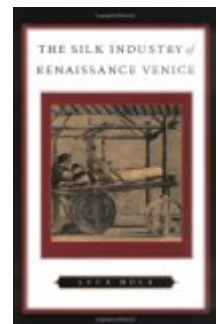
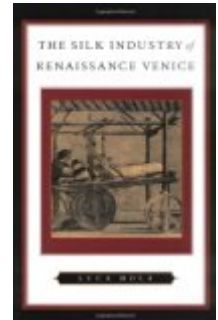


W. Patrick McCray. *Glassmaking in Renaissance Venice: The Fragile Craft.* Brookfield, Vermont and Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1999. \$84.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-0050-3.

Luca Mola. *The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xix + 457 \$48.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-6189-5.



Reviewed by Jo Wheeler

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Both these books deal with "the empire of things," the material culture and consumerism of Renaissance Italy. Both are concerned with the "metropolitan economy" of sixteenth-century Venice, with the increasing production of textiles and luxury goods, "linked by a distributive network in which retail stood between wholesale and manufacture, but overlapped with both." [1] And both tackle the problem of innovation in a key sector: the silk industry (Mola) and glassmaking (McCray). But they are radically different from each other.

Mola's excellent study is based on formidable archival research, the entire body of laws on the silk industry of the Venetian state. McCray, in contrast, works from the transcriptions and transla-

tions of the mass of data published over thirty years by Luigi Zecchin. He has a wholly different and daring methodology, which amalgamates history, archaeology and materials science: combining physical and chemical examinations of the glass itself, with recipes, inventories, treatises and pictorial evidence.

The evidence of his research, Mola' says, should "demonstrate that in the Renaissance the structures of the Venetian, and more generally, the Italian silk industry were highly flexible and were continually adapted to the changing needs and habits of consumers" (xix). It does, and the end product a fundamental reorientation of our understanding. He effectively demolishes the received idea that the silk guilds stifled innovation.

Quality controls were essential, and conservatism retained all its force for the most prized fabrics, but the freedom to innovate was absolutely necessary to create cloths ever responsive to the growth of the market for cheaper products, the changes of fashion and the challenges of intense competition. This tension between regulation and freedom imposed on the legislation a complex mix of rigidity and innovation.

Mola' provides a wealth of new information and insights. Bringing together many local studies, he traces the geographical spread of silk production throughout Italy and Europe, the relatively free movement of artisans and entrepreneurs and the rapid dissemination of techniques. And this is just essential background, the first of the third book. His focus then turns to Venice and its mainland state.

He soon demonstrates, for instance, that Venetians diversified their output of every single type of fabric, producing it in distinct varieties at higher or lower prices. He uncovers an underlying tension between setaioli (merchant-entrepreneurs) and spinners, provoked by the vigorous demand of foreign markets for Venetian semi-finished products and silk thread produced and imported from its mainland state. Yet even the spinners were themselves riven by tensions between the minority who worked thin thread for local markets and the majority who processed thick thread for re-export. I found the section on dyeing especially interesting, detailing the adoption of cochineal within a year of its arrival from the New World and the proliferation of new shades and colors.

The last third of the book deals with the *Teraferma*, the astounding growth of sericulture, especially in Vicenza and Verona and the response of the government and guilds to the subject cities. Again there is some very stimulating new evidence: the fiscal policy the government assumed toward the silk trade runs sharply counter to its general commercial policy, forcing manufactured

goods to be distributed exclusively through the capital. The position of the spinners diverged sharply from that of the government, and they launched campaigns in the first half of the sixteenth century to shut down silk mills in the Dominion.

The title though is misleading. The book is primarily about production and commerce and does discuss the workforce, immigration or women in the industry in depth (because he deals with them in other publications). [2] My only criticism is that at times the accumulation of detail interferes with the pace of the argument.

McCray's book has an even broader scope: technical aspects of glassmaking, the social and economic contexts of the craft from workshop up to state level, demand and distribution. Its overall purpose is to "arrive at a "comprehensive understanding of how consumer demand and technological development interacted in Renaissance Italy" (4). The real strengths of the book for me are his superb chapter on the technology of glass-making (96-140), his discussion of the selling of glass in Venice (146) and discussion of worker migration (157-59). His discussion of consumer demand takes off from the work of Mola's supervisor, Richard Goldthwaite, which, however, is focused on Italy. What struck me was McCray's table of glass exports in c.1590, with over 35,000 ducats worth of glass directed to Syria, Turkey and Egypt, and 42,000 ducats to Spain and colonies (135) and then seeing distinctive Venetian glass destined for Turkey in the Lehman collection in the Metropolitan. Mola's close attention to different markets with different requirements and the diversification of output (his use of Carlo Poni's concepts of "vertical differentiation" and "market segmentation") seem directly relevant here (303).

McCray also examines the qualities which contemporaries found desirable in Venetian glass, such as skill, ingenuity and transparency (87-91) after the development of colourless *cristallo* glass. Guy Turner, though, has recently argued that pri-

or to the mid-fifteenth century, material imitation appears to have been the standard point of aesthetic departure and with *cristallo* new standards of transparency were associated with glass. [3] He also raises the issue of the connections between alchemy and glassmaking, and another which seems to me still unclear is the relationship between glassmakers and nobles, and who owned furnaces. But there should be no doubt, that like Mola's book, it raises issues that are sure to stimulate new interest in these areas.

Note

[1]. I have taken these concepts from Richard Goldthwaite, "'The Empire of Things': Consumer Demand in Renaissance Italy", in . F.W.Kent and P.Simons., eds. *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Society* . Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1987, 154 and Richard Mackenney. *Tradesmen and Traders. The World of the Guilds in Venice and Europe, c.1250-c.1650*. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1987, 81.

[2]. See Reinhold Mueller, Luca Mola', Claudio Zanier. *La seta in Italia dal Medioevo al Seicento. Dal baco al drappo*. Venice: Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Marsilio Editore, 2000. Luca Mola'. *La Comunità dei Lucchesi a Venezia. Immigrazione e industria della seta nel tardo Medioevo*. Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1994.

[3]. G.Turner, "Allume catina and the aesthetics of Venetian cristallo", *Journal of Design History*, Vol XII, n.2, 1999: 111-122.

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