The Meaning of “Likeness”: Portrait-Painting in an Eighteenth-Century Consumer Society

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On the eve of the revolution Andrew Burnaby took what must have been for an Englishman the American equivalent of the Grand Tour. This Anglican minister traveled from Virginia to New Hampshire, recording conversations he had had with the “natives” in a large journal that was subsequently published in London. When Burnaby reached Rhode Island, he went out of his way to visit the house where George Berkeley, the famed immaterialist philosopher, had briefly resided some thirty years earlier. Local farmers entertained the visitor with stories about Berkeley, a thinker who they observed had held “wild and chimerical notions.”

Although their tales apparently amused Burnaby, he concluded that such materials would be largely out of the place in a formal journal and therefore begged “the reader’s indulgence” to repeat only a single story, presumably the best of the lot. Berkeley, it seems, envisioned “building a town upon the rocks” overlooking the ocean and had drawn plans for a road that would lead down to a sheltered beach. A man called Smibert—the locals told Burnaby that he was a “designer” who had accompanied Berkeley to America—remained skeptical. He asked a “ludicrous question concerning the future importance of the place.” To this inquiry the philosopher responded: “Truly, you have very little foresight, for in fifty years time every foot of land in this place will be as valuable as the land in Cheapside.” But according to the locals Smibert had the last laugh, for on the very spot where Berkeley had predicted a real estate boom, Burnaby saw only “an indifferent wooden house” and a dairy that had once served as the philosopher’s library.

The “designer” who asked such “ludicrous” questions, John Smibert, was one of the first professionally trained portrait painters to take up residence in colonial America. While Berkeley, his friend and patron, dreamed up quixotic real estate schemes, Smibert was presumably putting the final touches on a painting that has

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come to be known as the *Bermuda Group* (fig. 9). At the edge of this large canvas we encounter the painter himself. He peers at us, a sharp-featured man, looking a bit uncomfortable, even anxious, as if he had come to doubt the wisdom of exchanging the cosmopolitan comforts of London for the simplicity of colonial Rhode Island. One wonders why this intense person made so little impression upon the local farmers. Had the more curious among them not witnessed Smibert working on the *Bermuda Group*? Had they not heard that he later moved to Boston, becoming by the mid-1740s the most successful portrait painter in America? The vocabulary they used to describe him—he was the “designer”—seems strangely inappropriate for a man remembered as an artist. Why was he not a “painter,” for example? Or Smibert, the person who made portraits?  

Even today we remain uncertain how best to situate an accomplished artist like Smibert in eighteenth-century American society. To be sure, we know a great deal more than did the Rhode Island farmers about the details of the painter’s life. For Smibert, as well as for other, more obscure artists of the period, we possess impressive catalogues of surviving works, detailed investigations of the men and women who actually commissioned these paintings, and learned studies of each artist’s style and technique. But however valuable this scholarship—and this essay could not have been written without it—it does not satisfactorily link the artists and their works to a complex Anglo-American society which was in the process of generating many ideas and institutions that we now with the benefit of hindsight readily identify as modern.

Situating the provincial artists in a rapidly changing commercial society, therefore, involves a great deal more than collecting additional biographical detail or providing purely formalistic
commentary. The interpretive challenge requires us to consider how colonial Americans—in this case, painters, sitters, and viewers—went about the business of constructing a visual imagination out of the materials and experiences of everyday life. After all, the portrait was a project to which all participants brought a bundle of cultural assumptions. These notions, even when not fully articulated, informed conversation between artists and sitters. In other words, eighteenth-century painters were not engaged in the production of what we might call an objective "likeness." If they were to be successful in this provincial market, they had to craft images that resonated with broadly shared cultural meanings.

The reconstruction of social context might proceed in a number of different ways, some obviously more persuasive than others. One particular approach deserves special attention. Indeed, it is probably the most common way to get at the problem of linking the provincial artists and the society in which they worked. A respected art historian recently argued, for example, that the most successful portrait painters of Smibert's generation were men whose canvases reflected the core values of eighteenth-century America. The wealthy merchants and powerful lawyers—members of a colonial elite—apparently insisted on portraits that mirrored "their materialistic interests, their pragmatic outlook, their egalitarian spirit, and their quiet self-confidence, which came in part from the good life and the prosperity they had gained through their own labor. Such were the components defining the social being known as the colonial American . . . and it would be unthinkable that they should not appear as salient characteristics in the portraits of the upper-middle-class mercantile aristocracy." A struggling artist who did not understand what was expected of him or who foolishly introduced "artificial social conceptions or ideals" soon found himself without commissions.3

However plausible this straightforward reading of mideighteenth-century portraits may sound, it does not resolve several major interpretive problems. First, the logic of the analysis is circular. The modern critic seems to have decided in advance what cultural values prevailed in provincial society and then proceeded to locate them in the paintings. In other words, a twentieth-century art historian has projected meanings onto the colonial portraits, and although one applauds the effort to situate the artist in a specific social setting, the interpretation really amounts to little more than asserting that bourgeois Americans commissioned what look to be bourgeois portraits.

A second difficulty with this approach relates to the claim that colonial portraits were "objective" portrayals of "physical reality." This suggestion raises profound philosophic problems that need not detain us here.5 It is probably sufficient to observe that one would be hard pressed to demonstrate that these portraits were mere transparencies, windows that provide modern viewers with direct access to the core values of a lost colonial reality. What we encounter in the portraits—a point made powerfully by Jean-Paul Sartre in Nausea—are interpretations of reality, or more precisely, interpretations devised by artists and sitters of their place within an imagined Anglo-American society.6

This essay handles the problem of contextuality in a different way. It focuses on a social process known as self-fashioning.7 The very term implies human agency. Eighteenth-century men and women in conversation with artists like Smibert decided how they wanted to present themselves on canvas, and by attending closely to those elements of self-fashioning that were distinctive products of an eighteenth-century commercial society, we are able to recapture the culture meanings that the colonists, as opposed to the modern historian, brought to the creative exchange.

Such a hermeneutic strategy forces a radical reinterpretation of familiar mideighteenth-century portraits. I speculate here, for example, that for provincial Americans the central element in these paintings may have been the sitter's clothes, the character and the quality of the fabric, and not—as we have sometimes been led to believe—the posture of the body or the details of the face.8 In fact, it is in the context of a vast Anglo-American consumer society that we not only gain fresh insight into the cultural meaning of "likeness," but also connect the world of Smibert to that of ordinary colonial farmers.
such matters usually viewed the American colonies as a vital source of raw materials. Sugar, rice, and tobacco cultivated in the New World freed the English from dependence upon foreign products. This was classic mercantilism. What the political economists of the age were slow to appreciate was the importance of consumption in promoting happiness and prosperity throughout the empire. The facts, however, were clear enough for those who bothered to analyze them. Long before the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the English began demanding manufactured goods. The times were generally good; most workers had a little extra money in their pockets. And for those who were short of cash, storekeepers provided generous credit. Almost everyone in Great Britain could buy something—a small knife, a decorative plate, a piece of glassware, a yard of cloth—and with each passing year this domestic market grew. Roads and canals carried an ever-expanding number of items to eager purchasers; newspaper advertisements announcing the latest fashions fueled consumer desire.

Consumer demand, of course, was not an invention of the eighteenth century. It had a long history. Nevertheless, there was something strikingly unusual about this particular period. In previous societies, the wealthiest people had always purchased items that set them apart from the less well-off. In Roman times moralists had warned against the spread of Asiatic luxury; in the prosperous cities of Renaissance Italy an elite lived in personal splendor. In Georgian England, however, a much larger percentage of the population began to participate in the consumer marketplace. To be sure, this was an age of aristocratic resurgence, and the magnificent mansions that dotted the English countryside displayed the wealth of the great landholders. But a growing middling group, perhaps containing as many as a million people, also acquired the new manufactured goods. These people could not compete with the landed elite in the quality and quantity of items purchased. They attended fewer concerts, owned fewer suits and gowns, made do with domestic china. They did not, however, buy different categories of goods. Everyone that could afford to do so, for example, acquired at least some china. That was the secret of Josiah Wedgwood’s success. Entrepreneurs of his stripe created England’s first mass market; they recognized the difference between elite consumption and a consumer society.\(^9\)

The explosion of consumer demand transformed social relations in Great Britain. In fact, one historian has recently drawn attention to what he calls an eighteenth-century “revolution of manners.”\(^10\) In a society that allowed for a comparatively high level of social mobility—compared, that is, to contemporary European societies—people increasingly made claims to social status through the possession and display of goods. “Was there not,” Gerald Newman asks rhetorically in his splendid study of eighteenth-century English nationalism, “a pattern of sharpening cultural differentiation during this period, expressing itself through significant alterations in dress, speech, etiquette, taste, intellectual tone, manners, and morality?”\(^11\)

There is no doubt about the correct answer. Everywhere one looks, one encounters evidence of men and women attempting to distinguish themselves from members of other status groups, in other words, trying to establish clear markers separating themselves from all the others who were clambering up the social ladder. Consumer goods became the props in a new public theater of self-fashioning.\(^12\) The “peacocks” who populated the Georgian court knew this. So, too, did the middling sorts who gave up spitting in their homes and who worried about speaking proper grammar. The entire system was extraordinarily unstable, or so observers claimed at the time. People differentiated themselves through their relations to goods, and since anyone with money or credit might purchase a handsome new suit of clothes or set of dishes, no one excepting perhaps the peers of the realm enjoyed security of status. There were too many claimants; the gradations within the hierarchy were too narrow. Fear of losing place—as much as the dream of upward mobility—spurred additional purchases. Indeed, popular consumption gave a frenetic, competitive edge to eighteenth-century English society.

These social tensions help explain the passionate intensity of the debate over luxury. Conservative moralists complained that “fashion” was contaminating society. They hated the new forms of self-fashioning. The rage for distinction had spawned envy, discontent, insolence, and insubordination among the lower and middling orders. Almost every major author of this period contributed to the public discourse about the decay of social etiquette. The topic obsessed Tobias Smollett; it energized John Brown’s polemical writings. For these commentators, the prob-
lem was not original sin. The villain was mass consumption, a spreading evil that seemed inevitably to result in political leveling. Henry Fielding was only one of the many persons who sounded the alarm. In his *Enquiry into the Cause of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1751), Fielding announced that "the Introduction of Trade" had transformed the character of the lower orders. "This hath indeed given a new Face to the whole Nation, hath in great measure subverted the former State of Affairs, and hath almost totally changed the Manners, Customs, and Habits of the People, more especially the lower Sort. The Narrowness of their Fortune is changed into Wealth, the Simplicity of their Manners changed into Craft, their Frugality into Luxury, their Humility into Pride, and their Subjugation into Equality." The poorer people had become so addicted to material vices, Fielding argued, that they turned robber to fulfill their needs. Such criticism was not directed solely at the "lower Sort." Other English Jeremiahs of the mid-eighteenth century attacked the aspiring bourgeoisie not only for its expensive dress but also for its increasingly vocal demands for political reform.

Curiously, it was the Scots who most effectively undermined this dominant moral discourse. The major writers of this region openly questioned the negative effects of consumption. A few even dared to defend "luxury," noting that if nothing else, consumer demand stimulated the national economy and brought a higher level of comfort and prosperity to an ever-greater percentage of the population. In "Of Refinement in the Arts," David Hume shocked conservative sensibilities by stating that "Luxury is a word of an uncertain signification, and may be taken in a good as well as a bad sense." Whereas a Fielding or a Smollett berated consumer demand for unsettling the traditional social order, Hume saw it as personally liberating. The Scots, of course, condemned "vicious" luxury. In general, however, they argued that the possession of such goods freed people from dependence; it generated a spirit of "commerce and industry" among the populace. According to Hume, "In a nation, where there is no demand for such superfluities, men sink into indolence, lose all enjoyment of life, and are useless to the public, which cannot maintain or support its fleets and armies, from the industry of such slothful members."

My interest in this debate is not that of the intellectual historian. I am less concerned with the arguments of various authors for or against luxury than I am in the fact that most of them were fully conscious of the power of mass consumption to transform the character of their society. These were people trying their best to make sense out of a new social landscape, one in which economic life became "in itself a realm of representations." The colonial experience cannot be divorced from this English background. As eighteenth-century Americans became ever more dependent on Great Britain for a supply of manufactured goods, they also were compelled to confront the moral and political implications of self-fashioning in a consumer society.

The colonists were quickly incorporated into this expanding consumer market. Indeed, Ralph Davis, an economic historian, claims that the colonies became the dynamic element in the commerce of eighteenth-century Britain. English merchants responded to the protectionist policies that increasingly cut them off from traditional Continental markets by exporting ever larger quantities of finished manufactured goods to the New World. During the early decades of the century the American trade rose steadily. The major takeoff, however, occurred in the 1740s. Exports to the colonies accelerated dramatically. The effects of this sudden growth were soon apparent on both sides of the Atlantic. According to Davis, "The process of industrialization in England from the second quarter of the eighteenth century was to an important extent a response to colonial demand for nails, axes, fire-arms, buckets, coaches, clocks, saddles, handkerchiefs, buttons, cordage and a thousand other things." This flood of exports finally overwhelmed the clerks of the British Customers service, and after midcentury they began lumping the scores of smaller consumer articles into a single general category—"Goods, several sorts."

This growth was a reflection in part of England's own protectionist policies. The colonies were covered by the Navigation Acts, seventeenth-century statutes that prohibited the Americans from importing manufactured goods from any place other than Great Britain. Articles of Continental origin had to be transshipped through an English port, thus adding considerably to the price that the American consumer eventually paid. Adam Smith, a harsh critic of mercantilism, grumbled in *Wealth of Nations* that "a great empire has been established for the sole purpose of raising up a nation of customers who
should be obliged to buy from the shops of our different producers, all the goods with which these could supply them.” For the sake of maintaining this American monopoly, he insisted, “the home-consumers have been burdened with the whole expense of maintaining and defending the empire.”

But in this instance, Smith probably overrated the impact of the Navigation Acts on the flow of trade. The driving engine of this commerce was American demand. The colonists wanted the products of the English manufacturers as much as did the people of Great Britain. A few statistics indicate exactly what was happening. As Benjamin Franklin and others observed, the population of eighteenth-century America was doubling about every twenty-five years, a rate of growth so extraordinary that it became the foundation for Thomas Malthus’s dark theories about the relation between population and food supply. But the colonists did not starve. They became consumers, purchasing finished manufactured goods at a rate that actually exceeded the expansion of population. Between 1720 and 1770, for example, per capita American imports went up by approximately 50 percent. Even these numbers underreport the trend. Since so many colonists at any given moment were young children and dependent workers, the bulk of the purchases must have been made by free adults. A fraction of the population, in other words, was buying ever-larger quantities of British goods. One estimate places the annual per capita expenditure on foreign imports between 1761 and 1770 at £3.35. Since the per capita income in this period was about £12, we must conclude that Americans spent about a quarter of their income on manufactured items.

These statistics surprise us largely because we have come to see colonial America as a society composed of self-sufficient yeomen. There is no question that the overwhelming majority of people grew their own food. But in other matters they do not seem to have been able—nor particularly eager—to achieve full economic independence. Most households in the third quarter of the eighteenth century did not even have the capacity to produce cloth. They either lacked an adequate supply of raw fiber or did not possess the tools necessary to meet a family’s basic clothing needs. An historian who has examined colonial probate records concludes that “in America only a fraction of what people wore or put on their tables and beds had been spun at home.” The colonists’ dependence on Great Britain for ceramics, metal goods, and glassware—just to name a few items—was even more pronounced. The weekly newspapers contained scores of advertisements announcing the arrival of the “latest goods from England.” As in the homeland, the availability of easy credit opened the market to colonists of modest income. What was happening, of course, was that men and women throughout America were being integrated into an expanding, complex imperial economy, and though their primary loyalties were as always to family and community, they increasingly found that their sense of self was being transformed by external economic forces largely beyond their control.

This was not a development that most Americans seem to have resented. Being part of an Anglo-American empire in this period meant having access to manufactured goods, items that radically changed their material culture, making it warmer, cleaner, and more colorful. It was certainly more convenient to purchase a bolt of cloth from a shopkeeper than to produce it oneself. In this sense, Hume was correct. The spread of the consumer economy could be for many ordinary people immensely liberating. And for most of them, the very notion of being members of a British empire was bound up with these personal, highly symbolic transactions. For much of the eighteenth century, in fact, the burden of imperial authority weighed lightly upon the Americans. They could go months without even seeing a royal official; most of them had little personal involvement in the frontier wars against the French. We must conclude, therefore, that the “anglicization” of eighteenth-century American culture was largely a function of the marketplace. No doubt the process operated in different ways in different regions. But whatever the details may have been, there can be no disputing that the men and women who purchased these imports, wore English cloth, drank out of English glassware, ate off of English plates, shot English guns charged with English powder, smoked English pipes, and recorded their thoughts on English paper had by the eve of the revolution acquired an outlook on culture and society that was profoundly English.

Access to these imported manufactures was most certainly not restricted to members of the colonial elite. As in Great Britain, wealthier peo-
ple purchased goods of better quality, but even Americans of rather humble status—urban laborers, for example—could afford to buy something. A complex merchandising system developed to reach these scattered consumers. The large wholesalers like the Hancocks of Boston or the Beekmans of New York handled huge quantities of goods. They then sold—or more likely gave out on credit—various English manufactures to storekeepers located in the cities and the countryside. In the South the distribution was usually channeled through a resident Scottish factor.

And throughout eighteenth-century America one encountered peddlers, the men whom one leading wholesaler called simply "my country chaps." What strikes us about these itinerant salespeople (the peddlers were female as well as male) is how eager the colonial consumers were to do business. Local buyers literally assailed the peddlers on the streets. In 1740 Alexander Hamilton, a Maryland physician, and his black servant ran into some of these aggressive purchasers in Newport. Hamilton reported that they arrived "betwixt seven and eight at night, a thick fog having risen, so that I could scarce find the town. When within a quarter of a mile of it my man, upon account of the portmanteau, was in the dark taken for a peddler by some people in the street, whom I heard coming about him and inquiring what he had got to sell." Hamilton later met a peddler in Stonington, Connecticut, who had traveled with his goods all the way from Annapolis. Many colonial assemblies attempted to control the itinerants, who they suspected of dealing in stolen goods. Such efforts inevitably failed. There were too many Americans who wanted to see what the peddlers had for sale.

These imported manufactures changed patterns of self-fashioning in provincial America. The articles became markers, status indicators, that allowed people to think of themselves and others in relation to goods. Or, stated in slightly different terms, the colonists of the mid-eighteenth century increasingly communicated social status through possession of imported English goods. It is, of course, difficult to document such shifts with precision. The evidence by its very nature is bound to be impressionistic. Fortunately, Benjamin Franklin provides powerful insight into this psychological process. In his Autobiography Franklin describes how imported articles could acquire symbolic significance.

... my breakfast was a long time bread and milk (no tea), and I ate it out of a twopenny earthen porringer, with a pewter spoon. But mark how luxury will enter families, and make a progress, in spite of principle: being call'd one morning to breakfast, I found it in a China bowl, with a spoon of silver! They had been bought for me without my knowledge by my wife, and had cost her the enormous sum of three-and-twenty shillings, for which she had no other excuse or apology to make, but that she thought her husband deserv'd a silver spoon and China bowl as well as any of his neighbors. This was the first appearance of plate and China in our house, which afterward, in a course of years, as our wealth increas'd, augmented gradually to several hundred pounds in value.

Franklin is telling us something about the psychology of taste in provincial America. His wife—and women seem to have played a major role in the consumption of imported goods—took her cues from "neighbors." In other words, she defined in part her standing in the community through the possession of visible English manufactures. The neighbors in turn probably learned about the fashion for china from newspapers that advertised the "latest goods from London" or from smart retail shops in Philadelphia. They were all students of the subtle process of social differentiation through goods. And as the quoted passage suggests, none was more perspicacious than Franklin himself. He recognized that his own social identity as an Anglo-American was somehow bound up in the silver spoon and china bowl. The purchases, of course, did not stop with a memorable breakfast. This form of presentation of self was expensive, and as Franklin looked back upon his long career, he recognized that his own success had been punctuated by additional acquisitions valued at "several hundred pounds."

The cost of maintaining one's place in this society amazed some colonists. John Wayles, a Virginian employed by a large Bristol merchant house, knew exactly how much the new material culture was costing the Chesapeake planters. During the early 1740s a local gentleman seldom ran up a debt to an English merchant of more than a thousand pounds. But consumption had changed the rules. The merchants offered easy credit, and the planters ran with the latest fash-
ions. By 1766 no one worried about a debt of over ten thousand pounds. "Luxury & expensive living," Wayles reported, "have gone hand in hand with the increase of wealth. In 1740 I don't remember to have seen such a thing as a turkey Carpet in the Country except a small thing in a bed chamber. Now nothing are so common as Turkey or Wilton Carpetts, the whole Furniture of the Roomes Elegant & every appearance of Opulence." 24 Wayles was less concerned about the morality of conspicuous consumption than about the possibility that his high-living customers might not pay their bills. 25 

For other Americans, however, the condemnation of luxury became almost an obsessive theme. Their shrill language paralleled that of the contemporary English discourse. Consumer goods had unsettled society. People no longer knew their proper place; they had forgotten God. The narcotic of fashion had undermined traditional values. If nothing else, the very passion of this rhetoric reveals how dramatically these goods must have changed colonial patterns of self-presentation. In 1740, for example, two gentlemen who were touring the northern colonies recorded the shocking excesses of a young farmer and his wife who lived just outside New York City. These patronizing visitors picked up quickly on the visible cues of material culture. One man "observed several superfluous things which showed an inclination to finery in these poor people; such as a looking-glass with a painted frame, half a dozen pewter spoons, and as many plates, old and worn out, but bright and clean, a set of stone tea dishes and a teapot." Such articles, the travelers decided, were too extravagant for this humble cottage, and one of them advised selling these goods "to buy wool to make yarn; that a little water in a wooden pail might serve for a looking-glass, and wooden plates and spoons would be as good for use, and when clean would be almost as ornamental. As for the tea equipage, it was quite unnecessary." 26 We do not know how the members of this family received this instruction. One suspects, however, that like Benjamin Franklin they added steadily to their inventory of English imports.

Colonial ministers, especially during the Great Awakening, railed against ostentatious consumption, equating luxury with sin. In 1727 the Reverend Thomas Prince used the occasion of an earthquake to warn his parishioners of the dangers of exalting themselves "against the Glorious God." The concern for externality, for self-fash-

ioning through worldly possessions, promoted selfishness. "It expresses it self," the Boston minister explained, "in Boasting of and Praising our Persons or Actions [and] in extravagant Apparel, Building, Furniture, expensive and pompous ways of living." 27 A few years later a Boston newspaper reported that the evangelist James Davenport had actually destroyed the "corrupting goods" in a huge fire in New London. He instructed his followers that they "were guilty of idolizing their apparel, and should therefore divest themselves of those things especially [those that] were for ornament, and let them be burnt." 28 But perhaps to no one's surprise, Davenport did not roll back the consumer society. Nor did George Whitefield or Jonathan Edwards do much better. It was not that colonial buyers were unmindful of the perils of worldliness. No doubt, for many people, the acquisition of English imports created a certain amount of guilt. Such feeling may have discouraged extreme forms of conspicuous consumption. In the end, however, the goods poured into America, and those like Governor James Glen of South Carolina who tried to resist the tide were left sputtering: "I cannot help expressing my surprise and Concern to find that there are annually imported into this Province, considerable quantities of Fine Flanders Laces, the Finest Dutch Linens, and French Cambricks, Chints, Hyson Tea, and other East India Goods, Silks, Gold and Silver Lace, &c. . . . By these means we are kept in low circumstances. . . . I have always endeav- ored to correct and restrain the vices of Extrava-gance and luxury by my own example." 29

As much of this commercial evidence suggests, the most important article among the British exports to eighteenth-century America—in terms of value as well as bulk—was cloth. The customs records reveal that approximately half of all colonial imports consisted of textiles. Some of these originated in foreign countries—silks, calicoes, and German linens, for example—and thus had to be reexported to the colonies through an English port. Most textiles purchased by the Americans, however, had been manufactured in Europe. Various types of woolens sold especially well. In fact, between 1754 and 1774 the amount of woolens shipped to the mainland colonies increased by over 300 percent. 30 It would not be a great exaggeration to claim that cloth held the empire together—it did, at least for the Americans. These fabrics acquired an emblematic character. They provided a palpa-
ble link with England, a physical tie that literally touched almost every colonist. If, as I have argued, the culture of eighteenth-century America was becoming increasingly anglicized, then surely a central element in that process was cloth.  

Self-fashioning through textiles became an exciting preoccupation in colonial society. These fabrics introduced Americans to an unprecedented range of consumer choice. The change occurred rather rapidly. In the early decades of the century, merchants offered a limited variety of textiles. After 1740, however, the market suddenly became alive with possibilities. One could purchase different textures and weights; shopkeepers offered an impressive selection of colors and designs. A survey of advertisements in the newspapers of New York City indicates the speed of this transformation. In 1733 there was only a single notice for satin. By the 1750s merchants found it necessary to distinguish various grades and colors: black satin, blue satin, corded satin, crimson satin, green satin, laced satin, pellelong satin, pink satin, red satin, spotted satin, white satin, and yellow satin. The colonists described cloth in a language richer and more complex than their parents would have known. This was not a vocabulary restricted to dry-goods merchants. The public understood—indeed, came to expect—a precise listing of offerings. In the *New-York Weekly Journal* of 4 June 1753 Thomas Forsey announced that readers would find in his store “in Hanover Square, just opposite the meat market”:

> Broad-cloths, german serges, sagathees, duroys, penstons, shalloons, tamies, stuff, durants, bear-skins, camblettes, broad camblets, ever-lasting call-immancos, stamp’d camplets, ozennbigs, 3-4, 7-8, yard-wide, yard and 3-8 and 6-4 linnen and cotton checks; cotton holland, cotton gowns, 3-4 and 7-8 garlicks, scotch hankerchiefs, A choice assortment of cambricks, flower’d, strip’d and check’d lawns clear and pistol, do. tandums, sileasias, brown, do. britannias, diaper and damask clotting, table cloths . . . packit cambricks, satinn, damask, black, yellow, and light-colored china and persian taffeties, strip’d persians, tandem, dowlass, a choice assortment calicoes, buckram, allapeens, silk crapes, cotton romale, turky tobinies, turkey and highland plad. . . .

In the same issue of this journal, Forsey’s competitor on Dock Street, Dirck Brickenhoff, lured customers with “venitian poplins, check’d and corded, do. bombazeens, irish camblets, worsted brocades. . . . All of these, he declared, had been “Just imported from London.”

It is worth noting that during this period many colonial shopkeepers began carrying mirrors, especially the small, affordable looking-glasses employed in personal grooming. This may have been the first generation of Americans who could conveniently check how they actually appeared in public. The colonists admired themselves in these different fabrics. They decided whether they looked better in yellow or red, stripes or solids, light cottons or heavy woolens. They could monitor the process of self-fashioning anytime they pleased.

Americans developed a good eye for textiles. It is surprising how often their descriptions of other people drew attention to the quality and color of garments. These word-pictures sometimes amounted to little more than commentaries on fashion. Philip Fithian was not a person whom one would expect to have noticed such things. This religious young man, a recent graduate of Princeton, served as a tutor for the children of Robert Carter. Fithian kept a private journal of his experiences at Nomini Hall, one of the largest plantations in Virginia. One summer evening in 1774 he met Miss Betsy Lee. “She wore a light Chintz Gown,” Fithian recounted, “very fine, with a blue stamp; elegantly made, & which set well upon her—She wore a blue silk Quilt—In one word Her Dress was rich & fashionable. . . .” On another occasion he explained that when they attended church, “Almost every Lady wears a red Cloak; and when they ride out they tye a white handkerchief over their Head and face.” It was not only outsiders who made such observations. The Virginians commented extensively on the cut of Fithian’s garments. When John Bartram, one of America’s first botanists, set off in 1737 to visit two of Virginia’s most influential planters, a friend advised him to purchase a new set of clothes, “for though I should not esteem thee less, to come to me in what dress thou will,—yet these Virginians are a very gentle, well-dressed people—and look, perhaps, more at a man’s outside than his inside.”

When Bartram’s friend used the word *outside*, in all probability he was not referring to the botanist’s physical features. It was clothes that mattered. To be sure, Americans took note of an individual’s height and weight. They spotted ob-
vious deformities. But when called upon to describe another colonist they inevitably concentrated on the color and quality of the person's garments. One sees this sensitivity to textiles expressed most dramatically in the frequent newspaper advertisements for runaway servants. These descriptions contained general information about hair color and body type. It was clothes, however, that received the most detailed attention. An advertisement that ran in the Virginia Gazette explained that when William Smith disappeared, "He had on . . . a light coloured broad cloth coat, which is broke at the elbows, and with very few buttons on it, a pail duroy waistcoat, a pair of deep blue sagathy breeches, coarse shoes, several pair of stockings, steel buckles, coarse felt hat, a Newmarket coat of light bath coating, not bound, but stitched on the edges with death head buttons on it, a pair of wrappers, rather of a darker colour than the Newmarket coat . . . he likewise carried off with him a black sattin capuchin, a piece of new Virginia cloth, containing eight yards, striped with blue and copperass." Such advertisements for servants appeared in newspapers throughout the colonies, indicating if nothing else that the consumer revolution touched the lives of even the most humble eighteenth-century Americans. During the French and Indian War, military authorities attempting to track down deserters employed virtually the same descriptive language. When John Thomas left Captain Thomas Shaw's Company of New Jersey Provincials, for example, he "had on . . . a white Drugget Jacket, and Breeches of the same, a Calico under Jacket, check Shirt, grey Worsted Stockings and new Shoes, with large Brass Buckles in them."  

Social distinctions expressed through the quality of cloth extended even to the decoration of the various Virginia churches. As historian Dell Upton explains, "Expenditures on textiles could easily outstrip even elaborate architectural work in parish churches." In 1751 one parish spent over £103 in Virginia currency, a large sum of money, to obtain imported crimson velvet hangings with gold fringe and lace. The decision doubled the local church rate, but no one seems to have complained. After all, most Virginia parishes "preferred imported crimson or red velvet hangings. Less wealthy parishes chose ingrain broadcloth in crimson or purple."  

The most graphic account of a colonist attempting to negotiate social status through cloth comes from Maryland. Dr. Alexander Hamilton—the man whom we encountered in Newport with his serving man—entered a rural tavern called Curtis's, located on the Maryland-Pennsylvania border. There he met William Morison, an individual to whom Hamilton took an immediate dislike. Morison, it seems, was "a very roughspun, forward, clownish blade, much addicted to swearing, [and] at the same time desirous to pass for a gentleman." The proprietor certainly did not think he merited special treatment. She took one look at his clothes—"a greasy jacket and breeches, and a dirty worsted cap"—and concluded that Morison must be a "ploughman or carman." And at Curtis's such persons received weak tea and scraps of cold veal.

When he saw his meal, Morison exploded, yelling that it was only the presence of another gentleman that kept him from throwing "her cold scraps out of the window and [breaking] her table all to pieces, should it cost him 100 pounds for damages." Lest no one question his claims, Morison exchanged "his worsted night-cap" for a "linen one out of his pocket" and announced to the assembled onlookers, "Now . . . I'm upon the borders of Pennsylvania and must look like a gentleman." But even after they had departed the tavern, Morison remained defensive, as if he suspected that the doctor really did think him a common laborer. As Hamilton recounted, Morison 'told us that tho' he seemed to be but a plain, homely fellow, yet he would have us know that he was able to afford better than many that went finer; he had good linen in his bags, a pair of silver buckles, silver clasps, and gold sleeve buttons, two Holland shirts and some neat nightcaps." And to clinch the case, he bragged that "his little woman at home drank tea twice a day." Morison assumed that Hamilton—and the owner of Curtis's for that matter—understood the language of goods. They were all products of a consumer society, people skilled in interpreting the cues of a richly textured material culture.

Like almost everyone else in this Anglo-American empire of goods, colonial portrait painters were caught up in a swirling consumer economy. They crafted objects that eighteenth-century Americans wanted to buy. Though this state-
ment is obviously a commonplace, it helps to frame a hermeneutic interpretation. It directs our attention away from purely aesthetic judgments and encourages us to situate their work within a world of commerce. It helps us to understand how they wove the materials and experiences of everyday life into a distinctly new set of visual symbols. This claim is not intended to degrade their artistic accomplishment. Copley and West produced magnificent paintings. By considering these portraits within a specific historical context, however, we begin to reconstruct lost meanings that might otherwise escape our attention.

One way to force a rethinking of interpretive categories—to link artists and sitters in a common cultural project—is to see the painters themselves as articles of commerce. The portrait painters of midcentury—the great majority in any case—were themselves colonial imports. Their very presence in America is testimony to the close connection between art and commerce in this society. Many migrated after 1740, the year that marks the dramatic rise in colonial consumption. Like other migrants, British artists traveled to the New World looking for economic opportunities. And judging from their activities once they had arrived, we must conclude that these men knew a good deal about how to run a small business. It was not uncommon for them to advertise in local newspapers. In May 1752, for example, Lawrence Kilburn announced in the New-York Weekly Post-Boy that he had “just arrived from London,” and he guaranteed that any person “inclined to favor him in having their Pictures drawn, that he don’t doubt of pleasing them... and giving agreeable Satisfaction, as he has heretofore done to Gentlemen and Ladies in London.” This was the same argument that merchants used to sell cloth and other goods. Kilburn took for granted the anglicization of the American consumer. Other artists ran advertisements in Boston and Charleston.

Some American painters became shopkeepers in the New World. However disappointed they may have been, they discovered that only the most talented artists could support themselves by portraits alone. During the late 1740s Geradus Duyckinck II sold paints and looking glasses in New York City. He also gave drawing lessons. Thomas Johnson of Boston offered an even wider assortment of imported goods. His trade card of 1732 stated that Johnson sold furnitures, “japaned” woods, “Looking-Glasses,” and “Coach, Chaise, or Sign Painting at Reasonable Rates.” Even a person like Smibert, who received important commissions, was forced to maintain what today might be called an art supply store. He carried a selection of prints and glass. In fact, the only Smibert letters that have been preserved concern his business dealings with a London agent.

Like the peddlers who hawked English goods from town to town, the American painters were highly mobile, a sort of commercial itinerant. Almost every biography of an eighteenth-century artist mentions travel. John Wollaston may have held the record, for like his famous contemporary George Whitefield—a revivalist who was known as the Great Itinerant—Wollaston took extended trips in America. He is known to have worked in New York, Maryland, Virginia, Philadelphia, and Charleston. John Hesselius came close to matching Wollaston’s performance. He left a trail of paintings scattered through Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. Copley and West left their homes to try their luck in New York City. Joseph Blackburn shifted his activities from Boston to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Robert Feke accepted commissions in Philadelphia as well as Boston. And not a few colonial painters simply disappeared from the records after working in a town for only a few months. Like commercial travelers, they probably had taken to the road in search of new business.

Portrait painters operated in a peculiar market. After all, they were not selling a finished product. Both parties—sitter and artist—had to negotiate the details of a process by working out schedules and prices. During these discussions colonial consumers do not seem to have been intimidated by the painter’s “expertise.” They expressed opinions and made demands. It is perhaps not surprising that many commissions during this period came from newly successful merchants, or in other words, from businessmen who were used to bargaining over goods. Artists tried to anticipate these expectations. In 1744 Smibert demonstrated good judgment by ordering from London a set of prints depicting ships of “modern construction.” He explained to his agent that he intended to employ these models “in a distant view in Portraits of Merchts etc who choose such.”

It was by making such choices that merchants
participated in the production of an artifact, which is exactly how many of them perceived the process. The portrait was an object, an article of commerce, an ornament to be displayed with other possessions. Americans who were not merchants shared this materialist perspective. It was a turn of mind that drove the ablest artists, especially those who rose to prominence in the late colonial period, to distraction. Benjamin West recounted for his biographer, John Galt, the constraints the market placed on the artistic imagination.

In New York Mr. West found the society wholly devoted to mercantile pursuits. A disposition to estimate the value of things, not by their utility, or by their beauty, but by the price which they would bring in the market, almost universally prevailed. Mercantile men are habituated by the nature of their transactions to overlook the intrinsic qualities of the very commodities in which they deal. . . . The population of New York was formed of adventures from all parts of Europe, who had come thither for the express purpose of making money. . . . Although West, therefore, found in that city much employment in taking likenesses destined to be transmitted to relations and friends, he met with few in whom he found any disposition congenial to his own. 

Though Galt surely exaggerated, there was no question that it irritated people like West to be treated as a mere artisan, a maker of commodities. In 1767 Copley informed an English correspondent—again, somewhat hyperbolically—that “A taste of painting is too much Wanting [in America] to afford any kind of helps; and was it not for preserving the ressemblance of particular persons, painting would not be known in the place. The people generally regard it [as] no more than any other useful trade, as they sometimes term it, like that of a Carpenter[,] tailor or shew maker, not as one of the most noble Arts in the World.”

Copley had a point. People in the eighteenth century did consider paintings as wall furniture. Wealthy colonists regarded the huge, elegantly framed canvas as an essential element in fashionable interior design. The portrait did not seem to enjoy independent standing as fine art. It found meaning for contemporary Americans largely within a context of other objects. Fithian helps us to comprehend this way of viewing material culture. When he visited Mount Airy, the magnificent Tayloe plantation located on the Rappahannock River, the young tutor noted, “The House is about the Size of Mr. Carter's [sic], built with Stone, & finished curiously, & ornamented with various paintings, & rich pictures.” Northernners recorded similar reactions. During a tour of western Massachusetts in 1760, Paul Coffin, a Harvard student, commented on the disparity between the external and internal appearance of the homes. “The Painting and Utensils and Furniture in the House,” Coffin observed “did not equal outward Appearance of their Houses in this part of the Country.”

Like Fithian, Coffin lumped paintings in with a number of other goods. Size and context seemed to have determined as much as quality how one responded to this “wall furniture.” That is certainly what Charles Carroll, perhaps the richest planter in Maryland, believed. He was dismayed when he heard that Charles Willson Peale had decided to specialize in miniature painting. There was no market for such works in America. “I would have you Consider,” he wrote to the young artist, who was then studying in London, “whether that may be so advantageous to you here or whether it may suit so much the Taste of the People with us as Larger Portrait Painting which I think would be a Branch of the Profession that would turn out to Greater Profit here.”

3

As Carroll and other colonial patrons knew full well, however, size alone did not assure excellence. Americans expected portrait painters to produce a “likeness.” As we have already noted, this is an extremely elusive term. On one level it involves no more than an insistence on absolute realism: did the sitter really look like the person in the painting? According to Jules Prown, Copley owed his financial success to his ability to produce portraits precisely of this type. “Copley's clients wanted realism,” Prown writes, “and Copley gave it to them. Like any successful Boston dealer in a commodity for which there was a market, he reaped all the rewards that society had to offer.”

Such claims—correct though they may be—are based almost completely on the fact that people purchased these paintings. We have almost no evidence how provincial Americans actually viewed the works. William Byrd provides one notable exception. John Perceval, Earl of Eg-
mont, sent the Virginia planter a portrait of himself. At an earlier time in Byrd's life the two men had been close friends, and the American was fully aware that the powerful Egmont was in a position to distribute political favors. "I have the pleasure," Byrd declared in a letter in 1736, "of conversing a great deal with your picture. It is incomparably well done & the painter has not only hit your ayr, but some of the vertues too which use to soften and enliven your features. So that every connoisseur that sees it, can see t'was drawn for a generous, benevolent, & worthy person."58 After the passage of so many years, Byrd still recognizes Egmont, and the portrait brings back pleasant memories. There is nothing in the Virginian's fawning letter, however, to suggest that he had the slightest interest in the artist who painted the picture. Nor, for that matter, in the color or composition of the portrait. He looked at the painting the way that someone today might view a snapshot in a family album.

We should not make too much of Byrd's letter. Most Americans who commissioned portraits in the mid-eighteenth century apparently did not want the artist to produce an exact mirrorlike depiction. They were certainly not interested in a realism that included—as Oliver Cromwell might have said—warts and all.59 The painter and sitter participated in a process of self-fashioning. Both parties fully understood what was at stake. The goal was not simply to represent the sitter, but rather to depict that person as he or she wanted to be represented. In this sense, the painting of a portrait involved a cultural conversation. The artist and client understood realism within the context of an anglicizing society, one in which, as we have seen, people increasingly defined themselves and their relations to others through English imports. It is not surprising, therefore, that colonial artists freely borrowed ideas for composition and costume from English prints. They were being paid to fashion Anglo-Americans.60

Even in this expanded context, however, "likeness" remains a problem. In portraits painted by Copley one can appreciate the personality of the sitter. He presents these people as distinct individuals. We can read the signs of human strength and weakness on their faces. But Copley was unusual. The majority of the paintings that survive from the mid-eighteenth century shows us men and women who seem to have been cloned for a common source. When one looks at the faces of the colonists painted by John Wollaston, Robert Feke, John Hesselius, Joseph Blackburn, and Jeremiah Theus—productive and successful painters—one is overcome by a sort of visual déjá vu (see figs. 10–11). We repeatedly encounter the same square-jawed, almond-eyed, awkward men and women. The female faces are particularly disappointing.61 One wonders how Americans could possibly have accepted these portraits as genuine "likenesses"? Were they looking at some aspect of the painting that eludes us today?

The answer has already been suggested by William Morison, the "roughspun, forward, clownish blade" whom Dr. Hamilton encountered in a Maryland tavern. The eye is drawn in these midcentury portraits not to the faces, but to the garments the people wore. However poorly a painter handled a sitter's physical features, he almost always managed to capture the brilliance and luster of the clothes. Indeed, these portraits celebrate the colorful silks and rich satins, the bright velvets and gold lace that colonial merchants were then importing in such volume from Great Britain. The provincial Americans were concerned in these portraits to fashion a visual identity through cloth. It was in this manner that they expressed their individuality; the textiles distinguished them from other sitters. This was a material language that the "drapery painters" whom they hired fully understood.62

In colonial America these men did very well for themselves. And none seems to have succeeded better than John Wollaston. This itinerant artist painted at least three hundred portraits in the colonies (e.g., see fig. 12). Modern critics who have viewed this scattered work have expressed considerable ambivalence about Wollaston's artistic achievement. Though the faces of his sitters possess a dull sameness, their garments are painted brilliantly. George Groce, for example, praised "the sheen of [Wollaston's] satins, the soft warmth of his velvets, and the delicate pattern of his laces. . . ."63 And Edgar P. Richardson claims that what Wollaston's works "lacked in characterization was made up by his skill in painting laces, silks, and satins." He notes that these portraits must be seen in the context of Georgian drawing rooms, where one can fully appreciate the large canvasses in relation to other decorative objects. "That a painter," Richardson explains, "whose skill lay in painting
Fig. 10. Robert Feke, *Mrs. Charles Willing*, 1746, oil on canvas, 50 × 40 in. Courtesy, Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Del.
Fig. 11. Jeremiah Theus, *Elizabeth Wragg Manigault (Mrs. Peter Manigault)*, 1757, oil on canvas, 49\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 39\(\frac{3}{8}\) in. Courtesy of the Charleston Museum, Charleston, S.C.
Fig. 13. John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. John Amory (Katherine Greene)*, c. 1764, oil on canvas, 49½ × 40 in. (125.7 × 101.6 cm). M. and M. Karolik Collection of Eighteenth-Century American Arts. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
textiles rather than faces should enjoy such success implies an intense desire for portraits among the colonial gentry and the acceptance of the portrait more as a symbol of status than as a person characterization.64 Richardson's analysis can be pushed another step. It is true that the portrait itself was a symbol of status. But—and this is the point Richardson missed—status was also negotiated through the quality and character of the fabric that the sitter chose to wear at the moment of self-fashioning.

Sometimes these relationships became quite complex. Copley, for example, painted three women—Mrs. John Amory, Mrs. Daniel Hubbard, and Mrs. John Murray—in exactly the same dress (figs. 13–14). The design for this gown in turn was taken from an English mezzotint by John Faber of Mary Finch, Viscountess Andover (fig. 15). What seems to have occurred was that each American woman—no doubt influenced by Copley himself—made a conscious decision to look exactly like the English lady depicted in the print. Again we see colonists participating in a process of self-fashioning. Each sitter appears in a dress of a strikingly different color. This discovery suggested to Frederick Sweet “that Copley was working from actual materials. All three ladies are painted in a very solid, three-dimensional manner and their voluminous gowns seem to stand out in a clearly defined space. . . . This implies the actual presence of his sitters dressed in a model gown and could not have been achieved if he had merely copied the entire mezzotint except for the head.”65 In other words, for these three colonists the central element of the portrait was not how they looked, but how they looked in a specific garment. With Copley’s help they manipulated “reality.” They were playing at being English. And in the consumer society in which they lived, all three were apparently content to express their individuality through the color of a dress.

To see this kind of self-fashioning as a distinguishing characteristic of eighteenth-century society or as the special preserve of an elite within that society would be a mistake. There was nothing uniquely American about the relation between art and commerce. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, one might speculate that similar cultural and economic forces were at work in seventeenth-century Holland, a nation that probably experienced mass consumption earlier than any other in Europe and that, according to Svetlana Alpers, encouraged the “privileging of portraiture.”66 This art form was also extremely popular in Georgian England, another society that was being transformed by broad popular consumption. The same may have been true among the very wealthy in contemporary Ireland.67 The interpretation advanced here is structural, rather than chronologic. It tells us something significant about a specific historical context and in no way anticipates the subsequent development of American art.

Nor would I argue that this framework of analysis applies only to a colonial elite. From the perspective advanced here it makes no sense to separate “high” or “patrician” art from other forms of self-fashioning in early America. To be sure, only the wealthiest members of this society could afford to commission a major painter to do their portrait. Even in “folk” or “primitive” works, however, one finds the same concern for presenting the sitter in relation to objects, especially to British manufactures. A painting from the Garbisch collection, Susanna Truax (fig. 16), provides an example of this phenomenon. This portrait by an unknown artist shows a young girl outfitted in a bright, striped dress, obviously a garment made of imported cloth. On a table one sees a tea pot, sugar cubes, and a cup and saucer. Though the picture does not possess the finely detailed lines of a work by Copley, it clearly situates the girl within an Anglo-American consumer economy. Like William Morison, the man who bragged of owning a linen cap and several holland shirts, she demands the viewer’s attention. A tea set and a fashionable dress support her claim to social standing. What gives this painting special charm is the fact that Susanna Truax is so demonstrably at ease among her possessions.

I returned finally to the original challenge of situating those portraits in a specific historical context. It is important to avoid a reductionist interpretation. There were obviously many different ways to read these eighteenth-century paintings, and each possesses strengths and weaknesses. I have argued here that the portraits of this period were doubly encoded. On one level the portraits themselves were artifacts, not unlike the fancy tea sets and fine textiles. They allowed the colonists who possessed them to differentiate themselves from those who did not.
Fig. 14. John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. Daniel Hubbard*, 1764, oil on canvas, 58 x 48 in. The Art Institute of Chicago Purchase Fund, 1947.28. Copyright 1990 The Art Institute of Chicago, all rights reserved.
Fig. 15. John Faber after Thomas Hudson, *Mary Finch, Viscountess Andover*, 1746, mezzotint, 12\(\frac{3}{4}\) × 9\(\frac{3}{8}\) in. The Trustees of the British Museum.
Fig. 16. Gansevoort Limner, possibly Pieter Vanderlyn, *Susanna Truax*, 1730, oil on canvas, 37¼ × 32¾ in. (95.8 × 83.6 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.
In this sense the portraits were what Copley and West most feared: wall furniture, mere ornaments in a consumer society. On another level, however, these paintings show people living with goods and making status claims through their relation to goods. These works explore the meaning of “likeness” for men and women who were busy fashioning new social identities within an Anglo-American empire. Put somewhat differently, the portraits were at once objects in a consumer society and a cultural commentary upon that society.

Notes


In a subsequent book I intend to explore what distinguishes the consumer society of the mideighteenth century from those of other periods. Several historians have argued that a major—if not the major—transformation in the relation of the self to manufactured goods occurred in the late nineteenth century. T. J. Clark, for example, dates what he terms the “colonization of everyday life” from this period. This massive shift, he explains, involved an “internal extension of the capitalist market—the invasion and restructuring of whole areas of free time, private life, leisure, and personal expression which had been left, in the first push to constitute an urban proletariat, relatively uncontrolled. It indicates a new phase of commodity production—the marketing, the making-into-commodities, of whole areas of social practice which had once been referred to casually as ‘everyday life’” (Painting of Modern Life, 9). Several American historians have accepted this general interpretive framework: see Richard W. Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); and William Leach, “Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890–1925,” Journal of American History 71 (1984): 319–42. This literature sees consumer goods as capable of transforming the self. It becomes transparent, merging its identity with the very object of its desire. If one purchases a certain brand of cigarette or automobile, for example, one takes on the attributes that are popularly associated with that article, becoming in the process more desirable, beautiful, and intelligent. In my estimation these historians fail to distinguish an earlier, equally significant psychological stage in the development of a consumer society. During the eighteenth century the self was still coherent; it could be represented through goods, could acquire social status through consumption, could literally fashion itself before others, without thereby losing its integrity.


17. Ralph Davis, “English Foreign Trade, 1700–1774,”
The Meaning of “Likeness”  


20. Ibid., 258.


31. See Breen, “Baubles of Britain,”

32. Observations about the character and content of eighteenth-century colonial American advertising found in this article are based on extensive research in the newspapers of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and Charleston carried out by the author and Rebecca Becker of Northwestern University.


34. The statistics for the importation of mirrors are derived from Customs 3. Also see Benjamin Goldberg, The Mirror and Man (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985).


50. Foote, John Smibert, 88 (italics added).


54. Fithian, Journal, 94.


57. Prown, John Singleton Copley 1:46.


64. Edgar P. Richardson, American Paintings and Related Pictures in the Henry Francis Du Pont Winterthur Museum (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986), 30; Richardson, Painting in America, 50, 69.

