

Early Modern Urbanization and Marketplaces and an Architecture of Trade

Adrienne Atwell, "Ritual Trading at the Florentine Wool-Cloth Botteghe," in *Renaissance Florence: A Social History*, ed. John Paoletti and Roger Crum (New York, 2006): 182–218.

Of particular interest in this week's readings is the Atwell essay on the "Ritual Trading at the Florentine Wool-Cloth Botteghe." Through analysis of contemporary accounts and reconstruction of the urban environment in which these histories took place, a thorough examination of the structure of the visits of foreign cloth merchants and their ritualized process of consumption during the period of 1317-78 is given.¹ This ritualized process is described as a "corporate trading routine" that was established in order to "stimulate and monitor business," therefore placing on emphasis on the sellers (in this case members of the *Arte della Lana*, or Florentine Wool Guild, in this process of mercantile exchange.² The urban network of markets was not only a ritualized space where predetermined circulation aided in the sales for those places of exchange. Its spatial qualities lent itself to a environment that was far more consumer oriented, where variety and choice was made manifest in the breadth of visual scope and where a method of comparison made possible by tangible interactions with the saleable goods allowed for the knowledgeable discernment of the buyer.

The bureaucratic structure of the ritualizations inherent to Florentine wool trade may shed some light on the empirical process that is described throughout the article. The visiting tradesmen are not lone agents in the process of inspection and consumption that is a part of the choreographed path set out by the wool guild. *Sensali*, or brokers, were assigned by the wool guild to groups of visiting tradesmen. Their task was one of

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² Ibid.

negotiation, coordinating the supply and demand in two areas of the industry's wholesale commerce – the sale of wool, cloth, and yarn.³ That their task was more than one of calculating numbers, and ensuring a maximum profit for the guilds and merchants that they served might be implied by the etymological root of their title. *Sensali*, shares a common origin with the Italian word *senso*, which means “sense”, “sensation”, or “feeling” amongst other things. It is therefore possible that his role is much more tactile in nature, and is meant to instill an empirical knowledge upon the tradesmen that they were guiding.

The *sensali* would lead the visiting buyers throughout Florence in search of commodities to purchase. Certain corridors and public spaces of the city, such as those within the Olt'Arno, San Pancrazio, Por San Piero, and San Pier Scheraggio districts are described as cohesive units functioning as an open market for the trade of wool. The first of these districts is described as being commercial “promenade,” entirely devoted to the establishment of business space and its related pedestrian traffic. One thoroughfare in the Olt'Arno district, the via Maggio, was clearly modified to suit its designated purpose when the Florentine commune ordered the demolition of all protruding structures such as low-hanging balconies facing the street.⁴ This arrangement providing both ample room for the new transitory processes of pedestrianized consumption on the commercial level. In addition, through the resultant homogenization of the market environment, visual distraction may have been reduced, and depth of perspective increased therefore providing for a visual effect that emphasized both the content of the market, and its expanse.

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The process of viewership in this new space is described as a deliberate process of expanding the linear distance of traversal, therefore multiplying the surface area of commercial interface. The walking method of *Spina pesces* – a zig-zag method of traversing the commercial space, allowed for the consumers to observe the broadest variety of goods possible on this linear path lined with *botteghe*, or stores. An ubiquitous furnishing object within these manifold *botteghe* that served the wool market was the *Mostra*. One such object, belonging to the wool merchant Taddeo di Cecco da Barberino was described as a large wooden display rack 10x7 ft in plan and an impressive 40 ft in height.⁵ Though this was likely an extraordinary example of the furnishing used to display the woolen cloths to the visiting consumers, its dimensions emphasize the two-fold purpose of such a device: demonstration saleable goods, but also the theatrical display of variety. This last purpose is key in the creation of an understanding of both abundance as well difference within that body of wealth, two factors necessary in the refinement of a consumer's sense of discernment and taste.

Although the arrangement of the Florentine wool market stood to benefit the foreign traders and merchantmen in the formation of their sense of taste and judgment towards the goods that the members of the wool guild had to offer, it is easily argued that this structuring equally aided the market and the sellers themselves. The visual dialogues established along a two-sided continuous market corridor are such to create a sense of competition amongst those sellers that border it. Furthermore, through establishing a field that increases the consumptive intelligence of the buyer, greater attention to the quality of output and the display of goods is created. A nascent culture of elaborate and

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architecturalized marketing therefore may find its origins within such marketplaces of comparison and visualized competition.

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