



Aesthetics for a polite society: Language and the marketing of second-hand goods in eighteenth-century London

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Abstract

The late early modern period witnessed critical consumer transitions across Europe. Yet, while the explosion of the material world and the transition from an ‘old luxury’ material culture to a ‘new luxury’ model is well documented, our understanding of the underlying value systems of consumer goods is still under-developed. Building on a database of eighteenth-century advertisements for household auctions in the London-based *Daily Advertiser*, this article maps the value systems that characterized elite secondary markets in London. We find the language of consumption growing in complexity and sophistication as the eighteenth century progressed, but historiographically, key concepts such as fashion and modernity played minor and sometimes unexpected roles. While silverware is traditionally perceived as a store of wealth and marker of status, and hence a textbook ‘old luxury’, in the auction advertisements it is often praised for its design value. Chinaware, often attributed a central role in forging an affordable yet fashion-sensitive ‘new luxury model’, is paradoxically valued for its age and patina. In fact, the boundaries between ‘new’ and ‘old’ luxuries were never clear-cut. The intrinsic value of material culture continued to matter, and the

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language of consumption continued to reproduce social inequalities, much as it did in previous centuries.

KEYWORDS

second-hand, auctions, advertisements, aesthetics, fashion, old and new luxury

For decades now, the history of early modern material culture and consumption has been characterized by a series of grand narratives. Nowadays, few would still espouse the kind of ‘birth of a consumer society’ outlined by [Neil McKendrick](#), with its emphasis on economic growth, social equity, and the freedom to consume and the propensity to do so via emulative modes of consumption. However, this has not prevented other master narratives which draw from the legacy of this seminal work from emerging.¹ A broad historiographical agreement remains concerning the eighteenth-century consumer patterns that originated in the Low Countries and England which were indeed different – in scale, scope, and nature – from earlier material and consumer cultures. It was there, [Frank Trentmann](#) recently argued, that ‘a more dynamic, innovative culture of consumption came to take hold’.² Novelty, variety, and the speed of change marked the transition from an ‘old luxury’ economy, characterized by exclusive and expensive luxuries aimed at social distinction, to a ‘new luxury’ consumer pattern. The latter, thanks to product and process innovations, enhanced the development of cheaper luxuries and served myriad consumer wants for a growing share of the population.³ Yet, while it is easy to reconstruct the ownership patterns and trace the trade flows that underpinned this consumer transition, the multiple ‘meanings of consumption’ are harder to map.⁴ The historiography includes narratives of ‘modernity’ centred around a proliferation of explanatory concepts such as social emulation, the craze for novelty, the tyranny of fashion, the quest for comfort, domesticity, luxury, individualism, exoticism, cleanliness, and pleasure. Yet, overall, surprisingly little systematic empirical evidence is available on the cultural meanings of eighteenth-century consumer changes.⁵ This holds true in particular for the authoritative *Industrious revolution* initiated by [Jan de Vries](#). According to this influential work, the reorientation onto cheaper luxury items (semi-luxuries), and the development of a larger and more complex consumer culture, were paralleled by a growing allocation of household resources (especially labour time) to the market. Late early modern households increasingly engaged in market-oriented production – working more, harder, and more productively – so that they could buy more goods and services on the market rather than producing them at home. This alleged industriousness and its entanglement with living standards, especially for the lower middle classes and rural households, has attracted much attention.⁶ Yet, even de Vries’ nuanced assessment of the transition from old to new luxury leaves many key questions about changing consumer aspirations unanswered. For [de Vries](#), old luxury distinguished an aristocratic elite and communicated a ‘hegemonic cultural message’ through ‘exquisite refinement’ and exclusive grandeur. New luxury,

¹ [McKendrick](#), ‘The consumer revolution’, pp. 9–33.

² [Trentmann](#), *Empire of things*, p. 53.

³ [de Vries](#), *The industrious revolution*, pp. 44–5.

⁴ [Kwass](#), *The consumer revolution*, pp. 99–132.

⁵ [Horrell, Humphries, and Sneath](#), ‘Consumption conundrums unravelled’, pp. 831–2.

⁶ [Van Nederveen Meerkerk](#), ‘Couples cooperating?’, p. 266.



by contrast, was characterized by moderation, inclusivity, and sociability, and by things that were less expensive and more easily replicated.⁷ This sets up a binary which is not reflected in detailed understanding of the underlying consumer mentalities of elite and middling groups.⁸ We know little about how the new, fashion-sensitive, and affordable luxuries were appropriated in the consumer culture of the wealthier middling sort and the metropolitan elites, or what became of the older and seemingly out-dated goods valorized within an old luxury regime. More fundamentally, it remains unclear how far people's valuation of goods was transformed in the way that de Vries models. Meanwhile, the development of such meta-narratives has also obscured the cultural values and bundles of characteristics woven around specific objects and groups of objects. As Maxine Berg acknowledges, 'While much of the recent history of consumption has focused on the role of demand and on new consumer aspirations, it gives little consideration to consumer goods themselves'.⁹

This article engages with this crucial lacuna by assessing empirically the consumer mentalities of London's polite society as revealed by advertisements for forthcoming household auctions. We start with a discussion of the available sources for the reconstruction of the language of consumption on the elite/middling secondary markets (section I), followed by an overview of the most striking modifiers, the adjectives used to appraise entire household estates and specific 'objects of desire' (section II). Given their key status in the debate on the origins of a 'new luxury economy', silverware and chinaware take centre stage before we provide a detailed account of how bed furnishings and pier glasses – which highlight different bundles of characteristics – were framed (section III). The circle is closed in our conclusion (section IV), where we reflect upon the significance of our empirical survey for the larger debates in critical consumer transitions in the long eighteenth century.

I | AUCTION ADVERTISEMENTS AND SECONDARY MARKETS

Contributing to the lacuna in our understanding of past consumer mentalities are both the poor source coverage and the lack of a methodological framing that has the potential to provide deeper insights.¹⁰ To this end, several historians have already turned to advertisements and trade cards.¹¹ While often informative, eighteenth-century advertisements for new or newly arrived products tend to focus on a fairly narrow, often even 'marginal' set of goods: new publications, patent medicines, and the like. Those placed by suppliers are equally partial since established retailers and reputable craftsmen seldom felt the need to advertise.¹² Moreover, these advertisements usually offered discrete or even isolated packages of information on products and people since they dealt with a particular object, service, artisan, or shopkeeper. And they are often analysed in terms of their persuasive rhetoric linked to particular concepts in the historiography, especially

⁷ De Vries, *Industrious revolution*, p. 44.

⁸ Blondé, 'Conflicting consumption models?', pp. 74–5.

⁹ Berg, *Luxury and pleasure*, p. 85.

¹⁰ On the limits of probate inventories for these research questions, see Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, pp. 114–6.

¹¹ See, for example, Berg and Clifford, 'Selling consumption'; Lyna and Van Damme, 'A strategy of seduction?'; Stobart, 'Selling (through) politeness'.

¹² Walker, 'Advertising in London newspapers', p. 125; Smith, *Material goods*, pp. 62–3.



fashion and novelty.¹³ In practice, consumer and product values are interrelated and thus need contextualization.¹⁴

Our approach to elite and middling consumer aspirations is based on notices for second-hand auctions of household goods in eighteenth-century newspapers.¹⁵ Auction advertisements offer an answer to the conundrum because they provide insights into a varied selection of goods. This article draws on such advertisements to map the value systems that reigned on the secondary market in eighteenth-century London. We focus on the metropolis since it played a crucial role in the new consumer cultures of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ In the Age of Enlightenment, it was one of the places, if not the place, where cultural norms and fashions were forged.¹⁷ The auction advertisements clearly address a wealthier clientele. Hence, rather than concentrating on the appropriation of populuxe items by industrious strata in society, this research will help to clarify how elite consumer mentalities were affected by the transition from ‘old’ to ‘new luxury’ patterns.

The notices were placed in the *Daily Advertiser*, the first English newspaper wholly devoted to advertisements.¹⁸ All auction advertisements have been drawn from the *Burney Collection* for two sets of sample years to provide a picture of change over the course of the eighteenth century: 1730–45 ($n = 500$) and 1793–6 ($n = 947$). The majority were for auctions in London, but auctioneers holding sales in surrounding counties clearly believed that announcing these events in the press would reach the desired audience of mainly middling and genteel buyers, especially as London newspapers enjoyed a wide circulation beyond the metropolis. Typically, the advertisements had a standard structure, often with a repetitive and formulaic syntax, which remained stable over our study period. They began by announcing when and where the auction would occur, generally with a statement of whose goods were being sold, sometimes accompanied by a general assessment of the quality of the household estate on offer. This was followed by a summary of the goods to be auctioned, and at the bottom were details of arrangements for viewing the lots and information about where catalogues could be obtained. Detailed catalogues were already mentioned in 43 per cent of auction advertisements in the period 1730–45, indicating the benefits of providing additional information to prospective buyers. By 1793, only 10 per cent of advertisements failed to mention a catalogue, in part a reflection of the requirements of the 1777 Auction Duty Act.¹⁹

Auction advertisements have not yet been extensively used by those studying product values and consumer cultures in the eighteenth century. Their seemingly repetitive, standardized, and formulaic vocabulary does not appear to offer information about the qualities and the nature of the goods being offered for sale. However, it is paramount to understand the ways in which the goods were valued by those selling and buying. An object can be described in closer detail by mentioning the raw material from which it was made, by providing design details, or by identifying specific qualitative descriptions (Appendix I). While the boundaries between these categories are never clear-cut, as will be evidenced below, it is especially the qualitative markers that will take centre stage in this analysis.

¹³ See, for example, McKendrick, ‘George Packwood’; Lyna and Van Damme, ‘A strategy of seduction?’, p. 113; Stobart, ‘Selling (through) politeness’.

¹⁴ De Munck and Lyna, ‘Locating and dislocating value’, p. 4.

¹⁵ Lyna and Van Damme, ‘A strategy of seduction?’, p. 102.

¹⁶ Earle, *The making of the English middle class*, p. 17; Greig, *The beau monde*, p. 151.

¹⁷ Porter, *English society*, pp. 222–5.

¹⁸ Elliot, *History of English advertising*, p. 95.

¹⁹ Ohashi, ‘The Auction Duty Act of 1777’, p. 23.



Overall, specific qualitative descriptions were given of the goods in only a minority of the cases: about 18 per cent of objects in the first sample period, falling to 13 per cent in 1793. There is some tantalizing evidence that auctioneers were wary of being seen to ‘puff’ the goods. In a catalogue, one Northamptonshire auctioneer acidly observed that ‘Bombast Puffing of Pictures as well as other Articles, is always ridiculous; as not furnishing any just or clear Ideas by which the unskilled may form any judgment of their Merits, but at the same time never fails to excite the Laughter and Contempt of the Connoisseur[sic]’.²⁰ It is therefore unsurprising that only a relatively small proportion of objects were given a qualitative descriptor. However, for our research purpose, this low incidence is an advantage rather than a drawback. The lack of detailed descriptions suggests an opportunity cost and added to the marginal value of those objects that were described in closer detail – some 4660 of the 29 129 objects of our database. The fact that such descriptors were used sparingly underlines their importance when they do appear, yet the overall number remains large enough for meaningful analysis.

In highlighting the particular features that auctioneers thought would lure consumers to an auction, they reveal the consumer values that were shared by buyers and sellers. A brief comparison with a small sample of printed catalogues serves to highlight continuities between the two sources. The newspaper notices were often repeated on the covers of the catalogue.²¹ More particularly, specific descriptions were sometimes carried over into the catalogues. The 1740 advertisement of the sale of Colonel John Mercer’s household goods, for instance, mentions among others ‘a very curious bedstead of the old Japan’. On page 21 of the sales catalogue, this bedstead, located in the Japan Bed Chamber, was described as ‘a curious India Japan bedstead & teaster compleat’. With an estimated value of 10 guineas, it ranked at the top of the household objects for sale. More important for the current discussion, the bedstead was labelled as ‘curious’ both in the advertisement and the catalogue. Focusing on specific item descriptions in effect cuts out the ‘noise’ of objects without descriptors and allows us to examine what mattered for eighteenth-century Londoners when considering the purchase of household goods. In some exceptional cases, the combined aesthetics and materials of particular pieces could prompt lengthy descriptions, with one London advertisement waxing lyrical about a ‘most matchless Ladies India Commode of Rose Wood, richly inlaid with Ivory of curious Workmanship’.²² In this way, language reinforced some of the key characteristics of such luxury goods: the quality of materials, intricacy of design, complexity of manufacture, and, last but not least, the aesthetic appeal. However, most objects were described with a single quality descriptor. Importantly, these descriptors come in clusters that prove meaningful. The pianoforte, for instance, was occasionally described as ‘grand’ and quite often identified by the name of the original builder, but it was predominantly praised as ‘fine toned’. Within the subset of described objects, it is not the exceptional or occasional descriptor but rather the frequently occurring markers that will serve as a guide into the ‘objects of desire’ in eighteenth-century London.

It is also important to be aware of the economic significance of the cultural vocabulary used in describing objects and household estates in these announcements. They say little or nothing about the personal motives of the former owner, but they do tell us what people esteemed

²⁰ Northamptonshire Central Library, Catalogue for auction at Islip Mills, 19 December 1787.

²¹ The latter were consulted via Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) and comprised the catalogues of Thomas Coke (1728), Col. John Mercer (1740), Sir Joseph Eyles (1740), Henry Watson (1743), Edward Cokayne (1753), Thomas Stapython (1754), Mr Moore (1780), Victualler (1781), Samuel Hall (1787), A lady and a person of fashion (1789), a Gentleman (1794), and Wilhelm Cramer (1795).

²² *Daily Advertiser*, 14 March 1772.



especially attractive with the goal of enhancing the attractiveness of the auction. Eventually, the cultural categories revealed in this research may be considered revelatory for the economic value of household stuff on the secondary market.

Auction advertisements were by no means targeting a random sample of London society. If their goods were being sold off post-mortem or when moving house, few ordinary people from the lower orders had the means or the need to employ a professional auctioneer, much less advertise in the press. That said, our database still covers a wide range of groups within what might be called ‘polite society’: from the titled elite through to gentlemen and ladies to grocers and shoemakers, biscuit bakers and carriage-makers, midwives, and even the occasional ‘eminent singer’. For our analysis, the advertisements are allocated to three social groups. The first (group A) comprises the nobility, gentry, high government officials (such as ambassadors), and military officers, a group which saw its relative share growing from 15 per cent to 27 per cent as the century progressed. Merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, craftsmen, and professionals were placed into the ‘bourgeoisie’ (group B), which declined relatively from 28 per cent to 21 per cent between 1730 and 1796. The third, residual, set of advertisements (group C) relates to those where the status or occupation was not stated, people being referred to by their first and family names only. As will be evidenced in the following pages, London’s ‘polite society’ was marked by a rather homogeneous consumer culture, yet some significant divergences are noticeable. The ‘gentry’ (group A) were more likely to have their goods described in more detail. By the 1790s, for example, 16 per cent of their possessions were given a specific descriptor, compared with 9 per cent for the ‘bourgeoisie’ (group B) and 12 per cent for those whose occupation is unknown (group C) – an intermediate position which suggests that this residual group was socially mixed.

II | DESCRIBING OBJECTS OF DESIRE

The adjectives used to describe the entire household belongings set the tone for the whole advertisement and by extension the auction itself. They were frequently printed in capitals or a larger font and were clearly designed to grab the reader’s attention. In the advertisements considered here, the most commonly used terms to describe the complete set of the auctioned goods were ‘genuine’ and ‘entire’ (figure 1). ‘Genuine’ was used in about 30 per cent of advertisements in both sample periods, as with the announcement in the *Daily Advertiser* on Friday, 6 May 1757, that Mr Prestage would be offering for sale ‘The genuine Household Furniture, &c. of Sir JOSEPH D’ANVERS, Bart, deceased, at his late Dwelling House at Wendover in Bucks’.²³ The cultural framework within which goods were valued and valorized placed importance on the individual owner. Part of their kudos merged with their belongings as these entered the second-hand market.²⁴ On other occasions, ‘genuine’ was also applied to particular sets of goods, usually collections of paintings, prints, or books to emphasize their reputable origin. For example, Mr Langford announced his sale of ‘The genuine and curious collection of prints, books of prints and drawing, of a gentleman, lately deceased’.²⁵ Several advertisements emphasized – using capitals – that ‘ALL’ the household goods were to be auctioned, thereby stressing the completeness of the sale and assuaging any fears that the choicest objects had already been removed. A similar function

²³ *Daily Advertiser*, 6 May 1757.

²⁴ Greig, *The beau monde*, p. 36.

²⁵ *Daily Advertiser*, 14 March 1757.

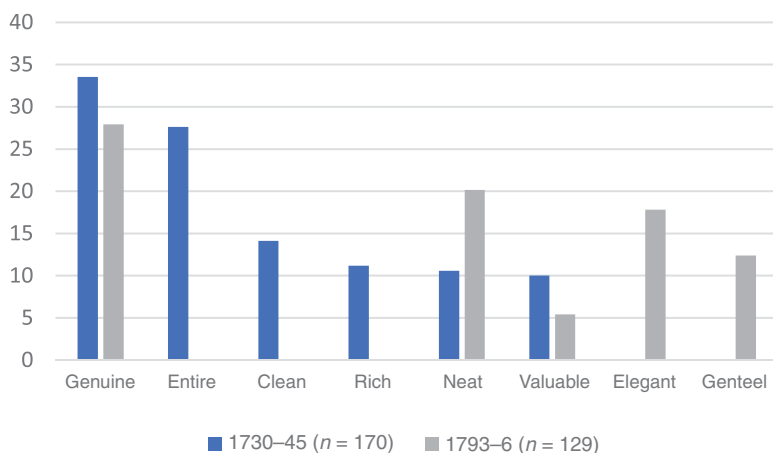


FIGURE 1 Descriptors as a percentage of all advertisements with a general quality description, 1730-45 ($n = 170$), 1793-6 ($n = 129$). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

was fulfilled by ‘entire’, which appeared in nearly 28 per cent of advertisements in 1730-45. Yet, together with references to ‘clean’ (14 per cent) and ‘rich’ (11 per cent), ‘entire’ largely disappeared from the auction headings as the century progressed.

After ‘genuine’ and ‘entire’, the other descriptors used in the headlines of auction announcements in the *Daily Advertiser* focused on the aesthetic qualities of the goods – and increasingly did so – in ways that linked them into value systems that placed merit on objects as markers of status (figure 1). Describing auction goods as ‘neat’ or ‘elegant’, rather than as ‘fashionable’, aligned them and their potential purchasers with gentry status and ideals in the same way as shopkeeper’s advertisements, which were frequently addressed to gentlemen and ladies.²⁶ ‘Neat’ and ‘elegant’ carried subtly different meanings. For Samuel Johnson, elegance was ‘beauty without grandeur’ and ‘elegant’ therefore meant ‘pleasing with minute beauties’. ‘Neat’ was a shade more modest: ‘beautiful without dignity’.²⁷ A generation later, James Barclay nuanced this by asserting that ‘neat’ described something ‘made with skill and elegance, but void either of splendour or dignity’, whilst agreeing with Johnson that ‘genteel implies something above the common run [and] elegant means beautiful without grandeur’.²⁸ This last point was brought out in the preface to Ince and Mayhew’s *Universal system of household furniture* of 1762, in which they noted that elegance was necessary to balance out ostentatious expensive furniture.²⁹ Despite these subtleties, both popular descriptors communicated ideas of skill and beauty, but also of modesty. They grew in importance through the eighteenth century – from about 11 per cent for ‘neat’ in 1730-45 to 38 per cent for both labels combined at the end of the century – displacing descriptions such as ‘rich’ or ‘clean’, which largely disappeared (figure 1).³⁰ The quest for gentility is also addressed directly through the use of ‘genteel’ in the 1790s, when it was invoked in 12 per cent of advertisements.

²⁶ Stobart, ‘The language of luxury goods’, p. 8; Stobart, ‘Selling (through) politeness’, p. 319.

²⁷ Johnson, *Dictionary*.

²⁸ Barclay, *A complete and universal English dictionary*.

²⁹ Ince and Mayhew, *Universal system*, preface.

³⁰ Vickery, *The gentleman’s daughter*, p. 161; Vickery, *Behind closed doors*, pp. 180-2.

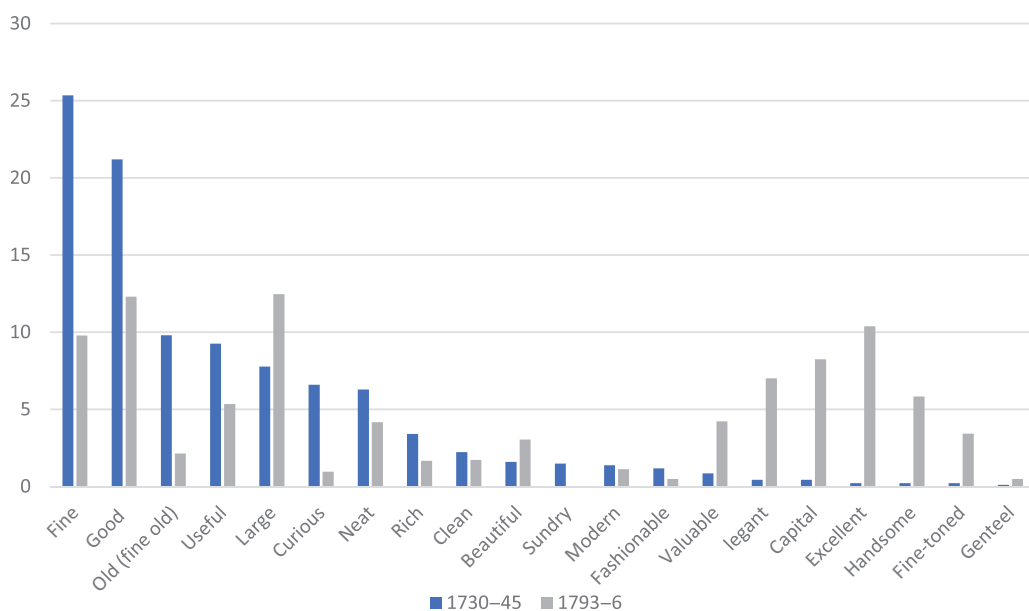


FIGURE 2 Descriptors as a percentage of all described objects, 1732–45 ($n = 939$), 1793–6 ($n = 1869$). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Reading from the headline to the main body of the advertisements, it is apparent that a small number of words stand out in marking specific objects – ‘fine’ and ‘good’ account for around half of all descriptions in 1730 – but also that the variety of terms increased over the course of the eighteenth century (figure 2). While the top five descriptors accounted for 73 per cent of cases where any modifier was used in 1730–45, this figure had fallen to 53 per cent by 1793. The rather generic ‘fine’ and ‘good’, which in 1730–45 were each used in about one in four advertisements, had dropped to just 10 and 12 per cent respectively by the 1790s. Meanwhile, ‘capital’, ‘elegant’, ‘excellent’, and ‘handsome’ gained considerably. Grouping these words according to their meaning, we can see the same priorities of aesthetics, gentility, and value that stood out in the headlines being written onto individual items and sets of goods. Clearly, the vocabularies used to describe and promote objects for auctions were multi-layered, and London advertisements were markedly complex and refined. This reflected both a rich, nuanced, and refined material culture and an elaborate and civilized language of consumption – a finding which accords with our general reading of the key importance of London as a social centre and as a major fashion maker. Moreover, the consumer vocabulary and the semantics of consumption grew more complex as the eighteenth century progressed, which again is not unexpected, given the presupposed consumer transitions taking place then.

Surprisingly enough, however, modernity and the tyranny of fashion, often highlighted in the literature on the neophilic eighteenth-century consumer culture, only played a minor (or at least a more hidden) role in advertising auctions. ‘Fashion’ and ‘modern’ each accounted for about one per cent of the object descriptions.³¹ Generally speaking, ‘new’ and ‘old’ were marginal categories in the London advertisements. ‘New’ and its more meaningful synonym ‘modern’ accounted for less than two per cent of goods. Of course, it would be difficult for auctioneers to describe lots of

³¹ McCracken, *Culture and consumption*, pp. 76–7; Lemire, *Force of fashion*, pp. 33–4.



second-hand goods as novel, but 'modern' and 'fashionable' remained options since that would increase both resale value and public interest. Since only a minority of objects were described in closer detail, there was *a fortiori* a great incentive to identify specific second-hand objects as 'fashionable' or 'modern', whenever that quality was still applicable. Hence, as we will see, 'fashionable' was explicitly deployed in some cases, but the overall absence of the concept is thought-provoking for the historiographical consensus about the key importance of fashion in the long eighteenth century.³²

'Old' was deployed more often than 'new', 'modern', and 'fashionable' combined, usually in conjunction with other adjectives to create reinforcing pairings such as 'fine old', 'valuable old', 'rare old', and even 'very fine old'. The second adjective brought these things into the sphere of scarcity, value, and aesthetic appeal and suggests that England already had moved towards the rediscovery of 'patina' as an important marker of product qualities.³³ Overall, however, 'old' as a marker also lost in relative importance: from 10 per cent in the 1730–45 sample to scarcely two per cent by the 1790s.

In general, household belongings were more likely to be promoted in terms of quality (e.g. 'excellent', 'fine', and 'capital'), aesthetics ('handsome', 'elegant', 'neat', 'beautiful', and 'genteel'), or value ('useful', 'valuable', 'capital', and 'prime'). What is especially eye-catching is the growing relative importance and linguistic refinement of aesthetics through the eighteenth century. The assertion that the overall collection of household goods was genteel, neat, or elegant (figure 1) is repeated for individual groups of goods and joined by other aesthetic descriptors, most notably 'elegant', 'handsome', and 'beautiful' (respectively seven, six, and three per cent in the 1790s). 'Handsome' appears to have signified something rather grander than neatness and elegance.³⁴ We see handsome post-chaises, horses, sofas, and mahogany bedsteads – an array of goods rhetorically linked by the suggestion that they had a certain grandeur, dignity, and sense of grace.³⁵ 'Neat' was also deployed (four per cent in the 1790s), but unsurprisingly, it was primarily used when describing items that embodied modest good taste. Modesty here came in terms of size, but also decoration and pretension. For example, in 1766, Mr Shute offered 'a very neat Phaeton with its first Wheels on, and a Pair of bay Geldings with Nag-Tails, six and seven Years old, in very good Condition'.³⁶ Here the restrained gentility of the carriage was coupled with the physical appearance of the horses and the good condition of both vehicle and animals to make the whole an attractive object of desire. 'Elegant', virtually absent in the 1730s, gained markedly to account for seven per cent of descriptions in the 1790s and became perhaps the most versatile descriptor. In a single issue in January 1794, the following goods were up for auction: 'elegant Pier and Chimney Glasses', 'elegant Four-Post and Field Bedsteads with Chintz Cotton Furniture and Window-Curtains', and 'a large and elegant Collection of the most esteemed French Authors, a great Number of the English Poets in elegant Bindings'.³⁷

It is possible to dismiss these as filler words, used to add a certain flourish to descriptions, but even if this was partly true, it is significant that these words, rather than others, were

³² Lemire, *Force of fashion*, pp. 38–40.

³³ Edwards, 'Perspectives', pp. 43–58; Clifford, 'The veneer of age', pp. 245–6.

³⁴ Johnson defined it as 'beautiful with dignity; graceful', meanings with which Barclay largely concurred Johnson, *Dictionary*; Barclay, *A complete and universal English dictionary*.

³⁵ *Daily Advertiser*, 28 March 1766; *Daily Advertiser*, 10 October 1786; *Daily Advertiser*, 2 December 1786; Barclay, *A complete and universal English dictionary*.

³⁶ *Daily Advertiser*, 12 June 1766.

³⁷ *Daily Advertiser*, 7 January 1794.



chosen and that they remained sparsely deployed in the advertisements as a whole. Such arguments are reinforced by the use of terms such as ‘fine’, ‘excellent’, and ‘capital’. At face value, ‘fine’ is a rather bland description, best defined in terms of its antonym (coarse) and frequently used to promote the merits of household linen.³⁸ In this sense, ‘fine’ might be aligned with Woodruff Smith’s argument about the growing importance of respectability in defining the middling sort and their consumption.³⁹ However, it could also imply that things (or people) were ‘exquisite’, ‘delicate’, ‘handsome’, ‘spruce’, or even ‘ornamental’.⁴⁰ These were associations which connect more closely with the aesthetic qualities of the goods being sold and thus to a set of values more aligned with gentility than respectability. Another major cluster around ‘fine’ was prints, pictures, and drawings – again underscoring the aesthetic connotations of this attribute. For example, the auctioneer Mr White advertised the sale in October 1780 of ‘the very neat Household Furniture’ of Mr Arthur Goodwin, currier. This included ‘excellent Beds with Cotton Furniture, fine Goose Beds and Bedding, Mahogany Wardrobes, Dining Tables and Chairs, a Table Clock, a capital Piano-Forte by Buntebarr, fine Prints after Bartolozzi, Paton, &c’.⁴¹

As this notice reveals, much the same is true of ‘excellent’, the use of which had grown significantly by the closing decades of the eighteenth century, when no less than 10 per cent of items for sale were characterized as such (figure 2). Dyche and Pardon defined ‘excellent’ in a manner that accords with current uses of the word – ‘rare, choice, good’ – but they also saw it as meaning ‘highly valuable’, whilst Johnson expanded this into ‘of great worth, of great virtue, of great dignity’.⁴² In describing household goods as ‘excellent’, auctioneers thus declared their quality. They highlighted specific attributes that again tie into aesthetic considerations and issues of status and rank. Thus, we read of Arthur Goodwin’s ‘excellent beds’ and also the ‘excellent Mahogany [sic] Library Bookcase in three Divisions’ that was advertised in the same issue of the *Daily Advertiser*. More specifically, the quality of manufacture was often lauded in this way, as in a 1786 auction that included ‘Cabinet-Work of excellent Workmanship’.⁴³

As noted above, ‘excellent’ also communicated ideas of value. This forms part of a broader emphasis on the economic and practical aspects of value highlighted in the main text of auction advertisements. As Amanda Vickery and Karen Harvey both argue, prudence was a key domestic virtue for both the gentry and the middling sort. It spoke of a well-managed household in which resources were husbanded in an appropriate and sustainable manner.⁴⁴ These concerns were manifested in the buying practices of Glasgow’s merchant elite, noted in Stana Nenadic’s analysis of household auctions in the city. Above all, they bought practical goods like household linen and kitchenware, highlighting the importance of prudent management of household budgets rather than a desire to acquire showy items.⁴⁵ The retained economic and use value of these things was important in making them attractive to buyers. This was flagged by declaring the high quality of objects being sold – describing them as ‘good’, ‘capital’, or ‘prime’ – and occasionally with a direct assertion that they were ‘valuable’. Whilst this also carried connotations of being

³⁸ For example, *Daily Advertiser*, 7 January 1789; *Daily Advertiser*, 17 April 1794; *Daily Advertiser*, 17 April 1794.

³⁹ Smith, *Consumption and the making of respectability*, p. 224.

⁴⁰ Dyche and Pardon, *New general English dictionary*; Johnson, *Dictionary*.

⁴¹ *Daily Advertiser*, 10 October 1786.

⁴² Dyche and Pardon, *New general English dictionary*; Johnson, *Dictionary*.

⁴³ *Daily Advertiser*, 2 December 1786.

⁴⁴ Harvey, *The little republic*, pp. 64–98; Vickery, *The gentleman’s daughter*, pp. 127–60.

⁴⁵ Nenadic, ‘Middle rank consumers’, pp. 133–5.

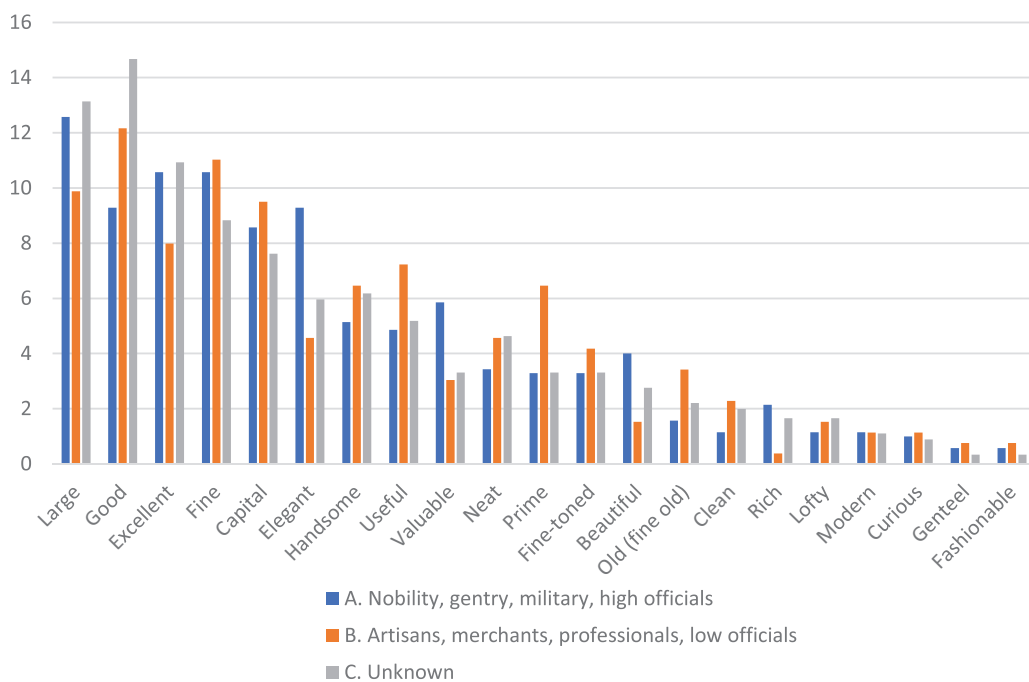


FIGURE 3 Descriptors as a percentage of all descriptors in each social category, 1793–6 ($n = 1869$). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

‘worthy, deserving of regard’,⁴⁶ its primary meaning related to economic value and signals that goods could retain this quality well beyond their first cycle of ownership. Here as well, language diversity grew as the eighteenth century progressed. Objects being described as ‘good’ declined by nine per cent between the two sample periods, while ‘capital’ (up eight per cent), ‘prime’ (rising nearly four per cent), and ‘valuable’ (up over three per cent) all gained.

We noted earlier that auctioneers were more likely to use adjectives when advertising the possessions of the nobility and gentry, suggesting that special efforts were made to ensure good attendance at these sales. Social distinctions were also apparent in the choice of adjectives, although differences were often subtle and framed within the imperatives of gentility, aesthetics, and value that characterized advertisements regardless of the status of the previous owner (figure 3). Moreover, given the methodological constraints, in particular the blurred boundaries between social groups and the large residual category (group C), differences tend to be in degree rather than in kind. Yet, in articulating the genteel qualities of the goods being sold, the possessions of the higher status group were more likely to be described as ‘beautiful’, ‘elegant’, or ‘rich’, whereas those of the middling sort were more often ‘handsome’ or ‘neat’. The last term, with its connotations of modesty, is perhaps to be expected, but ‘handsome’ suggests that at least some of their possessions had a grander appearance. In terms of value and quality, gentry possessions tended to be labelled as ‘excellent’, ‘large’, or ‘valuable’, while those of the middling sort were ‘good’, ‘useful’, or ‘clean’. The distinctions are slim, but again imply more modesty in the possessions of those lower down the social scale and the consequent need to communicate their utility and clean condition.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *Dictionary*.



III | TRADITIONAL AND NOVEL GOODS

While some words easily migrated between objects and object categories, several specific pairings existed as well. Pianos were lauded as being fine-toned, mirrors were assessed by their size, and for wooden furniture the raw material, in the eighteenth century increasingly mahogany, mattered. Given the occurrence of such product-specific qualitative markers, the analysis in this section is broken down by looking at specific goods and the bundles of characteristics that surrounded them. The choice of goods is significant to our overall analysis because the objects selected held a particular place in consumer transitions, in the ideas of old and new luxury, and the functioning of the second-hand market. Silverware can be seen as archetypal ‘old luxury’, even if the emergence of silver plate helped to diversify the market by making it more affordable.⁴⁷ Silverware held both symbolic value as a sign of wealth and status, and intrinsic material value that could act as a store of wealth as well as a means of exchange. In contrast, chinaware is a ‘new luxury’ item – more affordable and closely linked to inclusive practices of sociability. Its material fragility – whilst sometimes overstated – meant that its value was first and foremost cultural and utilitarian. Chinaware, moreover, is closely linked to the rapid consumer changes of the late early modern period. Thirdly, the economic and cultural value of bedsteads, beds, and bedding can hardly be overestimated. Beds were key belongings and traditionally held a high resale value. However, growing concerns about cleanliness and hygiene during the eighteenth century are sometimes seen as undermining their attraction as second-hand goods. Finally, mirrors gained importance in the domestic interior, not least as changing production technologies allowed for larger and more affordable looking glasses. Nonetheless, chimney and pier glasses remained relatively costly and highly visible items, the value of which was often enhanced by costly frames that held a strong aesthetic appeal, all of which is reflected in their considerable presence in auction advertisements.

As noted earlier, direct references to fashion and novelty were rare in the auction advertisements and catalogues. This is perhaps less surprising as a finding than the only exception to this rule in our database: silverware. Despite its ‘old luxury’ credentials, the general shift from intrinsic economic to design-based value – observed by Roche and others – is seen most clearly in the way that auctioneers chose to describe the silverware and silver-plate ware being sold.⁴⁸ Our samples include 597 cases where silver and plate were advertised. The majority included no additional description, suggesting that the attraction of the silver spoke for itself. Several announcements of plate explicitly note its weight, reflecting traditional notions of silverware as a means of storing and displaying wealth and equating value with the quantity of silver rather than the workmanship embodied in particular pieces.⁴⁹ It is telling that this same idea also applied to silver plate, where the intrinsic value of the metal was more challenging to extract. We thus read in a notice placed by Mr Robins in 1786 that he would be auctioning, amongst other household belongings, ‘upward of 300 Ounces of modern Plate in Waiters, Candlesticks, Butter-Boats, Coffee and Tea Pots, &c.’.⁵⁰ The quantity is significant, but more important in this advertisement is the promise that this silverplate is ‘modern’, a term which contemporaries understood as meaning new or

⁴⁷ Berg, *Luxury and pleasure*, pp. 154–92.

⁴⁸ Blondé, ‘Cities in decline’, pp. 50–2; Roche, *Histoire des choses banales*.

⁴⁹ Wijzenbeek-Olthuis, ‘A matter of taste’, p. 45.

⁵⁰ *Daily Advertiser*, 2 December 1786.



recent.⁵¹ This reflects the growing importance of design in the desirability and value of silverware, and is repeated in many other auction advertisements.⁵²

In the 1730s 36 per cent of the silver items were praised as being ‘fashionable’. At the end of the eighteenth century almost 37 per cent of the silverware advertised in London that was explicitly described was marketed as being ‘modern’, and a further 17 per cent of advertisements still announced plate as ‘fashionable’. By that time the idea of plate as something with utility had seemingly faded away. ‘Useful’ dropped from 45 to 3 per cent.⁵³ Paradoxically, silverware owed its position as a ‘fashionable’ item to its intrinsic qualities, especially the potential for melting and remaking of a valuable item. As such it was both a safe investment as well as a feverish and volatile consumer item.⁵⁴ The workmanship on silverware – its fashioning in the sense of crafting rather than pursuing modishness – was important in discriminating between owners with and without good taste.⁵⁵ Obviously enough, the choice to market silverware by its design and modernity was also prompted by a solid, more pragmatic economic rationale. It alerted potential buyers that they were buying more than the weight of the silver. The objects did not need to go into the melting pot for refashioning, which meant they got a good deal indeed.⁵⁶

By the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of fashion – which had previously augmented usefulness as a descriptor – had given way to modernity, an idea freighted with even stronger cultural baggage (figure 3). Taking a longer perspective, the emphasis on the modernity and fashionability of silverware corresponds with a changing climate of evolving sensibilities. During the early modern period, flaunting wealth and power through conspicuous consumption of sturdy precious metalwares had made way for convenience, good manners, and refinement.⁵⁷ Urban society as a whole became more conscious of how material goods were to be used as mediators of individuality, taste, and sociability.⁵⁸ Silverware was thus both a store and symbol of wealth, but part of the world of modernity and fashion. Its dual role raised its attractiveness, and auctioneers gratefully took advantage of this.

Porcelain – or ‘chinaware’ as it was invariably described in the auction advertisements – undoubtedly figures as one of the iconic drivers of the early modern ‘consumer revolution’. It was a new product in Europe that increasingly replaced older style goods, such as pewter and majolica.⁵⁹ Chinaware reflected both the taste for exotic imports and the growing range of imitations created around them, initially by manufactories at Bow and Worcester but later, and most famously, by Josiah Wedgwood who engaged in widespread promotion of his wares.⁶⁰ There was clear market segmentation, differentiated by the purpose of the wares being sold and by fine distinctions in the material qualities of the product. Chinaware was often described as being ‘useful’ (i.e. tableware) or ‘ornamental’ (decorative pieces intended for display on chimneypieces or in

⁵¹ Dyche and Pardon, *New general English dictionary*; Johnson, *Dictionary*.

⁵² Clifford, ‘A commerce with things’, pp. 152–4.

⁵³ ‘Neat’ also lost ground, from about nine per cent to a mere three per cent by the end of the eighteenth century.

⁵⁴ Baatsen, Blondé, and De Ren, ‘Zilver in Antwerpen’, pp. 101–4.

⁵⁵ Clifford, ‘The veneer of age’, p. 247; Blondé, ‘Conflicting consumption models?’, pp. 71–4.

⁵⁶ Clifford, ‘A commerce with things’, pp. 155, 161; Berg and Clifford, *Consumers and luxury*, pp. 147–68.

⁵⁷ Baudouin, ‘Profaan Zilverwerk’, pp. 15–24.

⁵⁸ Richards, *Eighteenth-century ceramics*, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Hatcher and Barker, *A history of British pewter*, pp. 279–301; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*, p. 86; Sear and Sneath, *The origins of the consumer revolution*, pp. 89–90.

⁶⁰ Berg, *Luxury and pleasure*, pp. 117–53; McKendrick, ‘Josiah Wedgwood’.



cabinets), a distinction increasingly deployed from the 1770s when British manufacturers were growing rapidly. The phrase ‘useful and ornamental’ doubled from 13 per cent of all labelled chinaware in the years 1730–45 to 28 per cent in 1793–6. Yet, this did not communicate anything further about the intrinsic qualities or desirability of the chinaware being sold. Moreover, given the importance of provenance in shaping the desirability of chinaware, there were surprisingly few references to the manufacturer – rare examples being the advertisement of ‘a rich blue Table-Service, and two others of Wedgwood’s Ware’ in 1788 and, about a year earlier, of a set of ‘beautiful old Japan, Chelsea, Derby, and oriental China’.⁶¹ In the latter, we see chinaware being described as beautiful, but such aesthetic markers were also comparatively rare, with ‘beautiful’ accounting for just 12.5 per cent of descriptions in the 1790s.⁶² Far more common were descriptions that promoted the wares as ‘fine’, with all its connotations of delicacy and refinement, yet this description declined significantly as the eighteenth century progressed, from 59 per cent to just 13 per cent.

In sharp contrast with silverware, there was no attempt to present porcelain as modern or fashionable – a remarkable finding for a product entangled with fashionable consumer practices. Instead, it was frequently declared as ‘old’. This description was most commonly deployed in the 1730s and 1740s (65 per cent), but remained important at the end of the century (41 per cent), when there was a significant overall rise in the proportion of announcements making reference to chinaware (up to 24 per cent in the 1790s). As noted earlier, ‘old’ did not indicate worn or old-fashioned, a point made clear by the combination of old with ‘fine’ or ‘beautiful’ – as in the announcement cited above – but also with ‘valuable’, ‘curious’, or ‘rare’. Thus, we see an auction of the belongings of a ‘person of distinction’ in April 1760, which included ‘scarce and valuable rare old Japan China, of the Dragon and Wheatsheaf Patterns’.⁶³ ‘Old’ is modified and valorized by scarcity, a combination seen especially with chinaware described as oriental and one that underlined the attraction and potential value of the objects both in cultural and economic terms.

Such old and rare items might form additions to collections that reflected the owner’s taste, knowledge, and wealth, as Grant McCracken argues.⁶⁴ Significantly, while descriptions of silverware varied little with social status, these descriptions of chinaware were about five times more frequent in group A (the gentry) than group B (the middling sort). This suggests a ‘community of taste’ among the elites of polite society, centred around the desirability of things that were old and scarce. It might even point to an embryonic market for antique chinaware in the metropolis. Indeed, as has been suggested, as the eighteenth century progressed, the drive to acquire ‘new objects’ was such that people started to attribute value to ‘rare’ old things that were collectable, but which also marked out their owners from the growing mass of fashionable consumers.⁶⁵ Moreover, with growing output from centres of European porcelain production, the linking of ‘old’ with Asian products points to another category that was becoming especially desirable among collectors.⁶⁶

⁶¹ *Daily Advertiser*, 30 January 1788; *Daily Advertiser*, 2 December 1786.

⁶² In the 1730–45 sample ‘beautiful’ was not used in relation to chinaware.

⁶³ *Daily Advertiser*, 7 April 1760. It is likely that this was the Kakiemon style Japanese porcelain, increasingly sought after in eighteenth-century Britain. See Ferguson, ‘Japan china taste and elite ceramic’.

⁶⁴ McCracken, *Culture and consumption*, pp. 45–50.

⁶⁵ Blondé and Van Damme, ‘Fashioning old and new’, p. 6; Edwards and Ponsonby, ‘The polarization of the second-hand market’, pp. 99–103.

⁶⁶ Ferguson, ‘Japan china taste and elite ceramic’, p. 120.



Beds and bedding are seen by historians as increasingly problematical as second-hand purchases because of growing concerns that they harboured bed bugs and other infestations. These considerations were nothing new, but they were given considerable impetus by the publication of John Southall's *Treatise on buggs* in 1730, which made the problem more visible through its large-scale illustration of the chief culprit, the bed bug (*cimex lectularius*). Bedsteads were viewed as the main culprits in harbouring these insects, especially those made with deal and beech. Southall recommended that, when purchasing both old and new furniture, householders should undertake a thorough examination of holes in the woodwork and look for the bugs themselves in the draperies.⁶⁷ Sara Pennell has noted the ways in which this growing knowledge was linked to an apparent decline in the advertising of second-hand beds and bedding in the London press.⁶⁸ Our data, however, point to the sustained presence of beds, bedding, and bedsteads throughout the eighteenth century, with 82 per cent of advertisements in 1793–6 mentioning bed-related items. The relative value of beds within auctions is apparent in the mid-eighteenth century from surviving catalogues which include valuations of each lot being sold. They often formed the most valuable item offered for sale. At the 1743 sale of Henry Watson's household belongings, for instance, the 'four-post wainscot bedstead, with yellow damask furniture' in the principal bed chamber was valued at £8 8s, and the accompanying bed, bolster, and pillows were listed at £3 3s.⁶⁹ Ten years later, the annotated catalogue of Mr Edward Cokayne reveals that bedsteads, beds, and hangings comprised no less than 21 per cent of the total worth of all the household goods being auctioned. We lack similar evidence for the later eighteenth century, but the continued importance of these items is apparent from their location within auction advertisements. They were the first items to be mentioned in 45 per cent of announcements in 1793–6.

Descriptions of beds and bedding took two forms. One focused on general qualitative statements, while the other was concerned with the nature of the feathers with which the bed was filled. Taking these in turn, quality was most often expressed in terms of a simple description of the bed as 'good' or 'fine', although both lost ground as a qualifiers, dropping from 48 to 35 per cent and from 26 to four per cent, respectively. This decline was the result of a marked expansion in the vocabulary deployed by the last decade of the eighteenth century. 'Excellent' rose to 13 per cent by 1793–6, 'prime' to 19 per cent, and 'seasoned' to nine per cent – the last being an indication that the feathers had been suitably prepared (and this word was often combined to create the double descriptor 'well-seasoned'). This also hints at a concern for cleanliness, something which we might expect to see increasingly emphasized over the course of the eighteenth century. On closer inspection, declaring beds as 'clean' peaked in the 1730s and 1740s, with 15 per cent of all beds described in this way – probably a direct result of the panic created by Southall's publication.⁷⁰

Paralleling rising prices, the quality of the feathers also came into sharper focus as the century progressed, being noted in a higher proportion of advertisements in 1793–6 than in the 1730s and 1740s (figure 4).⁷¹ Both this increase and the distinction between goose and regular feathers is most notable for sales at noble or gentry houses, but goose feathers were mentioned with growing frequency across the full range of advertisements. What marked the social distinction was the low number of elite houses in group A for which ordinary feather beds were noted. Goose feathers

⁶⁷ Southall, *A treatise on the Cimex lectularius; or, bed bug*, pp. 45–6.

⁶⁸ Pennell, 'Making the bed', pp. 35–41.

⁶⁹ Catalogue of the auction of Henry Watson's household belongings (1743).

⁷⁰ In the 1790s 10 per cent of all beds were still being described as clean.

⁷¹ Horrell, Humphries, and Sneath, 'Consumption conundrums unravelled', p. 850.

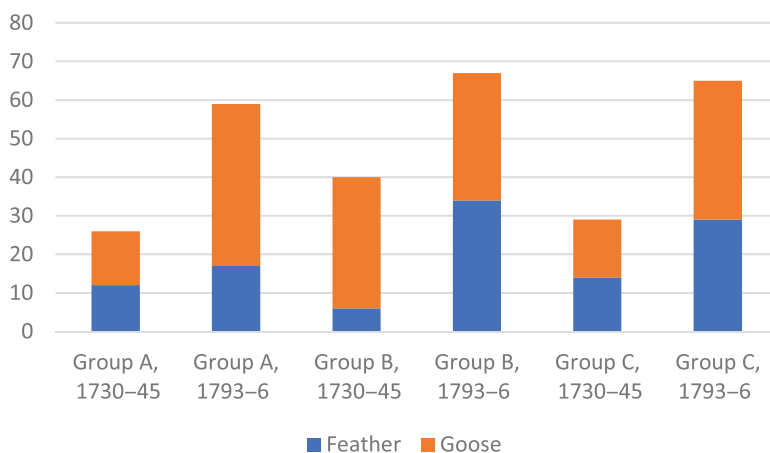


FIGURE 4 Percentage of auction advertisements mentioning feather and goose feather beds in the *Daily Advertiser*, 1730–45 and 1793–6, by social group. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

were thus a mark of the social standing of the household and might also have helped to alleviate concerns about the risk of buying second-hand bedding because goose feathers would have been used in the best beds, slept in by the owner of the house rather than servants.⁷²

In the sample of advertisements from 1730–45, material descriptions of bedsteads were too few in number to reach robust conclusions (six qualitative markers in 33 cases). By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the number of descriptors had grown substantially, again a sign of the growing importance of beds and bedding in auctions, and can be used for quantification. Surprisingly, mahogany was mentioned quite sparingly, at only 13 per cent of the 1217 bedsteads of the 1793–6 sample. Such was its importance in English furniture making that the proportion of bedsteads made from mahogany was undoubtedly higher than this indicates. No less than 43 per cent of all objects for which a raw material was given in 1793–6 were identified as made from this exotic wood. Moreover, its association with particular styles of furniture that were seen as up-to-date, tasteful, and, more arguably, distinctively English meant that the material label could communicate a range of more complex and nuanced associations. In short, noting that bedsteads and other pieces of furniture were made from mahogany locked them into value systems that revolved around intrinsic qualities, aesthetics, craftsmanship, and fashion.⁷³ That mahogany was known to be less susceptible to infestation and smells was another bonus. This makes it surprising that more bedsteads were not described as being made from mahogany while heightening the impact of those which were. Qualitative descriptions were more common and aesthetic categories were particularly widely used, with ‘handsome’ (29 per cent), ‘elegant’ (24 per cent), and ‘neat’ (eight per cent) accounting for well over half of the adjectives deployed. Perhaps most striking, though, is the use of ‘lofty’ in nearly 16 per cent of all cases. This term was seldom invoked for objects other than beds and seems designed to communicate the height and grandeur of the bedsteads.

⁷² While they do not feature in advertisements, catalogues regularly list servants’ beds. See, for example, [Stobart](#), ‘Domestic textiles’.

⁷³ [Anderson](#), *Mahogany*, p. 13.

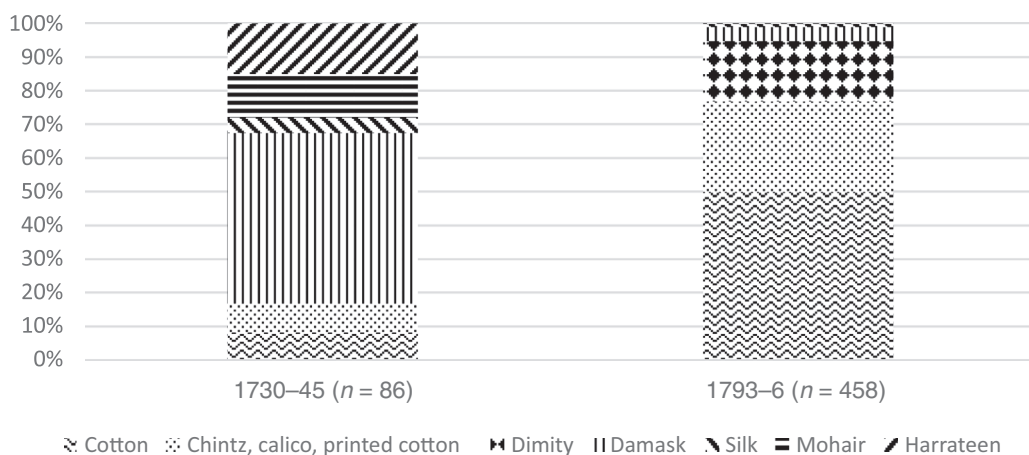


FIGURE 5 Relative composition of textiles in bed hangings with a textile description in 1730–45 and 1793–6.

Few places lay bare the spectacular consumption transition of the eighteenth century more clearly than the realm of household textiles.⁷⁴ This is true of both the type of textile being deployed (figure 5) and the ways in which these were valorized in the auction announcements. In advertisements from 1730–45, we see the dominance of textiles traditionally used for bed hangings: harrateen, mohair, and above all damask, which alone accounted for nearly half the textiles specifically mentioned. At this time, cotton and chintz were beginning to appear, despite a series of prohibitions on their importation and sale. In line with Daniel Defoe's oft quoted and critical description, they spread rapidly through the house and onto the body, but on a timescale that was longer than Defoe suggested. From less than 20 per cent in the 1730s and 1740s, cotton and chintz comprised almost 80 per cent of textiles mentioned by the 1790s, with dimity (another cotton-based fabric and one absent in the earlier period) making the domination all but complete.⁷⁵ In mentioning these fashionable if no longer new textiles, the advertisements again highlighted the cultural currency of the goods being sold. At the same time, they increasingly described bed hangings in qualitative terms as well, with 'rich' (24 per cent) and 'handsome' (28 per cent) being particularly prevalent descriptors in the 1793–6 sample.⁷⁶ The former was exclusively used for chintz hangings, probably reflecting the richness of the patterns. We thus see beds with 'rich Chintz Cotton and Damask' hangings as the first item on the list of the furniture and exotic and other plants, formerly the property of Henry Watkins, that were being auctioned on Wednesday, 15 June 1796.⁷⁷ In contrast, cotton hangings were more usually described as 'handsome' or more occasionally 'beautiful' or 'neat'.

Large mirrors were costly items that marked out better houses. Hannah Greig demonstrates that selecting the right sconces was important to members of London's beau monde who needed to demonstrate their status and taste. Finding appropriate pier and chimney glasses involved sim-

⁷⁴ Riello, 'Fabricating the domestic', pp. 42, 47.

⁷⁵ Stobart, 'Domestic textiles', p. 28.

⁷⁶ 'Neat', 'elegant', and 'beautiful' accounted for 10 per cent of all cases each, while 'fine' accounted for six per cent of all references and 'modern' merely four per cent.

⁷⁷ *Daily Advertiser*, 10 June 1796.



ilar care.⁷⁸ Two things distinguished such mirrors: their size and the frame in which they were held. Many of the descriptors used relate to frames, which clearly contributed significantly to a mirror's value and its appeal to potential buyers. Carved gilt frames were noted in 28 per cent of the cases in the early-eighteenth-century sample period and speak of old luxury being recirculated and perhaps appropriated by less wealthy householders. Other descriptors – initially 'rich' and 'magnificent' and later 'capital', 'noble', and 'superb' – were applied to the ensemble of looking glass and frame.⁷⁹ They give an idea of the grandeur of the mirror (another old luxury association) and underline its potential impact on the buyer's drawing room or dining room, both as decorative objects and a way of enhancing the lighting of a room.⁸⁰

The most dominant descriptor used for mirrors, however, was their size. No less than 60 per cent of all mirrors were described as 'large' in 1730–45, expanding to 81 per cent in 1793–6. This relates to their likely cost because, like silverware, the physical dimensions of mirrors were an essential determinant of their value. A bigger mirror cost more and therefore required and demonstrated the depth of the owner's pocket. Yet size was not simply symbolic. It was also a practical consideration. Knowing the exact measurements of the mirror (which were often given instead of the more generic 'large') would confirm that it would fit over the mantle or between the windows in the house of the prospective owner. Chimney and pier glasses, then, were old luxuries in their intrinsic grandeur but also in terms of the space they required. A large mirror could scarcely be squeezed into a modest house.

IV | CONCLUSIONS

A systematic analysis of product valuations in the auction markets of eighteenth-century London has proved effective in re-assessing some of the master narratives that are often deployed in the study of eighteenth-century consumption. While consumer and material culture historiographies revolve around general, homogenizing concepts such as fashion and industriousness, the secondary markets of polite society reveal that a nuanced and multi-layered set of values was woven around (sometimes specific) household goods. By carefully analysing the markers of quality, aesthetics, and value that were used to represent objects in auction adverts, we have been able to examine some of these consumer values. This reveals that the alleged neophilic consumer culture – with a heavy emphasis on novelty, modernity, and fashionability – seems to have played only a marginal role in the minds of polite Londoners. While it would be tempting to associate their relative absence with the nature of the secondary market, which for obvious reasons engaged to a lesser extent with new and novel goods, in practice 'fashion' did play a role, albeit a somewhat unexpected one. Silverware and silver plate, textbook examples of 'old luxuries', were described in terms that emphasized the value added by craftsmanship (fashion) and increasingly the idea of modernity (newness), rather than simply their intrinsic economic value as a precious metal. Conversely, chinaware, a prototypical 'new luxury' which was subject to rapidly changing fashion cycles, was often promoted in terms of its utility and, most strikingly, its attraction as a collectable – at least for those pieces that could be framed as old and scarce (and therefore valuable).

⁷⁸ Greig, *The Beau Monde*, pp. 43–4.

⁷⁹ 'Rich', 'fine', and 'magnificent' accounted for 13 per cent, 13 per cent, and 9 per cent, respectively, of all qualifications in 1730–45. These qualifiers disappeared altogether to make room for 'elegant' (12 per cent), 'capital' (6 per cent), 'handsome' (5 per cent), 'noble' (3 per cent), brilliant (2 per cent), and superb (2 per cent) in 1793–6.

⁸⁰ Crowley, *The invention of comfort*, pp. 122–30.



Our analysis is thus at odds with the current literature on the eighteenth-century material culture in which novelty and fashion occupy a disproportionate amount of space. If fashion played a substantive role across different categories of goods, it did so indirectly, through aesthetics and taste. The latter were articulated through a consumer vocabulary that gained in complexity over the course of the eighteenth century, largely due to the aesthetic categories of beauty which were increasingly being described in a varied and nuanced lexicon. The generic 'fine' thus gave way to the more varied and nuanced 'neat', 'elegant', 'beautiful', and 'handsome'.

Significantly, product values came in clusters – 'bundles of characteristics' suggesting an 'economy of conventions', with recognizable 'repertoires of evaluation'.⁸¹ In the case of bedsteads and furniture, for instance, craftsmanship mattered, as did the product's raw material, with mahogany being a unique selling proposition throughout the eighteenth century. In contrast, aesthetic categories set the tone for bed hangings and furniture, with 'rich' and 'handsome' as key markers, the former being closely associated with patterned chintzes.

The quest for quality was firmly rooted in well-established practices of prudent household management, in which secondary markets continued to play a key role. Although the aesthetic canon in and of itself changed with evolving fashion cycles, it was not fashion or novelty per se that appealed to eighteenth-century consumers or middlemen when they visited auctions of household goods. Auctions were key scenes for the recirculation of goods, and value for money remained a key motivation for buyers. This links to the emphasis that [Nenadic](#), [Vickery](#), and [Harvey](#) place on prudence within the household economy and, in this way, suggests a long-term continuity with the twentieth-century shoppers studied by [Daniel Miller](#).⁸² Moreover, the raw materials, closely connected to the so-called intrinsic qualities of products, continued to weigh heavily on the valuation of objects. Goose-feather beds serve as an example of a desirable product valued for its intrinsic qualities and utility, and much the same could be argued for mirrors, where price was determined by size.

Yet, while the historiography has been explicit in describing the transition from an old luxury model to a new luxury economy as a shift from an intrinsic value-based to a design-based material culture,⁸³ our analysis shows that, in practice, the boundaries between intrinsic and design values were never clear-cut. In the case of mahogany furniture, it was the wood used that served as a marker for its fashionability and arguably for its design qualities as well. Yet, mahogany was associated with particular modes of furniture making and thus communicated style and aesthetics as well as material qualities.⁸⁴ Hence, the boundaries between 'old luxuries', deriving economic value from craftsmanship and a high intrinsic value, and the 'new luxury model' were blurred. In practice both models coexisted, complemented, and competed with one another, often even in one object category. Moreover, recent research has unveiled the long historical road towards these new luxuries, and the critical role played by elites in society in fostering product and process innovations that eventually would lead to the expansion of affordable populuxe. In short, the 'old luxury' versus 'new luxury' dichotomy is a conceptual rather than a historical tool of analysis.⁸⁵

According to the standard narrative, the new consumer culture of the eighteenth century implied greater affordability of semi-luxuries by ever-greater parts of the population. However, the

⁸¹ [De Munck and Lyna](#), 'Locating and dislocating value', p. 11.

⁸² [Nenadic](#), 'Middle rank consumers'; [Vickery](#), *Gentleman's daughter*, pp. 127–60; [Harvey](#), *Little republic*, pp. 64–98; [Miller](#), *Theory of shopping*, pp. 35–7, 101–2.

⁸³ [Blondé](#), 'Cities in decline', pp. 44–52.

⁸⁴ [Anderson](#), *Mahogany*, pp. 9–11; [Horrell](#), [Humphries](#), and [Sneath](#), 'Consumption conundrums unravelled', p. 501.

⁸⁵ [Peck](#), *Consuming splendor*, p. 13.



heavy emphasis on aesthetics required judgments of goods that were based on taste and knowledge. Our findings suggest that the aesthetics of a polite consumer culture might have helped to reproduce social inequalities in the eighteenth century. Trickle-down processes and social emulation notwithstanding, eighteenth-century polite consumer culture still fitted well into an elitist model of conspicuous consumption, one that reproduced social inequalities through ownership patterns and a *savoir vivre*, albeit with shifting social boundaries for the middling sort. The central values of the metropolitan auction world correlated more to social distinction and exclusion than to access and inclusion.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request from the authors.

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APPENDIX I

	1730–45	1793–96
Number of auction ads	500	939
Group A	75 (15%)	256 (27,3%)
Group B	138 (27,6%)	198 (21,1%)
Group C	287 (57,4%)	485 (51,6%)
Number of objects advertised	5,049	15,103
Number of advertised objects with raw material details	733 (14,5%)	2,807 (18,6%)
Number of advertised objects with design details	539 (10,7%)	532 (3,5%)
Number of advertised objects with quality descriptors	885 (17,5%)	2,010 (13%)