

A SENSATIONAL ECONOMY:  
LUXURY, ART, AND THE ORIGINS OF THE FACTORY SYSTEM

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This paper charts an alternative historical narrative of the drawn-out contention among eighteenth-century thinkers known as “the luxury debate.” From the 1750s onwards, the consumer boom responsible for much of England’s economic growth reached revolutionary proportions. The onset of this “consumer revolution,” as many political theorists and intellectual historians have observed, sparked a wave of conflicting ideas on the virtues and vices cultivated by luxury—its economic benefits and social detriments to the individual, the public, and the state. Yet, as I argue below, consumerism animated discourses and practices that transcended political economy, or rather connected it to the simultaneous emergence of modern aesthetics, the fine arts, and the factory system.

While political theorists have touched on virtually every aspect of luxury as an idea in modern economic discourse, they have seldom probed its relation to the complex of interconnected, simultaneous transformations in aesthetic theory, modern art, and the capitalist labor process. This paper seeks to address this lacuna by earmarking luxury’s place within a network of modern developments that cut across the histories of capitalism, aesthetics, and art. I pursue this by, first, reading David Hume’s defense of luxury, published from 1752 to 1777, in the context of his political economy *and* aesthetic theory. I argue that, for Hume, luxury’s promises of pleasure, happiness, and sensuous gratification were strictly contingent on a specific organization of production characteristic of the factory system. In short, Hume’s vision of a developed commercial society lured by commodity fetishism and material desire was the *fait accompli* of capitalist modernity. That is here a kind of spark meant to unchain a succession of cultural, aesthetic, and economic developments that were either imminent or already underway.

In the second half of the paper, I probe the work of the English ceramics manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood as an illustration of how Hume’s projections played out historically from the late 1760s to the mid 1790s. I suggest that Wedgwood’s innovations in industrial production were largely animated by his artistic ambition to produce vases whose elegance, beauty, and public reception elevated them to the status of art, consequently absolving his reputation from the stigma associated with ceramic craft. In attending to this goal, Wedgwood transformed an artisanal apparatus of production by imposing stricter divisions of labor, scaling output, streamlining manufacturing, and ultimately veering legions of artisans toward his factory. Moreover, in assailing the independence of artisans and ultimately recasting their status as industrial workers, Wedgwood’s factory inadvertently advanced the goals of a modern art system championed by institutions such as the Royal Academy and figures like Joshua Reynolds whose project to safeguard the fine arts rested in part on raising the practice of painters, architects, and sculptors above the domain of handicraft. As Wedgwood’s “factory town” engulfed the traditional pottery industry, it gradually converted scores of artisan potters into menial industrial workers, accordingly advancing the agenda of a modern ideal of art that depended in part on figuring artisanal labor as the waged, mechanical ‘Other’ against which artistic labor was defined as liberal, creative, and free.