“Fashion, Business, Diffusion: An Upholsterers’s Shop in Eighteenth-Century Paris”
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This paper is a part of a larger project dealing with the shop and the city in modern Europe. In that project, my goal is to understand the place of small businesses and small businessmen in broader cultural and commercial exchanges. The shop is at the heart of the circuits of redistribution, between production and consumption; it thus provides a good vantage point from which to observe the dissemination of fashion, the circulation of objects, and inventiveness of merchants, in short, the boom of consumption that marked so strongly Europe and the American colonies in the eighteenth century.

In this paper, I will focus on certain aspects of the activity of one artisan/shopkeeper involved in the luxury and semi-luxury trades in full swing in Paris in the second half of the eighteenth century. I have chosen the shop of an upholsterer/mirror-maker, Mathurin Law, who was in business on the rue Saint Honoraë from at least the mid-1760s.1 Because the merchant declared bankruptcy in July 1788, the Archives of Paris have preserved his sales registers as well as his account books; these permit us to follow his operations over the course of the 1780s.2 Why choose Mathurin Law? For several reasons that constitute his representativeness, despite his uniqueness. First, he belonged to one of the guilds, half artisanal, half retail, upon which rested Paris’ renown for artistry and craftsmanship. Here is how the guild was described in the Almanach du Dauphin for 1777: “The upholsters are Merchants who buy, produce, and sell all kinds of tapestries and other furnishings. This community is one of the oldest and most substantial in this Capital.”3

As an upholsterer, Law exercised a very old trade, but one which, as we shall see, knew how to adapt itself to new modes of consumption and sail with the wind. Alfred Franklin estimates the master upholsterers of Paris to have numbered more than 600 at the end of the Old Regime.4 They were far from the only retailers of furniture, despite the formal regulations of the guild system: joining them were art dealers, furniture dealers, wood workers, cabinetmakers, makers of game boards (tabletiers), second-hand dealers, and others. In this large group, if Law was not famous (like the mercier Daguerre or the cabinet maker Jacob), neither was he unknown. His name was not included in the almanacs of the time, and he had a prosperous business: according to the year, his transactions amounted to or surpassed 100,000 livres. At the time of his bankruptcy, he had assets of 22,000 livres (of which 13,000 livres was merchandise in stock), and liabilities of 74,383 livres. His shop was located on the rue Saint-Honoré, the most fashionable business street in the city, the one that brought together the shops most visible and appreciated by both Parisian and foreign elites. Law’s clientele, which
numbered several hundred people, reflected the importance of the two social groups most affected by the new culture of consumption: the nobility and the merchants. Finally, Law maintained his books with care and regularity. For all these reasons – professional, chronological, and geographical – the upholsterer Law was at the heart of a system of redistribution of objects and tastes which constituted the new consumer culture of which Paris was one of the beacons.

Since the sixteenth century, Paris had been a producer of luxury goods -- silverware, fine furniture, clocks, rare books, and cloth -- which the almanacs and guidebooks of the time vied with each other to celebrate. Consider, for example, this entry from an almanac published in 1789:

The commerce of Paris consists especially in objects that are useful, fashionable, and decorative, like furniture, bijoux, clocks, bronzes, gilt bronze, porcelains, and a host of other precious objects of which we shall give the best possible accounting.

Fine furniture, that is, furniture made with rare woods or veneered . . . which is made in Paris is always greatly appreciated, either for its good construction or for the fine finishes, elegant form, or richness of the decoration, either in bronze, gold, etching, etc. We would add to this appreciation that modern furniture is lighter, better formed, and more striking than the old furniture which, though richer to the eye, lacked the convenience and fine form that results from the good taste and intelligence which guide today’s artisans. Another almanac joined in the chorus of praise:

As for works of both cabinetmaking and marquetry . . . nowhere else is wood worked as well as in Paris; everything which is produced here has an elegance and beauty which makes them admired by all the nations of Europe; some are so finely wrought that they astonish the connoisseurs.

I would thus like to use this one shopkeeper’s sales registers as a starting point to reflect on how the retail fashion trade was exercised. My goal is to make sense of a diverse set of activities across a range of products, clienteles, and professional networks, all linked to the broader economy. These include innovating, inventing new products, and transforming, but at the same time preserving, maintaining, and repairing. They entail offering novelties to a rich and demanding clientele, while at the same time providing a much broader clientele with used and second-hand goods at moderate prices. These were Law’s daily activities.

I make use of four account books which offer a partial vision of Law’s business because they are only sales registers: a large register with the title, “Extract of Sales on Credit,” covers sales to 36 elite clients between the years 1776 to 1786; three other account books chronicle the daily sales on credit and in cash from 1782 through 1787. Without a register of purchases or of objects given to other merchants to be sold on consignment – a very common practice in the eighteenth century – and with no knowledge of Law’s provisioners, brokers, or other associates, a major portion of the shopkeeper’s activity remains in the dark. Only the list of the creditors who appeared before the bankruptcy court allows us to identify Law’s provisioners and professional associates. Of these creditors/suppliers most (46 out of 50) were merchants and artisans. But the richness of the available sources lies elsewhere. These registers shed light on the luxury trades’ clientele, fashions, consumer practices, and tastes. I am going
to focus on three aspects of the upholster’s trade which were interwoven but which I will separate for the sake of clarity: clientele, professional networks, and objects sold. I will analyze these three elements in order to demonstrate how a prosperous yet hardly illustrious merchant could at his modest level participate in and advance the consumer revolution of the late eighteenth century.

1. A Mixed Clientele of Aristocrats and Shopkeepers

The variety of his transactions and the importance of credit in his business (which always threatened his economic equilibrium) presented the upholsterer with a major problem: how to control a large and unstable clientele. Law’s registers, like those of all shopkeepers, mixed precision, approximation, and confusion. Law noted down daily activities conscientiously, but he left many gaps, and the diversity of his business led to confusion due to a lack of overall vision. Still, in order to succeed the upholsterer had to foresee the unforeseeable, because the extension of credit could not be avoided. Law was a typical shopkeeper: although he carefully made entries in his account books (or had it done), vagueness prevailed because he never prepared a balance sheet, a summary, or even an inventory. Take for example the year 1783, a year in which the upholsterer did 108,000 livres worth of business. (Table 1)

In this year, Law noted 800 transactions (65 a month on average) which occurred in a very uneven rhythm. This irregularity was common in eighteenth-century small retail businesses. Some days Law completed no transactions; on other days he completed ten. From 1782 to 1787, his months of maximum activity were rarely the same. The 1783 transactions, which involved over 300 clients, were quite varied. Most (85%) involved objects furnished or services rendered by the upholsterer, and thus represent debts. However, a minority (15%) involved funds advanced by clients for future purchases: credits, which he used toward future purchases, or payments on merchandise already sold, or payments on standing loans. The register of sums due (“Owed by Monsieur . . .”) and received (“Received from Monsieur . . .”) makes no distinction between these different kinds of transactions. The method of payment and the cancellation of debts, often dated, were noted in the left margin, next to the description of the transaction, as, for example, “paid in cash; paid in full October 30, 1784” (for a sale made on July 26, 1783). Other notations include: “paid in kind,” “paid with a note,” “paid off by compensation and with cash . . . .,” “paid with an acknowledgment of debt repayable next year,” “a payment of what he owes me,” and so forth. Calculating a balance was thus impossible. How could a merchant have an overall sense of his financial situation even with such detailed records? Surely the registers were supplemented by other kinds of unwritten knowledge of the accounts and the clients, since Law was able to keep his business going for many years.

Using these registers, it is difficult to analyze Law’s clientele. The shopkeepers’ registers give detailed descriptions of the objects that were sold but often say nothing about the individuals who purchased them. Nevertheless, Law’s registers are much more complete the norm. More than eight hundred (826) buyers are mentioned in the six years covered by the two account books examined here. The address is mentioned for 70 percent or 587 of the clients, and the profession or title is indicated for 59 percent or 489 clients. Three qualities characterize this clientele: diversity, geographic
concentration, and volatility. But a closer look suggests a more nuanced view: some of Law’s clients lived far away, a few maintained a special relationship with the upholsterer, and most – but by no means all – clients came from two social groups: aristocrats and merchants.

Well-established on the prestigious rue Saint-Honoré, Law counted among his clients employees, clerks and bailiffs, domestics from noble houses, barristers and lawyers, notaries, police commissioners, master surgeons and physicians, architects, quite a few merchants and artisans, négociants, contracts and builders, bankers, farmers-general and tax collectors, priests and bishops, a few members of the sovereign courts, and many nobles. (Table 2)

[INSERT TABLE 4.2 HERE]

In short, contrary to what we might have expected in light of his location, Law attracted a varied clientele, from the petite bourgeoisie to the high aristocracy. These buyers, with very different fortunes, constitute an excellent subject for the historian of material culture: the purchases of a merchant, a postal clerk, a dress maker, a lawyer, a counselor in the Parlement, or a princess will tell us a great deal about the nuances of consumer culture.

Law’s location – at the center of a fashionable neighborhood in full swing since the 1770s – attracted clients and explains their diversity. Some of the clients worked in the vicinity (clerks, employees, shopkeepers), while even more resided there (see Table 3).

[INSERT TABLE 4.3 HERE]

The Saint-Honoré quarter contained more monied elites (be their origin high nobility, finance, or the merchant elite), than its equivalent on the left bank, the Saint-Germain quarter. At the end of the eighteenth century, the north west pole of the quarter became a financial and administrative center, while the area surrounding the Palais Royal became the home of the luxury trade. Luxury shops were particularly concentrated on the rue Saint Honoré, which was several kilometers long and joined the old center of Paris to the village of Le Roule. The ten clerks who were Law’s clients all worked very near the rue Saint Honoré and chose him because of proximity to their workplace. Pigeau (who lived at the other end of Paris, near the Pont-aux-Choux) was employed at the post office on the rue Platrière. Dizy worked for the Farmers General in the rue de Grenelle Saint-Honoré. Dupon (who lived in the rue d’Anjou, in Saint-Germain-des-Prés) was a greffier or scribe in the Royal Council which sat at the Louvre. Erse was a clerk at the Royal Treasury on the rue Saint-Honoré.

However, Law’s clientele consisted for the most part of his neighbors, those who resided in the quarter. The two-thirds of his Parisian clients (or 352) whose address is known lived in this part of Paris; and among them, 53% (286) lived in the quarters of Saint-Eustache, Palais-Royal, and Louvre, through which the rue Saint-Honoré ran. Not surprisingly, since this was where they tended to live, all of the financiers noted in the register for whom we know the address lived in this area: Tournachou, commercial representative from Lyon; Desverdun, farmer general (rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin); Chacel, receiver general of finances (rue neuve-des-Petits-Champs); Chomat, intendant of trade with China (rue de Richelieu); and so forth. More than sixty percent of the nobles cited in the registers lived in the north west, an interesting fact because most nobles continued to live in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. As for the merchants, 70 percent of
them lodged in the quarter itself, a high proportion considering the dispersion the merchant class throughout the city. Still, the preponderance of the northwest does not mean concentration: Law’s clientele was spread out over 230 different streets. Three-quarters of these streets contained only one or two clients. Only the rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré (10), rue neuve-des-Petits-Champs (11), rue de Richelieu (13) and the rue Saint-Honoré (48) housed a substantial number of clients. Other neighborhoods were left behind: only nine percent of the clients lived in the northeast, principally workers in the building trades (cabinet makers, locksmiths) and members of the nobility of the robe (the president of a sovereign court, a counselor of State). Three percent of Law’s clients lived in the Cité, which was home to jewelers, gilders, and clock makers; and 2.5% (iron mongers, engravers) in the working class districts of the southeast. The southwestern part of the city, a traditional home of the aristocracy, was a bit better represented, thus underscoring the significance of his noble clientele at twenty percent (106).

This rapid review of the geographical distribution of Law’s clients underscores the importance of the neighborhood to clients and suggests several interpretations. The proximity of Law’s shop to his clients’ homes, as well as the relative weakness of the southwest among their addresses, indicate that even though Law was well known, he was not among the elite of Parisian shopkeepers. For the aristocracy, proximity to their abode did not play a role in their choice of purveyors. For the artisans and shopkeepers (to whom I will return later) proximity can be explained by professional ties and common specializations.

A large part of Law’s clientele was not regular: three quarters of the buyers appear only once or twice in six years; only six percent appear ten times or more. Among this small core of regular customers (about 50 individuals), only two are mentioned from one end of the period to the other; the vicomte de Carvoisin is listed 46 times, but over the course of one year. Almost three-quarters were nobles (25, of whom most were aristocrats) and 17.5% (6) were shopkeepers: three merchants from the rue Saint-Honoré (Loreau, Sédillot and Montclar); Guillard, an upholsterer on the rue Sainte-Avoie; and the two famous clock makers, Ferninand Berthoud, uncle and nephew (rue du Harlai), who are mentioned 31 and 35 times respectively over the course of the six years in question here. The person most frequently mentioned in the registers (68 times) is a guard of the Royal Treasury, Savalette de Lange. One finds here amplified the salient trait of the socio-professional profile of Law’s clientele: the overwhelming presence of shopkeepers and nobles, who alone represent more than three-quarters of the whole. Of this group, 149 individuals (30.5 %) are artisans or shopkeepers and 229 (47 %) are nobles. This latter group is constituted principally of aristocrats: 53 counts and countesses, 36 marquis and marquises, 12 barons and baronesses, 10 viscounts and viscountesses, 8 dukes and duchesses, 2 princes and princesses; whereas members of the Parlement are a small minority at only 5%. As for the shopkeepers, their occupations are more diverse but still linked to Law’s business. Leaving aside the twenty-three merchants whose speciality is unknown (15.5%), two very unequal clusters emerge: three large groups of equal importance (housing, textiles, and metals) comprise 72.5%; followed three smaller groups involved in the provisioning of food (12%), care of the body (2%), and music (1%).

Law’s clientele was, therefore, made up primarily of the two groups most involved in the new consumption patterns, patterns which laid the groundwork for the
“commercial revolution” that spread over the course of the century to the middling classes and even the popular classes.\textsuperscript{15} For the aristocrats, driven by the need to maintain their rank, to shine was a categorical imperative; they had to be at the cutting edge of fashion. The boundless expenses of the private townhouses, which extended to all domains – food, clothing, architecture and interior decoration, horse racing – demonstrates the courtiers’ need for luxury, seconded very quickly by that of the financiers. Let us now return to the analysis of Law’s clientele. If we turn from a qualitative, that is socio-professional analysis of the clientele to a quantitative analysis based on the amount of money spent, the preponderance of the nobles is again evident. Among the thirty-six clients noted in the “Extract of Sales on Credit” (which deals with only 4\% of the 826 clients in the two account books), only a dozen buyers accounted for purchases of 6,000 livres or more and all were aristocrats.\textsuperscript{16} An upholsterer and a goldsmith spent much smaller sums, between 1200 and 1300 livres. The two account books underscore this asymmetry: only the two clockmakers, uncle and nephew Berthoud, together disbursed more than 6,000 livres. This certainly does not mean that all the nobles were big spenders: the marquis of Beauharnais owed Law only 645 livres and the marquis d’Ambray only 578 livres. But the aristocrats’ fortunes were in no way comparable to those of the lower and middling bourgeoisie!

Nevertheless, the merchants, who stood at the heart of the circulation of goods, earning large fortunes and aspiring to enter in due course the ranks of the notables, were not left behind. Daniel Defoe had already sensed this well. The author of A Plan of the English Commerce (1731) based the growth of domestic consumption above all on that of manufacturers and shopkeepers due to their number and the variety of their demand, much more than on the luxury, vanity, and high living of the gentry and the aristocracy, who aimed only for the high end. “These are the people that carry off the gross of your consumption . . . these are the life of our whole commerce, and all by their multitude,” he proclaimed.\textsuperscript{17}

2. A Double Trade Inscribed in a Dense Professional Network

Still, consumer culture is not at all synonymous with consumer society. The upholsterer repaired and rented as much as if not more than he sold, indeed a great deal more: the duality of his trade indicated the coexistence of different kinds of ownership. Fashion and novelty are imperious: an object that no was no longer rare remained precious, often unique, not disposable. It was thus maintained, or it is then given away, exchanged, abandoned, becoming part of a vast market in second-hand or recycled goods.

A large part of the upholsterer’s activity was thus devoted to repairing furniture, maintaining it, or rearranging or renovating interiors, as the frequency of the following expressions reveals: “repaired,” “mended,” “remade” (curtains), “made solid” (a dressing table), “re-lined” (a counterpane), polished (a dressing table), re-veneered (a secretaire), “revived” (chimney pans), “cleaned” (a lantern, a porcelain figure, chimney pans), “bleached” (fire grates), “lengthened,” “re-sewed,” “recovered” (arm chairs, a fire screen), “rehung” (a bed, a tapestry, an entire salon), “remounted” (mirrors), “re-upholstered” (a chair), “re-stuffed” (a mattress), “re-attached” (shelves), “replaced,” “removed upholstery” (from an armchair), “took apart,” “removed gilding,” and so forth.
The cost of these repairs varied from one pound to fifty or sixty. To fix wooden furniture was generally fairly cheap, but to repair metal ornamentation was more costly. Most of Law’s clients, whatever their social status, asked him to do this kind of work for them. Here are just a few examples: he charged Monsieur Savalette 120 livres to arrange and furnish his salon and dining room for a ball, supplying benches and lighting and relaying two carpets; while the younger of the Berthoud clockmakers paid only 3 livres to have the canopy on his bed cleaned and rehung. Law repaired a mirror frame for the silk merchant Doucet for 4 livres, a table for the glazier Jerome for 10 livres, and a pair of chandeliers for the chevalier Dourdan for 78 livres. He did a variety of services for the draper Curmer: he replaced a mirror, repaired a couple of games tables, and recovered one with new felt, for a total of 12 livres. Finally, for the marquise de Sabran he repaired and restored three pieces of mahogany furniture, at a total cost of 5 livres.

Renting furnishings was also one of the prerogatives of the upholsterer. Here again, all Law’s clients sought out this service: the only difference was the value of the object rented. Renting (by the month) could be a more economical means of remaining in style, no matter what happened, or a way of decorating a temporary apartment (a solution adopted by many aristocrats passing through Paris), or a short-term loan. The bailiff Jaluso rented a bed for a livre a month; Madame de Pellagra rented a folding bed for her chamber maid for 4 livres; the Comte de Vergennes rented 4 screens for 12 livres; and the marquis de Pezé rented a complete salon for 108 livres a month. On January 24, 1785, Law furnished one of his best clients, a conseiller d’état named Moreau, with everything he needed for a supper party: “one mahogany table, seven stools upholstered in red Utrecht velvet, two pairs of candle holders, and a pair of gilt girandoles, another pair with three gilt branches; and six crimson curtains for the gallery windows, installed.” Law also hung all the curtains (some green and some red) and the lanterns, hung the paintings and prints in the galley, and furnished the nails and wire, at a total cost (transportation included) of 60 livres.

The work of the upholsterer, in the context of a great specialization and division of labor, was only possible with the help of numerous artisans and merchants. Most of the shopkeeper clients of Law belonged to trades related to his and with which he tended to collaborate. The upholsterers were the most in demand by far, which proves that the trade could not be exercised by an individual alone, but there were also gilders, goldsmiths, jewelers and clockmakers, cabinetmakers, wood merchants and carpenters, silk, cloth, and trim merchants, to name only a few. Lacking a register of purchases, I cannot determine what proportion of these merchants who were Law’s clients were also his suppliers. A certain number of them, well known in the Parisian marketplace, must have taken advantage simply of the proximity of the shops, whose density and variety gave such a particular character to the rue Saint-Honoré: the drapers, mercers, and other cloth merchants Rasle, Carmes, Le Mor, Curmer, and Doucet; the goldsmiths Charvet, August, and Tesnières; the famous furniture dealer Daguerre. The majority of the merchants in the second cluster, who were not at all involved in Law’s business, lived on the rue Saint-Honoré (such as the apothecary de Londre, the tobacconist Jamais, the violin maker Payant, the pastry maker Rouger), or on neighboring streets.

However thanks to the list of creditors, as well as the notes concerning barter and exchange of services, I know that several buyers were also suppliers or even associates,
for the transactions always went both ways. The following were among those who were both creditor and debtor: the mercer Buisson (to whom Law owed 2,342 livres at the time of his bankruptcy); the silk merchant Lequene (2,081 livres); the sheath maker Mantel (612 livres); the iron monger Fremin (5,604 livres); the gilders Bulot (278 livres), the jeweler Juliou (399 livres), the furnace maker Kropper (155 livres), the cabinetmaker Topino (150 livres), and the tailor Benoist (155 livres). Law’s largest debts were owed to cloth merchants, the Saint-Gobain mirror factory (7,952 livres), the gilders, and the iron monger. The variety of fabrics is remarkable and corresponds to precise uses: cloth from Flanders, Jouy, Alençon, Lyon; Brussels ticking, Utrecht velvet, Grenada silk; cotton, wool, mohair, felt, serge, striped silk, satin, crepe, damask, taffeta, among many others—not to mention the ribbons, cords, fringes, and feathers used for decoration.

The upholsterer used an enormous amount of fabric (especially for beds); furnishing apartments, in elaborate forms, was one of his primary occupations. He “covered” furniture (with velvet, toile de Jouy, mohair, felt, damask for armchairs, chairs, bergères, waxed cloth for the buffet, cotton or serge for dust covers, green cloth for the gaming tables, green taffetas for screens); “stuffed” mattresses and cushions; “lined” counterpanes, curtains, rugs and tapestries; “decorated” alcove walls. He also made covers for doors and windows and “installed” all kinds of drapes, curtains and hangings.

Law could not have worked without the help of many artisans, as the numerous notations in his registers reveal: “had a pair of candlesticks gilded,” he notes, or “had the marble re-cut for a table,” or “had the parquet of a fire place painted.” These notations show how often Law employed the services of his fellow artisans. Iron mongers and locksmiths provided him with a large quantity of hardware necessary to his profession such as nails, tacks, locks, pulleys, keys and bells. Law often noted the money he owed these artisans as well as the sums destined for those who transported his goods. For example, he owed a locksmith 12 livres for the locks, curtain rods, bolts and pins “in the Roman style” installed at the home of the marquis de la Salle. To painters he owned 12 livres for painting and varnishing done at the home of the comte de Coucy. To the famous wallpaper merchant, Arthur, he paid 254 livres for the wallpaper hung in the hope of the Comte d’Aumale. Law required the services of apprentice cabinetmakers, dyers, porcelain makers, painters, and furnace makers, as well as carriers and packers. To a carrier, Law paid 194 livres for the boxes and packing of merchandise delivered to the vicomte de Velleurnoy. Charges for crating and transporting goods were very common in Law’s business because the nobles had their purchases delivered to their homes, either their Parisian townhouse or their provincial chateau—all arranged by the merchant who had supplied the goods.

Another way of ascertaining the links between Law and other merchants is to note the exchanges of goods, bills, and other methods of payment. A few rare notes reveal that Law maintained an ongoing association with other merchants, such as the gilder Delérie and the clockmakers Mera and Berthoud. In September 1782, when he first mentioned Delérie in his register, Law noted that he was the gilder for M. Guigault, a merchant-goldsmit. On this occasion, the upholsterer acted as an intermediary between the gilder and the goldsmith. In May 1783, he wrote concerning Delérie: “furnished by his order to sieur Gigault, merchant goldsmith . . . and delivered to Mme Gilbert a commode . . ., 120, a similar commode, 120.” Again in August, Law noted
delivery of a large mirror for a chimneypiece and a secretary to Gigault on Delérie’s orders. He sometimes worked in the same way for the clock maker Mera. For example, on December 1, 1784, he noted that on Mera’s orders he delivered a walnut secretaire to a customer on the rue Bourg-l’Abbé. Ferdinand Berthoud himself sought to sell one of his armoires through Law: “February 12, 1785, paid 7 livres to two apprentices to dismantle an armoire with class doors in the niche of (Berthoud’s) dining room and bring it to my shop to sell for the same Berthoud.”

The registers testify to an important problem, but one which I will not have time to investigate at length here: the broad and varied use of commercial credit (letters of credit, bank notes, receipts, agreements, coupons, installment payments, and accounts paid monthly), and the important role played by barter. Merchants who worked together also frequently “paid” one another by reducing their running debt. In this way, at certain dates the ceramics dealer Bailli and Law retired the debts they had run up to each other for various articles. For example, Law notes in his “Extract of Sales on Credit” that on the April 17, 1783, he received “the reckoning of the articles that (Bailli) provided for me between 20 January 1781 and 30 September 1782, which amounts to 231 livres.” He did the same thing with the gilder Delérie, who retired his debt by giving Law a secretaire, a commode, and a walnut toilette. Or take the iron monger Petit: on February 10, 1783, Law noted that he and Petit exchanged a commode à la Régence, a traveling toilette case in walnut, and a writing table, thereby canceling their mutual debts. The cabinet maker Levasseur purchased a bed and provided Law with 561 livres worth of merchandise by way of payment. The upholsterer Houdon purchased two old, veneered commodes for 600 livres and provided Law with unspecified merchandise in return.

Barter was a means of payment that was widespread, no matter what the social standing of the buyer. At the end of the eighteenth century, objects served as means of payment and down payment on loans, just as they had two hundred years before. Several nobles got rid of old or unwanted furniture in this way: Savalette de Lange gave up for only 36 livres “five old armchairs covered with worn tapestry.” The comtesse de Larbouste bought a secretaire which she paid for with another of a lesser value. De Grandmoussaine did the same with a men’s dressing-case which he paid for with an older dressing case and 78 livres. Barteuilh, commandant of the Louvre, paid for a part of his purchases in kind: Law noted that he received an inkstand and sand-box in copper, a rosewood tric trac set, iron fire-irons with their shovel and tongs, a bureau and two gilded candle sticks. The vicomte de Carvoisin paid in the same way: he provided 5 mirrors of different sizes and a pair of golden candelabra. The comte de Coucy offered by way of payment a chaise percée in cane with its pot, a marble top for a secretaire, a walnut commode, and a veneered sewing table. Payments could be a mixture of several elements: credit, cash, or objects. In 1782, Law took down and relung the mirrors over the fireplaces in Madame de Poitevin’s home. He received in return a down payment of 36 livres cash and an old gaming table. In 1785, the marquis de Gerberviller paid Law 96 livres in cash and threw in a mahogany music stand. Two years before, the marquis de Salle gave Law 2,718 livres in the form of three bank notes payable to the upholsterer, 21 livres in cash, as well as 19 pieces of tapestry and 11 scraps.

Such practices produced a vast secondhand market which allowed less wealthy Parisians to follow changes in taste. Novelties were also diffused by ricocheting
outward. Tables, commodes, chandeliers, and toilet objects thus passed from hand to
hand by the intermediary of the merchant, just like clothes, thereby participating
in the celebrated consumer revolution. The upholsterer, like the second hand clothes dealer,
sold to the broader public the most fashionable items after a short delay. Like many
merchants at the time, Law was at the heart of a triple market -- the new, the used, and
items purchased on credit -- which brought together different networks. The relations
woven between the merchant and his clientele were therefore complex, because they
were not limited to a simple relationship between buyers and seller. Barter produced an
original kind of redistribution which is essential for explaining the expansion of the
market in what Maxine Berg has called, “semi-luxuries.”

3. Qualities, Prices, and Diffusion

The variety in quality and the divergence of prices confirms the diversity of the
clientele and the range of choices offered by a clever shopkeeper like Law. The
adjectives Law employed to describe the materials (especially the different woods used
in furniture) and ornamentation, reveal a very rich palette in regards to quality: “bad”
(a table, mattress ticking, a tapestry); “old” (a toilet set, bolsters, chairs); “antique” (a
dressing table); “common” or “ordinary” (straw for caning chairs, an armoire, silk, a
night table); “veneered” (corner cabinets, tables, consoles, bureaux, sewing tables,
secretares, dressing tables, embroidery frame); “cheap” (commodes, mirrors,
armchairs, candlesticks). Furniture was “veneered” in mahogany, satin wood, purple
wood, mosaic, or silver. “Fine” materials (gold, wool, straw, cloth, quilting) were
opposed to items that were “strong” (a table, a shovel, a lock), “solid” (rosewood,
mahogany), “modern” (a tric trac set), or “English” (tables, crystal, paper, leather,
varnish, green taffeta, linen, armchairs).

The same differentiation applied to materials and decorations. Among the
“ordinary” and the “inexpensive” woods could be found walnut, pine, beech, and
cherry. On the side of the rare, exotic, and expensive, veneered or not, were purple or
Brazilwood, rosewood, mahogany, violet wood, ebony, and lemonwood. The richness
of the ornamentation was linked to the value and the craftsmanship of the metal
marquetry, be it silver or silverplate gold or gilding, gilt copper or ormolu, forged in
color or gilded.

Law’s prices varied enormously from a few sols to several hundred livres,
allowing all kinds of clients to purchase something in the shop: 15 sols for an ink pot in
copper purchased by a carpenter; 1livre for a music stand; 4 livres for a hearth bellows;
5 livres for a mirror or a writing table in walnut; 6 livres for a taffeta screen; 7 livres for
a folding bed made out of pine; 27 livres for a veneered sewing table; 33 livres for a
walnut table or a cabriolet chair covered in Utrecht velvet; 84 for a round table in the
English style or a little secretaire; 90 for a man’s dressing case; 150 for a satin wood
commode with gilt bronze mounts and a marble top, a mahogany dining table or a
veneered armoire; 240 for a rosewood secretaire-armoire with gilt bronze mounts and a
marble top, or a set of fire irons; 400 for an armoire veneered in rosewood; 500 for
mantle clock; 738 for a complete bed; or 1000 livres for a pair of girandoles on gilded
mounts purchased by Prince Xavier of Saxony.

For the same type of item, the prices could vary enormously. Take, for example,
tric trac set. Trictrac was a fashionable game at the time and the tric trac board was
sold to a varied clientele (unlike the billiard table which cost 450 livres and was sold to only two clients). Tric trac boards and tables were purchased from Law by a notary, an upholsterer, a financier, a priest, a countess, and a duke, all of whom shared (apparently) the same passion for the game. According to the size, the fittings, the ornamentation, and the wood – smoked, veneered, walnut, glazed, violet wood, purple wood, ebony or mahogany – the price of a tric trac set varied between 10 livres and 300. One could buy a board of ordinary wood for 13 livres or a tric trac table in mahogany and black Moroccan leather with ivory and green playing pieces for 264 livres. Between these two extremes there were simple boards veneered in purple wood and accompanied by green and white ivory playing pieces that sold for 84 livres; for 204 livres one could buy a mahogany tric trac table with ivory checkers, whose top reversed to an inlaid chess board which also contained drawers to hold a gilt bronze ink stand and sand-box.

The variation in prices also applied to less trendy objects, especially to tables, commodes, secretaires, and dressing tables. New or old, more or less ornamented, large or small, second hand or new, fashionable or unfashionable, the variety seems infinite and responded the needs of a diverse clientele. The aristocrats did not necessarily choose the most expensive items: everything depended on the use to which the object would be put and where it would be displayed. A pair of candle holders destined to light an antechamber, or a commode purchased for a servant could be “common.” The price for candle holders varied from 6 livres for a simple silver plated candlestick to 120 livres for gilt bronze candelabra to be displayed in public rooms. A dressing table could sell for as little as 22 livres, when made from simple walnut, or as much as 430 – like the one purchased by the vicomte de Carvoisin that was made of solid mahogany, with fluted legs, gilded trim, and multi-use shelves. A table cost between 2 livres, for one of plain cherry wood, and 240 livres, if was like the Tronchin-style desk purchased by the comtesse de Champagne that was made of solid mahogany with shelves covered in green leather, gold lacework, two folding candle holders, a baradelle inkwell, a sand-box, and a tray.

Barter, the second-hand market, and recycling were the foundation of an intense circulation, and incessant movement of objects and fashions that played as important a role in the consumer culture as the market in new goods. Shopkeepers specializing in luxury and semi-luxury goods offered a wide range of prices in the hope of attracting a large number of clients. By doing so, these retailers helped spread the consumer revolution to a broad audience, both urban and rural, and thereby overturned the “social meanings of appearances,” despite the always pregnant ideal of an egalitarian society and the reality of social hierarchies. The success of semi-luxuries contributed to the “confusion of symbols” and therefore the confusion of conditions. Daniel Roche and John Styles have shown in regard to clothing that following fashion meant emulating the rich, an activity which must figure in any definition or explanation of popular luxury. For Maxine Berg, who prefers the notion of innovation to emulation, an imitation – like rhinestones or veneers – which made luxury goods available at a lower price, is a kind of invention, a process of adaptation which created commodities adapted to larger markets and like luxury goods, provoked desire. Consumers, aristocrats, grands and petits bourgeois, even poor folk followed fashion, more or less brilliantly, precociously, and permanently, of course. But the spirit of fantasy and
elegance touched the whole of society. As the *Magasin des modes nouvelles* stated optimistically in 1788, fashion was “for everyone.”

Forgetting her rank in society, her status, her birth, and even her fortune, every woman can appear at a ball in the richest, most elegant outfit, without fear of incurring a very serious critique.\(^{26}\)

With the assistance of upholsterers such a Mathurin Law, such a woman could furnish her room or her home just as fashionably and elegantly as she could clothe her body.
1. Law worked for Princess Kinsky in 1764 and 1765; see Natacha Coquery, *L’hôtel aristocratique. Le marché du luxe à Paris aux XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1988), 386; Archives Nationales (AN) T 220/5-7: “Mémoire des ouvrages et fournitures faites pour son Altesse Madame la Princesse Kinsky par Law Marchand Tapisseur du 8 février 1764 (2500 l); and “Mémoire des ouvrages . . . pendant l’année 1765 (4600 l).”

2. The account submitted at the time of bankruptcy included both the assets and liabilities, with a complete list of the inventory, outstanding credits, and debts. It was accompanied by the depositions of thirty creditors (Archives de Paris, D4 B6 102-7192). The registers are for the years 1782-1787 (Archives de Paris, D5 B6 1024,3066, 3451, 3209); see also note 7 below.


7. The register D5B6/1024, “Extrait de la vente au crédit. Commencé l’an de Grâce 1782,” is an oversized volume in which each client occupies two pages. On the left-hand page (headed “Owes”) is inscribed what the client owes; on the right-hand page (headed “Received”) are the payments or installments on the debt which Law had received, the date when the merchandise was delivered, and the price. The register consists of 34 numbered pages, which I have transcribed in their entirety. The three other registers are daily accounts of sales (either on credit or paid in full), which is to say that the notations are in chronological order, regardless of the client or the type of transaction. The credit transactions (“Received”) and debit transactions (“Doit”) are intermingled. Two of these registers are consecutive: (D5B6/3066, “Journal de la vente au crédit et au comptant . . .;” 379 pages running from January 2, 1782 to November 16, 1784; followed by D5B6/3451, “A la gloire de Dieux et de la très sainte Vierge ce journal soit commencé de 17 novembre 1784 . . .,” 254 pages, which begins in November 17, 1784 and ends in April, 1787. I took notes on two thirds of the first register and all of the second register. The third register, D5B6/3209, “Journal de vente au crédit et au comptant . . .” (89 pages), concerns the same time period as the preceding register but was kept in an erratic fashion. It begins on June 16, 1784, continues until the end of April 1786 when there is an interruption, and then recommences at the end of January 1787, to stop altogether on October 12, 1787. Due to the lack of time, and because it covers the same period as the preceding register and is of less interest, I did not take notes on this register.


9. The numbers are very proximate rather than precise. It is nearly impossible to figure out the exact number of clients. In fact, the spelling can vary a great deal for the same name, and certain letters are illegible. For example, a “Payant” is noted 115 times, but most of the time without address or title, which makes it difficult to know when it refers to the same person. Only five people are not named.

10. The upholsterer noted the titles of only 420 purchasers, but with the help of the commercial almanacs of the time, and above all of the high probability that around fifty persons were nobles, I was able to establish the profession of 489 clients.

12. Coquery, *L’Hôtel aristocratique*, 35. In this work I studied the spatial relations among five aristocratic families and their purveyors and found that there was no correlation between the location of the townhouse and the addresses of its suppliers because aristocrats took advantage of the entire city to find artisans whom the esteemed the most. Their choices were not based on the location of the merchants, but on their specializations and their fame.

13. The remainder of the nobility consisted of *chevaliers* (30), several military officers, secretaries in the embassies, and nobles whose titles were not specified.

14. The artisans listed under building trades included 15 upholsterers, 3 cabinet makers, 3 lumber merchants, 2 lock smiths, 2 china makers, 1 furniture merchant, 1 stationer, 1 carpenter, 1 *boisselier* or dealer in small wooden items like curtain rods. The textile category includes 7 drapers, 5 silk merchants, 4 tailors, 3 button makers, 3 mercers, 3 canvas merchants, 3 cobblers, 2 seamstresses, 2 boot makers, 1 belt maker, 1 dyer, 1 *dégraissieur* (dry cleaner). The category of metal workers includes 9 gilders, 7 clock makers, 5 goldsmiths, 4 jewelers, 3 iron mongers, 2 engravers, 2 *fourbissoirs* 1 silver smith, 1 joaillier, 1 gold picker, 1 chandelier maker. The artisans from the alimentary trades included 4 grocers, 3 wine merchants, 2 lemonade sellers, 1 pastry cook, 1 butcher, 1 *buraliste* (clerk or tobacconist), 1 candlemaker, 1 flour dealer. The clients who were occupied in various kinds of hygiene included 1 apothecary, 1 perfumer, and 1 wig maker.


16. This register is very incomplete for reasons that are unknown. The clients frequently cited or who spent the most in the other registers tend to be absent. Of the 27 whose profession we know, 20 were nobles and only 4 were merchants. The marquis de Montbrun, Prince Xavier of Saxony, and the vicomte de Carvoisin each spent around 8000 livres; the marquis de Gerbeviller and the guard of the Treasury Savalette of Langes spent about 12,000 livres apiece; while the *abbé* and count de Coucy (1778-1784) noted together, spent 17,000. The governor of the Louvre, Barthouilh (1780-1785) spent almost 20,000 livres, the count de Vergennes more than 25,000, and the comte de Bouville, 34,000.


21. The term Law used here is “hasard,” which today means “used,” but at the time could simply mean “cheap” or “a bargain.” Note the following definition: “In speaking of a piece of furniture, a painting, a book or some other thing that one has bought at a low price, one says ‘C’est un meuble de hasard, un tableau de hasard, un livre de hasard. In the way one also says Trouver un bon hasard (Find a bargain).” *(Dictionnaire de l’Académie française, 4th ed.*

22. Trictrac was a popular game in the late eighteenth century which resembled modern backgammon. Like backgammon, trictrac was played on a board that was painted or inlaid with ivory, ebony, or other rare woods, and a set included a hinged box or board, playing pieces, cups, and dice. A table might also be inlaid so as to serve as a tric trac board.


