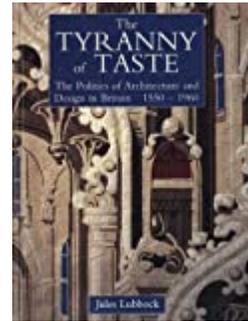




**Jules Lubbock.** *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain, 1550-1960.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. xv + 413 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-05889-5.



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## The Power behind British Design

Rare is the art historical work that convincingly argues for the relevance of David Hume's economic theories to the style of eighteenth-century English domestic settings. And, rare is the art historian who is willing to pose a question and explore the evolution of its answer over a period of four hundred years. Jules Lubbock's *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain, 1550-1960* strives for, and for the most part achieves, these daunting goals. Lubbock, lecturer in art history and theory at the University of Essex, has previously co-authored, with M. Crinson, *Architecture—Art or Profession? Three Hundred Years of Architectural Education in Britain*.

As the title *The Tyranny of Taste* indicates, the historical and intellectual scope of the book is massive. In this impressive compilation of fifteen years of research, Lubbock examines the political and economic issues that have influenced the appearance of domestic objects (furniture, porcelain, textiles) and private and public buildings in Britain for the past four centuries. Combining royal proclamations, economic treatises, design manuals, and three-dimensional objects, *The Tyranny of Taste*

records a new kind of history of British design and architecture. Rather than removing the objects to a traditional, formalist vacuum, Lubbock situates them as players in debates over the morality of luxury goods, the economic effects of foreign trade, and the relationship between the intellectual ruling classes and the working classes. He chooses to turn his attention to selected moments of debate and change throughout the four centuries, specifically focusing on the early seventeenth century, the mid-eighteenth century, the mid-nineteenth century, and the mid-twentieth century.

The surprisingly vast interdisciplinary interests and chronological span presented in *The Tyranny of Taste* are its most important contribution to the field of art history. This breadth also delivers an interesting comment on the fields of economic and political history. Art history, since the steady invasion over the past two decades of literary criticism models, has been fraught with conflicting opinions over the scope of its purview and the nature of what is considered "art." The most prevalent trend has been to contextualize art objects, to reconceive them as products of a specific time and place rather than as isolated

expressions of genius. *The Tyranny of Taste* is an important contribution to the self-questioning field of art history because its contextualization is thoroughly and convincingly rendered. Lubbock does not rely on intellectual clichés to describe prevailing attitudes in certain historical moments. Rather, he examines the writings and practices of the period and attempts to reconstruct opinions and philosophies in dialogue with one another. When he then introduces the physical results of these opinions, both the objects and the theories are enriched by the contradictions and complements that are exposed.

Lubbock's desire to integrate far-reaching policies and daily objects in *The Tyranny of Taste* is perhaps most eloquently stated in his introductory chapter to the section on eighteenth-century economic theories: "... one might portray a history in which events and ideas are intrinsic to one another... a portrayal of ideas always struggling into existence in the form of events or social conditions, and of the lessons of events being distilled into an idea and that idea being embodied in a programme or policy—so that the passage of time and of history comes to be seen as both a physical and an intellectual process in which ideas are like the fruit of the past and the seeds of the future" (p. 90).

Likewise, Lubbock's choice to study four hundred years of the "political economy of design," rather than the more conventional smaller span of years, provides a stage for recurring questions and issues that would be lost in a more narrow book. Certainly different periods of time require different types of analysis and response on the part of the scholar. However, art historians, and historians as well, tend to fracture their view of the expanse of the past into rigidly defined segments, each with a set of completely unique problems and concerns. Lubbock's book is an excellent example of the lessons of time travel: not only do we learn that successive generations struggled with similar debates, but the approach we use for one area suddenly reveals surprising information about another area. As art historians focus on context, it is important not to forget the richness of chronological context.

The group of objects known as the decorative arts (that is, furniture, silver, glass, etc.) has traditionally been considered less important in the study of art history than the fine arts of painting and sculpture. This discrepancy is the result of a wide variety of amorphous and circular causes, ranging from the prejudices of the canon to the dearth of good scholarship in the area. *The Tyranny of Taste* is an important contribution to the study of decora-

tive arts, or domestic design, because it provides an intelligent and rigorous frame for examining these objects. By showing that intellectual and political leaders believed in the educational and moral effects of the design of domestic objects, Lubbock brings a new level of significance to these pieces, which are often discounted as emblems of conspicuous consumption. Lubbock's thoughtful analysis and willingness to expand the boundaries of the contextual arena for decorative arts (he does not simply say that economics are a factor; rather, he recounts the dialogue of economic treatises, how those systems worked in daily practice, and how that practice affected the perception and consumption of different types of objects) provide a worthy role model for students in the field and bodes well for future studies.

*The Tyranny of Taste* is divided into six parts, each with multiple chapters and subdivisions of the chapters. The first three parts create a social, political, and economic setting for the earliest incarnations of the design debate. They also introduce the major themes around which Lubbock structures his study. The last three parts present a chronology of style and its political and economic origins from the early seventeenth century through the mid-twentieth century.

Among the ideas introduced in the first three parts of the book is the concept of "Good Design" (introduced in the preface to Part II). Good Design "emerged in reaction to fashion," and is, according to Lubbock, the tool employed by various intellectual and political elites to fight the excesses of luxury and fancy embodied in trendy, fashionable objects. An object of Good Design must "function as the tool of its ideology" and "is improving, reforming, and coercive" (pp. 21-22). Lubbock places the origin of the notion that a design could embody propriety and morality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: in the eyes of the ruling classes, booming international markets and trade in luxury goods threatened to disrupt the stability of English agrarian society.

Using precedents from the early seventeenth century, Lubbock describes how the nobility were continually banished from London where their private consumption of foreign luxury goods was seen as a drain on the economy and a cause of unhealthy urban growth and unemployment. In an attempt to further limit the population of London, James I instituted a series of strict building regulations that he hoped would define the future look and character of the capital city and that remained in effect until the twentieth century. The nobility, in turn, were asked to maintain their country residences, thereby fos-

tering local trade and agricultural employment and keeping them out of London. One of Lubbock's most interesting contributions to the study of seventeenth-century country houses is the idea that these residences were originally conceived, in part, as symbols of their owners' responsibility to the local economy. Far from being the palaces of competitive conspicuous consumption as they are traditionally dismissed, there is a good deal of textual evidence that ties their ostentation to a tightly ordered social hierarchy where those who did not spend "liberally," according to their particular position, were called "miserable" by their peers (from *The Life of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, 1732*, quoted in *The Tyranny of Taste*, p. 45). The doctrine of liberal spending included the construction and upkeep of the house, its furnishings, and its grounds (providing local employment), high-style entertaining (maintaining the authority of the peerage), and significant amounts of local charity. It did not, however, condone expenses that challenged the wealth and social standing of superior ranks. Certainly it would be naive to think that the prodigy houses of Elizabeth I and James I's reigns were merely seen as a form of tedious taxation for those in a position to build them. However, Lubbock's analysis of period proclamations and private correspondence adds a provocative dimension to this era of hedonistic luxury consumption. He forces us to consider that notions of social propriety and responsibility have, for several centuries at least, been employed as counters to the perceived dangers of unbridled, fashionable consumption.

Also introduced in the first part of *The Tyranny of Taste* is a brief history of economic theory. The fifty-five pages devoted to a variety of figures such as Thomas Mun (author of the first economic treatise in English, written in 1623), Bernard de Mandeville, Richard Steele and Joseph Addison (writers for *The Spectator*), David Hume, and Adam Smith seem the most remote to the discussion of the appearance of architecture and domestic objects. However, they are crucial in demonstrating the driving beliefs behind design legislation. Theories concerning the requisite levels of consumption in a healthy economy, the harmful or beneficial consequences of import tariffs, and the place of luxury goods in the national market all have direct and indirect consequences on the style of objects available for purchase. In addition, Lubbock has made a helpful contribution to economic history in his brief biographical summaries by focusing on the writers' attitudes toward beauty and taste.

The second three sections of *The Tyranny of Taste* are devoted to a chronological recounting of debates that

affected notions of Good Design from the early seventeenth through the mid-twentieth century. To better shape the breadth of his time scale, Lubbock has chosen specific moments of ideological challenge and change. His process of selection thus focuses on the influence of Inigo Jones' trip to Italy, but does not dwell on high neo-Palladianism (James I's Banqueting House rather than Lord Burlington's Chiswick House). Similarly, Ruskin is discussed in depth, but William Morris and the entire Arts and Crafts Movement are only mentioned. This selectiveness does not detract from the central theses of the book, partly because to have provided an account of every stylistic fluctuation for four hundred years would have created an exhausting narrative. Furthermore, Lubbock's extensive analysis of select pivotal moments provides an excellent springboard for further examination of those areas not directly addressed.

Among the more compelling discussions in the latter part of *The Tyranny of Taste* are those of the competing political nuances of the "vernacular gothic" and classicism of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and of William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*. Using a combination of poetry, architectural treatises, and private notebooks and letters, Lubbock weaves a web of political significance around the vernacular and classical styles of architecture and furnishings in the seventeenth century. He demonstrates that the vernacular (epitomized in Ben Jonson's 1616 "To Penshurst") was not simply perceived as the form of an outdated, rural England. Rather, Tudor and Jacobean gothic was employed as a symbol of the strength and stability of England's agrarian society and of the hospitality and generosity of the ruling classes. Jones' classicism became the appropriate form of the newly united "Magna Britannia," the style that would bring Britain together in its strongest state since the Roman Empire. Thus, the vernacular gothic and classicism were employed simultaneously to speak to the strength of the past and the prospects of the future of Great Britain.

In his discussion of Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*, written in 1753, Lubbock again brings a subtle interpretation to the designs of the famous rococo artist. While mid-eighteenth-century rococo is frequently seen as the epitome of excess and decadent living, Lubbock's examination of this important treatise shows that Hogarth advocated "intricacy and variety" in order to stimulate the mind and senses of the viewer. The greater the intricacy, the closer the object or image would be to the perfection and beauty of nature's complicated designs. For Hogarth, rococo design supported the development of the in-

tellec and the ability to perceive and appreciate beauty; too staid a reliance on the books of Palladio leads to boredom and stagnation.

As the title, *The Tyranny of Taste*, and the definition of “Good Design” imply, part of Lubbock’s agenda is to show how economics and politics have spurred the ruling classes into controlling the underclasses through the design of living spaces and the appearance of their consumable goods. To Lubbock’s credit, this agenda rarely appears in cynical or angry tones; while manipulation and pedantry on the part of rulers and designers may indeed be the case, it is the responsibility of the scholar to analyze these trends in an objective voice. The least successful part of the book from this perspective is the section on the take-over of London’s planning and skyline by the post-World War II modernists. Here Lubbock resorts to implications of conspiracy as he explains how the “right chaps” infiltrated RIBA and introduced the Floor Space Index so that newly defined daylight indexes and population density limits could be met only through buildings of austere, plate-glass, high-rise Modernism.

The major weakness in this impressive volume is, surprisingly enough, the lack of compelling visual evidence. Where Lubbock integrates objects and buildings into his intellectual analyses, the visual characteristics as well as the abstract ideas are enhanced and strengthened with a subtlety that can only derive from intelligent, penetrating attention to object and text. The opportunities for such insight are sadly not frequent enough; the narrative too often relies on the influencing factors and does not jump to the pieces that were themselves influenced. The problem of balancing contextual ideas with physical buildings or objects is endemic to this new phase of art

history. It frequently seems that the art historian strives to recreate a thoughtful, complex setting for the object, then relies on cliches for actually discussing visual presence. In places such as his interpretation of Jacobean vernacular and classicism and of Hogarth’s rococo, Lubbock achieves a praiseworthy level of graceful integration. In the sections where his focus is on writers who had little direct contact with physical objects, it is his responsibility to present to his readers the visual consequences—whether it is a building or a porcelain tea service—of those ideas.

This drawback aside, Lubbock’s *The Tyranny of Taste* is a significant contribution to the study of architectural design, decorative arts, and the changing field of art history. It provides an excellent study of how national politics and economic concerns have influenced and will continue to influence public and domestic design. It also introduces an entirely new historical era where these questions can be found and analyzed: conventional history has dated the genesis of moral design to the mid-nineteenth century, disregarding the compelling information that Lubbock presents about the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Furthermore, it offers a solid, scholarly account of the decorative arts that places these often-ignored objects in a significant national context. Far from being the “last word” on the political economy of design, Lubbock’s book should be praised for leading the way to a more rigorous, far-reaching analysis of why things look the way they do.

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