

Women and Material Culture, 1660-1830

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The introduction to this collection of twelve essays promises a taste of the 'sophisticated interdisciplinarity of recent work on material culture', a promise on which the volume certainly delivers. It contains a feast of things: from the coins, trade tokens, receipts, some hops and a baby's cap found in a tie-on pocket in Oxfordshire, to a Sèvres toilet set presented by Louis XVI, the first public statue of a nude male by a woman to be displayed in London, and two sets of waxworks inspired by the novel *Pamela*. And taken as a whole *Women and Material Culture* uses a wide range of evidence: material objects, novels, commercial records, plays, didactic works, paintings, personal correspondence and prints.

The introduction is, however, silent on one of the more curious aspects of the volume - its organisation. The book is divided into sections on: 'Dress and adornment', 'Women and sculpture', 'The material culture of empire', and 'Women and books'. It is not a division which immediately suggests 'total coverage' of the subject, and it would have been interesting to hear the editors' views on the kinds of issues which might arise from these perspectives. That said, the subjects covered are much broader than those headings might indicate, as a brief overview of the chapters will show.

Part I contains two of the strongest pieces in the volume. It opens with Marcia Pointon's rich work on 'Women and their jewels', which manages to tie evidence from 'letters, paintings, other visual material, trade manuals and commercial records, etiquette books and fiction' (p. 12) into a coherent argument about the function of jewellery in a woman's lifecycle and its wider meanings in relation to ornament, authenticity and the purpose of fashionable objects across the late 17th to 19th centuries. It also provides a thought-provoking preview of the book's overall assessment of the nature of materiality, for it is the 'capacity for transformation

... to be malleable and changeable while representing permanence - that situates jewels and jewellery as a powerful agent in the dynamics and in the politics of femininity' (p. 23).

Another remarkable essay, 'Fanny's pockets: cotton, consumption and domestic economy, 1780-1850', by Barabara Burman and Jonathan White, is an object lesson in object lessons. It examines four tie-on pockets of between 30-40cm in length belonging to a woman called Fanny Jarvis in the early 19th century. The analysis focuses on the form and fabric of the tie-on pocket with the aim of 'seeing its changing material properties, social uses and meanings as both expressions of broader change and at the same time as carrying its particular narrative of development' (p. 32). The authors deal with the strength, durability and relative plainness of the form in relation to its meanings and significance, and tie it to educational literature, neoclassical styles of dress, the perfect whiteness of cotton and a remarkable 1849 didactic novel called *Grandmamma's Pockets*. Burman's and White's analysis, which ranges from a set of objects belonging to one woman to the construction of ideologies on a national scale, has the widest trajectory of any chapter in the book.

The section, concentrating on the category of personal objects connected to the female body, ends with the narrower focus of Jillian Heydt-Stevenson's chapter on the role of hats in the development of plot and character in the novel. In the first of several essays on literary representations of materiality, she connects women's relationship to their hats to larger, extra-textual themes through their symbolic functions; to 'the individual dialectical formulations of public and private experience, whether in poetry or politics, and the dynamic attempts to separate and join the two, which remain in flux throughout this age' (p. 66).

The second section concentrates on extraordinary women and Rosalind P. Blakesley introduces two further themes of the volume as she outlines the role of Maria Fedorovna in the decoration of the Imperial palace of Pavlovsk. Blakesley's thorough investigation links consumption to production as she connects work on the embellishment of the building to Fedorovna's activities as an artist (in which role she appears on the cover of the volume). She foregrounds the connection between patronage and national identity, noting Maria's role first as a conduit of European fashion and design and later as a patron of Russian artists and craftsmen. Finally Blakesley addresses the significance of the Grand Duchess's status: 'Neither the modest dilettante content with private success, nor the aspirant professional forced to contend with innumerable obstacles, she compels us to reconsider the tendency to position women artists of her day at one of the two poles' (p. 73).

Marjan Sterckx, picking up on the questions raised in the previous essay, focuses on the first generation of female sculptresses by exploring the ways in which educational conventions and cultural prejudices affected women's contribution to sculpture (indeed the unsuitability of life classes as training grounds for women looms large in this section). Most interestingly, Sterckx explores the gendered language around artistic endeavour, quoting Priscilla Wakefield's comment that, 'If the resistance of marble and hard substances be too powerful for them to subdue, wax and the other materials of a softer nature, will easily yield to their impressions' (p. 92). Sterckx then pursues the relationship between gender and status productively by tracing the connections between women's exclusion from the Royal Academy and their non-canonical work in that appropriately soft material, wax. In so doing she exposes a world of naff wonders, from the works of a Mrs Mills, who displayed her 'present Court of England' in wax for money and would turn her hand to 'deceas'd Friends on reasonable Terms', to Madame Tussaud (p. 94-5).

This section achieves unity through its focus on an intimate group of women and the final piece by Angela Escott, discussing theatrical representations of Anne Damer (identified in Sterckx's piece as the possible creator of the first public statue of a nude male by a woman to be displayed in London), explores the connection between the role of female sculptors off the stage and their representation on it. Escott argues that playwrights questioned conventional constructions of femininity by 'making their characters break taboos in a blunt and unrefined manner' (p. 109).

The third part of the volume considers cultural exchange. Ellen Kennedy Johnson discusses the reception of hand-painted Chinese panoramic landscape wallpapers and their machine-printed European imitations, seeing them as markers of taste instrumental in maintaining class distinctions and as part of a visual culture

which participated 'in a range of nationalist discourses' (p. 119). She traces the movements of the taste in these papers, noting changing prices and the way manufacturers positioned their European versions in the market. She contrasts "'China-mania" and the love of Chinese and chinoiserie designs by the last quarter of the century, with its unfettered designs, in the service of the nationalist project', an aesthetic which was gendered female and relegated to private spaces, with 'European-designed scenic landscape wallpapers', which 'clearly represented male prerogatives, such as appropriation, colonisation and empire-building' (p. 128).

David Porter's contribution picks up on this question of the appropriation of alien forms and their connection to gendered aesthetics. At the centre of his analysis is the translation of aesthetic ideas across cultural boundaries - the way ideas might accompany things. In a bold argument he contrasts the Chinese 'scholar's stone', a contorted garden rock, with its cultural other: the statuesque figure which was equally prominent in the paintings and gardens of European tradition. Pondering women's use of china decorated with such rocks, he then argues that in the process of gossip around the taking of tea, women may indeed 'have internalised something of the imaginative sensibility implicit in Chinese art', as 'both the narrative structure and social function of gossip ... suggest much closer affinities with Chinese rocks than with classical statuary'. 'Pleasure', he concludes, 'encouraged the cultivation of habits of perception and response that transposed elements of a Chinese value system into English social practice' (p. 145).

The final piece in the section, although still about 'thinking with cultural difference', has a totally different feel. Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace raises the question of women's agency in a world of goods, analysing Hannah More's bizarre comparison between women's relationship with fashion and the slave trade in her 1805 pamphlet 'Hints towards forming a Bill for the Abolition of the White Slave Trade, in the Cities of London and Westminster' (p. 148). Kowaleski Wallace argues that, 'Even as she promotes the idea of a "deep" female subject, one remarkable for her spirituality and her resistance to material culture, she also denies women the agency that potentially comes from meaningful interaction with a world of goods' (p.148).

The final essays in the volume pick up this question of women's agency in their focus on women and books. Jennie Batchelor examines Richardson's *Pamela* in the context of its 'spin-offs, parodies, sequels, comedies and operas ... engravings and paintings, as well as two sets of waxworks, a set of playing cards, a tea service and a *Pamela* fan, each of which invented the novel anew.' (p. 165) This piece, like several of those before it, is alive to the relationship between different marketplaces in the period (in this case those of fashion and literature). Batchelor uses this association to argue the importance of maintaining the connections between literature and the cultural artefacts which it spawns; to get away from the unhelpful divisions of 'high and low' art forms which here 'privilege the textual over the material' (p. 165). She then problematises the novel's use of the connection between the material and the moral through her analysis of the *Pamela* fan, pointing up 'the extent to which individuals were liberated or colonised by the commodities through which they sought to define themselves' (p. 169).

Alessa Johns picks up on earlier questions of national identity and materiality by considering the relationship between women's publishing and collecting, and Anglo-German exchange, asking 'how these texts, moving between countries in spite of wars and political tensions, shed light on questions of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism and the rise of nationalism' (p. 176). She suggests that 'women, despite their lack of legal and political identity, were shaping politics by cultural means' (p. 177). Her focus is on the University of Göttingen (founded by George II in 1734), its library, and the publishing house which grew up around it. She uses the particular dynamics of this location to explore the family dynasty of female intellectuals of Braunschweig alongside the University itself. Johns concludes that women generated a 'quotidian rather than transcendent cosmopolitanism', which can be contrasted with a masculine type of revolutionary activity (p. 189).

Finally, Susan Staves outlines the variety of methods by which 18th-century women writers acquired books. These ranged from purchasing on credit to the use of private libraries which were designed for lending to friends. But the most noteworthy aspect of her work here is on the way books are caught up in human relationships, for instance how the gift came to stand for an invitation to 'adopt and develop an ideological or

literary perspective that the lender aimed to promote' (p. 203), or how a series of such loans and gifts constructed circles of things and ideas. Her assertion that 'whenever books are offered to readers they are offered as a part of a relationship' (p. 208), connects the act of writing to the commercial market, and the book as object to the book as a vehicle for ideology.

As should by now be apparent, a wide range of issues is addressed here, as larger political and ideological questions are drawn out from the material. The essays make it clear that concepts of gender and attitudes towards individual women's roles and choices were often conditioned by the perceived connection of women to material things. However, it is in those places where the contributors attend to questions of taste and its connection to status and the relation between different marketplaces, that the inextricability of the different elements of the volume's title is most clear.

But that still leaves the large and fascinating question of what it might mean to talk about material culture. That is both a question about method, and a question about focus. In terms of the latter, one could certainly argue that the book has a blind spot for material culture below the level of the elite. It describes predominantly the experience of groups for whom, in Pointon's pithy sound bite, 'jewels were to women what real estate was to men' (p. 23). As someone who works on the less flamboyant end of the material spectrum I was prepared to find this focus alienating. But this is not a book which is blind to issues of status, just one which looks at the higher end of its hierarchies. There is an engagement with less elite forms, for instance the focus on women's work forces the boundaries of the 'sculpture' section to extend far enough to include wax models; there is Batchelor's piece on the connection between a novel and its fans - things linked by celebrity but distanced by aesthetic status. Ellen Kennedy Johnson's essay on wallpaper and Pointon's on jewellery both consider the way objects and their meanings alter as they descend the social scale. Status hierarchies appear through engagement with notions of taste then. Nevertheless, as a result of the chapters' initial focus on the elite, the volume as a whole does have a tendency to work with fairly static models of downwards dissemination which deny an independent set of practices outside this sphere.

And the volume certainly does not give equal space to the quotidian aspects of material culture. What the focus of the chapters does suggest is a rather distinctive slant on material culture. In the majority of cases it is taken for granted that materiality means engagement with artistic production and consumption; with literature and the decorative arts. Again, the readings given amply justify the rich possibilities of such a focus, but it does happen silently. With the exception of Fanny Jarvis's pockets there are few objects which seem entirely separated from a high-culture market. One would like to know whether this was a conscious decision on the part of the editors, or a reflection of the kinds of research currently being undertaken in the field.

Perhaps the most admirable aspect of this volume is its dogged pursuit of the fullest range of meanings of materiality. Description for its own sake has no place here, and several of the articles track very distinctive paths from objects to gender through a close attention to practice and intention. David Porter's piece on stones and gossip is loose and experimental in its argument, but it tackles questions of practice, of use, ownership and attitudes towards objects head on; it takes them very seriously. Barbara Burman and Jonathan White are equally serious, but their method is very different, tracing a long and complex journey from individual pieces of clothing to a series of national meanings. They argue that:

The history of these objects and the social worlds within which they were produced and used ... requires a thoroughly interdisciplinary inquiry which can draw on histories of technology, trade, business and broader processes of socio-economic change, alongside a newer attention to the material properties of objects and a similar recognition of the importance of literary and visual culture records and methods. (p. 32)

This is material culture studies as its own discipline. It is easy to see why so few of the essays manage to give such a full picture. Apart from the time and skills involved, the method aims at a kind of thick

description, a total history which fits uneasily within the discipline of, for instance, literary studies. The essay about pockets tells a story about those pockets, which considers their possible intervention in larger ideological questions. It does not tell a story about ideologies which uses the pockets as an example. In other words the volume raises very interesting questions about the discussions which still need to be had about ways of telling such material stories within disciplinary structures.

This volume should generate such discussions because it makes the case for the centrality of material culture to our understanding of women's lives and much else besides. It is worth reading from cover to cover. All the stories of women and objects are interesting and thought-provoking for the insight they give into different aspects of the triangle of gender, materiality and ideas. But there are also articles here that must make those who are concerned with any of the points of that triangle ask questions about the methods they use, and the position of their discipline in relation to the study of material culture.

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