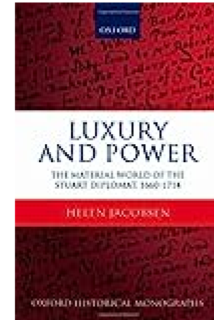

Helen Jacobsen. *Luxury and Power: The Material World of the Stuart Diplomat, 1660-1714.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xv + 286 pp. $125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-969375-7.

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Poverty was the persistent lament of the early modern ambassador. Besides having to negotiate complicated issues of international politics in multiple languages under the constant threat of espionage (and often suffering the unexpected effects of foreign food), ambassadors were also tasked with projecting the splendor and magnificence of their monarch, on a fraction of the royal budget. In the medieval period, monarchs dodged the bill for their envoysâ expenses by selecting eminent churchmen to represent them on special (short-term) embassies, since they could draw from their ecclesiastical benefices. Noble ambassadors might be appointed on special occasions, and were provided with a diet (i.e., salary) that by the sixteenth century might range up to around Â£6 per day. With the emergence of resident embassies the cost of maintaining aristocrats abroad became prohibitive, which partly explains why Elizabethan resident ambassadors were almost always commoners chosen from the university elite. By the Restoration period, however, the profile of the English resident ambassador had changed again. European culture had been radically transformed by a flood of exotic and luxury commodities that flowed in from Asia and the Americas, and rulers like Louis XIV and Charles II spent prodigiously to project their magnificence in an unending contest for cultural hegemony. In such a world, an Oxbridge education was all very well, but what did the scholar-diplomat know about the latest line of silver sugar casters? Could they distinguish between a real Titian and a fake? Or where the finest Turkish carpets could be found at the most discounted rates?

In *Luxury and Power: The Material World of the Stuart Diplomat, 1660-1714*, Helen Jacobsen shows how such questions came to dominate–and sometimes even dictate–the personal and professional lives of English ambassadors in the late seventeenth century. Jacobsen leads her reader on a thorough, detailed, yet wide-ranging investigation of early modern diplomatic consumer culture, drawing on material from multiple archives in four countries (the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and Italy). The result is a new and innovative interpretation of early modern diplomacy that emphasizes the political, and not just the material, value of the items ambassadors purchased: âConsumption was not just a means of displaying power, it *was* power and was as integral to politics as spectacle and pageantryâ (p. 7). These ambassadors opened a duty-free door through which exotic goods and beautiful art flowed into England, and had a significant influence on the direction of English fashions and aesthetic taste. Although Jacob-

sen concedes that their role as cultural âmediatorsâ was mainly one-directional (English products rarely set new trends in Europe), she argues that later Stuart diplomats played a greater role in cultural diffusion than their pre-Interregnum predecessors, not only because the number of English ambassadors had increased to meet the representational demands of new states created by the Peace of Westphalia, but also because they were more sensitive to the opportunities for self-promotion that luxury consumption provided.

The book is divided into two parts: the first (âDiplomats Overseasâ) contains four thematic chapters on the essential items ambassadors purchased or brought with them, how they furnished and kept their places of residence, trends in art-collecting and connoisseurship by region, and how various items were displayed for maximum diplomatic impact. The second part (âStrategies of Distinctionâ) presents five case studies of individual ambassadors who exemplified in different ways (though not always to positive ends) the ideal of the cultivated *homme du monde*. Dividing the book in this way allows the reader to trace wider trends in ambassadorial patronage, although this also leads to a certain amount of overlap (for example, the ritual and representational significance of coaches is given detailed treatment in both chapters 1 and 4). Nevertheless, both parts are organized in a loosely chronological way to show how different cultural strategies were developed and improved on over the fifty-four years covered (for example, the gradual shift in patronage from French to Italian to Dutch art).

The book includes many finely reproduced (albeit black and white) images of the architecture, furniture, plate, paintings, and other items purchased by ambassadors either during their term of service to extend their influence at a foreign court, or after they had returned home. Besides exhibiting a strong fascination with the great masters of the European Renaissance, ambassadors also valued the new and exotic commodities being shipped from Asia via the East India Company, especially Japanese porcelain, screens, cabinets, and lacquered tables. The more difficult the items were to find, the more prestige and social value were attached to them. Many ambassadors thus chose to turn their purchases into career investments, sending items home to influential friends and patrons at court in order to gain allies or advance family interests. At a time before the introduction of art auctioning in the 1680s, ambassadors served a crucial role in the dissemination of art: âDiplomatic duties included remitting home cultural intelligence just as much as political informationâ (p. 81). Despite the often eclectic nature of their purchases, Jacobsen traces a âtentative aestheticâ running through many ambassadorsâ patronage activities, rather than just a magpie-like fascination with all things new and shiny.

Besides drawing attention to the ways material acquisition could help or hinder an ambassadorâs success, Jacobsen provides fascinating insight into the running of the typical diplomatic household, which could contain upwards of thirty people including both near and extended family as well as servants, secretaries, and chaplains. On rare occasions ambassadorial wives might serve as unofficial secretaries (as Lady Lexington reportedly did in the mid-1690s) or conduct family business in their husbandâs absence, but Jacobsen suggests their most significant political roles were assisting their husbands in the selection of appropriate furnishings and promoting their husbandâs career by socializing with other well-to-do women at court. Although this may not sound like âactiveâ political engagement by twenty-first-century standards, patronage and personal relationships were the driving forces behind early modern diplomacy, and female contributions to this dynamic did not go unnoticed or unappreciated: the Levant Company paid Â£200 to the wives of successive English ambassadors in Turkey, presumably for ensuring the success of their husbandsâ embassies (p. 60).

In the case study chapters, Jacobsen looks in detail at the diplomatic careers and patronage activities of five prominent men whose experiences abroad significantly shaped English artistic tastes and their own subsequent professional lives. In each chapter, Jacobsen assesses whether it is possible to link an ambassadorâs patronage of certain styles and nationalities of art to their political views and motivations. In the case of Henry Bennet, earl of Arlington (1618-85), who served in France, Savoy, and Spain before becoming Charles IIâs longest-serving secretary of state, the acquisition of French art reflected his alleged popish and absolutist views rather than a more politically neutral Francophilia per se, and set the tone for English court style in the 1670s. For Ralph Montagu (1638-1709), also an ambassador to France and another influential patron, the appropriation of French fashion was *not* evidence of his support for absolutism, but rather his preferred way of displaying personal success–even though the conspicuous consumption that earned him an earldom and later a dukedom put him Â£22,000 in debt. The patronage of Italian (particularly Venetian) art and music by Charles Montagu (1662-1722), fourth earl and first duke of Manchester, may have led some to suspect him of a subversive interest in republican pol-

itics, but Jacobsen argues his taste was too eclectic to reflect a systemized cultural agenda, and that his fascination had more to do with an appreciation for undiscovered talent and novelty. Matthew Prior (1664-1721), more famous for his poetry than for his work as secretary to various ambassadors at The Hague and in Paris, exemplifies how men of the educated gentry class attempted to use art patronage as a means of social advancement. Although Priorâs attempts at self-promotion were thwarted by Queen Anneâs snobbery, his connections throughout the European art world made him an indispensable contact for friends and colleagues in England. In contrast to these four trend-setting connoisseurs, the final example of Thomas Wentworth, third earl of Strafford, demonstrates how conforming to the latest aesthetic trends could earn one access to the ranks of the international elite, though it did not prevent Straffordâs fall from political favor after 1715.

Overall, *Luxury and Power* significantly contributes to our understanding of early modern diplomacy by demonstrating that political activity was not only expressed in speeches, letters, and treaties, but in the visual (and often highly theatrical) display of wealth. Although it may be a stretch to conclude that the âincreased sophisticationâ of the diplomatâs surroundings led to âa greater sense of belonging to a distinct âcorpsâ of government servants,â since each of the ambassadors Jacobsen investigates appears to have seen his duties abroad as a stepping-stone to greater preferment at home, nevertheless Jacobsenâs accessible, thoroughly researched, and skillfully written book makes clear that diplomats took on a more pronounced role as conduits of fashion and taste during the later seventeenth century than many of their predecessors, thereby broadening their opportunities for personal advancement and extending English international influence.

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