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The language of luxury goods
Consumption and the English country house, c.1760-1830*

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Luxury is both a slippery and relative term: a category that is contingent upon time and space, as well as culture and wealth. Building on a lengthy debate over the virtues and vices of luxury which had run through much of the early modern period, Adam Smith distinguished two types of luxury consumption: that which does not endure and that which does. He noted a switch from one to the other as taking place in the early eighteenth century, with elite consumers increasingly seeking new indicators of status: 'For a pair of diamond buckles perhaps, or for something as frivolous and useless, they exchanged the price of the maintenance of a thousand men for a year, and with it the whole weight and authority which it could give them'.[1] Historians have confirmed this transition, although Linda Peck and others have pushed the timing back into the seventeenth century or earlier.[2] They have also broadened out the scope of luxury consumption, moving beyond Smith's rather pejorative emphasis of fripperies and Werner Sombart's emphasis on the gratification of individual sensuous desires to encompass a broad range of material goods. Indeed, the nature of the goods being consumed was central to Thorstein Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption as a means of cementing and displaying social status. He wrote that consumption by the leisure classes 'undergoes a specialisation as regards the quality of the goods consumed. Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit'.[3]

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1 A. Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (first published London, 1776; Oxford, 1976) 418-419.

2 See, for example: L. Levy Peck, *Consuming Splendor. Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* Cambridge, 2005) 10-22; R.M. Berger, *The Most Necessary Luxuries. The Mercers' Company of Coventry, 1550-1680* (University Park, 1993); R. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600* (Baltimore, 1993).

3 T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class. An Economic Study of Institutions* (first published New York, 1899; London, 1994) 74.

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Defining the precise character of these 'excellent goods' is problematic.[4] They were positional goods in that their value was used to mark out status, but their excellence was not merely a reflection of cost.[5] Whilst his name has been attached to goods consumed in this way, Veblen himself was aware of the need for discernment on the part of the consumer to identify and consume the right sort of goods: 'to discriminate with some nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods'.[6] Writing in 1577, William Harrison noted that 'in noblemen's houses it is not rare to see abundance of arras, rich hangings of tapestry, silver vessel, and so much other plate as may furnish sundry cupboards'. He went on to note that, in the houses of knights and gentlemen, there might be found: 'tapestry, turkey work, pewter, brass, fine linen, and thereto costly cupboards of plate'.[7] By the eighteenth century, some of these goods had fallen from fashion; overtaken by more novel items: pewter was replaced by earthenware and porcelain, turkey work by mahogany, and tapestry (to an extent) by damask wall hangings.[8] But a focus on the home remained important. Looking back from the early twentieth century, Sombart drew on contemporary sources to argue that domestic luxury formed the area of enormous and growing expenditure: crystal lamps, busts and medallions, carved marble chimneys, Asian textiles, gilded furniture and magnificent clocks.[9] The impression is confirmed by Amanda Vickery's recent tour de force of the Georgian interior, although she notes that new luxuries were balanced by others that were more established, much of the spending of mid-eighteenth-century gentlemen still being centred on coaches, horses and wine cellars.[10] A similar blend is seen in Fanny Burney's *Cecilia*. When Miss Larolles plans to go to the sale at Lord Belgrade's house, she has in mind a rather different set of goods. When asked by Cecilia what will be sold there, she replies: 'O every thing you can conceive; house, stables, china, laces, horses, caps, every thing in the world'.[11]

These lists underline the importance of luxury goods to elite consumption and highlight the country house as a key site for luxury consumption: a place where no expense was spared to make a very public statement of the wealth, taste and connoisseurship of the owner.[12] In this sense, luxuries can be defined in a rational and purposeful sense. For Veblen and, when it comes down to historical specifics, for Sombart as well, luxury conveyed and communicated status. This links to the idea of luxuries as 'social valuables', characterised by their high cost; 'the patron-client relations of

4 For discussion of the concept of luxury, see: M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2005) 21-45; C. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury. A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994) 138-139; Peck, *Consuming Splendor*, 1-24.

5 F. Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (London, 1977).

6 Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Classes*, 74.

7 W. Harrison, *The Description of England* (London, 1587) 197.

8 For a good overview, see J. de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution. Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008) 122-185.

9 Sombart, *Luxury and Capitalism*, 105.

10 A. Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors. At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven, 2009) 124-125. See also H. Grieg, 'Leading the fashion. The material culture of London's *beau monde*', in J. Styles and A. Vickery, ed., *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America 1700-1830* (New Haven, 2006) 293-313.

11 F. Burney, *Cecilia. Memoirs of an Heiress* (first published London 1782; London, 1986) 28.

12 See 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, e.a., ed., *Fashioning Old and New, Changing Consumer Patterns in Western Europe, 1650-1900* (Turnhout, 2009) 65-71.

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Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire, 1724-1726, designed *(photo by author)*

production and trade, and the protection and reproduction of status systems'.[13] To these anthropological perspectives we might usefully add cultural definitions of luxury goods which centre on them as 'incarnated signs' carrying broader meanings and associations. Understanding the social and cultural meaning of these signs depends on semiotic virtuosity, whilst consuming luxury in an appropriate manner draws on specialised knowledge.[14] Both of these must be learned by the discerning consumer, sometimes through systems of formal education as Bourdieu argues, but also via cultural institutions such as the Grand Tour and everyday processes of sociability and consumption.[15] In all of these contexts, language was central to the ways in which luxury was understood, communicated and valued by elite consumers.

In this paper, I want to explore the semiotics of luxury and the pragmatics of representing and communicating luxury through written sources. This is done through discourse analysis of two key media relating to the consumption of luxury goods in

13 Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, 30.

14 A. Appadurai, 'Introduction. commodities and the politics of value', in: idem, ed., *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986) 3-63.

15 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of Judgement and Taste* (London, 1986); J. Black, *The British Abroad. The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (Stroud, 2003); D. Arnold, 'The illusion of grandeur? Antiquity, grand tourism and the country house', in: idem, *The Georgian Country House. Architecture, Landscape and Society* (Stroud, 1998) 100-116.

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the country house: bills for goods bought by elite consumers, and sales catalogues for post-mortem auctions of their contents. The former were primarily intended as lists of goods supplied, together with their cost; but they also comprised descriptions which in effect offered post-purchase reinforcement of the material and cultural attributes of the goods. Catalogues were produced by the auctioneers and distributed in advance of the sale and operated as advertisements for the goods on offer as well as guides to the timing and organisation of the sale. Their lists of goods were thus promotional as well as descriptive, making the use of language doubly significant. My sample of bills is drawn from the archive of the Leighs of Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire. It covers three generations: Edward, the third Lord Leigh (1684-1738); Thomas, the fourth Lord (1713-1749), and his son Edward (1743-1786). The sales catalogues cover twenty-four auctions at a range of country houses in Northamptonshire held during period 1760-1832.[16] Fourteen of the properties were owned by gentlemen or esquires, three by titled aristocrats (including a notable local magnate: the Earl of Halifax), two by women, and five by people for whom we have only a name.

Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's register of luxury, I first consider the ways in which language was used both to identify goods as luxuries and link them into wider systems of meaning. This is a surprisingly neglected area, despite the existence of a large literature which discusses contemporary views on luxury, largely framing this in terms of political thought or moral issues. Christopher Berry and John Sekora, for example, discuss changes in the ways in which luxury was conceived and expressed, often in a strongly critical light.[17] Naturally, such work touches on language, but focuses on how it related to luxury as a concept rather than luxury goods as material objects. My concern here is the latter, particularly the pragmatics of representing goods as luxuries (and in effect to define luxury) in language, and the ways in which language was used to associate luxury with other cultural categories. In addition to generic associations with gentility and elegance, with their connotations of refined taste, I focus on the presence of goods described as antique and briefly consider their place in the country house. The second half of the paper then considers luxury in terms of semiotic virtuosity and its association with knowledge systems – the ways in which luxuries were set within wider cultural contexts of learning, consumption and understanding. Here, I argue that cultures of collecting, genres of painting, and exotic associations were all important in emphasising the quality of luxury goods, and that the language deployed was crucial in linking goods and cultures.

Writing luxury: the use of language

Many of the goods in country houses could be defined as luxuries by their price or the complexity of their production or acquisition. At Stoneleigh Abbey, these included damask, silk lace and goose feathers supplied by John Burroughs in 1710;

16 The Stoneleigh Abbey bills are held at the Shakespeare Central Library and Archive (SCLA) DR18/5. The catalogues are kept in the Local Studies Collection of Northamptonshire Central Library (NCL).

17 J. Skekora, *Luxury. The concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore, 1976); C. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury. A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994). See also Peck, *Consuming Splendor*, 6-14; Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, 21-45; Berry, *The Idea of Luxury*, G. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption. New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomingon, Indiana, 1988).

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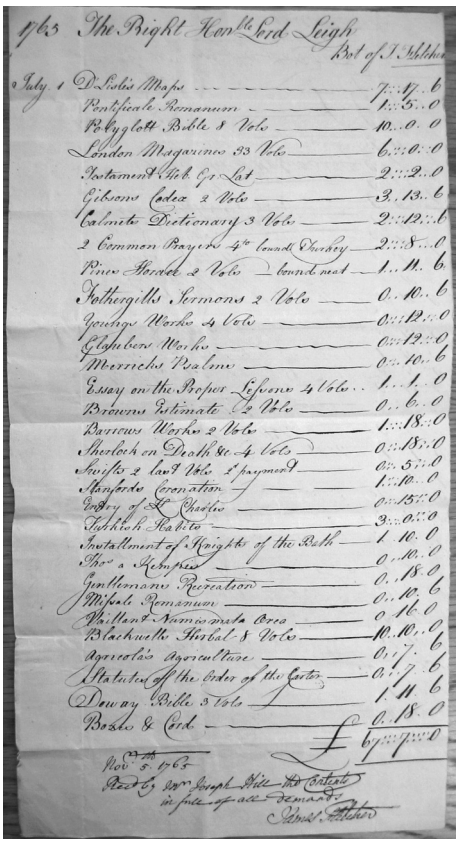
wallpapers hung by Bromwich and Leigh in 1765, and a wide range of silverware from Thomas Gilpin through the 1740s-1760s.[18] The quality and cost of these items helped to create an appropriately grand and luxurious interior in the Leigh's country seat. A similar range of luxury goods was dispersed in country house sales. The drawing room curtains sold on the second day of the Barton Hall sale were made of 'rich crimson silk damask … lined, with tassels and fringe', whilst the 3x5 foot pier glass from the dining room in Rolleston Hall was set in 'strong frame, richly carved with elegant top ornaments gilt in burnished gold'.[19] We might imagine that such costly materials spoke for themselves, but descriptions in bills and sales catalogues took great pains to detail and augment their status through the careful use of language, deploying a range of adjectives to emphasis key attributes of the goods.

Looking across the bills as a whole, the word most commonly employed to communicate superior quality was 'fine'. This was used to describe anything from tea and coffee, through table linen and wallpaper, to furniture, and might be seen as so broad as to be effectively meaningless. In some cases, it was a stock descriptor which retailers employed to distinguish different grades of a particular product. Thomas


1765 The Right Hon^ble Lord Leigh
Bot of J. Fletcher

July 1 D. Stelin's Maps — 7:: 17:: 6
Pontificale Romanum — 1:: 5:: 0
Polyglott Bible 8 Vols — 10:: 0:: 0
London Magazines 33 Vols — 6:: 0:: 0
Testament Heb Cy Lat — 2:: 2:: 0
Gibsons Codex 2 Vols — 3:: 13:: 6
Calmets Dictionary 3 Vols — 2:: 12:: 6
2 Common Prayers 4^to bound Durley — 2:: 8:: 0
Pines Horace 2 Vols bound neat — 1:: 11:: 6
Fothergills Sermons 2 Vols — 0:: 10:: 6
Jennings Works 4 Vols — 0:: 12:: 0
Glasbers Works — 0:: 12:: 0
Mearnes Psalms — 0:: 10:: 6
Essay on the Proper Lessons 4 Vols — 1:: 1:: 0
Browns Estimate 2 Vols — 0:: 6:: 0
Barrows Works 2 Vols — 1:: 18:: 0
Sherlock on Death &c 4 Vols — 0:: 18:: 0
Swifts 2 last Vols 1 payment — 0:: 5:: 0
Stanfords Coronation — 1:: 10:: 0
Entry of K. Charles — 0:: 15:: 0
Turkish Habits — 3:: 0:: 0
Installment of Knights of the Bath — 1:: 10:: 0
Per a Ramped — 0:: 10:: 0
Gentlemans Recreation — 0:: 18:: 0
Missale Romanum — 0:: 10:: 6
Vallancy Numismata Aera — 0:: 16:: 0
Blackwells Herbal 8 Vols — 10:: 10:: 0
Agricolas Agriculture — 0:: 7:: 6
Statutes of the Order of the Garter — 0:: 7:: 6
Dewey Bible 3 Vols — 1:: 14:: 6
Boxes & Cord — 0:: 18:: 0
£ 67:: 17:: 0
Nov 5 1765
Rec^d the Contents
in full of all Demands
Jos. Fletcher

Bill presented to Edward, Fifth Lord Leigh by James Fletcher of London, bookseller *(coll. and photo Shakespeare Central Library and Archive)*

18 SCLA, DR18/5/1808; DR18/5/2216; DR18/5/3121.
19 NCL, M0005646NL/5, Barton Hall, 1784, 13; NCL, MOOO5647NL/2, Rolleston Hall, 1801, 20.

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Ballard, for example, supplied Edward, the fifth Lord Leigh, with green tea and finest green tea, hyson and fine hyson; but even here it connoted goods which were better the norm. When linked to longer descriptions, it leant goods a feel of luxury. We see this in the 'very fine large glass' and 'very fine japann'd table' supplied by Thomas Davies in 1711 and in the 'fine saxon blue stock emboss'd paper' hung by Bromwich and Leigh in 1763.[20] Given the cost of these items (the mirror was 22 guineas, whilst a room hung with saxon wallpaper came to £5 14s 9d), such descriptions underscored material quality, and the ability of these goods to reflect and communicate Edward Leigh's wealth and dignity. Significantly, perhaps, it was often the higher order luxury goods which were described in most detail by their suppliers, a point nicely illustrated through two examples. In 1763, Edward began to refurnish Stoneleigh Abbey in anticipation of his coming of age the following year. He engaged the London upholsterer Thomas Burnett to supply a large range of furnishings, who in turn contracted the furniture makers William Gomm & Co. The bill presented by the latter ran to sixty pages and incorporated detailed descriptions of each piece supplied, including: 'an exceedingly handsome mahogany communion table, the feet very neatly carved with flowers and foliage, the frame very richly carved; on the front a cherubim's head foliage and flowers'.[21] This level of detail reflects something of the difficulty in succinctly describing the luxury of material objects. It also echoes the time and care that went into producing this piece of furniture, the quality of which is hammered home with superlatives: 'handsome', 'neat' and 'rich'. The quantity and quality of the furniture supplied through Burnett must have given a huge lift to the feeling of wealth and luxury at Stoneleigh Abbey – an image reinforced by considerable spending on stuccowork, wallpaper, books, artwork and silverware.[22]

Luxury was carried beyond the walls of the house through the personal appearance of the owner and his servants, and his means of conveyance. Edward Leigh also spent lavishly on a new carriage, the *pars pro toto* of an elite lifestyle, which merged old repertoires of status consumption with newer concerns for fashionability.[23] The vehicle was described on the bill from John Cope as having 'neat ornamentl mouldings, painted with a glaz'd ruby colour, and the arms and dignity in very large mantles, and all the framework gilt, and the roof, back and sides japan'd'.[24] The total cost of £130 reflected both the workmanship and the public statement that such a coach would make. Again, the language is as telling as the description, the work being 'neat' and reference made to Edward's 'dignity' as a peer of the realm. Carriages were luxuries by any standard. The language in the bill reinforced the idea of luxury by emphasising both the aesthetic quality and material qualities of the vehicle, helping to communicate its visual impact through words.

20 SCLA, DR18/5/5998, DR18/5/1855, DR18/5/4402.

21 SCLA, DR18/5/4408. This table is still located in the chapel at Stoneleigh Abbey.

22 For a more detailed account of this refurbishment and its place in the changing consumption practices of Leighs, see: J. Stobart, 'Gentlemen and shopkeepers: supplying the country house in eighteenth-century England', *Economic History Review*, LXIV (2011) 885-904; A. Gomme, 'Abbey into palace: a lesser Wilton?', in: R. Bearman, ed., *Stoneleigh Abbey. The House, Its Owners, Its Lands* (Stratford-upon-Avon, 2004) 82-115.

23 P. Burke, The *Historical Anthropology of Early-Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987) 139. Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 124, draws an analogy between the eighteenth-century coaches and the present-day helicopter.

24 SCLA, DR18/5/4350.

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Stanford Hall, Leicestershire, 1697-1704 *(photo by author)*

A similar range of superlatives was deployed when it came to selling a much wider range of goods from country houses, some of which were not self-evidently luxuries. Here, descriptions took on extra significance as declarations of luxury.[25] That said, the lexicon of those compiling the catalogues was reasonably constrained. Some catalogues remained very objective in their descriptions, in extreme cases utilising no qualitative adjectives at all.[26] This may have been an extreme response to the strictures expressed by one auctioneer who wrote in a catalogue for a sale at a very large country parsonage that: 'Bombast Puffing of Pictures, as well as of other Articles, is always ridiculous; as not furnishing any just or clear Ideas by which the unskilled may form any judgment of their Merits, but at the same time never fails to excite the Laughter and Contempt of the Connisseur [*sic*.]'.[27] Most auctioneers were less modest and a handful waxed lyrical about the quality of the goods on offer, providing lengthy descriptions and endorsements of a range of luxury items. As in the bills sent to the Leighs, many of these involved close descriptions of the materials and design of the pieces. Mahogany was almost ubiquitous by the 1760s, but carving and upholstery made furniture more luxurious in Sombartian, sensuous terms, and offered more potential for elaborate descriptions. With window curtains, the possibilities were almost endless and the catalogues were careful in their descriptions of

25 Here, I am drawing on ideas of speech-act theory. See J.R. Searle, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, 1969).

26 These were: NCL, M0005644NL/2, Cottingham (1761), NCL, M0005646NL/4, Bramton (1779), NCL, M0005647NL/7, Laxton Hall (1801).

27 NCL, M0005645NL/5, Islip Mills, 1787.

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fabrics, styles and colours. At the 1792 sale of Sir Richard Cave's possessions from Stanford Hall, the principal bed chamber contained 'two sets of beautiful striped and flowered chintz pattern cotton festoon window curtains, 13 feet long, 3 breadths each, lined with calico and fringed, to correspond with the bed'. A few years later, the sale at Hazlebeach Hall included, in the drawing room, '3 handsome *Azure* Calico Window Curtains, trimmed with *Puce* Fringe'.[28] Handsome was the word most commonly used to described curtains, but elegant, fine, neat, lofty and rich were also deployed in an attempt to communicate something of the desirable nature of these textiles and 'declare' them as luxuries.[29]

More intricate pieces allowed some auctioneers to really exercise their linguistic muscles. For example, at the Rolleston Hall sale, Lot 252 in the Best Chamber was described as a 'mahogany case of four large, and two small compress drawers; the upper part, with folding doors, encloses a valuable ebony cabinet, the fronts of the drawers of which are MOST DELICATELY PENCILLED with the history of the journeying the Israelites in the Wilderness, and a great number of exquisite miniature figures'.[30] Such ornately decorated cabinets were often found in English country houses, sometimes having been bought whilst on the Grand Tour.[31] Capturing their intricacy and communicating their sensory luxury and significance was no easy task. Although mainly descriptive, the auctioneer's account highlights the quality of the drawings: they were 'delicately pencilled' and 'exquisite'. Later in the same catalogue, this auctioneer offered the widest ranging (and certainly the longest) description of a single lot:

> 325, VERY CAPITAL EIGHT-DAY CHIME CLOCK, which plays, from two barrels, twenty-one favourite and select tunes, in a very handsome root-vaneered [sic] case, ornamented with gilt brass pillars and mouldings
>
> The train and movement of this valuable clock (which, for accuracy of going, might be relied on in Astronomical observations) was calculated and arranged by the very eminent Mathematician and Horologist Mr LUDLAM and the excellent mechanism most correctly executed by that admirable Mechanic and Artist Mr THOMAS EAYRE, of Kettering; – Mr GOODFELLOW, a friend … of WILLIAM FORTORY, ESQ. (whose property it originally was) and eminent as a Professor of Music, was also consulted, and attended closely to its musical department; – It is no wonder, therefore, that the conjunct abilities of such a TRIO produced a piece approaching so near perfection.[32]

Here we again have close description of the piece itself, coupled with hyperbole about the process of its design and manufacture, complete with names of all those involved and enhanced by the endorsement afforded by naming its original owner.

28 NCL, M0005645NL/11, Stanford Hall, 1792, 5; NCL, M0005647NL/7, Hazlebeach Hall, 1802, 19.
29 On declaration, see J. Searle, 'A taxonomy of illocutionary acts', in: K. Günderson, ed., *Language, Mind, and Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1975) 344-369.
30 NCL, M0005647NL/2, Rolleston Hall, 1801, 10.
31 For example, at Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire, there are two Neapolitan cabinets bought by Sir Thomas Isham whilst he was touring in Italy in 1677. They cost 250 ducats (£62).
32 NCL, M0005647NL/2, Rolleston Hall, 1801, 13-14.

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Used in this way, language reinforced some of the key characteristics of luxury goods: the quality of their materials, intricacy of design, and complexity of manufacture.

Language also tied goods to wider systems of taste and cultural norms. The most common descriptions on the covers of the catalogues were 'genteel' and 'elegant' which, together with neat, 'embodied the social distinctions of provincial gentility'.[33] 'Genuine' was widely used in the late eighteenth century, presumably to reinforce the authenticity of the goods; but this fell into disuse from the turn of the nineteenth century. Apart from these, there were a handful of references to the goods on offer being neat, handsome or useful, and some more surprising suggestions: at Geddington House, the effects of the wealthy squire T. J. Tibbet were described in 1823 as 'very elegant and fashionable', whilst those at the two subsequent sales at Geddington were 'modern and genteel'.[34] Again, we might see these as declarations of the status of the goods: an attempt to create meaning and identity through language.

If we open the catalogues, we find that the most common description was 'handsome', used in sixteen catalogues to describe twelve different types of luxuries, and especially widely deployed in the early decades of the nineteenth century. It was 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 or the 'handsome mahogany oval shape loo table' sold from the Breakfast Room at Wollaston Hall.[35] The masculine connotations of the word are reflected well in these pieces and many others to which the term was applied, including prints and books. However, it was also used to describe feminine furniture in feminine spaces, most notably the 'lady's handsome secretary writing desk, with cylinder top' in the Drawing Room at Brixworth Hall; and also a wide range of china a glassware, including 'two handsome fine … fruit dishes' and 'two handsome cut glass cups and covers' at Stanford Hall.[36] 'Elegant' was also widely used, being applied to furniture and chinaware, but above all to mirrors, appearing in descriptions of pier and chimney glasses in around one-third of catalogues. It was applied particularly to the carving of the frames and the matching sconces and girandoles as at Hazlebach Hall and Stanford Hall which had respectively: an 'elegant girandole with gilt brass arms', and 'two pair of elegantly treble-light girandoles, neatly carved and ornamented'.[37] 'Neat' was also applied quite widely usually referring to furniture, but also to carriages, mirrors, silverware, clocks and even firearms. For Vickery, this term conveyed taste, but not ostentatious grandeur and was often used to describe wallpapers.[38] Its application in the sale catalogues appears to connote similar meanings of modest good taste. For example, in the Breakfast Room of Welton Place, the sale catalogue notes a 'neat

33 A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, 1998) 161.

34 NCL, Mo005644NL/8, Geddington House, 1823; NCL, Mo005645NL/10 Geddington House, 1828, NCL, Mo005645NL/13 Geddington House, 1829.

35 NCL, Mo005647NL/7, Hazlebeach Hall, 1802, 15; NCL, Mo005644NL/5, Wollaston Hall, 1805, 15.

36 NCL, Mo005646NL/15, Brixworth Hall, 1727, 14; NCL, Mo005646NL/11 Stanford Hall, 1792, 12. On the gendered nature of different interiors, see: Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, passim; J. Kinchin, 'Interiors: nineteenth-century essays on the "masculine" and the "feminine" room', in: P. Kirkham, ed., *The Gendered Object* (Manchester, 1996) 12-29.

37 NCL, Mo005647NL/7, Hazlebeach Hall, 1802, 12; NCL, Mo005646NL/11, Stanford Hall, 1792, 10.

38 Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 180-182.

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painted three-tier book shelf' and a 'very neat mahogany sofa table'. These are set alongside the grandeur of a 'handsome pier glass in gilt frame' and the subtly of 'three elegant china ornaments'.[39]

All of these adjectives linked into notions of refined and polite taste, thus tying these second-hand goods into wider value systems. It is significant that they played on notions of politeness and respectability; on correctness and restraint, rather than emphasising the opulence and intrinsic luxury of the pieces. Only on rare occasions did adjectives obviously link to either the sensuous nature of luxury or ideas of splendour. Richness is mentioned in just two catalogues, and 'splendid', 'superior' and 'noble' were used very sparingly. We have already seen that lengthy descriptions were used to convey the rich carving of Edward Leigh's communion table and the equally rich decoration of the ebony cabinet at Rolleson Hall. Yet the term itself was eschewed as shorthand for luxury. Instead the most frequently used qualitative description was 'excellent'. Nine catalogues deployed this term to describe furniture, from the 'excellent six-leaved japanned screen' at Stanford Hall to the 'excellent mahogany writing table with three drawers, brass bound on wheel castors, the top covered with leather' at Wollaston Hall. Its precise meaning is difficult to discern, but comparison with the next two lots at the Wollaston Hall sale is revealing: 'a very good mahogany writing table, completely fitted up with seven drawers' and 'a mahogany one-flap table with shifting flap to join'.[40] Whilst there is a risk of over-interpretation, there appears to be a distinction drawn in terms of the complexity of the piece and the level of finish – another example of language being used to differentiating a luxury from a more commonplace piece.

All this suggests that luxury goods were being described and promoted in the sales catalogues primarily in terms of their meaning and position within the context of polite taste. In this way, luxury was linked to broader value systems that were inclusive rather than exclusive: elegance, neatness and gentility were touchstones for the gentry as well as the aristocracy. One exception to this was the term 'antique' which was deployed from at least 1792 to connote high quality pieces from an earlier age. It remained an uncommon description at least through to the 1840s, despite the growth of the antiques trade in London, initially in Soho and later around Bond Street and Jermyn Street.[41] However, its use in sales catalogues both reflected and promoted the growing interest amongst some gentlemen and aristocrats in the old as well as the ancient. 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.[42]

Antique was initially linked to china. At the Stanford Hall sale, for example, Sir

39 NCL, Mo005644NL/13, Welton Place, 1830, 24-5.
40 NCL, Mo005646NL/11, Stanford Hall, 1792; NCL, Mo005644NL//5,Wollaston Hall, 1805, 7.
41 C. Wainwright, *The Romantic Interior. The British Collection at Home* (New Haven, 1984) 35.
42 C. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Cambridge, 1987); Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

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Richard Cave had 'a pair of fine antique jars and covers', and a 'scarce antique dish'.[43] China was also identified as antique in the sales at Welton Place (1830), where there were 'two antique tea pots' and an 'antique ewer, basin and candlestick', and at Sudborough (1836) which included 'antique china' and an 'antique sideboard glass with branch'.[44] This spread across different places was matched by an expansion into other types of goods. At Brixworth Hall in 1797, the silverware included an 'antique cup and cover'; whilst at Welton Place we see listed an 'antique bureau and bookcase', an 'antique linen chest', and an 'antique table in a carved frame'.[45] This indicates some of the complexity of the term, the meaning of which appears to have been somewhat unstable during this period. It referred to something old rather than ancient (antique being distinct from antiquity); but it was also distinct from something that was merely old. In this way, 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. A linen chest, for example, was usually a very workaday piece of furniture and china was relatively inexpensive, unless it came from an exclusive works such as Sevres or Meissen. 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.[46]

Reading luxury: semiotics and knowledge systems

The notion of antique linked particular goods into wider systems of knowledge, both in terms of an awareness of the antique as a desirable and collectible type, and the ability to distinguish what was valuable and interesting from what was merely old. The same was true of many other luxury goods found in country houses. The marble tables being sold in 1772 following the death of the Earl of Halifax were luxury goods by any standard.[47] Yet they were also replete with layers of meaning which reinforced their status as luxuries and underpinned their importance in the material culture of the country house. Lord Halifax's tables were described in the catalogue merely as 'curious marble slabs', with attention falling instead on their carved and gilded frames. It is possible that the auctioneer failed to recognise the meaning and symbolism of such pieces – their associations with the Grand Tour and a wider European culture of consumption.[48] More likely, he knew these associations were so widely understood amongst his target customers that he felt little need to re-emphasise the point: 'curious' serving to highlight their potential attraction to the cognoscenti.

This tacit linking into broader systems of knowledge is clearer from the ways in

43 NCL, M0005646NL/11, Stanford Hall 1792, 11-12.
44 NCL, M0005644NL/13, Welton Place, 1830, 20; NCL, M0005645NL/22, Sudborough, 1836, 12, 5.
45 NCL, M0005644NL/13, Welton Place, 1830, 21, 22, 24.
46 NCL, M0005645NL/22, Sudborough, 1836, 7.
47 NCL, M0005647NL/6, Earl of Halifax, 1772, 19.
48 See Black, *The British Abroad*; Christie, *British Country Houses*, 179-188.

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which paintings were described. These appeared in significant numbers in around half of the house sales, but the focus in the catalogues was generally on the subject matter. Sometimes this went little further than naming the subject or the genre, but it could involve detailed descriptions of the paintings. Amongst a range of high quality paintings at Kirby Hall in 1772, formerly the seat of Lord Hatton, there was a 'view of Kirby Hall', 'Lord Longer-ville, 3 qrs', 'Queen of Hungary, half-length', 'the Countess of Pembroke, whole length', and 'Lord Strafford, 3 qrs'. Similarly, at Rolleston Hall, there were paintings of 'K. Charles II, 3 quarters', 'Oliver Cromwell, Protector' and 'Lancelot Andrews, Bishop of Chichester'.[49] Only rarely was there any attempt to attribute the paintings to particular artists and thus tap into the semiotic virtuosity of the cognoscenti. The auctioneer organising Lord Halifax's sale noted that:

> the auctioneer presents his compliments to the pubic in general, and to the lovers of the art of painting in particular, and is very sorry to inform them, that the catalogue of those valuable pieces included in this day and to-morrow's sale, is lost: – he shall therefore be obliged to leave their merits to be explained by their own beauties, and the discernment of such gentlemen as must be better judges of their real worth, than it's reasonable to suppose the auctioneer himself can be.[50]

Cox's apology is telling. It protested his own ignorance (whether real and imagined is unclear and, to an extent, unimportant) and declared that *gentlemen*, properly educated in such matters, would be the best judges of the quality, authenticity and value of these luxury goods. He drew on a rhetoric of discernment to place the paintings firmly within wider systems of knowledge whilst offering no pretence of being located within that system himself. Edward, the fifth Lord Leigh, was clearly part of the cognoscente to which Cox was appealing. Bills presented by those supplying him paintings and prints occasionally restricted themselves to descriptions, but much emphasis was placed on the artist. Amongst others, he acquired landscapes by Claude and Woollett, '3 small heads by Figues', a Rembrandt costing 20 guineas and a Steenwyck, also for 20 guineas.[51]

Artwork formed a central part of the material culture of the country house – it was something that visitors expected to see and, indeed, many travelled around country houses with the expressed purpose of viewing the paintings.[52] The cost of paintings or sculptures; the specialist knowledge required to appreciate the skill of the artist; the refined lexicon of description and discernment, and the ability to recognise genuine pieces were all important in distinguishing the elite both as owners and critiques of paintings.[53] Significantly, the ground upon which painting was to be judged was far from stable: tastes changed and artists rose into or fell from favour.

49 NCL, NCL, M0005646NL/3, Kirby Hall, 1772, 10, 12; NCL, M0005647NL/2, Rolleston Hall, 1801, p.4.
50 NCL, M0005647NL/6, Earl of Halifax, 1772, 39. Nonetheless, Cox was clearly aware that these pictures would attract considerable attention, so much so that he gave over two days for the sale of the 24 lots.
51 SCLA, DR18/5/4295, DR18/5/4490, DR18/5/4495. It is unclear to which Claude the bill refers.
52 A. Tinniswood, *The Polite Tourist. A History of Country House Visiting* (London, 1998) 91-102.
53 Christie, *British Country Houses*, 179-221.

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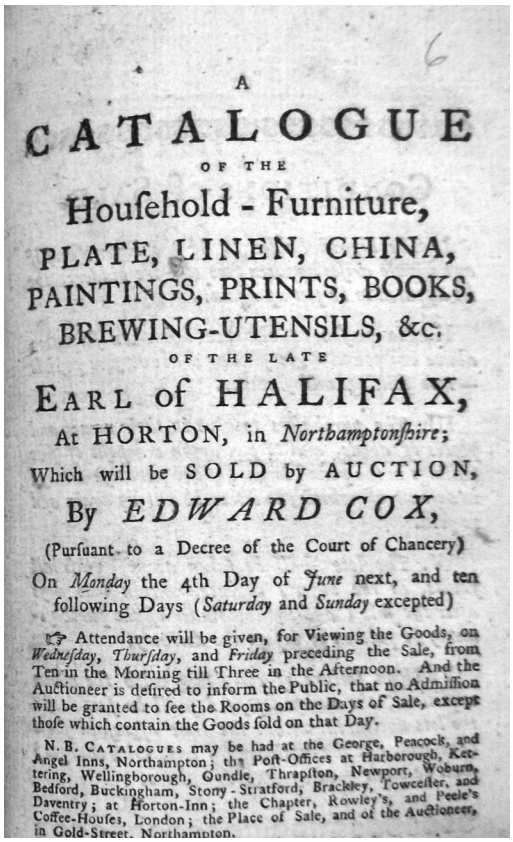
Catalogue of the household-furniture of the Earl of Halifax *(coll. and photo Northamptonshire Central Library)*



A
CATALOGUE
OF THE
Houſehold - Furniture,
PLATE, LINEN, CHINA,
PAINTINGS, PRINTS, BOOKS,
BREWING-UTENSILS, &c.
OF THE LATE
EARL of HALIFAX,
At HORTON, in *Northamptonſhire*;
Which will be SOLD by AUCTION,
By *EDWARD COX*,
(Purſuant to a Decree of the Court of Chancery)
On *Monday* the 4th Day of *June* next, and ten following Days (*Saturday* and *Sunday* excepted)

☞ Attendance will be given, for Viewing the Goods, on *Wedneſday*, *Thurſday*, and *Friday* preceding the Sale, from Ten in the Morning till Three in the Afternoon. And the Auctioneer is deſired to inform the Public, that no Admiſſion will be granted to ſee the Rooms on the Days of Sale, except thoſe which contain the Goods ſold on that Day.

N. B. CATALOGUES may be had at the George, Peacock, and Angel Inns, Northampton; the Poſt-Offices at Harborough, Kettering, Wellingborough, Oundle, Thrapſton, Newport, Woburn, Bedford, Buckingham, Stony-Stratford, Brackley, Towceſter, and Daventry; at Horton-Inn; the Chapter, Rowley's, and Peele's Coffee-Houſes, London; the Place of Sale, and of the Auctioneer, in Gold-Street, Northampton.

Alongside the traditionally favoured genres of family and political portraits, landscapes were increasingly found in country house collections, as were sporting and historical scenes. In the Kirby Hall sale in 1772, there were paintings by several old masters, including Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Ruysdael and Brueghel. Some 60 years later, fashions had moved on and the Welton Place catalogue of 1830 listed paintings by Caneletto, Cimarolli, and various English landscape artists including John Wootton, William Anderson and Julius Ibbotson.[54] But new genres did not entirely displace the old: the picture galleries of country houses formed palimpsests as new artists and paintings were added to existing collections. At Welton Place, there newer landscapes were set alongside older masterpieces by Rubens, Claude, Wouwerman, Patel and Pynacker. Most of these were hung together in the drawing room, with smaller collections in the dining room and hall. Elsewhere, paintings were assembled in galleries, creating displays that linked them, together with other pieces of artwork, to the world of collecting and thus to the need for specialised knowledge and language in order to consume in an appropriate manner.

54 NCL, M0005646NL/3, Kirby Hall, 1772, 11, 12, 15 (The catalogue does not make clear which Brueghel); NCL, M0005644NL/13, Welton Place, 1830, 19-20.

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Collecting forms the most obvious and in some ways exclusive form of knowledge system linked to luxury consumption. A true collection required both knowledge of the categories that linked and sub-divided genres, and a set of contacts that might be drawn upon to acquire the item themselves.[55] Edward Leigh clearly possessed both and put them to good effect when assembling his library in the 1760s. He drew mostly upon four London booksellers: James Fletcher at St Pauls, Thomas Payne at St Martin in the Fields, James Robson on New Bond Street, and Paul Valient. As the addresses suggest, these tradesmen were rather different from one another and there was some specialisation of provision: Payne tended to supply histories and classic texts, some in Latin; Fletcher sold scientific and religious books, and Valient sent folio editions of prints.[56] These were men upon whom Lord Leigh could rely to source sought-after volumes and to take the initiative when the occasion arose. Thus we see Payne writing that: 'I have made bold to send yr Lordp Dionysius and Juston', adding that 'they are good copies but if not approved of, shall be taken again'.[57] That these volumes were evidently seen as useful additions to a noble library is significant since Edward was concerned with assembling collection of books that reflected his learning as well as his status as a peer of the realm. Indeed, mathematical and scientific books formed a major element of his purchases. There were practical texts such as Cooper's Anatomy, Cheselden's Anatomy, 'Cowper on the Muscles'; more metaphysical volumes, including Scheuchzer's 'Physica Sacra', and an impressive 113 volumes of L'Academie de Sciences bound in morocco leather which cost him £105.[58] Both in the bills and the library at Stoneleigh Abbey, these books were accompanied by a range of scientific instruments, including thermometers, barometers, hygrometers, and globes. These formed part of a collection that reflected and proclaimed his status as a man of learning, as well as providing a resource through which to refine his knowledge and polish his language for 'polite conversation in the age of the virtuosi'.[59] However, these were luxuries not only in their connection with systems of knowledge, but also in their intrinsic material qualities. The globes were ornamented with silvered meridians, 'neat mahogany frames' and clawed feet, and all the books were luxuriously bound and lettered – an exercise which could often cost as much as the text itself.[60]

Not every country house was associated with the culture of collecting. From the sale catalogues, only a handful appear to have had what might be termed collections. At Welton Place there were six glass cases containing stuffed birds (including a curlieu, goshawk and ptarmigan) which might be seen as part of a growing taste for England's natural history. Another assemblage which looked forward to the Victorian fascination with natural science was the 'collection of butterflies in a japanned frame, glazed', rather curiously located in the drawing room of Rolleston Hall where it may have

55 J. Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 1997) 201-287, 427-492.
56 See, for example, SCLA, DR18/5/4440, DR18/5/4384, DR18/5/4202.
57 SCLA, DR18/5/4452.
58 SCLA, DR18/5/4486, DR18/5/4482, DR18/5/4488.
59 Reid, 'Proto-bibliophiles', 34.
60 See J. Stobart, 'Gentlemen and shopkeepers'.

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acted as a conversation piece. This appears to be a one-off rather than part of a larger set of specimens, but it reflected a broader interest in science as the sale also included a reflecting telescope, microscope, camera obscura, hydrostatic balance, refracting telescope, and pairs of globes – all found in the hall.[61] The butterflies might be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities, but this equipment required specialist knowledge to put it to good use. These were luxuries of a very particular kind and would appeal only to a small set of potential consumers. Rather more accessible was the small collection of snuff boxes which formed five lots in the 1823 sale at Stamford Baron – a popular item to collect, especially amongst women. At Stamford Baron, they formed part of a larger range of curios and ornaments which also included 'a curious silver filigree honeysuckle, enclosed in a glass case', 'a piece of lapis lazara', and ten spar and scent vases.[62] Other collections had rather grander pretensions, linking directly to practices established in association with the Grand Tour. At Cottingham, Thomas Medleycot's collections of busts and medals were offered for sale, although they were neither trumpeted nor described in the kind of detail that might make them appeal to the cognoscenti. In the study, Lot 2 comprised 'plaster bustos' and Lot 7 'Five Collections of Medals in plaster, fram'd and glaz'd'. Far more detailed were the descriptions of the coin collection belonging to J.P. Clarke, esquire, which ran to 16 lots including: English and foreign silver coins (the former differentiated by reign and face value), provincial coins, and Greek and Roman coins (the latter carefully categorised by Caesar), and silver medals.[63] 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. It thus epitomised the link between knowledge and luxury, and the ways in which such knowledge was shared amongst an elite that comprised the nobility, but also a broader set of wealthy gentlemen.[64]

Conclusions

Luxury was central to the material culture of the country house and to the lifestyle and identity of the social elite in eighteenth-century England. It was associated with the self and with sensuous pleasure, but also formed a key feature of positional goods with which status was marked. As the presence of collections makes clear, luxury in the country house took many forms, and it went well beyond goods deemed luxurious in terms of their cost and complexity. Such goods were found in abundance in the homes of the elite, and were important in defining and signalling their status, but luxury was also defined in terms of semiotic virtuosity. Paintings, books, coins or even snuff boxes were often costly, but they gained meaning from their position within wider systems of knowledge. A full appreciation of the contents of a picture gallery or library came from understanding these broader contexts of learning and virtuosity. For these reasons, luxury consumption by the elite was not simply conspicuous.

61 NCL, M0005647NL/2, Rolleston Hall, 1801, 21, 14.
62 NCL, M0005644NL/9, Stamford Baron, 1823, 49-50.
63 NCL, M0005644NL/2, Cottingham, 1772, 11; NCL, M0005644NL/13, Welton Place, 1830, 17-18.
64 Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 427-492.

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It was a much more complex process, shaped by taste and dignity as much as cost; by learned value systems as well as wealth, and by self-image in conjunction with public perception.

Luxury goods were both social valuables and incarnated signs: their materiality and symbolism were intimately related. The cost and complexity of a painted cabinet bought on the Grand Tour was overlain by its provenance and associations with elite tourism and pan-European cultural values. The ways in which luxury goods were described when being bought and sold reinforced these links. Detailed descriptions in part show the practical difficulties of capturing and communicating luxury in words alone and might be read as attempts to declare goods as luxuries. But they also served to emphasise the appropriateness of the item to the status and dignity of its owner. Adjectives such as neat, elegant and handsome linked both objects and owners into wider value systems of refinement, politeness and self-respect. The language of luxury is therefore important both in understanding what made luxury goods luxurious, but also in comprehending how they were viewed and understood by contemporary consumers.