



Stocks and flows: Material culture and consumption behaviour in early modern Venice (c. 1650–1800)

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of consumption practices in Venice in the long eighteenth century through the combined use of post-mortem inventories and household budgets. Although Italy experienced a period of relative decline between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, our findings suggest that Venetian households enjoyed a rich and vibrant material culture that was fully comparable with those of the most advanced European urban economies. However, although new products, practices, and fashions were adopted by Venetian society, the architecture of consumption did not undergo sudden and extreme changes; rather, consumption was gradually refined, following the path that it had begun during the Renaissance. We therefore argue that the Venetian economy did not experience a consumer revolution but, instead, consumer evolution. Moreover, this study shows that sophisticated consumption practices were not exclusive to the more dynamic economies of the continent but were widespread even in those regions that were victims of the Little Divergence. We thus suggest that the relationship between consumption development and economic development was not necessarily causal and that the

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diffusion of new consumption practices throughout society was a necessary, but insufficient, prerequisite for economic take-off.

KEYWORDS

consumer revolution, consumption, early modern Italy, household budgets, inventories, Venice

How did consumption practices evolve in Italy during the long eighteenth century? The answer is not simple. Although a substantial body of literature exists on Italian consumption and material culture during the Renaissance,¹ our understanding of the material development that occurred over the final stages of the Old Regime is more erratic, especially from a quantitative perspective.²

This study aims to help address this gap in the literature by tracing the evolution of consumption dynamics during the long eighteenth century in one of the primary urban centres of the Italian peninsula, Venice. Our methodology involved the combined use of post-mortem inventories and household budgets to analyse both the static and dynamic aspects of consumption. Our findings show that Venetian households enjoyed particular material wealth between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We also show that, even if the consumers of the city of Saint Mark were quite receptive to new products, practices, and fashions, the architecture of Venetian consumption did not undergo sudden and extreme changes during the long eighteenth century. Rather, consumption was progressively refined, following the path that it had begun to take during the late Renaissance.

The findings presented here help us to gain a better understanding of the role played by consumption within economic and industrial development, a debate that has roiled historiography over the last half a century.³ Indeed, with the 1970s, consumption gained a central role within the narrative of the birth of modern capitalism. Since that very period, a growing number of scholars began to point to the unprecedented expansion of consumption experienced in the Netherlands, England, and France between the Baroque period and the Enlightenment – the ‘consumer revolution’ – as a primary engine of the pre-modern development of north-western Europe.⁴ Our results show that, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sophisticated consumption practices were not restricted to the most dynamic economies of the continent. On the contrary, they appear to have been widespread, even in economies that were victims of the Little Divergence. This indicates that the relationship between consumer development and economic development was not necessarily causally linked, and suggests that the diffusion of new consumption practices throughout society was a necessary, but insufficient, precondition for economic take-off. Moreover, the fact that Venetian material culture reached very advanced levels not through upheavals of revolutionary proportions but rather through a process of incremental growth that began in the

¹ Ajmar-Wollheim, Dennis, and Miller, *At home in Renaissance Italy*; Currie, *Fashion and masculinity*; Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the demand for art*; Hohti, *Artisans, objects, and everyday life*; Welch and O'Malley, *The material Renaissance*; Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*.

² Exceptions are: Ago, *Il gusto delle cose*; Bettoni, *I beni dell'agiatazza*; Clemente, *Il lusso 'cattivo'*.

³ For a recent overview, see Kwass, *The consumer revolution*.

⁴ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society*; Roche, *Histoire des choses banales*; Shama, *The embarrassment of riches*.



Renaissance reinforces the idea that the long eighteenth century was characterized by a consumer evolution rather than a consumer revolution.

The paper is organized as follows. Section I reviews the existing literature on the consumer revolution in relation to economic growth. Section II introduces the sources, while section III describes the research methodology. Sections IV and V analyse the stock of material wealth and the consumption dynamics of Venetian households, respectively, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Section VI provides conclusions.

I | THE CONSUMER REVOLUTION: AN AGENT OF GROWTH?

In the ‘thirty glorious years’ following the conclusion of the Second World War, mass consumption underwent an unprecedented expansion, disrupting pre-existing social and economic equilibrium. Consumption emerged as a potent agent of growth, one capable of shaping identities and influencing public and private life to an unparalleled extent.⁵ The new centrality of consumption prompted scholars to re-evaluate classical economic theory, which had traditionally viewed consumption as a mere outlet for production.⁶

This Copernican shift in perspective had a profound impact on economic history,⁷ leading researchers to question whether consumption had played an active role in driving even pre-modern economic growth. In this context, the theory of the ‘consumer revolution’ emerged.⁸ This postulated that, in the eighteenth century, a growing portion of the English middle class, driven by the desire to emulate the consumption paradigms of the wealthier classes, decided to satisfy their novel needs and wants by ramping up their participation in the market economy. This wave of consumerism would have played a significant role in boosting the secondary sector, thus triggering industrial development.⁹ In other words, the consumer revolution assumed that the birth of the consumer society went back to the eighteenth century and assigned it the same catalytic powers with regard to economic growth as the contemporary one.

This theory generated a heated debate among historians¹⁰ and was tested by a number of quantitative studies, mostly based on large collections of post-mortem inventories, that confirmed the rapid spread of new consumer goods into English households from the late seventeenth century.¹¹ As research expanded, scholars indicated that the consumer boom had had a beneficial effect on

⁵ Cohen, ‘A consumers’ republic’; Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieuses*; Galbraith, *The affluent society*; Katona, *The mass consumption society*; Rostow, ‘The stages of economic growth’.

⁶ ‘The more men can produce, the more they will purchase’ is the original formulation of the Say’s Law. Say, *A treatise on political economy*, p. 3.

⁷ It is worth acknowledging that, during that period, economic history had already embarked on investigating consumption. Notably, Epstein’s ‘history from below’ and the French *Annales* school initiated fruitful research on the history of everyday life and private life within past societies. These themes were deemed indispensable tools for gaining enhanced insights into the internal dynamics of societies, and they contributed significantly to advancing our comprehension of such phenomena. Duby and Ariès, *A history of private life*; Thompson, ‘History from below’.

⁸ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society*.

⁹ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society*, p. 9.

¹⁰ The greatest criticism was directed at the emulation paradigm that would generate the expansion of consumption, but there was no lack of broader criticism: Fine and Leopold, ‘Consumerism and the industrial revolution’; Fine, *The world of consumption*; Lemire, ‘Second-hand beaux’; Levi, ‘Comportements’.

¹¹ Shammass, *The pre-industrial consumer*; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*; Overton et al., *Production and consumption*.



not only material living standards but also on the entire economic system. It would have provided a boost to the proto-industrial system, a strengthening of the retail sector, an intensification of wage labour in families, and an incentive to improve the agricultural sector.¹² Ultimately, the consumer revolution was increasingly establishing itself as a crucial step towards modern economic growth. This idea was further reinforced by research on France and the Netherlands showing that a substantial evolution and acceleration of consumption practices during the long eighteenth century was a common feature of all the most advanced and dynamic economies on the continent.¹³ Used to explain British prosperity, the consumer revolution actually became a key element in understanding the reasons behind the economic success of North Atlantic Europe.¹⁴

As the exploration of early modern material culture came to include a wider geography, the link between the consumer revolution and economic development became less and less robust. Thanks to studies on urban and rural areas of Germany,¹⁵ Ireland,¹⁶ the southern Netherlands,¹⁷ the Ottoman Empire,¹⁸ Scandinavia,¹⁹ and Spain,²⁰ we are now aware that traces of a consumer revolution can be found in several economies, even those furthest away from the core commercial area of Europe.

Within this debate, Italy is probably the most evident absentee. The centre of gravity of the European economy throughout the middle ages and the Renaissance,²¹ the Italian peninsula was characterized, until the Baroque period, by a rich and sophisticated material culture.²² With the advent of the seventeenth century, however, came a period of great difficulty, which led Italy to cede its leading role to the more dynamic economies of North Atlantic Europe.²³ What was the effect of the end of the economic peak on consumption and material culture? Was Italy able to continue along the path of material enrichment that it had begun to take during the Renaissance, or did its decline within the European economic arena lead to the decline of its consumer world? Did Italy experience a consumer revolution in the long eighteenth century?

Here, we will answer these questions, focusing on one of the main urban centres of the peninsula, Venice. The city offers an interesting lens through which to analyse Italian dynamics of consumption. On the one hand, in terms of demographic strength and commercial connections, it is fully comparable with the major urban centres of North Atlantic Europe. Despite enduring severe waves of plague in 1575 and 1630, Venice consistently maintained, over the long eighteenth century, a population between 100 000 and 140 000 inhabitants, making it one of the most

¹² Blondé et al., *Retailers and consumer changes*; Mui and Mui, *Shops*; de Vries, *The industrious revolution*.

¹³ Pardilhé-Galabrun, *The birth of the intimacy*; Roche, *Histoire des choses banales*; Shama, *The embarrassment of riches*; de Vries, *The industrious revolution*.

¹⁴ Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.

¹⁵ Ogilvie, 'Consumption, social capital and the "industrious revolution"'; Bovenkerk and Fertig, 'Consumer revolution in north-western Germany'.

¹⁶ Flavin, 'Consumption and material culture'.

¹⁷ Blondé and van Damme, 'Retail growth'.

¹⁸ Karababa, 'Investigating early modern Ottoman consumer culture'.

¹⁹ Rönnbäck, 'An early modern consumer revolution'.

²⁰ Moreno Claverías, 'Révolution de la consommation paysanne?'; Morey Tous, 'Grupos campesinos intermedios'.

²¹ Malanima, 'La perdita del primato'. For a critical discussion of the historiography of the Italian Renaissance, see Brown, *Economies*.

²² Currie, *Fashion and masculinity*; Hohti, *Artisans, objects and everyday life*; Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*.

²³ Allen, 'The great divergence'; van Zanden, 'Introducing the problem'.



populous cities on both the peninsula and the continent.²⁴ Additionally, the city remained a major hub for Mediterranean trade, and the activity levels of its commercial fleet continued to be significant until its fall in 1797.²⁵ On the other hand, it experienced a period of significant economic restructuring and relative decline, following the same path as many other areas of Italy.²⁶ Starting from the seventeenth century, the economic strength of the mainland became more and more evident, and the city abandoned its position as a unique leader in the manufacturing, commercial, and financial sectors in favour of greater integration with the provinces of Veneto and Venetian Lombardy.²⁷ This process of reconfiguration guaranteed that the Venetian economy could grow,²⁸ even if it could not maintain the same pace of growth as the urban centres of the North Sea region.

II | SOURCES

Consumption is, by its very nature, a composite, multifaceted, and ever-changing phenomenon. To capture this complexity, we have decided to use a combination of two types of historical source (i.e. post-mortem inventories and household budgets) that offer two opposing but complementary views on consumption. While inventories provide an insight into the stock of material wealth of a family unit, household budgets reveal the purchases and expenditures made by a household over time. In the following section, we analyse these two kinds of documents in detail.

A probate inventory is a list of the material possessions belonging to a household at a precise moment in time. Their production generally coincided with the death of the householder; this was a time when a multitude of bureaucratic procedures involving a household and its members began. In fact, inventories represented the first step in many legal procedures, such as dowry restitutions, divisions of assets among heirs, and settlement of debts to creditors.²⁹ The Venetian inventories that form the basis of this study, which were collected from the archives of the magistracy of the *Giudici del Proprio*, are no exception. The documents we collected were drafted after the death of the householder so that the most common legal matters could be resolved. In our case, the documents were usually about the restitution of the dowry to the widow.³⁰ These documents were drawn up by certain civic officials, who were sometimes assisted by external experts in the appraisal of some categories of goods for which a particular expertise was required, typically jewellery, silverware, works of art, and timepieces.³¹ The care with which these documents were composed makes them mines of information.³² The listing of movable assets was often carried out room by room, in a kind of tour of the entire flat – the objects in each environment have been listed with special care and detail. The inventory generally follows a precise analytical order. The walls are the first to be described, along with the artworks and other accoutrements that adorn them.

²⁴ Beltrami, *Storia della popolazione*, p. 59; Pezzolo, ‘The Venetian economy’, p. 257.

²⁵ Panciera, *La Repubblica di Venezia*, pp. 76–80.

²⁶ Sella, *Italy in the seventeenth century*.

²⁷ Demo, ‘Industry and production’; Lanaro, *At the centre of the Old World*; Pezzolo, ‘The Venetian economy’.

²⁸ Ciriaco, ‘Le trasformazioni economiche’; Panciera, ‘L’economia’; Trivellato, *Fondamenta dei vetrai*; Trivellato, ‘Guilds, technology, and economic change’.

²⁹ Riello, ‘Things seen and unseen’.

³⁰ Lanaro, ‘La restituzione della dote’.

³¹ Da Mosto, *L’archivio di Stato di Venezia*, p. 89.

³² Cecchini, ‘A world of small objects’; Palumbo Fossati Casa, *Dentro le case*; Zanatta, ‘L’inventario come fonte’.

This is followed by the more valuable furniture (beds, wardrobes, and tables, mostly) and then by the less expensive items. Each cupboard, chest, and drawer was opened and its contents revealed to convey the variety and quality of the personal items, clothing, and household linen therein. In the kitchens, cooking objects are listed one by one, as are the items for serving meals. Every barrel of wine present in the cellars is accounted for, and in the attics every piece of furniture is considered. Not all inventories are so precise and detailed, but most boast a remarkable degree of detail in their descriptions. Some inventories are characterized by a specific estimate of the worth of each item, while others (the majority, unfortunately) contain only an overall summary estimate of all the listed goods.

The richness and quantity of information that inventories can offer, as well as their presence in archives all over Europe and their ease of use for comparative studies, have made them popular among consumer historians.³³ Over time, inventories have established themselves as a preferred source for the study of the demand for goods in the pre-industrial age. The preference given to these documents has led to a privileging of the static perspective, which traces the patterns of ownership of durable goods, to the detriment of the dynamic perspective, which instead analyses the complete structure of household resource allocation.

Today, to analyse the purchase cycle of a family and changes in consumption over time, economists can count on essential tools such as household budgets.³⁴ During the Old Regime, there were no national statistical bureaus or regular national surveys investigating household budgets, as there are currently. Nevertheless, these kinds of documents can be found in many archives throughout Europe. On some occasions – most commonly, as seen above, the death of the household – if there were minors or infirm people to protect, the law forced the establishment of a trust and obliged the trustees to keep accounts of all spending undertaken on behalf of their beneficiaries. In Venice, there was a judiciary charged with monitoring trusts and the behaviour of trustees – the *Giudici di Petizion*.³⁵ Venetian household budgets take the most diverse forms, as the court of *Petizion* did not oblige the trustees to follow any particular method of reporting. There was only the obligation to keep the accounts of the trust up to date and provide all documentation to the court by the end of the trust period. Thus, there are documents listing daily income and expenditure, while others account for these on a weekly or monthly basis. Still others, especially in the late eighteenth century, offer an annual summary similar to a contemporary balance sheet. In all cases, these documents report the entire household's consumption, listing durable or semi-durable goods as well as the amount of money spent on perishable goods, services, leisure, and intangible assets. If inventories are an excellent source for studying the stock of material wealth, household budgets are crucial documents for studying the actual patterns of household resource allocation.

III | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We investigated the evolution of Venetian consumption practices using a quantitative analysis of a newly collected historical dataset that focused on a period of about a century and a half, from the middle of the seventeenth century to 1797, the year of the fall of the Venetian Republic. Our corpus

³³ On the main limitations of post-mortem inventories as a source for the study of material culture, see [Bedell](#), 'Archaeology and probate inventories'; [Riello](#), 'Things seen and unseen'; [Schuurmann](#), 'Probate inventories'.

³⁴ [Deaton](#), *The analysis*, p. 7.

³⁵ [Cassandro](#), 'La curia di Petizion'.



TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of the total estimates of Venetian probate inventories for the periods 1651–1700, 1701–50, and 1751–97

	1651–1700	1701–50	1751–97
Sample size	98	95	106
Mean	513.12	382.81	431.42
Median	285.85	229.73	277.95
Standard deviation	1010.29	473.60	620.62
Minimum	23.51	17.21	8.23
Maximum	9062.40	3457.24	5669.30

Notes: Data in ducats are expressed in real terms. Data were adjusted for inflation using the wheat price series collected by Toaldo for the Venice market: TOALDO Giuseppe, *Giornale*.

Source: Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), *Giudici del Proprio*, Inventari e stime, bb. 6, 13, 17, 23, 34, 41, 48, 57, 63, 64, 72.

of sources consisted of 299 inventories and the budgets of 35 households, which, in turn, provided us with information on more than 1000 months of expenses. All the documentation is preserved at the Venetian State Archive. Inventories were collected from the archives of the *Giudici del Proprio*, while the budgets came from those of the *Giudici di Petizion*.³⁶

Inventories were analysed by grouping them into three blocks of 50 years. For the first block, which covered the period from 1651 to 1700, we collected 98 documents; for the second, from 1701 to 1750, we gathered 95 documents; for the third and last, from 1751 to 1797, we collected data from 106 inventories. The analysis conducted using the household budgets compared the consumption patterns of Venetian families in the second half of the seventeenth century with their consumption patterns during the second half of the eighteenth century. For the first period, we selected all 14 trusts monitored by the *Petizion* that were active in the 1670s and then followed the documentation of them across all the years and decades before and after. For the second period, we began with the 21 trusts that were active in the 1770s and proceeded as described above. Descriptive statistics on the monetary value of post-mortem inventories and monthly expenditure per capita from household budgets, expressed in real terms,³⁷ are provided in tables 1 and 2.³⁸

For the analysis of probate inventories, we decided to follow a well-established research path using a method-oriented approach.³⁹ We thus selected 16 key categories of objects from those that seemed the most useful for tracing and describing the evolution of consumption practices over the long eighteenth century. For all items, we measured the frequency of their occurrence in the inventories and the total number of items in each inventory. Exceptions to this rule were cooking pots, pans, and pewter items, for which only the frequency of possession was provided. In most cases, these objects were counted by weight, not by number, as their value was calculated based on the metal used to make them.

³⁶ A complete reference for the families that are part of our sample and the chronology of the data that refer to them are provided in online appendix 1.

³⁷ We have used the series of wheat prices transcribed by Toaldo and obtained from the registers (whose original records have gone unfortunately been lost) of the *Provveditori e collegio alle biave*, the Venetian judiciary in charge of the food supply of the city. Toaldo, *Giornale*.

³⁸ The number of pupils is not always correctly identifiable. For this reason, for household budgets, data on per capita monthly expenditure is only available for 10 out of 14 files for the seventeenth century, and for 19 out of 21 for the eighteenth century.

³⁹ Hoskins, 'Reading the inventory', pp. 54–95.



TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of monthly per capita expenditure in Venetian household budgets for the periods 1651–1700 and 1751–97

	1651–1700	1751–97
Sample size	10	19
Mean	587.58	943.21
Median	71.38	428.74
Standard deviation	1201.91	2030.96
Minimum	13.16	17.11
Maximum	3652.59	9120.09

Notes: Data in decimal lire are expressed in real terms. Data were adjusted for inflation using the wheat price series collected by Toaldo for the Venice market: TOALDO Giuseppe, *Giornale*.

Source: ASV, *Giudici di Petizion*, Rendimenti di conto, bb. 983, 984, 985, 986, 1001, 1002, 1003, 1004, 1005, 1006, 1007, 1008, 1009, 1010, 1011, 1012.

In historical studies, the quantitative exploration of household budgets has been limited and fragmented.⁴⁰ To make the most of the data provided by these sources, we decided to borrow one of the economic tools that is most often used to analyse contemporary household budgets and adapt it to pre-industrial sources. We began with the Classification of Individual Consumption According to Purpose (COICOP) system, which was developed by the United Nations in 1993 and is now used by many national statistics offices around the world.⁴¹ We developed it into a new classification system called Historical Classification of Household Expenditure According to Purpose (HiCHEP). The COICOP system is characterized by an articulated structure divided into three sections: divisions, groups, and classes.⁴² Divisions are the broadest category and show the most general changes in the consumption patterns of a household.⁴³ Each division is then subdivided into a variable number of groups, while each group is made up of a different number of classes. In the transition from COICOP to HiCHEP, this tripartite structure remained unchanged, while much was done to adapt it to the pre-industrial consumption model or, rather, models.⁴⁴ First, all categories referring to typical post-industrial consumption were identified. Some categories were discarded altogether, while others were simply recalibrated according to what goods and services were available before 1800. A considerable amount of work has been done on COICOP division 12, labelled ‘miscellaneous goods and services’, which was rather heterogeneous in the original version. The latter was unpacked into four divisions to be able to further appreciate the continuities and discontinuities in consumption patterns over time. Finally, division 16, which collects all ‘unidentified expenses’, was created from scratch. This division included all expenses that could

⁴⁰ Malanima, *I Riccardi*; Mira, *Le vicende economiche*; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*.

⁴¹ United Nations, *Statistical papers*, Series M, N. 84, 1999.

⁴² For the complete updated scheme of the COICOP system with all the specifications, See United Nations, *Statistical papers*, Series M, N. 99, 2018.

⁴³ Here, we do not consider division 13 (Individual consumption expenditures of non-profit institutions serving households), and division 14 (Individual consumption expenditures of general government), since they are not strictly related to household consumption.

⁴⁴ Although it has been conceived, implemented, and tested to be used on budgets collected by the *Giudici di Petizion*, HiCHEP does not aim to be a system suitable only for the Venetian context. It is intended to be a system that can be easily used for the analysis of household budgets of other regions in Italy and in Europe. That is why we have tried to maintain for HiCHEP a structure that is as general as possible, just as with the COICOP system.



TABLE 3 The Historical Classification of Household Expenditure According to Purpose (HiCHEP) classification systems at division level

Division
1 – Food and non-alcoholic beverages
2 – Alcoholic beverages and tobacco
3 – Clothing and footwear
4 – Housing, maintenance of the dwelling, livestock, and fuels
5 – Furnishings, household equipment, and services
6 – Health
7 – Transport
8 – Communication
9 – Recreation and culture
10 – Education
11 – Catering and accommodation services
12 – Personal care and effects, and miscellaneous services
13 – Social protection and support services
14 – Financial and legal services
15 – Taxes and fees
16 – Unidentifiable expenses

not be assigned to one of the aforementioned categories, either because they were described too vaguely (e.g. ‘expenses for the pupil’ and ‘for pupil maintenance’) or because the trustee combined different goods and services (e.g. ‘spent on food and clothing’ and ‘for a pair of stockings and a notebook’). Table 3 summarizes the main categories into which HiCHEP is divided, while a complete discussion of how the system was conceived, including its complete structure, is presented in online appendix 2.

To situate the portion of the population represented by the documents produced by the *Proprio* and *Petizion*, it is important to understand that Venetian society was divided into three major social groups. At the top there was the patriciate, which included all the members of the city’s nobility. Then there were original citizens (*cittadini originari*), a socio-professional group that enjoyed great privileges and occupied an ancillary position in the running of the state. Finally, there were the commoners (*popolo menudo*), who comprised the vast majority of the population.⁴⁵ From the sixteenth century onwards, coinciding with an intense growth phase for the city, a new group emerged that some called the *popolo grande*. This was a sort of bourgeoisie that included wealthy merchants, lawyers, notaries, and prominent members of the city guilds.⁴⁶ Overall, the documents that form the basis of this study represent the upper-middle class of Venetian society (i.e. the most affluent strata of commoners; the *popolo grande*; the original citizens; and the patriciate). In our sample, we identify shopkeepers, artisans, artists, merchants, members of the nobility of the mainland, and Venetian patricians.

Positioning the households in our sample on the income pyramid is difficult given the lack of reliable and complete estimates of income distribution in early modern Venice. However, we

⁴⁵ Bellavitis, ‘Family and society’.

⁴⁶ Knapton, ‘Tra Dominante e Dominio’, p. 283.



can draw a few broad conclusions, especially for the seventeenth century – the period for which we possess the most data on wages. Between 1650 and 1699, the real monthly wage of a master glazier was 96.75 lire, that of a construction worker was 60.75 lire, and that of a baker was 23.84 lire.⁴⁷ Considering the monthly maintenance expenses of a single pupil, we can see that they had a minimum value of 13.16 lire, with a median value of 71.38 lire. Through these figures, we can see that the households in our sample received income that positioned them within the upper-middle portion of society.

IV | STOCKS OF MATERIAL WEALTH

We begin our analysis with probate inventories – these relate to the objects that surrounded the inhabitants of Venice in the long eighteenth century and help us to understand how this world changed over time. Even after a first qualitative reading of the inventories, we can acknowledge how Venetian families enjoyed a sophisticated material culture, as well as an everyday life rich in objects of every type, shape, and colour. Every room visited by appraisers, from cellars to attics, was filled with objects. The walls were very rarely bare. Rather, they were covered with decorated leather or cloth. Where a covering was missing, dozens of paintings of the most varied subjects made their appearance, alongside Byzantine-style icons, small sacred objects, and mirrors of all sizes. Beds had plentiful mattresses, sheets, blankets, and duvets, while chests and wardrobes stored clothes and household linen in large quantities. Dozens of chairs crowded rooms and hallways, often resting around tables ready to be attractively set with tablecloths, napkins, and tableware in the most varied types and patterns. Cauldrons, pots, pans, and frying pans were found in the kitchens, where there were also dishes of all kinds. We found everything needed for roasting pieces of meat, baking bread, and frying fish. Already, through this first reading, we could see how the passage of time and changing fashions actively influenced what objects Venetians possessed. In the wardrobes, hemp and linen made more and more room for silk and cotton; in the kitchens, objects for the consumption of hot drinks of colonial origin became more prominent; and in the dining rooms, pewter plates made way for more refined ceramics. This is even without mentioning the specialization of the rooms, which became increasingly evident over the course of the eighteenth century.

These impressions were confirmed by a quantitative treatment of the inventories, as can be seen in table 4. Between the second half of the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century, we found tables in more the 90 per cent of houses, with similar percentages for pots and pans. Pewter items were also very widespread: We found these in 70–80 per cent of cases. Tablecloths, often accompanied by a huge number of napkins, were present in more than 7 cases out of 10, while cutlery, needed to serve meals with elegance, appeared in almost half of the inventories. Venetian material splendour manifested itself even beyond the dinner table. More than 90 per cent of households had at least one wall painting (40 per cent of them had more than 20), while 60 per cent owned an object made from gold or silver. We can also see how mirrors, already present in more than half of the interiors in the seventeenth century, became ubiquitous during the following century, reaching a peak of 88 per cent in the last decades of the life of the Republic.

⁴⁷ Calculations were based upon [Trivellato](#), *Fondamenta dei vetrai*, pp. 65–6, and [Pezzolo](#), *Il fisco dei veneziani*, p. 197. All data were deflated using the Toaldo price series.

**TABLE 4** Frequency of possession and number of selected goods in Venetian probate inventories

	Percentage	1651–1700			
		<i>n</i> = 98			
		Goods per inventory			
		Min	Max	Mean	Median
Tables	94%	1	19	4.49	3.00
Cooking pots and pans	90%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pewter items	71%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dishes	79%	6	210	63.52	50.00
Clay dishes	6%	2	100	29.40	10.00
Books	4%	8	40	24.00	24.00
Table linens	74%	1	77	10.90	6.00
Cutlery	45%	1	60	14.57	9.50
China and majolica	1%	22	22	22.00	22.00
Utensils for hot drinks	0%	0	0	0.00	0.00
Silver and gold	61%	1	58	12.77	9.00
Mirrors	63%	1	8	1.87	1.50
Musical instruments	1%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Boats	8%	1	2	1.13	1.00
Pictures	95%	1	65	22.24	20.00
Timepieces	3%	1	2	1.33	1.00
		1701–50			
		<i>n</i> = 95			
		Goods per inventory			
	Percentage	Min	Max	Mean	Median
Tables	92%	1	19	5.56	4.00
Cooking pots and pans	91%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pewter items	74%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dishes	62%	1	194	46.40	42.00
Clay dishes	39%	2	245	64.32	45.00
Books	16%	1	127	18.15	4.00
Table linens	71%	1	54	7.91	6.00
Cutlery	58%	1	30	10.62	8.00
China and majolica	6%	1	178	47.50	8.00
Utensils for hot drinks	16%	1	50	8.07	4.00
Silver and gold	59%	1	118	15.48	10.00
Mirrors	81%	1	14	2.69	2.00
Musical instruments	1%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Boats	6%	1	2	1.17	1.00
Pictures	94%	1	135	28.89	18.00
Timepieces	7%	1	1	1.00	1.00

(Continues)



TABLE 4 (Continued)

	Percentage	1751–97			
		n = 106			
		Goods per inventory			
		Min	Max	Mean	Median
Tables	92%	1	29	5.56	5.00
Cooking pots and pans	91%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pewter items	81%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dishes	69%	1	166	52.90	44.00
Clay dishes	29%	12	252	39.62	25.00
Books	18%	1	75	25.00	14.00
Table linens	75%	1	114	11.31	6.00
Cutlery	47%	1	72	14.82	9.50
China and majolica	12%	1	90	27.44	18.00
Utensils for hot drinks	56%	1	54	9.12	6.00
Silver and gold	62%	1	84	22.59	14.00
Mirrors	88%	1	15	3.06	3.00
Musical instruments	2%	1	2	1.50	1.50
Boats	7%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Pictures	95%	1	198	25.98	13.00
Timepieces	38%	1	8	2.00	1.00

Source: ASV, *Giudici del Proprio*, Inventari e stime, bb. 6, 13, 17, 23, 34, 41, 48, 57, 63, 64, 72.

The wealth of Venetians was great even when compared with that of the citizens of some of the most developed urban centres in Europe. Alongside Londoners,⁴⁸ Amsterdammers,⁴⁹ and Parisians,⁵⁰ the inhabitants of the city of Saint Mark seem to have been characterized by an equal, if not superior, material culture, even though the economic trajectory followed by the lagoon city as compared with those in the North Atlantic was radically different. At the end of the seventeenth century, the distribution of tables and table linens was the same between Venice and London, at 94 and 74 per cent and 93 and 71 per cent, respectively. At the same time, the distribution of pots and pans in Venice (90 per cent) was in line with Paris but higher than in London (about 80 per cent). We observe the solid positioning of the city in the European context, even in terms of the distribution of paintings and prints. They appeared in more than 90 per cent of Venetian homes, a percentage much higher than that of London (43 per cent in the 1675–1705 period) and Paris, which peaked at 71 per cent in the years after 1750, and in line with that of Amsterdam (96 per cent in 1701–10). With regard to mirrors, it is true that the figures for the 1651–1700 period (63 per cent) are lower than estimates for other European cities, but in the following 50 years, when they exceed 80 per cent, they surpass the percentages for both Paris and Amsterdam, which are set between 60 per cent and 70 per cent. As concerns gold and silver objects, there was a gap of at least 20 percentage points (61 per cent versus 42 per cent) between Venice and London in favour of Venice in the seventeenth century. Specific object categories were undoubtedly less common

⁴⁸ Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*, p. 76.

⁴⁹ Faber, 'Inhabitants of Amsterdam', p. 153; McCants, 'Exotic goods', pp. 450–1.

⁵⁰ Pardilhé-Galabrun, *The birth of intimacy*, pp. 83–7, 154, 164.



than elsewhere in Europe. The percentage of books, for example, was still rather low at 4 per cent in 1700, climbing to 18 per cent a century later. However, in Amsterdam, they were already present in 8 out of 10 households in the early eighteenth century.

What can we say about the evolution of Venetian material culture during the long eighteenth century? On one hand, we can appreciate that there was a substantial proliferation of objects in the homes of Venetian families, a phenomenon that seems to span the entire social spectrum. On the other hand, it is also true that the changes we can discern do not appear to be the result of a sudden acceleration in consumption but rather the continuation of the process of a gradual increase and refinement of material wealth that can be traced to the very late Renaissance. Let us consider these two phenomena in detail.

First, beginning in 1650, we see the increased crowding of objects in homes. If we look at the average number of items per inventory, we can see a positive trend in all object categories surveyed in our database. Some increases are slight, as in the case of books, table linens, and cutlery, which increase by a few percentage points.⁵¹ For other objects, the proliferation is more noticeable. The numbers of tables and majolica increase by a quarter, and mirrors and clocks increase by 50 per cent. The data on the maximum number of objects per inventory provide quite similar figures, although they more often exhibit conspicuous rates of increase. This is a sign that, for the richest families, the process of material growth was especially sustained.

In part, this trend resulted from an intergenerational accumulation process, which is particularly evident from this kind of source, since inventories only listed valuable, durable goods. However, it should be noted that this phenomenon developed simultaneously with a contraction in the total monetary value of assets.⁵² Between 1651 and 1700 and 1701 and 1750, we noted a reduction of 25 per cent for the average figure (from 513 to 382 ducats) and of 20 per cent for the median figure (from 285 to 229 ducats). Between 1651 and 1700 and 1751 and 1797, the overall decrease was 16 per cent for the average figure (from 513 to 431 ducats) and 3 per cent for the median figure (from 285 to 277 ducats). A similar dynamic was observed both in England and New England over the same period. This was associated with declining manufacturing prices, which would have allowed many households to increase the number of goods they owned without increasing the portion of their income devoted to consumption.⁵³ We do not have a consistent price series for manufactured goods in the Venetian market, and we cannot say whether local prices underwent something similar. However, the simultaneous contraction in the monetary value of the stock of material wealth associated with an increase in the number of goods leads us to believe that what we observed concerning the Atlantic economies was also the case in the lagoon city. To a certain extent, the cadastral data on shops would also help to confirm this theory. In fact, we know that the number of shops registered in Venice rose from 4422 in 1661 to 5904 in 1740.⁵⁴ This is a sign

⁵¹ Exceptions are boats, which remain a rather rare commodity with small numbers, and plates. The decrease in the number of the latter is, however, counterbalanced by the increase in the number of clay dishes. In these figures, we can appreciate that process of alternation between pewter and clay for tableware, which was widespread in many areas of Europe during this period.

⁵² We used the total estimates of inventories, namely the total monetary value of the assets surveyed in each estimation. We must bear in mind that these are not complete data, because part of the securities, perhaps out of self-interest, was withheld from the estimates, and it is almost impossible to quantify how big this missing part is. We can reasonably assume that this later represented a minor share and that this behaviour was equally widespread among both the wealthiest and the poorest families.

⁵³ Shammus, 'Changes in English and Anglo-American consumption', pp. 185–94.

⁵⁴ Zannini, 'La città', p. 26.



that the demand for goods must have been sustained and was also likely due to the downward trend in prices (and, in a sort of virtuous circle, an increasingly articulated and pervasive distribution system helped, in turn, to keep prices low). Thus, part of the reason for the greater presence of objects is linked to heirlooms from past generations accumulating in the homes of subsequent generations. However, it is also true that, at least in the eighteenth century, this was linked to the greater affordability and availability of goods on the market.

It is important to emphasize that the expansion of consumption that took place during the long eighteenth century was highly pervasive. The trends that we have been able to note heretofore were not only boosted by the families at the top of the socioeconomic pyramid in the city; they emerged as the outcome of a broader change in consumer dynamics that encompassed all social and income groups examined here. To show this, we have first disaggregated the data of noble households from those of non-noble households. Looking at the data on non-noble households in table 5, we can see how all the distinctive features of Venetian consumption previously outlined emerge with equal force. First, households belonging to the common class were already enjoying a very rich material culture in the seventeenth century. Tables, pots, and pictures are almost omnipresent, and pewter, plates, table linens, and mirrors can be found in about 70 per cent of cases. Moreover, even among these families, the eighteenth century represents a period of diversification of consumption practices, as shown, for instance, by the rapid dissemination of utensils for hot drinks and timepieces. The Age of Enlightenment was characterized by both qualitative and quantitative advancements. Data on the median and maximum number of objects per inventory unveils the increasing presence of diverse commodities within the households of the Venetian middle class. Data relating to noble households (table 6) should be viewed with more caution, given the small number of households in the sample, even if they do provide some interesting insights. In this group, also, we can see the spreading of novel consumption practices, as demonstrated by the figures on utensils for the consumption of the new hot drinks of colonial origin, china and majolica objects, mirrors, and timepieces. However, some data go decisively against the trend, showing a decrease in the spread of pots and pans, dishes of all kinds, cutlery, and even silver and gold items. These might simply be false trends due to the small number of inventories, but they could be a sign of a deeper phenomenon. Indeed, we know that, during the course of the early modern period, the Venetian patriciate suffered a profound internal fracture. Especially over the long eighteenth century, the gap between the families that made up the ruling class became wider and wider. While a small group of households hegemonized the social, economic, and political top of the state, others embarked on a declining parabola.⁵⁵ Keeping in mind the limits dictated by our sample, it is, therefore, possible that the contraction in the spread of certain objects mirrored the growing difficulties that a portion of the Venetian patriciate was experiencing.

As we mentioned earlier, the expansion of consumption involved households in all income brackets within our sample. This observation is of paramount importance, as it shows that the impetus for change stems not only from the most affluent families (whatever their social status) but from the entire upper-middle portion of Venetian society. Table 7 presents the calculated percentage of households per quintile possessing a specific category of objects. These data enable us to discern that the seventeenth century marked a period of pervasive material affluence, evident in the widespread ownership of items such as tables, pots and pans, and pictures across all income brackets. Moreover, the analysis of the aforementioned data unveils a general inclination towards

⁵⁵ Davis, *The decline of the Venetian nobility*; Trebbi, 'La società veneziana'; Viale, Demo, and Ricciuti, 'Economic inequality'.

**TABLE 5** Frequency of possession and number of selected goods in Venetian probate inventories: non-noble households

	Percentage	1651–1700			
		<i>n</i> = 87			
		Goods per inventory			
		Min	Max	Mean	Median
Tables	93%	1	19	3.65	3.00
Cooking pots and pans	91%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pewter items	70%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dishes	79%	6	200	61.76	50.00
Clay dishes	7%	2	100	29.40	10.00
Books	5%	8	40	24.00	24.00
Table linens	71%	1	42	9.35	6.00
Cutlery	39%	3	48	14.26	12.00
China and majolica	0%	–	–	–	–
Utensils for hot drinks	0%	–	–	–	–
Silver and gold	59%	1	58	12.37	9.00
Mirrors	66%	1	8	1.77	1.00
Musical instruments	1%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Boats	7%	1	2	1.17	1.00
Pictures	95%	1	65	21.29	18.00
Timepieces	2%	1	1	1.00	1.00
		1701–50			
		<i>n</i> = 88			
		Goods per inventory			
	Percentage	Min	Max	Mean	Median
Tables	91%	1	19	5.28	4.00
Cooking pots and pans	91%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pewter items	74%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dishes	63%	1	194	46.24	42.00
Clay dishes	40%	2	245	61.89	45.00
Books	15%	1	127	19.58	4.50
Table linens	72%	2	395	52.42	28.00
Cutlery	57%	1	30	10.29	8.00
China and majolica	5%	2	88	26.50	8.00
Utensils for hot drinks	15%	1	15	5.31	4.00
Silver and gold	57%	1	118	16.10	10.00
Mirrors	81%	1	14	2.70	2.00
Musical instruments	1%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Boats	6%	1	2	1.20	1.00
Pictures	94%	1	268	31.35	17.00
Timepieces	8%	1	1	1.00	1.00

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

	Percentage	1751–97			
		n = 92			
		Goods per inventory			
		Min	Max	Mean	Median
Tables	91%	1	17	4.66	4.00
Cooking pots and pans	93%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pewter items	82%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dishes	72%	1	166	53.06	43.00
Clay dishes	32%	12	65	29.00	24.50
Books	14%	1	75	21.50	14.00
Table linens	73%	1	45	8.61	6.00
Cutlery	45%	1	69	13.63	8.00
China and majolica	9%	6	90	43.60	20.00
Utensils for hot drinks	54%	1	54	9.08	6.00
Silver and gold	63%	1	81	19.76	11.00
Mirrors	86%	1	13	2.70	2.00
Musical instruments	1%	2	2	2.00	2.00
Boats	5%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Pictures	97%	1	153	21.74	12.00
Timepieces	36%	1	8	1.97	1.00

Source: ASV, *Giudici del Proprio*, Inventari e stime, bb. 6, 13, 17, 23, 34, 41, 48, 57, 63, 64, 72.

the adoption of new products, practices, and fashions. The diffusion of novel luxuries transpired, in fact, at comparable rates in both less wealthy and wealthy households.

Returning to the evolution of Venetian material culture during the long eighteenth century, we must point out that the rich and dynamic material culture that we have been able to discover was not a quirk of this period. Rather, after 1650 there appeared to be a development and refinement of a process of material growth that began in the Renaissance. Comparing our data with those of Cecchini,⁵⁶ who undertook a study on Venetian material culture between 1511 and 1615, we see how the spread of more sophisticated consumption patterns was already underway well before the advent of the Baroque period. In the 1510s, more than 60 per cent of families owned paintings, tapestries, and carpets. Forty per cent of them owned a table and pewter plates, and almost half owned some silver cutlery. If we then consider the long-term evolution of material culture, the available data suggest that the period in which consumption gained momentum was the late Renaissance, not the eighteenth century, as commonly suggested by the historiography of north-western Europe. It is precisely in this period that Venetian consumer practices seem to have experienced a significant change of pace, with an increase in the number of households turning to the market to satisfy their needs and wants and a growing number of goods entering the city's homes. The ensuing decades were indisputably marked by the dissemination of new objects, fashions, and trends. In fact, inventories show how some practices spread aggressively and rapidly among the Venetian population during the last phase of the Old Regime. Items connected with the consumption of colonial products were absent in the seventeenth century but present in more

⁵⁶ Cecchini, 'Material culture', pp. 13–6.

**TABLE 6** Frequency of possession and number of selected goods in Venetian probate inventories: noble households

	Percentage	1651–1700			
		<i>n</i> = 11			
		Goods per inventory			
		Min	Max	Mean	Median
Tables	100%	5	19	11.40	11.00
Cooking pots and pans	82%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pewter items	82%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dishes	73%	20	210	82.00	64.00
Clay dishes	0%	–	–	–	–
Books	0%	–	–	–	–
Table linens	100%	3	77	20.70	15.50
Cutlery	91%	1	60	15.78	8.00
China and majolica*	9%	22	22	22.00	22.00
Utensils for hot drinks	0%	–	–	–	–
Silver and gold	82%	1	48	15.00	10.00
Mirrors	45%	1	5	3.00	3.00
Musical instruments	0%	–	–	–	–
Boats	18%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Pictures	91%	2	54	30.10	29.50
Timepieces	9%	2	2	2.00	2.00
		1701–50			
		<i>n</i> = 7			
		Goods per inventory			
	Percentage	Min	Max	Mean	Median
Tables	100%	2	16	8.86	8.00
Cooking pots and pans	86%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pewter items	71%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dishes	57%	2	83	48.25	54.00
Clay dishes*	29%	130	130	130.00	130.00
Books	29%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Table linens	57%	4	175	71.80	68.00
Cutlery	71%	5	25	13.80	13.00
China and majolica	29%	1	178	89.50	89.50
Utensils for hot drinks	29%	2	50	26.00	26.00
Silver and gold	86%	1	19	10.33	10.00
Mirrors	86%	1	6	2.50	1.50
Musical instruments	0%	–	–	–	–
Boats	14%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Pictures	86%	2	57	27.83	27.50
Timepieces	0%	–	–	–	–

(Continues)

TABLE 6 (Continued)

	Percentage	1751–97			
		n = 14			
		Goods per inventory			
		Min	Max	Mean	Median
Tables	100%	4	29	10.86	8.00
Cooking pots and pans	71%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pewter items	79%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dishes	50%	10	114	51.43	48.00
Clay dishes*	14%	252	252	252.00	252.00
Books	43%	1	70	35.50	35.50
Table linens	86%	2	114	26.27	12.00
Cutlery	64%	2	72	19.44	12.00
China and majolica	36%	1	20	7.25	4.00
Utensils for hot drinks	64%	1	41	9.33	5.00
Silver and gold	57%	4	84	43.13	41.50
Mirrors	100%	1	15	5.14	4.00
Musical instruments	7%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Boats	14%	1	1	1.00	1.00
Pictures	86%	4	198	57.08	29.50
Timepieces	50%	1	6	2.14	1.00

Note: Within the categories marked with an asterisk (*), the descriptive statistics pertain to a singular observation, as the remaining documents merely denote the presence of such objects without providing specific quantification.

Source: ASV, *Giudici del Proprio*, Inventari e stime, bb. 6, 13, 17, 23, 34, 41, 48, 57, 63, 64, 72.

than half of households a century later. There was also a large acceleration in the spread of chinaware and clocks, with the presence of both types of items increasing by about 12-fold, and of books, which quadrupled. These dynamics, however, do not seem to alter the existing paradigms of consumption but rather simply endow them with new facets and possibilities.

To conclude this section, one final question arises: Was there a consumer revolution in Venice during the long eighteenth century? On the one hand, it is true that the city witnessed an increase in its consumption levels over this period in terms of both objects consumed and the social diffusion of new consumer practices. On the other hand, it is equally true that this increase occurred progressively, over time, taking a path of incremental growth, without any sudden and radical transformations. Moreover, as suggested above, if there was a revolutionary acceleration of consumption, this must be placed in the Renaissance and not afterwards. For this reason, during the long eighteenth century, Venetian consumer practices seem to have been characterized by consumer evolution rather than a consumer revolution.

V | FLOWS OF EXPENDITURE

In this section, we continue our analysis by looking at household budgets. Thanks to these documents, it is possible to obtain information on the consumption of durable goods and also the demand for services, entertainment, social activities, leisure, and all intangible goods more

**TABLE 7** Frequency of possession of selected goods in Venetian probate inventories per quintile of wealth

Item	Time period	Quintile of wealth (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
Tables	1651–1700	95	90	95	90	100
	1701–50	84	95	89	89	100
	1751–97	82	86	95	95	100
Pots and pans	1651–1700	80	95	89	85	100
	1701–50	100	100	100	100	100
	1751–97	91	86	90	95	90
Mirrors	1651–1700	55	60	68	75	58
	1701–50	68	79	68	89	100
	1751–97	77	76	90	100	95
Gold and silver	1651–1700	25	50	63	75	95
	1701–50	26	58	42	84	89
	1751–97	32	52	76	76	76
Pictures	1651–1700	100	90	95	95	95
	1701–50	100	89	84	95	100
	1751–97	95	95	95	100	90
China and majolica	1651–1700	0	0	5	0	0
	1701–50	0	5	16	5	6
	1751–97	14	0	10	19	19
Utensils for hot drinks	1651–1700	0	0	0	0	0
	1701–50	11	0	16	21	33
	1751–97	27	48	57	71	76
Timepieces	1651–1700	0	5	0	10	0
	1701–50	0	5	0	16	17
	1751–97	18	33	24	43	71

Source: ASV, *Giudici del Proprio*, Inventari e stime, bb. 6, 13, 17, 23, 34, 41, 48, 57, 63, 64, 72.

generally. Moreover, we can trace the actual demand for all goods that, for various reasons, were not included in the probate inventories: food, drink, personal care products, and everyday objects of little monetary value that were usually ignored by notaries and public estimators. In this way, it is possible to analyse the evolution of consumption in a more complete and in-depth manner, considering virtually every type of consumption.

The analysis of household budgets was conducted using our in-house classification system, HiCHEP, which we employed to compare the second half of the seventeenth century with the second half of the eighteenth century. We began by identifying the three divisions in which a higher proportion of wealth was invested for the two periods under consideration. As shown in table 8, in the seventeenth century, these divisions were clothing and footwear (division 3), social protection and support services (division 13), and financial and legal services (division 14); in the eighteenth century, they were food and non-alcoholic beverages (division 1) and, again, the services in divisions 13 and 14. In the first period, food expenditure also ranked highly, and the figures for division 4, which comprised all housing costs, were always significant over the long eighteenth

**TABLE 8** Percentage of expenditures per division during the entire period of the trust

Division	1651–1700 <i>n</i> = 14	1751–97 <i>n</i> = 21
1 – Food and non-alcoholic beverages	4.25%	8.78%
2 – Alcoholic beverages and tobacco	0.76%	0.40%
3 – Clothing and footwear	8.23%	3.84%
4 – Housing, maintenance of the dwelling, livestock, and fuels	3.86%	6.70%
5 – Furnishings, household equipment, and services	2.55%	1.41%
6 – Health	1.09%	0.71%
7 – Transport	1.01%	0.73%
8 – Communication	0.09%	0.08%
9 – Recreation and culture	0.08%	0.34%
10 – Education	1.42%	1.56%
11 – Catering and accommodation services	0.82%	0.24%
12 – Personal care and effects, and miscellaneous services	2.91%	1.96%
13 – Social protection and support services	13.54%	24.49%
14 – Financial and legal services	12.75%	20.17%
15 – Taxes and fees	3.33%	5.73%
16 – Unidentifiable expenses	18.94%	7.90%

Note: Median values.

Source: ASV, *Giudici di Petizion*, Rendimenti di conto, bb. 983, 984, 985, 986, 1001, 1002, 1003, 1004, 1005, 1006, 1007, 1008, 1009, 1010, 1011, 1012.

century. Overall, these results align with what we know about the basic structure of early modern consumption, in which garments, dwellings, and food represented core family disbursements.

Although food expenditure ranked highly, the proportions appear surprisingly low, as they were under 10 per cent in both periods. For reference, in the same period, a Veronese notary invested at least 50 per cent of his income in staples, so we can reasonably affirm that these percentages seem suspicious.⁵⁷ The reason is not to be found in the exceptional wealth of Venetian families⁵⁸ but rather in the characteristics of trusts as a legal institution and the nature of the sources. First, there is the possibility that food expenditure was not counted, simply because of a directive by the trustee. In most cases, guardians were close relatives of the beneficiaries – for example mothers, sisters, brothers, children, aunts, or uncles. While it is true that the *Petizion* judiciary created a rigid system of rules and controls to prevent trustees from stealing the patrimony of their beneficiaries,⁵⁹ it is also true that the intentions of the trust managers were not always bad. It could be that the guardians decided not to count the expenses for general subsistence due to the good relationship they had with their relatives. Second, the documents in our possession are not always detailed, and much information has been provided only at the aggregate level, often combining very different items under a single label. Food and beverage expenses and, occasionally, clothing expenditure were often grouped under generic labels such as ‘for the pupil’s livelihood’, ‘for their

⁵⁷ Tagliaferri, *Consumi e tenore di vita*.

⁵⁸ Let us recall that, per Engels law, spending on food decreases as income increases. Percentages below 10 per cent, as those found here, would therefore imply some extremely high (and implausible) levels of wealth.

⁵⁹ Ferro, *Dizionario del diritto comune*, ad vocem *Commissaria*.



needs', or 'for their expenses'. Such entries were catalogued into social protection and support services (division 13), which included significantly high values.

We now turn to spending trends in the long term. Did resource allocation change over time? Overall, the portion of income invested in the core maintenance of pupils did not change greatly. Summing up divisions 1–3, 13, and 16 (unidentifiable expenses),⁶⁰ we obtained very similar values of around 44 per cent of the total. However, there was not complete qualitative immobility in the basic elements of Venetian consumer architecture. In the previous section, we could see how, for instance, in the long eighteenth century, new products were successfully introduced into Venetian homes. Considering the expenditure entries of the household budgets for clothing (division 3), we can quickly see that, even here, the situation changed significantly, both for fabrics and clothing materials and for garments. In the seventeenth century, the greatest expenses were linen, hemp, and wool products, while in the eighteenth century, silk absorbs the largest portion of family wealth.

Regarding the remaining divisions, we saw a fourfold increase in spending on cultural and recreational goods and services. The latter reflects the vibrancy of the Venetian cultural scene between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We can take as an example the world of theatre and entertainment. Theatre was popular in Venice for a long time and attracted much revenue, a situation that came to an end only after the depopulation of the city during the Napoleonic age.⁶¹ The Venetian theatre season, which attracted large audiences, was among the longest in Europe and was still capable of exerting considerable influence on the fashion and trends of the time, as well as being responsible for the fortune or misfortune of authors, actors, and theatre companies. In addition to numerous theatres, the Venetian entertainment scene was dotted with a multitude of dance and concert halls. In the eighteenth century, the city also saw an increase in *casini dei nobili* – places in which members of the patriciate would meet and socialize, for example, for dining, dancing, reading, and, above all, gambling. From the middle of the century, popular casinos (*ridotti*) also emerged. Here, despite their reduced means, members of the bourgeoisie and the middle class engaged in a variety of leisure activities.⁶² To return to our analysis, the increase in housing expenditure (division 4) was also particularly significant, accounting for almost 4 per cent of total expenses in the seventeenth century and increasing at the end of the eighteenth century to 6.7 per cent. It is curious to note that, at the same time, there were reductions in expenses for furnishings and household appliances (division 5), as well as personal care and effects (division 12). This trend seems to confirm the hypothesis of a decline in the price of many manufactured goods. The proliferation of objects inside Venetian homes and the concomitant contraction of the portion of wealth spent to purchase them seems to indicate that many everyday objects became increasingly more affordable during the eighteenth century.

Thus far, we have analysed the budgets at the aggregate level to appreciate broader changes in resource allocation. Isolating data for noble families from those for non-noble families enabled us to make additional observations. As far as noble families are concerned, we can see how, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they invested more and more in real estate. As we can see in table 9, expenses in divisions 4 (housing, dwelling maintenance, livestock, and fuels) and 5 (furnishings, household equipment, and services) saw a twofold increase. This should be linked to the increase for division 14 (financial and legal services), where we find the interest paid on loans

⁶⁰ We add this division to the count because a large part of the expenses recorded belong, albeit not uniquely, to one of the categories mentioned above.

⁶¹ Mancini, *I teatri di Venezia*.

⁶² Fincardi, 'I luoghi delle relazioni sociali', pp. 490–5.

**TABLE 9** Percentage of expenditures per division during the entire period of the trust: noble households

Division	1651–1700 <i>n</i> = 4	1751–97 <i>n</i> = 8
1 – Food and non-alcoholic beverages	2.66%	2.65%
2 – Alcoholic beverages and tobacco	0.51%	0.68%
3 – Clothing and footwear	4.34%	1.89%
4 – Housing, maintenance of the dwelling, livestock, and fuels	2.53%	6.13%
5 – Furnishings, household equipment, and services	1.47%	2.77%
6 – Health	2.61%	1.51%
7 – Transport	0.57%	0.55%
8 – Communication	–	0.07%
9 – Recreation and culture	0.08%	1.31%
10 – Education	0.03%	0.18%
11 – Catering and accommodation services	–	0.75%
12 – Personal care and effects, and miscellaneous services	3.15%	0.58%
13 – Social protection and support services	33.67%	27.96%
14 – Financial and legal services	4.16%	17.70%
15 – Taxes and fees	3.56%	7.01%
16 – Unidentifiable expenses	24.55%	5.63%

Notes: Median values.

Source: ASV, *Giudici di Petizion*, Rendimenti di conto, bb. 983, 984, 985, 986, 1001, 1002, 1003, 1004, 1005, 1006, 1007, 1008, 1009, 1010, 1011, 1012.

taken for the purpose of carrying out work on existing properties or purchasing new ones. This trend quantitatively confirms what has been observed in the literature on the Venetian patriciate in the late early modern period. The patrician class, already in severe demographic crisis after the plagues of 1575 and 1630, suffered heavily from the economic setbacks of the Cretan (1645–1669) and Morean Wars (1684–1699). The latter had caused the momentary but fatal paralysis of international trade, with a severe effect on the entire economy of Venice. Many investors – nobles, first and foremost – thus diverted their investments from trade to land ownership. The rush for land, fuelled by the sweeping process of land alienation that the same Venetian state began as a way to raise funds,⁶³ was so intense that, by the middle of the eighteenth century, Venetian patricians came to own more than one-third of the land in the provinces of Veneto.⁶⁴ Although the old narratives insisted on the inadequacy of Venetian patricians as landowners, more recent historiography has shown how the nobles of the lagoon were, instead, careful and competent managers.⁶⁵ Moreover, the nobility participated in Venice's increasingly vibrant worldly life, as confirmed by the significant investments in recreation and culture visible in division 9.⁶⁶ Reading the entries for expenditure in the budgets, we can see how strongly attractive the theatre was to the city's noble families. The expenses for renting a box for the season were indeed numerous, and very rarely were they limited to a single theatre. We often find disbursements for renting seats in two or more

⁶³ Beltrami, *La penetrazione economica*; Bianco, *Le terre del Friuli*; Pitteri, 'Contadini e proprietari'.

⁶⁴ Scarabello, 'Il Settecento', pp. 608–9.

⁶⁵ Georgelin, *Venise au siècle des Lumières*; Gullino, *Un patriziato per cinque secoli*.

⁶⁶ Damerini, 'La vita felice'.



TABLE 10 Percentage of expenditures per division during the entire period of the trust: non-noble households

Division	1651–1700 <i>n</i> = 10	1751–97 <i>n</i> = 13
1 – Food and non-alcoholic beverages	28.99%	8.80%
2 – Alcoholic beverages and tobacco	1.78%	0.01%
3 – Clothing and footwear	10.45%	3.90%
4 – Housing, maintenance of the dwelling, livestock, and fuels	6.13%	6.99%
5 – Furnishings, household equipment, and services	4.18%	1.04%
6 – Health	0.55%	0.67%
7 – Transport	1.44%	0.91%
8 – Communication	0.09%	0.09%
9 – Recreation and culture	0.10%	0.05%
10 – Education	1.43%	2.99%
11 – Catering and accommodation services	0.82%	0.18%
12 – Personal care and effects, and miscellaneous services	1.93%	2.01%
13 – Social protection and support services	2.61%	22.74%
14 – Financial and legal services	14.68%	20.17%
15 – Taxes and fees	3.33%	3.94%
16 – Unidentifiable expenses	12.37%	8.65%

Notes: Median values.

Source: ASV, *Giudici di Petizion*, Rendimenti di conto, bb. 983, 984, 985, 986, 1001, 1002, 1003, 1004, 1005, 1006, 1007, 1008, 1009, 1010, 1011, 1012.

halls. To these, we must add expenses, at least for the wealthiest families, related to holidaying on the mainland. In the summer, social life left the city and moved to country villas, the expenses for which, in terms of rearrangement and embellishment, are included in the above-mentioned categories. Looking at the non-nobles (table 10), a two-fold increase can be seen in the figures for education expenditure (division 10). This mirrors the Venetian government's massive investment in the education system in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The reform of elementary education, enacted at this very time, involved the establishment of schools in every neighbourhood (*sestriere*) of the city. Their success was such that, less than 10 years later, around 1787, there were already over 650 pupils, most of them from the merchant and artisan families represented in our sample.⁶⁷

Data provided by household budgets confirm what we know based on post-mortem inventories. Indeed, we were able to appreciate a rich and dynamic consumer society that evolved over time and was able to take advantage of what the abundant Venetian market offered in terms of both material and cultural goods. Even in the case of household budgets, however, we see how, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the architecture of Venetian consumption did not undergo a radical change. Over time, the allocation of household resources always remained quite similar, and the changes were, though significant, mostly qualitative and internal to the various categories. Unfortunately, we do not possess a touchstone for comparison with the earlier period. However, we can speculate that, similar to what we have seen through post-mortem

⁶⁷ Panciera, *La Repubblica di Venezia*, pp. 131–2.



inventories, a major reshaping of the structure of consumer baskets occurred during the Renaissance and that the long eighteenth century represents a continuation of the major changes that took place previously.

Finally, we can answer a question that was asked at the beginning of this paper: Did Italy experience a consumer revolution? Based on what we have seen regarding the Venetian case, in terms of both probate inventories and household budgets, we can affirm that there was no clear acceleration of the dynamics of consumption during the long eighteenth century, as occurred elsewhere in Europe. Rather, Italian consumption between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seems to have evolved steadily along a course already traced during the last phase of the Renaissance. Precisely for this reason, we believe it is preferable to speak of consumer evolution rather than a consumer revolution.

VI | CONCLUSIONS

How did consumption practices evolve in Italy during the long eighteenth century? We began this article by asking this question and observing that, given the current state of research, it was not an easy one to answer. Based on an analysis of 299 post-mortem inventories and accounts of 35 households between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we can now provide some answers. First, we were able to see how the inhabitants of the city of Venice enjoyed a rich and varied material culture. The reading of the post-mortem inventories has indeed shown how Venetian families were surrounded by a multitude of objects of the most varied types, as with the inhabitants of some of the most dynamic urban economies of north-western Europe. Furthermore, we saw how, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the number of objects in the homes of Venetian families continued to grow and that this increase in the stock of material wealth was accompanied by the adoption of new practices and fashions by households from diverse income and social segments. However, our analyses also revealed that these changes were not the result of a sudden and novel acceleration. Rather, the material enrichment of the long eighteenth century seems to have continued on the path it began to travel down during the Renaissance, where it is possible to detect a marked acceleration in Venetian consumption rhythms. Household budgets confirmed what we learned from the inventories. The long eighteenth century was indeed a period when new consumption practices made their way into the society of the city of Saint Mark, which seems to have been particularly open and receptive. However, these changes did not lead to an upheaval in the structure of the Venetian architecture of consumption, which remained fairly consistent between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

These observations help us answer the other questions we posed at the beginning of the essay: What was the effect of the end of the economic peak on consumption and material culture? Was Italy able to continue on the path of material enrichment that it had started down during the Renaissance, or did its decline within the European economic arena lead to the decline of its consumer world? Based on the above, we can say that consumption trends do not seem to have been significantly influenced by the downward trend followed by the Italian economy during the early modern period. A decisive change of pace for Venetian material culture does indeed seem to have taken place in the Renaissance and, thus, during a phase of economic expansion. However, throughout the long eighteenth century, a period in which many parts of Italy, including Venice, experienced a profound restructuring of their economies, consumption patterns underwent further incremental growth and refinement. The dynamism that developed during the Renaissance seems to continue to reverberate throughout the early modern period with regard to material



culture, which followed a completely autonomous path when viewed in the context of major macroeconomic indicators. This raises an interesting point regarding how we should view the Little Divergence. It is undeniable that, from the political, diplomatic, and macroeconomic points of view, Italy seemed to be increasingly distant from the North Atlantic European states. However, the divergence is almost invisible if we look at material culture. The levels of material well-being throughout the final phase of the early modern period are highly comparable to those found in the core economies of the continent. Moreover, from a cultural point of view, Italian societies seemed to be affected by the same consumerist ferments that have been identified in the richer and more dynamic urban economies of Europe.

In light of what we have seen so far, we can say that the Venetian case study offers an interesting perspective on the role played by consumption in economic growth. Indeed, if we can identify a substantial homogeneity in the dynamics of consumption and material culture in regions that have experienced differing economic development, perhaps claims that consumption was a variable in the development process should be profoundly re-evaluated. More and more, the development of sophisticated consumer behaviour proves to be a necessary but insufficient condition for economic and industrial development. It has been noted that contemporary societies differ more in terms of how wealth is consumed when compared with how it is produced.⁶⁸ This is certainly true, but it is becoming increasingly evident that consumption plays a minor role in the long genesis of that differentiation.

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⁶⁸ Viola, *L'Europa moderna*, p. 337.



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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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