

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods

Review Number:

357

Publish date:

Monday, 1 September, 2003

Editor:

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ISBN:

333963822X

Date of Publication:

2002

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

272pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

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Luxury in the Eighteenth Century is a welcome collection of essays on a very important topic. Since the 1982 appearance of the path-breaking *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, studies of consumption in eighteenth-century Western Europe have proliferated to confirm the thesis that the century experienced a dramatic surge in the production and consumption of goods.⁽¹⁾ This new, handsomely-edited volume explores two significant aspects of that expansion, namely the increased circulation of luxury goods and the great literary debates it provoked. Situating itself at the intersection of economics and culture, the book aims not only to follow the fabrication and transmission of various commodities but also to decipher their meaning for the age. To achieve this worthy goal, Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger have assembled an impressively heterogeneous group of essayists, including six scholars of history, five of English, two of art and design, one of American studies, and a museum curator. As the editors proclaim in the book's opening sentence, 'This volume provides the first interdisciplinary treatment of the history of luxury.' (p. 1)

The first section of the book, 'Debates', examines the sprawling literary controversy over luxury in the eighteenth century. The opening chapter, written by the volume's editors, provides an impressionistic overview of 'the rise and fall of the luxury debates.' That the authors chose to employ the term 'debates' in

the plural is revealing. Rather than tracking the evolution of a single, two-sided debate, Berg and Eger present a variety of sources and themes that constituted British and French engagement with the problem of luxury. Thus, we are introduced to the texts of commercial writers, novelists, social satirists, and political economists, and are invited to consider such themes as the relationship between luxury and commerce, the categorization of luxury goods, consumer taste and aesthetics, and changes in economic thought. While this kaleidoscopic approach renders any overarching argument difficult to discern, it nonetheless offers tantalizing insights into the literature on luxury, insights that will undoubtedly stimulate further research on the vortex of ideas, attitudes, and representations that comprise the luxury debates of the eighteenth century.

The other chapters in Part I focus on particular pieces of the luxury debate, adding nuance to a debate that is often depicted in stark or simplistic terms. In the second chapter ('Mandeville, Rousseau and the Political Economy of Fantasy'), Edward Hundert picks up where Adam Smith's review of Rousseau's second discourse left off. Hundert expertly summarizes Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, the scandalous yet foundational text that dared defend luxury as essential to national opulence and power, and suggests how Mandeville informed Rousseau's understanding of the modern world. Both writers agreed that luxury went hand in hand with commercial growth, politeness, and vanity, but, whereas Mandeville emphasized the material benefits of modern commercial civilization, Rousseau lamented the loss of a natural and more innocent human self. Hundert's analysis is razor-sharp and wholly convincing, but his parting comment that Mandeville ended up carrying the day, in the eighteenth as well as the twentieth century, may have missed the mark. Uncomfortable with both Mandeville's cynicism and Rousseau's backward-looking morality, many eighteenth-century writers attempted to find a middle way between the two. As for today's consumer culture, the packaging of luxury SUVs as rugged vehicles that will take us off-road to unspoiled nature speaks volumes.

In Chapter Three ('Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age in Theory and Practice'), Jan de Vries leads the reader back in time to the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century, where, he argues, a precocious consumer culture developed. De Vries associates that culture with what he calls 'New Luxury', a sociable and inclusive urban form of luxury that he contrasts with 'Old Luxury', a type of consumption that thrived at court and served mainly to demarcate social status. Arguing against historian Simon Schama, who underscored Dutch Calvinist discomfort with luxury consumption, de Vries points out that the Dutch seemed rather comfortable with 'new' luxury, so comfortable in fact that opposition to luxury was never weighty enough to provoke thorough-going debates such as those that erupted in eighteenth-century Britain and France. All in all, this is a very useful chapter, not only because it prompts us to remember the Dutch Republic as we search for the origins of modern consumer society, but more importantly because its insightful distinction between 'new' and 'old' luxury is widely applicable to eighteenth-century western Europe.

In the final chapter of part I ('Aestheticising the Critique of Luxury: Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*'), Michael McKeon turns our attention to eighteenth-century British literature to challenge the contention, advanced by John Sekora, that Tobias Smollett's 1771 novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* constitutes 'the most successful conservative attack upon luxury' of the era. (p. 57) McKeon seeks to overturn that interpretation by suggesting that the novel offers a highly ambiguous assessment of luxury. Conceding that, on the surface, the novel reiterates traditional critiques of luxury, McKeon cleverly shows how these critiques are challenged by the form and narrative of the book itself. In the end, the novel's multiple protagonists both exemplify and challenge traditional tropes of pastoral opposition - country and city, nature and artifice, need and want. Indeed, in terms of the luxury debate, neither the pro-luxury thrust of Mandeville nor the anti-luxury parry of Rousseau seems wholly to pertain.

Part II, 'Delectable Goods', moves beyond literary representations to take a closer look at the circulation and cultural meaning of specific luxury goods. For Dena Goodman ('Furnishing Discourses: Readings of a Writing Desk in Eighteenth-Century France'), this does not mean leaving intellectual history behind. On the contrary, she prefaces her analysis of writing desks with a discussion of the luxury debate, arguing that, by the 1770s, the moralizing discourse on luxury confronted a competing discourse on commerce that 'effectively changed the subject by focusing on questions of productivity, utility, taste, comfort, industry, improvement and innovation.' (p. 76). Goodman's distinction between the rhetoric of luxury and that of

commerce, which echoes de Vries' distinction between 'old' and 'new' luxury, is part of recent trend to change the image of pre-revolutionary France from a retrograde and sclerotic kingdom to a commercially vibrant society. Goodman elegantly formulates this reinterpretation by highlighting the ambiguous significance of the writing desk, a piece of furniture that could be found in both high-end and middling markets. While we may almost instinctively see such a precious object as belonging to the world of courtly luxury and aristocratic frivolity, Goodman demonstrates that it belonged as well to a vigorous world of wealth, commerce, and utility. Located at the intersection of these two worlds, writing desks and the women who used them suggest the social and cultural complexities of eighteenth-century luxury consumption.

While the writing desk represents the high and middling luxury market, the truly popular side of luxury is revealed in essays by Laurence Fontaine and John Styles. Fontaine ('The Circulation of Luxury Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris: Social Redistribution and an Alternative Currency') looks at the spread of luxury goods in eighteenth-century Paris, but casts his gaze beyond the nicely appointed shops that dotted fashionable streets to focus on the lesser known distribution circuits of itinerant peddlers, second-hand dealers, public auctions, and pawnshops. Scouring the underbelly of the luxury market, he finds that, far from being passed over by the Parisian commercial boom, peddlers thrived by serving as intermediaries between manufacturers and shopkeepers. Peddlers criss-crossed the city, selling snuff boxes, books, watches, and jewellery of widely varying prices. Such goods were valuable, Fontaine shrewdly observes, not only because they marked status and provided pleasure but also because they could easily be turned into cash. Their potential cash value helps to explain why cash-strapped Parisian commoners were drawn to the luxury market in such great numbers during the eighteenth century.

Like Fontaine, John Styles ('Custom or Consumption? Plebeian Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England') looks at the world of luxury from below. But Styles sets out to intervene in a specific historiographical debate over the social limits of English consumer society: pessimists, who do not wish to cheer the 'progress' of the eighteenth century, argue that the new consumer society was an exclusive affair; optimists argue, on the basis of anecdotal evidence, that new forms of consumption reached far down the social order. Styles injects some hard evidence into this debate by scrutinizing an account book that once belonged to a plebeian family, the Lathams of Scarisbrick, England. The Latham account book reveals the extent to which family consumption depended on individual and collective life cycles. Although the family barely scraped by in its early years, it purchased a number of petty luxuries, from gowns to personal accessories (hats and handkerchiefs), when the Latham daughters reached their mid-teens and began to earn money from spinning cotton. Although Styles concedes that such petty luxuries did not match the finery of the local gentry, he sides with the optimists by insisting that the Latham family's sartorial acquisitions were still very much a part of the expanding world of eighteenth-century fashion. It is difficult to know how the Lathams and other commoners conceived of their stylish clothing, but Styles offers some thoughtful possibilities: a means of sexual attraction, a source of self-regarding pleasure, or a professional investment. Whatever its purpose, Styles insists that plebeian consumption of petty luxuries did not erode popular custom.

Reconstructing how consumers imagined their own acts of consumption is a daunting challenge, as both Goodman and Styles suggest. One fruitful way to approach the meaning of luxury goods, however, is through their aesthetics, a neglected dimension of consumption that the volume explores in Part III, 'Beauty, Taste and Sensibility'. The section begins with an interpretation of Hogarth ('From the Moral Mound to the Material Maze: Hogarth's Analysis of Beauty'), by Annie Richardson, a historian of art and design. Richardson analyzes Hogarth's serpentine lines, explaining how the engraver's curves derived from a particular understanding of the human body. But, most originally, she links Hogarth's definitions of beauty and pleasure to the pro-luxury stance of such writers as Mandeville. According to Richardson, the eighteenth-century apology for luxury, which we normally associate with Enlightenment economics and social commentary, was present in aesthetic theory as well, as Hogarth and 'modernizers' in the luxury debate shared a common de-moralized, sense-based, materialistic view of human desire. Although historians are often reluctant to accept connections between such seemingly distant fields as art and political economy, they should take Richardson's argument and methodology seriously. To interpret the material world of the eighteenth century, the historian must know how contemporaries interpreted that world themselves.

John Crowley's chapter on landscape architecture ('From Luxury to Comfort and Back Again: Landscape Architecture and the Cottage in Britain and America') moves from aesthetic theory to practice. Through the example of the cottage, Crowley argues that the concept of comfort was an invention of eighteenth-century Britain. Once identified exclusively with rural poverty, the cottage was adopted as an architectural design which, while still exuding rustic simplicity, reflected genteel desires for modern convenience, cleanliness, privacy, and functionality. Later, in the 1790s, cottages were also construed as exhibiting refined elegance. Although scholars emphasize how eighteenth-century fashions and tastes spread down the social hierarchy, the evolving aesthetic of the cottage beautifully illustrates how taste-makers also revamped popular forms for middling and elite consumers. This multi-directional process is often ignored in studies that rely on simplistic notions of social emulation.

In the last twenty years, scholars of eighteenth-century consumption have tried to compensate for generations of supply-oriented economic research by paying more attention to demand. Yet properly conducted studies of production can reveal a great deal about the meaning of luxury goods, as Jenny Uglow's chapter ('Vase Mania') demonstrates. Uglow traces the steps of two enterprising manufacturers, Josiah Wedgwood and Matthew Boulton, who sensed the rising taste for things classical, forged a partnership, and capitalized on the trend by producing copies of ancient vases. What is most striking in this account is the free-wheeling improvisational style of the manufacturers. After they agreed on a collaborative partnership in which Boulton would set Wedgwood's vases in metal, the two men met in London, with their wives in tow, to go hunting for model vases. One gets the sense from Sarah Wedgwood that her husband, 'upon the ramble continually,' thoroughly enjoyed these inspiration-seeking jaunts (although he only allowed his wife to spend half as much on ribbons and lace as he spent on vases). The two manufacturers were constantly on the prowl for new vase designs, cheaper methods of production, and the support of high-profile patrons. As Goodman's innovative furniture makers also attest, it seems that for every group of fanciful eighteenth-century consumers, there was an imaginative producer who was constantly refashioning his products to profit from and simultaneously reshape consumer tastes.

In Sarah Wedgwood's desire for ribbon and lace, the Latham daughters' taste for gowns, and the Parisienne's attachment to her writing desk, the volume has already provided glimpses into women's role in the rise of eighteenth-century luxury consumption. Part IV, 'The Female Vice?' directly addresses the fraught relationship between women and luxury. Ros Ballaster follows a common literary personification of luxury -- luxury as Oriental woman - to see if it underwent a re-evaluation in the eighteenth century. Although the Oriental woman was often depicted as a source of violent and excessive passions, Ballaster finds that she was also portrayed in a more positive light, as capably curtailing masculine excess and securing her own political status. If the former, negative representation is consistent with an older critique in which luxury signaled decadence, the latter representation, Ballaster argues, reflects newer apologies for luxury in which luxury was recast as a productive source of power.

Vivien Jones also emphasizes ambiguities in fictional representations of women, focusing on the figure of the prostitute as a sign of luxury and excess. On the one hand, for conservative moralists, the prostitute represented the supreme feminine villain, a seductress who tempted men away from productive labor and turned them into prodigals. But as the English prostitute memoir transformed the figure of Lady Luxury into the whore of commerce, the figure of the prostitute began to exhibit certain Mandevillian ironies. 'Like commerce itself,' Jones writes, the prostitute's 'resourceful adaptability refuses the containment of a simple moral narrative.'(p. 187) There now seemed something admirable in her seemingly endless capacity to generate trade. Goodman's observation of a conceptual shift from luxury to commerce seems relevant here, as the literary trickster-whore benefited from positive associations with commerce.

The final essay on women, by Elizabeth Eger, considers the 'bluestocking philosophy' of Elizabeth Montagu. Writer, salonnière, philanthropist, and patron of literature and the arts, Montagu was the epitome of female taste and intellect in her own lifetime. She also managed Newcastle coalmines, oversaw a Berkshire country estate, and built a luxurious palace in Portman Square. With such prodigious wealth, luxury, and autonomy, Montagu could have made an easy target for moralist critics, but, as Eger makes clear, she self-consciously represented herself as a virtuous and sociable woman of taste. By characterizing her extraordinary house as 'a Temple of virtue and friendship' and 'a palace of chaste elegance,' (quoted on p. 197) and by placing social intercourse, intellectual exchange, and good taste above luxurious display, Montagu bestowed a moral sanctity upon the delightful material world she created. Putting luxury in the service of higher Enlightenment ideals made this 'mistress of conspicuous consumption' seemingly immune to the corruption of luxury.(p. 202)

The fifth and final section of the volume, 'Luxury and the Exotic,' reflects an increasingly forceful trend in historical scholarship to place the eighteenth-century European economy in a global context. Shelagh Vainker ('Luxuries or Not? Consumption of Silk and Porcelain in Eighteenth-Century China') takes us out of Europe altogether to investigate how two goods with exotic associations in Europe - Chinese silk and porcelain - were consumed in the country that produced them. Although in China porcelain and especially silk had associations of exclusivity, Vainker suggests that by the eighteenth century both products circulated in a broad middle market and conferred little social status on those who possessed them. It would be interesting to contrast Chinese consumption of these goods with European (mis)conceptions of the place of silk and porcelain in Chinese culture.

Shifting to the western hemisphere, Rebecca Earle ('Luxury, Clothing and Race in Colonial Spanish America') provides a fascinating analysis of the relationship between sartorial display and race in colonial Spanish America. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, she notes, European travellers in Spanish America were struck by the fact that broad sections of the population, including poor, mixed-race women, wore fine clothing and jewellery. Because Europeans at this time tended to regard clothing as one of several racial characteristics - skin color was understood to be 'in part a function of culture (including dress) and environment' - colonial authorities imposed sumptuary legislation to preserve racial as well as social distinctions.(p. 222) In the nineteenth century, however, when Spanish colonialism was overthrown and racial theory was 'biologised', dress no longer functioned as a racial characteristic and sumptuary law was abandoned.(p. 224)

Maxine Berg ('Asian Luxuries and the Making of the European Consumer Revolution') finishes the collection with a gloriously panoramic view of the Asian luxury market and its impact on Europe. Berg explains how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European merchants fuelled the desire at home to consume exotic 'Oriental' goods by intervening in already well-developed Asian luxury and semi-luxury markets. Asian commodities such as Indian textiles and Chinese porcelain, while hardly mass-produced, were nonetheless fabricated and shipped in sufficient volumes to keep prices down so they could be sold as ornamental novelties and decencies to middling class Europeans. If, in Europe, these goods were not necessarily high-end luxuries, they were undoubtedly quality products that, reflecting a mix of Asian forms and European themes, were aesthetically diverse enough to excite European consumers of discerning taste. Indeed, as Berg recounts, Asian goods sold so successfully that European governments attempted to protect

home industries by imposing heavy tariffs and prohibitions. This protectionism, in turn, gave rise to import-substituting industries in Europe that, by both imitating and competing with Asian producers, became integral to the development of European luxury and semi-luxury markets in the age of consumer revolution.

This splendid volume adds much-needed specificity to the grand question of luxury in the eighteenth century. In delving deeper into the literature on luxury and in tracking the circulation of luxury goods with greater precision, the book opens up new and promising lines of research into the culture and economy of an age on the threshold of modernity. In particular, the collection demonstrates the value of studying the interpenetration of high, middling, and even low luxury markets and its social implications; the ambiguous meanings of luxury and of women's relationship to it, at a moment when the Enlightenment was embracing values of commerce, utility, and comfort; and the global context in which goods and the meanings attributed to them were produced, marketed, and appropriated. All historians of the eighteenth century - social, cultural, economic or otherwise - will benefit from reading these thoughtful essays.

Notes

1. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, eds., *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1982).[Back to \(1\)](#)

The editors thank Dr Kwass for his review, and do not wish to comment further.

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