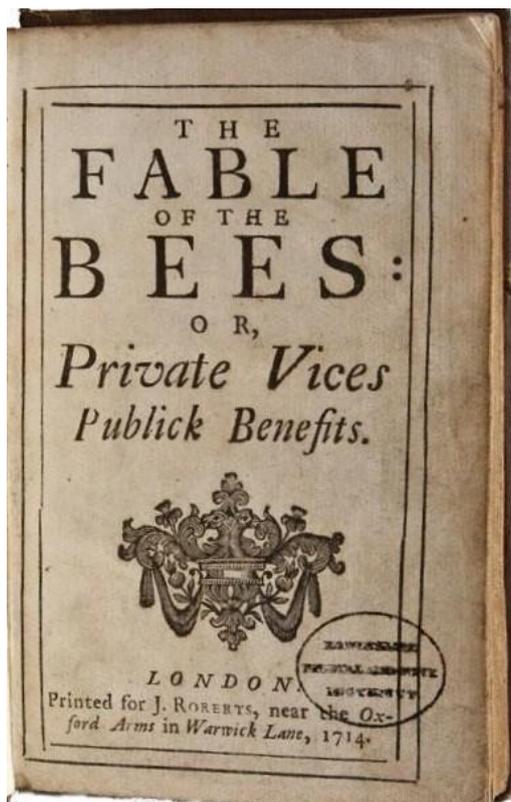


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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Luxury

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Keywords

Art

Commodities

Community

Consumption

Furniture

Luxury

Porcelain

Shopping

Tea-Table

Women

Abstract

Luxury has always been difficult to define. The eighteenth century saw a shift from ‘old’ to ‘new’ luxury (de Vries), from aristocratic displays of wealth and power to the widespread and sociable use of commodities like porcelain and silk. Such displays of tasteful and fashionable objects enhanced individual status, in domestic settings and in public spaces. McKendrick even claims a ‘consumer revolution’. If luxury was often coded as pernicious and immoral, some thinkers (e.g. Mandeville) provocatively praised its merits for the community and its positive impact on employment and free trade.

The rise of consumer goods and consumerism made luxury a much-debated topic throughout the eighteenth century. By its very nature, luxury is always defined in relation to an audience and hence cannot be conceived of without interaction. Humans not only have the urge to indulge in it but also to display it as evidence of their status. While philosophers, historians, and *literati*, from Plato to Werner Sombart, have mused about luxury for over 2,000 years, its meanings have varied greatly, as have the judgements passed on it.¹ One such fundamental shift in meaning has been described by Jan de Vries, who has argued that in a premodern society an ‘Old Luxury’ prevailed, functioning as ‘a prerogative of the privileged classes of rulers, warriors, churchmen and landowners’² who displayed items associated with ‘surplus resources’ and ‘high culture’ to cement their elite status and underline their authority. Thus, the display of luxurious items was also a display of political and / or military power. In contrast, ‘New Luxury’, which became increasingly visible in Britain around the onset of the eighteenth century, was enjoyed by far larger groups in a commercial and urban society (de Vries 43). In the course of the century, ‘new’ luxury items (porcelain, metalware, glass, printed cotton) became available to evermore citizens. Luxury goods were no longer only displayed by an elite but also by members of the middle class, even working people, in sociable contexts, for instance at the tea-table (china) and dances (dress), likewise in public leisure spaces.³ Eighteenth-century Britain saw an ongoing luxury debate, which occurred during a period when consumerism and the availability of consumer goods were rapidly growing.

Philosophy

Among the advocates and opponents of luxury, two philosophers stand out: Bernard Mandeville and David Hume, who both link luxury to community and human interaction. Many British readers had obtained initial awareness of the luxury debates through classical Greek and Roman literature.⁴ Especially, tales of the rise to power and wealth of Rome and its ultimate fall contained critique of excess and riches. If Tacitus claimed that the ‘virtus’ – the virtue – of the Roman Republic had, at some stage, given way to a luxury that became damaging to individual and state, Seneca and Cicero as well as the satirist Juvenal, all known to eighteenth-century readers, were wary of it too. In the eighteenth century, Mandeville’s famous *Fable of the Bees* (1714) took a provocatively different stance. His bees (who symbolize humans) are living ‘in Luxury and Ease’,⁵ but as they become too virtuous, the community collapses. Indulging in self-interest, pride, vanity, and luxury, he suggests, provides employment and aids trade. Thus, luxury, the ‘private vice’ is also a ‘public benefit’.⁶ Hume, too, defends luxury and links it to commerce, albeit in a less provocative manner. His essay ‘Of Refinement in the Arts’ (1752) distinguishes between an ‘innocent’ and ‘blameable’ luxury; but mostly it emphasizes the advantages of luxury: economic expansion, prosperity, and refinement, both in ‘private’ and in ‘public life’.⁷ Mandeville and Hume both connect the luxury debate to economic growth, wider societal issues and human interaction, and they argue in favour of the production and consumption of luxurious

commodities. In addition, Hume emphasizes the fact that the refinement created by a responsible use of luxury leads to sociability:

The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become: nor is it possible, that, when enriched with science, and possessed of a fund of conversation, they should be contented to remain in solitude, or live with their fellow-citizens in that distant manner, which is peculiar to ignorant and barbarous nations. They flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or their breeding; their taste in conversation or living, in clothes or furniture. (Hume 107)

Urban culture, taste, [politeness](#), [conversation](#), all rely on the refinement created by luxury. Thus, shopping for luxury goods such as silk and porcelain, the display of glassware at home, or the use of an equipage would be the beneficial effects of luxury.

Luxury Items

What were these new desirable consumer goods? Through which paths did they become available? And how did they circulate? Luxury products often arrived as novelties from other countries or far-away continents. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, porcelain, textiles, and small furniture were imported from Asia by the British, French, and Dutch. Due to their popularity, these items were later imitated, adapted, and manufactured in Europe (Berg 24). Many new consumer items were conveniences that served to make everyday life pleasurable, ranging from textiles (silk, calico) and metalware (watches, [buckles](#), cutlery) to equipages and expensive furniture. They were used for personal adornment (silks, textiles), domestic decoration (glass ware, porcelain), and personal comfort. Initially, some such items were expensive, difficult to obtain, and only available to a small elite. Chinaware from Asia for example was a collector's item in the early eighteenth century but a widely popular consumer good by the end of the century, when it was produced in Europe (Berg 150). Neil McKendrick has argued that, in the third quarter of the century, a 'consumer revolution' occurred;⁸ yet it can be contended that the process was more of a gradual nature.

The new luxury was exhibited in domestic spaces and in public spaces of leisure. Since domestic spaces were the stage where costly items for example furniture, paintings and tableware, were displayed as symbols of taste and of belonging to the genteel circles, sociability played an important part (Berg 39). Documenting taste and social status, many luxury items, such as the china on an eighteenth-century tea-table, were represented for visiting friends and neighbours. One luxurious innovation of the later eighteenth century, popular among well-to-do families, was the establishing of a library in the house which would be filled with books. These might not necessarily be read but would confer status on the home, while the room would be used for socializing. Not to her advantage, Charlotte Lennox's heroine Arabella begins to absorb the contents of such a collection:

From her earliest Youth she had discovered a Fondness for Reading, which extremely delighted the Marquis; he permitted her therefore the Use of his Library, in which, unfortunately for her, were great Store of Romances, and, what was still more unfortunate, not in the original *French*, but very bad Translations.⁹

Arabella has obviously misunderstood the meaning of this library, which does not aim to educate but is more of a status symbol.

The expanding market for paintings and engravings is another indicator for the rise of 'new' luxuries. If before 1700, paintings were effectively owned by royalty and the aristocracy, a London-based art market with international connections made such works of art more widely available and affordable. By the end of the eighteenth century, paintings decorated the interiors of prosperous middle-class homes, functioning both as self-representation (e.g. portraits) and as displays of taste (e.g. landscapes). Auctions, show-rooms, and exhibitions such as a show of at least 50 paintings at [Vauxhall](#) Garden in the 1730s provided opportunities not only for the acquisition of art but also for musing about it together.¹⁰

This development went hand in hand with the fashion, or craze, for engravings.¹¹ If around 1700, only select connoisseurs like the Duke of Devonshire held collections of luxury engravings, an increasing number of enthusiasts sought to buy them in later decades. Engravings, often representing artwork, especially portraits, and natural history, were collected in folios and were to be shown to other connoisseurs. As the production grew, engravings were also made to be hung up on the walls of middle-class houses. Thus art became more widely available. William Hogarth's highly popular moral series *A Rake's Progress*, painted in 1734 and followed by engravings in 1735, is one example of a highly successful set of images.

Among the public spaces where the new commodity items were staged were shops and shopping streets, theatres, pleasure gardens, all of them spaces where people often went in groups. For example, joint urban shopping trips undertaken for the acquisition of luxuries were often sociable.

Luxury, Women, and the Lower Classes

The fundamental changes in consumer behaviour were accompanied by long-lasting debates about the pernicious vs. positive effects of 'luxury' on individuals, families, trade, and the economy, both in literary texts and in periodicals. Certain clichés recur: since antiquity, opponents of luxury had upheld that luxury made men effeminate, while also emphasizing women's propensity to luxury. Thus, in the context of the eighteenth-century luxury debate, stereotypes of class and gender evolved, especially when the spread of luxurious items had

reached the lower middle class. A letter to the editor in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1773) describes an invitation to a grocer's house and a visit to a public entertainment with the grocer's family, who are living above their station: 'I found his wife and three daughters were dressed out in the most genteel and fashionable manner, and at a considerable expence [...] She was determined that none of the other shopkeepers [sic] wives and daughters should excel her' and 'to that purpose had consulted a great milliner at Westminster'.¹² The letter-writer finds the women so full of 'pride and vanity', so keen on spending lavishly, that he quits his original plan of proposing to one of them. Especially in the mid- and later eighteenth century, part of the luxury debate took place in journals, where the invasion of new manners, goods, and spending habits particularly among women and among tradesmen was seen with regret. Another cautionary tale in the *Weekly Entertainer* narrates a story about the linen-draper and grocer, Mr. Huckaback, who had turned his 'warehouse into what he called a saloon',¹³ adorned by paintings, and [wa]s brimming with the desire to appear 'genteel'. Mr. Huckaback's ambitions, love of luxury, and desire to socialize in a fashion well above his position, annoy the observer and author of the piece, who, after a sumptuous dinner, express his belief that such excesses could only lead to ruin.

The eighteenth-century luxury debate was multi-faceted. Even those who loved the new commodities, were keen to criticize others for overspending or misunderstanding the principles of taste. In the early and mid-nineteenth century, industrial production created a huge increase in the number of consumer goods that circulated.

1. See Peter McNeil and Giorgio Riello, *Luxury: A Rich History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
 2. Jan de Vries, 'Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age in Theory and Practice', in Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (ed.) *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 41.
 3. Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* [2005] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 28-31.
 4. John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 23-38.
 5. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, 2nd ed. (London, 1723), p. 1.
 6. Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A conceptual and historical investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 126-134; Berg, p. 22, p. 32.
 7. David Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts', in Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Political Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 106.
 8. Neil McKendrick, 'The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-Century England', in John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (ed.), *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 9.
 9. Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote*, ed. Margaret Dalziel (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 7.
 10. Thomas M. Bayer and John R. Page, *The Development of the Art Market in England* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 54.
 11. Stana Nenadic, 'Print Collecting and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Scotland', *History* (vol. 82, no. 266, April 1997) p. 203-207.
 12. J. N., 'Modern Taste of Tradesmens Daughters, exploded', *The Gentleman's Magazine* (January 1773), p. 15-16.
 13. Viator, 'Modern Manners', *The Weekly Entertainer* (16 March 1789), p. 249.
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Cite this article

SCHMID Susanne, "Luxury", The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century [online], ISSN 2803-2845, Accessed on 08/13/2024, URL: <https://www.digitens.org/en/notices/luxury.html>

Further Reading

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[Gentleman's Magazine on Dress \(1731\)](#)

[The Fable of the Bees \(1714\)](#)