Doing consumer history
Empirical sources and methodological challenges

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During the early modern era, the intensified intercontinental circulation of goods catalysed by the development of oceanic trade routes fuelled new consumer needs and an increasing differentiation of material culture. Scholarship has investigated the use and appropriation of exogenous goods, intellectual debates and changing attitudes concerning ‘luxury’ as well as the emergence of new forms of sociability related to specific consumer practices. The eighteenth century, in particular, has been identified – by scholars dealing primarily with north-western Europe – as an era of a ‘consumer revolution’ and technological innovation that resulted in a substantially augmented access to delectable goods by ordinary people.

What commodities were consumed by which social groups? How fast did new patterns of consumption evolve and to what extent were lower social strata and rural areas involved in these processes? Which goods remained exclusive and which became popular? How did information on new commodities spread and how did changing consumer habits influence material culture and aesthetical styles? Measuring and analysing the change and persistence of consumer patterns is a challenging endeavour. Our workshop will tackle these questions, discussing empirical sources and methodological approaches we can use as historians when we deal with consumption in past societies.