

Editor's Introduction

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his special issue focuses on material culture, a topic that has produced much exciting work over the past decade or so. The articles for this issue came in through the regular submission process and through a call for papers, and all went through a rigorous review and revision process.

Much of the recent work on things has analyzed the consumption of goods and how people create meaning and identities through material objects.¹ But as Frank Trentmann writes in his stimulating and provocative survey of the field article, historians need to look at things not just as bearers of meaning in larger contexts of home, nation, and empire; they need to look at the actual materiality of things. What difference did the physical material make? For instance, Trentmann cites John Broich's recent *Journal of British Studies* article about the construction of water mains in India.² While British engineers imposed their own assumptions about the best way to build this infrastructure, the soil of Indian cities foiled their best-laid plans by eroding pipes. As Trentmann suggests, the topic of material culture also promises to get beyond some of the impasses produced by the cultural turn and the reaction to it. Instead of just focusing on how disciplinary regulations and discourses shape people's lives or espousing an idealistic view of human agency, Trentmann argues that historians might look at the dynamic interactions among discourses, disciplines, people, things, and the environment. He draws on, yet critiques, the work of actor-network theorist Bruno Latour (most familiar to historians of science and technology). This essay also provides an illuminating discussion of governmentality in the work of Patrick Joyce, Nikolas Rose, and Chris Otter.

Objects of consumption are often identified as "soft" (household furnishings, clothing, and food) or "hard" (buildings, machines, infrastructure, and technology). The language is obviously gendered. But as the articles in this issue demonstrate, the gender of hard and soft commodities is more complicated. Articles by Chitralekha Zutshi and Danielle C. Kinsey examine soft Kashmiri shawls and hard diamonds, respectively, both of which were identified with female consumers.

¹ For other studies of material culture and consumption, see Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (2005): 1015–45; and Jonathan White, "A World of Goods? The 'Consumption Turn' and Eighteenth-Century British History," *Cultural and Social History* 3, no. 1 (2006): 93–104.

² John Broich, "Engineering the Empire: British Water Supply Systems and Colonial Societies, 1850–1900," *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 2 (April 2007): 346–65.

While consumption is often seen as frivolous and feminine, men actually controlled many household budgets and spent money on more expensive luxuries.³ The neglect of the history of men and consumption is now being remedied, for instance, in our article by Charles Ludington on port wine—a soft commodity. To be sure, men were more likely to control the built environment, a way of stamping meaning on the landscape—conveying messages about dynasty, religion, and nation, as William Whyte shows in his article on modernism and Englishness. However, some elite women could shape the built environment as well, as our articles by Barbara Harris and Judith S. Lewis demonstrate.

Barbara Harris's excellent article, "The Fabric of Piety: Aristocratic Women and Care of the Dead, 1450–1550," examines how aristocratic women bequeathed money and left detailed instructions for the construction of tombs and chantries, which were altars, chapels, or almshouses. They contributed to the material fabric of English churches and villages by leaving a concrete inheritance. Harris ingeniously uses these artifacts to suggest how these women expressed their subjectivity by memorializing who they were. Their tombs demonstrated their lineage, wealth, and importance to the local community—but also whether they felt more attached to their natal family, their first husband's family, or their second husband's family. Harris also sheds new light on the debate about piety and the Reformation by tracing changes in inscriptions on and instructions for these tombs and memorials.

In "When a House Is Not a Home: Elite English Women and the Eighteenth-Century Country House," Judith S. Lewis also addresses the question of how elite women expressed their subjectivity in material terms—in this case, during their lives—and how they lived in, rebuilt or built, and shaped their houses. This is a contested subject because eighteenth-century aristocratic families usually owned several homes that also functioned as political centers. Aristocratic women usually moved to their husband's seat on marriage and then, as widows, retired to a smaller dower house. In her thoughtful article, Lewis asks whether aristocratic women could make these grand houses into homes in the modern sense of the word as a place of intimacy and comfort. To answer this question, Lewis examines three case studies: Sarah, the duchess of Marlborough; Frances, Lady Irwin; and Frances Talbot, who became Lady Boringdon. In fascinating and poignant detail, she looks at inventories to show how these women thought of themselves as part of a dynasty, as part of a married couple, or as an individual.

In Charles Ludington's ingenious article "Claret is the liquor for boys; port for men": How Port Became the 'Englishman's Wine,' 1750s to 1800," the focus shifts to aristocratic men. Here, Ludington cleverly reverses Veblen's model that consumption patterns trickle down from the elites and shows that in fact, port trickled up, so to speak. In the early and mid-eighteenth century, port was the drink of middle-class men since it was relatively inexpensive and also patriotic, produced by England's ally Portugal, unlike the claret of England's enemy, France. Ludington does not only look at the symbolism, however: he looks at the material conditions—port was cheap because it was often adulterated by brandy and elderberry juice, and the aristocracy did not drink it because it was often of poor

³ Amanda Vickery, "His and Hers: Gender, Consumption and Household Accounting in Eighteenth-Century England," *Past and Present*, suppl. 1 (2006): 12–38; and Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods* (New Haven, CT, 2006).

quality. Ludington shows how port improved in quality by the third quarter of the eighteenth century. At the same time, the aristocratic elite came under political and cultural attack as effeminate and cowardly. Port was identified with the bluff, hearty, middle-class man. Indeed, the quote in Ludington's title comes from Samuel Johnson, who despised claret. By the end of the century, the aristocracy began to order large quantities of port for cellars ranging from those of the royal family to William Pitt to Oxford colleges. Ludington hypothesizes that this consumption choice bolstered their manliness against accusations of being effeminate and indulging in luxury.

As goods traveled from the colonies, they acquired the ability to signify Britain's industrial and scientific superiority: we have two articles that focus on this theme in the empire. In Chitralekha Zutshi's fascinating article "Designed for eternity": Kashmiri Shawls, Empire, and Cultures of Production and Consumption in Mid-Victorian Britain," she shows how these pashminas became an important imperial and industrial commodity. They originated in Kashmir where women spun rare goat's wool into yarn, and skilled Muslim male weavers took months to construct the elaborately patterned cloth. The Kashmiri shawl became emblematic of this remote region's fabled beauty. Officials of the British empire wanted to appropriate this industry and raise the goats; the latter task failed, but British manufacturers appropriated the design, such as the pinecone pattern, which became known as paisley for the Scottish town where the British versions of the shawls were produced. As a result, middle-class women could own such shawls, which became signifiers of taste and respectability—until they went out of fashion, despite the best efforts of Liberty's of London, founded in part to convey good taste in exotic imperial goods to female consumers.

In her scintillating article "Koh-i-Noor: Empire, Diamonds, and the Performance of British Material Culture," Danielle C. Kinsey also shows how a thing—a diamond—became a symbol of the British conquest in India. Lord Dalhousie took it in 1849 after the defeat of Ranjit Singh and presented it to Queen Victoria. The diamond's display at the Great Exhibition of 1851 was much anticipated. However, Kinsey demonstrates that this enormous diamond could not bear the weight of its cultural symbolism—it was not the sparkling proof of Britain's triumph over India but seemed to be a dull lump of glass emblematic of imperial excess. *Punch*'s ridicule of the supposed feminine obsession with diamonds threatened to implicate Queen Victoria herself in frivolity. Critics denigrated the diamond trade as less substantial and beneficial to the empire than industry. To redeem the project, Prince Albert had the diamond recut, and therefore the narrative of the diamond was recast as the triumph of British science over oriental treasure.

Finally, William Whyte examines the relationship of the material environment—architecture—to ideas of Englishness in the twentieth century in his elegant article "The Englishness of English Architecture: Modernism and the Making of a National International Style, 1927–1957." Modernism in building—form follows function, streamlined structures, absence of ornament—was associated with continental architects and often attacked in the early twentieth century, as it still is today. The question was whether Britain was part of a larger European movement or whether Modernism was inherently "unEnglish." In response, some architectural critics, such as the well-known Nikolaus Pevsner, tried to create an indigenous genealogy for English modernism by drawing on the eighteenth-century Georgian

tradition and the nineteenth-century arts and crafts movement. They asserted that modernism was “pragmatic, reasonable, rational, and forward thinking” (457)—quintessentially English. This movement was quite successful—for instance, the Festival of Britain at the South Bank and Coventry Cathedral were acclaimed as modernist masterpieces. Our next issue will feature both a survey of the field and a feature article on the English Reformation, as well as articles on gentry family size, the class structure of the British navy, empire and fiction, and race in the late 1960s.