

MAKING FASHIONABLE FURNITURE IN ENGLAND AND FRANCE DURING THE AGE OF ELEGANCE



Chapter Two

**On Becoming Fashionable in 18th
Century England and France**

On the Cover:

- Portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1775-6, Georgiana, *Duchess of Devonshire*, Oil on canvas, currently at the Henry E. Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, CA, USA. Taken from website: <http://www.abcgallery.com/R/reynolds/reynolds135.html> accessed on 02/2010.
- Portrait by Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, 1778, Marie Antoinette, Oil on canvas, currently at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, taken from website: <http://www.ladyreading.net/marieantoinette/det2-en.html> accessed on 02/2010.

II. ON BECOMING FASHIONABLE IN 18TH CENTURY ENGLAND AND FRANCE

A. *Introduction*

This chapter starts with an exploration of the different theories that relate to fashion in order to identify the relevant characteristics that define what fashion is and how it operates. Through the next sections, these ideas will be applied first to fashion in general during late C18th England and France, then to the creation of fashionable furniture. Part of this will be to put forth some viewpoints concerning the relevancy of the ideas of fashion to furniture. This chapter will end with the discussion of a major change in people's behaviour, which is reflected in the furniture that was being produced during this period.

B. *What Makes a Fashion?*

Fashion is a term that is clearly important to this thesis and therefore this topic requires some discussion. To begin this discussion, this section (***B. What Makes a Fashion?***) will first broadly define 'fashion' by looking at some of the different models describing fashion, so, in the following section, the ideas can more specifically be applied first to the C18th, then, in the next chapters (Chapters III, p. 118 & IV, p.153), specifically apply them to luxury furniture in the late C18th. This process is needed because historically most discussions concerning fashion have been centred upon clothing and personal adornment.

In defining the different models, this section sets out to 'define' fashion, identify the key terms and concepts that best describe the processes involved in fashion, and then to identify the potential drivers of fashion and to apply these models to the late C18th. In other words to answer the question – What attributes do 'fashionable' items exhibit?

This prefaces a later discussion comparing England and France demonstrating the interaction between them and outlining the different ways in which various stimuli resulted

in a new fashion in the design of furniture. Furthermore, it will argue that one new fashion in architectural design, above all others – the Neo-Classical style, played an integral part in the changes that were occurring across the varied cultures that comprised C18th society in these two countries.

The late C18th represented one of those few times in history when European culture was characterized by torrent of ideas and new approaches. New ideas concerning politics, business/economics, religion and, of course, the arts (including architecture and furniture design) were being put forth to and perhaps emerging from the growing upper and middle classes. It could be said for example that this was a period of time when it became “fashionable” to question the established order of things and to explore new approaches to addressing problems. In part this is why such phrases as the ‘Age of Reason’ or the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ are frequently used to describe this period. As part of this questioning and exploration, it was also during this time that the ideas about the ‘ancient’ civilizations were being imported to both England and France.¹ In many ways the act of looking to these ancient civilizations for inspiration was part of this questioning. In this section, the process for developing these new ideas and how they resulted in a different approach to the design of buildings and furniture will be examined.

So, how do we define fashion? It is quite amazing how different people define fashion. Much would seem to depend upon individual perspectives. According to G. Sproles:

“Fashion is the prevailing style at any given time” (From Nystrom, 1928)

“Fashion is the pursuit of novelty for its own sake” (From Robinson, 1958)

“Fashion is a process of social contagion by which a new style or product is adopted by the consumer after commercial introduction” (From King, 1964)

¹ As recognized by a number of authors it was also a time when there were new materials being introduced to both England and France through their colonies in the New World and through their exploration of Africa and the Far East. This will be discussed later (See p. 286).

“Fashion is a way of behaving that is temporarily adopted by a discernible proportion of members of a social group because that chosen behaviour is perceived to be socially appropriate for the time and situation “²

Regardless any of these definitions, when we hear the word ‘fashion’, one generally thinks of clothing or types of personal adornment - although some might think of art and music as part of ‘fashion’ and a still smaller number think that fashion applies to every area involving human social activities. A review of the literature confirms this hierarchy as most literature discusses fashion in the context of personal adornment, while a few authors go to the other extreme and apply it to all areas.

Was fashion always with us, or is this a sign of modernity? Opinions vary on this question also, to those who subscribe to the notion that fashion is a part of all human endeavours; fashion has always been with us and always will always be part of our social dynamic. However, others argue that fashion, at least in terms of its more contemporary usage, did not start until Western Civilisation itself started to become more sophisticated. Such authors point to changes that started to occur in the C14th, including, increased growth in cities, increase trade between cities and countries and areas of the world, greater sophistication of the ruling elite classes, and the increase in the number of people that were able to afford luxury items.³

² G. Sproles, Behavioural Science Theories of Fashion. In M. Solomon (ed.), *The Psychology of Fashion*, Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, USA, 1985, p. 55. G. Sproles was quoting:

- P. Nystrom, *Economics of Fashion*, Ronald Press, New York, 1928.
- D. Robinson, Fashion Theory and Product Design, *Harvard Business Review*, Vol 36, Aug. 1958, pp. 126-138.
- C. King, The Innovator in the Fashion Adoption Process, in Smith, G. (ed.), *Reflections on Progress in Marketing*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, 1964, pp. 324-339.
- G. Sproles, *Fashion: Consumer Behaviour Toward Dress*, Burgess, Minneapolis, USA, 1979.

³See for example E. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, USA, 2003. p. 17.

What is clear is that there are many different ways to define fashion and to identify the underlying processes. For example, the following are some of the definitions that are provided for the word 'fashion' in the Princeton On-Line Dictionary.⁴

- How something is done or how it happens.
- Characteristic or habitual practice
- The latest and most admired style in clothes and cosmetics and behavior.
- Consumer goods (especially clothing) in the current mode.

Once again it is demonstrated, there are variations of how to define 'fashion'. In some cases 'fashion' is used to describe how one does something or a behavioural attribute – thus, it refers to an activity (the first and second definition provided previously)⁵. In the other definitions (the third and fourth definitions), 'fashion' is the selection or ownership of items that define a particular style. They also suggest temporal bases and they relate to what is liked in general by some generally undefined group (i.e., "the latest and most admired style" and "in the current mode"). In general, when someone discusses fashion in casual conversation, the term relates to the selection or the possession of particular items especially regarding clothing or dressing accessories (the third definition).

To understand more clearly of what fashion is, it is sometimes helpful to understand related words or concepts. For example, fashion, it could be said, is invariably intertwined with the concepts of 'taste' and 'style.' Here, we see that *taste* is defined as:

⁴ Princeton On-Line Dictionary: <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=fashion>, accessed 01/10/08.

⁵ Note: According to M. Barnard, in *Fashion as Communication*, the word fashion is derived from the Latin word *Factio*, which "means making or doing" (M. Barnard, *Fashion as Communication*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 7).

- A strong liking.
- Delicate discrimination – especially of aesthetic values.⁶

And *style* is defined as:

- How something is done or how it happens.
- A way of expressing something – in language or art or music, etc. that is characteristic of a particular person or group of people or period.
- A particular kind – as to appearance.
- The popular taste at a given time.⁷

So, how do these terms differ? Fashion can be described as a function of taste. If one is 'in fashion', one could be said to exhibit a popular taste. However, the opposite may not be true, if you have 'taste' or if you have a taste for a particular style, you may or may not be in fashion. Changes in fashion can be described as "changes in the taste of the dominant group"⁸. Fashion can also be very similar to style. Both fashion and style relate to how something is done and/or a particular kind of group behaviour (e.g., 'popular taste'). There are differences however, e.g., if you are in fashion, you have probably adopted a particular style (one that is in the current mode), but, as with taste, if you exhibit a particular style it does not necessarily mean that you are in fashion. These differences may be found when exploring the nuances that define each of these terms. Consider how the issues of style and taste are discussed in Auslander's book – *Taste and Power*⁹. To quote from the introduction to *Taste and Power*¹⁰, Auslander defines 'Taste and Style' the following way:

⁶ Source: Princeton on-line dictionary: <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=taste>, accessed 01/10/08 – Note: only the relevant definitions are presented here.

⁷ Source: Princeton on-line dictionary: <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=style>, accessed 01/10/08
Note: only the relevant definitions are presented here.

⁸ M. Barnard (ed.) *Fashion Theory*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, UK, 2007, p.222.

⁹ L. Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France*, University of California Press, London, 1996,

¹⁰ L. Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France*, p. 2,

“Taste has been, for at least the last two hundred years, a term laden with contradictions. It has been understood to be innate and emotional yet capable of improvement through education: individual and idiosyncratic yet absolute; transcendent of time and space yet socially constituted. Style in contrast, has been understood to be historical and specific, resulting from either collective effort or individual genius.”

While fashion implies some kind of “compulsion from a group”¹¹ (even though it is thought to be made up of individual discussions) taste by itself suggests only an individual’s attribute. Style, on the other hand, suggests a way of doing something regardless of any outside guiding principle (e.g., It is in a particular *style*., It is consistent with her *style*., It is in the Art Deco *style*.), while fashion could be the guiding principle (The statement ‘He follows the latest fashion’ could be restated as ‘His style is in the latest fashion.’). Consider the times when the works of a particular designer become popular for a period of time, then falls out of favour. The ‘style’ is still associated with that designer and may still be produced by that designer however while originally it is fashionable (i.e., a group reacts by buying and wearing the items.), while later the style may go out of fashion (i.e., the group no longer reacts positively toward the designer’s style.) Thus, fashion is different from style in that fashion relates to an individual’s reaction relative to a group (either the member of the group emulates a particular behaviour or it stimulates others to copy their own behaviour or mode of adornment), and not of the individual in isolation. It could be said that a fashion could be the response to a style that has been advanced by an individual. The bottom line is that fashion is a social, interactive process while taste and style is more likely to related to individual behaviour or proscribed phenomenon. As a consequence, fashion either relates to a mode of behaviour (usually dressing or adorning oneself) or the ownership of particular items (usually clothing), which, while made up of individual decisions never the less represents group behaviour. Furthermore, this group behaviour is lead by some elements (leaders, stimulators) and is followed by other elements of the group or of other

¹¹ E. Sapir, in his article Fashion in M. Barnard, (ed.), *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, Routledge, London, 2007, p.38.

groups (emulators, followers, adaptors). Style might be best said to represent an idea that either has a historical or other basis but does not necessarily relate to group behaviour.

Taste is also perceived to be an individual concept or a concept related to some higher standard as indicated by the phrase “good taste”. Taste or *bon goût* as Auslander suggests, is learnable (one can learn or develop good taste.), but the standard of good taste is perceived to be relatively constant. Fashion, on the other hand, is characterized by change - almost by definition.

In addition to differentiating fashion from taste on this factor, this definition also differentiates fashion from style. Fashion changes over time, while style, to a lesser degree, taste seldom change. H. Blumer, a leading theorist, defines fashion as a process of change, when he argues fashion is a

“...continuing pattern of change in which certain social forms enjoy temporary acceptance and respectability only to be replaced by others more abreast of the times.”¹²

Or as Agnes Brooks Young describes it: *“Fashion is evolution without destination.”¹³*

Relating this idea to furniture, C. Sargentson adopts this view when she suggests a strong force in the luxury markets is the newness or *nouveauté* of an object suggesting that change and switching to the next new thing is an important characteristic especially sensitive to this idea were the shoppers of luxury goods.¹⁴

Now let us consider two other similar words to help to understand what fashion is and is not: these two words are ‘fads’ and ‘customs’. Like fashion, fads are also related to

¹² H. Blumer, Fashion, in D. Sills (eds.), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, MacMillan, New York, 1968, pp. 341 – 345.

¹³ A. B. Young, *Recurring Cycles of Fashion, 1760-1937*, New York and London, Harper & Bros., 1937, p. 5.

¹⁴ C. Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1996, p. 144.

change¹⁵. However it is generally differentiated from a fashion in that a fad is usually thought of as having a shorter duration and are more likely to be a temporary aberration. Thus fashion has two more characteristics; it lasts for a period of time that is longer than a fad and it is related to previous events – it has a history. Another way of putting this last statement is to say that a current fashion is usually either a variation of a previous fashion or it is an idea that was stimulated by prior fashions. H. Blumer suggests this when he argues:

*“The most noticeable difference (from fashion) is that fads have no line of historical continuity: each springs up independent of a predecessor and gives rise to no successor.”*¹⁶

At the other extreme are customs that are very long lasting and relatively stable¹⁷ phenomenon. Whereas fashions are part of history (they both use prior fashions and they become the building blocks for future fashions), customs are more likely to be historical themselves. Fashions can, in certain cases, supersede a custom, and either become a new custom or fades away and allows the original custom to resume. Consequently, fashion is neither an extremely short-lived phenomena nor is it something that lasts an extremely long time and fashion is consistent with the idea of a historical trend.

In conclusion, these are some of the more prominent features of fashion:

It is....

- A group behaviour that is made up of individual decisions – the group decides what is fashionable or not, but it is individuals who select the items or process.
- Temporally based – that is it changes over time. While it changes faster than customs it is slower to change than fads.

¹⁵ The Princeton dictionary defines a fad as simply “an interest followed with exaggerated zeal” without mention to its limited time frame (See <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=fad>). However, most other dictionaries mention this.

¹⁶ H. Blumer, Fashion, in D. Sills, (eds.), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, p. 344.

¹⁷ The Princeton dictionary defines customs as an accepted, habitual or a specific practice of long standing. <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=customs&sub=Search+WordNet&o2=&o0=1&o7=&o5=&o1=1&o6=&o4=&o3=&h=0>, accessed 02/10/08.

- Historically based. Current fashions, with few exceptions, are developed from prior fashions. Although this may not always be true, in general this means that there are cycles in fashion, about which many authors have written.¹⁸

The next question concerns whether or not the concept of fashion can apply to furniture – the immediate subject of this thesis. As stated before fashion is most typically associated with dress or personal adornment. Perhaps as a result of this perspective, it is the case that most articles and most research relating to the topic of ‘fashion’ concerns the topic of clothing fashion (Again, this connects to the third definition presented previously - the latest and most admired style in clothes and cosmetics and behaviour) even though a few papers relate fashion to the arts (music and visual arts), social habits (popular activities, popular behaviours or beliefs). Even fewer writings relate fashion to other areas such as politics, business or even medicine and science. In *Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection*, H. Blumer¹⁹ considers ‘fashion’ to be strongly related to all areas of human endeavours.

*“While occasional references may be made to its (fashion’s) play in other areas, such casual references do not give a proper picture of the extent of its operation. Yet, to a discerning eye fashion is readily seen to operate in many diverse areas of human group life, especially so in modern times. It is easily observable in the realm of the pure and applied arts, such as painting, sculpture, music, drama, architecture, dancing, and household decoration. There is plenty of evidence to show its play in the field of medicine. Many of us are familiar with its operation in fields of industry, especially that of business management.”*²⁰

This broader definition is the one that is embraced by this thesis and consequently furniture represents a field of endeavour that does not live outside the remit of fashion.

¹⁸ See for example;

A. B. Young, *Recurring Cycles of Fashion, 1760-1937*.

G. Sproles, Analyzing Fashion Life Cycles: Principals & Perspectives, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol 45, No 4, 1981 pp. 116-124.

¹⁹ H. Blumer, Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection, *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol 49, Issue 4, Fall 2008, pp. 275 – 291.

²⁰ H. Blumer, Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection, pp.275.

Furthermore, while presenting a theory of the development of fashions as an imperfect system of transferring information from one person to another (formulating what are called “Informational Cascades”) S. Bikhehandani, D. Hirshleifer, and I. Welch. also suggest how the creation of fads and fashions can occur in many varied categories and is not limited to clothing and personal ornamentation²¹. Some of these examples also include medicine and scientific research²², politics and in business. In the later case, they point out the existence of ‘waves’ in the markets. Such as the “*conglomerate merger wave of the 1960s, its reversal through restructuring and hostile takeovers in the 1980s*”^{23, 24}.

H. Blumer suggests that because fashion exists in all areas of human activity, that the study of fashion as a topic is indeed important.²⁵ H. Blumer did not mean to imply that he

²¹ S. Bikhehandani, D. Hirshleifer and I. Welch, A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades, *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 100, No 5, (Oct., 1992), pp. 992-1026.

²² In this these authors reference several “surgical fads and epidemics of treatment-caused illnesses (e.g., “iatroepidemics” such as tonsillectomy, elective hysterectomy, internal mammary ligation and ileal bypass.) R. Taylor, *Medicine out of control: The Anatomy of a Malignant Technology*, Melbourne: Sun Books, 1979 and E. Robin, *Matters of Life and Death: Risks vs Benefits of Medical Care*, New York, Freeman, 1984 were referenced in S. Bikhehandani, D. Hirshleifer, and I. Welch, A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades, p. 10-11.

²³ S. Bikhehandani, D. Hirshleifer, and I. Welch, A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades, p. 10-12.

²⁴ From personal experience, one could see in business, certain approaches to running large organisations also went through trends or fashions.

At one time, the development of new products is the focus of businesses in general; while at other times, many major businesses will focus on the revitalization of their old businesses. At times, organisations concentrate on building their own staff in order to have complete control over the resources and at other times their emphasis is on subcontracting as much as possible in order to save on overhead. Certain speakers and programs would become popular (For example, for a while in the early 1980’s the *One Minute Manager* 24 became the “must read” book by all American corporate executives and its author, Kenneth Blanchard, became the “must have” speaker at sales conferences.) Later, the phrase “management by objectives” crept into the business lexicon and the *One Minute Manager* was put away on the bookcase to gather dust. In all of these cases, one saw that the industry literature (trade journals) would actively promote and discuss the then relevant approach and internally, there would be meetings and seminars to communicate the new approach to a company’s employees. The change from one philosophical approach to human resource management did not occur because research ‘proved’ that one system worked better than the other, it simply occurred because one became more fashionable than the other.

²⁵ H. Blumer goes so far as to suggest that fashion has become one of the central mechanisms for creating order in modern society. There are essentially two other reasons why H. Blumer argues that fashion should be a serious area of study. The first reason provided for this conclusion is that behaviours related to fashion can have profound effects on the subject that a particular fashion is concerned. In the area of clothing,

believed that if fashion was limited to clothing then it would not be important, but that other people would perceive it to be less important or frivolous unless fashion did apply to other areas. This point was supported by several authors including G. Lipovetsky²⁶, E. Wilson²⁷, and M. Barnard in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*²⁸. To quote, Lipovetsky:

*“The topic of fashion arouses critical reflexes even before it is examined objectively; critics invoke it chiefly in order to castigate it...”*²⁹

R. Konig’s *A La Mode: On the Psychology of Fashion*³⁰ reinforces this point by arguing that fashion is “usually perceived as irrational” and that others tend to deny its importance, but because of its application to all areas of human activity, it is an extremely important topic of study.

If it is accepted that fashion does extend beyond clothing, we now need to specifically look at applying the term fashion to furniture. To apply the theories of fashion to furniture, one possible first step might be to see how many characteristics it shares with clothing since that is the singular product more commonly discussed in the literature about fashion. At first glance this seems to suggest that we are limiting our discussion to the idea that furniture can only be described as an object or, in their words, an example of ‘consumer goods’ to own. But it can be argued that in the case of furniture (as with clothing) that behavioural definition also applies. A new style of writing desk, for example, may also define how one uses that desk. Owning a particular desk may equally define the style or way that you seem to conduct yourself, it may also serve to define you by the fact of ownership of the new item.

millions, if not billions, of pounds are spent every year by industry hopping to guess the current fashions correctly. The second reason is, contrary to popular belief, fashion related behaviour is neither “aberrant” nor “irrational” (H. Blumer, *Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection* p.276). Instead he suggests that on an individual level this behaviour is thoughtful and directed, it is only on the group level that it appears irrational.

²⁶ G. Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Introduction*, in M. Barnard, *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, p. 25.

²⁷ E. Wilson, *Explaining It Away* in M. Barnard, M., *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, pp. 15-24.

²⁸ M. Barnard, *Fashion Theory: A Reader*.

²⁹ G. Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Introduction*, in Barnard, M., *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, p. 25.

³⁰ R. Konig, *A La Mode: On the Psychology of Fashion*, The Seaburg Press, New York, 1973.

Another aspect of fashion is what it communicates about its participant. Barnard, for example, argues that our clothing communicates an image or a statement about us. Pieces of furniture are similar to clothing in that for they too communicate an image. If you look at portraits from this period, the furniture and the other items that comprise the interior items in the paintings are just as important in defining who they are as is the clothing that they are wearing. However, it is clear that the most applicable definition to this particular thesis is that which relates to the third and fourth definition given by Princeton as we are

dealing with the popularity of objects (furniture) as a way of expressing one's own ideas or personality.³¹



Figure 2-1: Boucher's 1756 portrait of Madame de Pompadour showing how furniture is used, like clothing, to enhance the image of the person in the picture.

In the portrait shown in Figure 2-1, Madame de Pompadour is shown in her room with several decorations designed to communicate very specific ideas to the viewers. The inclusion of a writing desk, a bookcase filled with books, writing implements ready for use, as well as a book in her hand are used to enhance the reputation of Madame de Pompadour by demonstrating her achievements (reading and writing) as well as her importance.

What is being signalled here is that she participates in these important and 'fashionable' activities. Taking the writing table for

³¹ Madame de Pompadour by François Boucher (1703-1770) Painted in 1756 currently at the Alte Pinothek in Munich Germany. Taken from website:

[http://www.pinakothek.de/_scripts/bild_big.php?which=12119_11735&title=Bildnis der Marquise de Pompadour](http://www.pinakothek.de/_scripts/bild_big.php?which=12119_11735&title=Bildnis%20der%20Marquise%20de%20Pompadour), accessed 13/10/08.

In this portrait both a writing desk and a bookcase are used to enhance the reputation of Madame de Pompadour by demonstrating her activities (reading and writing). In addition to demonstrating that she participates in these 'fashionable' activities.

example, the idea for a writing table came from the fashionable activity of writing that was to emerge in the C18th and in turn, this item became a part of the behaviour of writing³². The exposed pen and paper on the writing table also reinforce these ideas. Additionally, the bookcase behind her further suggests her participation in the emergence of another popular activities – that of reading the latest literature.^{33 34} Again, having an open book in her lap underlines this idea. This picture also suggests that she is aware of and takes part in the then current dominated fashion in design known as Rococo.

While the paintings serve to communicate specific ideas about the person in the painting, the ownership of the actual furniture also can serve to communicate a message. Thus when a courtesan wanted to impress people and she wanted to have a safe place to keep business private she obtained a *secrétaire á abattant*.³⁵ This could also take the form of the

³² D. Goodman, The Secrétaire and the Integration of Eighteenth Century Self in D. Goodman and K. Norberg (eds), *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell us about the European and American Past*, Routledge, London, 2007, pp. 183-201.

³³ It has been suggested that reading books and writing letters was the ‘internet’ revolution of the C18th. While the printing press had been invented several hundred years before, it was only during this period that reading books was becoming a widespread pastime for the higher classes of society.

³⁴ In his book, *The History of Reading*, Fischer speaks of the control that the church had on reading during the medieval times stating that the typical transformation of knowledge progressed as illustrated below:

“author →Commentator →bishop→teacher→pupil” (p. 205).

Thus, the church interjected itself in the process of gathering information and communicating it to the general public. He goes on to explain that this hold on the control of information would only slowly loosen only after several hundred years. See: S. Fischer, *A History of Reading*, Reaktion Books, London, 2004. Even earlier, in Roman times, reading and writing were activities of scribes and underlings and not those of the ruling classes.

R. Wittman mentions this in regards to architecture, which he says that architectural publications were limited to a very small group of elite educated and wealthy segment of the French population until the mid 1740’s when the volume of architectural publications began to “*expand dramatically*” through the periodic press. Concurrently with this shift was a shift in the building in Paris. It was also during this time that the government was not spending much on the buildings in Paris, but this void was being filled by what R. Wittman calls the “nouveau riche financiers”. These observations both support the idea that intellectual activities were expanding and that the consumption of luxury items was also expanding to a new segment of the French population. See R. Wittman, The Hut and the Altar: Architectural Origins and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France, *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, Vol 36, 2007, p. 244.

³⁵ K. Norberg, Goddess of Taste: The Courtesans and their Furniture in Late Eighteenth Century Paris, in D. Goodman and K. Norberg (eds), *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell us about the European and American Past*, p. 97-114.

decoration that was used on the furniture. Many of the pieces for Louis XVI had symbols on them demonstrating specific areas such as an interest in the arts, literature or science.

It is easy to find other examples of English or French aristocrats being associated with symbols of intellectual activities such as reading and writing through the use of portrait paintings. There are even pictures of Marie Antoinette being surrounded by similar symbols.³⁶

In the engraving of a social gathering (See Figure 2-2) in France by Francois-Nicolas-Barthelemy Dequevauviller entitled *L'Assemblée au Salon* (1789), he clearly demonstrates how furniture had become an integral to fashionable and festive activities. This picture also demonstrates what the fashion was in furniture at that time. As discussed in *Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth Century France*, Hellman describes how

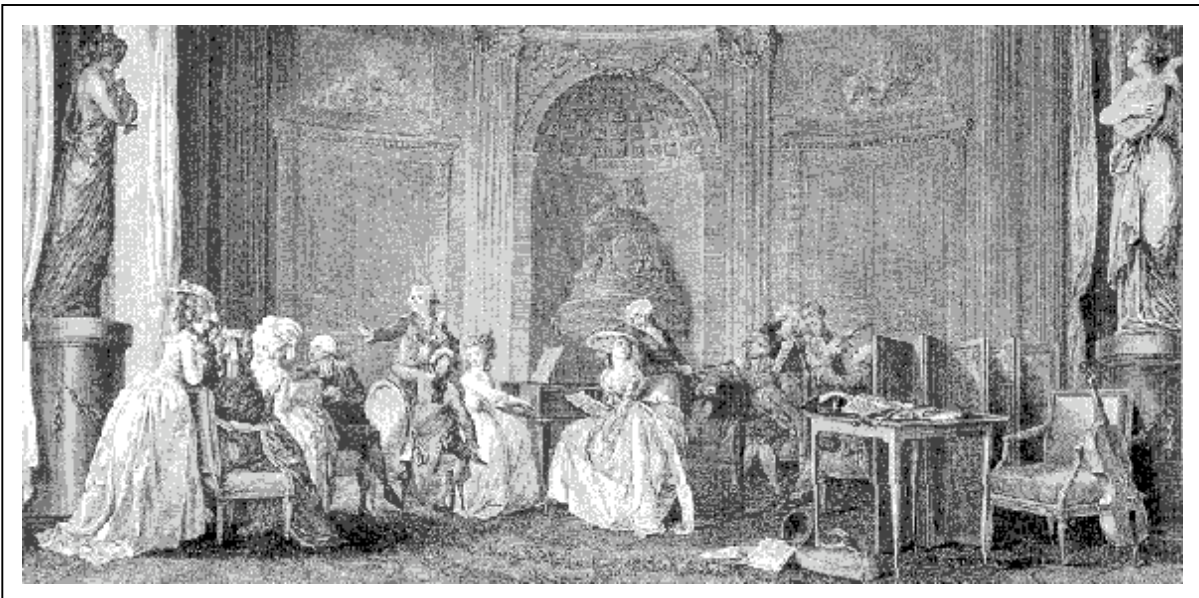


Figure 2-2: *L'Assemblée au Salon* by Francois-Nicolas-Barthelemy Dequevauviller (1745-1807) drawn in 1783. Showing how furniture was essential in a social setting.

³⁶ One example is the oil on canvas painting of Marie Antoinette by Jacques Fabian Gautier-Dagoty (1717-1785), completed in 1775 (currently at Versailles). In this painting, Marie Antoinette, dressed in the height of

the furniture defines four areas for fashionable entertainment.

“The arrangement of two games tables and a number of chairs establishes four distinct zones of activity, one for individual reading near a window, two for games toward the centre of the space and one for conversation by the fireplace”³⁷

It is interesting to note how the elite of this period in both England and France would design homes with two sets of furnished apartments. One set was for their own personal/private use while the other was for public display, to demonstrate to others their refined tastes and their wealth³⁸. A primary example of this kind of division into public and private spheres could be seen Versailles where both the King and Queen had their own very extensive private apartments where they could escape the formalities and public displays which took place in the public areas.³⁹ In England many of the aristocratic families also provided for public and private areas. For example, both Kedleston (built by Sir Nathaniel Curzon (1726–1804)), and Holkham (built by Thomas Coke (1697–1759), the first Earl of Leicester) were known to have separate private and public sections. When this was not possible, the estate would build a “state” room that was to be the display room to impress important guests.⁴⁰ The need to communicate success and authority to the guests and to the general public was so important that they went to the expense of creating these special areas that were only used when the guests were visiting. Baker discusses this topic as it relates to the uses of statues inside of many homes during the late C18th. Because statues

fashion, is surrounded by a globe, an open book one closed book.

³⁷ M. Hellman, Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth Century France, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32.4, 1999, p. 446.

³⁸ There was actually a third category of furniture purchased by these elite groups that was the furniture that was intended for the use of their assistants or servants. Both Chippendale and Riesener were known to produce such pieces of furniture. At the risk of over generalizing, these pieces of furniture tended to be the same high quality, but with fewer decorative elements such as extensive ormolu, or marquetry designs.

³⁹ According to the curator at Versailles, Louis XVI would wake up early in his private apartment so he could move to the public bedroom. From there he would wake up again, get bathed and dressed in front of his public. At night he would pretend to go to bed before an audience, then once they left he would journey to his private, more comfortable bed. Demonstrating how important it was for them to present themselves in the most opulent setting of the public bedroom. (Source: Interview with the D. Rault head of housekeeping at Versailles, 19 February 2008)

⁴⁰ E. Luce-Smith, *Furniture a Concise History*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1979, pp. 93-94.

are considered to be more of a public art their inclusion into domestic spaces implies that one purpose of these spaces may be to make public statements.⁴¹

It is clear from such evidence that furniture and other household decorations provide a form of communication just as clothing does. Furniture is used to convince others of one's position and level of authority. It could be used to display achievements or to emulate participation in fashionable activities or to facilitate the social gatherings where this kind of cultural exchange was regarded as significant.

One idea that is fairly consistent with all discussions concerning fashion is that it requires some level of complex society in order for a society to have a fashion. Furthermore, the more complex a society becomes, the greater the influence that fashion has upon the social group (This will be discussed in detail at a later point – See p. 44.) The first level of complexity that supports the existence of fashion is some kind of segmentation by class. In primitive society, where there is little or no class structure and very limited forms of hierarchy, it is thought that fashion is almost non-existent. The other extreme might be represented by contemporary western society and its complex set of consumers where fashion is regarded as the essential engine of change.

First furniture and clothing are unnecessary items that most perceive to be essential. Let's consider clothing; most would agree with the suggestion that clothing in some form is considered a necessity. We need it for warmth, protection, and to maintain some kind of innate or moralistic need for privacy. On the other hand clothing has been shown by many studying primitive societies to be completely unnecessary – neither for modesty nor as protection from the elements. Many have also argued that clothing's first purpose is for protection.⁴² But there are exceptions that demonstrate that clothing is not an essential

⁴¹ M. Baker, Public Images for Private Spaces? The Place for Sculpture in the Georgian Domestic Interior, *Journal of Design History*, Vol 20 No. 4, 2007, pp. 309-320.

⁴² As reported in Barnard, M., *Fashion as Communication*, p. 49, there are several authors that report that clothing protects individuals from weather, from accidents, even from "sins", "the unfriendliness of the world" or even "as a reassurance against the lack of love".

tool for protection. Darwin, for example, in his travels through the Southern Pacific regions found and documented societies that did not wear clothing even though it was (to European standards) quite cold.⁴³

With furniture – like architecture the situation is similar – most consider the need for chairs to sit on, beds to sleep on, and tables to eat off of as indispensable as they do shelter to afford privacy and protection. But yet, it is well known that some cultures do not find chairs and tables essential and many do not resort to the use of structures (beyond rudimentary and/or temporary). This leads to one similarity between clothing and furniture - both are non-essential and are only used because of socially influenced Western norms of behaviour. Both items, as shown before, perform a perceived use and they act as

⁴³ E. Wilson, in her article Explaining it Away, in *Fashion Theory: A Reader* (Barnard, M., ed) quotes from Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*, J. M. Dent and Sons, London, 1845, pp. 202-203.

"The men generally have an otter skin, or some small scrap about as large as a pocket-handkerchief, which is barely sufficient to cover there backs as low as their loins. It is laced across the breast by strings, and according as the wind blows, it is shifted from side to side. But these Fuegians in the canoe were quite naked, and even one full-grown woman ... it was raining heavily, and the fresh water, together with the spray, trickled down her body"

Later C. Darwin commented about the same people:

"We were well clothed, and though sitting close to the fire were far from too warm; yet these naked savages, though farther off, were observed to our great surprise, to be streaming with perspiration at undergoing such a roasting"

Another writer, D. Roche, while discussing the development of fashion in 17th and 18th Century France, summed this up by stating

"Shown how the primitive facts of protection, decoration and modesty only become clothing facts when they are recognised by different social groups and form part of cultural wholes defined by links and codes."

(See D. Roche and J. Birrell, (Translated by J. Birrell), *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Regime*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 44.) Thus, (within limits) clothing was not needed for protection nor was there an innate embarrassment for showing what Westerners would consider uncomfortable to publicly display (and perhaps awkward to view by the Western visitors). It is only when the clothing becomes associated with some meaning does it become relevant to either an individual or a social group. E. Wilson goes on to provide other examples of similar discoveries such as Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) in 1831. It is interesting to note that in one example a woman was embarrassed because she did not have a particular piece of jewellery while she was not embarrassed by the fact that particular areas of her body were not covered. This further suggests that our embarrassment concerning how our bodies are covered may be a socially learned reaction and not innate at all.

decorative items. It will be pointed in this chapter that both serve to communicate ideas about the owner.

Another similarity is that both clothing and furniture go through periods of change that reflect ideas and technical changes in society. Like clothing different styles of furniture become popular in different times. For example, in modern times, the more popular pieces are those that are lighter in colour and sparser in their decoration and structure probably as a result of the reduction in the

amount of space and the brighter lighting that is available. Whereas, in the C18th, the wealthy were purchasing very large, brightly coloured and heavily decorated pieces of furniture, No doubt that the selection of these brightly coloured, very dominant pieces of furniture



Figure 2-3: Example of furniture advancement in this case it is a mechanical desk designed for Marie Antoinette by Jean-Henri Riesener in 1778

was at least in part due to the large rooms and the darkness of the rooms, relative to modern well lit interiors. Technical changes also occur with in furniture and architectural designs, just as in modern buildings the use of lighter and stronger structural materials allow for taller buildings as the invention of the elevator made the first skyscraper possible.⁴⁴ New Technologies allowed for improved methods to bend wood allowed for a whole new range of furniture⁴⁵. Materials also changed. In the C18th leading furniture makers began experimenting with new mechanical devices that were designed to make the furniture serve a multitude of different functions. For example, David Roentgen (1743 – 1807) a German cabinetmaker of the C18th was known for both his marquetry and his newly designed mechanical fittings that became a favorite of his patron Marie Antoinette.

⁴⁴ J. Lienhard, *The Engines of our Ingenuity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 187.

⁴⁵ W. Rieder, Bentwood Furniture: A Versital Technique to Produce Curvilinear Designs with a Modern Flair, *Arch Digest*, August, 1996, pp 106-111.

At one time, Roentgen was appointed *ébéniste-mechanicien* by Marie Antoinette because of his proficiency in constructing furniture in which mechanical devices such as little dressing tables and washstands which converted into something else or held their essentials in concealment until a spring was touched.

In the C18th, as writing became more fashionable, furniture was developed to facilitate this activity. The fact that Boucher included a writing desk in his portrait of Madame de Pompadour (See Figure 2-1) demonstrates that Madame was a woman of letters, suggesting both her intellectual skills and her importance in society (This fashion will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter III, p. 118). A modern example of such a piece of furniture that was designed to accommodate modern activities might be the computer desk; as computers have become more popular; desks to facilitate their use were developed and have become fashionable.

All of this suggests several things, about the similarity it is between clothing and furniture. They go through cycles both in form, function and appearance. Neither are absolutely necessary, even though culture has deemed them to be. The use of furniture suggests a higher level of complexity in the society that uses it just as more elaborate variations in dressing suggests a higher social complexity. Changes in both can be the result of changes in activities, changes in technologies, or simply due to changes in 'taste'. The primary difference between clothing and furniture, which might affect the application of fashion theories, is that furniture is more expensive and more permanent than clothing. The result is that the time between the purchases for furniture are longer than for clothing, thus it takes longer for changes in furniture fashion than it takes for clothing fashion. However, this is not considered an issue in this thesis.

How does fashion work? Where does it start? How does fashion progress beyond an idea or concept to becoming a widespread cultural phenomenon. G. Sproles said it best when he suggested: ⁴⁶

“Psychologists speak of fashion as the seeking of individuality; sociologists see class competition and social conformity to norms of dress; economists see a pursuit of the scarce; aestheticians view the artistic components and ideals of beauty; historians offer evolutionary explanations for changes in design. Literally hundreds of viewpoints unfold, from a literature more immense than for any phenomenon of consumer behaviour.”⁴⁷

Historically, it was probably the late C19th when fashion started to be taken seriously by the academic community. Thorstein Veblen (1899) and Georg Simmel (1904) were among the first to seriously discuss fashion and both of them related fashion to a method of class differentiation and/or integration. These explanations remain valid today. While T. Veblen wrote from an economic-sociological viewpoint⁴⁸, G. Simmel⁴⁹ took a more pure sociological approach to describing how fashion develops. In 1947, Q. Bell⁵⁰ wrote about fashion from the point of view of an art historian, and E. Wilson⁵¹ discussed this topic as an economical/anthropological phenomenon and others took a pure economic approach (S. Bikhehandani, D. Hirshleifer and I. Welch)⁵². Probably the most controversial and thoughtful model was developed by P. Bourdieu⁵³ using an extensive analysis of social data to uncover key dimensions to fashion.

⁴⁶ It should be pointed out that many of the examples given in this section are from times after the C18th. While on the surface these examples may seem inappropriate, they are only used to illustrate the point being made or they are the examples used by the original author. In either case, if the point is supported by the example, it does not necessarily make the concept being discussed less applicable for the C18th.

⁴⁷ G. Sproles taken from M. Solomon (eds), *The Psychology of Fashion*, Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, USA, 1985, p.57.

⁴⁸ T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Macmillian, New York, 1899.

⁴⁹ G. Simmel, *Fashion*, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 62, No. 6, May 1957. Note that this is a re-print of an article written by this author in 1904 in the *International Quarterly*, which was published in NY.

⁵⁰ Q. Bell, *On Human Finery*, Allison and Busby, London, 1947.

⁵¹ E. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, USA, 2003.

⁵² S. Bikhehandani, D. Hirshleifer and I. Welch, *A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades*, pp. 992-1026.

⁵³ See for example one of P. Bourdieu most famous texts - P. Bourdieu (Translated from French by R. Nice) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Routledge, London, 1986.

As fashion is a rich and varied phenomenon, there are several theories as to how ‘fashion’ operates. Probably one of the most common approaches to describing fashion is to describe it as ‘moving’ through a social group. Usually this movement is the result of a conflict between two opposing forces – the desire to be part of a group and the desire to be an individual is one such model. This is what is referred to by some as the Diffusion Model, first proposed by T. Veblen⁵⁴ then more fully developed by G. Simmel⁵⁵. G. Simmel perceived fashion to be a simple conflict between desires to be part of a group and yet to be separate from others emanating in part from class divides within that society:

“Fashion is, as I have said, a product of class division and operates – like a number of other forms, honour especially - the double function of holding a given social circle together and at the same time closing it off from others.... Connection and differentiation are the two fundamental functions, which are here inseparably united, of which one of the two, although or because it forms a logical contrast to the other, becomes the condition of its realization. That fashion is a product of social needs is perhaps demonstrated by nothing stronger than the fact that, in countless instances, not the slightest reason can be found for its creations from the standpoint of an objective, aesthetic or other expediency.”^{56 57}

Consequently, fashion is the natural result of these two apparently innate opposing drives – the drive to be the member of a group or to conform to the group and the drive to differentiate oneself from others⁵⁸. To describe this in another way fashion is the result of

⁵⁴ T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

It should be noted that T. Veblen, was writing from the perspective of a Marxist who was very critical of fashion as a phenomena of the then current class structure. Fashion was a part of a system that, in part, through “*conspicuous consumption*” (a phrase he coined) separated the wealthy “*leisure class*” (another phrase that he created) from others. This process, according to T. Veblen, was a waste of resources. As such he was very negative to the concept of fashion.

⁵⁵ G. Simmel, *Fashion*.

⁵⁶ D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds.) *Simmel on Culture*, Sage Publications, Ltd., London, 1997, p. 189.

⁵⁷ It should be pointed out that G. Simmel perceived most human endeavours to be the result of different conflicts between extremes. In other writings he discusses the conflict between subjective and objective cultures, between moral extremes, etc. On occasion, he would cross over to discuss more metaphysical conflicts that result in particular behavioural results.

⁵⁸ It could be pointed out that G. Simmel thought that many social processes were brought about by two opposing forces such as the desire to be a part of a group vs. the desire to be different.

the conflict between the desire to look the same vs. the desire to look or act different. As G. Simmel goes on to argue, one group (the higher class) finds a way to differentiate itself from everyone else by taking on a particular characteristic or form of personal adornment or dress. Once the other groups identify this new attribute they begin to copy it. Once the first group realizes that they have been copied, they abandon that characteristic to adopt a new, differentiating look. Even within a group, individuals find ways to make themselves stand out from the other members; however in this case, they are doing so while trying to maintain their identification with their select group despite their desire to be slightly different. T. Veblen, by contrast, argued that the act of following fashion could be based on instincts and an evolutionary development into economic theory.⁵⁹ For T. Veblen, instincts are the driving forces for human actions and attitudes. The second difference he observed is that the actual act of consumption (both in what is consumed and how much is consumed) in itself becomes part of the way the upper class differentiated itself from others.⁶⁰

In his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, T. Veblen portrays an upper class who struggles for social distinction within their class, and whose lifestyle is imitated by the lower classes. For T. Veblen, like G. Simmel, fashion operates on two levels: It emerges through innovation within the upper classes who are continually creating new forms of dress, which are frequently more sophisticated and more expensive in order to reaffirm their higher place within society. Fashion spreads through imitation as the lower classes try to emulate the upper classes. Thus, fashion was the result of “*Pecuniary Emulation*” or the consequence of trying to emulate those of higher status. His negative judgement on this process continues to come through as he describes these as being based on the most primitive of motives.

“The whole history of society is reflected in the conflict, the compromise, the reconciliations...”

(G. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Fashion*, In D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture*, pp. 187 - 206.)

⁵⁹ In fact, T. Veblen perceived all social and economic behaviour to be based on instincts and the evolutionary process.

⁶⁰ This actually raises a question with G. Simmel’s approach. This concerns the fact that there are some things that the lower classes would never be able to copy.

Ownership of more is equated to the early primitive society, where brute force is used to take what one wants from others⁶¹. It was also perceived as a tool used by those in the upper classes to deprive others of a way to move up the social ladder.

Thus, T. Veblen thought that modern man was no better than primitive man except that instead of fighting over pieces of flesh from a recent kill, they were fighting over goods and prestige. Clothing fashions, according to T. Veblen, were primarily aimed at women to demonstrate that they do not work (hence they are part of the 'Leisure Class'). While his theories do differ substantially from that of G. Simmel's, there are similarities. First the adoption of fashion was perceived by both to be a natural process that is expected given human's natural desires and behaviours, second it is in part the result of a class conflict and that fashion was enacted by the lower socio-economic group imitating the higher segment. Third, neither thought that fashion was that positive (T. Veblen was, however, much more dismissive of fashion.) They also agreed that it is individual who creates fashion; however they differ in that T. Veblen believed that an external force (evolution) drives the individual to make these choices compared to G. Simmel who placed the decision on individuals and their conflicting desires to be part of a group vs. to differentiate themselves.⁶²

It is easy to see why fashion theory has so often turned to class. In the late C19th and early C20th French couture was dominated by figures that included Jacques Doucet, Madame Paquin, the Callot sisters and Jean and Gaston Worth – and French couture dominated the fashions of Europe. All were very upmarket designers whose products were intended for the wealthy and whose fashionable lines were subsequently adopted and adapted for the middle and working classes. Even in the U.S. where a mass-produced clothing industry was in its infancy, most wealthy individuals still had their apparel made for them rather than buying clothing "off-the-rack", exercising an important influence on fashions of the day.

⁶¹ T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

⁶² This however, began to change in G. Simmel's later writings according to Lehmann, U. in his book *Tigersprung*. (U. Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion In Modernity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, USA, 2000.)