

# [Global Histories]

## A student journal

**Review: “Luxury in Global Perspective: Objects and Practices, 1600–2000” edited by Bernd-Stefan Grewe and Karin Hofmeester**

Author: Daria Tashkinova

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.195>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 1 (May 2018), pp. 177–179

ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2018 Daria Tashkinova



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

---

Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin  
Global Histories: A Student Journal  
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut  
Koserstraße 20  
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website [www.globalhistories.com](http://www.globalhistories.com) or contact the editor at: [admin@globalhistories.com](mailto:admin@globalhistories.com).

---

## **Luxury in Global Perspective: Objects and Practices, 1600–2000**

Edited by Bernd-Stefan Grewe and Karin Hofmeester,  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. 322,  
£90.00, ISBN 978-1107108325

---

### **REVIEWED BY DARIA TASHKINOVA**

The new addition to the long-running Cambridge University Press series ‘Studies in Comparative World History,’ *Luxury in Global Perspective: Objects and Practices, 1600-2000* is an ambitious project led by Bernd-Stefan Grewe and Karin Hofmeester. This volume consists of an impressive collection of articles. Each builds its own detailed case study and supports the opening statement of the book: “Luxury is a global phenomenon.”

Global history is not a new approach when it comes to the history of things. In fact, histories of commodities have been among the most successful usages of global history, as historical entanglements and interconnections are best shown through the exchange of goods. The editors adopt J. Schneider’s approach of focusing on relationships between luxuries and essentials rather than on their distinctions, and push it further. Hofmeester and Grewe use global history as a lens to look at consumption and ‘show how luxury functioned in various settings and how local variations in taste could influence global economic interactions’ (p.2). Hofmeester and Grewe aim to kill two birds with one stone. Firstly, their goal is to enrich global history by looking at global production, exchange, consumption of luxury goods, and services. Secondly, they aspire to enrich the historical conception of luxury by avoiding Eurocentrism and focusing on more than the exclusivity of luxury goods and practices of their consumption.

Each of the articles in the volume represents a convincing case study in support of the editors’ claims. The most compelling articles rest comfortably in the middle of the book. In Chapter 5, Giorgio Riello disputes the existing distinctions between luxury and commodity, using Indian cotton cloth as an example. Through creating his own typology of luxury in the Early Modern era, Riello is able to explain how cotton cloths could gain major global success not just as a regular commodity, but as a luxury good as well. His triadic notion of luxury provides the necessary methodological framework to make a masterful case. Chapter 6 by Silvia Ruschak is an answer to the editors’ call for writing a history of luxury that is more than just a story of unique items from exotic places to be consumed by the European and American public. Ruschak demonstrates the possibility of a different narrative: she shows how wax prints, originally produced in the Netherlands, became a luxury item in modern day Ghana. In Chapter 7, Karin Pallaver examines one of the oldest misconceptions in colonial history. She investigates the exchange of glass beads, accepted by many societies around the world for

the purchase of precious commodities and territory: a practice that was deemed 'primitive' and 'naïve' by European colonists. Pallaver vividly illustrates how different commodities have different value in different societies, and how something that was worthless for Europeans had major economic value in East African societies. Much like Ruschak, Pallaver, challenges the traditional way of studying luxury commodities, which portrays Europeans as the consumers and Africans or Asians as the producers of exoticism. Instead, she focuses primarily on consumer practices in Africa and traces the commodity chain of glass beads from the production site in Venice to consumers in the trade markets of East Africa.

Covering a wide range of themes across various geographic regions, the articles of this volume raise questions and emphasize issues that are rarely studied in the context of luxury. For example, Chapter 4 examines the meanings of luxury in different cultures and raises an intriguing question: "to what extent is luxury a specifically European category, only transferrable to other cultures?" (p.114) This volume shows that the social practices linked to commodities and objects presented a wide scope of issues within social groups or cultural contexts. The issues raised in the volume might also ultimately lead to a re-examination of the concept of luxury in the European context. Moreover, the volume manages to show that the history of luxury is not merely a story of shiny precious objects or exclusive practices, but has the potential to shed new light on class structures, gender politics and labour history. The editors masterfully build their case on how a global history approach to the history of luxury can be beneficial to a wider scope of disciplines and scholarship. The introduction and the concluding remarks to this volume are a great example of a circular story where all the arguments align with each other and serve one purpose.

Despite its obvious strengths and well-deserved praise, the book is not immune to some critical observations. One, for instance, is a somewhat chaotic nature of positioning articles within the volume. The introduction briefly mentions the deliberate choice for a decentralized structure in order to reaffirm the editors' commitment to write a decentered global history of luxury. Unlike most traditional studies on luxury, this volume has a very broad geographical and chronological scope. It is not limited to a particular time period, region, or type of commodity. However, this decentered approach does not help to create a coherent narrative and framework. On the contrary, it leaves the reader more confused than they hoped to be. This tactic could have worked better in a single volume by one author. In this case, the conflicting writing styles and disconnected cases did not fit well with each other.

Another critical note concerns Eurocentrism. The editors discuss at length their views on Eurocentrism and how the authors of the volume successfully avoid the trappings of Eurocentric narratives, so frequent in previous studies on luxury in history. What then comes as a surprise is the overwhelmingly European 'cast' of authors in the volume. Since the collected articles discuss luxuries in Asia and

Africa, one would expect for at least some of the contributors to be of Asian or African descent. The choice for a European group of contributors, though stellar historians, does not particularly support the primary claim of the book to write a non-Eurocentric history of luxury. Giving a voice to researchers outside of the Western academic world could have given a major advantage to this volume. However, despite breaking some Eurocentric boundaries, the volume has left others untouched. Hopefully, future research will take history of luxury even further.

‘Luxury is a global phenomenon’—that was the main thesis of this volume. Grewe and Hofmeester bring together convincing case studies of particular luxurious objects and practices throughout history to create a unifying narrative of global luxury. The articles in the volume trace the commodity chains that have emerged all over the world around such luxury products as diamonds, gold, ivory, or porcelain. They allow the reader to explore the items’ unique local stories within the universal desire for luxury. While it leaves the door open for further improvements, this volume is a marvelous example of how decentered history can debunk Eurocentric assumptions and bring fresh ideas into the discussion.