

Study day on eighteenth-century domestic space RESCO

Sentiment and Consumption in the Middling Georgian Home

This paper seeks to explore the complex interrelationship between sentiment, consumption and domestic practice in the emerging culture of middling rank consumption in the mid eighteenth century, expressed in material evidence, text and image. Whilst conspicuous consumption was not a new phenomenon amongst the middling ranks, it acquired a greater significance as a means of presentation of social identity as the development of commerce expanded and enriched the middling ranks; not only the commodities themselves but also the manners which were enacted around them. In an increasingly fluid social world personal sensibility and empathy for the sentiments of others – articulated in epistolary novels such as Richardson's *Pamela* - became paramount requirements for engagement in 'polite' society, and the home was an important context for such engagement and display, as evidenced by the group portraiture of the time. Manufacture, commerce and consumption were implicit in the desire for the new 'decencies' such as wallpapers, carpets and looking glasses, and in the new custom of the preparation and consumption of tea in refined, informal groups, orchestrated by the lady of the house. The arrangement of domestic space and specially designed furniture emphasised this select sensibility, and interior decoration, rococo and Chinese in inspiration, borrowed from the exotic oriental origin of tea and the porcelain used in its consumption. The gendered nature of the preparation of tea could be seen as a challenge to male authority in the home, a discourse humorously addressed in Congreve's *The Way of the World* and 'the dominion of the tea table'. And whilst reliant on the labour of servants to maintain a certain level of leisured style, practically and socially this section of the household was kept as far as possible out of sight, the conflicting agendas of master, mistress and servants ironically explored in Swift's *Directions to Servants*. The domestic domain then – and its developing culture of consumption and conspicuous display - was a significant context in the development and articulation of new social identities and affections in the middling ranks of Georgian Britain, expressed in the arrangement of the house, its decoration and furnishings and attendant practice, and explored in image and in text.

Antony Buxton lectures on art and design history, material and domestic culture for Oxford University Department for Continuing Education and other academic institutions. He is also co-convenor of the *InHabit* research hub at TORCH (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities) and co-editor of a volume currently in preparation of cross-disciplinary papers on varying aspects of domestic culture.