British Art Studies

June 2020

A joint publication by

PAUL MELLON CENTRE

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

Contents

Luxury and Crisis: Redefining the British Decorative Arts

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Cite as

Iris Moon, "Luxury and Crisis: Redefining the British Decorative Arts", British Art Studies, Issue 16, https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-16/coversation

Introduction by

Iris Moon, Assistant Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This conversation piece explores the relationship between luxury and crisis. It asks: what role have objects, that have long been deemed as "superfluous", played in shaping and negotiating our political, social, and economic needs, wants, and desires, both past and present? Sconces, porcelain, upholstery, and other works of decorative arts are typically thought of as superficial things tied to elite taste, even though these "unnecessary" luxuries have permeated all classes of society. But what if aesthetic choices made in the realm of the everyday had the power to recalibrate needs and signal the urgency of our desires? Respondents have chosen one object that they view as an example of the "British decorative arts", and written short texts on the topic of luxury and crisis, with the aim of redefining the scope and parameters of the field, one object at a time.

The early impetus for this conversation piece and a forthcoming (Summer 2021) *British Art Studies* special issue on the British decorative arts stemmed from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's British Galleries, newly opened in February 2020. Their new narrative of "creativity in an entrepreneurial society" sought to explode earlier tendencies in the British decorative arts that had centered on the country house and aristocratic taste. Subsequent conversations held in 2019 with colleagues at the Yale Center for British Art and the Paul Mellon Centre recognised the limitations of the Met's new narrative, and demonstrated a mutual interest in the need to rethink the British decorative arts. However, what has more immediately shaped my thinking in 2020 around this topic is the language of crisis today. Living in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, cities have been shut down and movement limited to "necessary" ones. As non-essential sites, museums and cultural institutions, deemed luxuries that we simply cannot risk our lives for, have closed to the public. Beyond the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 and the subsequent protests against racism and police brutality in the United States, the United Kingdom, and beyond have fundamentally shaken the foundations of the museum. These events, which took place after the call for responses to this feature in *British Art Studies*, exposed the bedrock of structural racism upon which so many cultural institutions had been established. Museums are not neutral spaces. At times it takes a crisis to make that apparent.

The word crisis derives from the Greek word *krinein*, meaning to decide. We have a decision to make in understanding this moment. And while it may at first glance seem opportunistic to think of luxury and crisis in the same breath, a cursory look at the objects in the Met's British galleries proves otherwise. In fact, many of the luxuries in the gallery seem to attend to or be

accompanied by crises, economic, social, political, or artistic. For example, a seventeenth-century silver tankard was used to commemorate the Great Plague of 1665 and Fire of London in 1666 (Fig. 1). Why choose to memorialise such events on a conspicuously luxurious yet inherently unstable medium, one threatened by its easy translation into currency?
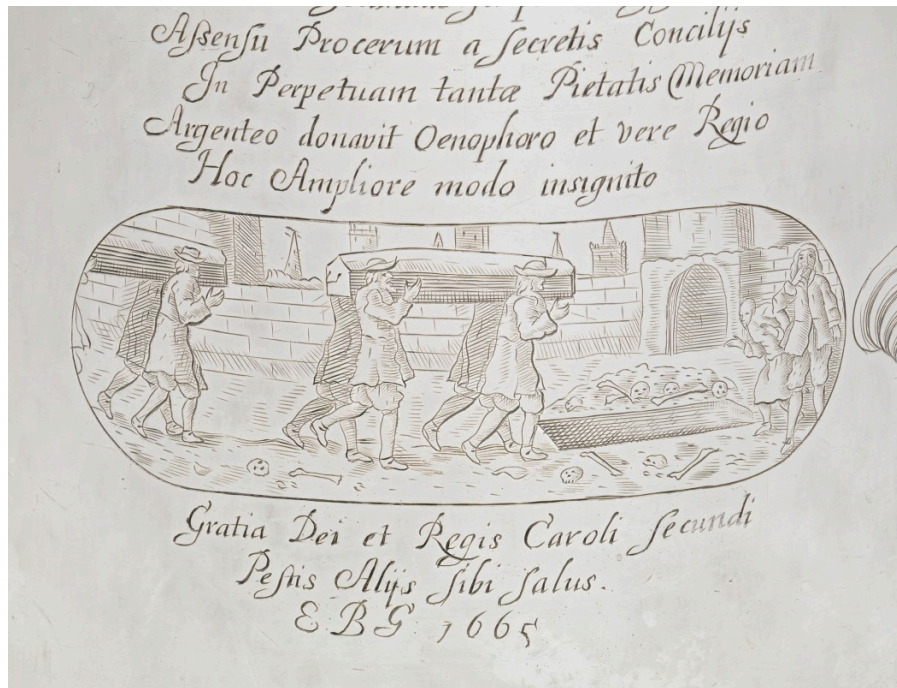

Figure 1.
Tankard engraved with scenes of the Great Plague and the Great Fire of London (detail), 1675–1676, silver, 19.1 × 23.5 × 15.2 cm, 1170.995g. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1987.54). Digital image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Henry S. Morgan, 1986 (Public domain).

Economic historians have long seen a causative relationship between luxury and crisis. In other words, too much or too little spending has adverse economic effects (depending on the thinker), while Marxist economists see crisis as built into the nature of capitalism itself. Beyond economic system builders, historical crises provided the opportunity to reconceive value systems as a whole. Communal luxury, for example, is the term that was chosen by the Paris Commune of 1871, when communards wrote a new artistic manifesto that recognised that the very idea of value had to be remade from the bottom up. Emancipated from the end goal of making a finished product judged by an aesthetic system or market separate from society, luxury, according to the artist's federation, would come from communal, mutually shared concerns, which formed the prior condition for the possibility of making art, or anything meaningful at all.

This feature invites a community of thinkers to ponder the question of luxury and crisis from a broad, diverse, and at times divisive perspective, and is intended to be open and ongoing. The point is to be as honest as possible about the conditions of crisis now and what it means to ruminate on things at a distance. For example, when you cannot enter spaces, cannot access objects, or books, or people, what kind of thinking emerges? How might such constraints lead to a different and empathetic way of considering, for example, the sorts of challenges faced by French Huguenot refugee designers arriving in seventeenth-century London without their tools, their drawings, or the right language? Alongside the decorative arts' traditional framework of taste, style, and patronage, the theme of luxury and crisis is meant to encourage reflection on thornier issues regarding: production, consumption, exploitation, exclusion, scarcity, extinction, depletion, resource extraction, recession, depression, inflation, labor, automation, protest, dissent, consent, needs, wants, and finally, desires.

Response by

Esther Leslie, Birkbeck, University of London

In a patch of London, shielded by busy roads and three railway termini, social housing was built, in the 1930s, by reforming Christians, who were eradicating the slums and had a belief in beauty for all. "Housing is not enough" was a watchword and this surplus to be added included decorative art—for once, not in wealthy London streets, but its poorest ones. On the Sidney Street Estate in Somers Town, Gilbert Bayes brought art into everyday life. Working with Royal Doulton on new procedures for polychrome salt-glazed ceramic designs, he made geometrical clusters of washing line posts, topped by finials, and illustrative roundels for the spandrels of windows. These drew on themes from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, nursery rhymes and Biblical stories.

In the centre of the estate is Bayes' clock surrounded by brightly coloured images representing the seasons (Fig. 2). It is the democratic counter-clock to Selfridge's monumental "Queen of Time", made by Bayes in gilded bronze and polychrome relief, in 1931, for somewhere economically far away. Bayes' frieze of the seasons suggests that a certain natural order is restored, with the distorting impact of slum life annulled: a rural idyll, an Arcadian ideal, brought into the city, and the rhythms of planting, harvest, feasting, and winter sheltering returned to the folk.

Figure 2.
Gilbert Bayes, Royal Doulton Ceramic clock surrounded by the four seasons and an hourglass, Sidney Street Estate, Chalton Street, Somers Town, Camden, London , early 1930s. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow

Time is there, on the clock face, the many minutes and hours of a day that must yet be spent in labouring or home-making. The clock helps standardise it all, in unfading colours. The clock is a harsh master and this one oversaw those who had no such luxury as a watch. Luxury in time for the poor is not to have too much or too little of it on your hands. Time is the measure of human labour, whose energy is extracted by production and compensated for only with the deadness of money.

Nearly everyone carries time with themselves now, in their smartphones, diminutive concentrations of technology and fantasy. These timepieces are glazed as Bayes' works are glazed, but differently, guarded by touchscreen glass. These phones are property for each of us alone, our own time, even if we remain socially calibrated, our taskmaster close to us and in our pockets.

The clock on the Sidney Street Estate has stopped. No one bothers to keep its mechanism going. It has slipped out of time. This is not the result of an explicit revolt against timekeeping—as carried out in 1830 in France, when revolutionaries ended that old history which was ticking on behalf of capital by shooting at tower clocks. This standstill of time is the negative face of

progress, or result of a loss of belief in something more for those who always have less. Social housing must suffer as little maintenance as everywhere else that once rocked lightly secured in the cradle of welfare.

The roundels on the walls, the clock, and its mythic avatars still shine brightly from the walls of the estate. They have stood the test of time—they have lasted, beautifully, even if time-telling was taken from them. Anything else that could be taken—the finials of ships, blackbirds, devils, and dragons, for one—was either smashed up by negligent builders or stolen to be sold in the top London auction houses. The smartphone witnesses that privatised consumption has become a life's work. The glaze of Bayes' works and the smartphone's glassy cover form a casing between humans and things we ourselves have made, but are alienated from when they become commodities, sold back to us. The glaze is a filter, the material sheath of the commodity fetish.

Response by

Marcia Pointon, Professor Emerita in History of Art, University of Manchester

As the coronavirus epidemic is mapped across the world, two words are repeated in different languages but across all media: "crisis" and "essential". Both are worth pausing over as we think about which objects or images museums might collect as a record of this time. If a crisis is, by definition, a turning point, how does that fit with a diachronic approach to events or an understanding of the time it takes to create an object, let alone introduce it to consumers and audiences? If we must reconsider our actions and recognise (perhaps for the first time) the interdependency and fragility of the social structure, then we are bound also to identify what is essential. Both terms have proven elastic in ways that would have intrigued Adam Smith, whose lectures "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" were published in 1759. Smith draws attention to a human inclination to admire things with disregard for their utility, which is to say their importance to the essentials of life.

Jewellery would surely rank high with modern-day commentators as a luxury with no utility value in a crisis. Many would agree with Georg Simmel (1908) that jewellery creates an extension of the personality. Whatever is recommended by "influencers", there is little doubt that wearing your diamonds for a Zoom meeting would not create the right impression as it would connote superfluity and a lack of gravitas. Nonetheless, it is true that until very recent times, wealthy Europeans would be dealing with this crisis by wearing amulets made of precious or semi-precious stones to protect against contagion. Ruby, for one, as poet Rémy Belleau explained in 1576, is so celestial that it chases away the terrors of the night and repulses the plague.

Though few in the West now believe a talisman will ward off plague, jewellery is intrinsic to crisis management for two reasons. High economic exchange value can be invested in an object of very small dimensions that may be hidden about the person. As recounted in my book, *Rocks, Ice and Dirty Stones*, a war-time bride was instructed by her serving fiancé that if a German invasion of Britain seemed imminent she should exchange the diamonds in her engagement ring for passage to New York. Jewellery may also register memory of a particular moment and, as we have seen in the pandemic, keeping a personal record has been important.

The object I have chosen to illustrate my proposition did not enable an escape but it enshrines, literally as embodiment and metaphorically as idea, the flight of the Queen of France. In this respect, it demonstrates how "crisis" when applied to anything other than a strictly pathological diagnosis is a *longue durée* fraught with loss, and leaving debris that enters chains of

ownership and material valuation. The epitome of the non-essential, this piece of jewellery, like the crisis whose story it tells, offers no certainties and no closures but rather a series of baffling possibilities.

Heart-shaped and padlocked, the locket can theoretically be opened to access the hair in the front and the inscription dated 1853 in the back (Figs. 3 and 4). A key is provided and hangs from a chain attached to a loop which would allow the owner to wear it. Less an invitation to dismantle this miniature construction, the padlock and key, along with the filigree surround and the heart shape, rather invokes emotional attachment and loyalty. The owner of such a locket becomes thereby a kind of gatekeeper to the blonde hair and a dated declaration of provenance within. We thus learn that this partly plaited and artfully arranged lock came from the head of Marie-Antoinette.

Figure 3.
Heart shaped pendant locket with a lock of hair, set under glass or rock-crystal with an inscribed card and mounted in a gold filigree setting, late eighteenth century, filigree, 4.65 cm wide. Collection of British Museum (1978,1002.1202). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Figure 4.
Heart shaped pendant locket with a lock of hair, set under glass or rock-crystal with an inscribed card and mounted in a gold filigree setting, late eighteenth century, filigree, 4.65 cm wide. Collection of British Museum (1978,1002.1202). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

It has been suggested that if indeed this is the Queen's hair (of which there can be no certainty short of a DNA test), it must have been taken before her apprehension on the 1791 flight to Varennes after which she is known to have turned white overnight. The locket may itself be late eighteenth-century craftsmanship with the inscription added later. Lady Abercorn, who is stated to have been the first owner, would have been wife of the thrice-married Marquess of Abercorn, and was probably the colourful Lady Cecil Hamilton (1770–1819 whom he married in 1792 and divorced in 1799). Since there is no record of her having visited Paris, how she acquired the locket is a mystery.

There is a tendency for each generation to regard its own crises as unprecedented. Historians know better. Albeit from different causes, the French Revolution introduced a "new normal" just as coronavirus is forecast to do. Fear of political contagion spread across Europe, and Edmund Burke spoke for many in lamenting that the age of chivalry was gone. Whether or not the hair is Marie-Antoinette's is irrelevant. This "trinket", as Adam Smith would disparagingly have described it, speaks as eloquently to crisis and a claim for what is essential as Burke's words. Three titled ladies vouchsafe for the authenticity of a relic of defunct royalty, implying bonds of gender and class that supersede generations and frontiers. A little battered and in need of a polish, it was consigned in 1978 to the British Museum where it is inscribed—the original owner might have thought defaced—with an acquisition number, secured for posterity its mysteries unsolved.

Response by

Max Bryant, Fellow, Downing College and Centre for the Study of Classical Architecture, University of Cambridge

Elizabethan hosts of luxurious dining ceremonies enjoyed forcing a test of wit on their guests. At the end of the dessert course, after each piece of fruit or small sugar sculpture had been eaten, the wooden plate, or "trencher" underneath would be turned over to reveal a composition of text and ornament. There was a different version for each diner, who would be expected to speak extempore to the assembly, reciting and discussing what they found. Their companions would then critically judge the guest on the basis of their response. A group of trenchers at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, when seen in the context of the contemporary religious crisis, presented the guest with a particularly acute challenge (Fig. 5).

Figure 5.
Trencher with quotation from "The Governance of Virtue" (1566), (one of a set), seventeenth century, sycamore wood, painted and gilded, 11.6 × 14.4 cm. Collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art (64.101.1580). Digital image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art (Public domain).

The first hurdle for the reader of these trenchers was to read the tiny script in the tangle of floral ornament. They would soon have seen that the mottoes on these trenchers, unlike the typical humorous verses, were prose quotations in English from the Bible. The guest's heart must have sunk: not only was the performance a test of theological morality, but now they had

also to navigate the Elizabethan religious settlement. To obtain obedience from conflicting denominations, the Queen's articles of religion of 1571 resisted an explicit statement of theology: silent submission was the best policy. Forcing theological discussion even within the walls of a banqueting house would have been a deliberate precipitation of crisis.

Looking closer, the guest would soon have discovered that, again unlike the typical trencher, further mottoes were written around the sides of the composition. Carefully turning it to read them, an overarching theme was revealed, one that had to be pieced together as dextrously as one turned the fragile piece of sycamore. One theme was about duty to the poor, another greed, another suffering. The tangle of flowers that joined them suggested the different potential connections that might be made by the guest on these general themes.

The guest's progress at this point would have been halted by a realisation: some of these texts were unfamiliar. No matter how well they knew the official Bible of the Church of England, the most diligent subject would almost certainly not recognise some of these phrases. Familiar in sense but alien in text, they came from different sources, some published decades earlier. In particular, the authorised version was juxtaposed with lines translated by Protestant radicals. The recital of the quotations then became especially perilous, because the diner might accidentally speak the words of a translation with which they were more familiar, possibly one that revealed heterodoxy.

This set of trenchers then can be understood to stage a religious conflict in the form of a crisis of social etiquette. Following the neglect of trenchers in the twentieth century, scholars of material culture have returned to what Victoria Yeoman has called these "visually provocative, dynamic objects". [1] The provocation is compounded, as in the case of the Met's trenchers, when the objects actively participate in contemporary conflict. As examples of historical luxury they ask us, like the original diner, to think on two distinct levels at once: that of the codified ceremony of behaviour, and that of a particular moment with an infinite number of potential outcomes.

Response by

Jonathan Michael Square, Lecturer, Harvard University

The "Vassal tankards" constitute Harvard's ceremonial silver (<u>Fig. 6</u>). They are taken out of Harvard Art Museum storage and displayed only for the most important occasions, most notably presidential inaugurations. Yet, behind this sterling silver finery lies a less-than-shining history steeped in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and chattel slavery. I considered including these tankards in *Slavery in the Hands of Harvard* (2019), an exhibition which I curated that paired archival documents and artefacts from Harvard's permanent collection related to slavery with the work of contemporary artists whose work grapples with the legacy of slavery in some respect. Though, ultimately, I did not include these tankards, I did include other objects generated by the Vassall estate: a tuition bill paid with casks of sugar and a map of eighteenth-century Jamaica on which Vassall plantations are labelled.

Figure 6.
Joseph Kneeland, The John Vassal Tankard, circa 1729,
silver vessel, 17.2 × 11.9 cm. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg
Museum, Loan from Harvard University (873.1927).
Digital image courtesy of Harvard Art Museums/Fogg
Museum, Loan from Harvard University.

John Vassall was a scion of the Vassall family, who counted among their sons
many generations of Harvard alumni. In 1759, John Vassall built a grand
Georgian-style mansion in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as a statement to the
world of his incredible wealth. The Vassalls made their enormous fortune off
the backs of enslaved people, who labored on their Jamaican sugar
plantations. As the sugar industry was dependent on the labor of chattel
bondsmen, so too were the Vassall's displays of conspicuous consumption. In
addition to the enslaved workers on his plantations in Jamaica, Vassall also
enslaved Africans at his Cambridge estate, now the Longfellow
House–Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site.

The Vassall family were major benefactors to Harvard and the university still holds many of the family's heirlooms and papers. Until recently, during past installations of Harvard presidents, two large silver tankards that the Vassalls bequeathed to Harvard were displayed on the dais as a symbol of the transferal of power and wealth from one leader to another. The exhibition of the tankards also reinforced the university's elite position as the nation's oldest institution of higher learning rooted in colonial "pedigree". Yet, this pedigree was constructed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from wealth acquired through the exploitation of enslaved bondspersons.

Despite Massachusetts' reputation as a stronghold of abolitionism with low rates of slave ownership, it was not unheard of for wealthy Massachusetts' families who had made their wealth in the Caribbean, to bring the tradition of large slaveholding to New England. John Vassall owned seven enslaved people. Isaac Royall, Jr.—another wealthy merchant and Harvard benefactor—brought a whopping 27 enslaved people with him from Antigua, who labored on his Medford estate Ten Hills Farm. Many of Harvard's current assets have their origins in enterprises that were supported by slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. Harvard University's endowment and material gain is rooted first in the displacement and exploitation of native people, but also in the money gained from the labor of enslaved people. From the names of buildings, to the seal of Harvard Law School, to objects in its museums, evidence of the school's connection to slavery abounds. Key to understanding Harvard's connections to slavery is analysing the material culture in the university's permanent collection that has origins in slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Response by

David Batchelor, Artist and Writer

On the day I begin writing this, I hear on the news that Covid-19 has probably claimed the lives of over 55,000 people in the UK. Everyone has been profoundly affected by the pandemic, whether or not they themselves have become ill. For a great many people, this has meant spending a lot more time alone. Solitude—how we might cope with it and what we might learn from it—has become an urgent topic in the media. I have read and listened to discussions by psychologists and philosophers, writers, religious commentators, educationalists, and therapists. And I have seen many people turn in their solitude to making things. These things might be drawings or paintings, designs or clothes, or music, or gardens. One of the possible by-products of this health crisis that has become an economic and social crisis is that we will emerge to a more decorative world, or at least a more decorated world. And this, it seems to me, raises questions about the purpose of decoration, and about the uses of the apparently useless.

The UK may or may not cultivate a particularly utilitarian mindset; it may or may not have developed a pragmatic culture that really values only that which serves an identifiable social or economic necessity; it may or may not regard all else as a luxury to be tolerated as and when time and money allows. But I don't think it makes sense to call these products of our solitude "luxuries", even if many of them might fit the conventional definitions of the term. Covid-19 has brought with it some vivid reminders of other necessities: those of kindness and compassion, for example. And calmness: an ability to stand apart, if only momentarily, from the turmoil and to reflect. It seems to me that any activity that contributes to this quality of reflective calmness needs to be embraced, as a joyful necessity, rather than tolerated as a dispensable luxury. In this, the decorative arts are no different from fine art, or music, or literature.

We can never know why early homo sapiens and Neanderthals felt compelled to decorate their environments and adorn their objects with abstract shapes and figures, and I am not at all sure we understand what compels us to do it now. But, given we do do it now and always have done it in the past, it is probably safe to assume it answers a need of some kind, and a fairly basic one at that. That need might be pleasure. Pleasure is complex (ask Epicurus or Freud) and I can't begin to address it properly here. But surely the considered pleasures of making things and sharing the results of this making are, at the very least, a necessary counterbalance to the more routine and sometimes stressful necessities of everyday life, Covid-induced or otherwise.

The quilts made by Arrange Whatever Pieces Come Your Way are vibrantly beautiful examples of these pleasures (Figs. 7 and 8). The title given to the project by Sheelagh Boyce and Annabelle Harty says something about the ethos of their quilt making, and it says something about the traditions of quilting from which they draw. For me, these are contemporary versions of a tradition that transcends the academic distinction between the decorative and the fine arts. In being made from pre-existing swatches and bolts of fabric—kimonos, shirts, etc—they also address other pleasures and necessities, and in particular those of reusing, reframing, and revaluing discarded materials of a culture that affords itself the luxury of waste.

Figure 7.
Annabelle Harty and Sheelagh Boyce, Quilt 8, 2018, cotton and bamboo, 115cm × 115cm. Digital image courtesy of Annabelle Harty and Sheelagh Boyce (All rights reserved).

Figure 8.
Annabelle Harty and Sheelagh Boyce, Quilt 8, 2018, cotton and bamboo,
115cm × 115cm. Digital image courtesy of Annabelle Harty and Sheelagh
Boyce

Response by

William Firebrace, Architect and Writer

I first wore a face mask last week, to visit the local supermarket. The mask was very simple, coloured light blue, and attached by strings to my ears. I felt awkward, absurd, and that everybody must be looking at me. But of course, nobody was looking, most of the other shoppers were also wearing masks and anyway they could not really see me, or at least my features, because I was now hidden behind my mask. I began to feel a kind of power, of being unrecognisable, invisible, not really being there, a feeling that must come to bandits and robbers, to the mysterious man in the iron mask, the masked avenger, but also to building workers and medical personnel. Wearing protective masks is nothing new in west London; over the years, I have noticed increasing numbers of men and women, families with kids, in standard blue masks. At first, I found them strange, slightly worrying, but now I hardly notice them at all. Back at home, and with my mask removed, I read an online piece about Japanese women and face masks, which explained that such masks are worn not just for prevention of disease but also because the wearers feel protected against being chatted up or questioned, or even because they need not feel obliged to put on make-up, they can be their natural selves because they are concealed, the masks are worn from choice, even when there is no danger. So masks become not merely pragmatic but also a form of decoration, rather elegant, diverting the attention from an inner form. People are proud of their masks. My sister sent me a photo of herself and her partner, both wearing hand-made bright pink masks, the two of them had become almost identical; the masks had become the most noticeable thing about them. Then a friend in Germany mailed me a picture of himself in a black mask and a black wool hat, a mixture of terrorist and surgeon, his features reduced to a pair of black spectacles, behind which lay two uncertain eyes. And now in the supermarket I notice numerous shoppers wearing masks with decorative patterns, flowers, animals, birds, cartoons, stripes and coloured squares, slogans, some rather disturbing fake mouths, the mask becoming fanciful, individual, the wearer is doubly concealed, first by the mask and then by the pattern, which alters the form of the mask. Masks become a fashion item, they are worn not just for concealment but for display, and I recall the young Islamic women I used to see in the streets in Marseille who combined face veils with camouflage clothing and brightly coloured high-heeled shoes, a bold blend of religious modesty and sexuality. Fashion houses now produce complex masks in luxurious fabrics, matching the latest outfits, expensive pandemic chic (Fig. 9). An online photo of a bridal-wear shop in Houston shows a bride wearing a complex white mask, beardlike, resembling the stubbly form of the corona itself, the bride as eroticised bisexual virus. But I still wear my simple blue mask for shopping, emboldened, anonymous, becoming a different person, whom nobody has quite recognised.

Figure 9.
Marine Serre: Runway - Paris Fashion Week
Womenswear Fall/Winter 2020/2021, 25 February 2020
in Paris, France. Digital image courtesy of Getty
Images (All rights reserved) | Photo: Victor Virgile /
Gamma-Rapho.

Response by

Peter McNeil, Distinguished Professor of Design History, University of Technology Sydney

No overseas travel, no luxury goods purchased abroad in glamorous stores, constrained sociability and an enforced return to the domestic and familial. Such has been our time in Australia during COVID-19, where a ban on all overseas travel remains enforced, and seated restaurants, cafés, and most stores were shuttered for nearly three months. Hairdressers were closed for the first month and then limited to 30-minute sessions, prompting a right-wing television commentator to successfully lobby the Federal government that it was impossible to maintain one's hair within such strictures. As international borders and local businesses slowly reopen, can we compare our predicament with an earlier eighteenth-century episode, when travel was impossible due to warfare, yet young men strained to experience foreign life, tastes, and fashions?

A Liverpool earthenware ceramic tile, made about 250 years ago, seems to share something of the contemporary mood of risk and peril in travel today, as well as demands on our appearance at times of social change (Fig. 10). It cannot be dated precisely but is copied from *The Englishman in Paris*, a print drawn by James Caldwell, that had been published 10 May 1770 by J. Smith and Robert Sayer, London. The tile, possibly destined for a chimney piece or created as a novelty, depicts a Frenchified "frizeur" or male hairdresser directing powder at the hair of an elderly gentlemen using a retractable wooden "powder carrot". The gentleman looks uncomfortable, but passive and obliging. On the floor lies an open book titled *A Six Weeks Tour to Paris*. The gentleman is either preparing for a visit there, or an imagined one, adopting a fashionable style on top of his head. The awkwardness of his pose and the provincial chair on which he sits are in contrast to the agile, balletic pose of the thin stylist, whose breeches have too much "room" in them as was often said of effeminate men at the time.

Figure 10.
Ceramic glazed tile depicting a hairdresser, Liverpool (manufacturer), after the etching and engraving by James Caldwell (printmaker), *The Englishman in Paris*, published 10 May 1770 by J. Smith and Robert Sayer , circa 1775, earthenware, 0.08 × 12.5 × 12.5 cm. Collection of National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, presented by Mr and Mrs F. Hodgkin, 1939(4656.72-D3). Digital image courtesy of National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (All rights reserved).

The tableau is inscribed within a rococo cartouche, re-emphasising its French charge and allusion. The print and tile are contemporary with the well-known macaroni of the 1760s–1770s, young men of cosmopolitan outlook primarily interested in luxury fashion and accessories, noted for their carousing, gambling, effeminate dress, and travel abroad. Their impact was amplified by the great expansion of printed satirical caricatures. Macaroni men embodied a tension in English society between native interests, manufactures, and prerogatives, and a cosmopolitan outlook that privileged travel, urbanity, and access to outside ideas.

Following the conclusion of the Seven Years War (1756–1763), many young well-to-do men rushed to France and Italy to see what was going on with the fashions they had so missed during wartime. Hairstyles were important and fashionable men in the late 1760s and 1770s ceased wearing the small

"scratch-wig" of the older generation, a prosthetic which supplemented natural hair. Instead, a very tall *toupée* rising in front and a thick club of hair behind required extensive dressing with pomade and white powder. These wigs became widespread and were copied by men "up from the country"—barbers and hairdressers were common even in rural areas of England and France. The new fashionable macaroni "queue" of hair was held in a large black satin wig-bag, often trimmed with a rosette, to protect the back of the jacket.

The wig-bag was requisite for attendance at court and therefore became striking when worn in the street and in everyday life; it also carried an added expense (account books indicate that wig-bags had to be replaced at least several times a year). The very high wig was commonly associated with continental affectation, much like the taking of snuff and the wearing of silk and velvet rather than good English broadcloth (woollens). Food also signified nationalism or contagion: satirical prints reiterating Hogarth depicted the robust Briton as consumer of hearty roast beef, whereas the French were scrawny beings who ate grilled cats, frogs, and pasta. Pasta—"macaroni"—did not require mastication and therefore was even more strongly marked as effeminate and unmanly.

Anxieties connecting luxury and foreignness, unease about cultural and racial difference, the rise of "common sense" in right-wing political discourse, these troubling developments in our own time can be glimpsed in this object. The exact function of its visual joke translated to a ceramic body is unclear, raising questions about how contemporary viewers reacted to such topical objects and social stereotypes. As many Australians hope and pray to visit continental Europe again—we are now told at least not until 2021 and possibly later—what luxury goods and experiences do we hope to sample there and how will we prepare for the journey? What objects may in future commemorate our anxieties around that travel, as well as our nationalisms and curiosities about other cultures, places and experiences?

Response by

Patricia F. Ferguson, Project Curator, Department of Britain, Europe and Prehistory, British Museum

Luxury, like so much in our world, may indeed be in crisis. Yet, it is not tone-deaf, it has always adapted and survived. Take this teapot now in the British Museum, made in provincial Worcester around 1768–1769 (Figs. 11 and 12). Nothing could be more quintessentially British, or more benign. Tea-drinking and its elegant accoutrements, a one-time preserve of the privileged upper classes, became increasingly democratised throughout the eighteenth century, ultimately becoming ubiquitous. Until the Commutation Act of 1784, however, which critically reduced taxes on tea imported from China from 119 per cent to 12.5 per cent, most of the tea consumed in Britain was contraband. Before then, smugglers—little studied as a consumer group—made their fortunes off the backs of The Honourable East India Company, a predatory multinational corporation with its own army, who held the official monopoly on heavily taxed tea. The Company's reputation for corruption and malpractice came to prominence in 1769–1770 during the Bengal Bubble, which led to a banking collapse, and when a savage famine killed up to ten million people in Bengal. The taxes, incidentally, circumnavigated by these racketeers (the smugglers), financed the empire building of the British government and military.

Figure 11.
Worcester Porcelain Factory, Teapot or punch pot with gold cartouche under spout, inscribed. Also a gold brooch in form of number 45 with legend; celebrates publication of number 45 of the 'North Briton', circa 1763–1770, porcelain and gold, 14.50 cm height. Collection of British Museum (1923,0215.11.CR). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Figure 12.
Worcester Porcelain Factory, Teapot or punch pot with gold cartouche under spout, inscribed. Also a gold brooch in form of number 45 with legend; celebrates publication of number 45 of the 'North Briton', circa 1763–1770, porcelain and gold, 14.50 cm height. Collection of British Museum (1923,0215.11.CR). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The tea industry was symbiotic with advancements in British ceramic material technology, namely, cream-coloured earthenware (creamware) and steatitic soft-paste porcelain. The first was a mass-produced global product aimed at all levels of society, while the second, containing soapstone that could withstand boiling water without cracking, cultivated a pretentious clientele. While teapot design rarely waivered from the Chinese original, fashionability became the watchword in this commodification of culture. The Worcester factory's proprietors unsurprisingly focused on teawares in a limited number of shapes to reduce manufacturing costs, decorated in innumerable patterns; painted designs in the latest fleeting taste was less expensive than making stylish moulds. Their signature underglaze scale-blue

ground, a mechanical imitation of the mottled *bleu lapis* of Vincennes and "Mazarine blue" of Chelsea, resulted in an aspirational luxury brand. The vacant panels, here painted in the Japanese Kakiemon-style, are framed within honey-gilt scrollwork devices disguising areas where the cobalt blue bled into the glaze that added bling, but also doubled the price. Discretely incorporated into these ornate frames is the inscription "No. 45", under the spout and handle and at the crest of the two largest cartouches.

Since 1763, "45" had become a symbol of the abstract notion of liberty, freedom of the press, universal suffrage, and even a republic. It was a reference to issue number 45 of the *North Briton*, a magazine published by the radical and scandalous Whig politician John Wilkes, which contained an attack on King George III's speech in Parliament written by Lord Bute. He was immediately thrown in the Tower for seditious libel openly insulting the oppressive government, but was then released under parliamentary privilege and escaped to France. When he returned in 1768, the celebrated outlaw ran for parliament and was mobbed by sympathetic "Wilkites", artisans, shopkeepers, and journeymen, many illiterate, who latched onto the number 45. The symbol was chalked on doors and carriages on the eve of his election in April and again following his arrest in May, provoking a constitutional crisis, which led to the Massacre of St George's Fields in south London, when government soldiers opened fire on riotous demonstrators and at least six people were killed, following the reading of the Riot Act.

Staffordshire creamware teapots survive boldly emblazoned with the inscription, "Wilkes and Liberty", a slogan adapted from a satirical caricature by Hogarth, and "No. 45", were purchased by middling classes openly dissatisfied with authority and attempts to stifle freedom of speech. Worcester's proprietors eschewed any such controversy—porcelain is rarely political, there was too much at stake—making this anomaly all the more surprising. Was the teapot originally part of a standard 43-piece tea service ordered by an elite "Wilkite"—countless women were seduced by him—or was it the singular work of a rogue "Wilkite" gilder adding a subversive slogan as a defiant act of political dissent? Luxury and crisis hidden in plain sight.

Response by

Deborah L. Krohn, Bard Graduate Center

The often brutalising expansion of British society over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries engendered the growth of global markets and ensuing access to goods, including plants and foodstuffs, as well as the evolution of taste. Often used as a metaphor for choice in furnishings, clothing, or interior decoration, taste was also, literally, about the sensory perception of food. Stimulated by the acquisition of literacy, especially among women, an increasing number of books appeared that provided guidance on how to source, prepare, and serve food, becoming a way to claim membership in a club that signalled sophistication and promised the ability to "dispose the best of Delicacies to the most eminent persons". [2] The cultural prestige of Italy, revered in Renaissance England as it trickled down to the middling sorts, can be seen in a curious pamphlet and accompanying set of playing cards, published in London in 1693. The full title says a lot:

> *The Genteel House-Keepers Pastime: Or, The Mode of Carving at the Table Represented in a Pack of Playing Cards. By which, together with the Instructions in this Book, any ordinary Capacity may easily learn how to Cut up or Carve in Mode all the most usual Dishes of* Flesh, Fish, Fowl, and Baked Meats; *and how to make the several Services of the same at the Table; with the Several Sawces and Garnishes proper to each Dish of Meat. Set forth by several of the best Masters in the Faculty of Carving, and Published for publick Use.*

By the end of the seventeenth century, carving skills were included in the growing number of cookbooks and related household manuals explicitly addressed to women such as the "genteel house-keeper" named in the title. A short pamphlet published with the cards provided verbal instructions on how to carve and serve meats, including the sauces to offer with them (though without recipes) similar to those found in contemporary cookbooks. This is followed by a set of fifty-three (one is blank) playing cards: the spades are "baked meats", architecturally shaped pies with fillings such as goose, tongue, potato, or hare (Fig. 13); the hearts are "beasts", cuts of meats, such as loin of veal or shoulder of mutton (Fig. 14); the diamonds are "fowl" such as goose, woodcock, and duck (Fig. 15); and the clubs are fish such as trout and mackerel (Fig. 16). The images on the cards, diagrams that instruct the viewer where to make the cuts on the meats and fishes, and how to shape the pies, derive ultimately from a pedagogical tradition dating to the late middle ages. Carvers and stewards were highly ranked male servants in

courts and elite households all over Europe, holding more prestige than cooks, who remained in the kitchen. Printed manuals and handbooks detailing their responsibilities proliferated in Italy starting in the sixteenth century.
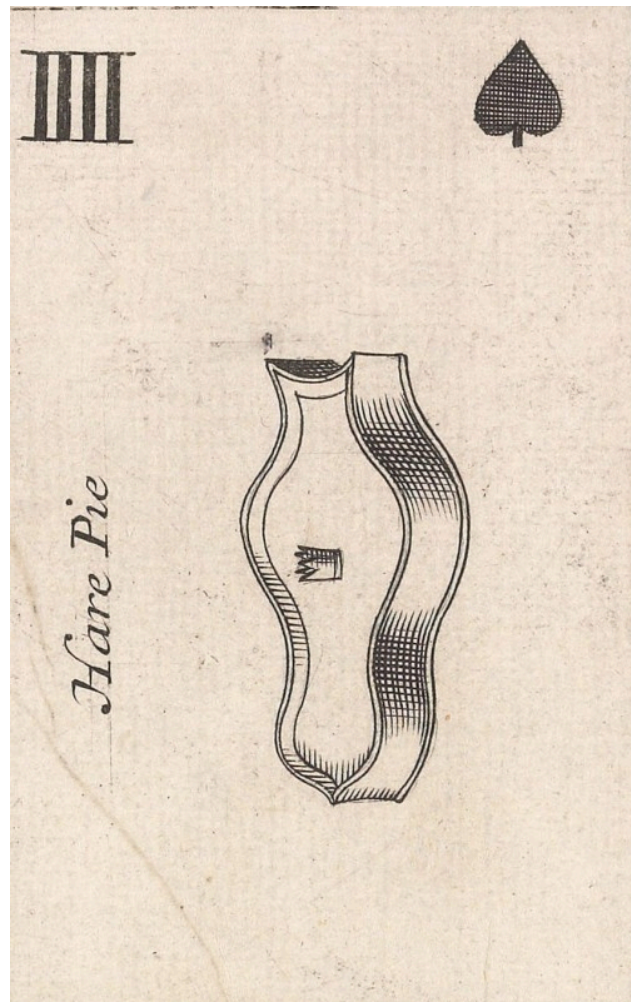

Figure 13.
The Genteel House-Keepers Pastime, Or, *The mode of Carving at the Table* represented in a pack of playing cards (four of a set), 1693, playing cards, 15 cm. Collection of Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University (UvL50 693G). Digital image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University (Public domain).
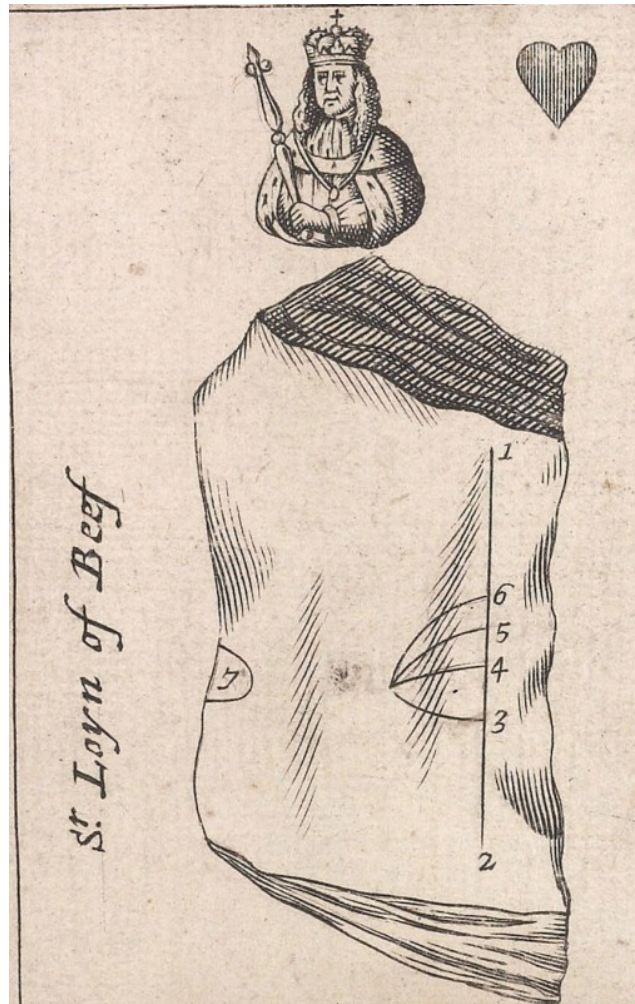
Figure 14.
The Genteel House-Keepers Pastime, Or, *The mode of Carving at the Table* represented in a pack of playing cards (four of a set), 1693, playing cards, 15 cm. Collection of Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University (UvL50 693G). Digital image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University (Public domain).

Figure 15.
The Genteel House-Keepers Pastime, Or, *The mode of Carving at the Table* represented in a pack of playing cards (four of a set), 1693, playing cards, 15 cm. Collection of Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University (UvL50 693G). Digital image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University (Public domain).
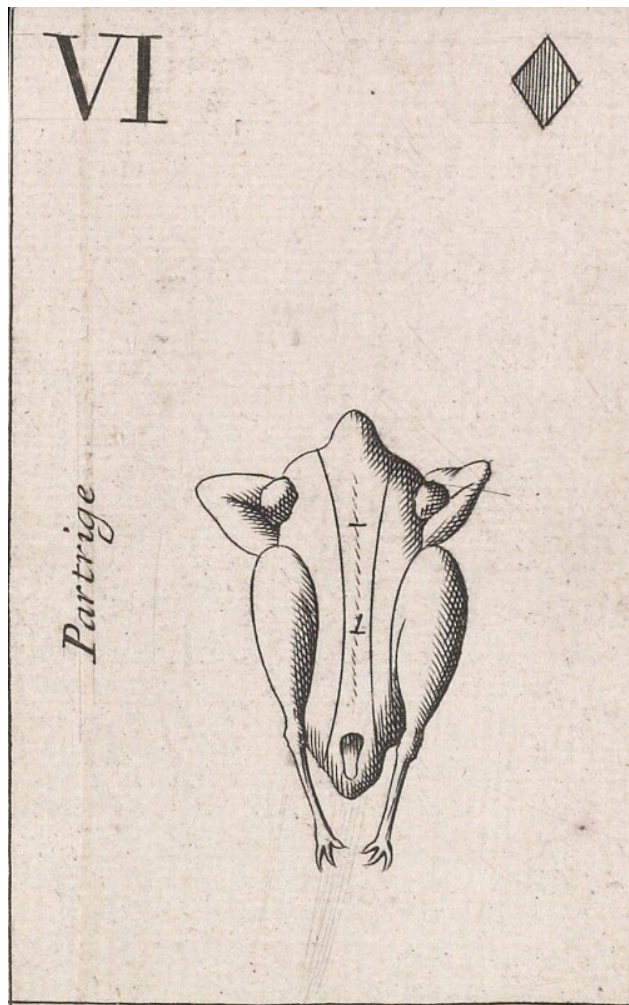
Figure 16.
The Genteel House-Keepers Pastime, Or, *The mode of Carving at the Table* represented in a pack of playing cards (four of a set), 1693, playing cards, 15 cm. Collection of Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University (UvL50 693G). Digital image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Yale University (Public domain).
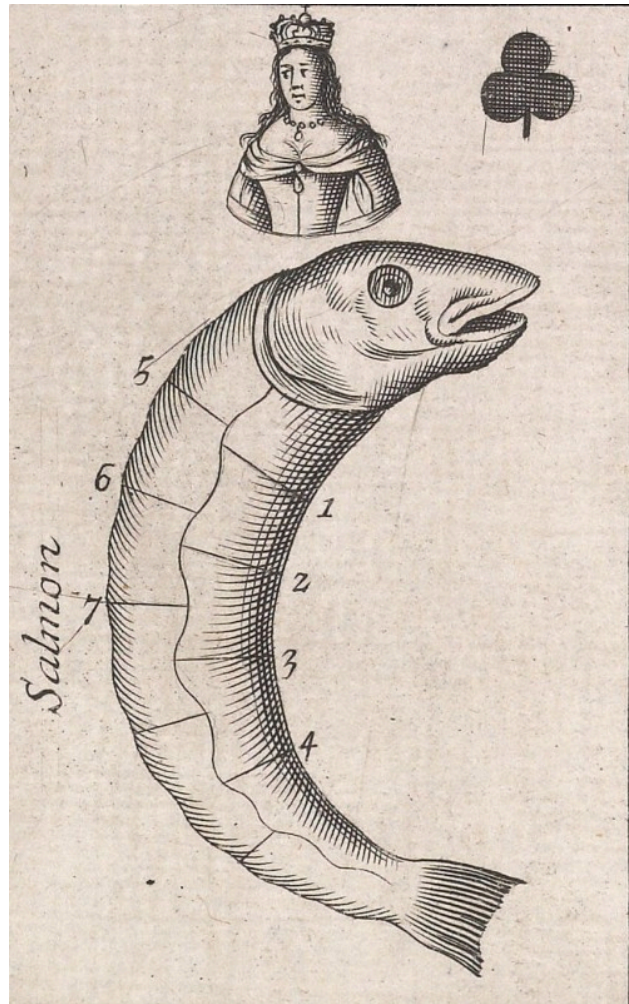
Illustrations based on Mattia Giegher's *Tre Trattati*, published in Padua in 1629, are found in books printed in Germany, France, Holland, Sweden, and Norway, and probably others, through the eighteenth century. Though the title spells out the audience for the cards, it is not clear exactly how—or if—they would have been used in an instructional capacity. Playing cards were just one of many forms of popular print culture marketed with an appeal to a realm of luxury that was beyond the economic reach of the majority. Published by James Moxon, also a purveyor of globes, maps, scientific and mathematical instruments, books, and other playing cards, including an astronomical and a geographical set, all advertised on the last two pages of the pamphlet, the carving cards appeared on the cusp of what

has been called the "birth of a consumer society", which witnessed the beginning of spending patterns that privileged desire over need, the very definition of luxury. [3] The carving cards are emblematic of this pivotal moment, with their consumption encouraged as a way to emulate "the wisdome of the Grandees of former Ages of great antiquity" but to do so as a way to avoid the "unthrifty wasting" of a dish of good meat. [4]

Response by

Ruth Scurr, Fellow of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge

Luxury and crisis sometimes intersect when decorative objects are designed to tell stories. The Popish Plot was a fictitious crisis that caused real suffering in seventeenth-century England. In 1678 Titus Oates, a renegade Anglican clergyman, and Israel Tonge, an anti-Catholic fanatic, forged evidence of a plot to assassinate King Charles II, so his brother James, a Roman Catholic, would inherit the throne and reverse the effects of the English Reformation. The invented plot induced widespread panic and inspired the broadside ballad, "A True Narrative of the Horrid Hellish Popish Plot."

These painted tin-glazed tiles (Fig. 17) were made in the workshop of Jan Ariens van Hammes, who left Delft with his family and sixteen workmen to settle in Vauxhall in South London in 1676 and obtained a patent to exercise his "art of makeinge tiles and porcelane and other earthen wares, after the way practised in Holland." [5]

Figure 17.
Jan Ariens van Hamme (producer) Copthall pottery (manufacturer), Tile depicting the "Popish Plot", 1679–1680, tin-glazed earthenware with painted decoration, 0.8 × 12.5 × 12.5 cm. Collection of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (414:823/9-1885). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (All rights reserved).

The designs for the tiles were copied from a set of engraved playing cards, published circa 1679, based on original drawings by the illustrator and comic book pioneer Francis Barlow. The first tile depicts Pope Innocent XI, three cardinals, and the devil (under the table) hatching the plot. The second shows the would-be assassins, allegedly Jesuit priests, signing their resolve to kill the king. In the next, Titus Oates, who was eventually found guilty of sedition and perjury, is pictured revealing the plot to the king and his counsellors. A close associate of Oates', the confidence trickster William Bedloe, who gave an account of the feigned plot to a secret committee of the House of Commons, is singled out for a whole tile of his own. Bedloe died in 1680, so did not live to be exposed as a fraud, unlike Oates, who was pilloried and whipped through London streets after James II became king in 1685.

The most gruesome of the tiles shows the Benedictine lay brother, Thomas Pickering, naked, waiting to be hanged, drawn and quartered. He was one of over twenty innocent men arrested and executed because of the fabricated plot, which would not have gained such credence had the country not already been convulsed with fear of a return to Roman Catholicism. Another of the tiles celebrates the burning of "Popish books, Images and relics."

For Hammes, the Popish Plot was a commercial opportunity. He had only been in England for two years, but the decorative tiles he sold for lining fireplaces, skirting boards or kitchen and scullery walls were already popular. White porcelain was not manufactured in Europe until the eighteenth century, but tin-glazing imitated the white of Chinese imports and was cheaper. Hammes copied more, perhaps all fifty-two, of the playing card images; the British Museum has a tile showing "The Execution of the Five Jesuits", which is not in the V&A collection. He also used the designs on plates; an example showing the supposed conspirators was sold at Christies in 2010, with a border of tulips (associated with the Netherlands), roses (a Lutheran symbol) and carnations. [6]

Luxurious artefacts, even those with a practical purpose, are designed to outlast political crises. What did the purchasers of the tiles think five or ten years on, as they watched the flames in their grates illuminate scenes from the Popish Plot? What did their servants think, mopping the floors or washing the dishes, looking at discredited images from an old invented crisis? Pity, perhaps, for the innocent people who died and disdain for the liars, unmasked by history.

Footnotes

1   Victoria Yeoman, "Speaking Plates: Text, Performance, and Banqueting Trenchers in Early Modern Europe", *Renaissance Studies* 31, no. 5 (2017): 755–779, at: doi10.1111/rest.12280.

2   *The Genteel House-Keepers Pastime: Or, The Mode of Carving at the Table Represented in a Pack of Playing Cards* … (London: Printed for J. Moxon, and sold at his shop at the Atlas in Warwick-Lane; and at the Three Bells in Ludgate-street, 1693), 4–5.

3   See Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), and many subsequent studies.

4   *The Genteel House-Keepers Pastime*, 2.

5   Ivor Noël Hume, *Early English Delftware from London and Virginia* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1977), 23.

6   "A London Delft Blue and White Popist Plot Plate: 1679–1680, possibly John Ariens Van Hamme's Factory, Copthall or Vauxhall", Syd Levethan: The Longridge Collection, 10–11 June 2010, Christie's Auction, at: www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/a-london-delft-blue-and-white-popish-5323620-details.aspx.

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