

# RETAILERS AND CONSUMER CHANGES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

## Fashion and the early modern consumer evolution

**Harm Nijboer, PhD- Student**

Freelance historian, the Netherlands

[harm@nijboer.biz](mailto:harm@nijboer.biz)

*'Fashion'd Plate sells for more than its weight.'*  
(John Locke 1695)

In the last two decades numerous studies have been written about consumption in the early modern period. Important for opening this field of research was a collection of studies by McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb (1982) and especially their provocative statement that a 'consumer revolution' took place in eighteenth century England. Although some historians still talk about a consumer revolution to denote changes in consumption in the early modern period, this concept has been heavily criticized by others. (e.g. Fairchilds 1993, De Vries 1993 & Schuurman 1997) Several studies have made clear that important changes in consumption patterns had already taken place before the eighteenth century, and not only in England. The emergence of modern consumption patterns has been a long-term process with shifting geographical center stages. Such a process can be better described as a consumer evolution than a consumer revolution.

In investigating and explaining this consumer evolution historians (and other social scientists) have followed two different paths. While 'cultural historians' investigate the emergence of a consumer culture, 'economic historians' focus on a rise in demand. Although attempts have been made to bridge this gap (e.g. De Vries 1993 & 1994), these distinct approaches remain persistent in recent literature. This is partly the result of the fact that consumption is differently conceptualized within the social sciences. Many cultural theorists define consumption as the use of goods, while economists tend to equal consumption to – depending on the context – effective demand, household expenditure, utilizing or the act of purchasing. In both cases the word 'consumption' is used for acts or processes that can be referred to by other terms more precisely. However, there is one act that can not be described by another term than consumption, namely, the process of the acquiring, using and subsequent discarding of a commodity. I want to hold on to this definition, not for reasons of semantic pedantry, but because this definition allows us to make a distinction between consumption and another usage of goods: the storage of wealth. Non-perishable commodities, especially those of valuable materials, do function as containers of wealth, whether their possessors intend so or not. Nevertheless, historians have largely overlooked the fact that in 'traditional' societies wealth is stored in goods rather than bank accounts. But this is something that gradually changed during the early modern (and even the modern) consumer evolution. An early shift from the *hoarding* of goods with a high intrinsic towards the *consumption* of commodities that were valued for their extrinsic value, can be observed in the Dutch Republic during its Golden Age.

The seventeenth century Dutch Republic is often regarded as the center stage of the consumer evolution at that time. (e.g. Schama 1987, Fairchilds 1993) Not only in Amsterdam, but in the whole coastal region of the Republic standards of living were high. Already in 1974 Jan de Vries argued that Frisian farmers during the seventeenth century started to consume

more and adapted a more 'urban' lifestyle. However, the figures<sup>1</sup> he presented show no clear increase in the value of their household possessions, as he admitted himself in a later article. (Cf. De Vries 1993) My own research in Leeuwarden, the capital of Friesland, led to similar ambiguous results. Surprisingly, the value of the consumer durables possessed by the middle class inhabitants of this, by then, flourishing town did not significantly increase or decrease during the seventeenth century. Still, many items for home decoration (paintings, curtains etc.) were definitely on the rise. But more remarkably is that during the seventeenth century copper and especially pewter objects were gradually replaced by fine earthenware.<sup>2</sup> In inventories pewter was usually appraised by its weight. This practice, that lasted until the 1670's, makes clear that objects of this material were possessed, at least to some extent, for their intrinsic value. The substitute, earthenware, had no intrinsic value of course. It seems that these findings are not confined to Leeuwarden or even the Dutch Republic. Similar findings have been reported by Blondé (2002) for Antwerp in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The rise of the 'new draperies' and a shift in dress from dark durable clothes to lighter and more colorful fabrics can be seen in the same context of a shift from hoarding towards consumption. (Van der Wee 1998) And in seventeenth and eighteenth century England plate was increasingly valued for its fashion instead of its intrinsic value. (Clifford 1999)

The extrinsic value of goods can be described as 'fashion', the surplus value of a commodity derived from style, design and workmanship. Note that I don't use the word 'fashion' in the sense that is usual in present day English, but in a sense that it has in common with the French, German and Dutch forms of the word ('façon', 'Fasson' and 'fatsoen').<sup>3</sup> But apart from the linguistics there are epistemological reasons to do so. Fashion is normally used - even in academic debate - in the sense of a not clearly originated bundle of normative ideas concerning style, dress and design. In this sense the concept of fashion has little explanatory power. (Cf. Campbell 1987, 24.) Even worse, like its nephew the *Zeitgeist* it has an obscure ontological status. By conceptualizing 'fashion' the way I propose, we can avoid such transcendentalism and shift our focus to actual objects and actions. Moreover it can help to bridge the gap between the economic and the cultural history of the early modern consumer evolution.

Using more perishable commodities meant that goods had to be replaced on an earlier stage, which stimulated expenditure on the long run. Unfortunately hardly any data about the lifespan of different products are known. For one single product we can theoretically state that when the average lifespan (measured in years) of that product is shortened with a factor  $1/x$ , yearly average expenditure on that product will rise with a factor  $x$ . (De Vries 1993; 103) But this model is of limited use, especially when we want to investigate the substitution of a 'valuable' by a 'fashionable'. In this case the following hypothetical scheme makes more sense:

	<b>Pewter dish</b>	<b>Earthenware dish</b>
Lifespan	50 years	25 years
Price	6 \$	2 \$
Remaining (intrinsic) value	4 \$	-
<b>Expenditure over 50 years</b>	<b>2 \$</b>	<b>4 \$</b>

\$ is used as a universal symbol for currency

In this example the consumption of fashionables is more expensive than the consumption of durables. Initial expenditure, however, is much lower. The buyer of a pewter dish has spent 6 \$, of which 4 \$ are 'invested' in an asset that is laying idle. A purchaser of an earthenware dish

on the other hand saves 4 \$, which are free to spend. This money could be used to spend more on consumer goods, to invest in one's own business, ... or to put out at interest.

My own research in Leeuwarden shows that while hoarding of goods was diminishing, savings were increasingly done by means of securities. Interest rates on these bonds fell gradually from 7% at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to 5% around 1700. One way to interpret this fall in rates, is that the supply of credit rose faster than the demand for loans. But aside from that, the revealed interest rates allow us to expand the scheme above. Let us assume that the buyer of an earthenware dish puts the 4 \$ he saved on the initial expenditure, out at 5% interest.<sup>4</sup> After twenty five years he has gained 5 \$ on his investment. More than enough money to replace the, by now, worn out dish. So after fifty years the buyer of the pewter dish has spent 2 \$ while he is still owning 4 \$ worth of assets. His counterpart, however, has spent 4 \$ and is, by now, owning 12 \$ worth of assets.

This simple example makes clear that substituting valuables by fashionables will increase the circulation of money and goods. Of course, many parameters are left out of this model. A more comprehensive model may include the use of credit as means of payment, the course of interest rates, and so on. But even then, one important question remains unanswered. Why would an obvious sign of wealth be substituted by a product with a much fuzzier symbolic value? Consumption of fashionables is no conspicuous consumption in the way Veblen (1899) defined it, an evidence of pecuniary strength. Sure, money is needed to buy fashionables, but appropriating them requires skills and good taste. While the hoarding of valuables is an investment in (economic) stock, the consumption of fashionables is an investment in cultural capital. (Cf. Bourdieu 1979, 1986) And while valuables are designating actual wealth, the proper use and possession of fashionables demonstrates capacities or future wealth. This display of credit worthiness can be linked back to the increasing use of securities and the importance of credit for business transactions. (Cf. Muldrew 1998)

In the foregoing I have drawn an outline of how the early modern consumer evolution can be understood as a 'fashioning process', a process whereby goods were increasingly valued for their fashion instead of their intrinsic worth and thereby stimulating savings to be invested instead of being hoarded. Despite it's tentativeness, the concept of a fashioning process has the advantage over existing, often complementary, models, that it offers a general explanation for both the rise of consumerism and the rise in consumer demand. Furthermore it forces us to give up the false dichotomy between thrift and acquisitiveness.

## References

### **Blondé 2002**

Bruno Blondé, 'Tableware and changing consumer patterns. Dynamics of material culture in Antwerp, 17th – 18th centuries,' in: J. Veeckman (ed.), *Majolica and glass from Italy to Antwerp and beyond. The transfer of technology in the 16th – early 17th century*, Antwerpen 2002.

### **Bourdieu 1979**

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London 1984. (Originally published in French 1979)

### **Bourdieu 1986**

Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital,' in: John Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York 1986, 241-258.

### **Campbell 1987**

C. Campbell, *The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism*, Oxford & Cambridge 1987.

### **Clifford 1999**

Helen Clifford, 'A commerce with things: the value of precious metalwork in early modern England,' in: Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds.), *Consumers and luxury. Consumer culture in Europe 1650-1850*, Manchester and New York 1999, 147-168.

### **Fairchilds 1993**

C. Fairchilds, 'Consumption in early modern Europe. A review article,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 (1993), 850-858.

### **Locke 1695**

John Locke, 'Further Considerations Concerning Raising the Value of Money. Wherein Mr. Lowndes's Arguments for it in his late Report concerning An Essay for the Amendment of Silver Coins, are particularly Examined,' in: *The Works of John Locke in Nine Volumes*, London 1824 (12th ed.), 131-206. (Originally 1695)

### **McKendrick, Brewer & Plumb 1982**

N. McKendrick, J. Brewer & J.H. Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society. The commercialization of eighteenth-century England*, Bloomington 1982.

### **Muldrew 1998**

Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation. The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England*, London & New York 1998.

### **Schama 1987**

Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, London 1987.

### **Schuurman 1997**

A.J. Schuurman, 'Aards geluk. Consumptie en de moderne samenleving,' in: A.J. Schuurman, J. de Vries en A.M. van der Woude (red.), *Aards Geluk. De Nederlanders en hun spullen van 1550 tot 1850*, Amsterdam 1997, 11-27.

### **Veblen 1899**

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class. An Economic Study of Institutions*, New York 1899.

### **De Vries 1974**

Jan de Vries, 'Peasant demand patterns and economic development: Friesland 1550-1750,' in: W.N. Parker en E.L. Jones (red.), *European peasants and their markets. Essays in agrarian history*, Princeton New Jersey 1975, pp. 205-266.

**De Vries 1993**

Jan de Vries, 'Between purchasing power and the world of goods: understanding the household economy in early modern Europe,' in: J. Brewer & R. Porter (red.), *Consumption and the world of goods*, Londen & New York 1993.

**De Vries 1994**

Jan de Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution,' *Journal of Economic History* 54 (1994), pp. 249-270.

**Van der Wee 1998**

Herman van der Wee, 'Consumptie van textiel en industriële ontwikkeling in de steden van de Nederlanden tijdens de late middeleeuwen en de nieuwe tijd: Aanzet tot een werkhypothese,' *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis* 81 (1998), 339-350.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The figures he provides, however, are rather obscure. No confidence intervals are given, some averages are based on only one observation and sometimes results are illogical (e.g. the average number of an item being 0.9 for all households that possess that item).

<sup>2</sup> Extensive figures will be included in the final draft of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The use of 'fashion' for designating a value has never been common in English. In archaic Dutch, however, 'fatsoen' was used in this sense and in present-day French 'façon' is still used in this way.

<sup>4</sup> Compounding interest was, as far as I know, unusual and under most legal systems even forbidden in the early modern era. So this option is not accounted for in the calculations.