

How the Renaissance appreciated wealth

by Nora Hamerman

The Italian Renaissance Interior 1400-1600

by Peter Thornton

Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1991

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This has to be one of the prettiest art books issued in recent years—typography, design, and quality of reproductions being equal to the marvelous subject.

Peter Thornton, being British, takes a resolutely unconceptual approach to his topic, which uses many beautiful paintings, most of them by second-rank artists, to illustrate the development of creature comforts in Florence and other Italian cities. It is well known that the use of the fork was unknown in Europe until it was invented in Florence, but this book shows how much of the furniture and clothing which we take for granted for our well-being, sanitation, and health had that origin.

Formerly the Keeper of Furniture and Woodwork at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Mr. Thornton is now curator of Sir John Soane's Museum in London. He asserts in the introduction that the prohibition against usury was lifted in Italy in the 15th century, "as it became more widely recognized that many of the improvements and benefits which the community was now enjoying had only been made possible because the money to pay for them was readily made available, either through taxes or through private generosity." This is not strictly true; what occurred is that in the writings of people like St. Antoninus, the 15th-century Bishop of Florence, the concept of usury was more strictly defined, to distinguish a legitimate notion of credit so that the economy could expand, from usurious exactions of illegitimate interest. In any case, as Thornton observes, wealth was no longer frowned upon.

One of the most captivating instances of the change in attitude is the way in which the Annunciation of the Birth of Christ to Mary is portrayed. In numerous Italian paintings the Virgin Mary is shown as a middle-class young woman in a comfortable and sometimes even luxurious interior, surrounded by the kind of objects that would have allowed her the leisure to develop her mind and spirit. Thus, material prosperity was not considered antithetical to the virtue of



Detail of the Annunciation by Filippo Lippi (ca. 1406-69). The richness of the interior furnishings illustrates not only the advances in standard of living of his day, but also helps celebrate of the painter's subject.

being "poor in spirit," that is, not attached to worldly goods in their own right. This is very different from the later Calvinist notion that material riches on earth denoted that one is a member of the predestined Elect. (As far as I know, there are no Calvinist-inspired paintings of the Annunciation!)

Thornton demonstrates how the refinements of daily life spread through the society and are reflected in religious and secular painting alike, showing even in small things, the Renaissance attitude that man beautifies and improves the natural world through his creative powers in the likeness of God. Most readers will probably not want to read all of the text but will get lost in the plentiful illustrations; however, the book serves as an excellent reference to identify the numerous and sometimes mysterious objects that appear in paintings of the period and can be important to the narrative.

One can only be grateful for his cataloguing of the "precious objects of a learned man in 1480," which identifies the items which surround St. Augustine in the famous portrayal by Botticelli. Most often there is a self-reflexive process afoot, as captured in the phrase, "the picture within the picture." For example, intarsia, the wood inlay technique refined in Florence in the 15th century, was used to portray intricate clocks and musical instruments in astonishing perspective. Thus the human mind reflects upon its own ability to invent new objects to enhance mankind's dominion over nature, and upon its capacity to apply abstract reason to measuring the visible world. In the process, ironically enough, the viewer's mind is lifted far above the material things so portrayed and enjoyed. This fact, however, seems beyond Mr. Thornton's grasp.