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Review of Artemis Yagou, ed., Technology, Novelty, and Luxury

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*Technology, Novelty, and
Luxury*

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Artemis Yagou, ed.

Technology, Novelty, and Luxury

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The eighteenth century was a turning point in history that transformed the medieval and Renaissance meanings and functions of various notions, ideas and artefacts into the contemporary ones we know today. In order to understand these changes in depth and comprehend how we now perceive certain values in everyday goods that almost everyone either owns or has access to, we need to delve into the historical context of this century and the factors that made them into “everyday goods”. We need to be able to review how people’s consumption habits changed over the course of the aforementioned century, and how the behavioural patterns of consumption shifted towards a wider audience. What part did technology play in this transition? How did it shape the perception of both consumers and producers of items that were considered to be or became synonymous with joy, education, practicality and innovation? And, most importantly, how and why did these items become available to more and more people, rather than to a certain economic elite?

Answers to these questions are offered in the four essays in this volume that analyse the three concepts – technology, novelty and luxury – and how the interactions between the three contributed to the gigantic leap in production and consumption of the Industrial Revolution. These three concepts are considered the fundamental forces that explain how our modern way of perceiving the value, aesthetics and functionality of commodities came to be, and how our changing perceptions reshaped these forces in turn. What we define as luxury is the possession of goods beyond those that are necessary, what we define as novelty are the innovative techniques whose implementation enhances the aesthetic worth, utility and price of a product, and what we define as technology is the process by which the tools, theories and scientific methodologies that make these techniques available are developed. Through the historical changes in musical instruments, rational toys, pocket watches and furniture mainly in England, France and Germany, these nations being the forerunners of the Industrial Revolution during the eighteenth century, the essays provide an in-depth explanation of how these concepts intertwined and formed what they define as a “consumer revolution”, in which extremely luxurious products like grand pianos, expensive geographical dissections, deluxe pocket watches and highly decorated furniture – goods

which asserted high social status and prestige – became affordable for a broader range of middle-class consumers and came to be defined as “semi-luxury” commodities.

In the first essay, on the transformation of musical instruments, Panagiotis Pouloupoulos describes four construction techniques and ornamental materials that altered the production of these instruments forever. These were substitution, miniaturisation, portability and mechanisation. His first example, substitution, is the Érard harp. Prior to the changes made by Sébastien Érard, this string instrument functioned both as a musical tool and as an element in the decoration of luxurious living rooms. However, during the latter part of the eighteenth century, Érard designed a new and innovative harp that combined decoupage, as a cheap form of ornamentation, with new functionality in the form of the pedal. The pedal had already been introduced some years before, but it was the Érard harps that actually established this component as standard in every subsequent harp. The pedal enabled new ways of playing which completely revolutionised the instrument’s diversity of sound and musical potential. On the other hand, the cheap materials used in the decoupage decorative technique reduced the cost of harps dramatically.

The second example, miniaturisation, is discussed in relation to the piano. A more compact design of piano was introduced during the eighteenth century, the square piano, an instrument that was both smaller and more innovative in the way in which its strings and dynamics worked. The application of cheaper wood for decoration and veneering gave the poorer social classes their own “grand piano”, whose size and internal components combined a lower price with a functionality and tone made possible by new technologies and design concepts.

Turning now to the third concept, portability, the introduction of the csakan provided for the needs of those who wanted to combine musical company with exercise and a day or nighttime stroll through the park. The csakan and other instruments such as recorders and flutes also came with groundbreaking designs that allowed them to function as receptacles for other services, being equipped with built-in first aid kits, custom blades, telescopes and the like.

Mechanisation, the final concept discussed in the essay, was an immediate result of the Industrial Revolution. Machines became inseparable components in musical instruments, introducing new qualities, levels of play and affordability through their mass production and cheap components. Tuners, necks and guitar-lyres with mechanised functions, all of them built out of screws and gears, often made by watchmakers, truly marked the era in which music was invaded by machines. Thus, the new designs of musical instruments combined innovative ideas with technology and fashionable aspects of luxurious aesthetics to produce affordable products for mass consumption.

A similar process can be observed in Joseph Wachelder’s essay on the development of rational toys. This essay focuses on kaleidoscopes, geographical dissections, yoyos, and

the need for such toys to be educational, fashionable and affordable. Kaleidoscopes, were introduced prior to the eighteenth century. However, it was in this era that their unique design saw them become the most popular plaything across Europe, and new modes of manufacture were introduced to exploit their educational and recreational potential. The mass production of kaleidoscopes featuring various shapes and reflections was introduced in eighteenth century, while the objects retained their fashionable status – some even served as furniture. Geographical dissections also followed a process of “popularisation” due to their educational value. Thus, while children could play with them and learn at the same time, the instruments were given colourful parts to make them a decorative addition to a medium-income household. The mass production of geographical dissections helped them spread across Europe from Birmingham, by lowering their cost through the introduction of mechanised workshops. Yoyos experienced a similar trajectory, though they originated in France and were very popular among the French elite. New materials for their manufacture, as well as children’s need for stimulation, made them immensely popular and enabled their mass production and consumption. The places where these three toys were made available, alongside many others, were called toy shops, which not only functioned as places where such toys could be purchased, but also as places for brainstorming new and innovative techniques and methods of constructing gadgets that either complemented those toys or did something other toys did not. It is no wonder that so many watchmakers and carpenters ran shops like these where technological advances were combined with fashionable and luxurious-looking designs that resulted in innovative and novel ways of interacting and perceiving rational toys.

Artemis Yagou’s essay focuses on the combination of luxury and technology provided in new affordable pocket watches. She begins by examining a specific pocket watch produced in England for the Ottoman markets in the eighteenth century. The need for the individuals to tell the time wherever they went created the need for small, portable time-telling devices. Once again, such pocket-watches started out as a product which only European economic elites could afford, but as the eighteenth century progressed, their designs got smaller and smaller while they retained their fashionable appearance; indeed, the gears, numerical system and springs used in their mechanism were aesthetically pleasing and fashionable in their own right, while the use of cheap materials allowed them to be manufactured in large numbers. Everyone could show off their watch now, everyone became aware of the pocket-watch’s increasing fame and innovative techniques used in its making, and everyone could buy one custom-made to fit their needs while the watch’s maker was constantly aware of the shifting fashion models, the individual’s desires and the patterns of mass consumption. They were the perfect embodiment of a “semi-luxury” product. These shifts in production changed the boundaries between social classes, and it is said that the pocket-watch itself was a milestone in steering industrial consumption into a more massive and personalised model.

Furniture making and carpentry, the subject of Camille Mestdag’s essay, is the only

one of the four that did not exactly follow this model of a luxurious item becoming a fashionable product for mass consumption as a result of technological innovation. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, France was considered the mecca of carpentry and furniture design. There, furniture manufacturers insisted on handcrafted and overly expensive pieces in lieu of cheaper products manufactured industrially on a massive scale. Perceiving furniture as art, objects of unprecedented beauty and a symbol of social status, they always used precious materials and did work by hand. Their work was presented at many exhibitions, which were meant to showcase technological advances in the furniture industry. This was somewhat ironic, as the use of machines was still minimal well into the nineteenth century, with French workshops still consisting of dozens of highly trained workers. It was not until 1878 that some exhibitions divided their exhibits between luxurious and affordable, establishing a new, modern approach that made furniture that was both attractive and cheap. This was the first time that industrial production had forced new techniques and products to emerge due to its global domination, rather than such change being a consequence of social change, or at least an ambiguous process in which patterns of both production and consumption interacted with technological approaches to result in fresh new products.

Nevertheless, the emergence of “semi-luxury” goods marked a permanent shift in the patterns of industrialised production. The interaction between luxury products and technological advances resulting in fashionable and novelty products intended for the masses was the driving force behind the ideological form of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century. Without these practical and theoretical changes, our modern luxurious lives would definitely be different. They would not be as “luxurious” as they are now, many products would not be mass produced and thus affordable, and not as much attention would be paid to design and ornamentation, complex structures and purpose, if the eighteenth-century predecessors of our twenty first-century products had not been produced in the manner described above. We owe our modern way of life to the application of these three notions to industrial production in the eighteenth century, which marked the beginning of the contemporary era in terms of the conceptualisation, application and enjoyment of popular goods.

The edited volume describes these phenomena through four case-studies based on solid, original research. Further case studies would be necessary in order to consolidate or qualify the arguments presented. In any case, the volume is a very welcome addition to the study of material culture and consumption.