

TRANSNATIONAL CONSUMPTION AND CIRCULATIONS

Supply Networks for the Aristocracy (Seventeenth-Nineteenth Century)

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ABSTRACT

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, European aristocrats shared the same culture of consumption, which prompted them to extend their supply areas. While their domains and nearby merchants still supplied them with a large part of their provisions, they also called on merchants in major commercial centers such as London or Paris, which turned into shopping sites and saw the emergence of the first department stores.



Robert Bénard, *La marchande de modes* (The Fashion Merchant), 1769, engraving from the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the European aristocracy shared the same tastes in fashion, decoration, and food. There was an aristocratic culture of consumption characterized by ostentation, a search for distinction, and increasing comfort and refinement. As a result, aristocrats often wanted to obtain the same luxury goods, works of art, clothing, choice foodstuffs, and collector's objects in Paris, Vienna, and Madrid. The most recent studies show the full diversity of these circulating products, as well as the numerous supply networks across Europe that met this constantly changing demand.

Supply on a European Scale

The expectations of European aristocrats were fairly similar, and followed changes in fashion. They dressed in the French manner, sought antiquities from Italy, and procured books in England. The circulation of luxury objects was

driven by their propensity to buy the same things in order to share a common culture of consumption, which distinguished them from the rest of the population. Polish magnates wore French clothing, which were synonymous with luxury and good taste. All efforts were made to obtain this desired merchandise, especially from France. Prince Francis Xavier of Saxony (1730-1806), who settled in France in the 1770s, had the disassembled parts for a clavichord sent from Italy. More ordinary products were also sold across borders for an aristocratic clientele. Chocolate and pasta from Italy, sweets, cheese, and truffles from France, and wine from Cyprus, Tokay, and even the Cape (in South Africa) were served at the best aristocratic tables in London, Madrid, and Brussels. Their consumption was often marked by a combination of influences based on their family and political relations, travels, and supplier networks. The Prince of Saxony bought watches from Italy, prints from Venice, wines from Spain, mineral water from Spa, etc. Numerous supply networks were used to meet this demand. The geography of supplies for an English aristocrat such as Sir Roger Newdigate (1719-1806) shows interlocking scales based on the product: small towns near his residence in Warwickshire supplied the vast majority of his ordinary purchases, while London and its shops provided select merchandise, and Florence and Naples precious objets d'art.

Merchant Networks and Private Networks

A few renowned merchants located in European commercial centers were the official suppliers of aristocratic homes, which they often emphasized in their advertising. They generally corresponded with a secretary or steward in charge of purchasing. Parisian notions dealers offered their aristocratic clientele a large range of products that they shipped abroad, such as Laurent Danet, who from 1680 to 1720 supplied Bavaria and Flanders with precious stones and objets d'art. Luxury stores were set up near the aristocracy's places of residence, such as rue Saint-Honoré and rue Palais-Royal in Paris. To better meet demand in the eighteenth century, they sometimes opened stores in European capitals—as the fashion designer Mme Belsent did in Florence—or traveled directly to princely courts, for instance when a number of Parisian merchants travelled to Dresden or The Hague to provide jewels and fabrics. Merchants used samples and periodicals (*Cabinet des modes*) to facilitate purchases by aristocrats and to stimulate their desires. The wooden mannequins that Parisian fashion merchants circulated oriented the choices made by aristocrats. All efforts were made to ship products in the best conditions using carefully arranged packaging, speedy transportation, and great reactivity to demand.

The international supplying of aristocratic homes was also based on other networks, and inscribed their consumption within the world of social and political relations. Clientele networks could be mobilized to obtain the best products. The Duke of Newcastle called on ambassadors, whose career he favored, to obtain various foodstuffs throughout Europe. During the eighteenth century, Swedish aristocrats close to diplomatic envoys to the French court (Count Carl Gustaf Tessin, Baron Ulric Scheffer, Count Creutz) asked them to purchase luxury objects prohibited in Sweden, books, jewelry, and clothing. The Prince of Saxony called on bankers and *chargés d'affaires*. In other cases, family members served as relays for these "purchases." For example, the Marquis de San Leonardo ordered shoes and a box made of Sèvres porcelain from his brother the Duke of Berwick, who lived in Paris. Sending gifts was also part of the supplying of princely homes. Jewelry, objets d'art, and refined foodstuffs were offered and circulated in Europe. The King of Savoy regularly sent white truffles from the Piedmont to aristocrats at the court in Vienna, so they would look favorably on his kingdom's interests. Finally, the real estate holdings of the upper nobility still offered original avenues for provisioning through the resources of domains and manorial rights. Despite increased reliance on trade during the eighteenth century, these networks were still mobilized to obtain agricultural products or game. Living off of one's property still remained an ideal in the aristocratic culture of consumption.

The Trend of Shopping

The trips made by aristocrats, which increased beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century, were also an opportunity to broaden the horizons of their consumption. They took advantage of travels to purchase foreign

merchandise. The popularity of the Grand Tour and the appeal of Italy often incited them to buy ancient objects or works of art. During the eighteenth century, the act of purchasing became a reason to travel, with the trend of shopping initiated in London and Paris, where the *Magasin général* was frequented by many foreign aristocrats including the Prince of Carignan, Lord Waldegrave, and Count von Hoym. According to Baroness Oberkirch, an assiduous client of Parisian merchants, “when you leave Paris you will need wagons.” The galleries of the Palais-Royal in Paris and Regent Street in London were home to many shops frequented by European nobility. The rise of this world of shops, in addition to the appearance of department stores in the mid-nineteenth century, provided new vitality for aristocratic consumption, in spaces offering the most sought-after merchandise of the period. It was thus good form at the time to visit the department stores of Parisian boulevards, or Harrods in London. In Europe, this period marked the beginning of a new era of consumption, in which the provisioning practices of the aristocracy gradually lost their particularities, and merged with the commercial customs spreading among the bourgeoisie.

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