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Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001. xiii + 321 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$45.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-520-22529-5.

Review by Victoria Thompson, Arizona State University.

Lisa Tiersten's *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France* examines the late nineteenth-century debate over the meaning and consequences of an expanded consumer market in fashion and interior *décor*. This debate took place within the context of attempts to solidify, both politically and culturally, the Third Republic, uncertainty about France's international economic position, and concerns about class relations and democratization. Critics and proponents alike of this expanded consumer market linked consumerism and its consequences to these broader questions, while focusing their attention on the department store and the female consumer. In the course of this debate, a new vision of the relationship between the market and society was elaborated, one that Tiersten calls "marketplace modernism." This model attempted to resolve perceived conflicts between democracy and hierarchy while potentially offering individuals new modes of identity.

In her introduction, Tiersten lays out the parameters of her study. Her concern is with the "history of the circulation of ideas about taste and the market [...] I am primarily concerned with the market as it was imagined by the professionals who attempted to structure it, rather than as it was seen by the private individuals who participated in it" (p. 10). Her study thus focuses on the debate over consumerism as it was elaborated in the fashion press, in department store catalogues and promotional materials, in manuals of *savoir-vivre*, and in works written by critics of the expanded consumer market. The attitudes and acts of individual consumers fall outside the scope of her study.

One of Tiersten's central themes is an exploration of taste as a "regulatory social force" (p. 10). Taste, long understood as a trait inherent in members of the aristocracy, came to be seen by some, during the Third Republic, as a quality that was accessible to all. However, although proponents of an expanded consumer market argued that all French men, and especially, women, could cultivate their sense of taste, they did not believe that taste was the same for everyone across the social spectrum. While critics of an expanded consumerism argued that allowing all social classes equal access to fashion and interior design would inevitably lead to a decline in national taste, even supporters proclaimed that not all tastes were the same, nor could all tastes be developed to the same degree. The aesthetic sensibility of the lower-middle-class housewife could not be expected to match that of the *grande bourgeoisie*, yet both were equally valid, and, most importantly, both stemmed from an inherent aesthetic sensibility increasingly associated with French nationality. Taste, Tiersten argues, thus functioned as a quality that could both unify and differentiate. From this perspective, Tiersten's study provides a detailed historical example of the way in which aesthetic sensibilities could be used to define social "distinction." [1]

In the first section of the book, Tiersten analyzes the arguments made by critics of the expanded consumer market. While Tiersten's study can be squarely placed within a growing body of work on consumerism, it also contributes to existing bodies of scholarship on both cultural attitudes toward the

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market more generally, and on *fin-de-siècle* fears of urbanization and democratization. Thus, as Tiersten's work makes clear, critics of an expanded market in fashion and home *décor* participated in larger social debates concerning the market and modernity. They argued, for example, that the emergence of a mass market in consumer goods threatened French aesthetic superiority and undermined social stability. As production for a mass market took on increasing importance, they expressed concern that a proliferation of cheap goods of inferior quality that were modeled after the fashions of the upper classes allowed consumers to present a false appearance which, "within the anonymous setting of the modern metropolis blurred visible distinctions between people" (p. 71). They also worried that the market encouraged self-interest, especially in women, and thus threatened the harmony of the domestic sphere. The blame for these changes fell most strongly on the department store, which made cheap goods available to a mass market, and advertising, which was charged with deadening the aesthetic sense of the French while encouraging irrational consumer desires.

The second, and longer, section of the book examines arguments in support of the expanded consumer market, and the new models of both market and self that were elaborated during this period. The division of the book into these two discrete parts tends to imply that critics and supporters were clearly divided, and yet this was not always the case. Arsène Alexandre, Marie Double, and the decorative arts reform movement, for example, appear as both critics of the department store and the female consumer in part I of the book and as their supporters in part II of the book. The exact relationship between criticism of the expanded consumer market and its defense is more complicated than the organization of the book makes it appear at first glance. Tiersten is dealing not with two separate groups of individuals but rather with two visions of the marketplace, a point that could have been made more forcefully. These two visions could, in some cases, be held simultaneously by the same people. For there is a certain consistency in the remarks of both critics and supporters, both of whom express concerns regarding class distinctions in an era of democratization, and, conversely, faith in the capacity of the aesthetic to both regulate society and promote French interests in an international arena. The model of "marketplace modernism" is in fact best understood as a product of these ambiguous attitudes toward consumerism in the sense that this model promised both democracy and distinction in the same breath. That it was produced by individuals whose livelihood depended upon the continued growth of consumerism, and yet who feared that very growth, goes a long way toward explaining why they eventually came to envision the marketplace in the way they did.

What then was this new vision of the consumer marketplace? Tiersten's discussion of this vision and of the new models of selfhood that accompanied it constitute the most compelling segments of the book. Central to this new vision was a redefinition of bourgeois style. Proponents of "marketplace modernism" argued that contrary to a long-held belief that middle-class taste was superficial and vulgar, the middle-classes could, by the late nineteenth-century, be considered to possess—at least potentially—a truly artistic and original sense of taste. This taste, or "chic," was not, proponents argued, as clearly or closely linked to the display of wealth and breeding as that of the aristocracy had traditionally been. Rather, it was the product of an innate aesthetic sensibility (increasingly linked to French nationality), cultivated through education, and used to express individual identity. Department stores, advertising, and fashion journalism played crucial roles in helping to educate consumers, aiding them in cultivating an appropriate sense of style and providing them with the items needed to express it.

A crucial component of this educational mission was the development of disinterest and rational judgement in female consumers. It had been a long-standing belief in French culture that women were particularly susceptible to temptations associated with consumerism, that they were pushed, for example, by the touch of silk to commit acts of adultery. Proponents of marketplace modernism argued that it was thus crucial that women learn to approach consumerism from a rational perspective. This rational approach to consumption included a careful analysis of prices, an assessment of the quality of raw materials used, and projections as to the likelihood of the durability of goods purchased. At the same time, proponents of marketplace modernism defined rational judgement primarily as the ability to

assess the aesthetic principles of a consumer good and place it in relation to other consumer goods to create a harmonious and meaningful whole. Rather than a dangerous pleasure, shopping became a "scientific" pastime that required "rationality, discipline, and knowledge" as well as artistic sensibility (p. 134).

For although it required discipline, the act of putting together a tasteful outfit or decorating one's home was also seen as the creative act of an "artist" who used the body and home as canvas. The modernism of proponents of the consumer marketplace was thus more akin to the 'scientific' realism of Zola than the mystical decadence of Huysmans. Women were encouraged to develop an appreciation of, and even participate in, the arts as a way to cultivate their sense of taste. However, although proponents of marketplace modernism argued in favor of women's innate aesthetic sense, they stopped short of arguing that women could create original works of artistic genius. Instead, they argued that women possessed a "talent for imitation and arrangement as opposed to genuine creative ability." Furthermore, they often treated the woman herself as "one of the objects in her artistic ensemble" (pp. 182-3).

One gets the sense that marketplace modernism benefited professionals in the fashion and interior *décor* trades more than the women themselves, although this is admittedly hard to prove with the evidence provided. The development of marketplace modernism contributed greatly to the professionalization of fashion journalism, and created a growing market for both fashion periodicals and for manuals of "*savoir-vivre*"—often written by fashion journalists—which purported to help women become the rational, artistic consumers the new market required. Proponents of this new vision also broadened the definition of art to include "store windows, fashion magazines and fashion plates and advertising images" (p. 143), thus defining those who specialized in fashion journalism and marketing as artists. Furthermore, in the 1880s and 1890s, "interior decorating came to be defined explicitly as an art of everyday life, a genuinely modern art form" (p. 150). Fashion and interior *décor* professionals may have developed the model of marketplace modernism at least in part in order to elevate their professional and cultural status. This model clearly helped fashion and interior *décor* professionals deny their own self-interest. Modernist aesthetics and new writing techniques, for example, helped the fashion magazine, "[deny] its commodity status" (p. 138).

Including the word "envisioning" in the title of the book promises an emphasis on the visual aspects of this debate. This promise is fulfilled with the inclusion of twenty well-chosen black and white illustrations. More than this, however, Tiersten's focus on the use of modernist aesthetics serves to emphasize the importance of the visual in this new vision of the market. Marketplace modernism emphasized the visual at the expense of the other senses. The works of art that consumers were to create on their bodies or in their homes were to be enjoyed primarily with the eyes. In this sense, marketplace modernism departed from earlier discourses on fashion that often emphasized touch (the feel of silk), and even sound (the rustle of skirts), as much as sight. As Tiersten writes, "looking—whether that meant browsing in the department store, looking at store windows and billboards on city streets, or sitting at home leafing through a fashion magazine or a department store catalogue—was defined as a crucial form of participation and agency in the modern market" (p. 218). This "spectacular" market can thus be seen as part of the visual culture of democracy that characterized *fin-de-siècle* Paris, as studied by Vanessa Schwartz. [2] Indeed, as Tiersten argues, the market was conceived of as an "aesthetic democracy," because everybody could share equally in its visual elements, if not in its material goods (p.219).

This apparent visual democratization was accompanied by an application to consumerism of new ideas about what it meant to understand art. Marketplace modernists participated in the aesthetic revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when they argued that taste was the ability to put objects together so as to create a pleasing ensemble, rather than the capacity for perceiving the absolute beauty of a single object. This shift was part of an attempt to "[establish] distance from the aesthetic codes of the past, in particular the neoclassical conception of absolute beauty," a concept that was often paired

with a critique of bourgeois taste as "hackneyed, imitative, and vastly inferior" (p. 159). In this sense, proponents of marketplace modernism stressed the importance of originality and individualism. Manuals of *savoir-vivre* and fashion magazines argued that women should cultivate a sense of self so as to be able to adorn themselves and their homes in an original manner.

Tiersten also argues that the fashion press developed a new concept of the self. It promoted a sense of self that was no longer understood exclusively in relational terms, as being based on concern for others (although this emphasis appears to have been re-asserted later), but rather was believed to emanate from an individual woman's experience and innate qualities. This increasingly individuated self was the starting point for consumer decisions, as female consumers were urged to choose their purchases according to whether or not they accurately reflected the identity of the consumer. This self was also visual: "the spaces, rituals and commodities of modern consumer culture offered a whole new range of possibilities for theatrical self-display and feminine posing" (p. 5). This new model of the female self was akin to the early nineteenth-century dandy, who expressed, Tiersten argues, individual identity rather than caste belonging with his clothes. In a frustratingly brief comment that deserves more development, Tiersten suggests that the marketplace participated in the "commodification of aesthetic selfhood" associated with the dandy. In so doing, "feminine identity, long associated with consumption, became ever more tightly tied to it" (p. 123).

Since Tiersten does not focus on individual consumers, it is hard to tell what impact this new model may have had on individual women. Tiersten seems to see marketplace modernism as potentially positive for women, arguing that "bourgeois women's roles as taste managers afforded them individual autonomy and agency, power and pleasure" (p. 149). Without evidence to support this claim, however, what emerges more strongly in her study are the limits that marketplace modernism placed on female autonomy and agency. For, as Tiersten repeatedly points out, the new model of identity developed by proponents of marketplace modernism remained inscribed within specific boundaries. Female consumers, for all the praise they received as individuals with an innate sense of "chic," were repeatedly told that their artistic abilities lay in the realm of arrangement, not creation, that they needed continual guidance in order to be good consumers, and that developing their sense of taste could not free them from either their social class or from their gender.

The limits of this new identity for female consumers arose out of the above-mentioned ambiguous attitudes toward the relationship between the marketplace and democracy. The *savoir-vivre* manuals, for example, "promised meritocracy in one breath, but narrowed the definition of distinction in the next. In so doing, they attempted both to gratify the bourgeois woman's aspirations to distinction and to assuage her fears about the encroachment of social inferiors" (pp. 110-11). These limits became more pronounced as time went on. At the turn of the century, female consumerism was increasingly presented within the context of domesticity. Elegance was portrayed as a domestic duty, something necessary to keep one's husband happy, while consumption was presented as an act that could solidify the bonds between husband and wife. Its ultimate goal, therefore, became less an expression of an individual sense of self and more a means to creating a happy home. Tiersten does not completely explain this transition, although she does suggest that it was a response to the potential instabilities created by the model of the female consumer as individual artist and a tactic developed to market to working-class women. One wonders also what role feminism played in both the development of the new model of female self-hood most discussed in this work, that of the consumer as independent artist, and what role anti-feminism may have played in the move away from this model.

In linking changing attitudes toward art, the market and the self, Tiersten's study offers much that is valuable. Art historians have studied the impact of the commercialization of the art market on artistic production and ideas about art in the late nineteenth century. This work offers a fascinating look into the other side of the equation, illustrating how those in commerce appropriated modernist aesthetics and theories. Tiersten also contributes to the debate over the relationship between consumerism and

female identity, wanting, it seems, to conclude that consumerism offered women agency and a sense of autonomy, yet suggesting that it ultimately may have reinforced gender norms. [3] In addition, Tiersten offers a detailed view of the marketing of fashion and interior *décor* objects at the end of the nineteenth-century, providing insight into how this marketing functioned and offering tantalizing suggestions as to how consumers may have approached and understood the consumer market, a topic that is difficult for historians to study.

Finally, Tiersten's study reminds us once again of the multiple ways in which culture and politics intersect and reinforce one another. When interior *décor* experts recommended that the female consumer "[create] a coherent whole out of disparate and seemingly incongruous elements" they were offering not only design advice, but a nice metaphor for democracy (p.170).

#### NOTES

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[2] Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[3] For a thoughtful overview of this debate, see Mary-Louise Roberts, "Gender, Consumption and Commodity Culture," *American Historical Review* 103:3 (June 1998): 817-44.

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