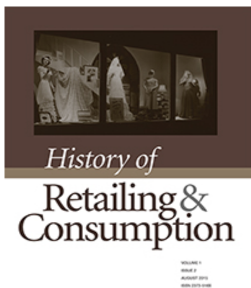

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In 'splendid isolation'. A comparative perspective on the historiographies of the 'material renaissance' and the 'consumer revolution'

Bruno Blondé[a*] and Wouter Ryckbosch[b]

Richard Goldthwaite's pioneering work on the material culture of the Italian Renaissance offered many clues for better understanding long-term changes and continuities in European patterns of consumption during the early modern period. Yet the large historiographical body on the subject of the 'material renaissance' has largely ignored or rejected these, and has more often than not studied the field in a sort of 'splendid isolation'. This article presents a review of some of the most important contributions to this field, and attempts to link them to the ongoing debates on early modern consumer change in the social and economic history outside of Italy.

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The empire of things

The time when the concept of 'Renaissance' called forth only associations with an elite culture of the arts and humanities – with or without the dressing of Jacob Burckhardt's inspired ideas about modernity, creativity and individuality – is long behind us. To an important degree many Italian city dwellers still had their couture, art collections, table etiquette, residences – in short, their everyday life and consumption – to thank for their identity besides access to a learned culture. It was Jacob Burckhardt himself who provided the spark for this insight:

> Outward life, indeed, in the fifteenth and the early part of the sixteenth centuries, was polished and ennobled as among no other people in the world. A countless number of those small things and great things which combine to make up of what we mean by comfort, we know to have first appeared in Italy. We read in the novelists of soft, elastic beds, of costly carpets and bedroom furniture, of which we hear nothing in other countries. We often hear especially of the abundance and beauty of the linen. Much of all this is drawn within the sphere of art. We note with admiration the thousand ways in which art ennobles luxury, not only adorning the massive sideboard or the light-brackets with noble vases, clothing the walls with the moveable splendor of tapestry, and covering the toilet table with nonetheless graceful trifles, but absorbing whole branches of mechanical work – especially carpentry – into its province.[1]

It was above all Richard Goldthwaite, though, who in the 1980s and 1990s put the Renaissance on the map as the cradle of 'material modernity'.[2] Goldthwaite pointed to consumer mentality as a

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[1] J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Dover Publications, 1945), 227.
[2] R. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300–1600* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). For a relativizing 'framing' of that modernity concept, see R. Mackenney, *Renaissances. The Cultures of Italy, c. 1300–c.1600* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 22–3.

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'creative force' that gave shape to the identity of the Italian city dweller. Whereas economic historiography had claimed for decades that the cradle of consumer society must have stood somewhere in the seventeenth or eighteenth century,[3] Goldthwaite's great powers of persuasion shifted attention to late medieval Italy:[4]

> Although the world has become infinitely more cluttered since the Renaissance, an argument can be made that modern consumer society, with its insatiable consumption setting the pace for the production of more objects and changes in style, had its first stirrings, if not its birth, in the habits of spending that possessed the Italians in the Renaissance.[5]

This article will argue that these ideas, and the expansive literature on the material world of the Italian Renaissance which they have spawned, should be taken out of their splendid isolation. More specifically, we will argue that there is a growing need to draw out the many connections between the 'material renaissance' and the 'consumer revolution' of the early modern North Sea area – not only historiographically, but also historically.

At the heart of Goldthwaite's reasoning was the commonsensical finding that over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the house (*palazzo* or *casa*), its furnishings and their uses each became successively more and more luxurious, varied and extensive. Around 1400, in spite of their external *magnificenza*, even the grandest *palazzi* only had rather sparsely decorated and furnished interiors. Over the course of the following two centuries, however, not only clothing but also furniture, paintings and tableware acquired a more important place in everyday and social life. The proliferation of paintings in private possession is considered to be exemplary of the transformations of material culture writ large. In Goldthwaite's explanation, the Italian nobility played a prominent role. Much earlier than their European peers, they exchanged an essentially aristocratic or feudal model for much more complex and subtle forms of conduct and consumption. Those social models were, like their residences, essentially 'urban'.[6]

Not everyone received this thesis with open arms.[7] Yet the idea that Renaissance culture took shape *also* in the many hundreds of thousands of everyday purchases and in the interiors of Italian *palazzi* has nevertheless been commonly accepted ever since.[8] In her book on Italian interiors, published 10 years ago, Elizabeth Currie described this as a genuine 'consumer revolution'.[9]

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[3] W. Ryckbosch, 'Early Modern Consumption History. Current Challenges and Future Perspectives', *BMGN – The Low Countries Historical Review* 130, no. 1 (2015): 57–84.
[4] R. Goldthwaite, 'The Renaissance Economy: The Preconditions for Luxury Consumption', in *Aspetti della vita economica medievale', Atti del convegno di studi nel X anniversario della morte di Federigo Melis Firenze-Pisa-Prato, 10–14 marzo 1984* (Florence: Instituto Datini, 1985), 659–75; Goldthwaite, 'The Empire of Things: Consumer Demand in Renaissance Italy', in *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F.W. Kent and P. Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 153–75; Goldthwaite, 'The Economic and Social World of Italian Renaissance Maiolica', *Renaissance Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1989): 1–32; Goldthwaite, *Wealth*.
[5] Goldthwaite, 'Renaissance Economy', 660.
[6] Goldthwaite, *Wealth*, 203.
[7] See, for example, the critical review by C.L. Stinger in *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25 (1994): 925–6 and L. Martines, 'The Renaissance and the Birth of a Consumer Society', *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998): 193–203.
[8] Another work in which this idea plays a central role, yet which is left outside the scope of this discussion on account of its analytical shortcomings, is L. Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London: Norton & Company, 1996).
[9] E. Currie, *Inside the Renaissance House* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2006), 14.

Although this last claim may well be overstated,[10] the attention to everyday life and more specifically to the materiality of the Renaissance is more than justified. The exceptionally rich correspondence of Isabella d'Este, for example, nicely shows the extent to which elites around 1500 were caught up in a myriad of anxieties and desires concerning their outfits, art collections, tableware and furniture.[11] Those who work their way through this source in its entirety are rewarded by numerous references to purchases, gifts, exchanges and pledges, in which the entire material culture of Isabella d'Este as well as everyday life at the Mantuan court spring to life. In 1491, for instance, the 17-year-old Isabella had items purchased for her in Paris and she asked insistently that they be according to the latest fashion. Her letters teem with orders, pledges, exchange activities and purchases of goods ranging from precious gemstones to gloves. And she does not just write about 'things'; she does it at times with an emotional, nearly physical appetite and with a barely veiled acquisitive drive. Such utterances of consumer consciousness, which at moments look surprisingly 'modern', pique one's imagination of course. They call forth questions about the role of material culture and consumption in 'the Italian Renaissance' in relation to modern consumer culture.

The splendour of the material renaissance

By now, the list of works that consider the 'material culture' of the Renaissance can hardly be surveyed.[12] Few syntheses or anthologies appearing today about any Italian city fail to notice the purchasing behaviour, consumer habits or interior designs of Italian Renaissance households.[13]

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[10] Invoked to excess, that is, if only because very comparable phenomena can be determined for other places and time periods. See, for example, J.M. Redfield, 'The Development of the Market in Archaic Greece', in *The Market in History*, ed. B.L. Anderson and A.J.H. Latham (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 9–28.

[11] A.M. Lorenzoni, 'Contributo allo studio delle fonti Issabelliane dell'archivio di stato di Mantova', *Atti e memori dell'academia virgiliana di Mantova* 47 (1979): 97–135.

[12] Here follows but a small selection from a harvest – almost impossible to survey – of relatively recent publications on consumption, domestic culture, the (nuclear) family and daily life on the Italian peninsula: C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); P. Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior: 1400–1600* (London: Harry N. Abrams, 1991); D. Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); J.M. Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); G. Clarke, *Roman House – Renaissance Palaces: Inventing Antiquity in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); L. Syson and D. Thornton, *Objects of Virtue: Art in Renaissance Italy* (London: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001); A. Scotti Tosini, *Aspetti dell'abitare in Italia tra XV e XVI secolo. Distribuzione, funzioni, impianti* (Milan: Unicopli, 2001); R. Sarti, *Europe at Home: Family and Material Culture 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); P.F. Brown, *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice: Art, Architecture and the Family* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); R.J.M. Olson et al., *The Biography of the Object in Late Medieval and Rrenaissance Italy* (London: Wiley, 2005); the special subject issue of *Renaissance Studies. Journal of the Society for Renaissance Studies* 19 (2005): 573–709, including, among others, L. Lindow, 'For Use and Display: Selected Furnishings and Domestic Goods in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Interiors', *Renaissance Studies* 19 (2005): 634–46.

[13] See, for example, R.J. Crum and J.T. Paoletti, '" … Full of People of Every Sort": The Domestic Interior', in *Renaissance Florence. A Social History*, ed. R.J. Crum and J.T. Paoletti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 273–91, and in the same collection M. Linguor, 'The Palace and Villa as Spaces of Patrician Self-Definition', 240–72, in which the embedding of noble families in the urban context is considered extensively; P.F. Brown, 'Behind the Walls. The Material Culture of Venetian Elites', in *Venice Reconsidered. The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797*, ed. J. Martin and D. Romano (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Note that in these examples architecture, lifestyle and the interior domestic culture of society's elites play a central role. As is often the case, it is the exception that confirms the rule. Thus, for instance – in an otherwise splendid guide – the entire consumer flank of the

In the past decade varied and impressive publications have appeared in the (art-)historical world, which increasingly have taken on the appearance of a 'state of the art'.[14]

Thus, it is difficult to do justice to the recent historiography of material culture in late medieval and sixteenth-century Italy. As we will argue, the wealth of approaches is not only the charm but also the potential pitfall of this historiography. In the following pages we will take a few recent seminal and exemplary publications as a point of departure for identifying the challenges facing future research on both the material renaissance and later changes in early modern material cultures. The stakes are high, since the scholarly literature on the material renaissance has much to gain by entering into a comparative debate, both in time and place, as this might potentially clarify our views on the nature of its causes and consequences.

Although she has seriously contemplated the major questions regarding the Renaissance as prefiguring modern consumer society, Welch's *Shopping in the Renaissance*, for example, almost unabashedly confronted the debates about modern consumer culture.[15] With 'shopping' in the main title, the work appeals to modern consumer cultures on its very cover.[16] Yet, already in the introduction Welch tempers the wrong expectations this title may have elicited from her readers: a search for the cradle of a modern consumer society in Renaissance Italy is treacherous. The least that can be said of her work is that it does justice to the kaleidoscopic reality of shopping in Renaissance Italy. There are no triumphant narratives of burgeoning consumer societies but instead a vivid account of multiple consumption practices and several commercial circuits in which they functioned.[17] Gifting, stealing, lottery drawings, purchasing, pawning, recycling and reselling: all belonged to the many possibilities in the realm of the material. One and the very same object could lead varied lives, following just as many divergent paths, each time laden with another meaning.[18] Welch wrote a book with narrative 'splendour'.

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economy and social activity is left as good as uncovered by K. Apuhen, 'Tools for the Development of the European Economy', in *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, ed. G. Ruggiero (London: Wiley, 2002), 259–78. While the author does devote attention to the broader processes of urbanization, international trade and the artisanal world, the work of Goldthwaite is only referred to tangentially.

[14] A project that played an important role was undoubtedly 'The Material Renaissance: Costs and Consumption in Italy 1300–1650', which ran from 2001 at the University of Sussex and the Victoria & Albert Museum.

[15] E. Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance. Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1350–1600* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

[16] Cf. E. Welch, 'The Gonzaga Go Shopping: Commercial and Cultural Relationships between Milan and Mantua in the Fifteenth Century', in *Leon Battista Alberti e il Quatrocento: studi in onore di Cecil Grayson e Ernst Gombrich*, ed. L. Chiavoni, G. Ferlisi and M.V. Grassi (Florence: Casa Editrice Leo S. Olschki, 2001), 269–84.

[17] For a rejection of linear development models in the retail trade, see, among others, B. Blondé et al., 'Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: An Introduction', in *Buyers and Sellers. Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. B. Blondé, P. Stabel, J. Stobart and I. Van Damme (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 7–29.

[18] For this reason, too, the study of secondary markets and circuits is important. See, among others, P. Allerston, 'Le marché d'occasion à Venise aux XVIe-XVIIe siècles', in *Echanges et cultures textiles dans l'Europe préindustrielle*, ed. J. Bottin and N. Pellegrin (Lyon: Lille University Press, 1996), 15–29; Allerston, 'Reconstructing the Second-Hand Clothes Trade in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Venice', *Costume* 33 (1999): 46–56; Allerston, 'Meeting Demand: Retailing Strategies in Early Modern Venice', in *Retailers and Consumer Changes in Early Modern Europe. England, France, Italy and the Low Countries*, ed. B. Blondé, E. Briot, N. Coquery and L. Van Aert (Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2005), 169–87; A. Matchette, 'To Have and Have Not: The Disposal of Household Furnishings in Florence', *Renaissance Studies* 20 (2006): 701–16; E. Welch, 'From Retail to Resale: Artistic Value and the Second-Hand Market in Italy (1400–1550)', in *The Art Market in Italy: Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. M. Fantoni, L.C. Matthew and S.F. Matthews-Griecco (Modena: Panini, 2003), 283–300.

In many respects it can serve as a sort of *synecdoche* for the recent historiography of the Italian Renaissance. For that which we gain in nuance, depth and breadth as well as in the aesthetic quality of publishing, we may well lose in comprehensiveness and overarching argumentation. Eventually this book does not engage in a dialogue with the broader historiography on material culture and consumption, nor does it compare systematically with evidence outside the Italian peninsula. Welch strongly believes in continuities, but by programmatically rejecting developmental perspectives many questions are left unexplored. Certainly the Italian material world of the early fifteenth century was not that of the late sixteenth century. Yet we are left guessing as to the influence of the increased array of products on commercial circuits and consumer practices and mentalities.

We find the same commitment to filleting the material renaissance in the collection of essays, *The Material Renaissance*,[19] an extremely refreshing book that ventures into debate with economic history. And even though here, as well, the kaleidoscopic approach is striking, this work has an important central message, as stated by Ann Matchette: 'Economic transactions cannot be seen as freed from the myriad social commitments that linked people to each other'.[20] Throughout the different chapters this message informs the multiple and complex social practices of buying, selling, consuming and producing. Social relationships, it is rightfully argued, heavily influenced price formation, and – conversely – commodities also held a central position in that very social system (as gifts, means for exchange, pledges and monetary alternatives).

Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholarly studies showed much interest in the Renaissance home, especially mapping its stylistic developments and decorative idiom.[21] Yet as late as the 1990s Goldthwaite had to plea 'to pull all these approaches and materials together and breathe a little social life into the Renaissance palace'.[22] Since that plea, quite a few studies have been published that have more or less systematically analysed wills, probate inventories and household diaries.[23] Works inspired by anthropology have fleshed out the active cultural role fulfilled by the home as well.[24] Meanwhile, art historians have emphasized the 'agency' of *objets d'art*.[25] And even the relationships between architecture and private life have been put thoroughly through the mill.[26] The authors of *At Home in Renaissance Italy*

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[19] This can be considered the academic flagship of the eponymous research project that Evelyn Welch and Michelle O'Malley supervised (see note 14). M. O'Malley and E. Welch, *The Material Renaissance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[20] A. Matchette, 'Credit and Credibility: Used Goods and Social Relations in Sixteenth-Century Florence', in O'Malley and Welch, *The Material Renaissance*, 225–41, particularly 239.

[21] See, for example, W. von Bode, *Die Italienischen Hausmöbel der Renaissance* (Leipzig: H. Seeman, 1902); M. Praz, *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration, from Pompeii to Art Nouveau* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964); Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior.*

[22] Goldthwaite, *Wealth*, 238.

[23] Among many others, see I. Palumbo Fossati, 'L'interno della casa dell'artista nella Venezia del Cinquecento', *Studi Veneziani* 8 (1984): 109–53; S. Cavallo, 'What Did Women Transmit? Ownership and Control of Household Goods and Personal Effects in Early Modern Italy', in *Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspective*, ed. M. Donald and L. Hurcombe (London: Palgrave, 2000), 38–53. There is also the work on inventories in M.S. Mazzi, 'Gli inventari dei beni. Storia di oggetti e storia di uomini', *Società e Storia* 7 (1980): 203–14.

[24] D. Romano, *Housecraft and Statecraft: Domestic Service in Renaissance Venice, 1400–1600* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Sarti, *Europe at Home*.

[25] G. Johnson, 'Family Values: Sculpture and the Family in Fifteenth-Century Florence', in *Art, Memory and Family in Renaissance Florence*, ed. G. Ciapelli and P. Lee Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 215–33.

[26] E.g. Brown, *Private Lives*; E. Cohen and T. Cohen, 'Open and Shut: The Social Meanings of the Renaissance Italian House', *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 9 (2001): 64–84.

were able to expand significantly on this scholarship,[27] investigating the house as a space of social change. For as much as massive Italian city palaces were meant to convey immutability and constancy, the lives that played out in them and the way in which Italians dealt with their interiors had to do not only with upholding family tradition but also just as much with continual accommodation and mutability. That the writers of *At Home in Renaissance Italy* did not evade the dialogue between 'materiality' and sociocultural interaction is admirable.[28] They also made a case for a presentation in which, for once, not just the urban *palazzo* but also the burgher's residence and the artisan's shop entered into discussion – albeit perhaps still rather timidly.[29]

Hats off, then, to this impressive collection of essays about sociability, health and nutrition, table manners, the Venetian and Florentine *casa*, the artisan's residence, 'house music', the representation of interiors, marriage and sexuality, working, cooking, praying and so forth.[30] Yet at the same time the book may frustrate readers in search of the relationships between space, people and objects, and how these factors have ultimately shaped culture in the Renaissance. The book could have profited from a more incisive conclusion.

The 'material renaissance historiography' is doing well. Yet upon closer inspection the discipline also pays a high price for its success. The subject suffers somewhat from the 'affluenza' that has also affected the broader historiography of consumption and material culture in general: too much fragmentation.[31] In the introduction of a recent, and otherwise unsurpassed, collection, *The Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior, 1400–1700*, the idea of proceeding case study by case study is no longer adopted for purely methodological reasons, but seems to have become a goal in itself.[32] For more than 20 years our understanding of the material culture of the Renaissance has become increasingly more complex and nuanced. Yet this nuance has come at the expense of an engagement with the major debates in the history of consumption and society outside of Renaissance Italy.

To make matters worse, the 'Italian Renaissance' is a very strong brand, one that sells itself. Unlike Goldthwaite, who emphasized that Italy was 'different', recent scholarly literature has almost entirely folded itself back onto the Italian peninsula.[33] In a similar vein, comparisons with developments in consumption in the later early modern period have also become rare.[34]

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[27] M. Ajmar-Wollheim and F. Dennis eds., *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (London: V&A Publications, 2006).

[28] A fine example in this context is the complex material culture that was developed surrounding marriage and sexuality, including, in addition to the dowry, a number of objects with commemorative functions as well. S.F. Matthews-Griecco, 'Marriage and Sexuality', in Ajmar-Wollheim, Dennis and Miller, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, 104–19; P. Allerston, 'Wedding Finery in Sixteenth-Century Venice', in *Marriage in Italy, 1300–1650*, ed. T. Dean and K.J.P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25–40.

[29] Palumbo Fossati, 'L'interno'.

[30] In *Renaissance Studies* 20, no. 5 (2006) an entire series of articles was conceived in the wake of *At Home in Renaissance Italy*. Among others, see M. Ajmar-Wollheim et al., 'Introduction. Approaching the Italian Renaissance Interior: Sources, Methodologies, Debates', *Renaissance Studies* 20, no. 5 (2006): 623–8.

[31] F. Trentmann, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. F. Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

[32] E. Campbell et al., 'Introduction. Early Modern Domesticities: Integrating People, Spaces, Objects', in *The Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior, 1400–1700*, ed. E. Campbell, S.R. Miller and E.C. Consavari (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 13.

[33] R. Burr Lichtfield thus reasonably wonders: 'Do we know enough to say that Italian urban society was so precociously different from that of the cities of northern Europe, which by the seventeenth century had developed much the same kind of luxury consumption that Italy had?' In *The Business History Review* 68, no. 2 (1994): 318.

[34] S. Cohn, Jr., 'Renaissance Attachment to Things: Material Culture in Last Wills and Testaments', *Economic History Review* 65, no. 3 (2012): 984–1004.

To be sure, Goldthwaite did attribute a kind of modern 'spirit of consumerism' to the Italians of the Renaissance. Yet as he saw it, there could still be no talk of a genuine 'consumer revolution' in the manner described by Neil McKendrick for eighteenth-century north-western Europe.[35] As a result, many assertions about the Italian Renaissance stand as claims devoid of systematic comparative evidence or explanatory power. This absence of a comparative approach cannot be ascribed to any lack of sources across numerous regions of Europe from the late middle ages to the eighteenth century. The focus of attention rather seems to follow the shifting economic maps of pre-industrial Europe, where the centre of economic and urban gravity moved from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, producing diverging (echo-)historiographies prioritizing 'golden ages' with little room for comparison between them.[36] Yet, as we will try to show, this is regrettable, for it too often causes us to fumble in the darkness when questioning the nature and impact of the material renaissance on broader developments in consumption, or when considering the origins of the urban lifestyle that is arguably its major explanatory variable. Was there a material renaissance outside Italy? And what about the material renaissance after the Italian material renaissance?

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Material cultures and social (in)equalities

According to most scholars of the Italian Renaissance, the greatest difference between the 'material renaissance' of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy and the 'consumer revolution' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the social dissemination of new consumption practices. Yet most chroniclers of the material renaissance have been content describing the transitions in the (splendid) material culture of the rich alone.[37] Implicitly they argued that only in the eighteenth-century consumer revolution did these transitions gain wide currency among the masses.

The issue of the social dissemination of Renaissance material culture cannot, however, be isolated from the nature of changing materiality itself. Goldthwaite correctly indicated that in the fifteenth century style, taste and artistic design began to prevail at the expense of the intrinsic value of raw materials as determinants of the value and price of commodities.[38] The social and economic ramifications of this 'material paradigm shift' were numerous, and cannot be fully detailed here.[39] However, an important consequence of this shift was a cheaper material culture. Majolica objects – however precious they might be – cost a fraction of the same objects made in pewter or silver.[40] As early as the sixteenth century a Neapolitan commentator noted that the nobility no longer used gold and silver eating utensils, but tableware produced by potters.[41] Unlike many

[35] Goldthwaite, *Wealth*, 251; N. McKendrick, 'The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-Century England', in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. Plumb (London: Indiana University Press, 1982), 3–33.
[36] H. Van der Wee, ed., *The Rise and Decline of Urban Industries in Italy and in the Low Countries (Late Middle Ages–Early Modern Times)* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988); J. De Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500–1800* (London: Methuen, 1984), 167–73.
[37] B. Blondé, 'Shoppen met Isabella d'Este: de Italiaanse renaissance als bakermat van de consumptiesamenleving', *Stadsgeschiedenis* 3, no. 2 (2007): 139–51.
[38] Goldthwaite, 'The Empire of Things', 171; Goldthwaite, 'The Economic and Social World', 31.
[39] B. De Munck, 'Artisans, Products and Gifts: Rethinking the History of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe', *Past and Present* 224, no. 1 (2014): 39–74.
[40] Goldthwaite, 'The Economic and Social World'; Syson and Thornton, *Objects of Virtue*; M. Ajmar-Wollheim and F. Dennis, 'Introduction', in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 'At Home', 10–31.
[41] E. Welch, 'Public Magnificence and Private Display. Giovanni Pontano's De Splendore (1498) and the Domestic Arts', *Journal of Design History* 15, no. 4 (2002): 211–221.', Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 'Introduction'; Goldthwaite, 'The Economic and Social World'.

Europeans, Italians no longer felt the need to regale with an expensive dinner service and silver or pewter cutlery.[42]

It is this shift from 'intrinsic qualities' to fashion, workmanship and design that many historians have seen as perhaps the most fundamental, distinctive characteristic of changes in the material culture at the end of the early modern period, one that also brought 'things' within the reach of more and more people.[43] This 'transition' inspired Jan De Vries's model of 'new luxury'.[44] On the demand side of the 'industrious revolution' De Vries identified a transition from a cultural model in which 'old luxuries' dominated, towards a repertoire based on 'new luxuries'. Where 'old luxuries' were strongly oriented towards the 'leisure' and 'conspicuous consumption' of a limited group of economically privileged people in socially skewed societies, 'new luxuries' were accessible to broad groups within pre-industrial society. The new consumer culture was no longer directed at distinction *per se*, but at domesticity, comfort and pleasure. Searching for the roots of those modern patterns of consumption, de Vries landed in the Dutch Golden Age. Here something extraordinary was growing: a 'bourgeois/urban' model of consumption. This was a pattern of consumption in which large strata of the population could participate, one that united rather than distinguished or divided. The new luxuries aimed not so much at what was unique or distinctive, but rather at what could be multiplied and shared. Even though expensive things were not eliminated from the array of products, cheap alternatives were developed for most luxury items. In so doing the primary hurdle in the transition from an aristocratic towards a bourgeois model of consumption was immediately cleared. The social attainability of all manner of consumer practices – such as using snuff or smoking tobacco, and displaying paintings – played a key role: 'Here, for the first time – on such a scale and on so enduring a basis – was a society in which the potential to purchase luxuries extended well beyond a small, traditional elite. A substantial tranche of society was now in a position to exercise choice – to enter the market and spend money to fashion a consumer culture'.[45]

However, given the 'new luxury' nature of the material renaissance, how fundamental was the difference between the Renaissance and these late early modern developments? Goldthwaite – still the economic historian of the wealthy in many respects[46] – remained

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[42] R. Liefkes, 'Tableware', in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 'At Home', 255.
[43] Among others, see B. Blondé, 'Tableware and Changing Consumer Patterns. Dynamics of Material Culture in Antwerp, 17th–18th Centuries', in *Majolica and Glass from Italy to Antwerp and Beyond. The Transfer of Technology in the 16th–Early 17th Century*, ed. J. Veeckman (Antwerp: Stad Antwerpen, 2002), 295–311; B. Blondé, 'Cities in Decline and the Dawn of a Consumer Society. Antwerp in the 17th–18th Centuries', in Blondé, Briot, Coquery and Van Aert, 'Retail and Consumer Changes', 37–52; J. De Vries, 'Between Purchasing Power and the World of Goods: Understanding the Household Economy in Early Modern Europe', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. J. Brewer and R. Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 85–132; H. Clifford, 'A Commerce with Things: The Value of Precious Metalwork in Early Modern England', in *Consumers and Luxury. Consumer Culture in Europe 1650–1850*, ed. M. Berg and H. Clifford (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 147–68; C. Fairchilds, 'The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris', in Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 228–48; H. Nijboer, *De fatsoenering van het bestaan: consumptie in Leeuwarden tijdens de Gouden Eeuw* (Groningen: University of Groningen, 2007).
[44] J. De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution. Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[45] J. De Vries, 'Luxury in the Dutch Golden Ages in Theory and Practice', in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century. Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. M. Berg and E. Eger (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 41–56.
[46] Among others, see the discussion of *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300–1600* by R. Burr Litchfield in *The Business History Review* 68, no. 2 (1994): 318; and Martines, 'The Renaissance and the Birth of a Consumer Society', 198.

unable to provide a conclusive answer. At one point he remarked that *consumers of modest means* were able to enter the consumer market,[47] and at another he cautioned that prosperity was distributed too unequally to enable the broadening of consumption so typical of eighteenth-century England.

In any case the 'new luxury' of the Renaissance was more varied than ever before and enabled the development of completely new products which in turn created new needs and manners, for instance at the table.[48] And, of course, cheaper materials gave greater numbers of commoners the prospect of a more 'luxurious' dining culture.[49] For this reason, Sandra Cavallo contests the idea of a radical fault line between the elite and the artisan's world in Florence, Genoa and Bologna.[50] The fluidity of the artisan's domestic culture was far greater, compared to that of the elites. Yet master artisans could also, for instance, invest in silver forks. Concerning the degree to which more modest people took part in this culture, the current historiography on the Italian Renaissance fails to provide a conclusive answer. How did the 'normal' city dweller of the sixteenth century, faced with a declining purchasing power, succeed in bringing more silver valuables to the home?[51] Conversely, how are we to interpret the finding that not all artisans' houses included a kitchen? Even if they did possess one, it often proved to have particularly 'basic' equipment. Cavallo suggests that the few artisans studied so far may well have been used to eating outside the home. They were in no sense participants in the elaborate rituals of sociability performed in the wealthier city residences. In the complex interplay between domestic interior and outside world, Marta Ajmar-Wollheim discerns an important contribution to the development of Renaissance sociability.[52] Was this sociability a luxury that was accessible to the wealthier Italians alone? Did these rituals of Renaissance sociability reproduce existing social inequalities?

These are vital, yet unanswered, questions. As Cohn argued, current research into the material renaissance is indeed still too much a study of the culture of the rich.[53] Wealth generates archival sources and is appealing – also to the (art) historian – even if it is only on account of aesthetics. Yet this selective historiography is unjustified, as Paula Hohti, among others, has shown: urban middling groups, too, had an authentic word to say in the Italian consumer narrative.[54] Renata Ago's research on seventeenth-century Rome even shows that it was above all the better middling groups – the wealthier craftsmen, merchants and lawyers – who demonstrated a particular 'gusto' for things. In the interim the many suggestive and stimulating studies of alternative circuits

[47] Goldthwaite, *Wealth*, 234.
[48] J. Lindow, 'Splendour', in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 'At Home', 306–7; Welch, 'Public Magnificence'; C. Goldstein, *Pieter Bruegel and the Culture of the Early Modern Dinner Party* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 87–123.
[49] Liefkes, 'Tableware', 264.
[50] S. Cavallo, 'The Artisan's Casa', in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 'At Home', 66–75.
[51] H. Blake, 'Everyday Objects', in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 'At Home', 332. For a contrast with the standard of living of Italian wage-labourers, see J.M. Nayemi, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575* (Oxford: Carlton, 2006), 310.
[52] M. Ajmar-Wollheim, 'Sociability', in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 'At Home', 206–21.
[53] Cohn, 'Renaissance Attachment to Things'; see also Blondé, 'Shoppen met Isabella d'Este'.
[54] P. Hohti, '"Conspicuous" Consumption and Popular Consumers: Material Culture and Social Status in Sixteenth-Century Siena', *Renaissance Studies* 24, no. 5 (2010): 654–70; Hohti, 'The Innkeeper's Goods: The Use and Acquisition of Household Property in Sixteenth-Century Siena', in O'Malley and Welch, *The Material Renaissance*, 242–59. In addition to the publication of I. Palumbo Fossati cited earlier, see for example D. Balestracci, *The Renaissance in the Fields: Family Memoirs of a Fifteenth-Century Tuscan Peasant* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1999).

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(whether commercial or not), and specifically second-hand markets, help to explain why even city dwellers with a modest purse could at times afford surprisingly luxurious objects.[55]

For the time being, though, we have to wait for studies that will hold larger samples of probate inventories up to scrutiny and connect them to wider developments in the standard of living, distribution of income and patterns of group formation – and to engage in more systematic analysis as has been employed for decades in French, Belgian, Dutch and English studies of early modern material culture.[56] For now, it remains difficult to determine whether the Italian material renaissance was comparable to the 'consumer revolutions' of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century or England in the eighteenth century, but the idea that the 'material renaissance' was a 'VIP-only' phenomenon clearly does not hold.

This re-assessment becomes all the more urgent since some historians working on the late early modern period are now less convinced that the expansion of the world of goods in the eighteenth century was paralleled by improvements in living standards, or resulted in significant reductions in social inequality.[57] Recent studies tend to disagree with McKendrick's idea that the eighteenth-century 'consumer revolution' was an expression of England's uniquely rising living standards, and the emergence of a society of 'socially closer rungs'. Nor do they confirm Daniel Roche's assertion that the new Parisian material culture prefigured the 'more open, less stiff and more frivolous world' that would arise during the French Revolution.[58] Instead, these studies emphasize that the living standards of the masses remained stagnant at best, and in most places declined.[59] Income inequalities throughout early modern Europe were high and were often rising, in the 'miracle' economies of the North Sea area as well as in the less vigorous Mediterranean.[60]

All this does not prevent the connection with the idea of underlying strong economic growth and social progress from potentially being cut.[61] Focused inventory studies have shown that even

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[55] Allerston, 'Reconstructing'' Allerston, 'Le marché d'occasion'; Allerston, 'Clothing and Early Modern Venetian Society', *Continuity and Change* 15 (2000): 367–90; Matchette, 'Credit and Credibility'.

[56] The principle examples here are L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760* (London: Routledge, 1988); T. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, *Achter de gevels van Delft. Bezit en bestaan van rijk en arm in een periode van achteruitgang (1700–1800)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1987); M. Overton, J. Whittle, D. Dean and A. Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600–1750* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[57] B. Blondé and I. Van Damme, 'Early Modern Europe: 1500–1800', in *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History*, ed. P. Clark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 240–57.

[58] D. Roche, *The Culture of Clothing. Dress and Fashion in the 'Ancien Regime'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [orig. 1990]), 504; McKendrick, 'The Consumer Revolution', 3–33. A somewhat different take on the issue, from the perspective of 'civic equality', can be found in W.H.J. Sewell, 'Connecting Capitalism to the French Revolution: The Parisian Promenade and the Origins of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France', *Critical Historical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 5–46.

[59] For an overview, see R.C. Allen et al., *Living Standards in the Past: New Perspectives on Well-Being in Asia and Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[60] C. Santiago-Caballero, 'Income Inequality in Central Spain, 1690–1800', *Explorations in Economic History* 48, no. 1 (2011): 83–96; G. Alfani, 'Wealth Inequalities and Population Dynamics in Early Modern Northern Italy', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40 (2010): 513–49; W. Ryckbosch, 'Economic Inequality and Growth before the Industrial Revolution: A Case Study of the Low Countries (14th–19th Centuries)' (working paper, Dondena Working Papers n° 67, Bocconi University, Milan, 2014), 33.

[61] P. Malanima and V. Pinchera, 'A Puzzling Relationship: Consumptions and Incomes in Early Modern Europe', *Histoire & Mesure* 27, no. 2 (2012): 197–222; H.-J. Voth, 'Living Standards and the Urban Environment', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain Volume 1: Industrialisation, 1700–1860*, ed. R. Floud and P. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 268–94; S. Horrell, J. Humphries and K. Sneath, 'Consumption Conundrums Unravelled', *Economic History Review* (2015).

in England the novelties associated with the new consumer culture did not spread to the labouring classes and the poor before the second half of the eighteenth century.[62] Moreover, historians have increasingly argued that the social effects of changes in consumption in late modernity were anything but unequivocally levelling.[63] Last but not least, although new and affordable luxuries might well have entered the homes of more and more people, this did not prevent the vocabulary of 'old luxury' – including its social philosophy – from continuing to be very attractive in eighteenth-century Europe.[64]

This revision of the early modern 'consumer revolution' has important consequences for any engagement with the material renaissance, as it tends to diminish the perceived contrast between the social spread of the material renaissance in Italy and the later period on both sides of the equation.

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Consuming anxieties

Perhaps the presumed contrast between the early modern 'consumer revolution' and the Italian 'material renaissance' is at least partly justified by the discursive and moral contexts surrounding acts of consumption. After all, the materiality of the 'material renaissance' was still fraught with moral anxieties and fears over the loss of spirituality. Indeed, the current historiography stresses how the Italians possessed an ideological frame of reference in which *magnificentia* and *splendore* were morally sanctioned as important virtues.[65] As it turns out, the inhabitants of sixteenth-century Venice, to give but one example, maintained complex and ambiguous ideologies in matters of consumption. While travelling in the 'city of doges', none less than Desiderius Erasmus described the 'things' of the physical world in plain neo-Platonic terms as 'mere shadows of reality'. The religious touchstone, too, in which objects ultimately were seen as ephemeral, subordinated to spiritual life. Here the anxieties over the relationship between the spiritual and the material with which Petrarca had wrestled were still strong.[66] In addition to utterances of 'inconspicuous consumption', there was also the especially complex 'sumptuary legislation', which all too clearly demonstrates that it is problematic to approach sixteenth-century Italy with a concept like 'consumerism'.[67]

[62] K. Sneath, 'Consumption, Wealth, Indebtedness and Social Structure in Early Modern England' (unpublished PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2009); P. King, 'Pauper Inventories and the Material Lives of the Poor in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', in *Chronicling Poverty. The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840*, ed. T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (London: Palgrave, 1997), 155–91; S. Horrell, 'Home Demand and British Industrialization', *Journal of Economic History* 56 (1996): 561–604. A more optimistic perspective on the spread of new consumer patterns among the poor can be found in A. McCants, 'Poor Consumers as Global Consumers: The Diffusion of Tea and Coffee Drinking in the Eighteenth Century', *The Economic History Review* 61, no. 1 (2008): 172–200.

[63] W. Ryckbosch, 'A Consumer Revolution under Strain? Consumption, Wealth and Status in Eighteenth-Century Aalst (Southern Netherlands)' (unpublished PhD diss., University of Antwerp, 2012).

[64] B. Blondé, 'Conflicting Consumption Models? The Symbolic Meaning of Possessions and Consumption amongst the Antwerp Nobility at the End of the Eighteenth Century', in *Fashioning Old and New. Changing Consumer Preferences in Europe (Seventeenth–Nineteenth Centuries)*, ed. B. Blondé (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 61–79; M. Kwass, 'Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France', *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 631–59.

[65] E. Welch, 'Magnificence and the Private Display: Pontano's "De Splendore" and the Domestic Arts', *Journal of Design History* 15 (2002): 211–27; G. Guerzoni, 'Liberalitas, Magnificentia, Splendour. The Classic Origins of Italian Renaissance Lifestyles', *History of Political Economy* 31, no. 5 (1999): 332–78.

[66] P. Findlen, 'Possessing the Past: The Material World of the Italian Renaissance, *American Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (1998): 83–144.

[67] P. Allerston, 'Consuming Problems: Worldly Goods in Renaissance Venice', in O'Malley and Welch, *The Material Renaissance*, 11–46.

This moralizing and legally restricted context for consumption has been contrasted with the discourse surrounding 'improvement', 'progress' and the moral acceptance of luxuries arising in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.[68] In the later luxury debates, so the argument goes, consumption was finally freed from moralizing restrictions. Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* is, of course, the ultimate textbook example in point.[69] Yet on closer examination both cultural frameworks of consumption might be different in degree rather than in kind. After all, the arguments of Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume or Mandeville, who attributed moral virtue to luxurious consumption, were not all that different from those of a scholastic philosopher such as Thomas Aquinas, who – following Aristotle – had thought the virtue of 'liberality' (in spending and consumption alike) to be at least in principle attainable by *all* good Christians, rich or poor.[70] Most debates on luxury, from Antiquity to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, concerned not primarily whether luxury consumption was acceptable in principle, but by whom.[71] After all, Bernard Mandeville himself did not consider it a good idea to have the labouring classes indulge in luxury consumption, since such a thing might end up making them less industrious.

It is true that some places, such as the Low Countries, were relatively spared from sumptuary legislation. In 1497 Philip the Fair (1478–1506) issued what was probably the first sumptuary law in the Low Countries, and this was repeated again in 1531, 1546 and 1550 – but applied with what seems to have been much less fervour than in Italy or France.[72] Yet this relative lack of restrictive sumptuary legislation should not be interpreted as a *carte blanche* for liberal consumption. In the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, at the heart of the early modern consumer revolution, the ambivalence regarding consumption was largely similar to the concerns expressed by those like Petrarca and Pontano during the Italian Renaissance.[73] Even in the eighteenth century medical treatises, popular songs, plays and poems in the Low Countries continued to portray the drinking of new luxuries such as tea or coffee by the 'lower social ranks' in the familiar negative and moralizing words associated with the condemnation of 'old luxuries' during the Renaissance.[74]

Urbanity and consumption

With his claim on the 'urbanity' of the 'new luxury' model, de Vries was writing his *Industrious Revolution* into a long lasting intellectual discussion on the social processes that drove

[68] P. Slack, 'The Politics of Consumption and England's Happiness in the Later Seventeenth Century', *English Historical Review* 122, no. 497 (2007): 609–31; M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); J. Sekora, *Luxury. The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollet* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
[69] On Mandeville, see E.G. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable, Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[70] Guerzoni, 'Liberalitas', 354–5.
[71] A. Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions. A History of Sumptuary Law* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).
[72] R. Van Uytven, 'Hiérarchies sociales et prestige au Moyen Age et aux Temps Modernes', in *Structures sociales et topographie de la pauvreté et de la richesse aux XIVe et XVe siècles*, ed. W. Prevenier (Ghent: Ghent University, 1986), 157–75; F. Buylaert et al., 'Sumptuary Legislation, Material Culture and the Semiotics of "vivre noblement" in the County of Flanders (14th–16th Centuries)', *Social History* 36, no. 4 (2011): 393–417; M. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[73] S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Random House, 1987).
[74] De Vries, 'Luxury in the Dutch Golden Ages'; V. De Laet, *Brussel binnenskamers. Kunst- en luxebeizt in het spanningsveld tussen hof en stad, 1600–1735* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 168–74.

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material changes in history. Scholars specializing in different places and periods have tended to emphasize different causal factors, ranging from court culture and emulation to the civilizing process, the rise of the middle class, Romanticism or the emergence of ideals of civic equality.[75] Here as well, possibilities for fruitful comparisons abound.

The nineteenth-century sociologist Werner Sombart thought that the new sensual consumer culture of the early modern period originated at court and was spread by its status-seeking courtesans. Norbert Elias's 'civilizing process', with its associated cultured manners and specific material culture, saw a similar spread from the early modern courts to bourgeois society. More recent cultural historical understandings of early modern consumer change, such as the transition from a culture of 'gentility' to one of 'respectability' argued by Woodruff D. Smith, continue to describe a long-term process in which a new material culture originated among the medieval aristocracy of Europe, and gradually became appropriated by the emerging urban bourgeoisie.[76]

Yet none of these influential theories was based on evidence from Italy or the Low Countries, nor could they have been. For in neither of these regions, often seen as the birthplaces of the 'material renaissance' and the 'early modern consumer revolution', does such a transition appear likely. Contrary to what is often assumed, sumptuary legislation in medieval Italy did not arise from an *aristocratic* desire to prevent emulation by the urban middling sorts. Instead, it seems to have primarily grown out of (religious) moral concerns for excess, and attempts by the urban '*popolo*' to constrain overly conspicuous consumption by aristocratic families residing in cities.[77] The growing inflation of dowry sizes in fifteenth-century Italy did spark legislation to impose a ceiling on social mobility through marriage, but even there the demarcation line was not placed between the aristocracy and the urban elites.[78] The rare pieces of sumptuary legislation that were promulgated in the Low Countries during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not so much concerned with marking the boundaries between nobles and non-nobles. Rather they were drawn between the elites (noblemen or not) who lived in a noble way and other members of the elites who debased themselves by performing manual labour. Such was the consequence of the combination of both a very affluent and politically influential urban society with mighty and wealthy elites on the one hand, and a nobility heavily engaged in this urban environment on the other.[79] Frederik Buylaert has unveiled what ultimately demarcated the boundaries of this Flemish nobility (the entitlement to a *seigneurie*), yet what role exactly was played by the material culture and lifestyles of the urbanized nobilities is far from clear. Nor do we know why material culture would have played only an auxiliary role in the Flemish context, while it played a key role in Italian society.

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[75] N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The Development of Manners: Changes in the Code of Conduct and Feeling in Early Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); W. Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus* (Munich: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1922); C. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
[76] W.D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600–1800* (London: Routledge, 2002).
[77] D.O. Hughes, 'Sumptuary Law and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy', in *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West*, ed. J. Bossy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 69–99.
[78] A. Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); S. Chojnacki, 'Dowries and Kinsmen in Early Renaissance Venice', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 5, no. 4 (1975): 571–600.
[79] Van Uytven, 'Hiérarchies sociales'; Buylaert et al., 'Sumptuary Legislation'.

In any case, both Italy and Flanders were marked by a strong interaction between the feudal aristocracy and the new, urban lifestyles they came to adopt and adapt.[80] In both places a culture of splendour seems to have sprung from the intermarriage of a realm of status with the world of commerce: a '*trahison de la aristocratie*' as much as a '*trahison de la bourgeoisie*'.[81]

Material culture may have had an agency in constructing social relationships. In her study on early modern Rome, Ago argued that the lifestyles shaped by the new material culture produced a new social stratification.[82] In a world where commerce and urban life had eroded the traditional legitimacy of the upper classes, a material language arose that could imbue class with status, and propagated status in the language of class. In the words of Owen Hughes, late medieval Italy 'dreamed of orders while facing the daily consequences of class fluidity'.[83]

Upon comparison then, perhaps more than Elias, Sombart or most historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century consumptive change suspected, many changes in early modern material culture had their roots in the city rather than at the court. In an early fifteenth-century fictional narrative, Gentile Sermini presents his readers with a prosperous farmer. Mattano, as the man is called, is doing comfortably and thinks he can lay claim to a political career in Siena. When it turns out that he has lots of money to spend but continually transgresses against urbane table manners and food choices, he is ultimately forced to abandon those ambitions.[84] Discourses in which ideal conduct in the city is shaped in opposition to the countryside are of course a well-tested literary technique, not only in Italy but also in the Low Countries and elsewhere in north-western Europe.[85]

Goldthwaite noted regretfully that the literature on the civilizing process and the changing behavioural repertoires focused too exclusively on France. And moreover this happened without proper attention to the material culture that, according to him, did not simply issue forth from changing manners but also directed them.[86] To be sure, the editors of *At Home in Renaissance Italy* also maintain that it was 'urbanity' rather than the court that lay at the basis of Elias's civilizing process.[87] For that matter, it is these refined codes of conduct with which Italians thought to distinguish themselves from the rest of Europe. In a popular etiquette book from 1558, Della Casa praises the Italians as fortunate for not having adopted the 'European' custom – he himself calls it a plague – of getting drunk purely and only for the sake of 'honour'.[88] In short, not only what you possess but also how you behave and what you know becomes crucial in the Renaissance model of material culture. For collecting antiquities and assembling art collections, more is needed than a

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[80] F. Buylaert, 'Lordship, Urbanization and Social Change in Late Medieval Flanders', *Past and Present* 227, no. 1 (2015): 31–75.
[81] Hughes, 'Sumptuary Law'.
[82] R. Ago, *Gusto for Things. A History of Objects in Seventeenth-Century Rome* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).
[83] Hughes, 'Sumptuary Law', 99.
[84] A.J. Grieco, 'Meals', in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 'At Home', 251–52. On Sermini and his anti-rural attitudes, see also S. Cohn, Jr., 'Highlands and Lowlands in Late Medieval Tuscany', in *Mìorun Mòr nan Gall, The Great Ill-Will of the Lowlander? Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands, Medieval and Modern*, ed. D. Broun and M. MacGregor (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2009), 110–27.
[85] P. Vandenbroeck, *Beeld van de andere, vertoog over het zelf: over wilden en narren, boeren en bedelaars* (Antwerp: KMSK, 1987).
[86] Goldthwaite, *Wealth*.
[87] Ajmar-Wollheim et al., 'Introduction'; D. Knox, 'Civility, Courtesy and Women in the Italian Renaissance', in *Women and Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. L. Panizza (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2–17. R. Muchembled, too, places increasingly more emphasis on this in his 'more recent' publications concerning this topic. See his 'Manners, Courts, and Civility', in Ruggiero, *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, 156–72.
[88] Ajmar-Wollheim, 'Sociability', 212.

purse full of money.[89] In that respect it also seems that civilization and the aestheticizing process of the Renaissance counteracted the potential redistributive effects of a cheaper material culture. It was not without reason that Peter Burke called assembling collections 'Renaissance chic';[90] and that even more modest master artisans were challenged to keep up with the deeper layers of meaning in the classicizing culture.[91] For less-educated city dwellers, the Renaissance erected a cultural barrier that was difficult to break. The 'material renaissance' not only offered possibilities for social participation, but also contributed in culturally reproducing social inequalities.

However, with this relocation of cultural dynamism in urban society and with the postulated bourgeois nature of new luxuries, the need for a more systematic comparison of Italy with the Low Countries (and beyond) becomes all the more urgent. The example of sixteenth-century Antwerp can serve to bridge the gap between the 'material renaissance' and the 'consumer revolution' – or at least of their respective historiographies.

Antwerp was not only a prominent commercial gateway, but also an important centre for the production of luxuries: it was a prominent fashion maker. The commercial fate of the city was closely intertwined with trade and commerce in the Italian peninsula[92] and as a result mid-sixteenth-century Antwerp functioned as an important mediator of Italian (material) cultures in northern Europe. The city remained devoid of a strong urban nobility, but was dominated (though not ruled) by mercantile elites.[93] Nevertheless, little sets Antwerp fundamentally apart from Italy in the sixteenth century.[94] First, a range of material innovations were launched from Italy via Antwerp into northern Europe, such as – to name but a few important ones – the production of Venetian glass, the manufacture of majolica and the Antwerp silk industry.[95] Strikingly enough, these three sectors yielded local decorative models that quickly gained importance, by targeting new bourgeois markets through product and process innovations which lowered prices. Without a doubt the Antwerp material renaissance already followed a clearly bourgeois (or 'new luxury') rather than a genteel pathway. And the renaissance influence reached beyond these sectors.[96] It is no coincidence that whenever Hans Fugger of Augsburg (1531–98) needed shoes in Italianate style, he ordered them to be made in Antwerp.[97] To a great extent

[89] Findlen, 'Possessing the Past'.
[90] P. Burke, *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 175.
[91] Allerston, 'Consuming Problems', 17.
[92] For a recent update with further references, see J. Puttevils, *Merchants and Trading in the Sixteenth Century: The Golden Age of Antwerp* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2015).
[93] H. Soly, 'Social Relations in Antwerp in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in *Antwerp. Story of a Metropolis, 16th–17th Century*, ed. J. Van Der Stock (Ghent: Snoeck Ducaju & Zoon, 1993), 37–47.
[94] In this context see the research of C. De Staelen, 'Spulletjes en hun betekenis in een commerciële metropool. Antwerpenaren en hun materiële cultuur in de zestiende eeuw ' (unpublished PhD diss., University of Antwerp, 2007); I. Baatsen, B. Blondé, J. De Groot and I. Sturtewagen, 'At Home in the City: The Dynamics of Material Culture', in *City and Society in the Low Countries, 1100–1600*, ed. B. Blondé, M. Boone and A.-L. Van Bruaene (forthcoming).
[95] See, for example, J. Veeckman, 'Production and Consumption of Glass in 16th and Early 17th Century Antwerp: The Archeological Evidence', in Veeckman, *Majolica and Glass* , 79–93; Veeckman, 'Recent Research Concerning Antwerp Majolica Production', in *Material Culture in Medieval Europe*, ed. G. De Boe and F. Verhaeghe (Zellik: IAP, 1997), 113–17; C. Dumortier, *Céramique de la Renaissance à Anvers. De Venise à Delft* (Brussels: Racine, 2002); I. Baatsen and B. Blondé, 'Antwerp and the "Material Renaissance". Exploring the Social and Economic Significance of Crystal Glass and Majolica in the Sixteenth Century', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Early Modern Material Culture*, ed. D. Gaimster, T. Hamling and C. Richardson (Farnham: Ashgate, forthcoming); A. Thijs, *De zijdenijverheid te Antwerpen in de zeventiende eeuw* (Brussels: Pro Civitate, 1969).
[96] R. Fabri, 'De "inwendighe wooninghe" of de binnenhuisinrichting', in *Stad in Vlaanderen. Cultuur en Maatschappij, 1477–1787*, ed. J. Van der Stock (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet, 1991), 127–40.
[97] U. Rublack, 'Matter in the Material Renaissance', *Past and Present* 219, no. 1 (2013): 41–85.

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the Low Countries' material culture experienced an *autonomous* dynamic as well, as recent research into the production and consumption of paintings demonstrates.[98] Even in modest households multiple paintings generally decorated different rooms, and mass-produced artworks coexisted with tailor-made paintings.[99] Moreover, next to the new luxuries, costly old luxuries such as pewter and silver objects also fared well on the shelves and cupboards of Antwerp families. These commodities extended well beyond the 'happy few' who were making big money in international trade. Relatively modest middling groups in Antwerp purchased luxury items of various sorts. The trades in artworks and luxury items targeted the urban middling groups, who proved to be more prosperous than often has been presumed.[100] The 'cheapness' of some luxuries can explain why different luxury industries continued to prosper even when the town's economy experienced a severe economic crisis in the years following 1585. In Antwerp, the paradigm shift from intrinsic value to decoration and workmanship, as postulated for Italy by Goldthwaite, also occurred with all its consequences for the economic relationships between different actors in the artisans' trades.

Hence, in terms of their material culture, and the legislative and cultural context surrounding it, Renaissance Italy and the Low Countries were not so different. Nor was the difference with the Dutch model of the seventeenth century all that much clearer. Metropolitan life, and a society based on money and commerce that came with it, increased the need for outward differentiation – a driving force of fashion, as Georg Simmel noted around the beginning of the twentieth century.[101]

A superficial comparison like the one undertaken here can only offer a few preliminary suggestions, but it will be clear that the splendid isolation of the historiography on the Italian material renaissance does little justice to the long-term continuities in European consumption history. At the very least, it can be argued that the materiality of the Italian Renaissance is certainly not beyond comparison, and that its historians have much to gain from looking outwards, both temporally and across the Alps.

Attachment to things

The parallels and continuities drawn above should not be pushed too far. It is far from our intention to drag the 'material renaissance' back into a Weberian modernization narrative, in which Petrarca shows the way to social and economic modernity. Despite its urban roots,

[98] F. Vermeylen, *Painting for the Market. Commercialization of Art in Antwerp's Golden Age* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003); B. Blondé, 'Art and Economy in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Antwerp. A View from the Demand Side', in *Economia e Arte Secc. XIII-XVIII. Atti delle Trenteessima Settimana di Studi, 30 aprile–4 maggio 2000*, ed. S. Cavaciocchi (Florence: Le Monnier, 2002), 379–91; M.J.P. Martens and N. Peeters, 'Antwerp Painting before Iconoclasm: Considerations on the Quantification of Taste', in Cavaciocchi, 'Economia e Arte', 875–94.

[99] H. Vlieghe, 'The Fine and Decorative Arts in Antwerp's Golden Age', in *Urban Achievement in Early Modern Europe. Golden Ages in Antwerp, Amsterdam and London*, ed. P. O'Brien, D. Keene, M. 't Hart and H. Van der Wee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 173–85.

[100] This idea has been forwarded by Herman Van der Wee at various instances. H. Van der Wee, 'The Economy as a Factor in the Revolt of the Southern Netherlands', *Acta Historica Neerlandica* 5 (1971): 52–67; B. Blondé and J. Hanus, 'Beyond Building Craftsmen: Economic Growth and Living Standards in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries: The Case of 's-Hertogenbosch (1500–1560)', *European Review of Economic History* 14 (2009): 179–207.

[101] G. Simmel, 'Fashion', in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. D.N. Levine (London: University Press of Chicago, 1971 [1904]), 294–323; G. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge, [trans. 1990]).

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the ‘material renaissance’, whether in Italy, the Low Countries or elsewhere, certainly did not represent any sort of ‘liberation’ of the market from traditional aristocratic and moral constraints. The gradual shift in the location of value described by Goldthwaite – from a focus on intrinsic worth to a stronger emphasis on aesthetic and fashionable value – has been identified in many studies of material culture across early modern Europe, and more often than not it has been interpreted in a rather linear manner of growing commercialization, progress and modernity. Yet, when seen from a long-term perspective, this interpretation becomes increasingly unconvincing.

Sam Cohn’s groundbreaking research into testamentary practices after the Black Death demonstrates how fruitful a more systematic and long-term approach can be. Unlike much recent historiography, which approaches the centuries between 1300 and 1600 as almost ‘timeless’, Cohn sketches an image of clearly changing sensitivities with regard to material culture. Especially after the second outbreak of plague in 1362–3, more and more Italians also began to worry explicitly about their material legacy in all sorts of varied ways when redacting their wills.[102] All kinds of stipulations, from ordering commemorative artwork to determining what could happen to a certain house, bear witness to a rapidly changing *and* socially widespread ‘attachment to things’. Yet, such practices of ‘keeping while giving’ significantly distorted the functioning of the marketplace, and ultimately contributed to the so-called *bullion famine* of the fifteenth century.[103] In many ways the pre-plague economy of the twelfth century came much closer to the ideal type of a fully commodified, commercialized and monetized market economy than did that of the ‘material renaissance’ In studying the seventeenth-century material culture of Roman upper middling groups, Ago also stressed how the ‘gusto for things’ often ran counter to commercialization and commodification. Many households, not only the aristocratic, sought to make their possessions inalienable, to preserve rather than trade, and ultimately to sacrifice their utility.[104] In the Low Countries as well, noble families – and those aspiring to an elite lifestyle – made use of ‘enclaved commodities’: objects traded freely on the market, but which held the *personal* qualities usually associated with gifts or heirlooms.[105] These findings raise the important question of what the ‘material’ and ‘objectified’ attitude to culture which rose to dominance during the Renaissance actually meant, and how it operated in the social world. Certainly, it did not signal a straightforward progression from a world of gifts to one of commodities, from a feudal to a commercial economy.[106]

Similar caution is needed when interpreting the multiple ways in which the transition from intrinsic value to aesthetics, decoration and design affected product value constructions at the supply side of material culture. Currie, for instance, clearly demonstrated how the occupation of the tailor underwent noticeable changes in Renaissance Italy. Until the beginning of the sixteenth century the cost of fabrics used for clothing dominated. As the century progressed, design and decoration with all sorts of accessories also increased in relative importance, a shift that was further intensified by the increasing use of cheaper and lighter fabrics. It put the tailors in an entirely new position of power, one in which they themselves started purchasing fabrics, stocking accessories and began valuing design in monetary terms by explicitly billing customers for it. In the process they derived part of their power from a relationship

[102] This is also the same time period that Paula Findlen associates with the rise of an – admittedly elitist – ‘attachment to things’ in her ‘Possessing the Past’, 95.
[103] Cohn, ‘Renaissance Attachment to Things’, 1001–2.
[104] Ago, *Gusto for Things*.
[105] Buylaert et al., ‘Sumptuary Legislation’.
[106] De Munck, ‘Artisans’.

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of trust with their clients, to whom they provided extra services in addition to advice on taste.[107] Here one almost imagines himself in an eighteenth-century fashion shop.[108]

As long as medieval material culture remained less varied, less complex and less culturally constructed, and hence more 'transparent', master craftsmen could more easily safeguard the exchange value of commodities by politically and morally sanctioning their intrinsic value. The 'renaissance model', conversely, set in motion a fundamental shift in value creation that redefined, among other things, the very nature of the value of labour[109] and products.[110] Henceforth, in the Low Countries as well as Italy, craftsmen and artists derived symbolic and economic power from their acquaintance with a knowledgeable culture and with designing skills. An interesting example from the middle of the sixteenth century brings us back to Bruges. In 1554 a dispute was brought before the municipal aldermen's bench between the cabinetmaker Gillis vanden Coornhuuse and Pieter vander Heyde, who was the dean of the turners' guild. The latter had dragged Gillis before the court because he had made *and* sold a bed that was finished with turned posts. Turned products traditionally belonged to the domain of the turners' guild, not to the cabinetmakers. Gillis, however, defended himself by claiming that these posts were only a component or *accessoire* for the piece of furniture. Therefore, the production of larger beds simply fell to the cabinetmakers' guild. Moreover, as Gillis contended, 'those people from the turners' guild' did not understand the craft of architecture enough to create these posts, since there were diverse and distinct forms, 'the one [as] Tuscan, the other Doric, the other Ionic, some [as] Corinthian and some Composite […]'.[111] By his own account, making turned woodwork should thus be open to him, certainly for the sake of the aesthetics of the piece of furniture and by virtue of his underlying knowledge. His arguments presumably carried weight because the complaint by vander Heyde was ultimately rejected.

Tellingly, in the eighteenth century even silverware – the textbook example of the 'old luxury' – was framed and advertised as a 'new luxury', deriving its value also from its fashionability.[112] Thus, the transition from an intrinsic value to a design-based value model caused a major series of interrelated shifts in power relationships that also redrew the map between producers, designers, retailers, supervisors and eventually also corporate firms. Yet here as well an obvious continuity from the material renaissance to the late early modern period can be unveiled.[113] Hence, engaging with the very materiality of 'things' also requires a thoughtful treatment of the 'material renaissance', one that hardly fits a model of linearity or modernity.

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[107]. E. Currie, 'Diversity and Design in the Florentine Tailoring Trade, 1550–1620', in O'Malley and Welch, *The Material Renaissance*, 154–73.
[108] B. Blondé, L. Van Aert and I. Van Damme, 'According to the Latest and Most Elegant Fashion: Retailing Textiles and Changes in Supply and Demand in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Antwerp', in *Selling Textiles in the Long Eighteenth Century: Comparative Perspectives from Western Europe*, ed. J. Stobart and B. Blondé (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 138–59.
[109] C. Lis and H. Soly, *Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 365–400.
[110] For a different, more modernist interpretation, see De Munck, 'Artisans'.
[111] Arthur Van De Velde, *De ambachten van de timmerlieden en de schrijnwerkers te Brugge, hun wetten, hun geschillen en hun gewrochten van de XIVe tot de XIXe eeuw* (Ghent: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde, 1909), 144–5.
[112] I. Baatsen and B. Blondé, 'Zilver in Antwerpen: drie eeuwen particulier zilverbezit in context', in *Zilver in Antwerpen: de handel, het ambacht en de klant*, ed. L. De Ren (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 95–125.
[113] B. Blondé and I. Van Damme, 'Retail Growth and Consumer Changes in a Declining Urban Economy, Antwerp (1650–1750)', *The Economic History Review* 63, no. 3 (2010): 638–63.

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Conclusions

We have attempted to demonstrate the importance of breathing new life into the 'material renaissance' by offering a comparative perspective across time and space. Given the historiographical divergence between the literature on the consumer revolution and that of the material renaissance, this implies a methodological *rapprochement* between both historiographies. Whereas the latter has been heavily influenced by semiotic and anthropological research traditions, the former is more obviously steeped in social and economic history. Both traditions have much to learn from one another. Presumably out of fear for narratives of linearity and modernization, much of the recent literature on the Italian material renaissance has consciously avoided the larger debate on long-term changes in consumer behaviour before the industrial revolution. Yet this principled rejection has undesirable side-effects of its own. The historiography on renaissance material culture so far remains too focused on the rich and fails to track changes in the social dissemination of consumption in Renaissance Florence, or to compare them with Augsburg and Antwerp at the same time, or with later developments in Amsterdam, London or Paris, let alone to places of less economic and cultural importance. The available evidence briefly touched upon here is suggestive: Italy does not seem to differ fundamentally from the Low Countries. But to validate this claim, more systematic research on lower and middling income groups must be conducted.[114] What is worse, the 'splendid isolation' of the historiography has tended to reinforce claims of the 'revolutionary' nature of early modern consumer changes in north-western Europe. Yet, when comparing sixteenth-century Antwerp with Renaissance Florence, the parallels abound. And the continuities between Antwerp in the sixteenth century and the Dutch Republic, England and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are obvious as well. The two historiographies need integration. Drawing out parallels and continuities is not only important in itself, but will shed light on the very nature and causes of changes in the material culture. Turning to the material renaissance in Italy and the Low Countries from a more integrated perspective implies a stronger focus on the city rather than the court as a causal factor, as well as a heightened sensitivity to the interweaving of aristocratic and urban lifestyles as the guiding principle of early modern material cultures.

However, a long-term view of European consumption patterns brings to the fore not only continuities but also changes. As the very focus on materiality which emerged in Renaissance Italy brought a growing range of objects within the grasp of European consumers, the heightened importance of global commerce[115] and commodification of the natural world[116] shifted the social balance of power throughout Europe.

The consumer revolution and material renaissance that emerge from a more integrated and long-term perspective ultimately remain the highly ambiguous product of societies that were urban yet aristocratic, feudal yet capitalist, organized by principles of status as well as by class, that both embraced and rejected luxury consumption, and that combined new and old luxury models. It is by approaching the material renaissance from a wider temporal, geographical and methodological perspective that these fundamental insights can gain in historical perspective again.

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[114] A notable exception is Hohti, '"Conspicuous" Consumption'.

[115] M. Norton, 'Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics', *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (2006): 660–91; M. Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures. A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[116] H.J. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

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