

Introduction

Luxury Textiles in Italy, the Low Countries and Neighbouring Territories (Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries): A Conceptual Investigation

Bart Lambert and Katherine Anne Wilson

Describing the city of Bruges in 1438, the Castilian nobleman Pero Tafur was moved to pronounce that ‘Without doubt, the goddess luxury has great power there, but it is not a place for poor men, who would be badly received’.¹ Clearly, part of the power of the goddess luxury lay in the ability of the concept to evolve over time, yet luxury’s malleability and the multiple connotations it carries, make clear that it is a term that has to be carefully considered by all who use it in their work. Furthermore, as the term is used to describe the textiles under examination in this volume it deserves some detailed thought.

Originally from the Latin *luxuria*, the term in its basic sense denotes excess, extravagance and magnificence. While these facets remain inherent to our modern usage of the term and understanding of the concept, there is no shortage of recent works emphasising the problematic usage of luxury both as a concept and as a term of description. As Christopher Dyer points out, the first issue lies in its shifts in meaning over time and thus its inability to ‘be strictly and easily defined’.² The second issue arises in the use of the concept of luxury by individuals from the classical to the modern period to describe actions or desired actions of individuals, groups or polities. Jan de Vries underlines luxury as ‘an essential prop upholding the established order, yet at the same time ... universally fraught with

¹ Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures*, trans., does this second comma need to be here? Malcom Letts (London: Routledge, 2005), 200.

² Christopher Dyer, ‘Luxury Goods in Medieval England’, in *Commercial Activity, Markets and Entrepreneurs in the Middle Ages. Essays in Honour of Richard Britnell*, ed. Ben Dodds et al. (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2011), 217.

moral danger'.³ For Marina Belozerskaya, the concept is 'charged and politicised' and 'has forever been a subject of contention'.⁴ The final issue lies in the modern attachment of the term luxury to an object. It is commonplace when writing on broadcloths, silks and tapestries to state that they are 'luxuries' or 'luxury textiles'. But what exactly made them a luxury and did contemporaries regard them as a luxury?⁵ Reflecting on objects described within probate inventories, Anton Schuurman notes that it is essential that such terms, if they are to be used, are properly defined and explain which criteria they use to distinguish between basic and 'luxury' goods.⁶

A brief historical consideration of the concept of luxury is useful to consider the potential pitfalls historians face when using the term due to its inability to be 'strictly and easily defined' and the multiplicity of associations it can carry as a result. For Aristotle great expenditure on texts and jewels was essential and befitting to those of appropriate status.⁷ But luxury also held negative connotations. As Jan de Vries notes 'Only a thin line separated the noble patron of the arts from the vain, prideful self-aggrandiser; the refined pallet merged effortlessly with gluttony; the admiration of a fine garment easily turned to lust'.⁸ For many medieval commentators this boundary, more often than not, was frequently transgressed. In Chaucer's eyes both gluttony and lust were connected to luxury: 'The holy writ take I to wnesse that luxurie is in wyn and dronkenesse' and 'If he be

³ Jan de Vries, 'Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age in Theory and Practice', in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century. Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 41.

⁴ Marina Belozerskaya, *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 1.

⁵ Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4–5, 32. He argues that the values needed to make an object a luxury are values assigned to the product to increase consumption and also the difficulty of acquisition.

⁶ Anton Schuurman, 'Probate Inventories: Research Issues, Problems and Results', in *Probate Inventories. A new source for the historical study of wealth, material culture and agricultural development*, ed. Ad van der Woude et al. (Utrecht: HES Publishers, 1980), 25.

⁷ Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, 'The Rise and Fall of Luxury Debates', in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century. Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 8. They note that Aristotle, in *Book IV of the Nicomachean Ethics*, developed the concept of 'liberalita', as a virtue with an objective of moral beauty in contrast to the vices of prodigality and avarice.

⁸ De Vries, 'Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age', 42.

ploungid in fowle and unclene luxuries, he is withholden in the fowle delices of the fowle sowe'.⁹ While Chaucer's negative view of luxury had long been espoused by churchmen such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) who criticised the adornment of churches as a corrupting influence that lead the faithful away from God, the concept of luxury was not universally condemned. For medieval users of the concept it could still embody the positive connotations ascribed by classical thinkers. Adornment and expenditure were deemed necessary to furnish places of worship through which one could also honour God as suggested by Bishop Suger (1081–1153).¹⁰ As the Middle Ages progressed, these tensions may have become ever more acute. The effect of a transformation in consumer goods and spending in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw not only a shift in the relationship between people and their possessions, but another alteration in the concept of luxury.¹¹ In Samuel Cohn's assessment, the humanist thinkers of Italy in the fifteenth century saw clear benefits in riches accumulated by a household.¹² These assets and possessions could act as instruments in the struggle for virtue, and their wealth could have the benefit of strengthening the body politic as a whole.¹³ But the use value, the exchange value of an object and accumulation for its own sake were not yet celebrated in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The benefits of luxury were to be seen in the utility of wealth, the splendour of objects and the people and places of status they could elevate, but its drawbacks were clear, abundant and to the fore of the medieval understanding and usage of the term.

It took the social and economic transitions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to foreground the positives and benefits of luxury both as a concept and as a term of description. The association of luxury with corruption and vice faded, and was replaced by the positive connotations of

⁹ Sherman M. Kuhn, ed., *Middle English Dictionary* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 1318.

¹⁰ Belozerskaya, *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance*, 1.

¹¹ Maryanne Kowaleski, 'A consumer economy', in *A social history of England: 1200–1500* ed. Rosemary Horrox et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 239.

¹² Sam Cohn, 'Renaissance attachment to things: material culture in last wills and testaments', *The Economic History Review* 65 (2012), 30–32.

¹³ Cohn, 'Renaissance attachment to things', 30–32.

production, trade and commodities.¹⁴ Luxury was re-conceptualised as a public benefit by Bernard Mandeville, David Hume and Adam Smith who all associated luxury with positive economic gain.¹⁵ In their view, it helped to oil the wheels of commercial prosperity and as a result the ‘cost’ aspect of the concept of luxury, which is pre-eminent in the modern usage of the term, is a legacy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, it took until the early twentieth century for the word ‘luxury’ to be used in an adjectival form. Despite the cost aspect of luxury still being pre-eminent in its twentieth and twenty-first century usage, it is now more multi-dimensional than its earlier conceptualisations in that it also embodies symbolic value and quality. These continual shifts in meaning and the multiple associations that can be made when the word is used as a term of description, may lead us to ask: how useful is the term at all for describing textiles consumed, commercialised and manufactured in Italy, the Low Countries and their neighbouring territories from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries?

Thankfully, the concept of a textile is far less fluid. The term ‘textile’ denotes weaving, woven fabric and cloth.¹⁶ The textiles that form the focus of this volume, broadcloths, silks and tapestry can be categorised under this heading. While tapestry has at times been separated from other textiles, and considered an art object in its own right (although more frequently downgraded by the nineteenth-century classification of the textile as a decorative art rather than as a fine art) Peter Stabel and Wolfgang Brassart have argued that while it can carry visual programmes and agendas, nonetheless it was also part of an increased diversification towards high quality textiles that occurred in the Low Countries during the fourteenth century, described by Brassart as *luxustextilien*.¹⁷ Of course, the term textile encompasses a huge variety of forms and types produced during the two hundred years covered by this volume. Therefore this volume proposes to consider what made textiles

¹⁴ Berg and Eger, ‘The Rise and Fall of Luxury Debates’, 7.

¹⁵ Berg and Eger, ‘The Rise and Fall of Luxury Debates’, 10–11.

¹⁶ Guy de Poerck, *La draperie Médiévale en Flandre et en Artois. Technique et terminologie* (De Tempel: Bruges, 1951).

¹⁷ Peter Stabel, ‘Guilds in late medieval Flanders: myths and realities of guild life in an export-orientated environment’, *Journal of Medieval History* 30 (2004), 8; Wolfgang Brassart, *Tapisseries und Politik an den Europäischen Höfen* (Berlin, 1992), 10.

a luxury in order to allow the contributors to examine and explore a range of textiles from broadcloths, tapestry through to a wide variety of silk and silk products.

When the term ‘luxury textile’ is used in this volume it is in a modern sense. The term luxury is not found in connection with the textiles under examination in this volume during the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. When broadcloths, silks and tapestry are described by household, narrative or travel accounts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the terms most commonly connected with these objects are ‘costly’ or ‘large’. These terms can reflect and refer to the production processes used to manufacture the objects described. As the chapter by Katherine Anne Wilson in this volume explores, the terminology used in the descriptions of the silks and tapestry possessed by the inhabitants of Dijon still carried associations with their original places of manufacture or reflected the production processes used in the manufacture of the textiles. Importantly, the terms also often allude to the difficulty of acquisition of the object described and the perceived ‘exclusivity’ of the textile under discussion, especially when it is associated with an exotic place of manufacture.

The volume proposes to consider whether, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, these broadcloths, silks and tapestry constituted a luxury in its modern sense. In order to use the concept fruitfully, it will split luxury into three major components. First it will address the symbolic value of the textiles, exploring their use and perception as markers of distinction by their commissioners, owners and viewers across different layers of society. Secondly, the volume will investigate their economic value: how they were commercialised and distributed and how their prices were determined by both the intermediaries who negotiated their sale and the customers who purchased them. Finally, it will discuss the quality of the broadcloths, silks and tapestry under consideration and the ways in which this was guaranteed during their production process. The contributors will seek to explore these questions by looking at the late medieval and early modern Low Countries, Italy and, to a lesser extent, their neighbouring territories. The geographical scope will allow them to adequately cover some of these textiles’ most important areas of consumption, their centres of production and the channels of commercialisation that connected them. At the same time, it will demonstrate how geographical boundaries or regional centres affected definitions of what

was a luxury. After all, Christopher Dyer reminded us that what might be considered as fashionable in the North, may well not be so in the South.¹⁸

Unlike other volumes, this work will choose to invert the usual order of things and will begin by addressing the consumption of luxury textiles, then their commercialisation, and finally their production. The rationale for such a structure is more than simply a desire for novelty. The first reason lies in the fact that the finished product of silks and tapestries is the form that we are most often directly confronted with, whether this be in contemporary accounts of their use, in visual programmes from the period, or in textiles preserved and venerated in present day museum collections around the world. The second reason is that by beginning with consumption, it allows the volume to present a dialectical concept of the relationship between manufacture and consumption, especially in a later medieval and early modern world where, as our chapters prove, manufacture of these types of textiles were driven in large part by changes in the perception, taste and fashion of consumers.

In the first section of the book, dealing with the symbolic value that was given to luxury textiles through their consumption, Katherine Anne Wilson explores who were the owners of silks and tapestry in later medieval Dijon as well as the spaces in which they were used. Christina Antenhofer discusses what kind of social meanings were connected to textiles displayed at the fifteenth and sixteenth-century Gonzaga court in Mantua and which political implications should be deduced from these performances. In her study, Laura Weigert describes the reception and ceremonial function of an individual tapestry within the setting of the abbey church choir for which it was made, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The volume's section dedicated to commercialisation and the textiles' economic value equally consists of three chapters. Bart Lambert provides new insights into the relationship between the Italian intermediaries who supplied silk products and the Burgundian court, one of the most conspicuous centres of luxury textile consumption in fifteenth-century Europe. Francesco Guidi-Bruscoli draws on understudied letters, accounts and receipts to examine the export of Florentine fabrics to a more peripheral market, that of sixteenth-century Central Europe. Through a

¹⁸ Dyer, 'Luxury Goods in Medieval England', 217–238.

study of an Antwerp merchant company, Jeroen Puttevils analyses the impact of the expanding consumer market for silks and tapestries in the sixteenth-century Low Countries on the supply, demand and the marketing of these goods. In the final section, treating the production and quality of luxury textiles, Peter Stabel investigates the effects that the transition of the cloth manufacture into a luxury industry in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth-century Low Countries had on the identity of its workers. Franco Franceschi deals with the chronology of the development of high-quality cloth production on the other side of the continent, in late medieval Italy. A parallel paper on the characteristics of the Italian silk industry between 1400 and 1600, written by Luca Molà, finishes the volume. Luxury textiles were objects that crossed geographical boundaries and created interdependent connections between territories and individuals. It is through the themes of consumption, commercialisation and production that our volume will explore these dynamics.

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