

French Taste, Absolutism, and Economic Competition in the Eighteenth Century

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“Il n’y a pas peut-être à présent un lieu policé sur la terre où le goût général soit plus mauvais qu’à Paris. Cependant c’est dans cette capitale que le bon goût se cultive.”¹

This analysis aims to examine through the lens of the history of consumerism the concept of a “goût français” that emerged in the last third of the seventeenth century to become in the following century a literary topos expressing the quintessence of elegance “à la française.”² France: the country that dictates good taste. This discourse still resonates today, despite the vagueness of the concept, linked to genealogy or fanciful appellations of origin, or to a retrospective reconstruction oblivious to crossovers, reappropriations and cross-fertilizations, as evidenced by a few examples from art history or economic history.

Art historian Pierre Rosenberg reminds us that Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain—today, incarnations of seventeenth-century French painting, along with the Caravaggesque Simon Vouet—were long considered “Italian” painters; it was the rediscovery of the work of the Le Nain brothers in the nineteenth century, followed by that of Georges de La Tour between the wars, that introduced the belated idea of seventeenth-century “French” painting.³ For her part, art historian Geneviève Le Duc has shown how Far Eastern aesthetics, whose imitation made the reputation of the porcelain-making industry of Saint-Cloud (1702) and Chantilly (1730), became an integral part of the “goût français” in ceramic art in just a few decades.⁴

In the field of economics, the economic historian Marco Belfanti has observed the intermingling of branded goods (which more or less began to appear in the eighteenth century), imitations and counterfeits, and puts his finger on the key issue, competition: “marked goods, imitations and counterfeits were not antithetical or in contraposition to each other, but were instead complementary and an integral part of the process of the formation of a European space of competition, through which shared market standards were shaped.”⁵ This phenomenon goes back

¹ Rousseau, *Émile*, 674.

² Three works in cultural history and art history are useful for grasping the context of the subject: Beaurepaire, *Le mythe de l'Europe française au XVIIIe siècle*; Edmond Dziembowski, *Un nouveau patriotisme français, 1750–1770*; Colin B. Bailey, *Patriotic Taste*.

³ See the interview conducted on the occasion of the creation of the Mission on Prefiguration at the Musée du Grand Siècle: <https://museedugrandsiecle.hauts-de-seine.fr/le-musee-du-grand-siecle>

⁴ Le Duc, “La manufacture de porcelaine de Meissen,” 55.

⁵ Belfanti, “Branding before the brand,” 1128.

a long way: in his article on fashion in Genoa, medievalist Jacques Heers refers to the success of counterfeit English or Florentine fabrics exported by Genoese businessmen in the 1450s, as these were of better quality and more renowned than those produced locally.⁶ The same was true of Lyon silks purporting to be Italian that were sent to Paris in the mid-1660s: “les marchands de Paris [...] obligent nos ouvriers à mettre sur leurs étoffes les planches et les marques des pays étrangers,” lamented the provost of Lyon merchants in a letter to Jean-Baptiste Colbert in 1665, two years before the minister’s ordinances on Lyon’s silk industry, the Grande Fabrique.⁷

This article, rather than taking as a starting point the writings of eighteenth-century philosophers, writers, artists, art critics or collectors who deliberated on the links between aesthetics, the judgment of reason, sensibility and the science of taste (taste being considered from the outset from the perspective of art or *savoir-vivre*), considers a more humble—even sub-literary—literature: that of the world of commerce. The information and advertisements in almanacs and the fashion press, the promotion of stores and production sites in city guides also reveal, in their own way, the mechanisms by which reputations and “good” taste were constructed. Echoing the liberal, emancipatory themes of the Enlightenment, the figure of the consumer (the word came into common usage around 1745) emerges as an autonomous subject, an educated and informed citizen, a participant in changes in taste.⁸ What commercial literature reveals is that good taste and aesthetic judgment are no longer the cultural prerogative of the court and aristocratic salons. Like a connoisseur of art, the consumer is seen as a sensitive subject, capable of judging through the exercise of taste, while the merchant is presented as an ingenious artist. Through the terms chosen in their titles and prefaces, trade almanacs delineate a privileged milieu of merchants and producer–*artistes*, and of customers who are *amateurs et protecteurs du Commerce et des Arts*.

An analysis of the texts promoting Parisian production in the latter part of the eighteenth century sheds light on a number of questions raised by this special issue: how was French taste defined and what purpose did it serve? The age-old rivalry between France and Britain, which reached new heights mid-century, even before the Seven Year’ War (1756–63), and the international surge of British power played a significant role in the French celebration of a “goût patriotique.”⁹ Beyond the leitmotif of tried-and-tested advertising rhetoric, the aim is to understand the foundations of trade discourse about the superiority and influence of French taste in Europe, and the role of Paris as an international metropolis of fashion and luxury, a label it would long retain. Central to the myth of the universality of French taste proclaimed in the trade literature are two main constructs: an idea of French elegance harking back to the Grand Siècle, and the struggle against the eternal enemy, the envied and admired Britain.

Luxury, Taste, and Absolutism: The Construction of “*élégance à la française*”

⁶ Heers, “La mode,” 1016–7.

⁷ Poni, *La seta in Italia*, 536. Belfanti gives several examples of indicating false origins for ribbons, very fashionable in the 18th century; origins that varied according to the place of sale.

⁸ Hilaire-Pérez, “Les boutiques d’inventeurs à Londres et à Paris”; Coquery, “The Language of Success.” In the fine arts, Bailey, *Patriotic Taste*, 2–3; Ray, “Talking About Art,” 531–44; Guichard, “Taste Communities,” 519–47.

⁹ Dziembowski, *Un nouveau patriotisme français*, 315–489.

The joint expansion of print and commerce led in the eighteenth century to an unprecedented boom in the business press. Trade journals, guides and almanacs, prospectuses, posters and flyers were designed to disseminate information deemed useful to consumers. Tools for urban reading, these texts burgeoned with the growth of cities and the development of trade and consumption.¹⁰ Commercial advertisements drew a picture of unanimously praised luxury “made in Paris,” but also a pronounced Anglomania (buttons, fabrics, horse-drawn carriages “made in England”) and the appeal of goods from Asia or imitations of these (paper, paintings, porcelain “from China,” “the Indies” or “the Orient”). An analysis of the (somewhat repetitive) advertising lexicon reveals five main elements: aesthetics (taste, elegance, beauty), luxury, reputation, variety, and novelty. Here is a selection of terms and phrases taken from trade almanacs from 1760–1780:

du meilleur goût; nouveau/dernier goût; avec goût; bon goût; goût exquis,
 agréable, national, nouveau
 beauté, beau
 élégance; délicatesse; aisance; grâce
 précieux; richesse; luxe
 de première qualité; excellente qualité; perfection
 réputation
 variété
 nouveauté; à la mode
 marchandises les plus nouvelles et les plus à la mode
 dans les goûts les plus nouveaux et les plus distingués; dans les goûts les plus
 recherchés
 ouvrages les mieux faits et les plus élégans
 toutes sortes d’ouvrages d’un goût et d’une élégance exquise

The concept most widely used and the most complex—taste—refers to aesthetics, in the sense of beauty. According to the *Trésor de la langue française*, taste is the “sentiment du beau, [l’]habitude du beau ou de ce qui est considéré comme tel.” It is also “le jugement en lui-même et, *p[ar] ext[ension]* l’ensemble des habitudes et des éléments esthétiques ou intellectuels choisis et constituant la mode de l’époque.”

The concept of taste is rooted in a particular history and milieu; having good taste reflects the aesthetic bias of the social elite.¹¹ The term in that epoch evoked delicacy, grace, the art of measure and balance, mirroring the qualities revered by the French aristocracy of the seventeenth century—the Grand Siècle!—in the court and salons, and by the literary circles in which the debate on taste began in the 1660s.¹² Harmony, simplicity, distinction: in other words, “le grand style” forged in the seventeenth century and disseminated both in cultural production (letters, arts, sciences) through the royal academies and salons, and in luxury goods production through the royal manufactures (Gobelins, Savonnerie, Sèvres, Beauvais, Saint-Gobain, Aubusson), of

¹⁰ Chartier and Roche, “Les pratiques urbaines de l’imprimé,” vol. 2, 521–58.

¹¹ Dens, “La notion de ‘bon goût,’” 728; Masseur, “Bon ton et bon goût ‘à la française,’” 645–58, “Enjeux franco-anglais de la distinction,” 103–17.

¹² Dens, “La notion de ‘bon goût,’” 728–9; Yim, “‘Le goût de la nation,’” 227–43; Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit*; Lathuillière, *La préciosité*.

which Colbert, following Barthélémy de Laffémas and then Cardinal Mazarin, was the maître d'œuvre.¹³ The aim was to make France a high-ranking, prestigious and attractive power in both cultural and industrial production.¹⁴

Art and production flourished, controlled by codes and standards, and granted royal freedoms, subsidies, monopolies and privileges, be it in language, the fine arts, music or dance (subject to the guidelines and directives of the academies), or industry (subject to the regulations and inspections of the manufactures). These qualities, integral to “le grand style” constructed in relation to absolutist power over the course of the seventeenth century, remained the supreme benchmark in matters of taste a century later, a taste that the commercial press helped to disseminate to a wider audience. In their discourse, the editors of the fashion journals and almanacs of the late 1780s linked elegance to taste and national “creative genius.” This “réputation,” this “grandeur,” this “grâce qu’aucun peuple ne peut imiter” or “nous disputer,” this pride, even arrogance, had its origins in Colbert’s earlier industrial policies, which promoted high quality production in line with his mercantilist principles of maximizing exports over imports. A sampling of the rhetoric from various journals makes the point clear:

les Nations heureuses et bien gouvernées ont toujours été reconnues à la commodité, à l’élégance, à la variété de leurs Meubles et de leurs Habillemens.

[...] Ce goût, le François le possède au plus haut degré¹⁵

On remarque dans tous les ouvrages qui sortent de cette Ville, ou qui en décorent les superbes magasins, une tournure neuve, une élégance dans les formes, une délicatesse dans l’exécution, l’empreinte, en un mot, d’un génie créateur qu’on ne trouve pas dans les ouvrages qui se font ailleurs¹⁶

Les ouvrages qui se fabriquent à Paris jouissent d’une grande réputation ; cette préférence leur est acquise par l’élégance des formes, le bien fini, une grace et une aisance inimitable ; aussi les étrangers en font grand cas, et il s’en fait une exportation considérable, qui est la partie la plus essentielle de commerce de

¹³ The period saw the successive establishment of the Académie Française (1635), the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (1648), the Académie Royale des Inscriptions (1663) (renamed the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1716), the Académie des Sciences and the Académie de France à Rome (1666), the Académie Royale de Musique (1669), and the Académie Royale d'Architecture (1671). The Gobelins tapestry manufacture was founded in 1601 (the workshops were grouped together by Colbert in 1662), the Savonnerie tapestry manufacture in 1650 (reorganized by Colbert in 1663), the Sèvres porcelain manufacture in 1759 (formerly the Vincennes manufacture, 1740), the Beauvais tapestry factory in 1664, the Saint-Gobain royal mirror manufacture and Aubusson royal tapestry manufacture in 1665 (pre-existing workshops that received the royal label), the Toile de Jouy manufacture in 1783 (20 years after its creation by Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf, a German-born industrialist naturalized around 1770). Privileges were always granted for a fixed period.

¹⁴ Guery, “Industrie et Colbertisme,” 297–312; Minard, “Economie de marché et Etat en France,” 77–93.

¹⁵ *Cabinet des Modes*. Passages underlined by the author of the article.

¹⁶ *Almanach général des marchands*. Passages underlined by the author of the article.

Paris.¹⁷

Dans tout ce qui concerne la mode, l'Europe est soumise à ses loix [la France]. Tout ce qui sort de ses mains, porte l'empreinte du goût et se distingue par l'élégance dans les formes, la beauté, la perfection et la variété des dessins, mais sur-tout par une grace qu'aucun peuple ne peut imiter. La manufacture des glaces établie à Paris, qu'aucune autre de l'Europe ne surpasse ; celle de tapisseries de la couronne, aussi à Paris, et celle de porcelaines, à Sève, qui n'ont point d'égaux dans l'univers ; celle de tapis de la Savonnerie que toute l'Europe admire, sont les manufactures de France, où la pompe et le luxe national se déploient avec le plus de grandeur.¹⁸

il ne faut pas perdre de vue que nous avons pour nous, en général, l'avantage du prix modéré de la main-d'œuvre, et sur-tout celui d'un goût, d'une élégance et d'une grace dans les formes, qu'aucun peuple ne peut nous disputer.¹⁹

In the same period, with the announcement of the Estates General on the eve of the Revolution, the Six Corps that made up Paris's merchant aristocracy sent a memorandum to the king in 1788 demanding representation in the future assembly in the name of the "prépondérance politique" of commerce. One passage reveals the importance of the link between politics and aesthetics, between nationalism and creation. The memorandum highlights the fundamental role of the "industrie nationale" created by Colbert in the emergence of a taste that was forged in the very development of economic nationalism:

C'est Colbert qui le premier a deviné cette prépondérance politique que le Commerce devoit obtenir un jour dans toutes les Nations de l'Europe, et qui, en la devinant, l'a fait naître ; c'est lui aussi qui a jetté dans ce beau Royaume le fondement de tous les arts, [...] ; en un mot, c'est lui, et lui seul, qui a créé notre industrie nationale toute entière. [...] Toutes les espèces de talens naquirent, pour ainsi dire, alors à-la-fois dans la Capitale, des Manufactures de tous les genres bientôt s'y éleverent ; l'industrie s'empara de toutes les matières et les féconda ; tous les métaux, tous les tissus, toutes les productions, même étrangères, acquirent entre ses mains une valeur qui étonna l'imagination même. Le goût et l'invention se disputèrent ensemble d'efforts et de recherches. La richesse des formes devint seule un art...²⁰

Anglo-French Competition and the Assertion of a "goût national": the Committed Discourse of the *Tableau général du commerce*

At the end of the 1780s, the *Almanach général du commerce* changed its editor and title (to *Tableau général du commerce*), and it turned to highlighting European production, fanning the

¹⁷ *Tablettes royales de correspondance*.

¹⁸ Gournay, *Tableau du commerce*, 281. Passages underlined by the author of the article.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 564. Passages underlined by the author of the article.

²⁰ *Mémoire présenté au Roi par les Six-Corps de la Ville de Paris*, 7–8. The Six Corps, whose order of precedence was established in 1660, was made up of drapers, grocers, haberdashers, furriers, hosiery makers and gold- and silversmiths.

flames of economic nationalism.²¹ The articles on “France” and “Paris” were an opportunity for the author, Gournay—a lawyer, man of letters and a fervent defender of Paris's luxury industry—to affirm his conception of national economic development (only the manufactures and foreign trade count) and proclaim the primacy of French production. “On [...] trouvera [dans l’article de Paris] [...] quelques réflexions qui sont propres à éclairer les Français sur la préférence trop souvent injuste qu’ils accordent aux marchandises étrangères.”²² The comments that precede the lists of Parisian merchants and manufacturers focus on the Anglo-French rivalry.

This shift in discourse, with its vindictive tone, can be explained by the context of tension between the two powers. Britain was experiencing unprecedented economic expansion, while France, which had enjoyed vigorous growth until the middle of the century, was suffering from prolonged stagnation.²³ Since 1750–60, competition with Britain had been an obsession for the trade minister.²⁴ This obsession was relayed by the state-controlled trade press, the *Gazette du commerce*, backed with a thirty-year exclusive privilege and run by editors “guidés par l’amour patriotique.”²⁵ It had the mission of promoting national production, and did so shamelessly, as illustrated by the introduction of the “Industry” section on April 30, 1763, a month and a half after the signing of the Treaty of Paris (10 Feb. 1763), which ended the Seven Years’ War while establishing Britain’s European hegemony and the fall of France’s first colonial empire.²⁶

Depuis long-tems la France solde avec ses modes l’importance des marchandises étrangères. Cette branche du commerce, que le goût et la délicatesse de la nation ont étendue jusques dans les régions les plus reculées, excite plus que jamais la jalousie de nos voisins, et mérite des encouragemens ; c’est pourquoi nous insérerons toujours avec plaisir les nouveautés en ce genre, sur-tout, lorsque la matière de ces modes sera le fruit de notre industrie, et sortira de nos Manufactures.²⁷

The notion of a “goût patriotique” affected the artistic sphere as much as it did the economic, although this turn toward a patriotic taste was not exclusively French.²⁸ Dezallier d’Argenville's *Abrégé de la vie des plus fameux peintres* (1745–52) marked the advent of recognition for

²¹ The title changed in 1789.

²² Gournay, *Tableau du commerce*, XII.

²³ Crouzet, “Angleterre et France au XVIIIe siècle,” 261–3; Lévy-Leboyer, “Les processus d’industrialisation,” 281–98; Léon, “Structure du commerce extérieur,” 415–22; Perrot, “Les concours poétiques,” 305–31.

²⁴ Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme*, 212 ff.

²⁵ *Gazette du commerce*, “Prospectus.” *Gazette du commerce*, then *Gazette du commerce, de l’agriculture et des finances* in 1765 and *Gazette d’agriculture, commerce, arts et finances* in 1769 until its disappearance in 1783. The first issue appeared on April 1, 1763. <https://dictionnaire-journaux.gazettes18e.fr/journal/0555-gazette-du-commerce>

²⁶ *Final peace treaty and alliance between Great Britain, France and Spain, signed in Paris* <https://mjp.univ-perp.fr/traites/1763paris.htm>

²⁷ *Gazette du commerce*, April 30, 1763, no. 9.

²⁸ Bleichmar, “Learning to Look,” note 9, 86.

French artists.²⁹ A year after the Treaty of Paris, the collector Lalive de Jully also asserted his “patriotic taste” for French painting.³⁰ « J’ai été étonné de voir que le goût des François, amateurs des Arts, les avoit portés à faire des collections de Tableaux étrangers [...] et que les Tableaux françois ou n’avoient point l’entrée dans leurs Cabinets, ou ne s’y trouvoient placés qu’au dernier rang.”³¹

Twenty years later, the outcome of the American War of Independence had not brought about the decline for Britain expected by Paris, and competition was intensifying. The Treaty of Paris (Sept. 3, 1783) and the Eden Agreement (Sept. 26, 1786) freed up trade, leading to a massive influx of British products from the summer of 1787 onwards: cloth, cotton, hardware, pottery, and more.³² On the French side, the agreement rekindled bitterness, jealousy and an obsession with competitiveness. The Anglophobia expressed by the editor of the *Tableau général du commerce* reflected fears of a conquering England. This explains his incessant emphasis on the superiority of Parisian production and his condemnation of fickle Anglophile consumers. In every sector, “le luxe et le goût national” prevailed over foreign production: in decorative arts, hosiery... even confectionery!

[*Goldwork and jewelry*] Tout concourt à faire rechercher l’orfèvrerie de Paris : [...] la beauté, l’élégance, la grace et la variété des dessins, la perfection de la main-d’œuvre, sont autant de causes qui lui donnent une prépondérance et une supériorité réelles sur celle des autres nations. [...] on trouve l’orfèvrerie anglaise très-belle et bien soignée, mais on lui reproche de la sécheresse et un peu de maigreur dans les dessins.³³

[*Hosiery*] Aucunes fabriques ne la surpassent [...] et si l’anglomanie, dont nous sommes plus que jamais tourmentés et dont nous ne cesserons de faire sentir le ridicule et l’absurdité, ne nous fermoit les yeux, nous nous garderions bien de tirer des fabriques de nos voisins.³⁴

[*Gilding, silver and bronze*] C’est une des parties où le luxe et le goût national se déploient avec le plus d’avantage. Paris renferme [...] des ouvrages magnifiques, et qui font [...] l’admiration des étrangers.³⁵

[*Confectionary*] Il n’y a pas de villes en Europe où les confiseurs ayent trouvé l’art de donner au sucre des formes aussi agréables et aussi variées.³⁶

Gournay’s discussion of Dauffe’s royal manufactory of “bijoux d’acier” (plated metal jewelry) is especially notable as a passionate appeal for the plating industry that was booming at the time,

²⁹ Bleichmar, “Learning to Look,” 86–7. In the second edition of the work, in 1762, the fourth volume is devoted entirely to French artists and French taste.

³⁰ Lalive de Jully, *Catalogue historique du cabinet de peinture*, 109.

³¹ Lalive de Jully, quoted in Bailey, *Patriotic Taste*, note 102, 260.

³² Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle*, vol. 3, 326. *United States of America. Treaty of Paris. September 3, 1783* <https://mjp.univ-perp.fr/constit/us1783.htm>

³³ Gournay, *Tableau du commerce*, 556.

³⁴ Gournay, *Tableau du commerce*, 578.

³⁵ Gournay, *Tableau du commerce*, 580.

³⁶ Gournay, *Tableau du commerce*, 581.

with Britain the undisputed leader. The interest of Gournay's remarks, in addition to providing details of the products on offer, lies in showing the extent to which the state remained involved in the production of luxury goods through its "encouragemens" (various forms of financial aid). With some help from industrial espionage, particularly in Birmingham, French manufacturers refined veneering and gilding techniques, lacquers and varnishes, and the use of steel.³⁷ But consumers needed to do their bit! The attack on Anglomaniacs is bitter. "Que quelques François, aveuglés par une anglomanie dont le ridicule va jusqu'à l'excès, et entraînés par un préjugé qui les rend méprisables aux yeux mêmes d'un peuple qu'ils préfèrent, condamnent, sans les avoir vus, les ouvrages de cette manufacture."³⁸

Faced with the fickleness of his fellow citizens, Gournay plays his trump card: the king's tribute to the "industrie nationale." This was a familiar argument to merchants, who were adept at attracting royal clientele in order to boost sales.

Cet établissement [...] fournit dès-à-présent tout ce qui se fabrique en acier, comme boutons, boucles de toutes espèces, épées, chaînes, plaques de ceinture, bagues, gances de chapeaux, tabatières, porte-épées, tire-bouchons, mouchettes, etc. etc. [...] Les beaux ouvrages y sont d'un fini admirable [...] on ne peut douter que cet établissement n'ait en peu de tems le plus grand succès, et ne fasse totalement tomber l'importation en France des bijoux et autres ouvrages d'acier d'Angleterre. [...] Il en sort des pièces d'un précieux qui étonne ; cet artiste estimable a [...] fabriqué un bouton d'habit qui est un véritable chef-d'œuvre, et dont plusieurs Anglois ont offert plus de trente louis [...]. [Note : Le roi qui a voulu voir cette pièce rare, en a été si satisfait qu'il en a commandé une garniture : il n'est point de moyen plus sûr pour un souverain d'encourager et d'honorer les arts. Il sera beau de voir Louis XVI vêtu de cette riche parure, rendant ainsi une sorte d'hommage à l'industrie nationale [...]]³⁹

The representation of French taste in the trade almanacs of the last third of the eighteenth century was one of elegance and perfection, seen as the expression of a nation's genius. A taste developed during the Grand Siècle in the refined milieu of the court, which functioned as a trendsetter, under the impetus of a mercantilist minister working for the grandeur of the state and the glory of the prince. It was a vision that Voltaire, who praised "le siècle du bon goût," and its "bons artistes" and "bons auteurs," would not have disavowed.⁴⁰ But while the state made good use of manufacturers to promote the luxury industry and artists to develop aesthetic standards, what the literature of commerce shows is that the merchants, for their part, used the consumer courtiers, right up to the first among them, the king and queen, as advertising stooges to sell their inventions. They didn't stay passive!

It is telling that this was a period marked by the intensification of international circulation, in a context of heightened competition. The multiple technological transfers between France and

³⁷ Hilaire-Pérez, *L'invention au siècle des Lumières*.

³⁸ Gournay, *Tableau du commerce*, 564.

³⁹ Gournay, *Tableau du commerce*, 563–65.

⁴⁰ Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*.

Britain, in particular, relied on diverse networks and loops (information, trade, family, sociability between scientists, institutional protection) that reinforced the proximity between the two countries, despite their political and economic rivalry.⁴¹ To describe the attractiveness of luxury “made in Paris”—“arts, objets les plus précieux, artistes, talents, chefs-d’œuvre”—Gournay uses the terms “émulation,” “rivalité” and “lutte perpétuelle,” keeping in mind the implacable economic competition for European leadership:

Considéré relativement aux arts, Paris est une des villes du monde qui fournissent les objets les plus précieux au commerce. Une foule d’artistes de tous genres, tant françois qu’étrangers [...] viennent de toutes parts essayer ou perfectionner leurs talents dans cette ville : l’émulation et la rivalité précieuses qui en résultent, donnent lieu à une lutte perpétuelle, et produisent chaque jour des chefs-d’œuvre qui deviennent aussi-tôt la cause ou le germe d’une infinité d’autres...⁴²

In addition to the French-English competition in craft inventiveness, what the trade literature reveals is that the famous “French taste,” an expression of national genius for those that lauded it, was in fact enriched by multiple foreign influences. Since the Middle Ages, Paris had been shaped by luxury industries such as goldsmiths, bookbinders, silk manufacturers and cabinet makers, driven by the presence of the court and aristocracy. Their rise depended to a large extent on the frequency and intensity of exchanges, the circulation and transmission of savoir-faire, and the international nature of production and trade which encouraged hybridization.⁴³ Royal manufactures depended on the importation of foreign processes and the recruitment of entrepreneurs and highly skilled foreign workers.⁴⁴ To these must be added the innumerable small structures that supported the Parisian luxury and semi-luxury trades, allowing flexibility and diversity in response to market fluctuations.⁴⁵ The resulting melting pot of various skilled workers who arrived over the centuries gave Paris an atmosphere conducive to creativity: objects, designs, materials, techniques and other innovations introduced by some were imitated, transformed and continued by others, blending profitably with local production to give rise to the legendary “goût français,” glorified by some, ridiculed by others. Or, as in the case of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, admiration and disdain could converge:

I have been running about Paris at a strange rate with my sister, and strange sights have we seen. [...] What delights me most here is a view of the magnificence often accompanied with taste that reigns in the King's palaces and gardens; for tho' I don't admire much the architecture, in which there is great irregularity and want of proportion, yet the statues, paintings, and other decorations afford me high entertainment. [...] There is here an excessive prodigality of ornaments and decorations, that is just the opposite extreme to what appears in our royal gardens; this prodigality is owing to the levity and

⁴¹ Cotte, *Circulations techniques*, 91-128.

⁴² Gournay, *Tableau général du commerce*, 551.

⁴³ Fox and Turner, *Luxury Trades and Consumerism*; Hilaire-Pérez, “Transferts technologiques,” 547–79.

⁴⁴ Minard, “Économie de marché,” 81.

⁴⁵ Crouzet, “Some remarks on the *métiers d’art*,” 277.

inconstancy of the French taste, which always pants after something new, and thus heaps ornament upon ornament without end or measure.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Alexander Pope, Letter LVII [1718]: 271–2.

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