

AN EDITORIAL COMMENT  
TO RICHARD GOLDTHWAITE'S

*The Economy of Renaissance Italy*

Attempts to explain in economic terms the phenomena we group together under the term “Italian Renaissance” have tended to be Marxist or Marxisant in character. Renaissance art and literature have been seen as the cultural superstructure produced from the socio-economic substructure, and so Marxist explanations have sought to explain changes in style by postulating direct correlations between art objects and the economic base. Richard Goldthwaite’s recent studies of the Renaissance are different from earlier economic analyses in two important respects: first, his “economic explanation” of the Renaissance is not based in any way on Marxist theory, but is couched in the terms of classic economic analysis, and specifically in terms of supply and demand; second, he does not seek to explain previously defined cultural phenomena in an economic way, but rather redefines the phenomena in economic terms, before attempting to give them an economic explanation.

In his book, *The Building of Renaissance Florence*, Goldthwaite approached what he himself has described as the Florentine Renaissance “building boom” from a largely “supply-side” economic point of view: the heart of the book is an analysis of the structure and performance of the Florentine building trades in the fifteenth century, and the discussion of “demand” in the opening chapters is brief — though it puts forward an entirely original point of view. In the following essay — printed in Milan in 1985 in the proceedings of the international symposium entitled “Aspetti della vita economica medievale” held in Florence, Pisa and Prato on 10-14 March 1984 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the death of Federigo Melis but neither officially published nor distributed —

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Goldthwaite has expanded the discussion in three further directions, and added a new afterword. Whereas the book was concerned specifically with Florence, and primarily with architecture, the scope here is enlarged to include the whole "material culture" of the Renaissance, and not just in Florence, but also in Rome, Venice and the Italian courts. Finally, the focus is on demand rather than supply, on the economic roots of the increased consumption of art objects which — in Goldthwaite's view — begins in and is characteristic of the fifteenth century. Instead of scratching his head over a supposedly inexplicable gulf between the poor "performance" of the Italian economy in the Renaissance and the amount of money spent on art — the "Lopez thesis" attempting to bridge this gulf is here attacked — Goldthwaite tries to show that performance is a less useful indicator for appraising the Renaissance economy than the accumulation of wealth and the fluid character of its structure and distribution.

Art historians who feel browbeaten by the scarcely veiled moralism and the over-physiological language of performance economics as applied to historical periods — the talk of "energy", "buoyancy" and so forth — will surely find Goldthwaite's analysis refreshing. Instead of seeing the objects art historians study as linked to and evidence of economic decline — a somewhat depressing as well as misleading view — Goldthwaite sees the very quantity and skilfulness of these objects, together with the upward mobility of their producers, as evidence of a different kind of economic prosperity.

However, the art-historical reader should beware of supposing that the Renaissance for which Goldthwaite here offers an explanation is *his* or *her* Renaissance. Goldthwaite's Renaissance has little or nothing to do with changes in artistic style. "Even if there had been no stylistic innovation", he writes, "all this consumption would be a notable phenomenon simply as economic activity". It is, in his view, increased demand for art that sets Italy off from the rest of Europe in the fifteenth century, irrespective of the nature of that art. In addition, but perhaps less importantly, the chronological limits of the Renaissance are shifted: it is taken to extend through the seventeenth century, when the cumulative effects of decline in production finally affected the structure of demand.

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Here we may perceive a problem with the argument. The curve of consumption is taken to be a continually rising one, from the beginning of the Renaissance to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: eighteenth-century Paris and London see a proportionately greater demand for art objects than that found in Renaissance Florence. But the conspicuous consumption of Renaissance Florence has earlier in the argument been causally linked to a wide distribution and flexible structure of wealth. Why, then, does demand for art not go down in the seventeenth century, when, according to Goldthwaite, the structure is tightened up, and wealth concentrated in fewer hands? Could it be the case that the development of the demand for art is more autonomous than he suggests? (Could this query be linked to the debates about the history of style — whether it is “inner-directed” or “other-directed”, to adopt Kitzinger’s useful terminology.<sup>1</sup>)

Art historians may be reluctant to concede that conspicuous consumption by itself is a sufficient condition for calling the period they study “the Renaissance” — and here the implications of the word itself must have some bearing. Thus Goldthwaite’s redefinition of the Renaissance in economic terms may meet with some resistance. Nonetheless all students of the period will be grateful for his turning of conventional economic history on its head in order to explain the phenomena of art consumption, however they are cumulatively defined. The editors of *I Tatti Studies* are confident that by making this essay available to a wider audience they will stimulate scholarly discussion of and response to “the Goldthwaite thesis”.



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<sup>1</sup> See E. K. KITZINGER, *Byzantine Art in the Making*, London, 1977, p. 13 and *passim*.