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# THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History  
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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## 5.3.1 Production and Consumption in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

*Marjorie Meiss, Maarten Prak, and Phil Withington*

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### Introduction

One of the defining features of the early modern era in Europe was economic development. Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, changes in the way that goods were produced, exchanged, purchased, and consumed had a huge impact on the lives of all European men and women and significant ramifications for European relations with the Americas, Asia, and Africa. This chapter introduces these developments by focusing on the concept of ‘consumer society’, meaning a society in which significant numbers of people have at once the disposable means (in cash or credit), opportunity (through supply and retail), and desire (however constructed) to choose to purchase goods that they may or may not ‘need’. Since the 1990s, ‘consumer society’ has become a key concept of economic, social, and cultural history, and is a useful way of thinking about the range of economic change that characterised much of Europe before the onset of industrialisation in the nineteenth century.

### When Was the Consumer Society Born?

Historians agree that consumer society flourished after the Second World War in the western world, but there is intense debate concerning its date of birth. A long-lasting narrative depicted consumer society as a result of the industrial revolution: in this account, profound change in the conditions of production of consumer goods at the end of the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century led to an impressive growth in supply and lower prices. New advertising and selling practices as well as new commercial spaces (shopping arcades, department stores) induced customers—including the better-off working classes—to buy more and more goods.

However, many historians of the early modern period dispute that narrative, arguing that it does not take into account decisive, earlier changes in consumer habits. In a pioneering study published in 1978, Joan Thirsk showed that the standard of living of the English peasantry improved between the first half of the sixteenth century and the end of the seventeenth century: at the end of the period, ordinary people had more objects, of more diverse kinds. Thirsk therefore denied the idea that the development of consumption was only a result of the industrial revolution. In his very influential *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (1982), Neil McKendrick has followed the same path, pointing out how widespread such consumer goods as cotton cloth, tea or china were in England in the 1760s. He has also claimed, moreover, that some innovative merchants like Josiah Wedgwood already promoted their products through effective advertising practices. Thus, according to McKendrick, the increase in demand came first and changes in the conditions of production followed.

Within this alternative interpretative framework, historians of the early modern era have proposed different chronologies and geographies for the development of consumption in European societies. For instance, according to Lorna Weatherill, a major shift occurred in England between 1675 and 1725, when objects which used to be rare (like china, curtains, or clocks) became more and more common. For Carole Shammas, the very first signs of this evolution can be seen as early as 1550 and some new products such as tobacco (for example) were already widely available before 1650. Jan de Vries, for his part, argues that an 'industrious revolution' occurred in the Low Countries (and to a lesser extent in England and in some parts of France and Germany) between 1650 and 1800: eager to enjoy the delights of consumption, families devoted more and more time to wage labour, he claims, in order to earn enough money to purchase new commodities available on the market (cloth, pocket watches, mirrors, small decorative objects, etc.). Renaissance historians even suggest going further back in time. For Richard Goldthwaite, in particular, the artistic blossoming of the Renaissance can be understood as a consumption phenomenon, a "demand for art" that emerged during the Quattrocento in the cities of Northern Italy, where the distribution of wealth allowed a substantial part of the population to buy objects crafted by goldsmiths, painters, sculptors, or ceramists.

Despite the importance of these chronological and geographical variations, at least two consensual conclusions have been reached. First of all, a basic observation: by the end of the eighteenth century, households of all social levels throughout Europe held more objects, of more diverse kinds, than they did around 1500 (even if scarcity, self-consumption, and reuse were still major features of the material world). Objects that used to be luxuries were now within reach for a larger part of the population. Second, some

categories of product played a key role in this development: cotton fabrics (painted calicoes imported from Asia then printed on cotton cloth produced in Europe), which gradually allowed ordinary people to wear more colourful and more fashionable clothes; exotic groceries like pepper, then tea, coffee, and cane sugar (which intimately connects the ‘consumer revolution’ with the development of the plantation economy and slavery); ceramic tableware—including china for the elite, or even cheaper china for the middle classes—and copper cookware; and the wide ‘toyware’ sector, that is to say the small-scale metalworking which produced clocks, scientific tools, jewels, small decorative objects and more.



Fig. 1: François Boucher, *The Breakfast* (1739), <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010059924>.

Obviously, some people benefited more (or sooner) than others from these developments, and the relative pace by which different social groups became involved in consumer practices depended on the social structure of particular countries and regions. In France, for example, aristocrats, wealthy merchants, lawyers, and clerics were the pioneers, while the peasants adopted the new consumer habits long after them—if at all. Although not necessarily wealthier, urban popular classes were more likely to become ‘modern’ consumers than

peasants. The former were more involved in urban life and commerce, while the latter often preferred to invest in land when they had accumulated some savings. The peasantry finally entered the early modern 'empire of things', albeit slowly and hesitatingly. In England, by contrast, the opportunities for commercial farming and rural industry meant that consumer practices spread more quickly among the rural classes than in France, especially among the yeomanry and wealthier husbandmen, and in the Low Countries high levels of urbanisation meant that, for contemporary commentators, the Dutch were in the vanguard of consumerism. But from Scandinavia to Iberia to Eastern Europe, variations in social structure and the distribution of wealth inevitably affected the timing, nature, and extent of consumption.

Having introduced these key questions and concerns, the next section turns to the more specific issue of increases in both the quantity and quality of goods produced in early modern Europe. The chapter concludes by outlining the set of interconnected factors which, along with transformations in craft and manufacture, made the development of consumer societies possible: commercialisation, globalisation, urbanisation, and the adoption of consumer practices.

## Development in Production

Between roughly 1400 and 1800, European industrial producers achieved a small miracle. Many of their products became increasingly sophisticated, while at the same time the prices of those products were decreasing steadily. As a result of these two developments, many industrial products that were only accessible to the richest class of people in 1400 were available to ordinary people by 1800. Moreover, these cheap 'populuxe' goods of the eighteenth century were often of a higher quality than their very expensive predecessors from the Middle Ages.

One example is clocks and watches. Mechanical instruments to keep time emerged in the Middle Ages, probably in the German lands, but the Italians also stake a claim to their invention. In the beginning, clocks were big and expensive, but by 1800 they had become small and affordable. The centre of watchmaking shifted from France to England, and to the western parts of Switzerland. The clock and watch-makers were sometimes organised in special guilds, the first of which emerged in the sixteenth century, while in other locations they were members of a general metal-workers' guild. The first clock-makers were migrant workers, moving from one church to another. By the time the watch came around it developed into an urban industry. However, the eighteenth-century watch industry moved back to the countryside, in the Swiss Jura.

Glass provides a second example. It was used for a variety of purposes, including windows and mirrors, drinking vessels, jewellery (glass beads), and household ornaments. It has been estimated that the output of all French glass-makers increased four to five times between the middle of the seventeenth century and the French Revolution. Italy was the first European region to develop a strong glass industry, and Venice was its core. Despite efforts by local authorities to prevent artisan migration, the Venetian ‘secrets’ were shared with other localities through migration, and from the mid-fifteenth century also in writing. Although Italian masters remained an important source of knowledge, other countries became increasingly involved in the diffusion. For example, crown glass (i.e. a thick round type of glass used for early windows) was introduced in England by artisans from France in the mid-sixteenth century.



Fig. 2: Jan Luyken, *Alchemist* (1694), <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-P-OB-44.546>.

Similar stories can be told about books, paintings, silk and other textiles, porcelain, and many other industrial consumer goods. What enabled artisans to achieve these improvements? One important factor must have been apprenticeships. Crafts were taught individually, under a contract settled between a master craftsman and his—sometimes her—apprentice. Guilds were increasingly setting rules for the training of young artisans. Gradually, a model emerged that was also followed for apprenticeships outside the realm of incorporated trades. This model was relatively uniform throughout Europe. Apprentices’ travel, compulsory in some countries, and the temporary and permanent migration of fully qualified artisans, ensured that best practices were shared between production centres.

Another factor was the emergence of craft manuals. In the fourteenth century, books full of so-called craft secrets appeared—so-called, because publication by definition ended the secrecy. They were perhaps never meant to be ‘secret’, but there was some ‘mystery’ to the crafts, which could only be mastered through plenty of direct, hands-on training. Still, these manuscripts purported to give the reader access to the procedures of artisan production. After the invention of print, in the middle of the fifteenth century, craft manuals multiplied and became very popular. Contributing to this popularity were the increasing numbers of literate craftsmen and women. One exemplary craft manual was a book about human proportions published by the well-known German painter Albrecht Dürer in 1528. A century later, Rembrandt had a copy in his studio in Amsterdam, apparently for the instruction of his pupils. The number of titles devoted to ‘science, technology and medicine’ published in Britain increased from 5.5 to nine percent during the eighteenth century; many of those titles had a practical aspect. It was difficult, if not impossible, to learn a craft exclusively from a textbook. However, those who had acquired the necessary skills could improve them by reading such books.

Moreover, such books were increasingly illustrated, allowing the reader to see what the often complicated instructions amounted to. Dürer had lavishly illustrated his book on human proportions, with pictures on the left-hand pages and text on the right-hand side. In the fifteenth century, various types of engraving emerged in Europe, possibly imitated from the Chinese. In the beginning wood-cuts dominated, which were often coarse and did not permit much detail. But from the sixteenth century, this was another area where craftsmen became more sophisticated, producing (for example) ‘exploded views’, showing the inside of complex machinery. Together, illustrations, texts, and practical instruction helped craftsmen and women all over Europe to improve their working practices and—through improving their working practices—the products they supplied to consumers.

## **Commercialisation, Colonisation, and Urbanisation**

Beginning in Italy and moving across the Alps to Germany, France, and the Low Countries, these transformations in guild and craft production were integral to the emergence of ‘consumer societies’ in pre-modern Europe, whereby men and women below the level of the aristocratic elites could choose to purchase a range of goods based on criteria other than simple utility or need. However, developments in craft production were not the only reason behind the greater availability and choice of commodities. Neither do they explain the greater capacity and willingness of different social groups to enter the market to buy



new goods—to engage in ‘consumer behaviour’, as economic historians would describe it.

Additional factors influencing the nature, variety, and supply of goods over the later medieval and early modern eras are relatively straightforward to identify. One was commercialisation—the development of trading institutions and networks within Europe that facilitated the exchange of commodities across space, and which gave consumers the power to choose goods which were not necessarily produced or cultivated in their own communities. Another was commerce and colonisation beyond Europe. Before the sixteenth century, the Mediterranean region served as the economic centre of Europe as much because of its trade routes into the Levant, Arabia, and Asia as the productivity and creativity of its inhabitants. The expansion of Portugal and Spain into the Atlantic and Indian Oceans challenged this hegemony by introducing new commodities like potatoes, tomatoes, tobacco, and chocolate into European diets and using colonial slave labour to increase the supply of traditional luxuries like silver, sugar, and spices. These methods of armed commerce, colonisation, and slavery were then adopted by the Dutch, French, and English, transforming Europe’s world of goods in the process. They did so not only by introducing new comestibles and commodities on a mass scale, but also by stimulating new practices of production among European manufacturers. Asian workmanship, materials, and design—for example in furniture, silk, and porcelain—were copied and reproduced. In the meantime, inventories from the later seventeenth century clearly demonstrate how ‘colonial groceries’ like tobacco, coffee, tea, chocolate, and sugar supported a burgeoning and socially extensive material culture devoted to their preparation and consumption.

In addition to indigenous developments in production, then, intensifications in both European commerce and global expansion contributed to the increasing supply and availability of consumables before the nineteenth century. Cities and towns were deeply implicated in all these developments, serving as centres of manufacture and industry, as nodes of national and regional commerce, and as the metropolitan hubs for extra-European networks. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the chronology and geography of consumerism in pre-modern Europe closely shadows the history of European urbanisation. But cities and towns were also, of course, centres of retail and consumption, reminding us that changes in the production and supply of goods were only one set of factors behind Europe’s so-called consumer revolutions. As important was the changing—increasing—demand for goods among different social groups.

It would be a mistake to understand this demand as merely a function of supply or the cumulative consequence of consumer decisions based on a ‘rational’ appreciation of availability, needs, wants, and costs—although these

must have been a factor, too. However, early modern views on the matter were much more complicated.

First, there were plenty of powerful ideological positions against consumerism. Christian teaching was opposed to individual acquisitiveness to excess, and to unnecessary indulgence. It preached instead the importance of charity, moderation, and modesty. These messages were reinforced by the civic humanist valorisation of citizenship, virtue, and temperance over 'luxury' and self-gratification, and by the assumption that men and women should dress, eat, drink, and live according to their social position and place, avoiding the perils of novelty and fashion. In the face of these proscriptions, it was neither easy nor straightforward to be a consumer in early modern Europe. Second, early modern commentators were also very conscious that consumer decisions varied from place to place and were shaped not simply by personal desires and ideological controls, but also by what we would understand today as 'cultural' factors that were geographically and socially specific. To that end, there was an extensive early modern vocabulary describing the particularities of everyday material and comestible culture: the world of goods was very much regarded as part of the 'customs', 'habits', 'practices', 'rituals', and 'ceremonies' by which and through which individuals, households, and communities lived their lives. Third, when early modern commentators moved beyond the cultural relativism of customs and practices and looked to explain consumption in singular and universalistic terms, they tended to reach for the concept of 'emulation'. By this they simply meant the human propensity for social imitation, whereby the customs and practices of one social group were admired and copied by others. Most usually, the direction of travel was assumed to be downwards, with the lower orders admiring and adopting the behaviour of the elites whenever possible: as William Prynne noted in 1628, "Inferiors [...] commonly adore [their] Superiors' chief and greatest vices, as so many glorious and resplendent virtues". But emulation could also be trans-cultural, with England's consumer revolution after 1660 often explained by contemporaries as the successful emulation of the Dutch.

## Conclusion

It is striking that when early modern historians rediscovered consumption as a key feature of Europe's economic history, they also reached for theories of emulation to explain the proliferation of watches, coffeepots, bookcases, silks, linens, cottons, porcelain, glass tableware, cutlery, and so on. Most influentially, it was argued that, after 1650, the potent combination of colonial groceries and 'populuxe' goods tempted the middling and lower-class households of Northwestern Europe to fundamentally alter their habits of consumption by

becoming 'industrious' enough to afford the goods and lifestyles previously monopolised by their social betters. However, as many historians have noted, concepts of emulation assume as much about human psychology and motivation as the economists' model of the rational consumer. More to the point, they also risk eliding the contingencies and meanings of custom and practice that also concerned early modern commentators. As such, it is perhaps worth concluding with Lorna Weatherill's more cautious but also more open suggestion that any overarching explanation for the rise of consumer societies needs to be attuned to the diversity of motives and meanings of consumption across geographical and social space.

### Discussion questions

1. In which ways did early modern Europeans live in a consumer society?
2. Which role did colonialism play in the development of the early modern consumer society?
3. In which ways does the early modern consumer society still shape our experience of consumption today?

### Suggested reading

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