

J Sleep: Consumer behaviour across an urban hierarchy 1650 to 1725

Condensing extensive research material and that material's theoretical underpinning into an hour's presentation is an unenviable task. Janet Sleep battled valiantly within the constraints imposed by the "Research in Progress" day. Fortunately there were few casualties. Evidence in changes in taste in furnishings between different social groups was clearly and cogently presented. An introductory comparison of the different contents of two probate inventories of 1698 and 1723 was intended to lead us towards the model which Janet Sleep tests in her thesis; that urban status, between the dates of 1650 and 1725 was of paramount importance to our understanding of domestic consumption as manifested by the contents of probate inventories within a specified urban hierarchy.

The mechanisms for developing a model for this research were outlined. Four levels of urban settlement were delineated, with Norwich forming the uppermost tier. The date for this stratification having evolved from John Patten's ranking of East Anglian towns by occupation between 1650 and 1699.

Although time was restricted, it would have been helpful to have had a resumé of the methodology employed and the theoretical background, which underpinned the thesis. References to the works of certain authors were made and I am grateful to Janet Sleep for expanding on these since her presentation. The following works led to the development of a methodology to chart the progress of the "so-called consumer revolution".

Much of the background to the thesis derives from the work of Thorstein Veblen and his theories of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste. Social anthropology forms part of this background, especially Gregory A Johnson's ideas about "style messaging". Thorstein Hagerstrand, a Swedish geographer evolved a theory of the diffusion of innovation and the effect of "contact networks", particularly within the town, which forms another element to her thesis.

Graphic illustrations were shown indicating the relationship between total inventory values and spending between 1650 and 1674. The rise of emergent goods, such as caned chairs at different dates and levels, was outlined. Declining goods, such as benches, were highlighted.

Reasons were postulated for the waves of emergent and declining goods as illustrated by these graphs across the levels outlined. A process of diffusion was suggested, with the spread of information disseminated by personal contact at differing times across the hierarchy. The leaders of society, in, for example, Norwich were characterised as "wilful gamblers", who had a preference for new ideas and forms. Tradesmen were held to have an important place in this diffusion process and the changes in taste, which occurred. This assertion required exploration. Consumption is usually a stage in the process of communication or an act of deciphering, which

presupposes practical mastery of a particular code. The balance between consumer and supplier in questions of taste, in, say furniture may have been usefully explored at this stage. Time-lagging, in terms of changing ideas on fashion, was dismissed. Oval drop-leaf tables were known across all levels in the locality under examination during the period of this survey for a long time, but were shown to "take-off" first in urban level one.

It was suggested that resistance to change in rural areas may have been due to different value systems in operation. Evidence of the virtue of frugality was presented as an important factor in rural consumer choice. Other factors must have also been operating such as an innate conservatism found in rural areas. However, post 1700, rural areas were spending more than urban areas. The main difference between "town and country" appeared from the evidence to be that more money was spent on "real" property in the country (such as land and additions to the main house) whereas in the town the only way the upwardly mobile citizen could demonstrate his or her status was by the lavish furnishing of their house. In addition, in an age when credit worthiness was a vital component of commerce, tradesmen had to show their financial viability by demonstrations of their wealth through their material possessions.

Janet Sleep's lecture fulfilled both expectations raised by the introduction to the "Research in progress" day. It was both extremely informative and encouraged a heightened awareness of methods of research, which are less usually applied to furniture history. We felt the want of an introduction to work, which formed the background to her thesis and her presentation, in fields of consumption and material culture. Inevitably, further questions were raised as to why a certain category of furniture should be "consumed" before another category in the social groupings under discussion. The lecture endeavoured to present the evidence for conditions in which consumers of cultural goods and their taste for them were produced. The question of what to do with that evidence was left unanswered and, may, at some later date form the basis for a social critique of the consumer's judgment of taste in selection of furniture to fill their home in the late 17th century in the locality under discussion.

Art history has been enriched in the last two decades by the application of methods of analysis, which were not thought appropriate or even relevant prior to this time. In contrast the study of the decorative arts and furniture history in particular, has been to an extent channelled towards the approaches based on theories of what can broadly be termed aesthetic connoisseurship. Work produced by members of the Regional Furniture Society and others has sought to bring to bear new approaches to the design, commissioning and creation of furniture. Janet Sleep's lecture opened our horizons further with her sure guidance through her thesis. Drawing on research on the consumer revolution, theories of consumption, and the diffusion of innovation, she illuminated the waxing and waning of fashions in furniture at a particular time and for this we are grateful.

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