



“Summary of article by Chandra Mukerji: Pictorial Prints and the Growth of Consumerism: Class and Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Culture” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 126-129

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

## **“Summary of article by Chandra Mukerji: Pictorial Prints and the Growth of Consumerism: Class and Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Culture”**

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, "... the increased production and use of consumer commodities was helping to join both rich and poor into similar market relations and gathering together buyers throughout Europe into common patterns of taste. The new patterns of consumption of these novel goods brought to life a cultural system that, because it tapped and bred new levels and types of demand, was particularly suited to and encouraging of capitalist development...The desires of new consumers and the patterns of their purchases stimulated new economic activity in Europe in specific ways: by discouraging hoarding, thus making new surplus a more potent economic force; by creating the broad patterns of taste that would support larger-scale production and trade; and by increasing the general level of demand for goods by making a greater proportion of the population consumers than had been typical in the past." (77-78).

This article traces the meaning and the impact of early modern consumerism through the example of pictorial prints, one of the first mass consumer goods of purely decorative value.

### **CULTURE AND MATERIAL CULTURE IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE**

Before the early modern period medieval European culture had appeared stable and unchanging for centuries. People from all social strata shared in a common popular culture. Strict egalitarianism among peers was often the rule, as in guilds and monasteries. The level of material culture was low. Even in the great medieval households, only the most rudimentary utilitarian furnishings were available. However, despite the appearance of stability, technological innovation continued in areas such as agriculture and warfare. The revival of long distance trade after about 1100 AD allowed new concentrations of wealth, while the spread of literacy among the upper classes led to the development of new styles and tastes. The trading towns of the late middle ages displayed increased concentrations of wealth and concern for conspicuous consumption, harbingers of the materialist culture that would come to dominate Europe from the early modern period to the present.

### **PRINTS AND THE GROWTH OF CONSUMERISM**

Pictorial prints, valued for nothing more than their decorative uses, fit perfectly the definition of consumer goods as expressive artifacts. While Europeans made woodblock prints in the fourteenth century, “the development of the printing press, movable type, and plate engraving

during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries made printing a sophisticated technology for producing a wide variety of marketable goods.” (38) Although prints created before the eighteenth century are often displayed in museums today, they were not considered fine art or valuable “collectibles” until the late seventeenth century. Originally, printmaking involved images created for a popular audience in using more conservative styles than the painting of the era. Of course some artists, such as Albrecht Dürer, worked both in painting and in printmaking, but more did not. With the growing cosmopolitanism of the art of the period, and the simultaneous development of a quite different world of popular prints, the distinction between elite and mass culture began to be a visible part of European culture. This differentiation of visual consumer goods both resulted from and stimulated increased consumerism.

## **GUILD EGALITARIANISM AND CAPITALISM**

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, artisans produced a growing variety of goods for both elite and mass consumption. The expansion of and change in the European economy in this period undermined the guild system which had controlled craft production in the middle ages. Guilds held legal monopolies on their trades, protecting their members from competition from outsiders. They also enforced a strict egalitarianism between the guild masters, insuring that each had the same amount of work and income. Expansion of trade thus tended to increase the power and income of the guild members. This was frustrating to customers who faced high prices and limited supplies, as well as to would-be artisans who faced burdensome apprenticeship requirements and other membership hurdles. Even the most successful guildmasters were held back because they could not expand their businesses faster than that of the guild as a whole, thus losing out on promising new commercial opportunities. All of these factors led to conflict and undermined the strength of the guilds.

Printmaking and publishing arose outside of the guild system, both because they involved new skills and trades and because book publishing in university centers had been outside the guild system in the late middle ages. However, toward the end of sixteenth century printers in England, France and some parts of Italy established their own guilds to protect their position and to formalize their control over workers in printing shops. By the sixteenth century the increasing division of labor in printing had transformed the industry from craft production of manuscript books to capitalist manufacture of printed ones. As printing expanded there were numerous attempts at political and religious censorship; however these were directed almost entirely at the words rather than the pictures in printing, leaving printmakers substantial freedom of expression.

## **DÜRER AND THE NEW CONSUMER CULTURE**

Few individuals were as important in the articulation of new cultural forms as Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), the German artist and printmaker. His education included an apprenticeship to a painter, training in printmaking, and travel to Italy to study the work of Renaissance painters. He quickly became successful both as a painter, gaining the support of aristocratic patrons, and as a printmaker, selling his work to a mass audience. He is often described as a transitional figure, using a mixture of medieval and modern elements in his prints. The formula for his commercial success was the use of the skillful naturalist techniques of the Renaissance to depict familiar medieval religious imagery. He helped to codify an aesthetic for prints, emphasizing skillful

technique in the production of mass culture and increasing the range of pictures available not only to wealthy patrons of the fine arts, but also to more common consumers.

## **COSMOPOLITAN PATTERNS OF CULTURE**

Prints contributed to the geographic spread of consumerism, helping to shape international patterns of taste, by introducing designs across vast areas. Because they were easy to transport and had become easy to read, prints played an important role in creating standardized images that were shared throughout western Europe.

Mass-produced prints of classical and Renaissance art, spreading throughout Europe in this period, were used to define the classical heritage for Europeans. One hundred years after Dürer, the great painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) not only sold his paintings but also had reproductions of his own paintings made by engravers and sold under his supervision. In so doing, Rubens increased his wealth and fame by exploiting the new legitimacy of printed reproductions of artworks.

With the spread of Baroque and classical art, regional cultural traditions declined but did not disappear. In fact, books about regional designs, artifacts, and costumes became popular. Dutch prints and books were read throughout Europe, helping to recreate a common culture after the Reformation. Trade in single sheet prints was extensive and influential in this period: Rembrandt, for instance, was able to develop a cosmopolitan style, in spite of the fact that he did little traveling, because he collected prints reflecting cultural currents that he could not experience directly.