

Introduction

Luxury and global history

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Luxury is a global phenomenon. (European) books and calligraphy in China; jewels and diamonds in South Asia and Europe; and glass beads and Indian textiles in Africa are or were luxury goods. Nearly all societies know objects whose value is not measured by usefulness and whose possession means more than the usual possession of objects by its members. But luxury does not only exist in the form of objects; just as important are luxurious practices fulfilling similar social and cultural functions. Such practices include attending concerts and the opera, traveling with special forms of transportation, certain acts of consumption, certain types of hunting, and generous gift giving. Luxury commodities are often global commodities, produced in one part of the world and consumed in another, its “exoticness” being one of its luxurious qualities. If we perceive global history as the history of connections, then commodities can be seen as traveling “things” that connect people in different regions of the world. Doing global history by way of commodities, following their production, exchange, and consumption along the global commodity chain is not new. However, up until now, global historians preferred to follow bulk commodities and perhaps even more luxury commodities that later became mass consumption products like coffee, tea, and sugar. An important reason for this omission is probably the influence of Immanuel Wallerstein’s *A modern world system*, who determined the paradigm of commodity research for quite some time. In his view luxury goods are per definition socially low-valued items in areas outside a capitalist world system and high-valued, high-priced goods in internal areas. The trade in luxury goods was therefore not essential to the functioning of either party and therefore of no importance to his

theory.¹ An important critic of Wallerstein's distinction between luxury and bulk and its consequences is Jane Schneider, who states that it is difficult to distinguish between luxuries and necessities because, for example, in precapitalist society the tribute system was maintained through the distribution of luxuries and imperialism necessitated "winning distant people with kindness." Also, Schneider rightfully claims that Wallerstein has no good explanation for precapitalist social change because he has no eye for the importance of the urge for luxury: this made people start traveling, going overseas, and so forth: "the luxury trade could induce massive alterations in technology, leadership, class structure, and ideology within trading populations and in 'relay' populations on the transit routes."² Her suggestion is to focus on the relationship between luxuries and essentials rather than on the distinction. We would like to take this argument one step further and show how luxury in various settings functioned and how local variations in taste could influence (global) economic interactions. This is linked up with the ideas of Christopher Bayly who states that "certain products such as basic grains and basic cloths were more or less universally required and universally produced in all pre-modern agrarian economies. Economic activities based on production and consumption at this level were predictable ... by contrast there were other products and patterns of consumption which were both geographically specific and heavily determined by cultural preference: Arab horses, otter skins, certain types of medical spices and diamonds for instance."³

This volume explicitly focuses on luxury commodities and practices for two important reasons. The first is to enrich global history by looking at the global production, exchange, and consumption of luxury goods and services. Following world-system theory and dependency theory, much critical research has been done to reveal the asymmetric economic relations in global economy in the past and present. But economic and most global historians, too, tended to overlook the specific meaning that all those who were involved in the production, trade, and consumption associated with these things and practices. Some others, such as the economic historian Jan de Vries have examined the Western European

¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730s–1840s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), xv, 131–2.

² Jane Schneider, "Was There a Pre-Capitalist World-System?," *Peasant Studies* 6 (1977): 20–9.

³ Christopher A. Bayly, "'Archaic' and 'Modern' Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena, c. 1750–1850" in A.G. Hopkins (ed.) *Globalisation in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 55.

consumption of luxury goods over the course of the “Long Eighteenth Century,” developing the interesting thesis of an “industrious revolution.” De Vries views the increasing consumption of coffee, tea, and sugar as a central factor in the emerging orientation of the private household away from a subsistence economy and toward wage labor.⁴ Christopher Bayly and Anne McCants have taken this approach further, seeing the development as not limited to the North Atlantic region but also at work in China and Japan, parts of India, and the Middle East.⁵ Until the present, such distant effects of luxury consumption have been studied principally for wares such as coffee, tea, cocoa, sugar, and tobacco, whose exclusive character eventually waned so that they became daily consumer goods with exotic origins. The work of Kenneth Pomeranz represents one exception to this tendency, focusing on several types of luxury goods, underscoring the importance for the global economy of wares such as silk and certain furniture that would only be accessible for an elite.⁶ The present collection is intended to contribute to a debate oriented along the same lines, while freeing itself from a perspective centered on North Atlantic consumers. Unlike earlier historiography, we will not only study the pre-modern period and the eighteenth century, but also the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

We believe that following luxury commodities will help us to better understand the specific functioning of global connections. Different societies and within these different social groups developed own material cultures and possessed a specific social logic attached to objects, practices, and ideas. Through economic interaction, not only on a global level, but on regional and local levels too, these different material cultures got in contact with each other and stimulated economic exchange that was also shaped by differences in economic power. The relevance of these cultural issues has often been underestimated by global (economic) historians, and studying luxuries and luxurious practices could thus provide useful new insights for the relevance of cultural differences for the functioning of global connections. The fundamental assumption is that the social and cultural context of the participants in a global chain of luxury

⁴ Most recently in Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁵ Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 49–50; Anne E. C. McCants, “Exotic Goods, Popular Consumption, and the Standard of Living: Thinking about Globalization in the Early Modern World,” *Journal of World History* 18 (2007): 433–62.

⁶ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 114–66.

commodities or luxurious practices was crucial not only for the way it was produced, traded, transported, or marketed, but also for how it was consumed. Through the analysis of specific social and cultural contexts, we try to better understand the functioning of global connections. The focus of our studies will often be local, but the perspective is transcultural and global.

The second goal of same importance is to enrich the historical conception of luxury by looking at it from a global perspective. By and large, earlier research on the history of luxury focused initially on court culture and later on emerging bourgeois culture, with more recent work concentrating on the development of European consumer society starting in the late eighteenth century. In contrast, the chapters in this volume break sharply with the traditional focus on northwestern Europe and the neo-European societies in the North Atlantic. This volume puts a thematic emphasis on those objects and practices whose most important customers were located in Asia and Africa. Furthermore, the phenomenon of luxury is here no longer reduced to its consumption; rather, those objects are examined as products of work and interpreted as part of a global division of labor. Until now, research on the critique of luxury within a cultural-studies framework has tended to elide the darker aspects of the European luxury-goods consumption – aspects often emerging outside Europe. For that reason alone, there is really no alternative to a global, transnational historical approach to the theme. The negative effects accompanying the production of luxury goods – oppression and exploitation of workers; long-term damage to health and the environment – have often been neglected because the emphasis has tended to be on highly qualified and specialized craftsmen and the goods' manufacturers.⁷ Our aim is not a criticism of the capitalistic connections around the luxury trade and its unfair socioeconomic consequences, but we would like to understand the social logic of the different people involved in these specific productions of luxury.

⁷ Typical in this respect are the otherwise excellent essays in Robert Fox and Anthony Turner, eds., *Luxury Trades and Consumerism in Ancien Régime Paris: Studies in the History of the Skilled Workforce* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1998). See Ulrich-Christian Pallach, *Materielle Kultur und Mentalitäten im 18. Jahrhundert: Wirtschaftliche Entwicklung und politisch-sozialer Funktionswandel des Luxus in Frankreich und im Alten Reich am Ende des Ancien Régime* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1987); Natacha Coquery, *L'hôtel aristocratique: Le marché du luxe à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Publ. de la Sorbonne, 1998); Jean-Claude Dumas and Marc de Ferrière le Vayer, "Les métamorphoses du luxe vues d'Europe," *Entreprises et Histoire* 46 (2007): 6–16.

METHODOLOGY

Most chapters in this volume use (either implicitly or explicitly) the global commodity chain approach to follow the commodities from their origin to the consumer to reconstruct the linkages and interconnectivity of societies around the world. Many earlier works have reconstructed and criticized the connections that are manifest in commodity chains, especially the negative impact on the “periphery.”⁸ In their basic conception, these works are often oriented toward the “dependency theory” of André Gunder Frank⁹ and Immanuel Wallerstein’s “world system.”¹⁰ This allows a description of the imbalance of economic power between countries located in that “periphery” and European and North American “metropolises.” Nevertheless, those supply chains not aimed at North Atlantic consumers have been broadly overlooked in such research. Although here assigned to the production side, “peripheral” countries have thus frequently not been perceived as consumers of goods and as value producers.¹¹ As valuable as these debates were, when the asymmetry of global political and economic connections has been substantiated, the assumed asymmetry of these power relations is already part of the research design. This volume wants to avoid this by bringing together those luxury researchers who take the agency of people outside Europe and North America more seriously and study their patterns of consumption and production, seeking to understand the meaning they attribute to their participation in these global linkages. We looked for luxury practices in regions like Africa and India that are rarely studied as a consuming part of global economy just like China and to a lesser extent Japan.¹²

⁸ See Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz, eds., *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994). An earlier form of the concept in Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Commodity Chains in the World-Economy Prior to 1800,” *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economics, Historical Systems, and Civilizations* 10, no. 1 (1986): 157–70.

⁹ André Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967).

¹⁰ Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*; *Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750*; *Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹¹ For a critical assessment Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank, eds., *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500–2000* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹² An exception to the rule is Frank Trentmann, ed., *Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) with articles by Craig Clunas on

As the global commodity chain approach helps us to see the connections between the different segments in the chain, the “social biography” approach shows us how people in different societies, or even within one society in different social contexts, attributed different meanings to the same objects. Since Arjun Appadurai’s pathbreaking work *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*¹³ biographies of objects have become quite widespread; but they have hardly found a place in approaches tied to global history. This is all the more remarkable as many such biographies, to the extent the objects are not locally produced, are the products of cross-border, global networks.¹⁴ Our intent is not simply to tie luxury as a social phenomenon to the group of those enjoying it, but to reconstruct the “social biographies” of luxurious objects, which is to say the history of their origin, production, transport, marketing, and consumption in various social and cultural contexts. The more seriously we consider the specific material and qualitative properties of these luxury commodities and the values people attributed to them exactly because of their specific properties, the more inviting such an approach appears. The hardness of diamonds, the glint of glass beads, or the purity and the seemingly everlasting lure of gold were important features to make them attractive.¹⁵

The concepts of global commodity chains and of biographies of objects can serve as lenses through which to view the global entanglement without neglecting the diversity of sociocultural contexts through which the objects passed. Something we see in the following chapters on the history of jewels, diamonds, and gold, but also of Chinese porcelain, Indian cotton, Dutch wax print cloths, glass beads, and ivory. In addition,

China and Jeremy Prestholdt on Africa; Douglas Haynes, Abigail McGowan, Tirthankar Roy, and Haruka Yanagisawa, eds., *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010) is useful though focusing very much on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹³ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁴ See Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York and Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁵ One might suggest to use the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) as an analytical approach, too. But ANT, and especially Bruno Latour, is very tacit about the cultural dimension of assemblages of things. ANT research usually does not study the representations that actors link with objects and they often ignore the important notion of intentionality. The intention of an actor to consume or practice one form of luxury or another and thus to express his or her social rank or aspiration is something that can’t be studied within an ANT framework. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); John Law and John Hassard, eds., *Actor Network Theory and After* (Oxford and Keele: Blackwell, 1999).

the examples of glass beads and ivory make clear how objects are evaluated differently in various sociocultural contexts. In Africa, ivory was no luxury; in Europe or the United States, it was part of luxurious leisure “instruments” such as piano keys and billiard balls. Inversely, where in Europe glass beads had a relatively profane function; in an East African society they gained entirely different meaning as a luxury good and highly valued means of exchange.¹⁶ Such examples point to an important second question this volume wants to answer – as a follow up on Appadurai’s thesis – that of the extent to which these “regimes of value,” that is, the varying valuation of things and practices in different societies, were constitutive for transcultural, global economic relations – whether they in fact were responsible for global economic exchange in the first place.

In contrast to many studies on luxury that either ignore the cultural and social implications of luxury or that turn a blind eye to its economic dimension, we try to connect the two. We intend not to neglect questions of prices, costs, and profits. Though this is not a collection on the global economic history of luxury, this does not necessarily mean that the analyses presented here are not interesting for economic historians. The previously mentioned recognition by some historians for the economic importance of premodern luxury commodity production, exchange, and consumptions should be broadened as their importance for later period global economic connections are also large. Here, our integrated cultural and economic approach, combining the global commodity chain with the social life of things approach, can not only help to enrich luxury studies but also deepen our understanding of global economic connections. When economists study the balance of trade, and in the course of this the flow of luxury commodities, they often use categories that were developed and defined on what North Atlantic customers considered luxurious, but there is little reflection on whether these concepts could also be applied to study balances in other regions of the globe. We need to keep in mind that a considerable portion of the Southern Hemisphere’s trade has not been quantitatively grasped, and that the evaluation of objects in different societies can vary markedly – both factors calling into question the usefulness of the categories in play here. In short, the unquestioned classification upon which the quantification of these commodity flows is based is only accurate from the standpoint of European

¹⁶ See Akinwumi Ogundiran, “Of Small Things Remembered: Beads, Cowries, and Cultural Translations of the Atlantic Experience in Yorubaland,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, no. 2–3 (2002): 427–57.

and North American culture. In other sociocultural contexts, the same objects could have a completely different meaning: cowries seemed to be worthless for Europeans, but were of high importance for African traders because they had a very high exchange value in the hinterland; in other regions, copper was of higher value than other metals; and jade, too, was much more important in Pre-Columbian America, in ancient China, or for the Maori, than for Europeans. These examples illustrate why we study the sociocultural context and analyze which meanings the (economic) actors attach to the different objects and practices. But first, we will need to define what *luxury* is.

DEFINING LUXURY

Different societies and different groups within them have always had their own ideas about what is to be considered luxurious. Objects and practices thought to be so in one sociocultural context are deemed profane and everyday in another such context. On the level of cognitive theory, this definitional problem is inherently present in the polysemy of both the objects and the trade in them¹⁷ – what seems self-evident and standard to some seems a luxury to others, and this understanding could even differ within a single social group what is especially the case when individuals are confronted with a new, not yet precisely classifiable form of object or practice. Luxury is thus a socially defined and multivalent material phenomenon.

Consistently, luxury is experienced *sensorially*, with certain luxury goods and practices tied to each of the senses: perfume and other scents for smell; champagne and truffles for taste; fine art and architecture for the eye; silk and other fine textiles for touch; opera and concerts for the ears. Although this sensuality shows that luxury is tied to pleasure, the question remains open of how luxury goods are to be distinguished from other goods. In this respect, several features come to mind tentatively defining such goods beyond any cultural differences.¹⁸ In the

¹⁷ On the polysemy and subversive power of objects, see Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life II: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, trans. John Moore (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

¹⁸ A pioneering distinction between different types of luxury is found in Werner Sombart, *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, 5th ed. (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot, 1922), 719–20. Sombart defines *luxury* as a relational concept determined in face of what is “necessary”; he here distinguishes between “physiology need” and “cultural need.” The additional distinction he draws from this between objective and subjective luxury no longer seems sustainable.

first place, within the social context where they are considered luxurious, luxury goods are as a rule *not mass goods* but special, unusual objects. A brilliant-cut diamond, an ermine fur, and a Mouton Rothschild vintage 1945 are, for example, all relatively rare objects that cannot be reproduced on a mass scale.¹⁹ Second, in cases in which they are indeed traded, such goods are usually very expensive, excluding much of the populace from their ownership *a priori*.²⁰ But their exclusive quality need not stem from purchasing price. In the period preceding the intensified interconnectiveness of the world that began in the 1860s, for example, exclusivity often lay in the exotic character of an object hard to procure because of its *special origins* – like Colombian emeralds in India; or mummies and shrunken heads being especially macabre examples. Many objects were exclusive because they were new and strange for other members of a group or society; and once everyday and accessible to many, the objects' exclusivity vanished. In contrast to novel objects, used luxury objects had exclusive character only on rare occasions – for instance when antiques came into fashion in eighteenth-century Paris.²¹

In the third place, the purchase and use of luxury objects moves *beyond the realm of everyday practicality*. Rather, they often are meant to make one or another practice or action more discriminating, cultivated, refined, or sophisticated. Typical examples for objects that have served such functions are a golden snuffbox, a gem-studded water pipe, a crystal wine carafe, or a tortoiseshell dildo. Such luxury goods serve to orchestrate the function of other consumer goods and endow their enjoyment with an aura of luxury.

In the fourth place (and this dimension of luxury is often not taken seriously enough in research on material culture), the objects involved here possess special *material qualities* distinguishing them from other objects: in the case of gold, diamonds, and jewels, there is, for example, sheer, nigh-eternal material durability, which on a more practical level

¹⁹ Even Haute Couture who creates exclusive custom-fitted clothing, but also offer some expensive ready-to-wear lines, is presented in fashion houses in the cities around the globe as if it was very exclusive – although it is not rare but in fact it is a mass product of high quality and high priced.

²⁰ This does not mean that luxury can only exist in societies resting on a money economy. The exchange value expressed in a money economy merely has another referential factor. On conspicuous consumption see Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; repr., Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 49–69.

²¹ See Ulrich-Christian Pallach, "Auktionen und Auktionskataloge des 18. Jahrhunderts: Bemerkungen zum Luxusmarkt des französischen Ancien Régime," *Francia* 8 (1980): 648–66.

produces ideal objects of enduring value for storage and hoarding. But other objects have been considered luxurious precisely on account of their *transience* – perfume, for example, with its evanescent scent, cut flowers in vases, selected exotic fruit, tiger hunting in Mughal India, roast game, or luxurious holidays such as safaris. Often, the *finesse* with which a piece of work is crafted has played a decisive role – the case for both furniture made of precious fine-grained wood and watches or jewelry.²² By the same token, the very *fragility* of crystal glass products is what distinguished them from other glass products. These examples strongly suggest that material qualities and their refinement play as strong a role in determining which goods are to be considered luxurious as their social construction by contemporaries.

In the fifth place, luxury objects almost always have a *special aesthetically pleasing quality* for their owners. In this respect, let us simply note that the close connection aesthetic sensation and judgment have with habit, hence with the social origins of those doing the judging, needs no explicit justification. Finally, a sixth, especially important quality of luxury objects is their function as *symbols of social status*, as a marker of class. Often, their owners wish to communicate a specific message through them – a specific picture of person and social rank. Where hierarchical societies mark elevated position in this manner, in those of the modernized West upwardly striving individuals use such symbols to signal their ambition to break the class divide, an aspirational practice. Inversely, luxury is also used as compensation for loss of footing – to accentuate the “actual” value of a group or person.

Luxury is a special material language. This language is understood and shared by everyone, but only an exclusive number of people can express themselves at free will without material and financial constraints. Most classes were condemned to share the language of luxury in a more passive way. Luxury must be considered to be a mode of social distinction.²³

THE PRACTICE OF LUXURY

Recent historical research has clearly mapped out luxury’s semiotic and communicative functions in Europe’s court society, its nobility, and

²² See Michael Stürmer, *Handwerk und höfische Kultur: Europäische Möbelkunst im 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Beck, 1982).

²³ See Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique Sociale du Jugement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979).