

Emergence of Consumer Cultures: A Cross-Cultural and (Art) Historical Comparison

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Historical studies of consumer culture typically focus on the West. This paper explores emerging consumer cultures in the East and the West. Based on historical and art historical archival sources, period artworks, and interviews with art historians and curators, we compare the origins and nature of consumption in the Dutch Golden Age and Late Ming China. The similarities in glorification of valuables, display, emphasis on pleasure and novelty, and moral negotiation reflect common elements of consumer culture. In this paper however, we focus on differences. Our findings suggest that the content of art taken in its context provides a rich understanding of the rise of consumer cultures, but that understanding this content requires a thorough consideration of the cultural context. We conclude that consumer culture is not a singular phenomenon.
