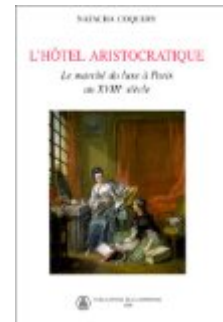


Natacha Coquery. *L'hotel aristocratique: Le marche du luxe a Paris au XVIIIe siecle.* Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998. 444 pp. 180 FF, paper, ISBN 978-2-85944-343-6.



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Scholars of seventeenth and eighteenth-century France have made known the terrific social pressure that was placed on nobles of French court society to consume correctly and carefully (1). It was a society in which the observable details of one's outward appearance, use of objects, and attention to proper etiquette were crucial in obtaining royal favors or honors and demonstrating one's respect for social hierarchies. Expenditure was to match the requirements of rank, not income, and the obligation to keep up appearances forced many nobles to take out hefty loans and survive on credit. In *L'hotel aristocratique: Le marche du luxe a Paris au XVIIIe siecle*, Natacha Coquery gives us a behind-the-scenes look at aristocratic consumption and shows how appearances were maintained in practice in the eighteenth century. Coquery's work exposes the everyday expenditures, exchanges, and decisions that enabled court aristocrats to participate in the luxury market, display proper taste, and maintain social rank. Like others before her, Coquery emphasizes the need to understand the production, distribution, and consumption of goods in the eighteenth-century luxury market as an indispensable

social obligation. Court society attributed symbolic value to objects and dictated precise social codes regarding their use, and the boundary between *le luxe* and need was blurred. These factors, Coquery argues, drove the market, and therefore seeking to understand noble consumption through pure economic indicators would be anachronistic and misleading.

L'hotel aristocratique is a fine addition to the growing bibliography of works on consumption in the ancien regime (appropriately, Daniel Roche authors the preface to the book). However, this study is distinguished from many other examinations of popular and elite consumption because the author examines aristocratic consumption from a spatial perspective. The story picks up in the early eighteenth century, when after an eight-year sojourn in Paris, the king moved back to Versailles in 1723. Versailles, however, was losing its grip on court society and the daily spaces of the aristocracy were becoming less centralized: nobles increasingly found themselves dividing their time among the court in Versailles, their houses in the surrounding countryside, and most of all,

their *hotels*, or noble residences, in Paris. As Paris became the new center of gravity, hotel construction, real estate investment, and the luxury trade took off. At the most fundamental level of the book's approach is the hotel, which is broadly considered for the many ways it "animated" exchange and consumption (p. 15). Coquery is not so much concerned with the exterior and interior architectural style and form of the hotel, and with the exception of the last 45 pages of the book, there is little here on the hotel as a built structure. Instead, the noble townhouse is examined as it represents both a space of economic exchange and an object of market exchange, or simply put, real estate. Furthermore, much of the study looks beyond the hotel as a circumscribed space and situates it in the wider spatial context of the city. A good part of this investigation is occupied with demonstrating how the circulation of noble residences, people, credit, objects, and fashion trends created new spatial patterns in eighteenth-century Paris and left a physical imprint on the city. *L'hotel aristocratique* is a generous, well-researched study that has much to offer to a range of historians; at the same time, the book's breadth is also a weakness.

It should be noted that the book does not propose to study all of the nobility. Rather, the focus is on those whom Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret has called the "plutocratic kernel" of the nobility, that is, the highest-ranking court nobles with incomes ranging from 60,000 to 300,000 *livres* (2). Because they were closer to the king than others in the court, these nobles were more obligated to spend, and thus more likely to fall into debt. Throughout the book, Coquery focuses on five of these elite court families; the author's principal sources are the papers on family property seized during the Revolution (*sequestres revolutionnaires*). The book, however, is to be commended for extending its scope of study to the merchants and artisans who were an important part of the luxury market and essential for furnishing nobles with fine merchandise. Much of the study concerns the com-

plex economic and spatial associations between noble consumers and those of the lower social ranks who provided them with goods.

In chapter one, therefore, Coquery thinks about the hotel as a site of consumption and investigates the spatial relationship between hotels and artisans' workshops or merchants' boutiques in order to understand the economic relationship between the two parties in the second half of the eighteenth century. The author compares the location of the noble houses to the location of the workplaces of those merchants and artisans who supplied the families with food, horse, housing, hygiene, clothing, and luxury items. While nobles moved frequently throughout this period, artisans and merchants did not, but they were dispersed throughout the city and suburbs. Given nobles' tendency to seek the services of merchants and artisans located at a distance from the hotel, Coquery argues that skill and specialty, not spatial proximity, determined supply and demand. The social demands of court society obligated nobles to search throughout the city for the most highly accomplished craftsmen and merchants who could offer distinctive and high-quality products.

With these spatial dynamics in mind, Coquery investigates how nobles and their providers encountered one another in the city to transact business. On the one hand, the migration of aristocrats to the western quarters of Paris throughout the century (more on this below) did garner a following among certain trade sectors, such as vendors of clothes. Noble residences imparted prestige to a neighborhood, stimulated economic development, and created high concentrations of merchants in fashionable commercial areas, such as the Palais-Royal and along the rue Saint-Honore. Nobles ventured to those boutiques that were on their usual social rounds or that were frequented by other aristocrats. Coquery uses sources such as almanacs and aristocrats' memoirs to describe the lively and well-lit "boutique-salon," which was always marked by the

exquisitely dressed crowds who surrounded its shop windows to admire and inspect the tempting goods (pp. 81-85). However, because the nobility rarely traveled to artisans' "repugnant" workshops or journeyed to distant stores, merchants and artisans came to the hotels, sometimes on a daily basis. One hairdresser, for example, arrived at his client's hotel at 6:00 A.M. everyday to style her hair (p. 77). Servants also frequently acted as go-betweens. The valet was particularly important, since it was he who was frequently charged with selecting goods and with decorating or furnishing the hotel according to his master's taste. It would have been interesting to hear more about how the valet, as an intermediary, might have complicated a noble's representation of him/herself through the accumulation of objects and declaration of style.

The second part of the book revolves around the hotel, but the three chapters that comprise this section ask how court aristocrats used the noble residence as merchandise in and of itself. Given that the crown's involvement in the development of Paris through most of the eighteenth century was limited to the construction of a few royal places, Coquery argues that nobles' residential mobility, their decisions regarding living patterns, and their real estate investments underlay many of the private initiatives that modified the urban design of Paris in this period. A decade by decade comparison of the addresses of court nobility as listed in the *Almanach royal* between 1700 and 1790 (approximately 530 people) shows the nobility to have been a nomadic and unstable population. Fifty-five percent of the nobles moved two times in this ninety-year period, and of these, 60% moved between three and seven times. But where were nobles moving? The *Almanach* reveals the pull of the west. The king's move to Versailles stimulated a large migration of court nobles from the once fashionable eastern neighborhoods of Paris, such as the Marais, to the city's western quarters in the first three decades of the century. By the 1730s, an imbalance between eastern and

western Paris was established, and the city was oriented along an east-west axis -- not the river axis -- because nobles frequently moved back and forth across the river. The Saint-Germain-des-Pres quarter reigned supreme, for 70% of all nobles lived in this quarter at one time or another. A second trend saw the push of nobles into the northern and western *faubourgs* (Chaussee d'Antin, Roule, Ville-l'Eveque, and others), which resulted in a redrawing of the boundaries of Paris.

Flexible property holding was necessary for a court nobility that was highly mobile, always seeking more prestigious property, and frequently in debt. Nobles had little, if any, attachment to their hotel as a "home." Instead, as chapter three shows, the hotel was at the center of a dynamic real estate market in the eighteenth century and was valued for its commercial use. Hotels were frequently bought and sold to increase or reduce deficits. Nobles, among other elites, were active participants in land speculation, especially in the northern districts of Paris, where ecclesiastical and seignorial properties were transformed into marketable real estate. Additionally, renting was a frequent form of property holding. The fact that renting was common even among the highest-ranking nobles indicates that it was by no means a demeaning practice. Instead, Coquery suggests that renting offered several advantages: it gave the socially ambitious noble flexibility of movement and the liberty to shift residences according to his rank. These claims could have been fortified with a discussion of the external appearances and interior layouts of these hotels to illustrate how variations in the architectural programs corresponded to social distinctions. Leasing also had financial advantages, and given the high rents in Paris, provided a sure profit. It was not unusual for a noble family to rent their hotel to another family, while themselves leasing another house. In more drastic cases, some nobles transformed their hotels into rental housing that could accommodate a family on each floor; in these cases, the hotel lost its original function as a noble residence

and sheltered, from top to bottom, a range of social groups. Coquery's approach in these three chapters, and indeed, in the book as a whole, effectively demonstrates the fluidity between urban spaces and domestic spaces. Rather than isolating the residence from the larger urban context, the book intelligently exhibits how domestic space was incorporated into the evolution of the city and similarly, how shifts in residential spaces produced a new urban geography.

The second and third chapters of part one turn to the social history of consumption as it was manifested in the economic relationship between ambitious court nobles and merchants who sold unique and fashionable objects. While these chapters are quite engaging and skillfully presented, they are rather discordant with the rest of the book since space drops out of the analysis. Coquery's discussion in these two sections gives readers a good sense of the symbiotic relationship that existed between court nobles and merchants: the two groups were linked to each other through the trade in luxury objects, and each in their own way was both powerful and powerless. Nobles, for their part, were entangled in a rather vicious system of consumption that used distinctive objects --distinctive in cost, beauty, and exclusivity -- to declare their preeminence and difference from other social groups as well as other nobles. A court noble was constantly compelled to maintain the delicate balance between innovation and emulation, creating a style worthy of imitation, while simultaneously guarding his or her unique style lest it become too banal. Court nobles' perpetual hunt for creative objects and attention to newly evolving styles created a pivotal role for merchants, as is shown in chapter two.

Coquery depicts these *marchands* not as victims of nobles' capricious demands, but as savvy and manipulative actors in the luxury market who created desire and seized upon nobles' search for the unique. Merchants employed various techniques to attract numerous court families

to their business. To have one's merchandise approved by a member of *les grands* was a surefire route to success. The most successful merchants were specialists with particular technical skills; those in overpopulated sectors attempted to offer exclusive and innovative products, like the scarf merchant who sold silk scarves with gold embroidery (p. 91). Creativity and invention were the keys to a merchant's success, but a bit of advertising did not hurt either. Much of this chapter is therefore dedicated to showing how, in the last third of the eighteenth century, merchants increasingly employed a variety of publicity techniques. Merchants used shop signs, placards, ornamented bills, and the multi-page prospectus to promote their associations with the royal couple, court, or academies, and to tout their wide assortment of original and reasonably priced merchandise.

On the other hand, merchants could suffer from their own success when nobles fell into debt and bankruptcy, as they frequently did. Chapter three looks at nobles' principal sources of income and the various financial strategies they employed to maintain such high levels of spending. Credit and loans, for example, had few pejorative associations but were normal modes of transaction and negotiation. Coquery also provides an interesting discussion of the tactics that nobles used to avoid paying merchants: delaying payment as long as possible, turning to numerous suppliers to avoid extraordinary bills with any one person, haggling over the details of bills (which was not too difficult, since bills often covered four or five years of transactions), or denying purchases altogether. It took, on the average, twelve years for a merchant to be reimbursed for his services.

As these two chapters demonstrate, urban space is not given even treatment throughout the book, and the spatial analysis emerges more clearly in some chapters than in others. It is not always clear where the emphasis is to lie in *L'hotel aristocratique*. At times the work seems to

want to teach us about consumption through the study of space and geography, yet at other times the concern appears to be that of learning about urban spaces and the hotel through a study of consumption. While these two objectives are compatible, they manifest the tendency of this work to cover many interesting issues, but at the risk of losing coherence and focus. The writing could also be a bit more economical at times, for the author often digresses or restates the findings of previous studies without using them to advance her argument (for example, the discussion of the luxury debates or that of Orientalism and Anglo-mania, both in I.2). In some places, the detail-heavy discussion makes for tedious reading.

The second major critique concerns that which is missing: a larger historical contextualization of the study. While the spatial evolution of Paris over the eighteenth century is very well demonstrated in the book, it is less clear if and how consumption patterns changed. Since the book spans the entire eighteenth century and includes the early years of the French Revolution, the reader might ask how court nobles' use of objects and property changed, and furthermore, how these changes related to shifts in the social and political realms, such as the rise of a non-noble elite that emulated court nobles' consumption habits. The state is also absent from this story, despite the fact that the king and especially the queen are noted to have been the supreme arbiters of style (p. 93).

The first critique raised above, however, also speaks to one of the strengths of the book, that is, the admirable research Coquery has completed. The work pulls together a wide variety of scattered sources -- bills, account books, family papers, travelers' accounts, maps -- to accomplish the challenging tasks of capturing the daily and active exchanges between nobles and merchants and of documenting the process of acquisition. Throughout the book, Coquery remains very conscious of her methodology and remains candid about the

strengths and limitations of her sources. At the end of *L'hotel aristocratique* is a 138-page appendix that includes helpful supplementary charts that break down much of the research presented in the text. Most useful to readers will probably be the numerous, readable maps that track nobles' movements within Paris. Curiously missing from the collection is a map of eighteenth-century Paris labeled with principal quarters and streets. Cross-references in the text to specific documents in the appendix also would have been handy.

The above critiques should not detract from the fact that this is a carefully researched and detailed book that will not only ease the imbalance between studies of nineteenth-century Paris and eighteenth-century Paris, but will be appealing to social, urban, and architectural historians alike.

NOTES

[1]. For this perspective, and though he was not French, the touchstone is Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

[2]. Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment*, trans. by William Doyle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53-59.

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