

Elite consumers and the pursuit of comfort in Georgian England

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Social elites occupy a liminal place in studies of eighteenth-century consumption: on the one hand, they are seen as leaders of fashion and taste whose conspicuous consumption practices and material culture was envied, imitated and sometimes emulated; on the other, they are isolated from the mainstream of consumption by a perspective that sees them as collectors and connoisseurs rather than consumers. All too rarely is elite consumption viewed holistically, to include everyday as well as luxury goods, and to think about motivations other than fashion, taste and display.

One particularly useful way of revealing a fuller gamut of elite consumption is to explore the role of comfort in shaping motivations and practices. In *The Invention of Comfort* (2001), John Crowley argued that physical comfort was a new and increasingly dominant ideal in eighteenth-century Anglo-American domesticity. Comfort was something that was sought after and privileged in the home, and it was something that slowly pervaded the whole of society, arguably as the acceptable face of luxury. Given their spending power, the elite were uniquely well placed to create environments that were physically comfortable, but was it really something that shaped their thinking and their actions? In reality, there have been few attempts to test Crowley's ideas against the empirical evidence of individual households and home owners.

In this paper, I examine how physical comfort related to elite consumption, particularly in terms of spending directed at creating comfortable domestic environments. Did it create particular objects of desire or was the assemblage of items more important? More broadly, I explore how any pursuit of physical comfort related to emotional well-being and the social comfort derived from domestic sociability. Both of these are side-lined in Crowley's thesis, but were intimately bound up with consumption and with the construction of houses that facilitated social interaction and which were experienced as 'home' (Lewis, 'When a house is not a home', 2007). I draw on a small number of case studies from the English elite to examine these issues in detail, focusing on the ways in which comfort was conceived and materialised. I build on this to draw out both the wider context of elites as active consumers in Georgian England and the insights that this can provide into the comfort and consumer cultures more generally.