A PAINTERLY PERFORMANCE OF POLITENESS:
JEAN-ÉTIENNE LIOTARD’S “STILL LIFE: TEA SET” AND IDENTITY IN EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY ENGLAND

BY

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THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Jean-Etienne Liotard’s 1783 painting, Still Life: Tea Set, functioned within its eighteenth-century context. Rather than considering the image as an academic exercise, depiction of the chinoiserie craze, or as evidence of the aging artist’s waning virtuosity, as other scholars have done, I argue that Still Life: Tea Set functioned as an active agent within its specific social matrix. Utilizing eighteenth-century sources as well as the work of contemporary scholars, this study closely examines the still life in relation to the phenomena of politeness and superficial self-fashioning, or the ancien régime of identity—a concept put forth by Dror Wahrman. When considered within the historically situated themes of eighteenth-century consumerism, the emergence of the Georgian middle-class, and polite society, it becomes clear that Still Life: Tea Set was an image created for consumption within a very specific cultural matrix, within which it was able to actively generate a range of flexible meanings for viewers.
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Introduction

In 1984, the J. Paul Getty Museum acquired two works by the Swiss-French painter Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702-1789)—a mid-century pastel portrait, typical of his oeuvre, and a still life, one of five oil paintings featuring porcelain done by the artist in 1783. Initially unassuming, the closely cropped Still Life: Tea Set depicts porcelain tea wares in use, although devoid of any human actors (Fig. 1). A tray bearing a white tea set, painted with a figural chinoiserie pattern and interspersed with silver spoons and crusts of buttered bread, rests on a tabletop. Produced at the end of Liotard’s long life, Still Life: Tea Set was not only a major shift in subject matter for the portraitist, but was also a rare production for the eighteenth-century in that it focused exclusively on a porcelain grouping. Surprisingly little has been written about Liotard’s Still Life: Tea Set. Marcel Roethlisberger, while acknowledging the image’s unique status in the history of the genre as a “porcelain still life,” reduced the painting to “an isolated expression of the taste for chinoiserie.” Louise Lippincott has suggested that Liotard’s Still Life: Tea Set was meant to be an academic exercise, exemplifying the prescriptions of his 1781 treatise on painting—*Traité des Principes et des Règles de la Peinture.* However, this paper will argue that beyond mere academic exercise or depiction of the eighteenth century craze for chinoiserie, Liotard’s still life addresses anxieties engendered by social flux. Identity in eighteenth-century Britain was externally situated—not only was it created on the surface, but it functioned and signified there as well. This superficial self-fashioning—the hallmark of the “ancien régime of identity”—was the source of both social opportunities and anxieties, ultimately giving rise to the

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phenomenon of “polite society.” Liotard cultivated his own unique personal identity located on his physical and social “surface” and also focused intently on the rendering of surfaces in painting. This can be seen in *Still Life: Tea Set*, the execution of which was an exercise in politeness as Liotard imbued the image with both the characteristics of *politesse* and notions of superficial identity construction. The “polite painting” functioned as an active agent of the *ancien régime* of identity, a concept put forth by Dror Wahrman that is invaluable to the consideration of this image in relation to eighteenth-century society.⁴ Liotard’s still life was an image made for viewing in a specific cultural matrix, within which it generated a range of flexible meanings for its audience.

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Chapter 1 Eighteenth-Century Britain—Consumerism, the Middling Sort, and Polite Society

To understand how Liotard was able to create a “polite painting,” we will explore the significance of its subject matter—a porcelain tea set—for his contemporaries. Eighteenth-century Britain experienced a “consumer revolution”—a watershed moment in the history of production and consumption that would lay the groundwork for modernity. This phenomenon sent enormous quantities of new goods into circulation that were sold, purchased, used, and collected on an unprecedented scale. The sheer quantity and diversity of commodities that became available in western Europe during the eighteenth-century meant that not only were wealthy elites consuming, but the typical consumption base for luxury items also expanded to include a diverse and growing “middling sort.” Clothing, personal accessories, furniture, household décor, new foods and beverages, and utilitarian items flooded the material world of early modern Europeans. The “range, diversity, materials, closely identified types, and even brands of the goods” that appeared over the course of the century irrevocably altered the fabric of daily life in Britain. For example, new hot beverages quickly became commodities of mass consumption. Their ingestion not only necessitated the purchase of additional goods like teapots and cups, but also restructured the schedule of a typical day. The Royal East India Company’s imports of tea “rose from twenty thousand pounds in 1700, to over two million pounds in 1800; and smuggling, the government unhappily estimated, brought in just as much.”

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Incipient forms of modernity threw traditional seventeenth-century social hierarchies into flux, entangling the rising demand for commodities with new, pervasive social anxieties. Economic and political conditions in the eighteenth-century allowed for the rise of a dramatically heterogeneous and increasingly powerful British middle class. Ranging in scope from farmers to craftsmen, tradesmen, professionals, and lesser gentry, social distinctions within the expansive “middling sort” were malleable and easily blurred. These people were neither at the bottom of the increasingly ambiguous social hierarchy, where servants, laborers, and wage earners dwelled, nor were they at the top with the aristocracy. In the late seventeenth century, approximately half of the households in England—about 700,000 out of 1,400,000—already belonged to this nebulous group. Their number continued to grow, rising in tandem with eighteenth-century industrialism and consumerism. Not only did the middling sort purchase new manufactured goods voraciously, forming the bedrock of Britain’s burgeoning consumer culture, but they also propagated both industry and consumerism as manufacturers and merchants. Consuming vigorously and benefitting financially from the commercial and industrial capitalism that made such a consumer revolution possible, the socially mobile middling sort upset the traditional balance of power and wealth in Britain.

This diverse group, which would later evolve into the more cohesive nineteenth-century “middle class,” was, in the eighteenth century, in a state of fluctuation and uncertainty, causing intense social anxiety. Not only were class boundaries and status markers easily blurred within it, but the demarcations between the expansive middling sort and both the lower classes and the aristocracy also became harder to define. Although the middling sort found opportunity for social mobility in contemporary ambiguities, its primary goal was not simply upward movement.

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9 Ibid., 14.
Rather, the middling sort expanded outwards, creating an entirely new class of British citizen. They reworked the traditional social ladder instead of merely climbing it. To carve out their own social space, the middling sort emulated the aristocracy to an extent but more importantly, they appropriated aristocratic behaviors and patterns of consumption, altering and putting them to work for their own purposes. The economic and social aspirations of the dynamic middling sort threw Britain’s entrenched, clearly defined hierarchy into a chaotic state of flux. Neatly delineated identity categories were crumbling. In 1773, the *London Chronicle* stated, “All ranks and degrees of men seem to be on the point of being confounded.”\(^{10}\) As the masses strove for gentility, titles denoting specific ranks on the social ladder depreciated. The terms gentleman and lady were no longer the exclusive purview of the landed elite but could be applied to a broader swath of the population who had cultivated and attained the social ideal of respectability. Paul Langford asserts that, “This debasement of gentility is one of the clearest signs of social change in the eighteenth-century, the mark of a fundamental transformation.”\(^{11}\)

To navigate this transformation, Georgians cultivated a culture of politeness. As a social framework, politeness provided a semblance of order and stability but also facilitated further mobility. Highly prescribed in its dictation of etiquette and behavior, politeness was a code of manners that served to ease social interaction.\(^{12}\) Those subscribing to the tenets of politeness were required to “make themselves agreeable to others.”\(^{13}\) In an increasingly ambiguous world, polite society emerged as a solution to the “rigidity, solemnity, ceremoniousness, and formality”

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\(^{13}\) Ibid.
of the previous century, characteristics which would not accommodate a social system in flux.\textsuperscript{14} Promoting an affect of ease and accessibility, the seemingly inclusive behavioral code did not disavow social rank, but rather encouraged a more relaxed mixing of ranks in social situations. Politeness lessened the tensions of social interaction when parties of varied or uncertain status were required to converse. The key factor in determining one’s politeness was consciousness of form. Physical deportment and conversation were raised to an art. Behaviors and mannerisms were carefully cultivated in order to adhere to the strictures of decorum, yet the true gentleman or lady should execute such displays with an air of nonchalance and ease. The goal of a genteel person was to appear worldly and refined, but naturally so. Polite gentility was accomplished by cultivating agreeableness, cosmopolitanism, urbanity, and generality. One must have broad interests, not specializing in any one thing but rather being the consummate amateur—knowing a little about quite a lot. These qualities facilitated polite sociability, which favored more democratized interactions rather than the rigid class distinctions and ceremony of the previous century that no longer mapped onto the current social terrain.

Lawrence Klein has defined polite society as “a formation, internally diverse with respect to wealth, nature of economic resources, status, privilege, and more and yet with a degree of experiential unity based on cultural allegiances.”\textsuperscript{15} Heredity and wealth no longer structured social interactions. Rather, socializing occurred amongst those who had cultivated polite behaviors. Considering that anyone could choose to adhere to the strictures and prescriptions of politeness, cultivating gentility by refining manners and behavior, the realm of socialization expanded immensely. Of course, hierarchical distinctions were not forgotten. The polite man or woman was aware of his or her social status, probably acutely so, but was not required to


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 888.
continuously reinforce distinctions with ceremonious behavior. Agreeable, easy sociability was much preferred to the constant reiteration of hierarchical differences, which were becoming more and more difficult to define, especially with regards to the middling sort. Social interactions came to be based on shared qualities of politeness and a common set of manners rather than circumstances of birth. Traditional hierarchical distinctions rooted in heredity and wealth should not be discounted as they still undergirded eighteenth-century British society but in social settings, the once rigid differences whose increasing blurriness presented a source of anxiety were relaxed in favor of a collective culture of politeness. One mid-century source noted that “True Nobility is not hereditary, but is purchased by eminent and personal Virtues…” Indeed, “a Man may be truly noble without ever being enobled,” and the etiquette book extolling this new merit system based on behavior would certainly be able to provide the instruction necessary to achieve social mobility…for the fee of one shilling. As established class markers destabilized and re-congealed around shared cultural traits, accessible to anyone with time to practice and money to spend, eighteenth-century social boundaries were redrawn in such a way that Britons could adapt to the changes and stresses accompanying the onset of modernity.

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16 The Lady’s Preceptor, or, A Letter to a Young Lady of Distinction Upon Politeness (Taken from the French of the Abbé D’Ancourt, and Adapted to the Religion, Customs, and Manners of the English Nation), 2nd ed. (London: J. Watts, 174?), 33.
17 Ibid., 35.
Chapter 2 “The Manners of the Present Age”—Consumer Goods and Social Practice

Although the affectation of polite manners, speech, and movement was meant to appear effortless, *politesse* was a cultural construction, assembled from habits that had to be learned, studied, and cultivated. Genteel behavior was a performance that necessitated both the purchase of etiquette books and the guidance of dancing masters, music teachers, and drawing tutors.\(^{18}\) Politeness was best performed with props—the necessary equipment easily found in England due to the nature of eighteenth-century consumerism. Essential to the enactment of gentility were tea wares—both the objects’ design and one’s handling of such delicate materials communicated the extent of the consumer’s respectability, elegance, and taste. Polite social interactions evolved into highly prescribed, elaborate rituals, not least of which was the consumption of tea. While one could take tea alone, within the private confines of the home, the act was usually a social affair, occurring within an arena of display and performance during assemblies, dinner parties, and domestic visits. The Georgian tea table became the stage upon which social manners and polite etiquette were enacted. In this ritualistic setting, tea drinkers could prove their agreeableness and refinement—characteristics of polite gentility.\(^{19}\)

In the 1777 satirical novel *The Pupil of Pleasure*, Samuel Jackson Pratt detailed the physical comportment expected at a polite tea table. Having been exposed to polite society, Pratt’s character Harriet Homespun became dissatisfied with her old lifestyle and with the boorishness of her impolite husband, the aptly named Reverend Horace Homespun. Criticized by his wife for less than decorous behavior at the tea table, Horace complained:

…She found fault with everything I did. She insisted upon it, I drank my tea too hot, which was not only, she said, injurious to the coat of the stomach, but shockingly indelicate. The teaspoon was not managed to her satisfaction. I sipped too loud from the saucer, when it would, I find, have been genteeler to

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apply a silent lip to the cup. Nay, what is worse than all this, I had the misfortune to fold the bread and butter inelegantly; and it would have been better there too, if I had put the end, rather than the side of it, to my mouth first. But that which most astonished me, was her objection to the good old custom of turning down my cup, which she said was out of the Ton, and that it would give her great pleasure, if, in future, I would lay the spoon across the cup.  

His wife’s new subscription to polite etiquette was a “lunacy” that the provincial Horace Homespun simply could not understand. As Harriet’s concern with fashionable and genteel manual gestures indicates, porcelain objects and their manipulation were at the center of the ritual of taking tea. Tea wares were the tools with which people enacted the performance of politeness. Properly serving and consuming tea, utilizing the necessary equipage, and making amiable conversation over the tea table were all markers of polite gentility. Manipulating such delicate objects as teacups provided an opportunity to showcase the corresponding delicacy and refinement of one’s own actions. Comportment at the tea table while engaging in the consumption of comestibles, which could be a rather impolite and base human act, was an exercise in genteel etiquette and physical elegance. The polite ritual of taking tea also helped participants navigate the intricacies of social intercourse. While individuals utilized the arena to display their own genteel qualities, the tea table was also a space for mediating tensions. Structured by the tenets of politeness, the consumption of tea “provided a space and time for people to prepare themselves for a difficult encounter in the neutral context offered through social ritual.”  

The guiding principles of gentility undergirding the act of taking tea helped people negotiate interactions within a shifting social spectrum. During assemblies, social calls, and dinner parties—spheres of mixed company—the common tenets of politeness gave people the necessary tools to smoothly navigate tensions regardless of the class or gender of those

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involved. Taking tea was the ultimate performance of polite sociability, which could both elevate one’s own status and also ease the stress of social interaction in an uncertain world.

Facilitating this performance, the new commodities of the eighteenth-century were active agents in the process of identity construction. As Sarah Richards has stated, “Refined consumer goods were a material support, which reinforced polite behavior, and were increasingly available to wider strata in society.” However, the cultural significance of objects like porcelain tea wares went beyond mere material support. Increasingly, refined artifacts were believed to lend their qualities to those who possessed and utilized them. Making the connection between the proliferation of “polite” commodities and the rise of polite manners, contemporaries remarked on the power of objects to affect change in people. On one side of the luxury debate were those who condemned materialistic effects on human nature as immoral, corrupt, and excessive. Luxury consumption by the expansive middling class, however, was tempered by the pursuit of respectability, gentility, and politeness. From their perspective, changes enacted by the appropriate material possessions were civilizing. In 1772, an article published in The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure declared that:

The manners of the present age in England are those of a wealthy, luxurious, refined, and learned people. Riches have polished every part of this island, and wherever they have spread their influence, they have carried in their train civility, ease, and pleasure… There is an air of polishing and elegance to be seen in everything… What can be more universal, than the effects of riches on manners in England? We see it everywhere, and in everything; all ranks of the people increasing in expense…hence we see a more refined civility, more attentive manners; some awkward imitations, it is true, but in general a strong desire to signalize themselves in dress, equipage…etc. As much ceremony is found in the assembly of a country grocer’s wife, as in that of a Countess; all this is mere wealth; the natural effect of riches, and must inevitably bring on a change of manners; that is, a decrease of rusticity, more polish…a softer humanity…to which we give the term politeness…

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22 Ibid., 99.
The power of refined goods to polish manners was “advantageous to every rank of life.” Indeed, commodities with which consumers could refine behavior and “signalize themselves” were widely accessible. From the mid-eighteenth century, British manufacturers, often belonging to the middling sort, began producing commodities domestically on a much greater scale. Lighting the spark for the Industrial Revolution, British factories responded to the popularity of expensive imported wares with a combination of plagiarism and creative innovation—resulting in domestic consumer goods that were both more affordable and that catered directly to the new tastes of the polite middling sort. Ceramics were one of the main commodities produced in Britain, feeding the intense demand for tea wares, which had evolved from luxuries to absolute necessities over the course of the century. There were a wide variety of styles available for any price range, from elaborate, highly embellished porcelain redolent of aristocratic excess to plain, undecorated earthenware for the lower classes. One distinctly British innovation in ceramics production, made while English manufacturers experimentally searched for substitutes for Asian ingredients, was the introduction of bone ash to the recipe of soft-paste porcelain. First used at the Bow Factory in 1749, the addition of bone ash allowed English producers to create soft-paste wares that rivaled true, hard-paste Asian bodies for quality and strength. After Bow’s success, English factories like Lowestoft, opened in 1757, avidly adopted bone ash as an essential component of their porcelain recipes. While hard-paste and other soft-paste porcelain formulas could be glazed and fired in a single operation, resulting in

24 Ibid.
crisp, clear, highly finished details, bone china required two firings.\textsuperscript{28} Although it was well formed and durable, after an initial biscuit firing and then a second firing of the lead glaze, the surface details of bone china were softened and blurred. This type of ceramic ware could be produced and sold at a significantly lower cost and as such, was marketed directly to the middling sort, who eagerly purchased soft-paste bone china imitations of Asian and Continental imports.\textsuperscript{29} Since these products—once the exclusive purview of the elite—could be acquired on virtually any budget, material possessions no longer served as a reliable indicator of one’s social status.

Consumers desired what commodities could represent and what owning them could provide. For example, ownership of a tea set necessarily implied respectability, although the appearance had to be solidified by proper utilization. Within this culture of both politeness and consumerism, it is no surprise that shopping became an increasingly popular pastime. As a luxury product, china could be purchased from dealers of similar goods like jewelers and goldsmiths.\textsuperscript{30} Wealthy shoppers often patronized the warehouses of ceramic dealers known as “chinamen.” These stores, located in fashionable shopping districts, utilized elegant showrooms and the lure of exclusivity to attract an upper-class clientele. Shop design and the display of goods became major points of emphasis for eighteenth-century retailers as polite society adopted shopping as a fashionable, leisurely pursuit. Selecting wares for purchase—an exercise in good taste—was another social event where one could display polite behavior.

However, exclusive retail establishments selling imported Chinese porcelain or domestically produced ceramics by Derby, Chelsea, and Wedgwood were not the only places one might procure tea wares. In addition to shops carrying less elaborate and more affordable

\textsuperscript{28} Maxine Berg, \textit{Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain}, 131.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Hilary Young, \textit{English Porcelain}, 161.
ceramics, there was also an avid second-hand market in England. Auctions for used goods like those held by James Christie attracted consumers from a wide variety of social classes. Quickly becoming a spectacular form of fashionable entertainment, the act of bidding at public auctions allowed a range of consumers to display good taste, connoisseurship, and polite refinement. Ironically, auctions exemplified both the destructive and generative possibilities of consumption. Estate sales often occurred when someone, pushed to ruin by the need to consume, was forced to sell property, which would then be redistributed to new consumers, eager to cultivate their own identities via material possessions.  

31 The auctioneer had the power to “dismantle a particular emblem of the social order,” whether that was a house, an estate, or a collection, and would then “invite the viewer, the bidder, the buyer—who may or may not be in the same social class as the previous owner—to reconstruct its possibilities.”  

32 When estates were broken up at auction, the goods for sale varied greatly in price, allowing both aristocrats and the middling sort to make purchases. This was not simply an arena of display for the elite. It was also a space of ambiguity where those on the lower levels of the social scale might make claims about their own gentility by purchasing objects like porcelain, which would suggest that they participated in the polite and proper ritual of tea drinking. Luxury items in the second-hand market were linked to broader value systems. With the purchase of a porcelain tea set, a consumer not only acquired the physical equipage but more importantly, also paid for the veneer of polite respectability.  

33 The redistribution of property at auctions created opportunities for the middling sort to buy into polite society. Auctions promised social mobility, however illusive and ambiguous that may have been. There was much more at stake when participating in these spectacles of consumption.

than the mere transmission of property. Rather, “they offered the apparent possibility of transmission of class.”

Thus, the purchase of polite luxury goods like china in an auction setting was both a class differentiator and a means by which one might blur already tenuous class divides. Commodities were used to navigate social tensions but also had the power to exacerbate them.

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Chapter 3 Polishing Polite Surfaces—Mid Eighteenth-Century Notions of Identity

Indeed, a major cause for anxiety and one of the more dangerous threats to the traditional social order “lay in the visible manner in which people remade themselves through the use of consumer goods.” It was this unique society in flux, inundated by new commodities and structured by the framework of politeness, which allowed for the existence of what Dror Wahrman has called as the ancien régime of identity. Although an admittedly problematic term, Wahrman’s ancien régime, when utilized in relation to emergent middle-class Georgian society, is incredibly valuable. Within the ancien régime, as Wahrman has defined it, identity was believed to be “mutable, malleable, unreliable, divisible, replaceable, transferable, manipulable, escapable, or otherwise fuzzy around the edges. Conversely, it was a regime of identity not characterized by an axiomatic presupposition of a deep inner core of selfhood.” This regime dominated eighteenth-century European conceptions of identity and the self. In England, identity was characterized by exteriority, constructed and enacted on the surface. One of the most popular mid-century social events, the masquerade, neatly embodies this mode of thinking. Identity play was at the heart of the masquerade; new personas could be donned and doffed with ease, stretching the limits of multiple identity categories such as race, gender, class, and age. This protean mutability was not restricted to the masquerade. In fact, the cultural institution was a parallel to real life. It was believed that the imperative to change one’s own identity was “an essential aspect of human nature.”

Contemporaries commonly equated daily life with the masquerade. In 1765 Thomas Letchworth wrote, “the world’s all face,” referring to the fact that in the eighteenth century,

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35 Sarah Richards, Eighteenth-Century Ceramics, 113.
37 Ibid., 158.
38 Ibid., 167.
identity was believed to rest on the surface, potentially as changeable as a costume or mask.\footnote{Ibid., Quote originally found in Thomas Letchworth, \textit{A Morning\’s Meditation; or, A Descant on the Times, A Poem}, (London, 1765).} However, a mask was not conceived of as hiding something “authentic” and unchanging. Instead, identities were understood to be malleable and replaceable. Conceptions of identity did not rely on a deeply seated “stable inner core of selfhood.”\footnote{Ibid., 168.} Rather, the eighteenth-century self was “socially turned,”\footnote{See Sarah Knott, \textit{Sensibility and the American Revolution} (University of North Carolina Press, 2009).} existing in a configuration or “set of positions within which one identified oneself—a set of coordinates, or a matrix. One’s position within this matrix, which could be prescribed or adopted (thus allowing for both subordination and agency), was relational.”\footnote{Dror Wahrman, \textit{The Making of the Modern Self}, 168.} The possibilities of the matrix described by Wahrman were facilitated by a looser, more variable sense of what “identity” was in the first place. One could simply change his or her identity with a change of their surface, whether the change was enacted with clothing, behavior, or any other outward sign. This was not necessarily a diversion or deception, but an expression of alternate truths.\footnote{Ibid., 167.} Herein lay the possibilities inherent in the \textit{ancien régime} of identity.

Exterior identity construction was the “visible manner in which people remade themselves through the use of consumer goods,” and it was a continual process of making and remaking.\footnote{Sarah Richards, \textit{Eighteenth-Century Ceramics}, 113.} It has already been noted that the products of eighteenth-century consumerism were believed to have had a direct impact on changes in behavior. Indeed, “the natural effect of riches…must inevitably bring on a change of manners.”\footnote{Anonymous, “Of the Manners of the Age, as Refined by Luxury,” \textit{The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure}, Vol. L, (London, 1772).} Goods like porcelain tea wares were not only props for the performance of politeness, but were also the tools with which people effected a change of surface, ergo a change of identity. In this way, identity was not essential, but was rather
something that could be adopted or discarded at will. It was a constructed and carefully cultivated play of surfaces. Eighteenth-century Britons understood their changing, chaotic world in terms of this mutable identity potential, which required a “spectatorial sense of self in society.” In various situations and among varied company, when traditional status categories were tenuous at best, a “socially turned fundamental malleability” allowed Georgians to both read the surfaces of others and to display their own carefully cultivated external identities, smoothing the tensions of social interaction.

Within the ancien régime of identity, the epoch in which Jean-Étienne Liotard was completely immersed, superficiality was essential. External and socially turned, identity was constructed on the human “surface.” The conflation of perceived human or social surfaces and literal, material surfaces was common in eighteenth-century language. This convergence of materiality with the social or ideological is most obvious in the following entries from Samuel Johnson’s eighteenth-century Dictionary of the English Language:

- **Gloss**, glôs. s. superficial lustre; a comment; a specious representation.
- **Glossy**, glôs’-sè. a. shining, bright, smoothly polished.
- **Polish**, pôl’-lish. s. artificial gloss, elegance.
- **Polish**, pôl’-lish. v. to smooth, brighten; to civilize.
- **Polite**, pô-lite’. n. elegant of manners, glossy
- **Politeness**, pô-lite’-nes. s. gentility, good breeding.

The etymological origins of the English word “polite” can be located in the Latin politus, meaning “polished.” Dr. Johnson made it clear that to be polite was to be polished, glossy, smooth, and shiny. One’s gloss was a “specious representation,” achieved by careful manipulation and cultivation. Maintaining the “superficial lustre” of politeness required constant

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47 Ibid., 326.
labor and endless polishing. It was an ongoing process of surface work. This was achieved through the careful selection of clothing, personal accessories, the materials with which one surrounded oneself in both public and domestic settings, the manipulation of hair, the application of cosmetics, and most importantly, through one’s behavior. Those making claims to gentility had to be vigilant in their constant affectation of the prescriptions of politeness. Polishing was deliberate and conscious. It was “a social process, a process of education and acculturation.” Gestures and behaviors had to be learned, studied, and practiced until they were executed with such ease and grace as to seem natural—the true gentlemen simply possessed an innate, nonchalant je ne sais quoi...or at least gave the appearance of such. Indeed, one’s appearance, located and cultivated on the human surface, was of the utmost importance. “It was a common observation that in England the appearance of a gentleman was seemingly sufficient to make him one, at least in the sense of his acceptance as such by others.” As traditional identity markers blurred, no longer stable indicators of a person’s status, the assessment of appearances had to be relied upon. Navigating eighteenth-century British society required a “legible semiotics...of identities.” This was a process of “reading” surfaces. Everything displayed on a person’s physical surface signified in various ways, contributing elements to their identity when perceived and interpreted by others. Ultimately, the surfaces cultivated by eighteenth-century Britons were carefully contrived representations. Indeed, “the concept of identity as representational is no postmodern anachronism,” but was rather “an essential component of eighteenth-century life.”

50 Ibid., 38.
51 Paul Langford, A Polite and Commercial People, 71.
52 Ibid., 66.
Already in the Renaissance there was “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process.”\textsuperscript{55} In sixteenth-century England, “there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned.”\textsuperscript{56} This sense did not lessen over the course of two hundred years but rather reached a zenith with the eighteenth-century \textit{ancien régime} of identity. Georgian consumerism contributed immensely to this peak moment of superficial, socially turned self-fashioning. Consumption was a “voluntaristic, self-directed, and creative process” in which eighteenth-century Britons took on increased agency, exercising the power of choice in the performance and development of identities.\textsuperscript{57} Consumer decisions—what and how one consumed, or even what one refused to consume—were all inscribed on the semiotically legible, self-fashioned human surface. Consumption itself was a performance. When consuming, one made certain choices, acting from “a repertoire of roles,” to construct their desired identity.\textsuperscript{58} Adhering to the strictures of polite society to cultivate respectability was one of many choices that consumers could make.

The performativity of consumption in the eighteenth century was reflexive. People consciously styled themselves \textit{as} consumers; you could \textit{be} a consumer. Indeed, choosing to consume in certain ways or even \textit{not} to consume was a common “self-reflexive way of defining oneself as a consumer” and establishing one’s political, moral, or ideological identity.\textsuperscript{59} For example, in the eighteenth century, sugar was a colonial import, produced via dangerous methods by slave labor. However, it was fashionable and quite common to take tea with sugar.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{57} Colin Campbell, \textit{The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (Alcuin Academics, 2005), 203.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 3.
In an effort to declare abolitionist opinions, some Europeans chose to boycott sugar, bypassing it at social functions or removing it from their tea table altogether. Abstention was one of the many ways individuals could curate the information displayed on their personal surface. Indeed, these movements gave a measure of agency to women, colonists, and religious dissenters—those who were not allowed to participate directly in the British government. In this way, disenfranchised individuals were able to create identities that communicated their personal beliefs. The eighteenth-century was an unprecedented moment in British consumer history when people “first began to see themselves as capable of choosing between a multitude of newly available luxury goods, and to see the choices they made as potentially redefining their socioeconomic status.” Consumers were intensely conscious of their decisions with regards to the purchase and use of commodities because those goods would be “drawn into active use and made to signify in ways which were instrumental in forming a person’s sense of self.” One could cultivate his or her identity by making choices with regards to consumption and by performing (or not performing) certain consumerist roles. With the ability to “make and unmake selves,” goods like tea wares possessed a “supernatural power over individual meanings and identities.”

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61 Ibid., 44.
Chapter 4 Performing *Le Peintre Turc*—Liotard’s Surfaces

Jean-Étienne Liotard’s own self-fashioning was a particular enactment of this superficial ancien régime mode of identity construction. In fact, the artist cultivated a personal “surface” that became famous throughout Europe. Beginning in 1738, Liotard spent five years in the Ottoman Empire, finding immense success painting Europeans abroad. While traveling, he adopted a plethora of foreign customs and upon his return to Europe, caused quite the sensation. Styling himself as “le peintre turc”—the Turkish painter, an epithet he would use until his death—Liotard deployed his Oriental-inspired exoticism as a marketing strategy, which garnered both public attention and immediate commercial success for the pastel portraitist. His flamboyant public façade could not be missed in the courts and cities through which he passed. Always dressed in “long baggy pants, a flowing caftan, [and] outlandish hats,” Liotard chose to present himself sans wig, sporting a dramatic beard that hung to his waist. Generally, eighteenth-century European men did not grow beards. Shaving signified the refinement of Western civilization. Thus, his exotic, hirsute appearance was so well known that when he chose to shave his facial hair on the occasion of his wedding in 1756, the event made the London newspapers!

Another “cross-cultural beard performer,” the Irish archaeologist Richard Pococke also grew a beard and mustache during his time in the Ottoman Empire. Painted by Liotard, Pococke was depicted sporting both his new facial hair and Turkish robes. The archaeologist wrote about his beard and the gradual transformation of identity he experienced as it grew. With

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65 Ibid., 97.
his change in surface, Pococke stated, “I am a perfect Arabian.”70 The foreign garb of both Pococke and Liotard was the total antithesis of the superficial guise cultivated just as carefully by the “refined and civilized” men of eighteenth-century Europe who donned fashionable “knee breeches, stockings, elegant coats, cuffs, and powdered wigs.”71 For the rest of his life, the artist fully exercised his Orientalized persona in both dress and comportment. For example, he was known to sit cross-legged on the floor—a posture no European gentleman would adopt. Liotard’s flowing robes, lengthy beard, and cross-legged position can all be seen in his Self Portrait from 1768 (Fig. 2). However, Mary Sheriff has written that the artist’s adoption of caftan, beard, and nickname signified much more than mere commercial self-promotion. Rather, the elements comprising Liotard’s persona were components of an identity matrix “forged through repeated instances of cultural engagement and disengagement and processes of imitation and differentiation.”72 The artist’s chosen external appearance should not be written off as a marketing ploy or even as the product of cross-cultural contact. Liotard’s “surface” was the active site of his conscious and deliberate self-fashioning; a space that was constantly under construction.

In addition to flouting European modes of dress and deportment, the eccentric peintre turc disregarded modern western conventions of representation. Deploring the often flamboyant and painterly rococo style that was so popular with the Academy, Liotard’s work drew on his experiences abroad, on his training as a painter of miniatures, and on his admiration for the highly finished, descriptive surfaces of seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes. He likely studied Turkish, Persian, and Chinese art during his years as an eastern expatriate. Thus, while his

72 Mary Sheriff, “The Dislocations of Jean-Etienne Liotard, Called the Turkish Painter,” Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art since the Age of Exploration, ed. Mary D. Sheriff (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 103.
portraits and genre scenes did not always incorporate Middle-Eastern or Asian motifs, his planarity, directness, realism, smooth surfaces, hidden brushstrokes, minute details, and meticulous finishes combined to give his work an Oriental feel.\textsuperscript{73} Although he had his share of negative criticism—mainly from academicians—the denizens of Vienna, Amsterdam, Paris, and London clamored to have their likenesses rendered by Liotard. His style, while obviously European, was infused with just the right amount of eastern allure, reminiscent of Oriental painting with its characteristic flatness and lack of shadows. Liotard praised eastern art for being “smooth, clean, and neat,” although he held seventeenth-century Dutch painting as the ultimate model of perfection.\textsuperscript{74} A unique product of these cross-cultural influences, his work features intense pictorial realism with meticulous, high finishes and yet his subtle modeling with very little shading also causes an interesting flattening of space. This planarity often implies a lack of volume or mass in his figures and a lack of depth in his settings. Describing Liotard’s Ottoman oeuvre, Kristel Smentek wrote that he “was quite capable of convincingly rendering recession into depth,” yet the artist’s pictorial spaces were “often indeterminate and difficult to decipher.”\textsuperscript{75} Indeed, even the horizontal meeting of dark green background and rich brown tabletop in \textit{Still Life: Tea Set} leaves the viewer with an unsatisfying understanding of the space depicted. It is unclear whether the table abuts a dark wall or if there is some distance between the edge of the furniture and a more distant background.

Liotard disregarded “perspective in favor of an aesthetic promotion of flatness, in all the richness of its possible patterns.”\textsuperscript{76} Rather than focusing on illusionistic depth, he rendered space as pattern. One example of his superficial, pattern-focused portrait style is Liotard’s 1760 pastel

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 94.
image of Isaac-Louis de Thellusson (Fig. 3), in which a flat, nondescript wall serves as the background for the more important patterns of lace, upholstery, and even hair. The planarity of the image and the flatness and materiality of the parchment are emphasized by the artist’s signature and date, which is prominently located in the upper left corner. These elements bring the flatness of the picture plane very much to the fore. His combination of planarity, painstaking attention to detail, and focus on pattern gives Liotard’s portraits an undeniable sense of exteriority. The artist made no attempt to depict the interiority or psychological depth of his sitters, but remained attentive to their surfaces. He avoided “any such indications of inwardness in favor of minutely observed and scrupulously registered external appearances.” For Liotard, both pictorial representation and his conception of the self were based on “a materially specific exteriority”—they were surfaces. His approach to portraiture shows an “absence of commitment to the depths of selfhood.” Referred to as “the painter of truth,” Liotard recognized “truth” as being located on the surface, an understanding in keeping with the externally situated ancien régime notion of identity. Rather than considering Liotard’s portraits negatively as lacking psychological depth, then, we can understand them more appropriately as representing the mode in which eighteenth-century Europeans would have conceived of the self—not internally but externally.

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
Chapter 5 Painting Porcelain—The Surfaces of a Social Signifier

Liotard would occasionally include porcelain objects in his portraits, as *Lady Pouring Chocolate*, *Madame Lavergne and Her Daughter*, *The Breakfast*, and *The Chocolate Girl* illustrate. However, it was only at the end of his life, when he was no longer receiving steady patronage, that he produced a handful of unique still life paintings featuring porcelain. Typically, his porcelain objects were shown in use by some human actor and served as supplemental props to the more important figural depictions. His 1783 *Still Life: Tea Set* was unique in that it focused exclusively on a porcelain grouping. Clearly at play in Liotard’s painting was an awareness of the not so distant history of art. The dark green background contrasting strongly with the bright white porcelain and the arrangement of items on display in the foreground certainly recall the seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes Liotard so admired. Indeed, in his *Traité des principes et des règles de la peinture*, Liotard wrote that Jan van Huysum had “in his paintings of flowers and fruit, carried oil painting to its highest degree of perfection…he painted them with all…possible truth; he came to render all the subtleties and the lightness of nature…no other oil painting can be compared to his for freshness, liveliness, and truth of imitation of nature.”

Having studied the pictorial realism, intense descriptiveness, and illusionism of Dutch painting for decades, in 1783 he finally executed a work that strongly referenced the material of his inspiration.

In *Still Life: Tea Set*, Liotard represented a reddish brown wooden tabletop surface on which a dark tole tray rests. Painted with a blue, pink, and white floral design, the metal tray was meant to imitate more expensive imported Chinese lacquer ware. On this highly reflective tray sits a complete tea set, depicted mid or post-use. By tilting the tabletop forward at a strange

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angle, Liotard has given the beholder a privileged perspective through which our view of the objects depicted is maximized. He has organized his tea equipage in a three-register composition with three sets of cups, saucers, and spoons and a lidded jug for cream on the level nearest the viewer. In the middle register is a teapot, plate of bread, and sugar bowl on which a pair of silver tongs rests. A lidded canister for tea leaves, another pair of cups, saucers, and spoons, and a large slop bowl containing the sixth and final teacup, saucer, and spoon trio comprise the most distant register. Reflecting the actual experience of taking tea in the eighteenth century, Liotard has also included slices of bread among the porcelain. Forgotten crumbs litter the assemblage and even escape the confines of the tray. A handle-less cup in the most distant register holds yellowish tea, the spoon standing as if someone was stirring the brew but abandoned the task. Besides this deserted cup, other elements also add to the sense of messiness in Liotard’s painting, suggesting that whoever had been sipping tea has now gone and we are left with the remnants of their fare. For example, cups are overturned and tilted on their sides and one used cup and saucer has even been relegated to the slop bowl.

There is a sort of ordered disorder here that can also be found in seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting. What might be construed as random disarray—cups tipped to the side, tea left unattended, sugar on the table—is actually a highly ordered exercise in both the act of painting and in the execution of politesse. The artist’s treatise, which emphasized chiaroscuro, contrast, and lighting effects, was published within two years of his execution of Still Life: Tea Set. Louise Lippincott has suggested that the three cup, saucer, and spoon sets in the first register of Liotard’s still life were an academic exercise in highlights, shadows, and gradations of tone as each set is shown in a distinct combination, able to present different variations of light.

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81 Louise Lippincott, “Liotard’s ‘China Painting,’” 123.
and darkness. Indeed, Liotard was both exemplifying the prescriptions of his treatise and displaying his own virtuosity as an artist.

Tilting towards the viewer slightly, the angle of the tabletop and tray echo the planarity of his earlier portraits. The same interest in surface is clearly at play as well as his focus on pattern. Against the dramatically dark background, the tea equipage itself becomes a flat pattern of bright curves and arcs. Interestingly, Liotard railed against *touches*, or unconcealed brushstrokes, in his treatise and never utilized them in his portraits. While many of the *Traite’s* prescriptions are exemplified in *Still Life: Tea Set*, Liotard subtly but deliberately revealed some of his *touches*, an act that went against his own rule. Taken as a whole, the still life is highly finished and has a strong illusory effect. Closer inspection, however, allows the viewer to discern Liotard’s brushstrokes in the buttered bread, tole tray flowers, and porcelain pattern. There is a denial of surface in the still life as Liotard strove for illusionistic artifice, visual deception, and realism, but there is also an intense awareness and acceptance of the flat, material surface of the painting. We can see “through” the picture plane to study the qualities of each surface depicted—the shiny smoothness of porcelain, the gleam of silver, the graininess of sugar, the reflection of metallic tole, the creaminess of buttered bread, and the clarity of translucent liquid. However, when attending too closely to the “surface” of individual objects, Liotard’s illusion is undermined by the overt materiality of paint and canvas.

Contrary to the rest of the highly descriptive image, the figural chinoiserie pattern of the porcelain is rendered with notably less precision. This blurred china can be compared to his chocolate cup in *The Breakfast* (Fig. 4), painted some thirty years before, where the Continental painted porcelain seems to be much more sharply in focus. While this meticulous description was typical of his earlier career, in *Still Life: Tea Set*, the painted dishes are not rendered with
hyper-realistic clarity. However, the lack of specificity in the porcelain design does not detract from the deception of Liotard’s illusion. Indeed, the porcelain in the back register features an even blurrier painted design than those in the front, which serves to heighten the picture’s realism and strange sense of depth. This technique was another prescription of his treatise.

When attempting to show that objects in the mid- and backgrounds occupied space behind those in the foreground, “the best and true way is to put a little less detail on the objects in the back.” To do so, he rendered porcelain painting as blur.

Marcel Roethlisberger suggests that the “awkwardnesses of execution and design” of Liotard’s later work, which he sees in irregular perspectives and the angles of tables, and which we might also see in the sketchier quality of the porcelain painting and unconcealed brushstrokes—elements missing in his earlier portraits—were due to his advanced age. Although Liotard was indeed in his eighties when painting his few still life pieces, I would argue that the changes in his later works like Still Life: Tea Set were conscious choices and not the result of shaky hands, failing eyesight, or decreased mental capacity. The meticulous application of highlights and shadows, the glowing reflections, and the barely perceptible gradual blurring of the porcelain designs as the viewer’s eye progresses from the front register to the back attest to the artist’s extant skill and virtuosity rather than waning competence. The blurred effect of his porcelain in Still Life: Tea Set was part of a set of deliberate choices, which contributed to the picture’s social resonance. Trained as a miniaturist by both Daniel Gardelle (1673-1753) and Jean-Baptiste Massé (1687-1767), Liotard was able to paint remarkable intricacies and highly finished details. The artist also dabbled in both the painting and manufacture of porcelain.

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82 Ibid., 102.
83 Marcel Roethlisberger, “Jean-Etienne Liotard as a Painter of Still Lifes,” 117.
Although his porcelain decorating business schemes came to nothing, Liotard possessed an intensely detailed knowledge of the material. This suggests that the blur of Liotard’s porcelain in *Still Life: Tea Set* was not an inaccuracy or even mere illusory technique, but was actually an accurate representation based on material knowledge and personal experience.

The artist’s family had only recently reached the bourgeoisie spectrum of social status with his father’s ascent in 1701. It comes as no surprise then that Liotard chose to depict the means by which those belonging to the lower middle class might take advantage of fluctuating categorical boundaries, adopting genteel, polite identities to achieve social mobility. While the porcelain in *Still Life: Tea Set* has generally been described as Chinese export ware, I would identify the equipage as English in origin. Liotard painted his porcelain shapes and patterns after those of the British Lowestoft factory, discussed previously. Similarly sketchy chinoiserie figures can be seen on multiple examples of Lowestoft from the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figs. 5-9). Painted in an almost cartoonish style, the figures were blurred further by the process of firing bone china. Liotard borrowed the gentle pastel coloring of the Lowestoft pattern and its distinctive “rose ornament,” or red borders and accents. He incorporated the tree branch motif from the Victoria and Albert Lowestoft teapot, cup, and cream jug and also appropriated the men with pipes, found on both the Lowestoft slop bowl and Liotard’s sugar bowl and cream vessel. On his teacups and cream jug, the artist used Lowestoft’s division of space with vertical bands of swirling, stylized floral patterns.

Domestically produced bone china made the material culture of politeness accessible to a much broader swath of the population so this type of Lowestoft tea set would have been affordable for someone of middling sort status. While the hazy designs of the porcelain were an

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85 Louise Lippincott, “Liotard’s ‘China Painting,’” 94.
unavoidable result of the firing process, the figures were conveniently blurred just enough to resist specificity but not so much as to disavow stylistic origins. The pattern was generally Chinese and its vague Oriental implications were enough to cultivate the “look” of politeness, with its emphasis on worldly, broad generality. A tea set such as this would provide the appearance of cosmopolitan urbanity without requiring any true knowledge of the East. Similarly, the tole tray on which the equipage rests was a cheaper tin imitation of more expensive Asian lacquer imports. Like the Lowestoft it holds, the tray attests to the opportunities inherent in politeness, a social system where status depended on appearance and behavior—one’s carefully constructed surface—rather than birth. With the proliferation of more affordable consumer goods in the eighteenth-century, almost anyone could cultivate gentility. Liotard deliberately chose to depict the polite props of the middling sort, painting the actual “blur” of bone ash china and referencing the plethora of opportunities available within the ancien régime of identity.
Chapter 6 A Polite Painting—Liotard’s Still Life: Tea Set

Again, I would disagree with Marcel Roethlisberger, who wrote that Still Life: Tea Set was “an isolated expression of the [European] taste for chinoiserie” in Liotard’s body of work. The still life bears meaning that extends far beyond a stylistic fad and cannot be explained simply by ascribing its existence to Europe’s eighteenth-century chinoiserie obsession. While the work does exemplify many of Liotard’s rules of painting from the Traite, Louise Lippincott’s focused analysis of Still Life: Tea Set also falls short of explaining the broader significance of the image. Instead, it is more useful to consider the painting in relation to eighteenth-century conceptions of identity and the ideologies of the social framework of politeness. Still Life: Tea Set is essentially a polite painting, depicting the primary material signifiers of polite society and featuring numerous parallels to ancien régime notions of identity. These parallels can be located not only in Liotard’s content, but also in his artistic technique and mode of representation.

The Lady’s Preceptor, or, A Letter to Young Lady of Distinction Upon Politeness, a typical etiquette manual for women, nicely highlights some of the contradictions inherent in and indeed, essential to, the performance of politeness. Much of the book’s advice centers on “appearance” and the importance of constantly regulating one’s surface, recommendations in keeping with externally situated ancien régime notions of identity. The Preceptor’s prescriptions make it clear that the performance of politeness was an artificial construction premised on dissimulation. While the book derides affectation as error, it heartily recommends affecting certain attitudes and appearances. It was possible within the ancien régime of identity to don and doff various masks or appearances. However, when doing so, one must “take care…that there be no Appearance of Affectation…but let all you say be easy, natural, and

87 Marcel Roethlisberger, “Jean-Etienne Liotard as a Painter of Still Lifes,” 120.
The same contradictory yet sanctioned spirit of dissimulation and external appearances can be located in Liotard’s *Still Life: Tea Set*. Throughout his *Traité*, the artist lauded naturalness and truth in painting. Yet, he favored illusionistic artifice above all else. Just as the polite individual must affect specific behaviors and movements while appearing nonchalant and unstudied, Liotard strove to paint deceptively but wanted his composition to seem natural. One of the most obvious indicators of this is the seeming disarray of the tea wares, which gives the picture a natural, true to life authenticity. While the porcelain grouping may at first glance appear messy, it is rather an exercise in ordered disorder—a highly organized and contrived arrangement of objects into a deliberate pattern. With the same emphasis on planarity seen in his earlier portraits, Liotard treated this image as a surface to be decorated with patterns, reminding the viewer that both paintings and human identities were constructed superficially. In Liotard’s shiny, smooth, high gloss porcelain and neat finish, we see a visual manifestation of the eighteenth-century conflation of human and material surfaces—to be polite was to be polished and glossy. His mode of representation mirrored the tenets of politeness. Indeed, Liotard wrote in his *Traité* that “La Peinture est le miroir immuable de tout ce que l’univers nous offre de plus beau.”

He believed that painting was a mirror—a surface able to reflect the world and in this case, polite society as it existed in conjunction with the eighteenth-century *ancien régime* conception of identity.

However, not all eighteenth-century Europeans subscribed to the tenets of politeness. The possibilities of superficially constructed identities relied on an increase in the freedom of personal choice. In response to this, Liotard’s china painting was deliberately ambiguous. The lack of figures makes it impossible to determine who was taking tea and what their specific

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88 Ibid., 50-51.
social identities might have been. We cannot know if the table was surrounded by “the assembly of a country grocer’s wife [or] a Countess.” In this way, it was able to appeal to a myriad of viewers with different ideologies and identities. Within the image, someone might locate his or her own consumerist identity or even project that identity onto the work. Thus, the image was aware of its own reception and consumption and was able to adapt in a complex social world depending on viewership just as politeness and flexible, mutable identities allowed Georgians to adapt to various situations in an era of uncertainty and change.

Ideas about porcelain were numerous and diverse. Depending on one’s socio-political stance, a teacup might positively represent the righteous fruits of empire, the domination over and domestication of foreign entities, or the polite, morally upright act of taking tea, which helped to civilize modern society. Conversely, it might also negatively represent a national dependence on imported goods, a materialistic obsession that was corrupting the domestic economy, the class conflict that emerged when working-class people started spending time and money on tea, or the dangerous gender inversion that could undermine the entire social order when women exercised power over the tea table as an important social space. Liotard’s deliberately ambiguous still life could accommodate viewers with any of these opinions. As paradoxical embodiments, the representation of porcelain tea wares in paint provided Liotard with the opportunity to create an ambiguous, self-reflexive image that any viewer could use to reinforce his or her own identity.

The painting presents beholders with a choice—you might identify with the subject matter on some level, feeling as though you just left the table after fully engaging in the polite ritual. Or you could deny it, seeing it as a depiction of corruption or excess and thus, also using

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the image to bolster your socio-political position. The painting does not prescribe a particular interpretation. The situation depicted was deliberately left open with the tea equipage available for the viewer to act as he or she saw fit. Approaching this painting, one might assume that the viewer is sitting at the near edge of the table, about to partake in the consumptive ritual but waiting to decide which role he or she will play and which choices they will make. Will the viewer take tea, utilizing the necessary equipage with finesse and strengthening his or her polite identity? Will the viewer take sugar, conforming to certain ideals of fashion and taste, or will they bypass the substance, cementing his or her anti-slavery standpoint? Will tea be refused altogether, suggesting a plethora of alternate identities for the viewer? Indeed, an overturned teacup indicates that the item has not yet been utilized. It would seem that the cups in the center and on the viewer’s left-hand side are waiting patiently for their potential users to decide upon a course of action. It is obvious that at least two and perhaps three others have already made their choices, so there is also a temporal element to the image that suggests the viewer must decide soon or the tea will cool and the other participants, although unseen, will take their leave. Conversely, the moment of consumption might already have passed, leaving the evidence of others’ choices and allowing the viewer to empathize with one of the identities embodied by the different cup, saucer, and spoon combinations. For example, someone who would choose not to partake in the ritual at all might associate with the overturned cup in the front left. A beholder striving for politeness might identify with the used teacup in the back or even with the discarded one in the slop bowl. It is unclear whether either of these cups held sugar, so the viewer is left to make yet another identity defining choice independently.

The visual consumption of this painting in a social setting would have been a performative act that lent itself to the location of identities within the picture or the projection of
identities onto it. Just as the consumption of certain goods at the tea table was a series of deliberate choices with which one could construct personal identity on one’s social surface, locating that identity within Liotard’s *Still Life: Tea Set* was also an opportunity to publicly display one’s self. The image played on social knowledge already possessed by the viewer, who would recognize that the scene depicted was not just a meal, but an important cultural ritual and who might then utilize the social implications of such polite behavior to reify his or her own identity.
Conclusions

In creating Still Life: Tea Set, which functioned as an active agent of the ancien régime of identity, Liotard produced a polite painting. Formally, the artist utilized deception and pictorial illusion but strove to do so in an unstudied, unaffected way—providing a visual corollary for the dissimulation of politeness, concealed on one’s surface by ease and nonchalance. In both painting and eighteenth-century identity formation, surface was a generative site of opportunity. It was the primary location for the staging and cultural production of the self and for the performance of personal identity. Beyond the manipulation of a canvas surface or the illusionistic rendering of painted surfaces, Liotard was concerned with the social surfaces that constituted the social fabric of his time. Individual choice was essential to the ancien régime system of external self-fashioning and so, the artist allowed for the active agency of his picture’s visual consumers. Within his still life, Liotard embedded an intense social awareness of the ancien régime of identity that would have been able to generate a range of flexible meanings for an eighteenth-century audience. Not only did Still Life: Tea Set illustrate a plethora of different identity choices available to Georgians, but it was also deliberately ambiguous so that any beholder could become involved as an active component of the image, discovering a personal stake within its depiction, and utilizing the image as a tool to create or reinforce his or her own social identity. Depicting the material culture of polite consumerism but also possessing the potential to be activated and utilized within the eighteenth-century social matrix of superficial self-fashioning, Still Life: Tea Set itself became a “polite” object.
Figures

Figure 1. Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Still Life: Tea Set*, c. 1783, oil on canvas, 37.7x51.6cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Figure 2. Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1768, pastel on parchment, 79x62.5cm, Museum Oskar Reinhart am Stadtgarten, Winterthur, Switzerland

Figure 3. Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Isaac-Louis de Thellusson*, 1760, pastel on parchment, Museum Oskar Reinhart am Stadtgarten, Winterthur, Switzerland
Figure 4. Jean-Étienne Liotard, *The Breakfast*, 1753, pastel on parchment, 66.5x53.7cm, Neue Pinakothek, Munich, Germany
Figure 5. Lowestoft (porcelain factory), *Tea caddy and cover*, English, c. 1785, soft-paste porcelain painted in overglaze enamels, 11.4 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Figure 6. Lowestoft (porcelain factory), *Slop Basin*, English, c. 1785, soft-paste porcelain painted in overglaze enamels, 7 cm h., 14.6 cm d., Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Figure 7. Lowestoft (porcelain factory), *Teapot*, English, c. 1785, soft-paste porcelain painted in overglaze enamels, 15.2cm h., 11.7cm d., Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Figure 8. Lowestoft (porcelain factory), Cup, English, c. 1780, soft-paste porcelain painted in overglaze enamels and gilt, 6.4cm h., 5.7cm d., Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Figure 9. Lowestoft (porcelain factory), *Cream jug*, English, c. 1769, soft-paste porcelain painted in overglaze enamels, 8.9cm h., 7cm d., Victoria and Albert Museum, London
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