

RETAILERS AND CONSUMER CHANGES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Developments in the retailing of domestic furnishings 1600-1850

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The furniture retailer (amongst many others) had always had a dual relationship with his customers. On the one hand, he was responsible for undertaking and responding to the orders of his clients in this service-oriented business where advertisements often requested consumers to favour the particular supplier with their 'commands.' On the other hand, the furniture retailer was also an arbiter of taste, one who could advise, guide and instruct the customers on matters of elegant furnishings. The furniture retailer then had a dual role as a consultant and as a servant. This developing relationship was not only one-way. By inviting customers to be attended to in his particular shop, the merchant was offering goods that were supposed to express a dignity and gentility, (only found there) so the act of buying these particular goods actually conferred these aspects onto the purchaser. The customers were initiated into the culture of shopping in all its manifestations, so that in the best circumstances, the retailer was the conduit for the purchase of good taste, comfort and gentility that the consumers would then display as their own.

On the other hand, the pleasures of shopping and the purchase of goods were tempered by the consumer's growing need to be aware of changing fashions, the value of goods and the levels of service on offer by competing retailers. In many cases, the buyer had to have a relationship with the seller that was, to a degree quite personal, and which not only encompassed the supply of goods but also other services, of which credit was probably the most important. The personal relationship was important, as the goods were often seen as possessions acquired from one by another, rather than impersonal 'traded' commodities. Furniture falls into this categorisation, especially where the seller was also the maker, and there are often mentions by diarists and letter-writers referring to 'my upholsterer' or 'my mercer.' By the early nineteenth century, these patterns began to be modified as production methods changed, and retailing altered as a result.

This paper therefore attempts to consider the continuities and changes that occurred in the retailing of furniture (mainly in England) in the period 1600-1850.

Originally, the upholsterers were dealers in old clothes, old beds, old armour, and other diverse sorts of materials that conveyed an unsavoury image of their trade. An inventory of an upholsterer's stock taken in 1356 listed an odd mix of goods including armour, pickaxes, sledgehammers, and feather beds.¹ The upholsterers' shabby and unattractive image took some time to eliminate. In Stow's *Survey of London* of 1598, he observed that Birchin Lane in the City of London 'had for the most part dwelling Fripperers or Upholders that sold olde apparel and householde stuffe.'² Their reputation remained suspect into the seventeenth century. At various times they were accused of handling stolen property, and selling contrary to the established customs of the City of London, and the guild.

¹ Houston, J. H. (1993), *Featherbedds and Flockbedds*, p. 3.

² Stow, (1598), *Survey of London*, Everyman Edition, 1980.

As with other crafts, the upholder's guild was established, in part to protect, and in part to control the activities of their members. The bye-laws they created to do this can give useful insights into their retail trading practices. The 1679 Ordinances of the Upholders' Company include a provision that the Company could enter the 'House, shop or booth of offending members and carry away goods.'³ The reference to the locations is valuable as it indicates three potential sites of retail business and a diversity of outlets. The house is the dwelling (and place of business), the shop may be a showroom but could also be a workshop that doubled as a site of selling, and the booth indicates a temporary trading place. A little later, in 1686, a charter was granted to the Company of Upholders by James II, giving them powers of search in 'the City of London, and the suburbs thereof and within seven miles in circuit of the same city and in all and every or any [of] the fairs and markets within this realm of England.'⁴ So again, there is an expectation that the products of the upholsterers will be on sale, not only in the city but also in fairs and markets right across the country.

Some further idea of retail selling practices can be found in the upholders' bye-laws. They declared that there should be no direct selling other than through channels recognized by the Company:

'No person ... do at any time go about the streets or any other places proffering any wares belonging to the said art or mystery of an Upholder or which are usually made or sold by Upholderers to sell from shop to shop, house to house, or in any Inn or place other than in open shop, fair or market....'⁵

In addition to this restrictive practice, clearly intended to protect bona-fide tradesmen, the bye-laws noted that if a maker had no shop premises, the only place from which the Company would allow him to sell his goods, was his own abode:

No person or persons using the Art or Mystery of an Upholder within the City of London ...and not keeping an open sale shop shall make or cause to be made any ware belonging to the trade of an upholder to be put on sale by him in any other place than his chamber or other such convenient place of aboad [sic] as he or they shall make known unto the said Master....⁶

By the very early seventeenth century, inventory evidence suggests that the living quarters, the selling space (shop), and the workshops were often in the same premises, especially in provincial towns.⁷ For example, in 1605, the upholsterer Nicholas Webster of Southampton was recorded as having a back and fore chamber, hall, kitchen, stables, loft, and a shop that held his stock of beds, cloth, valances, blankets and pillows. The probate value of his stock was more than twice as much as the contents of the private chambers, being £24.19.7d, as opposed to £11.14.4d.⁸ While in the 1638 inventory of James King, of Odiham, also included 'a chamber over the

³ Houston, J.H. (1993), *Featherbedds and Flockbedds*, p. 30.

⁴ Ibid, p. 31.

⁵ Ibid, p. 58. This method of selling has remained an issue for bona fide retailers with premises ever since.

⁶ Ibid. p. 59. These issues were addressed in terms of all internal trade in *The Trade of England Reviewed* published in 1681, which complained about the disadvantages brought to shopkeepers by hawkers who sold direct. The issue was still alive in the latter part of the twentieth century,

⁷ For London shops see Brown, F. (1986) 'Continuity and Change in the urban house: developments in domestic space organisation in seventeenth century London', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 28:3, p.578.

⁸ Beard, G. (1997), *Upholsterers and Interior Furnishing in England, 1550-1840*, p.11.

shop' where a not inconsiderable stock valued at £56.15.0d included bedsteads, cupboards, tables, stools, textile furnishings.⁹ The 1670 inventory of London upholsterer, William Ridges, shows a very different picture in terms of scale, though the principle remains the same. Ridges operated a business with five rooms devoted to the display of merchandise and a further six rooms for production operations. The success of this enterprise, situated in Cornhill, a prime retail location for upholsterers at the time, is evident from the total inventory value of £17,567.0.0d.¹⁰

By the early seventeenth century, wealthy clients were beginning to require consciously coordinated interiors in line with newly fashionable tastes. As the upholsterer had already undertaken part of this role, it was natural that he would begin to assume full responsibility for all furnishing supplies. This role was eventually to develop into the business of the complete house furnisher or the profession of interior decorator. Upholsterers were becoming arbiters of taste, not only through access to important homes and the circles of the wealthy, but also through their skills in introducing new styles and being in a position to influence public taste. In addition, and unlike many other retailers, they had to be skilled in running a complex enterprise, employing a range of suppliers and craftspeople and to be able to offer an individual service to each customer that often included working in their homes.

The upholsterer could only operate successfully with the assistance of the silk mercer, the passementier, the embroiderer, the cabinet-makers, and a whole range of other sub-contractors including feather dressers, linen drapers, glass merchants, blacksmiths, carvers, gilders, and the whole spectrum of building crafts. It was the upholsterer who was responsible for the overall works, and it was he who often took a profit on these other suppliers' efforts. Indeed, at the time (1615), it was noted that the upholstery business potentially provided a very profitable living: even so, it had its critics.

The trade of an upholsterer doth not require any art or skill for the exercising of it, inasmuch as he hath all things made to his hand, and it is only to dispose them in order after such time as they are brought to him...and so he is like to Aesop's bird, which borroweth of every bird a feather, his art resting merely in the overseeing and disposition of such things which other men work, and in the putting feathers into a tick, and sewing them up when he hath done, the which one that hath been an apprentice unto it but seven days is able to perform.¹¹

The sophisticated structure and systems of the business of the upholsterer during the eighteenth century were the result of developments laid down in the later seventeenth century which had themselves grown from earlier trading systems. Although these earlier systems were unsophisticated in comparison, they were a necessary pre-requisite to the full flowering of the upholsterers' craft in the eighteenth century.

The organisation of the upholstery business in England was very variable with some businesses making fortunes for the principal members whilst others were organised

⁹ Ibid. p. 11-12.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.12.

¹¹ Tolley's Case, 1615, cited in Lipson, (1948), *Economic history of England*, p. 281-2. The issue arose from an interpretation of the Statute of Apprentices 1563, which finally agreed that an upholsterer was not a trade within the definition of that statute. This is important in as much as it recognised that the upholsterer was an entrepreneur and co-ordinator within a retail environment, more than a craftsman-maker.

on a hand to mouth existence. Examples of profitable English furniture-makers could include Dale, an upholsterer who purchased the estate of Viscount Bolingbroke for £50,000 and Simms, a Quaker upholsterer reputed to be also worth £50,000. Even if these figures are exaggerated, they give an indication of the potentially profitable nature of the business.

For new entrants the costs were high and hours were long. Establishing a business could take from one hundred to one thousand pounds to set up. The financial arrangements between client and upholsterer were often long winded and protracted, meaning that traders were often pleading for payment. Cash flow was a serious matter to eighteenth century traders. The cost of importing stock, paying wages and business expenses such as insurance demanded high profit margins.

On the other hand, to train apprentices, a master upholsterer required twenty to fifty pounds more than most other interior crafts reflecting the desirability of this particular craft. In some of the highest quality businesses, the social status of the apprenticeship was on a par with trainee architects; 'articled young gentlemen' was the name given to the apprentices of William Rawlins establishment.¹² A normal working day would run 'from six in the morning to eight in the evening'.

The important role of women in the business of upholstery is found on two levels. On the one hand Campbell tells that the deft handling of needles to sew seams, the ability to sew on lace and to be able to use shears to cut valance and counterpanes with 'a genteel sweep' were performed by women as much as by men: 'All this part of the work is performed by women, who never served an apprenticeship to the mystery...' ¹³ On the other hand, it was often the case that women became principals of upholstery businesses, either in their own right or as successors to their husbands business. Daniel Defoe in his *Complete English Tradesman* actually recommended craftsmen to select a wife who would be able to assist in the daily running of an enterprise or be capable of continuing the business in the event of his death.¹⁴ Interestingly, some daughters of members of the Upholders' Company were admitted by patrimony during the century, and clearly carried on their deceased father's business.¹⁵ Even Royal patronage was no bar to females as there are examples of wives taking over the royal commissions upon the death of the husband.¹⁶

As has already been pointed out, the upholsterer was considered a leader of fashion and an arbiter of taste. This position of taste-leader ensured a constant supply of work for those at the forefront of the trade, but to maintain this status a continual programme of promotion needed to be undertaken. This particularly involved dealing with and being patronised by the taste-leaders in society.³

By the mid-eighteenth century, the upholsterer's speciality as an arbiter of taste was recognised by contemporary commentators, and this established a particular relationship between retailer and customers that has remained to this day. For example, in 1743 Lady Cust wrote from her London home. 'I have been at a great upholsterer's today; he says he has not made any furniture [i.e. upholstery work] of mohair this year. So I believe I shall be afraid to buy it but when my horses come I will go more about' ¹⁷.

¹² Cited in P. Kirkham *The London Furniture Trade* Furniture History Society, (1988), p. 44.

¹³ R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman*, 1747.

¹⁴ Cited in Kirkham, op cit. p. 4

¹⁵ Caldwell, 'Working Women in the 18th Century', p. 79.

¹⁶ Kirkham mentions Royal joiners-Elizabeth Price (1685), Catherine Naish (1759), and upholsterers-Sarah Gilbert (1759), Hanah Framborough (1773) and Lucy Gilroy (1783).

¹⁷ Records of the Cust Family II, 1909, cited in J. Fowler and J. Cornforth, *English Decoration in the Eighteenth century*, Barrie and Jenkins, London, 1986, p.25

Campbell confirmed these thoughts and was happy to say about the upholsterer that 'He is that man on whose judgement I rely on the choice of goods; and I suppose he has not only judgement in the materials but taste in the fashions, and skill in the workmanship'.¹⁸ Exactly the same sentiments were being expressed at the end of the century. In 1800 the upholsterer was described as follows:

As if worked by strings, tells one immediately what colours go together, how much each article costs, what one must choose in order to guard against the shape and style becoming old-fashioned after some years, what changes must be made in a house, what sort of carpets to go in the dining room and what sort in the dressing room. What materials last longest: how much time he needs to furnish the whole house and so on and so on'.¹⁹

Once the selling process was completed the task of the upholsterer moved from matters of taste to matters of production and delivery. An example of the actual duties of an employee of an upholstery firm, in this case the business of Thomas Chippendale, is indicative of the work that was carried out. The upholsterer stayed at the client's house, often for months at a time. During this visit he received and unpacked the furniture and furnishings, 'hung walls with damask or paper, made up bed furniture, upholstered the covered seat furniture, laid carpets and put up blinds (including those called Venetian), and made covers for every possible article, petty-cotes for the toilet tables, leather cases to encase the posts of the family bed, and oil-cloths for the sideboard tops'.²⁰

The range of work undertaken by upholsterers was extensive. It included the supply and fitting up of new furniture, hangings and drapes, bedding and fittings, carpets and floorcoverings, blinds and screens. In addition to this new work the upholsterer was required undertake refurbishments of used furniture and textiles, to open up and shut up houses or rooms at various seasons and to repair items as necessary. On yet other occasions the upholsterer would be employed to appraise household furnishings for valuations, to hire out furniture for particular occasions, and to undertake other work as required such as mounting and fitting needlework worked by the women of a family. Coach work involved the stuffing and covering of seats, lining interior surfaces and carpeting floors. In some cases, blinds or curtains were supplied to windows and trimmings were often essential to a coach finish. Finally, they were also involved in similar work for coach builders, ship fitting, and church upholstery work.

The importance of the upholsterer at the end of the eighteenth century is testified to by the growth in numbers of practising tradesmen listed in trade directories, as well as an increasing number of pattern and design books especially aimed at this particular business. The upholsterer and his business was often the basis for expansion into other branches of retailing and it was often the case that even if they did not become the basis for many department stores, they were an important section within them.

¹⁸ Campbell, *The London Tradesmen*, p. 170.

¹⁹ *London und Paris*, 6, (1800) pp.186-7. cited in P. Kirkham (1988) *The London Furniture Trade 1700-1870*, Furniture History Society

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