

Old Collectables in a Modern World (Ghent, ESSHC, 13-16 Apr 10)

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Call for Papers

Session: Old Collectables in a Modern World.

The Consumption and Circulation of Art and Antiques in European Cities, ca. 1750 - ca. 1914

European Social Science History Conference

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Ghent, Belgium at the Bijloke Site

From at least the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, European citizens showed an altering attitude towards old and used objects. The dawn of the much-discussed consumer and industrial 'revolutions' gave way to a material culture dominated by convenience, hygiene and fashion. Age-old consumer practices centered on second-hand circulations and the re-use of family/household possessions began to wane in favor of a continual renewal of the urban home. The rise of this modern 'neophilic' behavior is more or less known - tied to well studied processes such as industrialization, urbanization, changes in population growth and transport. Colin Campbell in particular linked these emerging attitudes to a nascent 'romantic' culture. Symptomatic of elusive feelings of loss and incompleteness, an uninterrupted 'hedonistic' consumption of 'newness' and 'novelty' provided a sort of existential satisfaction; materialism became a new way of life.

Ironically, the present consumption debate has largely ignored the Janus-head of the new: namely a consumption desire for the 'old', for traditions, an alliance with the past, a search for authenticity. These values were as much part of a 'romantic-sentimental' body of thought as a 'cry for the new'; and they were even becoming more important in times of structural landslides in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus, it is no coincidence that the second-hand markets in this period became increasingly segmented. At the one hand, old and used belongings

became perceived as inferior, and, in general, harder to recycle because of fashion changes, and the lighter, more breakable and less durable nature of the product-market. However, in the growing mass of easily discarded household possessions, several product categories were dealt with growing respect and passion. A blossoming group of excited collectors and 'connoisseurs' sought out second-hand books, art or period piece furniture precisely because of its age and 'patina'. Catering for this new demand for old collectables, a set of specialized commercial circuits arose. Especially newly equipped auction rooms and professional antique shops stood at the centre of this quickly developing antiquarian culture.

This session seeks to explore the changing consumption and distribution practices connected to the circulation of arts and antiques in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The organizers welcome papers that address different aspects of the creation of a specific antiquarian consumer culture. New theoretical or empirical research on qualitative and/or quantitative datasets is recommended, using a methodological framework from economical, sociological, anthropological, cultural and/or historical studies. This session aims to introduce new research and approaches to a broader audience. We welcome papers on topics as diverse as:

- The rise of a specialized art & antiquarian market, both via public auctions, antique shops and through specific fairs and markets.
- The geography of selling antiques, both macro (intercity relations) and micro (intra)
- The professionalization of related occupations (auctioneers, antiquarians, experts,...)
- The nature of the buying public (social-economic background, motivations, ...)
- The lay-out of professional and private networks in antique dealing and buying
- The perception of the collectables for sale (books, art, furniture, shells, stamps, ...)
- The role of commercial prints (advertisements, auction catalogues, ...)
- The development of a wider antiquarian culture in literature, salons, ...)

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If you want to propose a paper for this session, please contact the organizers to check whether your paper would fit in this session. Please submit your paper proposal via the conference website (<http://www2.iisg.nl/esshc/register.asp>) before the deadline of 1 May 2009.

Reference:

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