

similar institution in Valladolid when Philip III moved the court there (1601–06). Founded in 1579, the Italian Nation was governed by a council of ten governors and, from 1627, six members, representing Florence, Genoa, Milan, Naples, Rome, and Sicily. For bankers (who were mostly from Genoa), businessmen, nobles, bureaucrats, and clergy, the administration of St. Peter's hospital was an excellent way to develop a career in the Italian domains of the Crown, in Madrid, as well as the Roman Curia.

There is much to admire in this innovative study that examines a broad array of welfare spaces: hospitals, confraternities, monasteries, and convents. Rather than focus on one type of charitable institution, as most studies have done, Novi Chavarria looks at the many disparate histories and historiographies through one lens, and this comparative perspective reveals a common objective: the reception, care, and integration of the subjects of the Hispanic monarchy. In this sense, the book presents a groundbreaking approach to the history of charity and healthcare. In the last chapter, the author articulates these original perspectives and new areas of research, raising more questions than answers, proposing new stimulating fields of study rather than conclusions.

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Artisans, Objects, and Everyday Life in Renaissance Italy: The Material Culture of the Middling Class. Paula Hohti Erichsen.

Visual and Material Culture, 1300–1700. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 364 pp. €119.

One of the most fascinating aspects of material culture history is its potential to bring the Italian Renaissance world alive through the evocative power of objects. Objects can tell stories of how people lived, interacted with each other, celebrated events, demonstrated their faith, and built their identities. For the most part, Renaissance material culture studies have focused their attention on the consumption practices of the wealthy elite, while the middling classes of artisans and shopkeepers were neglected. Their disregard was based on the simple assumption that members of the lower classes did not possess the financial means necessary to participate in the consumption of those luxury objects that defined the Renaissance world.

Hohti Erichsen's book challenges this assumption and proves with abundant evidence that the middling classes engaged in Renaissance culture not only as makers but also as consumers of luxury material objects. Her study of archival and visual evidence suggests that their world was complex and dynamic, and it brings the reader to a much deeper understanding of how ordinary men and women of Renaissance Italy lived, worked, and engaged with their culture. Most importantly, Hohti Erichsen argues

that the acquisition and display of luxury goods was not just a way for the lower social groups to emulate the wealthy elite, but it was an expression of their “strong commitment to the values of civility and culture” (303). That is, material goods held very specific symbolic meaning and contributed to the consolidation of the family’s identity and status across the social spectrum, and not just for the wealthy elite.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 introduces the reader to the world of the middling artisanal classes. Hohti Erichsen paints a vivid picture of their everyday life, social bonds, and community connections, revealing the economic diversity and ranks within the community of artisans and shopkeepers. The central idea proposed in this section is that material objects were fundamental instruments used in the creation of identities within the complex middle-class social reality.

Part 2 addresses one important question regarding the economic context in which the middling classes lived; granted that artisans and shopkeepers enjoyed limited economic resources, how could they afford to buy luxury objects? Hohti Erichsen breaks the traditional assumption that they were excluded from the consumption of those objects and demonstrates that they were able to access a variety of goods thanks to supplemental sources of income and alternative systems of exchange, such as bartering and secondhand markets. Part 3 brings the reader back to the objects, which are described with exquisite details and carefully placed in their domestic contexts. The purpose is to show how the objects were used and, most importantly, how they were displayed to shape family identities as well as to “facilitate social relations” (44) and provide the means to “negotiate hierarchies and mediate between people of different rank” (295).

One of the most challenging tasks that cultural historians face is the deciphering of people’s intentions and aspirations. This is especially true for scholars who venture into the world of the lower and uneducated masses, who often did not leave sufficient direct evidence of their sentiments. Hohti Erichsen does a good job presenting well-reasoned arguments, which are the product of a careful analysis of a variety of sources. The richness of details is captured by both visual sources, such as period paintings and surviving objects, and detailed inventories of Siensese households. The use of other archival evidence, such as civic registers, adds precise and important economic data to support the overall argument regarding the economic complexity of the middling classes, their ability to acquire luxury goods, and their desire to display those objects in their homes.

The result is a felicitous narrative that will keep lay readers engaged, while satisfying the experts with meticulous bibliographical notes, an extensive bibliography, and a very useful appendix containing nine middle-class household inventories extracted from the Siensese archives. While the book is based on archival research conducted primarily in Siena, it is reasonable to assume that Hohti Erichsen’s conclusions can be broadly applied to the middling classes of other Italian Renaissance cities.

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