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Review Essay

Georgian Britain: Modernity and the Middle Classes

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Georgians Revealed: Life, Style and the Making of Modern Britain, an exhibition held at the British Library, 8 November 2013 – 11 March 2014. Accompanying book by Moira Goff, John Goldfinch, Karen Limper-Herz and Helen Peden, with an introduction by Amanda Goodrich (London: British Library, 2013). Pp. 168. £20 (paper), £30 (cloth)

Georgians Revealed, an exhibition held at the British Library in London, offers a lively perspective on the cultural history of Britain between 1714 and 1830. Drawing mainly from the Library's awesome bibliographic holdings, it is especially strong on the literate culture of the period, though it also displays objects – clothes, porcelain, musical instruments – from the Museum of London, the Victoria and Albert Museum and other private and public collections. Furthermore, the accompanying book offers over two hundred full-colour illustrations, making the exhibition a valuable teaching and research resource even at remote distance. *Georgians Revealed*, does, however, concentrate explicitly on middle-class experiences and concerns; whether this can be equated straightforwardly with 'Georgian life' or the coming of 'modernity' is a matter for debate.

The exhibition frames itself as an investigation of the 'unprecedented economic, social and cultural changes' in eighteenth-century Britain. The guide leaflet dutifully notes the new constitutional monarchy, military successes, growth in overseas trade and domestic manufacturing, improvements in the transport network, and the expansive shopping, fashion,

entertainment industries. The exhibition is, however, principally interested in the last of these topics: the Georgians' legacy to the contemporary world turns out to be a 'consumerist culture that we can recognise today'; a relentless pursuit of acquisition and display which 'enriched the lives of a growing middle class' and 'helped to shape modern Britain'.¹

The exhibition contains four overlapping sections. The first, 'Public Places, Private Spaces', concentrates on architecture, interior design, and the social activities of the home. This grouping usefully collapses distinctions between public display and the cultivation of the private self: visitors can examine polite letters alongside the conduct manuals which directed them; and porcelain next to pamphlets celebrating (and satirising) tea-drinking culture. These arrangements help to question Romantic notions of discreet selfhood, instead showing the performative nature of private actions, even the socially-constructed nature of privacy itself. There are some unexpected and productive connections. One display discusses the Burkean sublime as an influence on conceptions of landscape and gardens, before showing wallpaper bedecked with natural patterns. In this way, some of the key conceptual developments of the period – for example, an interest in the aesthetic sensibilities of the natural world – are shown to have been packaged for tightly commercial reasons. Importantly, this section also draws examples from beyond London. Not only is Grand Tour transnationalism foregrounded as an important source of objects and inspiration, but the exhibition also takes provincial culture seriously, and prevents London from acting as a proxy for the experiences of the whole country.

The second section, 'Buying Luxury, Acquiring Style', deals with fashion and shopping. The displays texts argue for the emergence in this period of many key components of consumer culture: spacious shops, advertising, sales catalogues, fashion magazines. There are some witty layouts: Georgian dresses on mannequins are presented in a cabinet with a transparent back, allowing one to observe other exhibition-goers as they continue round the

displays. By encouraging visitors to look past the objects and watch other people engaged in acts of looking, the exhibition makes one complicit in the fashionable rituals of furtive scrutiny and judgement. The ironies of fashion are also well-emphasised, especially how innovation is set within the often conservative frameworks of socially-acceptable appearance and behaviour. Strangely, despite some brief allusions to the 'dark side of consumerism', there is little mention of some important components of consumer culture: industrialisation, slavery, and imperial markets are briefly referenced, or are buried in euphemistic language ('Britain became wealthy through trade', [p.55]). The accompanying book does mitigate this a little with more extended discussions, but these are surely central components in the story of modern consumption and merit greater prominence.

The third section, 'Pleasures of Society, Virtues of Culture', discusses key facets of the burgeoning leisure industry: theatres, museums, sport, dancing, and tourism. Again, the exhibition is outstanding in showing how crazes for novelty – from spectacular fireworks to the latest celebrities – are structured by sets of conventions which dictate even supposedly spontaneous emotions of amazement or outrage. Indeed, codification plays a crucial role in the organisation of leisure – from elaborately complex dances to the regulation of spectator sports. The fourth section, however, is perhaps the most intriguing. Visitors step onto a giant version of Richard Horwood's map of London (1792-99), an extraordinary document which manages to depict every individual building in the city. On the surrounding walls are captions and photographs of important locations in both Georgian and modern London: Covent Garden, Bloomsbury and so on. The guide leaflet even includes a short walk to Lincoln's Inn Fields, pointing out the eighteenth-century buildings and other sites of interest – an especially apposite invitation given the rising popularity of tourism in the period. Superficially, this shows that Georgian architecture and activities remain integral to our experience of the modern city. But it also encourages viewers to see contemporary London

itself as an extension of the exhibition, and to plot their own routes through the archives of the built environment.

This is a truly inspired way to send visitors out from the museum and back to the contemporary world. In other respects, however, the exhibition is a little hampered by presentism. In focusing so determinedly on Georgian consumerism as a forerunner of today's lifestyles and concerns, it perhaps offers a rather dispiriting vision of contemporary Britain as a society interested mainly in shopping, spectacle and celebrity. Moreover, in assuming that these are the Georgian qualities that we can best 'recognise today', it sometimes adopts partial or uncomplicated positions on the period itself. Except for a few pages in the book (p. 19-22, 140), eighteenth-century debates about the dangers of luxury and extravagance are submerged from view. Overall, the exhibition often presumes a direct correspondence between consumption and social acclaim, whereas close reading of individual captions hints at more subtle picture. A display about pleasure gardens, for example, talks about 'fashionable but not respectable' patrons, a phrase which implies fascinating and under-explored tensions between high fashion and developing ideas about social and moral acceptability. There are also broader absences. Outside of Amanda Goodrich's introduction to the volume, there is almost no mention of religion, high politics or military conflict; and restrained references to the Enlightenment, empire, industry, or gender roles. Clearly, the exhibition cannot offer a complete survey of the period, but some of these topics are directly relevant to the chosen focus on leisure and consumption. This makes their relative absence keenly felt – especially given the ambitious subtitle: 'the making of modern Britain'.

Georgians Revealed is also overwhelmingly concerned with middle-class culture. This is not necessarily a criticism: part of the declared argument is to show the rise of the middle classes, as well as their role in both economic growth and the 'emerging concepts of taste and politeness'. But there is little acknowledgement of a world beyond the environs of

refinement: poverty, for example, is mentioned only in the context of charity. Instead, the emphasis is on incremental advancement of ‘new levels of sophistication and politeness’, essentially in emulation of ‘a small but still powerful elite’. This lends the exhibition an underlying conservatism: rather than remaking the modern world as creators, products and beneficiaries of new wealth and ways of thinking, the middle classes are merely copyists of their betters, who lurk behind the scenes setting trends and dispensing judgement. Clearly, this is ground for rich historiographical debate, but by focussing so resolutely on the middle classes gazing at the aristocracy, the exhibition discounts recent perspectives on the raucousness and invention of eighteenth-century popular cultures.²

Georgians Revealed, then, is a well-executed, engaging, and imaginatively presented exhibition. Its problems stem, in part, from the ambitious inclusion of ‘life’ and ‘modernity’ in its remit; any exhibit attempting to cover these expansive subjects is bound to be guilty of some omission. But as an exploration of eighteenth-century upper-middle-class life, it is entertaining and insightful. Best of all, the gorgeously-produced and copiously-illustrated volume is a valuable resource for historians of the period’s material and literate cultures.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise specified, quotations are from the ‘Exhibition Guide’ leaflet (London: British Library, 2013). The leaflet reproduces text from the main exhibition display captions.

² For example, Vic Gatrell, *The First Bohemians: Life and Art in London’s Golden Age* (London: Allen Lane, 2013); Jerry White, *London in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Bodley Head, 2012).