

Living It Up: Our Love Affair with Luxury. *By James B. Twitchell.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. 448 pp. Illustrations. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-231-12496-1.

Reviewed by Michael Kammen

James Twitchell is a professor of English at the University of Florida who mentions repeatedly in this work that his specialty is romanticism. The last five of his ten books, however, have concerned advertising, consumer culture, and taste levels in American life. Although Twitchell's emphasis in these works is largely contemporary (meaning developments since the 1980s), he does inject historical context and perspective. In this latest work, for example, he often cites attitudes and practices from the earliest years of the twentieth century as a benchmark by which to measure the dramatic changes that have occurred in recent decades. His expository style is informal, accessible, often even chatty. It is a fine book to assign because it will readily generate lively student interest and discussion.

The book is extremely well-researched—both in secondary works, especially in many different sorts of magazines (with particular attention to advertisements), and by means of “field work” with his wife and daughter in upscale retail establishments in carefully selected venues from Manhattan to Beverly Hills and Miami to Las Vegas. Overall, the work makes an engaging contribution to our knowledge of changing aspirations and attitudes toward material goods and consumerism during the past generation. His sense of historical perspective is reasonably sound. “While we may think that we are the first generation to be bombarded with appeals to luxury,” he writes, “such is hardly the case” (p. 160). He highlights what he calls “the emotional effect of luxury” and the seeming irrationality of the luxury object, as well as “the entertainment and religious value of luxury” (p. 214). Only when treating the “religious value” does he become overly impressionistic and subjective for the tastes of many readers. The selection of images to illustrate his points, mainly ads, is excellent—one of the most compelling features of the book.

This is a revisionist work, iconoclastic at times, that takes issue with a series of well-known critics of American materialism and consumerism, ranging from John

Kenneth Galbraith and Vance Packard in the later 1950s to Robert Frank (later 1990s). Although Twitchell insists that he is no apologist for “opuluxe” and its advocates, he does more than acknowledge how successful they are in placing temptation in our way. He believes that luxury has been democratized in recent decades because some version of consumer “desirables” is available at all socioeconomic levels (e.g., Martha Stewart items at Kmart), and because it’s a fact of life that Americans, especially, desire things that send signals of status. Therefore, he argues, it is psychologically better to have them than to be deprived of them. The difficulty here is that for most of the book he generalizes about “we Americans” as though most of us not only want frivolously upscale objects (from handbags to house-and-garden items) but also can afford them. Only at the very end of the book does he glancingly acknowledge how many Americans are unemployed, or live below the poverty line, or simply have a tough time making ends meet. And he never explicitly acknowledges how many Americans live beyond their means and incur highly problematic levels of debt.

Twitchell’s book is built upon five basic assumptions: (1) Humans are consumers by nature. (2) Consumers are rational. (3) “As opposed to buying turnips and aspirin, consuming top-of-the-line stuff stimulates the neurotransmitters that send waves of self-satisfaction coursing around our bodies.” (4) We need to question the criticism that consumption almost always leads to disappointment. And (5), “We need to rethink the separation between production and consumption, for they are more alike than separate and occur not at different times and places but simultaneously” (pp. 38–9). I must dissent from or question numbers 2, 4, and 5, especially. The last strikes me as a half-truth, and I remain in the camp of historians who believe that since the end of the nineteenth century there has been a discernible and consequential shift from a society of production to a society of consumption, an issue whose literature by now is quite rich. Twitchell is familiar with historian Gary Cross’s recent synthetic survey, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (2000), but his comparative perspective (with Europe) would have been enriched by also reading Cross’s earlier work, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (1993), which is especially intriguing on the subject of American “desires” for material goods during the middle third of the twentieth century and which actually in some ways reinforces some of Twitchell’s major

contentions. He also overlooks Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (1997), a book that should prompt Twitchell to rethink his chronological trajectory. The stimulation of consumer desire for costly items in non-elite "spheres" began earlier than he indicates—between the World Wars from Cross's perspective and since the late 1950s from Frank's.

The author also belabors his argument that taste is "socially constructed," which he insists that too many of us are "unwilling to confront" (p. 41). I would have called that point a given, even before we encountered Pierre Bourdieu's massive tome, *Distinction* (1979). Twitchell sometimes "doctors" history to suit the needs of his argument, for example, by arguing that "tulipmania" in the Netherlands during the early seventeenth century was a democratic phenomenon (p. 208). And there is needless repetition. We do not need to be told twice, for example, that Ralph Lauren (Polo) is really Ralph Lifshitz from the Bronx (pp. 120 and 185). The book and its theses meander during its final third. The project would have been more effective, especially for classroom use, at a svelte two hundred pages. There is too much self-indulgent chattiness about the personal feelings of the author and his family.

Finally, Twitchell declares that "all things luxurious are unpredictable" (p. 208). If he means that it can be hard to predict which luxury items will catch on, I suppose he is right. But I think that it is entirely predictable why certain things enjoy enduring status as emblems of luxury and status, such as the BMW, items from Tiffany, Gucci, Fendi, and Louis Vuitton. The explanation lies partially in a certain distinctive stylistic elegance, but equally in brilliantly successful advertising campaigns that create caché, a subject on which Twitchell has already written with considerable success. Despite all of the above reservations, I found this a well-informed and highly engaging book that needed closure about ninety pages earlier. Less would have been more: as the author explains very well, that is the subtle secret of success for the most high-end items in the panorama of purchases that he depicts.

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and the Twentieth Century (1999). *He is currently writing a history of the four seasons motif in American art and culture.*