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Between aesthetics and a culture of decency. A comparative analysis of the vocabularies of consumption on the secondary markets of eighteenth-century Amsterdam and Antwerp

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ABSTRACT

While detailed accounts of ownership patterns of material culture buttress major narratives on the critical consumer transitions of the late early modern era, still surprisingly little is known about the specific consumer mentalities that went along with the rapidly expanding empire of goods. On the basis of newspaper advertisements for auctions of household estates in Amsterdam and Antwerp, this contribution maps the language of consumption on the high-end secondary markets. Unsurprisingly the language of consumption in both (former) commercial metropoles evolved as the eighteenth century progressed, with product qualities such as 'modern' gaining in prominence. Yet, strange as it may seem, the boundaries between the mentalities of new, affordable luxuries and traditional old luxuries were by no means clear-cut. Moreover, in Antwerp as well as in Amsterdam, it was first and foremost the aesthetics of the rich material culture that were invoked to lure potential customers to an auction. Even though both societies were marked by a rather frugal and commercially oriented mentality, the elitist vocabulary of consumption relied heavily on 'taste' formation, hence contributing to the rising material inequalities that marked the eighteenth century.

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Introduction

On 12 May 1740, Jan Teding van Berkhout, the son of a prominent family in Delft, wrote a letter home whilst staying in Paris. During his stay, Jan had commissioned beautiful summer clothes from one of the most famous Parisian *couturiers*. Writing to his brother, however, he admitted that he would most probably not be in a position to wear these garments upon his return because they were '*trop beau pour oser les porter en Hollande*'.[1] Berkhout's confession testifies to the fact that what was fashionable at the court in Paris was likely to be disapproved of in the bourgeois society of the Netherlands. Berkhout's attitude can be considered an example of the bourgeois values that are generally thought to have dominated the consumption culture of the Dutch Golden Age.

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These consumer values are reassessed in this contribution through a study of the language of consumption on eighteenth-century secondary markets. In recent historiography, the Netherlands are indeed credited with having paved the way towards a new and modern consumer model, tailored to the needs of an urban bourgeoisie.[2] The Netherlands thus played a pivotal role in the genesis of present-day Western consumer society. The development of a strong and relatively affluent class of the 'middling sort of people' fostered the rise of so-called 'new luxuries', consumer goods that, in contrast to traditional 'old' luxuries, lent themselves to cheap imitations accessible to larger segments of the urban population. These novel luxuries would eventually provide the backbone for the breakthrough of mass consumer societies. Indeed, Thera Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, Harm Nijboer, Johannes Faber and Anne McCants, to name but a few authors, found evidence of the spread of affordable luxuries throughout almost all layers of Dutch (urban) society.[3]

According to Jan de Vries, the 'new luxury' model cultivated the emergence of a more uniform consumer society.[4] Whether or not this perceived uniformity brought about by the 'consumer revolution' masked the (re)production of more subtle consumer inequalities remains a matter of debate, however.[5] Moreover, little is known about the 'mental frameworks' that accompanied the penetration of fashion and novelty into the material culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Different authors have put forward different explanations as driving forces of the critical eighteenth-century transformations of consumption habits, such as emulation, the desire for comfort, luxury, pleasure and the development of the individual self. Other scholars, meanwhile, seem to take a propensity to consume almost for granted. In this regard, it is emblematic that in one of the most sweeping statements on Golden Age culture, Simon Schama stressed the ambiguous relationship of the Dutch with wealth and consumption. The paradoxical influences of commerce, humanism and Calvinism, while hardly restraining opulent consumer practices, combined to instil an 'embarrassment of riches' into Dutch consumers, including the republican-minded bourgeoisie.[6] De Vries, on the other hand, attributes the moral iconography on which Schama's conclusions are based to a failure of contemporary writers and artists to 'read' the new reality of consumption. In the absence of an appropriate consumer vocabulary, they embedded the critical consumer transformations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in existing moral discourses. Eventually, a theoretical framework in defence of bourgeois consumer practices was developed across the Channel by English political economists.[7]

Meanwhile, the Dutch consumer mentality in the eighteenth century remains elusive. Schama, like many cultural historians, maintains that after the French invasion of 1672 Dutch culture succumbed to the dominant French lifestyle, including its inclination towards excessive consumption.[8] The alleged egalitarian spirit of the Golden Age gave way to economic stagnation, social segmentation and cultural decline. Socioeconomic historians, who usually look at material culture through the lens of probate inventories, tend to deny that a trend change occurred. They instead see continuity in the burgeoning bourgeois-driven consumer society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In spite of the lamentations of contemporary Dutchmen and nostalgic nineteenth-century historians about the extravagance of the 'wig era', the spread of affordable 'new luxuries' continued unabated in the eighteenth century, even if purchasing power declined.

This article offers a contribution to the debate on consumer mentalities by delving into the everyday vocabulary of consumption. This will be done by scrutinizing the discourses

used in the advertisements for pending household estate auctions of second-hand goods in Amsterdam. Our exercise involves a comparison with the southern Low Countries. There, according to De Vries, 'craft traditions of long standing were sustained by the patronage of local and Spanish courts', which generated costly craft goods but no breakthrough in affordable consumer goods.[9] Recent research, however, suggests that the product and process innovations eventually leading to the 'new luxury' economy were already firmly rooted in the late medieval Flemish and Brabantine urban economies.[10] Moreover, intensive research into probate inventories from cities such as Antwerp, Aalst, Lier and Ghent, as well as from the Flemish and Brabantine countryside, has revealed that overall a very similar material culture developed across the Low Countries.[11] What has not been studied is whether or not this material culture was appropriated differently into everyday consumer mentalities.

Hence, in this article Amsterdam and Antwerp will be compared. The choice of these two cities was prompted by their shared (and to a certain extent even entangled) commercial histories.[12] Both experienced a 'golden age' as leading trade metropoles in the early modern era. By the eighteenth century, as more and more merchants became rentiers, each had lost commercial prominence, however. Yet, according to Karel Degryse, a major specialist in financial strategies of Antwerp households, the mercantile elites of the Scheldt city retained much of their commercial and frugal lifestyles even after they entered the nobility and (often reluctantly) abandoned their businesses.[13] The contrast with Brussels, a court city with a cultural morphology more attuned to Parisian fashion, is clear from an anecdote reminiscent of Berkhout's letter. When a Brussels nobleman asked Jacomo de Pret, a scion of a rich Antwerp-based merchant family, about potential buyers in Antwerp of ostentatious furniture owned by a certain marquise, he wrote back that '*La belle table et miroir de feu [sont] plus propre[s] pour Brusselles que pour Anvers, ou un particulier ne se sert pas de meubles aussi riches et distingués*'.[14] The statements of Berkhout and De Pret suggest that the urban bourgeoisies of Antwerp and Amsterdam suffered from the same moral unease about conspicuous consumption. Still, just like in the Netherlands, the 'embarrassment of riches' conundrum did not prevent Antwerpers from feverishly partaking in the 'consumer revolution'. Thus, the commercial path dependency of the consumption culture of Antwerp underpins the comparative design of this exploration and serves to minimize the potential influence of differences in urban typology on the commercial vocabularies in both cities.[15]

Research design

On the basis of auction advertisements, we will try to map the bundles of characteristics that were attractive to consumers in eighteenth-century Amsterdam and Antwerp. Our goal is to assess the underlying consumer values among the newspaper-reading populations in both towns. Our rationale is that to a certain extent, the meaning of consumption was forged by the language used in advertisements, catalogues and other written material.[16] All these were obviously not independent variables, but also dependent ones, mirroring both the reigning and the changing consumer attitudes. Hence, in order to grasp some aspects of (changing) consumption culture and values, this article analyses the subtle discursive ways in which objects obtained value in eighteenth-century newspaper advertisements.[17]

Rather than focusing on advertisements for new objects in shops, we will make use of announcements of household estate auctions, which offered all kinds of pre-owned household goods for sale. Indeed, even in a world of growing consumption of new luxuries, second-hand auctions still held an important place.[18] Part and parcel of a 'prudent economy', second-hand shops and auctions have been described as commercial milieus where both old and new luxuries were sold, and where people from different social backgrounds intermingled. Auctions of probate inventories in particular offered opportunities for people who were looking for affordable goods of high quality.[19] In these venues furniture, silverware, (household) textiles, china and the like were auctioned, and the choice and sequence of the objects that were explicitly selected for inclusion in the ads are, in and of themselves, already revelatory for existing hierarchies of consumption. Yet, interestingly, in order to attract potential end-consumers or middlemen, quite a few objects were also advertized using specific descriptors, adjectives that highlighted one of the supposed qualities of the items offered for sale.

An advertisement published in the *Amsterdamse Courant* on 9 January 1790 is an example of the rich descriptions that were sometimes added to advertisements in order to lure potential customers to an auction. A gentleman by the name of M. Spanceerder attempted to draw the reader's attention to his auction of an assortment of household goods by describing the estate as 'magnificent' and 'very genteel/decent'. Furthermore, Spanceerder described his gold – and silverware as 'modern' and the porcelain as 'old, blue and coloured'. Immediately, we can see different cultural ideas surrounding specific objects interacting in the same advertisement. 'Genteel' consumer goods could be linked to a discourse surrounding the 'embarrassment of riches', while modern silverware and old porcelain reflect the worlds of rapidly changing consumption patterns and fashion trends. This little example shows the potential of systematically studying the subtle discursive ways in which objects received specific values through auction ads, their often repetitive and formulaic language notwithstanding.

The bulk of the source material is drawn from the *Gazette van Antwerpen*, from which we took samples for the years 1730–1731, 1759–1761 and 1789–1791.[20] This generated a total of 3.676 advertisements and over 10.000 objects. We added a set of data drawn from the *Amsterdamse Courant* for the years 1740–1741 and 1790. This set consists of 286 adverts describing 3,160 objects. On the basis of these databases, we will analyse the kinds of adjectives used by auctioneers to promote their goods. It is worth noting that it remains somewhat unclear which social and economic groups in society were targeted by these newspapers. Circumstantial evidence points to a middle-class and elite audience, as do the objects that were advertized.[21] Since the middle class is mentioned by De Vries as the driving force behind the surge in consumption and the advent of new luxuries, this puts the newspaper advertisements forward as a source well suited to the study of middle – and upper-class consumer values. To this end, the article examines the language of consumer values in Antwerp and Amsterdam on two levels: the general descriptions of the estates being auctioned and the object-specific descriptors at the level of the auctioned goods themselves.

The temptation of the auction

Advertisements for the sale of household goods often followed a default format. The auctioneer first communicated the date and location of the sale. In Amsterdam, this was

usually followed by a general description of the character of the goods on offer. A more elaborate list of the available goods and their qualities followed. At the end of the advertisements, details could be found about the ability to view the goods and to obtain auction catalogues (see 'Appendix' for an example of an advertisement published in Amsterdam).

In this section we will focus on the more general descriptions of the collection of goods (henceforth called 'object ensembles') available in Amsterdam auctions. Figure 1 shows the most prominent adjectives used for household estates in Holland. Here, as well as in subsequent figures, we include only objects or object ensembles with at least one description. Both estates and objects could be described by more than one descriptor, but they were thus left out of the analysis in case they were not accompanied by any adjective at all. Interestingly, the most common adjectives that were used to announce a pending household estate auction were 'beautiful, neat, clean' ('*zindelijk*'), 'neat' ('*net*') and 'genteel/decent' ('*deftig*'). These descriptors point to the importance in advertisements of aesthetics as well as a certain discretion surrounding luxury consumption. By describing a collection of goods as 'decent/genteel' or 'neat, clean' the advertisers complied with a cultural desire for modest consumption. '*Deftig*', for example, can be translated as 'of modest beauty' or 'of moral beauty'.[22] These adjectives refrained from highlighting the ostentatious beauty of objects and conveyed to future owners that they could buy the auctioned goods without falling prey to the corrupting desires of extravagant material possessions.

Thus, auctioneers in Amsterdam, while stressing aesthetics, also felt the need to downplay the splendour of the goods on offer. A rich and exuberant description would not fit in with the norms and values of their potential customers. Evidently, this could be linked to the idea that Calvinism constrained Dutch luxury consumption or, at the very least,

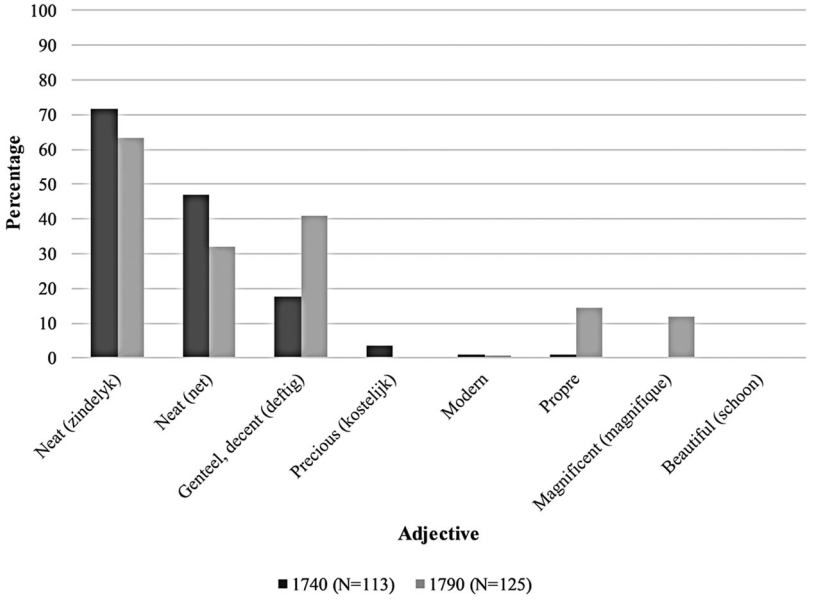

Figure 1. Frequency of key descriptions of object ensembles in two samples of auction advertisements, *Amsterdamse Courant,* 1740 and 1790.

conspicuous consumption, which was meant to display status and wealth. However, we should be cautious about drawing far-reaching conclusions from these formulaic introductions alone. Indeed, it seems to have been customary practice to start an auction advertisement with expressions such as 'a decent/genteel inventory' ('*een deftige inboedel*'). These standardized lines met general cultural, religious or social expectations of modesty. Yet, in order better to assess how consumers thought about consumption and what was attractive to them, we will need to delve into the specificities of the vocabulary used for the marketing of auction lots and goods, both in Amsterdam and in Antwerp.

All about aesthetics?

When we zoom in on the objects that were marketed, a preliminary quantitative exploration is helpful. The data reveal that the majority of the goods were advertized without any modifiers at all. In Antwerp, advertisers chose not to add an adjective in nearly 90 per cent of the goods they advertised. After all, dedicating space to descriptors meant listing fewer items. Furthermore, Amsterdam publishers often placed advertisements vertically, in the margins of their pages, so as to be able to include as many advertisements as possible. Evidently, space for advertizing in these newspapers was limited. Amsterdam's advertisers were more generous in this respect than their Antwerp equivalents, but even they chose to include an adjective only in 40% of cases. Overall, the relatively small number of descriptors is hardly an issue for the purpose of this research. On the contrary, this selectivity is revelatory of the economic or cultural value of those objects that eventually did receive specific descriptions. It seems intuitive that auctioneers preferred to detail objects that were especially appealing to potential customers and to detail object characteristics accordingly. In doing so, it seems clear that Amsterdam auctioneers not only made use of adjectives more often, but they also used a more versatile vocabulary. As depicted in Figure 3 (pertaining to specific objects) and Figure 2 (representing object ensembles), it is evident that Antwerp advertisers used a more repetitive terminology.

Aesthetics played a key role in both Amsterdam and Antwerp, although the specific vocabulary used to evoke the beauty of things was different in the two cities. Figure 3 shows the percentage of individual quality descriptors relative to the total number of adjectives used for goods as found in the entire data set for the *Gazette van Antwerp*. In almost 80 per cent of objects with a descriptor, Antwerp advertisers used the adjective '*schoon*', which can be translated as 'beautiful' or 'neat'. It is worth noting that other descriptors, such as 'modern' or 'new', also made their way into at least some advertisements as the century progressed – albeit to a limited extent only. Overall Antwerp advertisers dedicated many of their resources to emphasizing the aesthetic characteristics of their goods. Whether they were advertizing paintings, furniture, silverware, clothing, household linen or other items, they often did so by using the same 'filler' word, i.e. '*schoon*', over and over again. Strikingly enough, 'fashionable' was not a frequently highlighted feature of the objects that went under the hammer. This is counterintuitive, given the historiographical context and the evidence of the Antwerp material culture in the Age of Enlightenment.[23] While this material culture was very similar to Amsterdam's world of goods, Figure 4 shows that advertizers in the Dutch capital did use words linked to

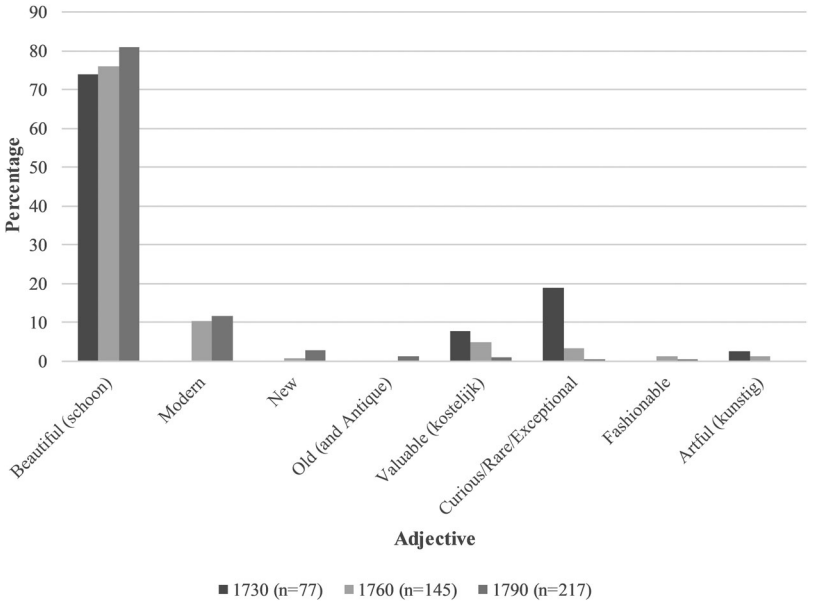

Figure 2. Frequency of key descriptions of object ensembles in three samples of auction advertisements, *Gazette van Antwerpen,* 1730, 1760 & 1790.

modernity and fashion to promote these goods. As we will discuss later, typically 'modern' or 'fashionable' goods for this era were not described as such in Antwerp, in contrast to Amsterdam. The fact that these goods were instead described as 'beautiful'

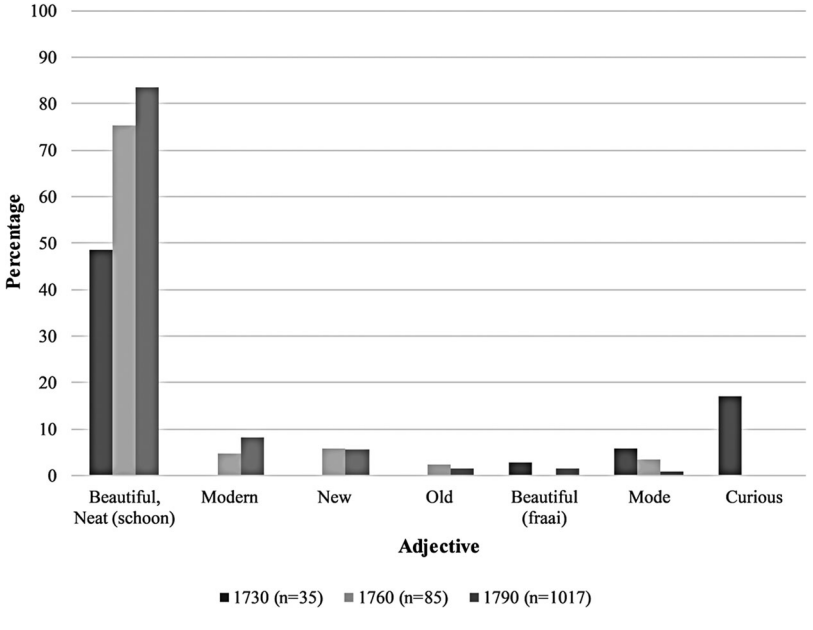

Figure 3. Frequency of key adjectives, relative to the total number of goods described by at least one adjective, *Gazette van Antwerpen*, 1730, 1760 & 1790.

points to their incorporation into ideas of taste and gentility. In this discourse, desirable objects, such as chinaware, conveyed 'taste', and as such they were linked to a certain social status. Obviously, '*schoon*' was a 'filler word', potentially hinting at notions of 'fashionability' and 'decency'. It remains striking that advertisers preferred to highlight the beauty of things rather than to specify, for example, the novelty or other features that figure prominently in the narratives of the eighteenth-century consumer historiography.

The evidence for Amsterdam is subtly different. Figure 4 reveals the most prominent descriptors in Amsterdam auction advertisements during the eighteenth century, again accounting for only the goods with a quality description. While the number of objects without an adjective is lower than in Antwerp, it is still fairly significant (60 per cent). The percentage of objects that were described with a specific marker indicated a significantly higher degree of sophistication in terms of the language of consumption. The most obvious difference is the lack of one predominant adjective such as '*schoon*' in the Antwerp records. At first glance Amsterdam's auctioneers focused somewhat less on marketing the beauty of things and more on the diverse characteristics of the household goods on offer. While 'beautiful' is also one of the most utilized adjectives in Amsterdam, other descriptors are prominent in the advertizing scene as well. Adjectives such as 'modern' and 'old', for instance, occurred constantly. It seems that Amsterdam advertisers felt the need to highlight different and more diverse characteristics of their goods. In doing so they moved beyond the aesthetic value of things.

It is important to note that notions of modesty, which figured rather prominently in the introductions to the auction advertisements of the *Amsterdamse Courant*, were nowhere to be found at the object-specific level. This begs the question whether such introductions served as a '*captatio benevolentiae*', a convention referring to path-

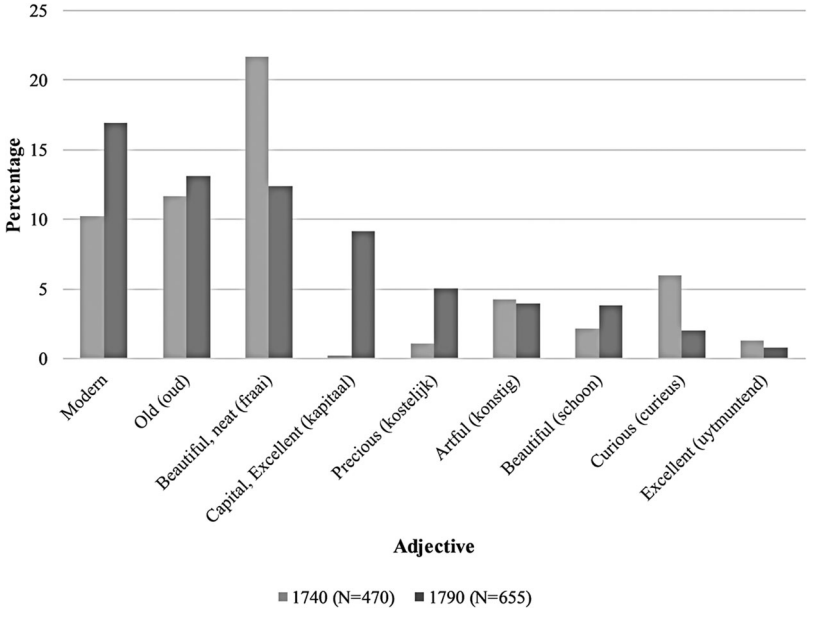

Figure 4. Frequency of key adjectives, relative to the total number of goods described by at least one adjective, *Amsterdamse Courant*, 1740 and 1790.

dependent moral categories of frugal consumption without necessarily affecting consumption preferences themselves. If so, this would explain the apparent disconnect between Dutch participation in the consumer revolution and the moral discourse found in Dutch art and literature. If we want to unravel this ambiguity further, we have to dig deeper into the language of consumption. One way to do so is to look at the distinction between 'old' and 'new' luxuries, which is usually linked to a supposedly different potential for social distinction. After all, historians of material culture have highlighted the pursuit of novelty as one of the main characteristics of the 'consumer revolution'.[24] The remainder of this article will therefore delve deeper into the sociolinguistic context in which notions of 'old' and 'new' were employed in Amsterdam and Antwerp auction ads, complemented with some additional information drawn from probate inventories in the cities under investigation. Both porcelain and furniture will, to this end, be scrutinized in greater detail in the next section. Finally, we will question the novelty paradigm by zooming in on silverware, which served as the most iconic archetype of an 'old luxury'.

Old porcelain versus modern furniture

Figure 5 shows the adjectives most frequently used to advertize certain specific, common consumer goods in Amsterdam advertisements. For the purpose of this analysis we have divided all the goods into broader categories. As noted earlier, Amsterdam advertisers were more generous with adjectives than their Antwerp colleagues, especially with regard to porcelain. Objects fashioned from this eye-catching material with great aesthetic value were some of the most important goods to both consumers and sellers,

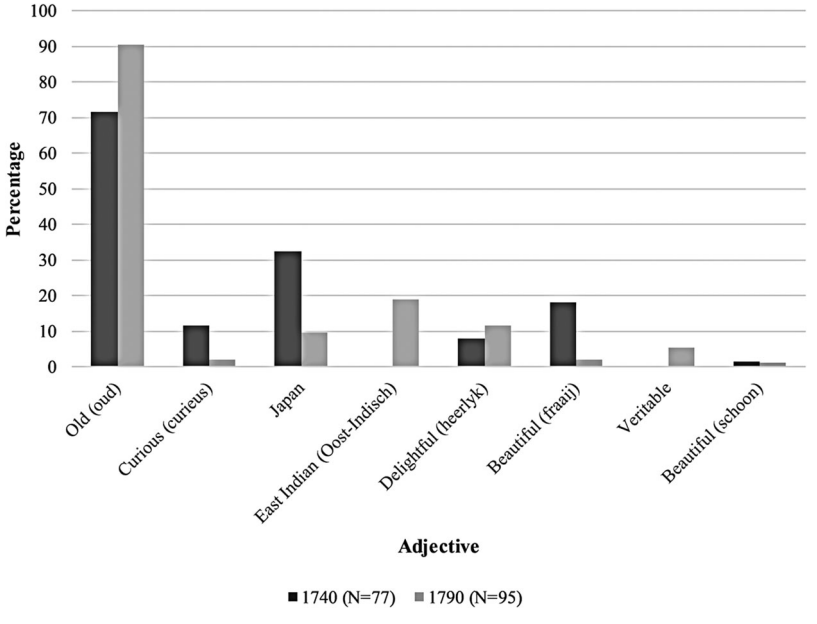

Figure 5. Frequency of key adjectives used to describe china relative to all china described by at least one adjective, *Amsterdamse Courant*, 1740 & 1790.

and wealthier Amsterdam citizens in particular seem to have invested disproportionately in chinaware.[25] For several reasons, chinaware played a critical role in the advent of new luxuries. Whereas pewter and silver tableware always represented a safe investment that could easily be converted into cash or used as collateral, chinaware, though breakable, was especially valued for its design qualities.[26] It thus played a crucial role in oiling the transformation towards the new luxury consumer model and the breakthrough of affordable breakables into the wider material culture.[27] Traditionally, an important role is attributed to the arrival of hot drinks in fostering the expansion of porcelain and its substitutes in the late early modern period.[28] Yet, a good case can be made for the fact that the rapid expansion of porcelain owed a lot to earlier developments; especially as earthenware and maiolica production techniques and consumer preferences show dynamics similar to those of the world of porcelain.[29] In fact, as we argued earlier, the Low Countries contributed significantly to the innovation of tin-glazed earthenware and the expansion of Delftware, and they did so especially by product innovations targeting affordable semi-luxuries for the (urban) middling classes. Even though Delft's pottery industry was in decline by the eighteenth century, this did not prevent 'high-end' – likely foreign-made – porcelain from figuring prominently in adverts for second-hand sales. Porcelain was not only frequently mentioned, it was often accompanied by more than one descriptor as well. Clearly, Dutch elites continued to value actual chinaware.

The most prominent adjective used to describe porcelain was 'old'. This seems to be a paradox, for porcelain is considered to be a prototype of the new luxuries which, according to authors such as De Vries, were attractive to consumers because of their design qualities and their proclivity to follow fashion cycles. One would thus expect novelty to be a key defining characteristic. Instead, advertisers capitalised on the fact that 'old porcelain' was especially attractive to consumers. Whether or not this 'old' porcelain was also genuinely Asian or rather a European imitation is hard to say. Yet, it is conceivable that elite families sought to distinguish themselves by displaying old and therefore deemed to be valuable porcelain in their houses. Chinaware was widespread throughout Dutch society in the eighteenth century. Even the lower classes usually possessed some pieces of porcelain. Indeed, coffee, tea and porcelain were accessible to almost all levels of eighteenth-century society, or at least the urban centres of Holland. Accordingly, poorer Dutch households usually possessed some porcelain in addition to various pieces of Delft – or other earthenware.[30] Yet, preliminary data on the ownership of porcelain in Amsterdam probate inventories, as well as the robust conclusions of Thera Wijsenbeek on Delft households, indicate that richer inhabitants were disproportionately investing in china, while middle-class consumers still preferred silver.[31] In the pursuit of old and expensive porcelain the power of 'patina' appears to have been introduced into the material world of china.[32] By investing in this valuable porcelain, the elites reproduced inequalities through their possessions and distanced themselves from middle – and lower-class consumers; the latter could simply not afford to take these risks and instead invested in silverware, a more proven store of value. In the process, old chinaware, possibly genuinely Asian rather than earthenware substitutions, had gained in attractiveness. In Antwerp probate inventories too, ownership of chinaware was heavily polarized.[33] Several of the changes in the material culture of the Low Countries that are usually associated with the advent of 'new luxuries', consumer emancipation and

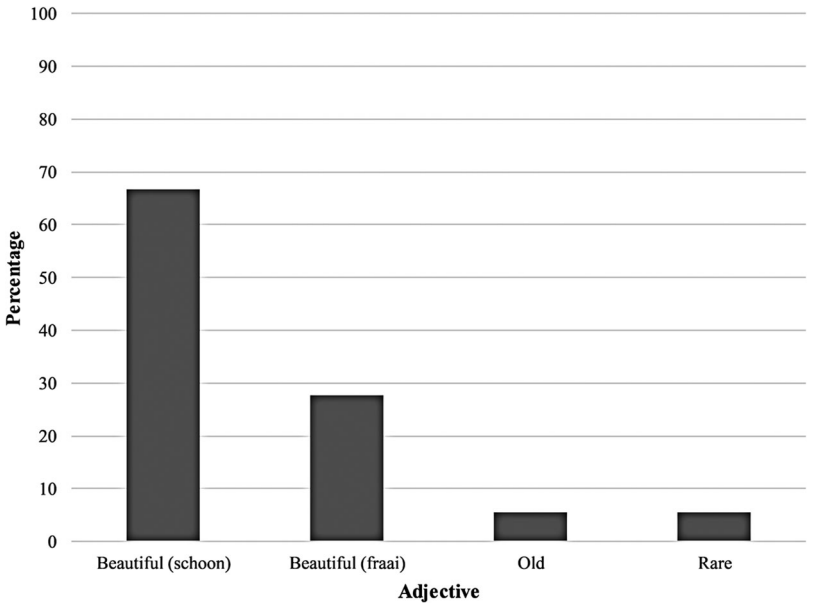

Figure 6. Frequency of key adjectives used to describe china relative to all china described by at least one adjective, *Gazette van Antwerpen*, 1730, 1760 & 1790.

the blurring of social boundaries, were in practice actively deepening social distinctions.[34] Yet, compared to the Amsterdam announcements, in Antwerp porcelain was advertized remarkably less often. While the notion of 'old' and 'rare' porcelain was not unfamiliar in the city on the river Scheldt, it was – again – the beauty of things ('*schoon*', '*fraai*') that took centre stage (see Figure 6).

The slightly counterintuitive example of porcelain exemplifies the juxtaposition of 'new' and 'old' as cultural concepts while having contingent potential for 'fashioning'. While in the case of porcelain the term 'old' signalled added value, furniture was frequently described as 'modern'. Indeed, furniture seems to fit into the standard narrative of the consumer revolution, with a growing choice and variety in style as well as a strong emphasis on 'new' as in 'novel'. By comparing the sample years 1740 and 1790 we can discern the growing importance of 'modern' as an adjective for furniture in Amsterdam's market. In 1740 the modernity of furniture was of hardly any importance. In 1790, however, it was the single most prominent descriptor. Meanwhile the adjective 'beautiful' ('*fraai*') lost prominence in the same period. In Antwerp, several auction lots (comprising a variety of pieces of furniture) were described in detail (Figure 7). The numbers involved are small, but the general tendency is clear. Much as was the case in Amsterdam (Figure 8), modernity gained ground as the eighteenth century progressed. And, here as well, it did so at the expense of beauty.

Silverware, a cultural hybrid?

In 1701 the author of *De gedebaucheerde en betoverde Koffy en Thee Weereld* ('The Debauched and Enchanted World of Coffee and Tea') complained about the arrival of

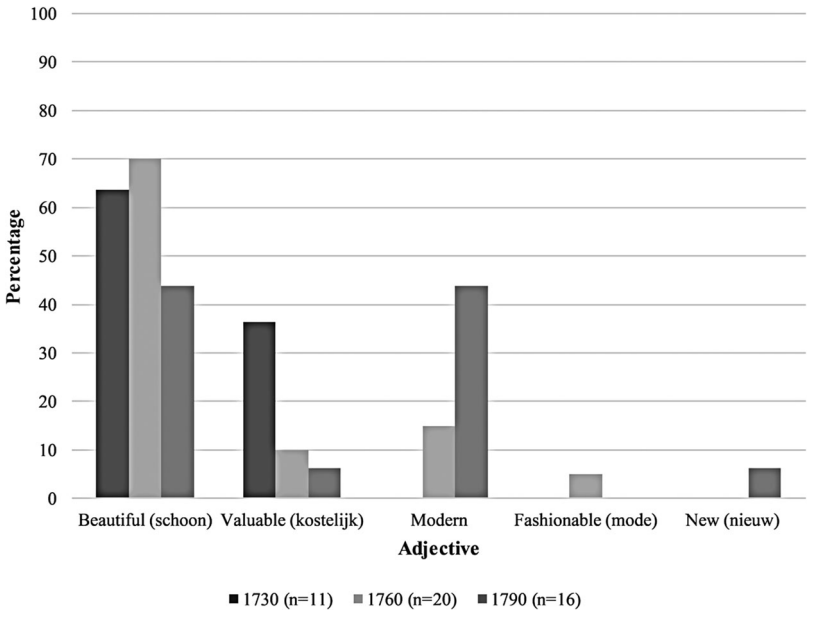

Figure 7. Frequency of key adjectives used to describe furniture relative to all auctions of furniture described by at least one adjective, *Amsterdamse Courant*, 1740 & 1790.

hot drinks. Coffee and tea, often sweetened with copious amounts of sugar, inspired the Dutch to drink from porcelain cups rather than silver vessels, although this meant a loss of capital in the event that the fragile porcelain broke.[35] The complaint comes as no surprise and fits well into the dominant narrative about the gradual replacement of 'old luxuries' with affordable, yet less durable 'new luxuries'. Silverware is traditionally seen as a typical 'old luxury', the value of which was first and foremost located in its material qualities. Silver and gold outcompeted other precious metals as media of exchange in the course of history and formed the basis of most European currencies. Hence, silverware was especially valued because it could easily be remelted and exchanged for cash. Silverware functioned, in other words, as a store of wealth.[36]

Probate inventories from Amsterdam confirm that silverware remained important in the course of the consumer revolution.[37] It was standard practice for notaries drawing up these inventories to weigh silver objects in the eighteenth century. The silver was also assessed on quality and accordingly given a monetary value per '*loot*' (15,44 grammes), which was subsequently multiplied by the weight in order to arrive at a precise estimate of the silver object's monetary worth. The broad middling layers of urban society, represented in Figure 9 by classes B and C, continued to invest heavily in silverware. They even increased its share in the material culture budget at the expense of porcelain and other new luxuries as the century progressed, to an average of around 10% of the total worth of movable goods by 1780. This percentage was even higher in inventories of the urban elites (class A), which also continued to invest disproportionally in silver items while reducing expenditures on porcelain. As the Dutch economy stagnated in the eighteenth century, households therefore opted to invest

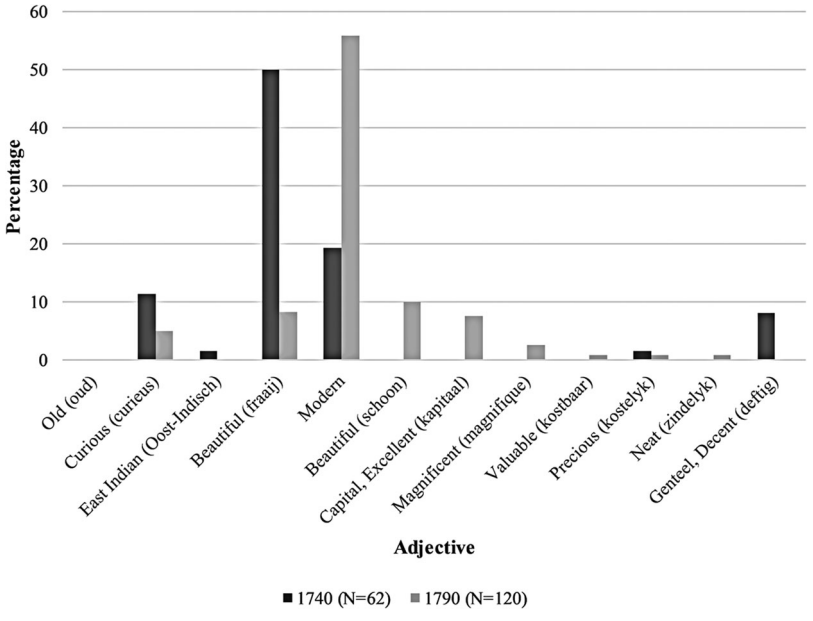

Figure 8. Frequency of key adjectives used to describe furniture relative to all auctions of furniture described by at least one adjective, *Gazette van Antwerpen*, 1730, 1760 & 1790.

some of their material capital in goods with intrinsic value rather than in fragile objects that were valued mostly for their design qualities.

While the vocabulary used in connection with chinaware differed fundamentally in Antwerp and Amsterdam, the similarities between the two cities in the vocabulary for silverware are striking. Even though the number of explicit references to aesthetics is once again higher in Antwerp, in both cities silverware is remarkably often described as 'modern' (Figure 10 and Figure 11) – a fact that is obviously *not* commensurate with its reputation as an 'old luxury'. As economic growth slowed down and households shifted part of their expenditures from new luxuries to silverware, there was an apparent need to stress that silver items, too, could be moulded into fashionable objects. A closer look at Antwerp probate inventories confirms this trend. Generally speaking, probate inventories are rather uninformative in documenting the product qualities of objects that were recorded.[38] Silverware was, however, an exception. Notaries drawing up probate inventories increasingly paid attention to whether or not the silverware they listed was up to date. A typical story is that of L.J. Du Bois d'Aissche, whose 1745 probate inventory includes a whole series of silver objects weighed by A.D. Van Huckelroy.[39] There was apparently no need to provide a detailed description of the silverware, which was sold by weight. Silverware that was converted into cash was called '*out fatsoen buyten de mode*' ('old-style and no longer fashionable'). The shift in meaning from 'old' to 'old-fashioned' and eventually to 'outmoded', whereby the same word acquired new meanings, is typical of this process. Martinus van Bombergen, who died in the Hoogstraat on 22 September 1741, had a reasonably impressive silver collection which, among other things, included a holy water basin, a tea canister, a bowl, a sugar saucer and a snuff box, all of which the acting notary described as 'modern'. However, Van

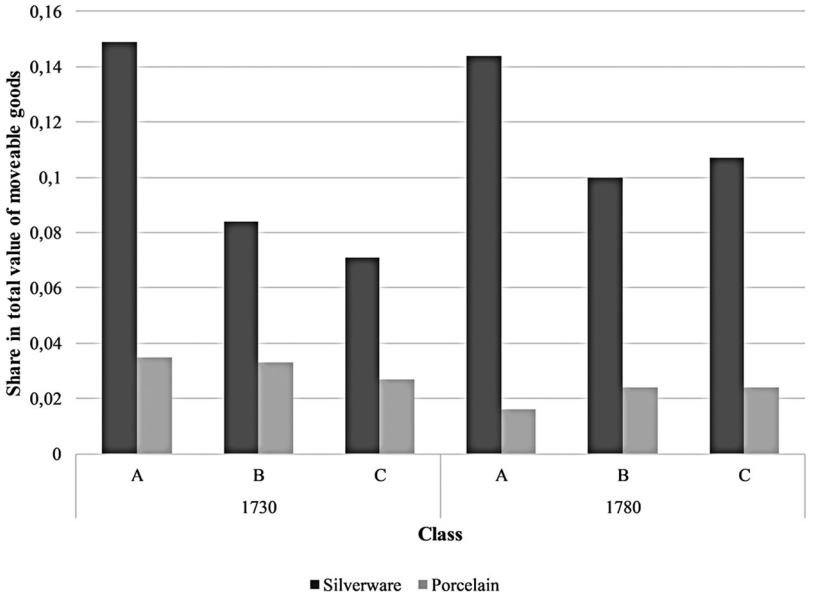

Figure 9. Average share of silverware and porcelain in two samples of Amsterdam probate inventories, 1730 ($n = 102$) & 1780 ($n = 103$).

Bombergen also owned an old-fashioned '*santhe meulen*'.[40] The same dubious honour befell a spoon and fork belonging to the widow of Sir Barnabé and Maria Fransisca Goris.[41] On 28 April 1753, the notary described four chased candlesticks and a pair of

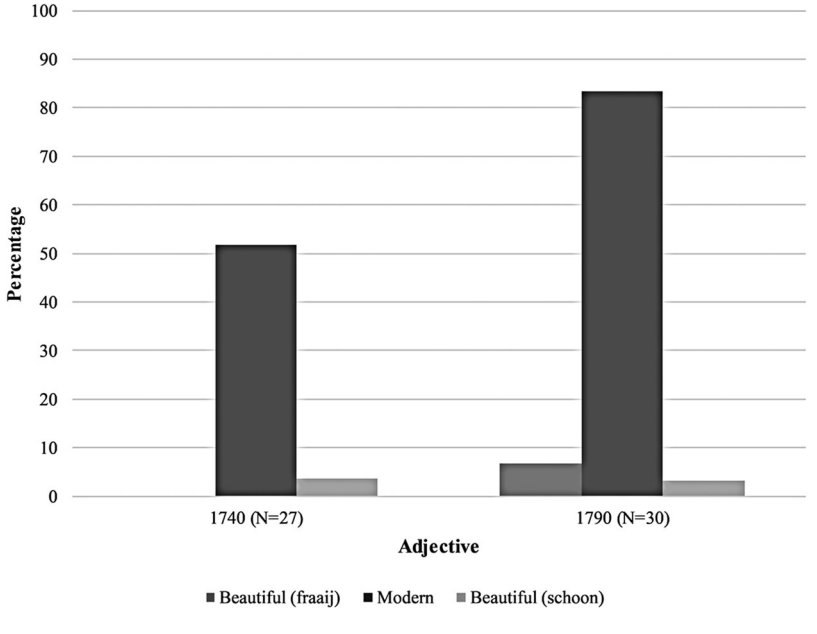

Figure 10. Frequency of key adjectives used to describe silverware relative to all silverware described by at least one adjective, *Amsterdamse Courant*, 1740 & 1790.

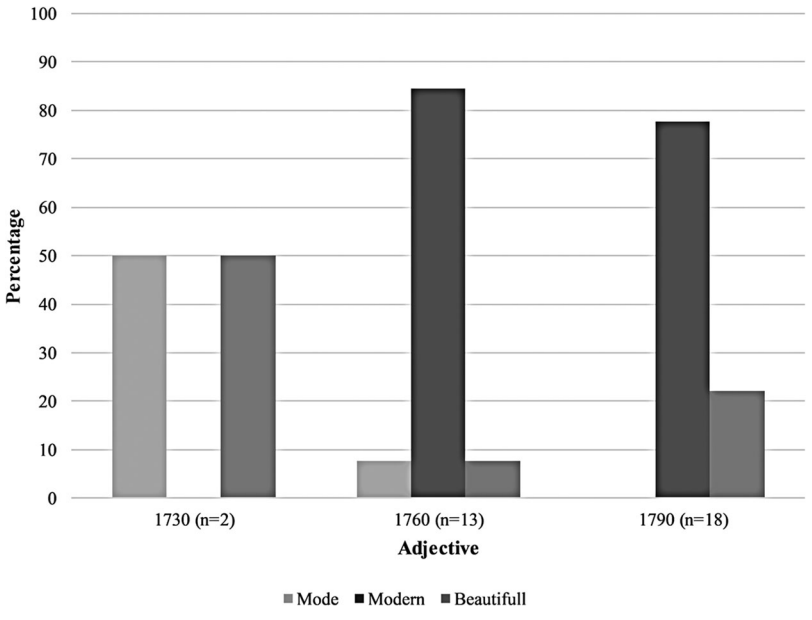

Figure 11. Frequency of key adjectives used to describe silverware relative to all silverware described by at least one adjective, *Gazette van Antwerpen*, 1730, 1760 & 1790.

salt cellars in the inheritance of Dominicus Arnoldus, priest, canon and cantor of the Church of St James, who had died on 17 April, as 'out of fashion'.[42]

For the present purpose, a complete survey of references to 'modern' silver objects found in the probate inventory database would take us too far. Nevertheless, we can conclude that in Antwerp the notion of modernity figured in both newspaper ads and probate inventories in the eighteenth century. Increasingly, alongside the value of the raw materials used, an object's design and most of all its fashionable nature became crucial qualities.[43] Traditionally, 'fashion' ('*fatsoen*') was used to describe the added value of the processing of silver(ware). On 28 March 1670 Elisabeth Moretus, widow of the former alderman Michiel Hugens, entered in her ledger that she had spent the sum of 5 guilders and 7 stivers on the fashioning of six new silver forks.[44] This barely put her out of pocket, since she traded in her old silver forks to be remelted and recovered for almost the same amount of money from the silversmith, i.e. 5 guilders and 5 stivers. In return she received a set of nicely cast forks with an updated 'cultural' value, but of less weight and less 'intrinsic' monetary value. When, in July of that same year, Elisabeth had her everyday silver saltcellar remelted, the old cellar fell short of covering the costs of the new one, and the widow had to make up the difference. Once again, she did not pay cash but relinquished a silver goblet. In September of that year two old silver candlesticks were sacrificed, alongside a small goblet and a gilt dish. Elisabeth had them refashioned into a vinegar cruet ('*azijnpotteken*') and four candlesticks. These four new candlesticks weighed almost the same as the two older specimens that had found their way into the melting pot.[45] However, Elizabeth would not have been an extravagant spender in her widowhood. Most of the trinkets she surrounded herself with were already hers when her husband was still alive. Judging from her household accounts, she did not seem to

be particularly interested in acquiring new, durable commodities. This did not prevent her from keeping up with silverware trends, however. Hence, for an advertiser it made sense to refer to an object as fashionable. It lured potential buyers to the auction of objects that did not need further processing.[46] Interestingly enough, 'fashion' was more frequently referred to in the earlier decades of the eighteenth century, while 'modernity' gained in prominence as time passed by. Aesthetic markers disappeared as the century progressed, and 'modernity', a concept that occurred rather infrequently in auction ads, achieved an almost monopolistic position for silverware.

The divergence between furniture, often marketed as modern, porcelain, which gained in attractiveness by ageing, and silverware, which had features of the 'old' and 'new' luxury alike, is marked. Our data show that, while a piece of chinaware was sometimes deemed fashionable as a result of its old age, the same characteristic rendered a chair or table undesirable. Silverware, on the other hand, retained its traditional function as a store of wealth, although it, like furniture, was increasingly refashioned to fit the modernity paradigm.

Conclusion

Our venture into the world of advertizing in eighteenth-century Amsterdam and Antwerp has harvested crucial insights into the values and preferences of contemporary consumers in both cities. The discourse connected to the material culture was rich and varied, and this holds especially true for Amsterdam. It would have gone beyond the limits of this article to discuss all the different objects on offer and the markers used to describe these. The choice of silver and porcelain was prompted by the roles they are supposed to have played in the transition from an 'old luxury' material culture to a 'new luxury' model. By analysing these emblematic goods and their adjectives, we have unearthed some seemingly paradoxical clues to the changing consumption values in eighteenth-century Amsterdam and Antwerp. Paradoxically enough, while some porcelain, a 'new luxury', achieved added value through ageing, for silverware the reverse was true. This adds to the conclusion that concepts of 'new' and 'old' were not clearly demarcated in the eighteenth century and that each could be 'fashioned'.[47] Put another way, the significance of old and new was highly context-specific. Moreover, the boundaries between the two could be blurred, not only between and within households of comparable social standing, but also within the qualities of one object. It was silverware that was unrivalled in combining key features of a modish and feverish consumption culture with the qualities and functions of a traditional 'old luxury'.

Citizens in Antwerp and Amsterdam shared a reputation for 'frugality'. Yet, if the auction advertisements can serve as an indication, frugality was more explicitly rooted in Amsterdam especially. At the top of the auction advertisements, the descriptions of object ensembles in Amsterdam are evidence of a lingering presence of modesty and perhaps embarrassment about conspicuous consumption. By describing a pending household estate sale as 'decent' or 'genteel' in the introductions to the majority of advertisements before referring to the 'beautiful', 'modern' or 'old/new' nature of the objects being auctioned, it is clear that the cultural notions of an 'embarrassment of riches' resonated with advertisers in Amsterdam as discussed by Simon Schama. However, at the object level, such markers of frugality were completely absent: here status-enhancing

taste and aesthetics dominated. Thus, the 'embarrassment conundrum' is perhaps not a product of different historiographical perspectives, but rather *essential* to the ambiguities within the Dutch consumer mentality itself. Our exploration supports Schama's analysis of Dutch culture caving to a richer and more lavish lifestyle while only in practice but not in theory abandoning Calvinist ideals of modesty and abstinence. Ideas about modesty still inspired the discourse surrounding consumption, mainly found in the warning of Calvinist preachers against the corrupting powers of money, whilst in reality Dutch consumers – as De Vries and other scholars have incontrovertibly shown – were more and more engaged in consumption. This conclusion is further strengthened by the rising importance of specific, fashion-linked adjectives found in advertisements from Amsterdam throughout the eighteenth century.

The contrast with Antwerp is marked. While the material culture in both cities did not fundamentally differ, and Antwerp even functioned as a major fashion broker for elite customers longing for '*le plus nouveau*' and '*le plus galant*' in the northern Netherlands, the discursive context in the Scheldt city was fundamentally different.[48] This raises the question whether the differences in auction vocabularies reflected local newspaper traditions or differential discursive contexts, reflecting and reproducing different consumer mentalities. The latter hypothesis seems plausible because the descriptions of objects in Antwerp auction advertisements resemble the language of consumption in Paris, the most important fashion benchmark at that time, as described by Charris De Smet in this issue.[49]

However, we need to advocate caution when dealing with a discourse dominated by references to beauty in Antwerp adverts. Other adjectives, such as 'modern', 'rare', 'valuable', 'curious', 'old' and the like, were deployed in Antwerp as well. It is impossible to completely disentangle beauty, modernity, fashion, etc. It is conceivable, for example, that Antwerp consumers linked a 'beautiful' piece of chinaware to a design that responded to the demands of recent fashion trends or to the patina that went with the ownership of an old object. While 'beautiful' dwarfed all other descriptors in Antwerp, references to aesthetics, with '*zindelijk*' and '*net*' as examples of key markers, also dominated the Amsterdam auction vocabulary. Depending on the specific object being auctioned, Amsterdam advertisers chose from a greater variety of adjectives to attract the attention of potential buyers. The analysis of these adjectives has led us to the conclusion that the high-end second-hand market was ruled by the feverish search for beautiful and fashionable goods. It was crucial for consumers to buy porcelain or furniture that reflected taste and status. As a result, advertisers clearly sought to highlight the fashionable characteristics of the goods on offer, even when fashionable implied the patina of an 'old' object. The Amsterdam advertisements provide compelling evidence for the intertwined concepts of 'new' and 'old' in the eighteenth-century world of consumption.[50]

Last but not least, both in Amsterdam and Antwerp the auction vocabulary bears witness to discursive strategies that pointed to taste as a critical consumer category, one that reproduced social inequalities. Our exploration of the world of auctions, even in the context of relatively frugal societies, has done little to reinforce 'consumer revolution' narratives about 'new luxuries' and their role in blurring social boundaries. There was rather, in Amsterdam and Antwerp alike, a world of taste and lasting, if not growing, consumption inequality.

Notes

1. Verhoeven, *Anders reizen,* 271–272.
2. Trentmann, *Empire of Things. How We Became a World of Consumers*, 53.
3. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, *Achter de Gevels van Delft*; Nijboer, "Fashion and the Early Modern Consumer Evolution," 21–36; McCants, "Poor Consumers as Global Consumers," 172–200; Faber, "Inhabitants of Amsterdam," 149–156.
4. De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 52.
5. Blondé et al., "The Low Countries' Paradox," 22–27.
6. Schama, *Overvloed en Onbehagen: de Nederlandse cultuur in de Gouden Eeuw*.
7. De Vries, "Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age in Theory and Practice," 41–56.
8. Schama, *Overvloed en Onbehagen: de Nederlandse cultuur in de Gouden Eeuw*, 289–328.
9. De Vries, "Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age in Theory and Practice," 52.
10. Baatsen, "At Home in the City," 192–219; Blondé and Ryckbosch, "In "splendid isolation," 105–124. Puttevils et al., "Silks and the "Golden Age" of Antwerp," 297–315.
11. Ryckbosch, *A Consumer Revolution under Strain*; Vermoesen, *Markttoegang en 'commerciële' netwerken van rurale huishoudens : de regio Aalst, 1650-1800*; Poukens and Provoost, "Respectability, Middle-Class Material Culture"; De Laet, *Brussel binnenskamers*; Schelstraete et al., *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*; Saelens, "Comforts of Difference"; Kamermans, *Materiële cultuur in de Krimpenerwaard in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*; Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit*; Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, *Achter de Gevels van Delft*; de Vries, "Peasant demand patterns and economic development: Friesland 1550-1750".
12. Lesger, *Handel in Amsterdam ten tijde van de Opstand*.
13. Degryse, "The Aristocratization of the Antwerp Mercantile Elite (17th-18th Centuries)"; ibid., *De Antwerpse fortuinen*.
14. Cited in ibid.,, *De Antwerpse fortuinen.*, 183.; see also Blonde and De Laet, "New and Old Luxuries," 39–57.
15. Blondé, "Conflicting Consumption Models?".
16. See, for example, Stobart, "Selling (Through) Politeness," 323–325.
17. De Munck and Lyna, "Locating and Dislocating Value".
18. Blondé and van Damme, "Fashioning Old and New," 1–13; Fontaine, *Alternative Exchanges: Second-Hand Circulations from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*.
19. Van Damme and Vermoesen, "Second-Hand Consumption as a Way of Life".
20. Lyna and van Damme, "A Strategy of Seduction?" 100–121.
21. Van Impe, *Biografie van een achttiende-eeuwse krant*, 257–261.
22. Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal, https://gtb.ivdnt.org/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=WNT&id=M013261&lemma=deftig&domein=0&conc=true, 23-12-2022.
23. Van Damme, "Middlemen and the Creation of a "Fashion Revolution"".
24. Kwass, *The Consumer Revolution, 1650–1800*; McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*.
25. Faber, "Inhabitants of Amsterdam".
26. Baatsen et al., "'Antwerp and the "Material Renaissance"".
27. Blondé, "Tableware and changing consumer patterns".
28. Shammas, *The Pre-industrial consumer in England and America*.
29. Goldthwaite, "The Economic and Social World of Italian Renaissance Majolica".
30. McCants, "Poor Consumers as Global Consumers"; van Koolbergen, "De materiële cultuur van Weesp en Weesperkarspel," 35.
31. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, *Achter de Gevels van Delft.,* 215–226.
32. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*.
33. Blondé et al., "The Low Countries' Paradox," 22–27.
34. Ibid., 15–42.
35. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis et al., "Van Medicijn Tot Statussymbool," 111.
36. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, "A Matter of Taste," 45–48.

37. These probate inventories are currently being processed in a database in the framework of the FWO Research project, 'The embarrassment of riches? Inequality and the Dutch material culture. Amsterdam, 1581-1780'.
38. Overton et al., *Production and Consumption in English Households 1600-1750*.
39. SAA, *Not.*, Prot., 2166. Reference G. Van Hemeldonck.
40. Hoogstraat. SAA, *Not.*, *Prot*., 1211. Reference G. Van Hemeldonck.
41. SAA, *Not.*, Prot., 2912. Reference G. Van Hemeldonck.
42. SAA, *Not.*, Prot., 2914. Reference G. Van Hemeldonck.
43. Clifford, "A Commerce with Things".
44. De Staelen, *Levenswijze en consumptiepatroon van een Antwerpse weduwe*.; Ibid., "Een venster op de materiële leefwereld van Elisabeth Moretus".
45. A possible explanation could be the size of the new candlesticks, but also a less 'silver intensive' production technique.
46. Clifford, "The Veneer of Age," 248.
47. Blondé and van Damme, "Fashioning Old and New".
48. Blondé, "De plus Nouveau et de plus Galant," 227–229 ; Coppens, "Au Magasin de Paris," 81–107 ; Blondé et al., "According to the Latest and Most Elegant Fashion," 138–159.
49. De Smet, "Marketing the French Revolution?" 92–96.
50. Blondé, "Conflicting Consumption Models?" 74.

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Appendix

'M. Spanceerder, Makelaar, zal op Dingsdag den 26 January en volgende dagen, voormiddags ten 10 uuren, te Amsterdam in de Warmoestraat, over den Vytendam, verkoopen: Een magnifique en zeer deftige INBOEDEL, bestaande in diversche gemaakte Juweelen, modern gemaakt Goud – en Zilverwerk, Galanterien en Rariteiten, Goude en Zilvere Zak Horologie Medailes, Munten en diversche Kostbaarhedens, oude blaauwe en gecouleurde Porccleiren, Lak – en Glaswerk, supra fyne Lywaaten, Mans en Vrouwe Klederen, fraaije Veld – en Koepel-Ledikanten, extra Beddegoed, Smirnsche en Schotsche Vlier. Tapyten, Carpetien en Klederen, capitaale Spiegels, zo met Glaazen als Vergulde Lysten, illustere. Branches, extra fraaije Clavieren, zynde Staartstukken, een fraaije Telescoop, gemaakt door Dyl, Staand Horologie, gemaakt door Rok, à Amsterdam, magnifique moderne Noteboome Boog-Kabinette, Mahoniehoute Eet – en andere Tafels, een compleete Luijermand, Schilderyen en andere Goederen meer; breeder volgens Catalogen, welke in tyds by bovengemelde Makelaar te bekomen zal zyn. Alles nagelaaten door wylen den Heere MEINARD STEENHOUWER, Zaterdag en Maandag voor den Verkoopdag te zien'.

Amsterdamse Courant, 9 January 1790, www.Delpher.nl, last accessed 7 December 2021.