

Face Value: The Consumer Revolution and the Colonizing of America. By CARY CARSON. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017. 309 pages. Paper, ebook.

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Face Value: The Consumer Revolution and the Colonizing of America is an expanded and updated version of Cary Carson's landmark essay "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?," which first appeared more than two decades ago in the essay collection *Of Consuming Interests*. That volume explored colonial manners, goods, and social institutions in an effort to trace "the rise of America's special brand of aggressive bourgeois consumerism," and it quickly became essential reading for students of material culture.¹ Carson, then vice president of the Research Division at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, was in the vanguard of those championing the study of consumer behavior, and he issued two challenges that remain as relevant and thought-provoking today as they were back in 1994: first, to rethink the nature of desire and the inevitability of consumption; and second, to highlight the value of material culture for scholarly research beyond that of art and architecture historians and archaeologists, who already understood its value. His mission was subtle but transformative. Though previous scholars of the eighteenth-century consumer revolution emphasized supply—fueled by spreading colonization, access to raw materials, expanding trade networks, and free and coerced systems of labor—Carson staked a claim at the other end of the equation. "It was indeed a revolution," he argues, "but a *consumer* revolution in the beginning. The better-known Industrial Revolution followed in response" (3). Seen from this perspective, store counters and homes were not final destinations in a linear march from production to consumption but a kind of middle ground where objects could be tested and evaluated, sometimes accepted, and at other times returned for redesign or refashioning. Consumption, in other words, is as much about people's thoughts, feelings, and values—which are negotiated and changeable—as it is about things. A profusion of publications since "Why Demand?" testifies to how seriously scholars took up Carson's call. Subsequent studies have not only incorporated objects into their analyses, but also broadened both the Atlantic regions and peoples considered as

¹ Quotation from back cover description for Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, Va., 1994). Carson's essay appeared as "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?," *ibid.*, 483–697. Used copies still do a brisk business on Amazon.com, while new volumes are listed for more than five hundred dollars; see Amazon.com, <https://www.amazon.com/Consuming-Interests-Eighteenth-Perspectives-Revolution/dp/0813914132>, accessed May 24, 2018.

consumers, including Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, as well as women and native and enslaved peoples.

Western Europeans were, of course, buying more, even before Christopher Columbus set sail across the Atlantic. As Carson notes, older studies using surviving wills, probate inventories, museum collections, buildings, and archaeological remains to track changing consumer behavior from the fourteenth century have long demonstrated increased spending on individual products and total expenditures on consumption. Scholars also generally agree that the rate and range of these acquisitions escalated during the seventeenth century, and—for the Anglo-American colonies that are Carson's subject of study—in the decades leading up to U.S. independence. "By the Revolution," he asserts, "even some of the poorer sort had made 'necessities' of goods that had been their fathers' 'decencies,' their grandfathers' 'luxuries' and before that were simply unheard of" (13). But that people could afford better food and clothing or buy larger homes with more elaborate furnishings is only the preface of his story. It tells us what colonists did, but not how or why they did so. These questions about desirability and display, personal meaning and social interpretation, are Carson's real passions and where he continues to make his most important interventions throughout the rest of the book.

The structure of *Face Value* will be familiar to readers of Carson's earlier essay. He begins by outlining his approach to explaining the Anglo-American consumer revolution, offering five hypotheses, the most important of which are the emergence of a gentry culture and increasing population dislocation.² These two factors worked in tandem, because people on the move created less stable societies that needed new ways to evaluate and critique "migrants and travelers" (35). The result, Carson argues, was "status-communicating" behaviors in "standardized architectural spaces" (36), where a language of goods developed to evaluate appearance and behavior.

Carson then moves back from this theoretical framework to the practices of "folk consumers" (37) in medieval and early modern societies whose worlds were "not closed, just close" (39). Neighbors who knew each other had little incentive to make emblems of status out of goods whose acquisition would not offset predetermined hierarchies based on lineage and rank. But as economic pressures mounted locally and opportunity beckoned more distantly, the familiarity common in such towns and villages eroded. What

² Carson's five hypotheses are: ordinary people enjoyed a higher standard of living by the mid-sixteenth century; by the end of the seventeenth century, this increasingly meant that goods could serve functions beyond basic needs allowing more people to live as only the gentry previously had; social, economic, and intellectual factors combined in the late eighteenth century to accelerate this process in Britain and British North America; fashion developed as a visual system of differentiation; and communities became less stable and more transient, resulting in new means of evaluating and categorizing members.

replaced it was a new object-based shorthand that allowed relative strangers to assess each other's respective worth and assign it value just "like paper money" (57).

The next chapters apply Carson's ideas about self-fashioning through a series of detailed, well-illustrated case studies. His insistence that the consumer revolution began much earlier than the eighteenth century, though daring when first aired in the 1990s, is now broadly accepted, but his close attention to how it unfolded in people's daily lives remains exemplary. Readers walk vicariously through a rural Massachusetts parlor, trace similarities in shards of ceramic and glass vessels to demonstrate the tenacious persistence of taste across geographically distinct regions, and study the long-gone faces recorded in the emerging art of portraiture. Even more detail goes into his examination of increasingly complex dining habits. Access to more and novel foodstuffs spawned new ways of preparing and serving meals, stimulating the creation of specialized dishes and utensils that were often presented in matched sets upon prescribed pieces of furniture. The proliferation of such rituals was ultimately codified in cookbooks and etiquette manuals, thus ensuring consistency across communities and colonies. Carson's calculated and persuasive interweaving of argument and object here is a true delight that time and time again demonstrates the value of analyzing objects as the embodiment of social norms and values, rather than treating them as inanimate tools or mere illustrations.

Face Value's footnotes alone make it worth reading. Carson painstakingly explores how different historical subdisciplines have tracked increasing consumption during the eighteenth century, and he summarizes each historiography with extended annotations demonstrating their specific contributions. As he shows, economic historians chart the rise of durable goods, while literary scholars examine books, pamphlets, and sermons on luxury and its denigrating effects. Art historians both count the number of portraits and paintings that were appearing more often in the homes of middling families and register the changes in lifestyles that they depict. Cultural historians point to the proliferation of etiquette literature that guided readers in the arts of social behavior and the proper use of the trappings of gentility, while architectural historians chronicle the diffusion of pattern books promoting consistent versions of classical architecture just when vernacular building styles became less popular. These approaches often depict the consumer revolution as a perfect storm of commodities, behavior, and standardization, in which consumers operated as an uneducated mass desperate for both acquisition and proper instruction. This position, Carson argues, confuses the symptoms with the underlying cause. Each of these literatures describes important changes in consumer behavior—and even the preconditions that made such changes possible—while simultaneously failing to ask why these changes occurred when they did, and instead taking a presentist view that assumes increases in disposable income necessarily lead to

greater spending. Carson, on the other hand, suggests that consumer trends reflected a growing distinction between living standards (literally, how one lived) and lifestyle (a cohesive force uniting like-minded people to reaffirm their similarities through consumption). Underlying his assumptions, however, is careful attention to demography, as Carson returns again and again to the proposition that changes in living standards depended on a critical population mass, which provided a semi-familiar but not neighborly community against which individuals measured themselves and by whom they were judged. In this attentiveness to the importance of symbolic exchange to community formation, he anticipated and indeed shaped the wave of cultural history that emerged in the two decades after "Why Demand?" was published and still influences studies of material culture even as *Face Value* arrives on the scene.

If there is one reason to critique Carson's framework, it lies in its steadfast concentration on a limited number of British North American colonies. Though this focus reflected the parameters of the book in which his work initially appeared, in the intervening quarter century, material culture studies have expanded far beyond his Anglo-American world. Carson does acknowledge that scholarship on the "material cultures of African Americans—both enslaved and free—Indians, and many immigrant Europeans who came to British North America" (xix) has grown in appreciable ways, and *Face Value* even includes a few examples (most notably on pages 114–28). But they often read as side stories rather than as central actors in the main plot. Though racial demographics were less unbalanced than in other parts of the Atlantic world, the numbers of African Americans and Native Americans living in the places Carson studies were not insignificant, particularly in the early Chesapeake. Greater attention to their place in his schema might have further bolstered his characterization that "there was more to a formalized lifestyle than can be adequately explained by . . . 'elite group boundary maintenance'" (128). Though Carson is always careful to show his readers the hands of makers, traders, sellers, buyers, and users who participated in the consumer revolution, goods do not act independently of those whose worlds they inhabit, and there are thus limitations on the people and communities Carson can see. It is a delicate balance for an author who sees himself as "a straight-ahead historian" (xvi) and yet devotes most of his time to exploring decorative objects that became increasingly available, yet still unobtainable, to so many.