

ABSTRACT

Jonathan Eacott, University of Michigan and University of London

Session 25

Manufacturing India: British Producers, Colonial Consumers, and Curious Collectors, 1750-1830

While Britons today may struggle to think of what a cut-glass hookah bottom, or a state palanquin might look like, in the eighteenth century they frequently constructed fanciful images of India based around these luxury goods. Manufacturers, however, increasingly developed and produced these items, not in India, but in Britain. Using manufacturers' papers, customs records, diaries, advertisements, images, correspondence, probate inventories, and travel guides, this paper questions how British manufacturers reinvented and produced the very goods upon which the perceived cultural differences between India and Britain often rested. Consumers in the home islands could have tapped into this ready domestic supply of palanquins and hookahs, but they did not. Neither product gained a consumer market in Britain, on the European continent, or in the Atlantic colonies. For Anglophones outside India, palanquins and hookahs remained rarities suitable only for collectors' cabinets crammed with alien and wonderful curiosities.

This contradiction has important implications for supply side theories that support historians' explanations for the emergence of new consumer products in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Historians tend to study products that became important elements of eighteenth century European consumer societies, like cotton cloth. Looking at goods which did not become popular in Britain, but did become popular in British India, shows that some manufacturers had a keen awareness of the business opportunities available in the cultural differences of empire. Looking at such goods also shows that the production of novel, even useful items, did not ensure a market in the domestic economy. Not only did Asian products spur innovation for domestic products, as Maxine Berg argues, but Asian products spurred British innovation for exports to send back to Asia. By applying British taste to Indian objects, producers turned the cultural difference between Britain and colonial India to their advantage. Domestically, these re-invented products served, not to Anglicize the novelty of India, but to ossify that sense of difference between West and East.