
The research for this book began with a chance archival discovery in the early 1960s. Ilardi, a diplomatic historian, came across an order dated from between 1462 and 1466 and placed by the duke of Milan for three hundred pairs of spectacles to eyeglass makers in Florence. Ilardi has produced the definitive history of spectacles – aided in part by economic historians and others who over the decades sent him relevant records discovered in Florentine, English, and other European archives.

Although magnifying lenses of one sort or another had been available since antiquity, spectacles – that is, two lenses surrounded by a frame made of leather, bone, or metal, attached with a nose bridge, that were worn on the face – were invented in Pisa sometime between 1280 and 1287. Ilardi marshals the evidence for this and numerous other facts concerning the manufacture and diffusion of eyeglasses, including much evidence in miniatures and wall paintings and the archaeological evidence of actual eyeglasses or pieces thereof discovered during excavations.

At a time when many historians of technology and of material culture conceive their work contextually or in terms of cultural meaning, this study is resolutely focused on the empirical evidence for spectacles as it has been found for various times and places. Partly as a result, the study is often occupied with “firsts”: the first images of spectacles in Italy (1351-2, in frescoes in the chapter house of the monastery of San Niccolò in Treviso by Tomaso Barisini de Modena); the first use of satire and deceit in connection to wearing spectacles (Franco Sacchetti, ca. 1332-1400); the first mention of goldsmiths as spectacle makers (1455); the first record of sunglasses (1459); and the first document containing reference to glass imported to England specifically for spectacle makers (1428-31), to name just a few. Its methodology is to marshal subsequent evidence concerning the issue in question, a task usually accomplished with precision and astute analysis of the veracity of textual and other kinds of evidence.

Using a variety of sources, including customs records, inventories, and correspondence in Rome, Mantua, England, and elsewhere, Ilardi firmly establishes that Florence was the center of eyeglass production in the fifteenth century and that it was considered the place to buy the highest-quality eyeglasses. Considering the preponderance of Venetian glassmaking during the same period, this conclusion may seem surprising, but it is well supported by evidence.

Exploring commercial records, Ilardi notes massive exports of spectacles, such as the twenty-four thousand of unknown origin sent from Venice to the Levant. He exploits primarily customs records and archaeological finds to assess evidence for spectacle importation and production in the Levant, Portugal, England, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain, Croatia, and Hungary. The evidence that exists often suggests significant spectacle production before the first documentary evidence.

Spectacles were useful and inexpensive, far more important to individuals than to the international economy. As a result they had low importance in the overall picture. Ilardi also investigates in detail the fabrication of spectacles, including the various kinds of rims. He provides a summary of the development of medieval and late-medieval optic thought and of artist's perspective. The concern of Florentine artists for perspectival issues and the well-developed glass industry provided the essential context for Florentine dominance in spectacle making in the fifteenth century.
In the final chapter, “From Terrestrial to Celestial Vision,” Ilardi shows that spectacle manufacture and experimentation were part of the essential background for the development of telescopes and microscopes. He summarizes medieval and postmedieval optical thought throughout, emphasizing the separate paths of spectacle making and optics until the work of Kepler in the early seventeenth century. His emphasis on a progression toward who got it right from the modern point of view (Kepler) may find a more receptive audience among modern optical practitioners and scientists, who are explicitly part of the prospective readership of this study, than among some practicing historians of science.

Ilardi begins his book by citing a poll that nominated eyeglasses the most important invention of the past two thousand years, effectively (the nominator of this invention stated) doubling the work life of any reader or person who does fine work. Only later in the book does the reader learn that the ancients possessed various magnifying instruments (although not spectacles) and thus come to realize that the initial statement of the book (admittedly a citation and not made by Ilardi himself) is simply not true.

More seriously, and also relevant to the opening comment, the book neglects the history of reading, a flourishing area of scholarship and surely one relevant to the history of eyeglasses. For example, Pliny through his life until his death at the age of fifty-six in 79 C.E. These habits included being read to almost continuously while he pursued other activities. Although he seems to have often taken notes himself, he also dictated to others. As scholarship of the past twenty years has shown, habits of reading and writing changed radically over the centuries. The habit of solitary, silent reading that developed in the late-medieval and early modern period surely made spectacles more essential to the aging reader than they had been previously.

These critiques are in no way meant to detract from the great achievement of this study. Ilardi has done more than expand our knowledge of a particular area of history. Over the decades during which he carried out his investigation and with the warmly appreciated help of scholars in other archives, most importantly the Florentine, he has created a substantial history of eyeglasses that had not existed before.

Undoubtedly other scholars will continue not only to discover other archival documents, as he hopes, but also to use his work to broaden an understanding of the historical practices of reading and writing (and the materials that accompanied them) and an understanding of the changing place of vision in European culture, including the symbolic role of spectacles as evidenced in both pictorial and textual forms.

--Pamela O. Long, Washington D.C.