

BOOK REVIEWS

Luxury in Global Perspective. Objects and Practices, 1600–2000. Ed. by Karin Hofmeester, Bernd-Stefan Grewe. [Studies in Comparative World History.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2016. xix, 322 pp. Ill. £90.00. (E-book: \$96.00).

Bernd-Stefan Grewe and Karin Hofmeester have compiled an excellent volume on the global history of luxury goods in the last four centuries. This book collects ten intriguing case studies of various luxury goods and practices – from diamonds to safaris – and aims to trace their histories, circulation, and meanings from a global perspective. Which functions did these luxury goods have? How did the meanings ascribed to these goods change, not only across time and space, but also according to social position and context, and from one site to another in the (often long) chain from production to consumption? Since such questions are not answered easily, growing numbers of historians in recent years have taken global studies of a single commodity as a reliable way to gain new insights into complex but important subject matters. Understanding the nature and dynamics of luxury consumption is no trifling issue, as it touches upon several important debates in global, social, and economic history. Despite ostensibly dealing with superficial objects such as porcelain teacups and tortoiseshell dildos, the chapters in this volume also touch upon the industrial and consumer revolutions, on slavery and colonialism, on the dynamics of world trade, on the nature of commodification, and on the intellectual challenge of post-colonial history to Eurocentric analytical concepts. Apart from being an interesting and intriguing book, it is thus also a challenging one, which raises several compelling questions – not all of which are answered within the boundaries of its own cover.

For an explicitly global perspective on luxury, the geographical spread of the contributions included might appear unbalanced at first: six chapters deal primarily with Asia (four on India, one on China, one on Japan), and four with Africa. Although most of these chapters chart broad circulations including numerous and often surprising global connections, the focus here is clearly more on the Indian Ocean realm than on the Atlantic sphere. This is not so much the result of a haphazard assembling process (the origins of the book go back to a 2009 workshop), but of a conscious effort to shed light on regions, commodities, and practices that hitherto have been under-researched. After all, the literature on Europe's consumption of exotic luxuries is already abundant, and Topik, Marichal, and Frank's well-known volume on global commodity chains branching out from Latin America has already filled many of the gaps for that part of the world.¹ The focus of the book is thus well-chosen and highly complementary to the existing literature, as well as innovative.

The result is a rewarding volume that surveys a diverse range of luxury commodities and practices. On a methodological level, several contributions highlight the complexity of using a conceptual tool such as “luxury” (as opposed to “necessity” or “commodity”) with a distinctly European history and associated meanings, to bear sensibly on Asian and African

1. Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, Zephyr Frank (eds), *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500–2000* (Durham, NC, 2006).

commodities. Bernd-Stefan Grewe, for instance, questions the applicability of the concept to gold in twentieth-century India, based on the often-overlooked quotidian uses of gold as a currency and collateral for loans. In a stimulating comparative study of the meaning of Indian cottons in Mughal India, Southeast Asia, and early modern Europe, Giorgio Riello proposes a new typology of luxuries – one in which the meaning *and* effect of luxuries can be very different depending on the social and cultural context in which they functioned. Similar questions with regard to the applicability and conceptual difficulty of using “luxury” as an analytical tool resurface throughout the volume, even though all authors appear to be in accordance that it does offer new and valuable insights as a pragmatic tool.

Another recurrent theme throughout the book, with more wide-ranging implications outside of the field of luxury studies itself, is the plurality of meanings and functions that luxury could take. Several contributions use Arjun Appadurai’s biographical approach to things in order to stress that the function of a luxury good was always dependent on the social context in which it was embedded.² Luxuries – even seemingly timeless ones such as diamonds or gold – do not derive their meaning and role in society from their natural or intrinsic properties, but from the society around them. As a result, they have a history. Diamonds in Mughal India could be gifts, plunder, tribute, or commodity (Kim Siebenhüner); and the shape, cut, size, and design that were appreciated by consumers varied significantly across time and space (Karin Hofmeester). Throughout the volume, the versatility of this anthropological approach helps to uncover more nuanced interpretations of the various roles of luxury in past societies. It is no surprise, then, that the editors of the volume identify as their most crucial contribution the demonstration of “the historicity of luxury” – the interpretation of luxury not as a timeless category intrinsic to the natural properties of objects, but as a product of local, social, gendered, and political contexts, in often complex relations to the global world.

In some of the best chapters of the book, this perspective is used to challenge prevailing views on the role of the “periphery” in economic history and during the process of “archaic globalisation”. Karin Pallaver’s subtly subversive study of glass beads recasts East Africa as a luxury consumer and Europe as its producer, while questioning age-old stereotypes regarding the perceived “naivety” of Africans in determining the value of commodities. Anne Gerritsen’s study of Chinese porcelain, Karin Hofmeester’s research on the complex circulation between Europe and Asia of taste and technology with regards to the cutting of diamonds, and Silvia Ruschak’s exploration of Dutch wax prints in South Ghana present similar reversals and complications to more typical narratives on the role of Africa and Asia in global trade relations. No less critical is the focus on the role of unequal economic and power relations, and associations to colonialism and slavery, which are nowhere clearer than in Bernhard Gissibl’s study of the changing face of East African safaris throughout the twentieth century.

Despite the variety of different objects and regions studied, *Luxury in Global Perspective* nevertheless achieves a remarkable cohesiveness and focus. This is helped to no small degree by the clear and programmatic introduction and conclusion written by the editors. Nevertheless, the approach taken leads more easily to sometimes descriptive (if also often critical) reflections on the dominant narratives in global social and economic history, rather than to new contributions to these debates. The strength of the “biographies of things”

2. Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1988).

approach seems to lie more clearly in deconstruction than in construction. In that respect, it seems to be no coincidence that the subtitle of a volume edited by Topik *et al.*, which appeared ten years earlier, is not repeated here. The arguments made in this volume largely steer clear of engaging in debates on the origins of the world economy, or the causal effects of luxury goods in this process. After finishing the book from cover to cover, it remains hard to say whether luxury objects and practices had an agency in the grand transitions that have beset the modern world in the last 400 years, or whether they merely offer the researcher a good vantage point from which to see those transitions reflected. Depending on what one is looking for, the refusal to be drawn into grand narratives can of course be considered either a good or a bad thing.

However, I could not escape the feeling that several contributions to the volume could have benefited from a clearer comparative engagement with the existing literature on commodity chains and luxury elsewhere in the world, including on Europe. Some of the conclusions reached regarding the uses of luxury as currency, or on the ambiguity of sumptuary laws, are presented as evidence of the inapplicability of European conceptions of luxury to non-Western consumption practices, while it would be just as easy to be struck by their basic similarity. What seems to be missing to arrive at a stronger argumentation is a more comparative perspective that could have provided a stronger underpinning (or refutation) of the perceived uniqueness of some of the cases presented here.

Despite this minor issue, this is a very stimulating and rewarding book. At the very least, the volume collects a stimulating collection of thought-provoking research on luxury goods and practices in previously under-researched areas of the world. Yet, it also makes a good case for the methodological merits of combining a “biography of things” approach with a “global commodity chains” perspective. And, finally, it offers several clues for challenging universalist approaches to the study of consumption history – even though on that matter the last word has clearly not yet been written.

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DOMINGUES DA SILVA, DANIEL B. *The Atlantic Slave Trade from West Central Africa, 1780–1867*. [Cambridge Studies on the African Diaspora.] Cambridge University Press, New York [etc.] 2017. xv, 231 pp. Ill. Maps. £75.00. (E-book: \$80.00).

The 1807 abolition bill passed by the British parliament saw the start of a prolonged campaign to end transatlantic slavery, which had, by that point, disembarked over eight million captive Africans in the Americas. Whether the motivations were moral, economic, or political have long been debated, but the impacts of the abolition campaign were substantial. Diplomatic and military pressure by the British, often in stark contravention of international law and seen by many as heralding Europe’s later colonial adventures, gradually put an end to a global system of trade in which coerced labour was acquired for the plantations