The Language of Success: Marketing and Distributing Semi-luxury Goods in Eighteenth-century Paris

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Abstract

With recourse to two main sources, trading almanacs and ledgers, this article is intended to establish the crucial role played by eighteenth-century
Parisian shopkeepers in accelerating new modes of consuming. The uniqueness of Paris as a market rested on the strong influence of the court. Craftsmen and shopkeepers knowingly exploited the rule of distinction borne by their clients and invented novelties and launched fashions capable of enticing them. Their advertising thus focused on a multi-faceted notion of quality: quality as it related to the shopkeeper, to the consumer, to the shop and to the products. Always on the lookout for novelty, aristocrats were the great suppliers of quality goods. Invariably short of cash, they used such goods as a means of payment to tradesmen, who stood at the centre of a triple market, made up of new and second-hand goods and those sold on credit. High quality and imitation, new and old: shopkeepers used a wide qualitative vocabulary to attract customers. This is how the semi-luxury market developed also among the less affluent. Thus, apparently archaic practices such as barter were in fact used to promote a new market, a semi-luxury market, and are essential to understanding the eighteenth-century consumer explosion.

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