Kate SMITH

*Material Goods, Moving Hands – Perceiving production in England, 1700–1830.*

Studies in Design

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Consumer understanding of the goods they consumed is something that is usually taken for granted or overlooked in design history, which has tended to focus on production, distribution, consumption, style and/or use. In all this, the level to which consumers know how the product was designed and made seems unimportant. Largely, designed goods of the industrial era are defined by the fact that they were intended for an anonymous market, in which the maker was distanced from the end purchaser, not only physically, but by a more or less complex structure of intermediaries. This started in the workplace with the division of labour and the separation of management from workforce and continued outside its walls through agents, wholesalers and retailers. In this model, the consumer is informed only by the end product, supported by advertising and publicity material. Few know much about the processes of production, nor even where the products are made.

In *Material Goods, Moving Hands,* Kate Smith sets out to explore the history that resulted in such an effective separation of market from manufacture, a history that she sees as relatively complete by the end of the ‘long eighteenth century’, which here lasts until the late 1830s. She begins in 1809, in the famous Ackermann image of the London showrooms of Wedgwood & Byerley, since 1986 familiar to most undergraduate design students through its appearance in Forty’s *Objects of Desire*.[[1]](#endnote-1) That book successfully positioned Wedgwood’s ceramic business as *the* case-study of the emergence of modern industrial design in the eighteenth century. Smith asks a simple question. Faced with the cornucopia of rather similar goods crammed on every surface and shelf, how did the potential purchasers differentiate between them? How did they understand the material science of the objects at a time when this was subject to rapid change? In short, how did they know what was worth buying?

Smith argues that to answer this question one needs to look at the way in which industrial manufacture had been disseminated to its products’ potential consumers over the previous three or four generations. Interestingly, she does not really consider how those prior to this time made judgements when it came to the purchase of decorative goods. As Smith focuses entirely on ceramics, one wonders how many seventeenth century purchasers of imported Chinese porcelain, or even European tin-glaze really knew how it was made, or indeed could make finer judgements as to the qualities of its material or making? The importance to Smith, then, is the size of the market, rather than its knowledge. We have to presume that the market for decorative ceramics in the seventeenth century, even of the ‘useful’ kind, was relatively small and insignificant. But, in the eighteenth century it grew into something that was not only significant in its own right, but was indicative of an expansion of consumption more generally. Moreover, it was largely British industry that responded and supplied it with goods. Understanding the market’s knowledge and expectations becomes important because they are a significant economic driver for such expansion.

Smith structures the book not unlike a PhD thesis, which seems to be its origin. To an academic reader this makes most of it rather comforting. It ticks all the boxes that one would like to see in a thesis. It raises enough questions to make the viva worthwhile and is engagingly written with a lot of interesting factual detail and reference to primary sources. After an introduction that proves the author’s engagement with the literature and research methods, we are taken through a narrative that begins with direct engagement with makers, to engagement mediated by knowledge acquired by secondary sources, to knowledge only acquired through secondary sources and engagement with products at retail outlets.

The general line is that in the seventeenth century, ceramic manufacture was largely mysterious. With the aristocratic and genteel fascination with porcelain, which could only be had from China, even the wealthiest would be unlikely to ever see from where it originated. In the first decades of the eighteenth century any desire for knowing how porcelain was made began to be answered by entries in the first encyclopaedias. As the material science of European and particularly British ceramics advanced in the mid-century, porcelain became far less mysterious; while, alongside the trademark basalt and jasper, Wedgwood (in particular) developed high-status, clear glazed white earthenware for table use. Soon the clear glazed white (or ‘cream’) earthenwares were widely copied and further developed by other makers. These, though at first at the luxury end of the market, were produced in comparative profusion and had a progressively expanding reach into the middling classes. By the end of the long century, white earthenware (now usually underglaze-transfer printed), had become the default tableware of the industrial age. In the UK the place of porcelain had been largely taken by the home-developed, glass-like bone-china. Both became synonymous with the word ‘china’, even if largely made in Staffordshire.

Throughout this history the development of the turnpike road system made it comparatively easy for those of means to tour Britain. The turnpikes were symbiotic with developing trade; while they allowed goods, orders and correspondence to more easily traverse the country, they also allowed the potential customer to directly visit places of manufacture, ‘industrial tourism’. During the 18th century it became common practice for manufactories to welcome visitors, who could then observe the manufacturing process. In the potteries, the highpoint was to see the ‘magic’ of throwing where, in seconds, the potential customer could see a lump of clay transformed into a finely walled and shapely vessel by the touch of a (very skilled) hand. At the end of the tour, wares would be presented and orders taken.

As the long eighteenth century progressed, it seems that manufacturers saw far greater value in distancing their customer from understanding the *making* process as an incentive to purchase, instead focusing their attention on the *selection* process of finished goods. As part of this, Smith argues, manufacturers began to discourage tourists by demanding appointments to be made in advance, and turning them away if they had not been (even if visitors had travelled far). Instead, knowledge of the production process was gained at second hand (if at all) and the customers made their purchases from retail outlets that could present a range of goods by different manufacturers. This offered customers greater choice, in which the customers’ decision-making processes, informed by engagement with the wide range of goods, became the means of access to their wallets and purses. In Smith’s analysis the increasing reluctance of manufacturers to allow public visitors to look round their potteries was paralleled by an increase in illustrated, printed accounts of what went on inside them. With such accounts appearing in the *Penny Magazine*, by 1840 even the most impecunious, but literate, potential consumer could be, to some extent anyway, *au fait* with industrial ceramic manufacture, without ever having seen a pottery.

Smith provides some fascinating insights as to how manufacturers, such as Wedgwood, understood the retail process. The very profusion, it seems, was carefully orchestrated to encourage connoisseurial consumer decision making. In the goods laid out in the 1809 showroom, a good quantity would be deliberately low quality, seconds and/or heavier anonymous wares that would act as a foil to customers’ selective processes, giving them an air of expertise when they chose to purchase the first-quality pieces. While Wedgwood and Byerley offered tables groaning with massed artefacts, many retailers adopted the semi-selective sales ploy of having their counter-staff present a selection of potential products of various styles and qualities to the request of the customer, but, by default this selection was limited and actually controlled by the retailer, even if the customer made the final selection. Surely this was the time when the retail adage ‘the customer is always right’ had its origins? Smith pays attention to gender and what might be called ‘retail tourism’, namely window shopping and impulse purchases.

The book also gives a lot of space to the materiality of the potteries themselves. Looking at issues such as noise and dust, working conditions, division of labour and industrial secrecy, Smith provides an analysis as to how not only visitors, but also the workforce themselves, understood places of production. There is an underlying idea that the move from industrial to retail tourism reflects and possibly contributes to the perception of manufactories changing from places of wonder and ‘magic’ to one of Blake’s ‘dark satanic mills’.

So far so good, very good in fact; but then Smith spoils the book with a conclusion that is no more than a blow-by-blow summary of each chapter. This takes its thesis-like qualities to a depressingly familiar end. As Smith presents her book like a thesis it would be churlish of me not to respond it as if it were. So, what might be tweaked up in the revisions? The first is that while the subject is worthwhile, the importance Smith gives it is unconvincing. This seems to be more a product of writers such as Richard Sennett and Glenn Adamson and current concerns over the idea of making, rather than eighteenth century history. Just how many buyers of even the most elite ceramic products ever looked round a pottery in the mid eighteenth century? In terms of production to consumption, I would question whether industrial tourism was any more than a ‘nice little earner’ for manufacturers and whether understanding of the making process was a significant factor in the market as a whole. Too much in this book is given academic buzz-words such as ‘contested’, when there does not seem to have been any contest, merely events playing out. Even innocuous trade-cards are given an over-blown art-historical analysis that is largely unnecessary and questionable in its depth for what were bits of advertising ephemera.

Moreover the book’s content is myopic in its focus on ceramic production, and this does not match its title. We get fleeting mentions of other industries, but no indication as to how tourists responded to them in market terms. Did the visitors to the Soho Foundry go away clutching the latest rotary steam engine? Did Reverend Plumptre conclude his visit to Heaton Colliery in 1799 by ordering a hundredweight of coal as a souvenir? No; surely this sort of interest in watching workers making goods in the context of industrial organisation was merely vicarious? As much as it might have been the result of an interest in understanding processes, equally it might be more akin to the spectacle of otherness; a visit to Bedlam, or a menagerie, or a public execution, even. Finally, did industrial tourism really end? As Smith points out, some potteries continued to offer tours, but on a rather more choreographed basis. Industrial tourism continued; new industries of the 19th and 20th centuries offered tours (and still do). Those tourists of more artsy-craftsy persuasion took to visiting small makers in traditional crafts. Opening studios to visitors is the stuff of current craft makers. Perhaps (but with an emphasis on that word) this is where consumer understanding of the making process by direct engagement has the importance Smith would have us believe it had to Eighteenth century industrial manufacture, but this is beyond the remit of her study.

In the end, the book’s lack of real conclusion is its content’s undoing. It leaves the reader asking ‘so-what?’ and questioning the content for what it does not do, rather than what it does. Had Smith just accepted her topic as interesting in its own right and not tried to give it unnecessary academic weight, this would have been a truly excellent piece of work. As it is, I entered it with interest, really enjoyed much of the content, but left disappointed.

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1. *Objects of Desire- Design and Society Since 1750.* Thames and Hudson, London; 1986 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)