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Joan DeJean, *The Age of Comfort: When Paris Discovered Casual and the Modern Home Began*. New York, N.Y.: Bloomsbury Press, 2009. 295 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$18.48 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13:978-1-59691-405-6; \$10.88 U.S. (pb). ISBN-10: 160819230X.

Review by Kathryn Norberg, University of California Los Angeles.

What is the most enduring legacy of the eighteenth century? Newton's natural philosophy? Adam Smith's economics or the French Revolution? In *The Age of Comfort*, Joan DeJean offers a very different answer: the upholstered sofa. "Sofa style," she argues, was at the cutting edge of a "comfort revolution" which began in 1670 and culminated around 1770. This revolution in style and manners created a "blueprint for modern living" (p. 2), a new way of furnishing, gesturing and dressing that endures even today. *The Age of Comfort* explores this "revolution" with the help of prints, paintings, museum furniture collections and published sources and takes the reader on a tour of just about every aspect of material life in old regime France. Domestic architecture, bathtubs, flush toilets, fireplaces, little tables, beds, dresses, fabrics and, of course, the aforementioned sofa are the subjects of individual chapters in which innovations in French design and *savoir vivre* are vividly described.

According to DeJean, the word "comfort" first appeared in the late seventeenth century as did the need for privacy and ease, as well as a preference for the casual. When DeJean's story begins, the court was the very height of formality and lavish display. "Magnificence" she writes, characterized the royal style--but not for long. The "comfort revolution" was, DeJean asserts, "a palace revolution" (p. 2). Comfort's earliest promoter was Madame de Montespan who furnished her own quarters with "comfort" furniture and lounged about in voluminous robes designed to hide her royal pregnancies. Montespan's successors as royal mistress feature prominently in *The Age of Comfort*, with Pompadour receiving special attention. Her lover, Louis XV, also appears as a design innovator devoted to privacy and of course, comfort.

The impact of comfort on architecture is the first and longest chapter in *The Age of Comfort*. DeJean here describes Blondel's approach to the distribution of rooms. "For the first time," she writes, "people believed that certain functions should be carried on in solitude...[so]...limited access" was created through hallways and smaller spaces (p. 6). The new privacy facilitated "an area of private life that people everywhere still consider somehow particularly French: seduction" (p. 61). Changes in the bedroom abetted this new development with the ceremonial bed retreating in favor of the alcove where love was better served. Seat furniture, however, receives both the most attention and helps DeJean make the most convincing case for "the comfort revolution." She ultimately devotes three chapters to the "easy seat," by which she means upholstered sofas, *canapés*, *bergères*, *chaises longues* fitted with cabriolet legs, upholstered backs, and arm rests. In the seventeenth century, the "power seat" had prevailed. It was an upright chair with hard wood seats and a stiff, minimally upholstered back. During the Regency, the cabriolet leg, upholstered back, and arm rests appeared. The grand theorist of the chair was the cabinetmaker André-Jacob Roubo. His extensively illustrated, four-volume *L'Art du menuisier* (1769-1775) is one of the neglected delights of the late eighteenth century.

Comfort also influenced dress and gesture and De Jean devotes a chapter to "dressing for comfort." Again her story begins in the palace but this time it is the loose, unstructured *manteau* or mantua that triumphs over "formality" in the form of the stiff *grand habit*, the ceremonial dress required of women in the presence of the king. Elisabeth Charlotte Duchess of Orléans, the letter-writer known to the world

as Liselotte, complained that the *grand habit* was uncomfortable, binding arms and leaving shoulders bare to the cold. Court women preferred the mantua which was more loosely draped and covered the neck and arms. It also allowed variety of style and showed fabrics to great advantage. In the eighteenth century, the *robe de chambre* or informal dress also appeared and challenged ceremonial dress. Again, the queen—in this case the retiring Maria Leszczyńska—championed the new informality, making the palace the birthplace of “casual,” at least in dress.

Fabrics were important in these developments and DeJean devotes a chapter to changes in pattern and color that produced the bizarre silks of the turn of the century and the Indo-Persian cotton prints of the later eighteenth century. Lighter and more fluid than the old velvets and brocades, cotton allowed movement and brought about the rise, DeJean claims, of the “comfortable body.” She devotes a chapter to this “modern body” and it is the most innovative in the book, going as it does beyond descriptions of furniture and clothing to consider the gesture and movement produced by new styles. DeJean uses paintings—particularly those of Watteau—to show that lounging on the grass, or just lounging, replaced the strict posture required at Versailles. Watteau may be a problematic choice. No artist has been so variously interpreted and or so closely associated with formal French dance.[1] But DeJean is to be commended for showing that furniture shapes bodies and produces new, perhaps more casual, ways of being.

“Casual” defined French *l’art de vivre* and therefore civilized manners. The French, DeJean concludes, invented “civilization” and offered it to the rest of the world where it quickly triumphed. From England to Virginia, people embraced comfort along with civilization, that is French manners. “The *Encyclopédie* was by its very nature,” DeJean writes, “on the same wave length as the creators of comfort” (p. 231). “There you have it,” proclaims DeJean in her final chapter, “the union of philosophy and furniture, of Enlightenment and comfort, the belief that as a part of the same civilizing process, Europeans had become both more rational and more casual.... France,” DeJean exults, “had produced the first modern civilization, the first civilization ever to be referred to by that newly coined word (civilization), because the French had taught their fellow Europeans simultaneously how to enlighten their minds and how to make their bodies more comfortable” (p. 235).

But, alas, backsliding occurred shortly thereafter, right in comfort’s birthplace, Paris. The French Revolution undermined comfort by sending the wealthy into exile and turning their private homes into public buildings. Then came the low point, the nineteenth century, when the corset reasserted its rule and indoor plumbing all but disappeared in the housing boom (p. 235).

Despite its far-reaching arguments, *The Age of Comfort* has little scholarly apparatus. Rationed footnotes—one per page—and no discussion of the literature suggests that DeJean has aimed her book at a general reader. Her last book, *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour* clearly sought a popular readership.[2] But *The Age of Comfort* is more subdued and serious in tone. Still, DeJean says nothing about similar scholarly works. She is not the first person to write a history of comfort, taste, domestic space, privacy, or furniture.[3] But these authors and their interpretations are never mentioned, much less discussed, in *The Age of Comfort*.

Consequently, the reader is left to his own devices when it comes to assessing the novelty of *The Age of Comfort*. Much looks familiar: DeJean’s description of the evolution of furniture adheres to the standard narrative created by Whitehead, Thornton, Girouard or Eleb-Vidal to name but a few who have discussed the eighteenth-century domestic interior.[4] Her contention that privacy appeared in the eighteenth century will not surprise anyone. But her assertion that “casual” prevailed as well may raise eyebrows. “Casual” is a confusing and ambiguous word. What DeJean appears to mean by it is the rejection of Versailles-style etiquette and decoration, in favor of other alternatives (pp. 13-14). There is

no question that many Parisians abandoned red brocades and uncomfortable stools in favor of pastel hues and deep sofas. But does that make their interiors casual? To me, casual implies not just informality but the suspension of rules and the triumph of spontaneity as well as improvisation. Eighteenth-century French interiors did not depend on the Versailles aesthetic, but they were still governed by notions of symmetry and unity of color which gave them a similar look. Mirrors hung over fireplaces, sofa and chairs were of identical style and fabric, walls and “seats” were upholstered in the same material, and clocks and porcelains sat on mantles.[5] Because of these rules, eighteenth-century interiors were predictable and legible and elite Parisians could navigate them with ease (to use a favorite DeJean expression). Structure, rules and clear conventions—formality—persisted, but in a new form that set the stage (I would argue) for less hierarchical kinds of social interaction.

An important innovation in *The Age of Comfort* is DeJean’s emphasis on science and technology as a motor for change in the decorative arts. Unlike previous authors, DeJean pays special attention to advances in technology that produced changes in interiors and increased comfort. Thanks to *The Age of Comfort*, we learn of Nicolas André de Boisregard who wrote the first treatise on the preservation of the human skeleton, *Orthopedia* (1741); Nicolas Gauger, whose *Mécanique du feu* (1713) changed fireplace design to diminish smoke and improve health through more even heating; and the cabinetmaker Charles André Roubo, who insisted that chairs have good back support and promote correct posture. The comfort revolution, we learn, owed a great deal to the scientific revolution and the eighteenth century’s promotion of technology.

Is DeJean’s comfort revolution convincing? One might prefer closer links to the Enlightenment and an examination of the social institutions that encouraged comfort. Some readers probably need reminding that the comfort revolution was limited to a privileged minority who led well-cushioned lives thanks to the hard labor of their inferiors. But mainly the comfort revolution could use some qualification. The old Versailles aesthetic waned, but the need to establish social position and display rank did not disappear. Did the easy seats need gilded and sculpted frames to be comfortable? Did expensive painted silk upholstery make them easier on the back? Were tables more useful when made of exotic hardwoods? Eighteenth-century decorative arts had multiple functions, some new, some old. While not magnificent in the same way as Louis XIV’s Versailles, eighteenth-century French interiors were still luxurious and very conspicuously so.[6]

Some observers can see little other than ostentation and expense in the glittering interiors of eighteenth-century France. At a conference several years ago, I saw a distinguished historian of material culture physically recoil when an image of an elaborate eighteenth-century French writing desk appeared on a screen. The audience composed principally of historians of colonial America was similarly appalled. Here was aristocratic privilege in material form, an obscene display of gilt, inlaid ebony and sculpted hard woods that cried out for a revolution! DeJean provides a needed corrective to such a view. She is the unabashed promoter of all things French and an enthusiastic advocate of eighteenth-century decoration. Far from recoiling, she “literally sinks to her knees in admiration” before a particularly fine Regency chair (pp. 128-129). While one may find the case for the comfort revolution overstated, *The Age of Comfort* brings the much maligned decorative arts into the historical mainstream and demonstrates their centrality to eighteenth-century history. And DeJean is not wrong to praise the enduring influence of the sofa. Enter any furniture store, upscale hotel, or even the trendy Urban Outfitters boutique and there you will see, considerably altered but recognizable nonetheless, the descendant of those easy seats praised by DeJean and produced nearly three hundred years ago by gifted Parisian artisans and their elite customers.

NOTES

[1] On Watteau's use of formal French ballet, see Sarah R. Cohen, *Art, Dance, and Body in French Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[2] Joan DeJean, *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

[3] Among the most pertinent works are Jean-Pierre Goubert, ed., *Du luxe au confort* (Paris: 1988); Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Michelle Perrot, *Histoire de chambres* (Paris, 1999); Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, eds., *Histoire de la vie privée*, vol. 3 (Paris: 1986); and John Whitehead, *French Interiors* (London: Laurence King Publishers, 1992).

[4] John Whitehead, *French Interiors*; Peter Thornton, *Interior Décor: The Domestic Interior 1620-1920* (London: Seven Dials Press, 2001); Mark Girouard, *Life in the French Country House* (New York: 2000); Monique Eleb-Vidal with Anne Debarre-Blanchard, *Architectures de la vie privée: maison et mentalités, 17-19ième siècles* (Brussels: Archives de l'architecture moderne, 1989).

[6] So strict were these rules that one contemporary English observer found all French rooms to look the same. See Mimi Hellman, "The Joy of Sets: The Uses of Seriality in the French Interior," in Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg, eds., *Furnishing the Eighteenth-Century: What Furniture Can Tell us about the European and American Past* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 129-152.

[6] The same could be said of clothing. John Styles argues that the adoption of cotton had nothing to do with health or comfort as historians long imagined, but rather stemmed from the superior ability of cotton to hold expensive dyes. Here again, the look-- not the feel--inspired a change with far reaching consequences. See John Styles, *The Dress of the People* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).

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