

HOUSEHOLD TASTE:
INDUSTRIAL ART, CONSUMERISM, AND
PRE-RAPHAELITISM

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For eighteenth-century philosophers, the concept of taste involved speculation about a *sensus communis*, as Kant called it, or the intersubjective agreement about values that seemed essential both to human nature and to social cohesion.¹ The bodily sense of taste, of course, is linked to those most basic forms of consumption: eating and drinking. As the metaphoric name for aesthetic discrimination, moreover, taste has a direct bearing on “the fashion mechanism” and consumer preferences whenever there are choices among commodities (Gronow, 74-130; McKendrick et al., 34-98). In both of these ways, taste would seem to be a concept of fundamental importance to economic theory. But while economics was emerging as a specific discourse around a limited set of issues about the public production of wealth, aesthetics was emerging as an at times antithetical discourse about seemingly more private, non-economic forms of value. And taste became central to aesthetics, not to economics. As the faculty or process of qualitative discrimination, taste seemed at once intensely subjective and individualistic and yet necessarily public, because everyone’s private tastes added up to what Enlightenment intellectuals often called “national taste.” But they also added up to patterns of economic demand, which might or might not be the same as good national taste.

These separate axiological discourses developed in part out of a contradiction within eighteenth-century “moral philosophy.” As Mary Poovey notes, the division is evident in “the Adam Smith problem,” or “the apparent discontinuity between his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*.” Abandoning the category of “sympathy” as “both the motor of social relations ... and the faculty of moral judgment” in his earlier work, Smith emphasizes the profit-motive or “acquisitive” instead of “contemplative” (aesthetic) desire (Poovey, “Aesthetics” 85, 86). He also defines value in terms of labour and hence of production rather than consumption. Value no longer depends on the immeasurable, because seemingly entirely