when in the north the chivalric tradition enjoyed a highly romanticized—and very expensive—resurgence, in urban Italy it had long receded into the realm of literature. And whatever the so-called 'refeudalization' of Italy's upper classes meant in the sixteenth century, it certainly did not mean that they spent any more money on these knightly pursuits. The only secular order in Italy, the Order of the Knights of S. Stefano, set up by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, defined an 'honourable' life-style as the prerequisite for membership; but the Order did not attract many of the older families, and the numerous men it took in from the business and industrial world—including even sons of brickmakers—hardly knew anything about military games.[9] Not even the nobles of Verona, who more than any other in Italy 'kept faith with their ancient feudal and knightly pretensions',[10] were really prepared to bear the cost of belonging to the military academy they set up in the sixteenth century to get themselves in shape to play military games; and eventually it could not compete for their attention with another academy (the first ever) founded to promote music, an art that in its taming sociability could hardly have been more remote from war—and one

[8] M. Mallett, *Mercenaries and their Masters: Warfare in Renaissance Italy* (Totowa, NJ, 1974), pp. 114–15.

[9] F. Angiolini and P. Malanima, 'Problemi della mobilità sociale a Firenze tra la metà del Cinquecento e i primi decenni del Seicento', *Società e storia*, 4 (1979), 17–47.

[10] M. Berengo, 'Patriziato e nobiltà: Il caso veronese', in E. Fasano Guarini (ed.), *Potere e società negli stati regionali italiani fra '500 e '600* (Bologna, 1978), p. 196.

that perhaps cost as much in time if not in money. Elsewhere in the Veneto in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries military academies popped up here and there; but the best indication that the noble's heart was not really in this kind of activity was his unwillingness to pay the ridiculously low share of the cost of operating them. These academies were able to open only after the Venetian Senate was prevailed upon to grant them subsidies (which it did out of its concern for the state's defences); and they all degenerated into social clubs within a generation of their founding.[11] Writers like Castiglione and Montaigne commented on the Italians' incapacity for fighting. Duels, for example, had become extinct in Italy by the end of the sixteenth century, at a time when Henry IV of France was punishing duellists by the thousands.[12] Travellers to Italy were impressed that Italians did not even carry swords. 'So,' as David Hume later observed (talking 'Of Refinement of the Arts'), 'the modern Italians are the only civilized people, among Europeans, that ever wanted courage and a martial spirit.'

Nor did Italians imitate the rural nobility of the north in what Lawrence Stone has called their 'old country ways'—maintaining hoards of servants and a large kitchen so that they could, in the words of one late-sixteenth-century English writer, 'keep open houses for all comers and goers'.[13] In the city there was much less occasion for hospitality. A man's status was not to be judged by the number of his attendants and the scale of his hospitality, and servants and a kitchen were not a major part of household expenditure. It is an amazing fact, especially in view of the size of their palaces, that rich men in Florence did not have many servants at all. A man as wealthy as Giovanni Rucellai had only eight between his country house and his town palace, including stable-hands and two female slaves. Other rich households at the time had no more than two or three servants and these were mostly women, many of whom, incidentally, did not stay very long, with the result that a normal household staff underwent continual change in its ranks. Many Florentines preferred a female slave, probably to assure themselves of a little stability in their household affairs;

[11] J. R. Hale, 'Military Academies on the Venetian Terra ferma in the Early Seventeenth Century', *Studi veneziani*, 15 (1973), 273–95.

[12] F. R. Bryson, *The Sixteenth-century Italian Duel: A Study of Renaissance Social History* (Chicago, 1938), pp. 132–3.

[13] Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary* (Glasgow, 1907–8), iv. 94–5.

but few households had more than one.[14] What kind of retinue could a great man like Rucellai, or any of his friends, put together with a few women, a slave, a stable-hand? Montaigne found Venice 'the city in the world where one lives most cheaply, as a train of valets is here of no use whatsoever ... Everybody going about by himself'; and in Padua he observed that 'it is not the custom here to ride about the town on horseback, and not many are followed by a lackey'.[15] Other travellers made the same observation about Italians in general—they did not have servants, horses, swords. Fynes Moryson added a great deal about how little Italians spent at table, both for the purchase of food and for the entertainment of guests—which led him repeatedly to tirades, by way of contrast, against the good old ways in which the English were spending their money at the time.[16] 'The natural hospitality of England' led Sir Henry Wootton, in 1624, to regard certain aspects of Italian palace design as unsuitable for imitation in England—namely, the small size of the service rooms and the fact that they were confined to the basement and therefore not 'more visible'.[17]

Things were somewhat different at the courts of the northern Italian princes, but not very much. Ceremony was obviously more elaborate than in merchants' homes, and much of it had a feudal gloss to it. Many of these men were, after all, military men, and what other model was there to follow? These Italian princes wanted the legitimacy that a feudal title could nominally confer, and their courts had all the trappings of feudal rites and ritual; but how successful could feudal ceremony be in holding together a state, like that of the Visconti, the Gonzaga, or the d'Este, which stayed afloat on mutual-defence pacts drawn up in terms of sheer power, not claims of tradition or legitimacy; where local lords held their distance and resisted being absorbed into the court life of the ruler; where claims of family—the strongest of feudal bonds—were continually answered by violence or rejected in favour of illegitimacy? Under these circumstances feudal consumption habits did not arise from the real exigencies of life; and this is why the

[14] On servants in Florence, see my study, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History* (Baltimore, 1980), pp. 106–8; C. Klapisch, 'Célibat et service féminins dans la Florence du XVe siècle', *Annales de démographie historique: Démographie historique et condition féminine* (Paris, 1981), pp. 289–302.

[15] *The Diary of Montaigne's Journey to Italy in 1580 and 1581*, ed. E. J. Trechmann (London, 1929), pp. 92, 94.

[16] Moryson, *An Itinerary*, i. 192–3; iv. 93–9, 172–4.

[17] Quoted in F. Heal, 'The Idea of Hospitality in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 102 (1984), 71.

chronicles of these places do not have anything like the chivalric orgies and spectacles that fill northern court records, just as the treasury accounts of these Italian princes, more tellingly, do not record such heavy expenditures for these kinds of activities and the household accounts of nobles are not full of expenditures for 'pomp and circumstance' in attendance and service at court. 'Yet no doubt they of all Nations can worst judge what it is to keepe a plentifull house, or a Princes Court and Trayne,' observed Moryson at the end of the sixteenth century. In Florence Moryson 'saw nothing in the trayne, or Tables of the Court, wherein many of our Earles and Barons doe not equall it'; and he found the court of Mantua 'after the Italian manner, faire for building but solitary for trayne of Courtiers'.[18] The 'style of a Renaissance despotism', to use Werner Gundersheimer's formulation for his study of Ferrara, was something very different from the traditional feudal mode.

The appearance of the city in the midst of feudal Europe set the stage for the eventual emergence of an alternative set of values, and the cities in northern Italy were the most precocious in realizing this potential. As the residence of the dominant groups within society, the city became the unchallenged centre of culture in Italian life, where an appropriate ideology with ethical–religious, juridical, historical, and aesthetic components slowly worked itself out.[19] Nothing indicates more clearly how life in the city thus conditioned men's values and behaviour than the way they spent their money.

Life in the city meant above all subordination to a more complex and demanding collectivity, to a fluid society based more on contract than on status. One direct cost this kind of life carried was self-taxation, an item the Italian urban élites were more prepared to enter in their budgets than most northern Europeans. The greater autonomy of the city as a territorial state and the relative political instability in Italy imposed a correspondingly greater responsibility for security. The history of taxation of nobles in feudal kingdoms points up, by contrast, the importance of the more highly socialized conscience

[18] *Shakespeare's Europe*, ed. C. Hughes (Manchester, 1902), pp. 106–7, 117–18.

[19] S. Bertelli, *Il potere oligarchico nello stato-città medievale* (Florence, 1978), pp. 149–64; M. C. De Matteis, 'Societas christiana e funzionalità ideologica della città in Italia: Linee di uno sviluppo', in R. Elze and G. Fasoli (eds.), *La città in Italia e in Germania nel medioevo: Cultura, istituzioni, vita religiosa* (Bologna, 1981). See also G. C. Argan and M. Fagiolo, 'Premessa all'arte italiana', in the Einaudi *Storia d'Italia*, i (Turin, 1972), 734–6.

among the urban upper classes. This sense of collectivity among urban residents also expressed itself, in a more private and voluntary way, in the forms of their charity. The feudal noble dispensed charity in a characteristically personal gesture, literally handing it out in an act of hospitality on his own premises; or he simply made blanket gifts to the church as intermediary, in a sense abdicating any direct responsibility for society at large.[20] Life in the city, however, generated more pressing problems of social control; and urban élites assumed the responsibility for dealing with general welfare through institutions like orphanages, hospitals, and confraternities dedicated to the distribution of alms. Taxes and charitable contributions are two expenditures men were prepared to make that indicate how the city—and not only the Italian city—came to represent a different kind of social organization with its own system of values that slowly took possession of urban élites, setting them off from the rural nobility of feudal Europe.

The most obvious physical expression of this cultural outlook was the city itself; and the proof of the real loyalties it could inspire is that disposition (so notable among Italians) to spend money co-operatively on urban monuments. Public spending of this kind—both official and private—is much more impressive in Italian cities than in northern ones. The great cathedrals of Italy, just to take the example of the most conspicuous monument in most medieval cities, were public projects, whereas many a Gothic cathedral in northern Europe was erected by an ecclesiastical authority, usually a noble-dominated cathedral chapter, which was often capable of explicitly excluding the local burghers from participation in the enterprise.[21] In the classical Mediterranean tradition, architecture thus reasserted itself as the concrete, material—and therefore costly—expression of a cultural ideal.

This urban ideology informed private behaviour in putting architecture at the centre of that 'empire of things' the Italians began to build up for themselves in the Renaissance. As the communes evolved into more oligarchical and despotic states, the ruling élites began to build more assertively for themselves; but, if building shifted from the public to the private sphere, it still belonged in a civic context. For all the egotism one may wish to see in the building activities of both oligarch and despot, ranging from chapels in public places to ambitious

[20] J. T. Rosenthal, *The Purchase of Paradise: Gift-giving and the Aristocracy, 1307–1485* (London, 1972), pp. 130–1.

[21] W. H. Vroom, *De financiering van de kathedraalbouw in de middeleeuwen in het bijzonder van de dom van Utrecht* (Maarssen, 1981), pp. 106–8.

urban renewal schemes (the likes of which were not seen in any northern town until much later), we cannot discount altogether the appeal of the arguments made by Alberti, Palmieri, and others, both humanists and architectural theorists, about the contribution of the beauty of such things to the common good. Architecture, as Alberti observed, is pre-eminently an urban art form; and, as virtually every Renaissance treatise on architecture asserts—and as most architectural historians ever since repeat—architecture is also pre-eminently an expression of power. For the Italian oligarchs and despots it was the focus of their preoccupation with publicity, which was perhaps all the more keen once it became clear how inappropriate the older feudal forms of ritualistic spectacle were. Moreover, Italians as no other peoples in Europe, had tangible evidence of the grandeur and immortality of architecture in the Roman ruins that were everywhere around them. The Romans gave the Italians a model to follow. In this sense style, too, came to have profound cultural meaning; and it was style that elevated their buildings to the level of architecture. And style, consisting of conspicuous embellishment, thrived all the more in the competitive atmosphere of urban life.

Architecture thus became the principal means by which Italians staked out their claim to grandeur and magnificence; it was certainly the chief luxury they spent their money on; and it was the one art form the upper classes were interested in reading about and showed a passionate intellectual and even creative interest in. It was the chief term by which they redefined the traditional aristocratic concept of magnificence.[22] Architecture, indeed, became the most important sign of nobility in Italian society. Already by the time Vespasiano da Bisticci was writing his lives, its status—more than that of painting or sculpture—had given rise to the concept of patronage of the arts as ennobling. At the more mundane level of conspicuous consumption, the importance of the town palace and the family chapel had, by the sixteenth century, clearly won over even the most recalcitrant rural feudal nobility—in southern Italy, for instance, where nobles let their traditional country seats fall into ruin by abandoning them for residence in Naples; and in the even more provincial backwashes of the Marches, where the nobles came into town and built palaces and chapels in accordance with the new mode of asserting one's social

[22] A. D. Fraser Jenkins, 'Cosimo de' Medici's Patronage of Architecture and the Theory of Magnificence', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 33 (1970), 162–70.

status.[23] The geography of Italian art in the sixteenth century—that is, the appearance of new centres in Rome, Naples, Genoa, and elsewhere—was partly determined by the urbanization of rural élites and the consequent changes in the spending habits of men in search of a new definition of their nobility.

Economic values show just how important buildings were both as expenditures in themselves and in the way they in fact determined further spending and thereby defined new consumer habits. Buildings were by far the most important expenditure many of these men made. How many men can be found in the annals of great builders (before the industrial era of high salaries) who, like Filippo Strozzi, spent more than one-third of the value of their entire estate just to put up a house, without counting its furnishings? This palace of a Florentine merchant cost one-third to one-half of what Henry VII, king of England, paid out, in these very same years, for his great palace at Richmond, a building that 'was destined to be the architectural symbol of the Tudor dynasty . . . a symbol [by which] all Europe would measure this upstart king'.[24]

It is well known how men in the Renaissance justified their spending on building by developing the concept of magnificence as a public virtue, but magnificent building also had implications for one's private living expenditures that raised moral questions. At the end of the fifteenth century Giovanni Pontano developed this theme in his treatise on the social virtues, which he linked with that part of ethics that presupposes the spending of money, and so in a sense he subjected possessiveness itself to moral analysis. At the centre of this scheme is a new virtue, splendour, which is the complement of magnificence, being the logical extension of magnificence into the private world. Whereas magnificence is manifest in public architecture, splendour expresses itself in the elegance and refinement with which a person lives his life within buildings; it therefore consists in the furnishings, ornaments, and adornment of town houses as well as in the gardens of country villas. It is the beauty of all these things that excites admiration for the possessor of objects, and moreover that beauty

[23] G. Labrot, *Baroni in città: Residenze e comportamenti dell'aristocrazia napoletana, 1530–1734* (Naples, 1979), esp. pp. 31–6; B. G. Zenobi, *Ceti e potere nella Marca pontificia* (Bologna, 1976), pp. 270–1.

[24] G. Kipling, *The Triumph of Honour: Burgundian Origins of the Elizabethan Renaissance* (Leiden, 1977), pp. 3–4.

consists not in utility and inherent value but in variety and craftsmanship. Hence Pontano clearly 'translates the ethical principle as an end in itself into a principle of beauty', in a sense endowing possessiveness with an aesthetic as well as an ethical quality.[25]

The possessiveness that slowly overcame Florentines manifests itself consciously in their most basic economic records—the account books covering their busy economic lives and carefully kept in double entry. As if taking up a novelty, they began to open separate accounts for individual pieces of furniture, for the furnishings of rooms, and for the particular artisans who supplied these goods. As the pace of acquisition increased, however, the world of goods grew beyond accounting control, and by the sixteenth century the accounts of household furnishings become more generalized and the individual object loses its particular identity. Thus possessiveness came to be taken for granted.[26]

This process of accumulation can also be traced in the internal history of many a palace. When the Strozzi palace, for example, was finally ready for occupancy, about a decade after the builder's death, his widow did not have much furniture to take with her on moving day; but the household accounts of subsequent generations (up to the end of the line in this century), along with complete inventories at each juncture when the palace passed from one generation to the other, reveal the slow process by which the house was adapted for use, and readapted with changes in fashion. A century after it was begun, the family still occupied principally only one floor, the *piano nobile*, which was, however, now crammed with furnishings, including many kinds of things that had not even existed at the time the building was put up; but there were still many empty rooms on this floor, and on the top floor all the rooms were empty or used for storage, one of these extravagant spaces being used for the keeping of chickens. Clearly, there was no need for so much space when such a great palace was put up; but once the space became available, men learned how to use it and adjusted their way of life accordingly. In short, form preceded and, in a sense, determined function.

The history of how life evolved inside the Strozzi and many other early palaces can also be written around the adaptation of the great generalized spaces of the original plan to the more particular needs

[25] F. Tateo, *Umanesimo etico di Giovanni Pontano* (Lecce, 1972), pp. 171–7. Tateo has edited Pontano's *I trattati delle virtù sociali* (Rome, 1965).

[26] See my discussion in *The Building of Renaissance Florence*, pp. 77–83.

the family developed as it adjusted to life inside. The considerable modification of interior space over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is dramatized in the radical transformations that had to be made when an older Renaissance palace was remodelled in the seventeenth century for more modern living. When the Riccardi bought the Medici palace they found that what had been in its time the grandest palace in Florence, if not all of Italy, could not even begin to satisfy the needs of a rich family almost two centuries later. No sooner did the new owners take possession than they virtually gutted it, putting in two staircases in the new fashion—one a spiral, the other grandly sweeping through the height of the building; needing a larger reception room than any the house then had, they threw several of the larger older rooms together and even raised the already high ceiling on the *piano nobile* well into the floor above; the loggias were enclosed to make galleries around the courtyard; an extension was added virtually doubling the size of the house and including an even grander hall, the famous library, and accommodations for stable and carriages; and, finally, no fewer than four chapels were opened, besides the space which had been the Medici chapel, itself apparently an anomaly in fifteenth-century town houses.[27] In short, the history of domestic architecture over the period of the Renaissance is the history of the redefinition of the use of interior space, and this has enormous implications for the history of luxury consumption—including, of course, art.

While these urban élites were enlarging their world of goods within their town houses, they were also extending it beyond the city with the villas they built all over the surrounding countryside. Even the feudal nobility of central and south Italy, once it was thoroughly urbanized, preferred villas on the outskirts of Rome or Naples (in addition to their town house) to the seats of their more remote ancestral estates, which they now let fall into ruin. The great ecclesiastical princes in Rome and the secular princes in Ferrara, Mantua, Florence, and elsewhere built villas across town from their town palaces, and others just outside the city walls, and yet others somewhat beyond in the more remote countryside. We know that the first Grand Duke of Tuscany did not spend much time during his long reign in any one place: he was continually on the move, going from one villa to another, each place just down the road no more than an hour or so away at

[27] F. Böttner, 'Der Umbau des Palazzo Medici–Riccardi zu Florenz', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 14 (1970), 393–414.

the most. And these villas—like those of other princes—were not located at the centre of great rural estates; they were not in provincial towns, where they might have served conspicuously to remind subjects just who the prince was; they were not fortified places strategically located in the defence network of the state. In short, this ceaseless villa-hopping had a different purpose from the mobility of the itinerate courts of the feudal north. Nor did the villa in Italian life represent the refeudalization of the Italian upper classes; their move to the country was, rather, an extension of urban life into the countryside, and the fuss they made about the *otium* they found there presupposes an urban point of view. With the villa, in any case, they added another corner with its own distinctive character to their newly created, ever-expanding physical world: it was just that much more space to be filled up with goods, goods that expressed the new life-style that gave their world its meaning.

Many account books of the rich tell the story of how, across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, merchants and nobles, princes, and prelates, spent more and more of their wealth on building and furnishing, and then remodelling, as successive generations settled down to life inside such enormous spaces. With the construction of these spaces in the Renaissance, Italians created a world in which they could develop a different style of life, and in which a new culture came to be defined. This is why so much was spent on objects, why so many new kinds of objects came into existence, why in the final analysis the arts flourished now in the domestic world as they had earlier in the religious world.

All too little is known about this culture, about the coherence of this 'empire of things', about its enlargement and transformation. We are only now beginning to learn just how central the bedroom was in the home of the early Renaissance Florentine. The first accounts kept by a young man who had at last reached financial independence often open with the detailed expenditures for the fitting-out and furnishing of this room, which in fact added up to a kind of counter-gift to the dowry of the wife he would eventually lead there. In Alberti's treatise on the family, when the husband takes his wife on a tour of her new home, it is the last room he leads her to, and he closes the door behind her to show her all those things he keeps there for his private enjoyment. Inventories confirm this absolute priority of the bedroom as the place in the house where objects of all kinds—many of those things we today call art—begin to appear in notable quantities. And

yet, given the current state of research into this social background for art, who could think of opening a study of the history of secular art in the Renaissance with a first chapter entitled 'Bedroom Art'?

We know a little more about the private study—the *studiolo* or *scrittoio*.[28] Whether in the homes of merchants in Florence and Venice, or of princes in Mantua and Urbino, these rooms came to be filled up with all those curiosities men enjoyed in privacy, giving rise to new art forms and to the collecting of older ones, to the refinement of taste and to the improvement of learning. Almost a quarter of the famous inventory of the Medici palace made on the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent in 1492 is taken up with the list of items in his minuscule and remotely located study; and these included his most valuable possessions. Here was a kind of mini-'empire of things' that reveals another aspect of these new spending habits. Lorenzo's study was not the treasury of a feudal prince: the value of his precious objects was not inherent in their materials, and they did not have the function of ceremonial display, either liturgical or secular, of the typically feudal kind. Nor was hoarding the characteristic behaviour of men who lived in the economic world of the Italian towns; instead, behind their collecting impulse was a new cultural ideal—one that emphasized craftsmanship rather than intrinsic value of materials, learned content rather than ceremonial function, private pleasure rather than public display. Here, in short, was a programme for altogether new consumer habits.

Much more needs to be learned about bedrooms and studies—and other rooms, too—and about their further evolution and transformation as the demands on domestic space changed. The movement of a picture like Botticelli's *Primavera* from the bedroom of a town house (where we now know it was originally) to the hall of a villa (where Vasari saw it some years later), involved much more than a rehanging, just as it is more than a mere quantitative leap from the intimate Renaissance *studiolo* or *scrittoio* to the sumptuous library and collection gallery of a baroque palace. That history is recorded in the changing and enlarging constellation of goods that men bought to furnish and decorate these rooms to make them livable and usable; and historians have yet to chart the underlying patterns of these

[28] W. Liebenwein, *Studiolo: Die Entstehung eines Raumtyps und seine Entwicklung bis um 1600* (Berlin, 1977); J. von Schlosser, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens* (Leipzig, 1908).

kaleidoscopic changes in consumption habits, let alone explain the deeper impulses that gave rise to them.[29]

The dynamic behind the expansion of this 'empire of things' was the working out of what might be called a new life-style. The famous description of Niccolò Niccoli by Vespasiano da Bisticci already in the early fifteenth century points to the new model:

> Of all men ever born he was by far the cleanest, in his eating habits as in all else. When he was at table he ate from the most beautiful antique dishes, and he drank from cups of crystal or some other fine stone. To see him at table, as old as he was, gave one a sense of refinement. He always insisted that the table cloth before him be of the whitest, like all his other linens. Some may be astonished to hear that he possessed such a vast quantity of tableware, and to these may be answered that in his day things of this sort were not so much in vogue or so highly prized as they have been since ... There was no house in Florence that was more adorned than his or where there were more refined things than in his, so that whoever went there, whatever his interests, found an infinite number of worthy things.[30]

Gentilezza or refinement is the repeated word in Vespasiano's text; and this was the new model of behaviour Italians expressed in the goods they bought—from the increasing quantity and variety of tableware that conditioned their dining habits, to the books, musical instruments, and art works with which they cultivated taste and learning.

The backwardness of northern Europe served to put the relative refinement of the Italians into relief. It was not simply that Italians thought themselves the cleanest people in Europe. Machiavelli observed that Italian princes ate and even slept with greater 'splendour', and Pontano criticized the French at table for exactly this reason—they ate to satisfy their gluttony rather than with any sense of splendour.[31] Northerners regarded the forks they saw in Italy as strange, if not positively suspicious; like Montaigne, they were impressed that each diner had his own napkin and complete service of silverware, so that he did not even touch his plate with his hands while

[29] This subject is now being studied by J. Kent Lydecker, of the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

[30] *Vita di uomini illustri del secolo XV*, ed. P. d'Ancona and E. Aeschlimann (Milan, 1951), pp. 442–3.

[31] Cited by C. De Frede, '"Più simile a mostro che a uomo": la bruttezza e l'incultura di Carlo VIII nella rappresentazione degli Italiani del Rinascimento', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 44 (1982), where the Italian attitude is discussed, esp. 577–81.

eating. When the poet Tasso went north he found it curious, if to their credit, that the French used glass to make church windows for the glory of God rather than table utensils 'for display and for the pleasure of drinkers'.[32] Even Marie de' Medici, who went as Queen of France, found the Louvre more fit for use as a prison than as a royal residence.

By the end of the sixteenth century Italians had created a style of living with its own world of goods that clearly set them off from other Europeans. Fynes Moryson was much impressed by the Italian passion for buildings, furnishings, and ornamental gardens: 'for', he says, 'they bestow their money in stable things, to serve their posteritie, where as [he adds, referring to the value the English put on feasting] our greatest expenses end in the casting out of excrements.' Moryson criticizes the Italians for never travelling abroad, which, he explains, is because they 'are so ravished with the beauty of their own Country ... holding Italy for a Paradise'. 'In truth,' says Giovanni Botero, 'we Italians are too much friends to our own selves and too much involved admirers of our own things, when we prefer Italy and its cities to all the rest of the world.'[33]

By the second half of the sixteenth century no one would think of describing the nobility in Italy in the way that applies to France: 'a group living on the land for the most part, rough, usually unlettered, often brutal, and perhaps just as often courageous, with a tradition of fighting as its profession even if all did not fight.'[34] *Civile* is the word Italians used to describe what these northern rural nobles were not; and by that they meant everything that is implied by residence outside a city, something that struck all Italian observers as peculiar about the northern nobility. According to an old Tuscan proverb, already cited by Paolo da Certaldo in the late fourteenth century, only animals lived in the country; and in the words of a Florentine exile a century later, to be sent away from the city was to be expelled from *civilità*.[35] The full evolution of a thoroughly urbanized way of life eventually conferred on the Italian upper classes, even on courtiers like Tasso in

[32] *Le lettere di Torquato Tasso*, ed. C. Guasti, I (Florence, 1854), p. 42.

[33] Moryson, *An Itinerary*, iv. 82, 94; G. Botero, 'Delle cause della grandezza e magnificenza delle città', in *Della ragion di stato*, ed. L. Firpo (Turin, 1948), bk. II, ch. 12.

[34] E. Schalk, 'The Appearance and Reality of Nobility in France during the Wars of Religion: An Example of How Collective Attitudes Can Change', *Journal of Modern History*, 48 (1976), 23.

[35] D. V. and F. W. Kent, *Neighbours and Neighbourhood in Renaissance Florence: The District of the Red Lion in the Fifteenth Century* (Locust Valley, NY, 1982), p. 29.

one of the most feudal-like courts in Italy, a completely new concept of culture.

It is urban life that made much of the difference in Italian civilization, and that difference still sets Italians off today, when they confound foreigners with their judgements about whether other people's comportment is, or is not, *civile*. As Botero observed, trying to explain this difference at the end of the sixteenth century: the closer proximity of noblemen in the city, where they are continually on view, breeds a keener sense of competition and changes the terms of that competition, so that the urban nobility spend more lavishly than the rural nobility, and this leads 'necessarily' to more building and the multiplication of crafts. Perhaps, too, we could further extend this argument along the lines of David Hume's observation about the course of civilization in England at a time when consumerism was becoming a notable phenomenon there—that is, says Hume, luxury heightened the gratification of the senses and hence led to refinement in taste and in the arts generally. In any case, these new spending habits were induced by the urban residence of the dominant classes in Italian society and by the redefinition they gave to the noble life-style.

It is nothing new to say that the city has always been at the centre of Italian life, but the implications of urban residency for the development of a distinctive way of life have not been explored. Rather, the social history of Italian urban élites takes its cue from how the earlier relations between the traditional rural nobility and the new mercantile classes affected the formation of the commune, and the emphasis is on the ensuing dialectic, with its themes of the 'betrayal of the bourgeoisie', its 'aristocratization', and, finally, in the sixteenth century, 'the return to the land' and 'refeudalization'—to use the slogans of the argument as it is currently formulated. In the final analysis, all this leaves the city as a mere transitional stage in the long history of the traditional nobility, rather than a formative one in the evolution of a new kind of nobility. It sets up a class dialectic without regard to the synthesis that was ongoing from the very beginning, as the rural aristocracy and the new urban élites merged on their common ground, the city—something that did not happen in northern Europe; and it underplays the distinctive difference between the Italian and northern traditions of culture by exaggerating the influence of the north on Italy and overlooking the later influence of Italy on the north. To understand the social fusion and the emergence of a new concept of nobility that

found such self-conscious expression by the sixteenth century, we need to know more about the peculiar ways in which city life impinges on man's habits, shapes his attitudes, determines his relations with other men—in short, programmes his behaviour according to the rituals of social life. How men spent their money is not the whole story, but it is one way in which the economic historian can explore the distinctive sociology of urban élites.

In any case, the material culture of the Italian Renaissance does not reveal anything like the so-called 'class mentalities' that have given rise to so many flights of scholarly fancy in the traditional historiography of the social and cultural life of Italy.[36] The consumption habits noted here do not appear peculiar to merchants, bankers, and manufacturers—the so-called bourgeoisie—or to princes and aristocrats, any more than they resemble the ways the feudal élites of northern Europe were then spending their money. This consumption was an index to a new concept of nobility that was engendered in the city and that asserted itself in co-operative political action and social control, in the magnification of public space, in the cultivation of new forms of private and domestic social life, in the refinement of taste and education, and—finally—in the definition of art and in the patronage of it. In these ways it was city life, not class behaviour, that gave rise to that 'empire of things' we call the Renaissance.

[36] A criticism of this historiographical tradition, with special reference to the recent literature on the earlier period, can be found in R. Bordone, 'Tema cittadino e "ritorno alla terra" nella storiografia comunale recente', *Quaderni storici*, 52 (1983), 255–77. This tradition has been reinforced by the popularity in Italy (as marked by recent translations) of the work of Otto Brunner and Norbert Elias, neither of whom, however, addresses the Italian situation—nor, indeed, do they take it into consideration as an influence on the evolution of the concept of nobility in northern Europe.