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‘Rare and curious’ or ‘Genuine and fashionable’? The material culture of the elite, c.1760-1840

In August 1823, a wide range of goods belonging to the late Henry Fryer, esquire of Stamford Baron in Northamptonshire were offered for sale by auction. According to the catalogue, they included a valuable library, scarce engravings and a ‘selection of rare and curious articles’. Some years earlier, in April 1800, a similar sale of the property of Lieutenant-General Phillipson at Peterborough trumpeted the goods as ‘genuine and fashionable’.¹ In many respects, these represent useful shorthand for the ways in which elite material culture was distinguished from that of the middle classes during this period.

Blondé has highlighted a specifically aristocratic model of consumption focused on silver and paintings, gaming and hunting, liveried servants and carriages.² In their emphasis on luxury and on fashion as a means of connoting rank and dignity, his Antwerp nobles resemble the London *Beau Monde* studied by Greig.³ Both groups sought out positional goods which were differentiated in terms of type, quality and cost, and which operated as markers of status. Their motive for doing so was simple. In Veblen’s words: ‘failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit’.⁴ But Veblen was also aware of the need for discernment or taste amongst elite consumers in order ‘to discriminate with some nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods’.⁵ We might interpret this in terms of a Kantian aesthetic – a taste for ‘difficult’ things.⁶ Another possibility was to consume goods that were rare; that is, to collect. As McCracken argues, this has the advantage that ‘collectibles are not available to any one with means ... not even a vast purchasing power will bring these objects into reach’.⁷

My aim here is to explore these two aspects of elite material culture through the pages of a set of 78 catalogues from house sales occurring between 1760 and 1836. In doing so, I want to address three key questions. First, was it

possible for second-hand property to act as positional goods but also fulfil the needs of the discerning consumer or collector? Second, what was the specific position within these processes of goods described as ‘antique’ Third, and perhaps rather too ambitiously, is it possible to identify the key markers of elite material culture during this period?

Second-hand goods: categories and language

The first thing to note from the covers of the sale catalogues are the striking differences in how the property of the elite and middle classes was described (Table 1). With the middle classes, the emphasis was on gentility and modernity. In describing goods in such terms, auctioneers drew on and reasserted the cultural affinity between the lower gentry and the polite middling sort.⁸ By stressing modernity they placed both goods and their prospective buyers within a culture of consumption that emphasised change and progress, despite their location in second-hand circuits of exchange. In contrast, ‘fashionable’ was used on only twice in total: *a la mode* was trumped by modern.

Items offered at sales from elite houses were ‘elegant’ and ‘genuine’. The former is a term which Vickery sees as emblematic of genteel status in the eighteenth century, whilst the latter communicated important messages about provenance.⁹ Those buying such items might be seen as seeking out bargains – a motivation played on by auctioneers who also promoted elite property as ‘valuable’. In contrast, very few auctioneers described the goods being sold in terms of their rarity. Indeed, other than Fryer, only one other sale was promoted in these terms.¹⁰

From the covers of the catalogues, it seems that auctioneers were more concerned with promoting the belongings of the elite as positional goods rather than in terms of their ability to mark out the consumer as discerning.

These messages become more nuanced when we open up the catalogues and look down the lists of goods contained within. These included everyday goods and luxury items, the latter being differentiated in terms of the intrinsic qualities or their refined nature. In this context, we might differentiate the two beds sold at Stanford Hall (see slide).¹¹ What marked out the country house sale, and with it elite material culture, was the presence of significant quantities of these luxury goods.¹²

Yet goods were made appealing not simply in terms of their intrinsic qualities, but also through the language used to describe them.¹³ There are striking differences in the nomenclature used within the sales catalogues from that which appears on the cover (Table 2): 'valuable' was seldom mentioned, whilst 'genuine' and 'modern' disappear completely. In their place, we see descriptions which play on the quality or qualities of these goods. Most common were 'handsome' and 'elegant', to which we might add 'neat', 'capital', 'lofty' and 'genteel'. Both handsome and elegant were applied to a range of goods, most often applied to furnishings and mirrors, for example with the 'very handsome mahogany case of four drawers and slide' sold at Hazlebeach Hall in 1802 and the 'two pair of elegant treble-light girandoles, neatly carved and ornamented' at Stanford Hall.¹⁴ These terms communicated good taste, rather than ostentatious grandeur and served to link elite goods to middle-class consumers who frequented house sales. Quality was also marked by describing goods as 'fine' or 'excellent'. Such words were part of the lexicon used to describe new goods. Their deployment tied second-hand to first-hand circuits of exchange through a common value system which emphasised quality as a measure of goods as markers of status.

As we have already noted, second-hand goods also offered consumers the opportunity to distinguish themselves in other ways. Scarcity was an important quality because it heightened the economic and cultural value of goods and linked into cultures of collecting. Some household goods were promoted in this

way, for example the six 'beautiful and very scarce china cups and saucers, tea pot, coffee pot, sugar bason and cover, slop bason, and 2 plates' offered for sale at Stamford Baron.¹⁵ More commonly, certain goods were given extra value because they were recognised as being more intrinsically parts of collections. This was most obviously true of books and paintings. The former appeared in significant numbers in more than half the sales, notably those of the clergy; but the latter appear to have marked out elite consumers – much as Blondé argues.¹⁶ It is telling that the catalogues offered details of painters and subjects, with some marking out particular paintings as being especially desirable because they were old masters. In the Kirby Hall sale in 1772, there were paintings by several old masters, including Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Ruysdael and Brueghel.¹⁷

Three things are important here. First is the need for specialist knowledge to appreciate the significance of these items – a point played on by the auctioneer selling off the property of the late Earl of Halifax who apologised that the catalogue of paintings had been lost (see slide).¹⁸ Second is that country house sales offered a rare opportunity to acquire such goods – aside from London dealers and auction houses there were few alternatives. And third is the way in which paintings could operate both as positional goods and markers of taste and distinction. They were valuable and often impressive in a material sense, but they were also sought after because they formed part of collections which demonstrated the cultural and economic reach of the owner.¹⁹

House sales, antiques and collecting

The diversity of eighteenth-century collecting was seen in the range of things offered for sale from country houses, although (outside the library and picture gallery) true 'collections' appeared in just a handful of sales. Two of these linked directly to practices established in association with the Grand Tour. At Cottingham in 1762, Thomas Medleycot's collections of busts and medals were

offered for sale: in the study, Lot 3 comprised 'plaster bustos' and Lot 7 'Five Collections of Medals in plaster, fram'd and glaz'd'. More fully described and thus more prominent in the pages of the catalogue was J.P. Clarke's coin collection, which ran to 16 lots.²⁰ This was clearly an important collection and would have required considerable specialist knowledge, both to judge the authenticity of the coins and to appreciate their collective economic and cultural value as a set.²¹

Another type of collection was to be found in the six glass cases containing stuffed birds sold from Welton Place and the 'collection of butterflies in a japanned frame, glazed' located in the drawing room of Rolleston Hall.²² Both looked forward to the Victorian fascination with natural history and formed part of a wider interest in science represented in a range of instruments from microscopes to camera obscuras. Rather more accessible was range of curios and ornaments which included snuff boxes and 'a curious silver filigree honeysuckle, enclosed in a glass case'.²³

One particular form of curiosity which was gaining an important market during this period was the antique. This was a term used very sparingly on the cover of catalogues, although the practice appears to have grown somewhat during the 1840s.²⁴ Within the catalogues, a greater number and variety of goods were described as 'antique'. The earliest reference I have found is to '11 antique casts in lead' sold at the Kirby Hall in 1772.²⁵ But 'antique' as a term to connote high quality pieces from an earlier age first appears in 1792 and remained relatively uncommon at least through to the 1840s, despite the growth of the antiques trade in London²⁶ Goods described as antique were evidently different and in some sense more desirable than other luxuries. As well as their obvious link to the past – an association which was increasingly desirable as romanticism took hold of elite sensibilities from the late eighteenth century – they were associated with scarcity, uniqueness and distinction.²⁷

Antique was initially and most often linked to china or glass (see slide).²⁸ There does not appear to have been any particular type or form of china and glass that was favoured as antique. One-off pieces seem to feature rather more often than the remnants of larger sets, but 'antique' was a label attached to useful as well as decorative pieces. A similar variety is apparent when looking at the furniture described as antique (see slide).²⁹

This indicates some of the complexity of the term, the meaning of which appears to have been somewhat unstable during this period. Antique was clearly seen as a virtue – something that would add value to the item being offered for sale, probably by adding extra layers of meaning, particularly in terms of what a proper understanding of its worth might say about the knowledge and taste of the owner. Yet it was a term that could be applied to a wide variety of objects, only some of which would appear to be high quality or high value from their intrinsic qualities or their functions. Moreover, it does not appear to have necessarily linked to authentic associations, the 'antique India quadrille table' in the drawing room in Mrs Dore's residence in Sudborough being especially puzzling in this regard.³⁰

Markers of elite material culture

What can this brief analysis of sales from a variety of country houses tell us about elite material culture in late Georgian England?

Many of the goods available were positional goods, the language used to describe them serving to heighten their credentials as markers of status in terms of wealth, luxury and quality.³¹ This suggests that there was little intrinsic difference between first and second-hand goods: both acted in a similar way, linking into the same value systems and drawing on the same points of reference to determine their economic and cultural worth. It also

suggests that what separated elite from middle-class material culture was the quality rather than the type of goods.

However, elite houses were also distinguished by the presence of collections of books and paintings. The value of these things came from their scarcity as much as well as their intrinsic quality – they were part of a collecting culture that allowed a cognoscenti to distinguish themselves in terms of their cultural as well as their economic capital.

Good paintings were expensive. A purer expression of the importance of scarcity was found in the collections of curiosities found in a small number of houses. Antiques might be fitted into this category, at least for a short period in the early nineteenth century. Whilst the market for such goods remained limited, their monetary value was relatively modest – they marked out consumers in cultural rather than economic terms. But antique is itself problematic in this regard. On the one hand, the monetary value of antiques rose as the market developed in the middle decades of the nineteenth century so that they increasingly became positional goods. On the other hand, they were not the exclusive domain of the elite. In my sample, they appear in the homes of baronets, esquires and the widows of gentlemen; by the 1840s they were also found in sales in rectories and urban villas.

It is therefore difficult to pin down what distinguished the homes of the elite. Their material culture shifted, even over short periods of time, and varied according to the taste of individuals. Perhaps it was, as Lord Chesterfield noted of the *Beau Monde*, a certain *je ne sais quoi*.³² But this is to give up too easily. From the sale catalogues that I have analysed here, it appears to have been the assemblage of goods that mattered. All could be found in middle-class homes, but not in the quantity, range, quantity and combination found in the country house.

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- ¹ NCL, M000056444NL/9, Stamford Baron (1823), cover; M0005647NL/1, Peterborough (1800), cover.
- ² B. Blondé, 'Conflicting consumption models? The symbolic meaning of possessions and consumption amongst the Antwerp nobility at the end of the eighteenth century', in B. Blondé, et al (eds) *Fashioning Old and New, Changing Consumer Patterns in Western Europe, 1650-1900* (Turnhout, 2009), 65-71. See also J. Stobart, 'Gentlemen and shopkeepers: supplying the country house in eighteenth-century England', *Economic History Review*, 64 (2011), 885-904.
- ³ H. Grieg, 'Leading the fashion: the material culture of London's *beau monde*', in J. Styles and A. Vickery (eds), *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America 1700-1830* (London and New Haven, 2006), pp. 293-313.
- ⁴ T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: an Economic Study of Institutions* (1899; London, 1994), p.74.
- ⁵ Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Classes*, p.74.
- ⁶ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of Judgement and Taste* (London, 1986), p.???
- ⁷ G. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988), p.113.
- ⁸ A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian England* (London and New Haven, 1998), pp.13-37.
- ⁹ Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter*, pp.161-95.
- ¹⁰ NCL, ?????, Orlingbury, 1823, cover.
- ¹¹ NCL, M0005646NL/11, Stanford Hall, 1792, pp.3-4.
- ¹² J. Stobart, 'Luxury and country house sales in England, c.1760-1830', forthcoming.
- ¹³ J. Stobart, 'Language of luxury. Consumption and the English country house, c.1760-1830', *Virtus*, 18 (2011).
- ¹⁴ NCL, M0005647NL/7, Hazlebeach Hall, 1802, p.12; M0005646NL/11, Stanford Hall, 1792, p.10.
- ¹⁵ NCL, M0005644NL/9, Stamford Baron, 1823, p.50.
- ¹⁶ Blondé, 'Conflicting consumption models'.
- ¹⁷ NCL, M0005646NL/3, Kirby Hall, 1772, pp.11, 12, 15 (The catalogue does not make clear which Brueghel); NCL, M0005644NL/13, Welton Place, 1830, pp.19-20.
- ¹⁸ See NCL, M0005647NL/6, Earl of Halifax, 1772, p.39.
- ¹⁹ See McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*, p.113; Stobart, 'Language of luxury', pp.96-7.
- ²⁰ NCL, M0005644NL/2, Cottingham, 1772, p. 11; M0005644NL/13, Welton Place, 1830, pp.17-18.
- ²¹ Berg?²
- ²² NCL, M0005647NL/2, Rolleston Hall, 1801, pp.21, 14.
- ²³ NCL, M0005644NL/9, Stamford Baron, 1823, pp.49-50.
- ²⁴ Three catalogues from the 1840s mention antiques on the front cover, including that of Right Hon Lord Douglas at Broughton.
- ²⁵ NCL, M0005646NL/3, Kirby Hall, 1772, p.11.
- ²⁶ C. Wainwright, *The Romantic Interior* (New Haven, 1984), p.35.
- ²⁷ C. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Cambridge, 1987); Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
- ²⁸ NCL, M0005644NL/13, Welton Place, 1830, 20; NCL, M0005645NL/22, Sudborough, 1836, pp.12, 5.
- ²⁹ NCL, M0005644NL/13, Welton Place, 1830, pp.21, 22, 24.
- ³⁰ NCL, M0005645NL/22, Sudborough, 1836, p.7.
- ³¹ NCL, M0005647NL/2, Rollaston Hall, 1802, p.3; M0005644NL/5, Wollaston Hall, 1805, p.15; M0005644NL/8, Geddington House, 1823, p.4.
- ³² Greig, 'Beau Monde'.