

Review for Nuncios

Serena Dyer. *Material Lives. Women Makers and Consumer Culture in the 18th Century* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Visual Art, 2020).

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Elena Serrano¹

In her compelling *Material Lives*, Serena Dyer tackles an exceptional legacy: four ladies' ingenious sartorial designs on which they worked for most of their lives. Dyer's masterful analysis of these material sources immerses the reader in the world of the polite society and British fashion between 1750s and the 1820s, shedding new light on the creative and fluid boundaries between makers and buyers.

Carefully analysing these life-spanning material sources, each chapter of the book tells the story of one of these well-off women. Chapter one is devoted to Barbara Johnson (1738-1825), the daughter of a career-churchman and a literate woman well-known by historians of children's books, who from the age of eight until she was eighty-four pasted samples of her clothes and snippets of small engraved fashion plates from pocket books in an old legend book. She also annotated prices, types of material, and occasionally, when she has worn them. Chapter two traces the life of Ann Franklin Lewis (1757-1842), from a family of politically minded men, who recorded the "dress of the year" in thirty-two water-colours inspired in the firsts fashion plates in British periodical press since she was a girl of seventeen years old until she was a mother of fifty. In Chapter three we learn about the passionate and talented Swiss Sabine Winn (1734-1798), who over twenty years adorned the figures of sixteen French engravings on the theme of love and sex with snippets of silk taken from her own garments among other creations. Finally, Laetitia Powell (1741-1801), daughter and wife of buoyant business men, exquisitely designed the dresses of twelve miniature dolls, some mimicking her own garments, from the age of fourteen to fifty.

¹ Universitat de València. Project CIRGEN, ERC Grant Agreement No 787015.

Dyer's argument is that these creations can be explored as "material diaries," "mirrors of a life," autobiographies in which women deliberately represented themselves. Their designs give us insights into the emotional and material lives of these women. To be sure, both textual and material diaries are complex artefacts that serve to multiple purposes. They not only store memories and emotions, but make space for self-reflection, serve as moral arguments, and self-represent their owners. For instance, through the minutely analysis that Dyer made of Lewis' watercolour that represented a little girl and her mother in a mourning dress, we see Lewis painful experience of losing her husband. We guess how the passionate courtship of Winn continued later in marriage through the carefully ornate prints that she made. We can understand the patience of a mother guiding her daughter to adult life through the uneven stitches in a doll dress. These sartorial practices could also have helped counter accusations of engaging in "conspicuous idleness," or of being "frivolous consumers," of which Georgian women were often accused. Material diaries also linked their owners with imagined or real communities of women. Just as manuscripts were shared with relatives and friends, these artful pieces were probably admired and imitated through generations. Powell's family for instance continued to dress miniature dolls for another hundred years, and Johnson's nieces continued with their aunt's album.

In addition to uncovering the emotional and material lives of their creators, the analysis of objects could also add vital nuances to current historiographical positions and even disrupts historical models. In this case, Dyers demonstrates that the maker/buyer binary that still underpins much of the narratives in the fields of economics does not represent what was really going on. Instead, "material literacy" is a more useful category for understanding the relationships between markets and consumers. By paying close attention to these women's mastery of sartorial techniques (designing, patternmaking, cutting, cutting, sewing, embroidering); their expertise in the material qualities of garments and their social meanings; the precise language with which they described clothe, fabric types, and seams; and the creative ways in which they handled informational sources (periodicals, pocketbooks, and dolls, to name but a few), Dyer convincingly demonstrated the knowable and active engaging of these women in fashion making. Moreover, although the assiduity of Johnson, Lewis, Witts, and Powell might be unique, their sartorial practices were not. Through her findings in other archives, Dyer concludes that they in fact represented a largest group of gentlewomen whose material literacy challenge the buyer/maker divide.

Besides historians of the dress, consumerism, industrialization, and economic historians; art and cultural historians, and historians of women and gender, this lavishly illustrated book is particularly useful to historians of science and technology, who are nowadays well-aware of the complex relationship between practices of knowledge making, communication, and consuming. Although “the material turn” has been with historians of science since quite a while (the pioneer *Things that talk* for instance dated from 2004), most of us are still quite dependant of textual sources. As Simon Werrett recently remarked, historians of science “read about things rather than engaging with them directly.” Yet, for engaging with things directly one needs to master “the vernaculars of material culture,” as Dyers put it: one needs not only to have the skills for reading stiches and brushstrokes in watercolours, but also to understand the web of gendered practices in which objects and their makers are embedded and dynamically acquire meanings. One of the many strengths of this book is the way Dyer deconstructs the objects by situating them in a broad social and cultural web of relations: from the political meanings of certain patterns in the cloths, to the importance of women’s artistic accomplishments in the culture of self-improvement, to the close influence between how these women represented themselves in their creations, and the evolution of fashion journals and pictures. In the jargon of Science and Technology Studies, one needs to understand the socio-materiality of actors and their objects, and *Material Lives* is an excellent example of how to do so.
