

Textiles and the Enlightened Consumer

HI3T5 Value in the Age of Reason

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Another embarrassment of riches

- Textiles come in a great variety of fibres, yarns, weaves, colours, and patterns
- Even if we limit ourselves to woven textiles used for clothing – as opposed to knitted or felted textiles, or those used for furniture, bedding, and so on
- Main premodern fibres are wool, silk, cotton, linen, and jute
- Major weaves are plain or tabby, twill, and satin
- Some specific textiles from eighteenth-century England (Anne Buck)
 - ‘worsted’ = a high-quality wool used for weaving
 - ‘fustian’ = a general term for the many types of fabric made of linen warp and cotton weft
 - ‘Irish stuff’ = a fabric with silk warp and worsted weft
 - ‘damask’ = silk patterned by alternating between a warp-faced and a weft-faced weave
- Price varied widely across these varieties

Cotton and the British industrial revolution

- 1721 - Calico Act bans import of finished (not raw) cotton to Britain
- 1733 – John Kay invents ‘flying shuttle’ to help mechanise weaving
- 1771 – Richard Arkwright creates early cotton mill in Derbyshire
- 1779 – Samuel Crompton invents ‘mule’ for spinning cotton
- 1793 – Eli Whitney invents cotton gin, transforming US cotton industry and leading to massive expansion of slave-based plantation system
- 1820 – cotton cheaper to produce in Britain than in India by this date
- 1785-1827 – British cotton production increases ten-fold

The eighteenth-century consumer revolution

- A historiographical revolution?
 - Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. J. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (1982)
 - John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (1993)
 - Donald Quataert, ed., *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1922* (2000)
 - Maxine Berg and Edith Eger, *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (2002)

- Frank Trentmann, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (2012)
- HI994 Themes and Approaches to the Historical Study of Consumption – MA module in Warwick History Department from at least 2017-18
- Not just people using more stuff!
 - market integration
 - advertising
 - quality not just quantity of goods
 - novelty, variety, individuality of goods
 - widespread consumption of ‘populuxe’ goods, such as tea and sugar
 - consumer-driven globalization, eg. great demand in Britain for Indian textiles
 - consumer-driven industrialisation, eg. weaving technology designed to make high-quality textiles
- consumption and gender
 - “Historians should be cautious to avoid conflating women and consumption as exclusively as an earlier generation of scholars identified men with the processes of production” (Finn, 2000)
 - Both men and women were consumers, across all classes
 - But there were differences nonetheless...
 - The idea that consumption is a female matter gained currency in the 18th century (Kowaleski-Wallace, 1997)
 - In Birmingham and Sheffield, middling women showed more interest in novel, distinctive, individual possessions than middling men did (Berg 1996)

Consumption and material evaluation

- The word ‘evaluation’ not often used by historians of consumption....
- ...but two promising developments...
- The history of shopping – *how* people bought things, not just *what* they bought (Berry 2002)
- Material literacy – what you need to know about materials to be a good consumer (Smith 2012; Dyer 2020; Dyer and Smith 2020)