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LUST FOR *LUXE*

“Cashmere Fever” in Nineteenth-Century France¹

SUSAN HINER

...la feuille de figuier de notre mère Eve était une robe de cachemire.

Théorie de la démarche



In the first “Convolute” of *The Arcades Project*, taking for subject “Arcades, Magasins de Nouveautés, and Sales Clerks,” Walter Benjamin identifies the cashmere shawl as the essential hot commodity of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Quoting an 1854 volume entitled *Paris chez soi*, Benjamin offers the following synopsis of the lifespan of the shawl:

... In 1798 and 1799, the Egyptian campaign lent frightful importance to the fashion for shawls. Some generals in the expeditionary army, taking advantage of the proximity of India, sent home shawls . . . of cashmere to their wives and lady friends . . . From then on, the disease that might be called cashmere fever took on significant proportions. It began to spread during the Consulate, grew greater under the Empire, became gigantic during the Restoration, reached colossal size under the July Monarchy, and has finally assumed Sphinx-like dimensions since the February Revolution of 1848. (55)

Benjamin’s source conflates two favorite nineteenth-century discourses in his brief chronology—that of malady (*disease, spread*) and that of orientalism (*Sphinx-like*)—linking the two through the concept of size (*gigantic, colossal, etc.*). According to Benjamin’s bemused speaker, who historicizes the contagion of cashmere, the cashmere shawl, unlike most other shorter-lived fash-

ion trends, possesses an ever-expanding appeal that seems, curiously, to be directly linked to the shifting political regimes of nineteenth-century France.

What might this “feverish” acquisition of cashmere shawls indicate about French society and its consumption habits in the nineteenth century and, no less significant, what does it suggest about the cultural impact of the object itself? Further, what political subtext might be lurking beneath the surface of the story of cashmere in nineteenth-century France? This article investigates the trajectory of cashmere shawls in Balzac’s *La Cousine Bette* and Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale* and proposes that the rise and fall of the cashmere shawl as fashion trend expresses significant social and political concerns—namely the inter-related anxieties over authenticity and social mobility—that preoccupied the nineteenth-century imagination. Before exploring the novels, first I will outline the historical context of the cashmere shawl in nineteenth-century France and then consider two key early texts by Balzac that define its cultural context.

1. CASHMERE IN CONTEXT

An expensive, hand-woven textile brought to France from the East through Napoleon’s campaigns, the cashmere shawl was to become a cultural fetish evoking sensual fantasies of the Orient before falling out of fashion in the latter half of the century. Frank Ames, in his history of the Kashmir shawl, describes the first point of contact between fashion and empire: “When Napoléon returned from Egypt, the generals and officers who had served under him brought back mementoes of the Orient. Among these were Kashmir shawls which they wore wrapped around their waists as belts, and which had been plundered from the Mamelukes, the soldiers of the Egyptian army” (135). From its origin as a war souvenir, back in Paris the shawl was quickly transformed into fashion’s *dernier cri*, in part for its beauty but also for its functionality in the new, simpler fashions of the first Empire, which necessitated warm coverings for exposed *décolletages* and gauzily-clad limbs (Ames 135). An erotic vestimentary sign because of its warmth and delicacy, the cashmere shawl permitted fashionable ladies to dress scantily in public and still remain decorously covered. The garment that was once associated with the masculine, public domain of the military, its appropriation indicating conquest and power, shifted as it moved into the feminized, private, and domestic sphere of fashion, but lost none of its power. Its rise to the status symbol par excellence of the mid-nineteenth century was precipitated largely by

the trend setting and exorbitant spending of the Empress Joséphine, who reputedly never asked the price of a shawl (Ames 135).² Following Joséphine, every fashionable lady required a shawl to complete her wardrobe and signal her standing among the social elite of early nineteenth-century Paris.

The *cachemire* was a marker of economic status, and one's correct use of it a marker of class. As an illustration of the cash value of a cashmere shawl, an 1806 inventory of the Empress Joséphine's possessions "evaluated her 45 shawls at 36,000 francs, a Rubens at 1,500 and a Leonardo *Virgin and Child* at 1,000" (Werther 88). Of course, there were gradations of value even among the French imitations, which were perfected over the course of the century, but the genuine Kashmiri shawl was always the most highly valued, followed by the "Parisian" shawl, and finally the "provincial" shawl.³ Fashion correspondent Alida de Savignac reveals at once the great fashion for and the hierarchy among shawls in an article on the "Exposition des Produits de l'Industrie de 1839" written for the *Journal des demoiselles*:

Malgré la mode des mantelets, les fabriques de châles n'ont point suspendu leurs efforts pour égaler les châles de cachemire; on peut même dire que l'un de nos fabricans a surpassé tout ce que l'Inde et la Perse peuvent offrir de plus merveilleux. Figurez-vous un châle d'une grandeur extraordinaire, et sur ce châle sont représentés des jardins, des pagodes, des processions de personnages divers. Ce sont des prêtres, des musiciens, des soldats, des caravanes, tout cela se détachant assez nettement, et aussi facile à distinguer que s'il s'agissait d'une gravure. Il est impossible de pousser plus loin l'audace de la composition, l'éclat et l'harmonie des couleurs, que ne l'a fait M. Gaussen dans l'exécution de ce châle prodigieux. A côté de ces merveilles, auxquelles les têtes couronnées peuvent seules mettre un prix, les fabricans de Paris ont exposé de fort beaux châles *tapis*, dont la chaîne et la trame sont en pure laine cachemire. La fabrique de Lyon offre aux fortunes médiocres des châles indous, dont la chaîne est en bourre de soie. Enfin, Nîmes est parvenu à tisser des cachemires très jolis et d'un prix si modéré, que cela semble un rêve. (Savignac 188–89)

Mme de Savignac's description of the prodigious Gaussen shawl contains an excess of oriental referents, belying its inauthenticity, its "trying too hard," but her narrative nonetheless attests to the great power of the cashmere shawl to inflame the desires of a wide range of shoppers.

Most potent in terms of what we might designate its "moral" signifying value, the prized *cachemire* was linked not only to social and economic status, but also to feminine virtue, the corollary to masculine honor. Traditionally a

trousseau item, a *cachemire* was often handed down from mother to daughter or purchased at great expense before her wedding. “Comme le précise la presse féminine, le châle est le surtout de demi-saison que, seules, les femmes mariées ont le droit de porter” (Lévi-Strauss 100). In short, as fashion journals imply and as novels make explicit, the *cachemire* was an accessory reserved for married or marriageable women. “Inappropriate” women’s appropriation of it signals at once their desire to be respectable and the sartorial imposture of the lower class into the upper class.⁴

For its social, economic, and moral signifying power, then, the cashmere shawl emerged as an important marker of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “distinction,” that quality of uniqueness that the dominant social group cultivates in order to maintain its place in the hierarchy.⁵ The authentic cashmere shawl was coveted by all, but difficult to obtain, thus ensuring and augmenting its cultural value. Distinction gave way to imitation, however, as fashion typically, and paradoxically, illustrates.⁶

In his historical study of the shawl, John Irwin recounts the rise of the European shawl industry, the eventual success of which would depend on mass production, which, paradoxically, caused the ultimate decline in the value of the cashmere shawl as a luxury item reserved for the elite. Irwin tells us that in 1801 “M. Guillaume Louis Ternaux, a well-known shawl manufacturer, obtained the semi-official support of the French Government to sponsor a trip to Tibet to acquire a flock of goats . . . By the time he reached France most of the goats had died; the rest suffered severely from a scab disease . . . Initial results . . . were disappointing” (27). Eventually though the shawl was successfully imitated, and Ternaux’s name became synonymous with the most common imitation shawl on the market. As the century progressed, the cashmere shawl began to circulate, focusing the desires of the dying aristocracy, the rising bourgeoisie, and the Parisian *demi-monde* alike.

2. LA FEMME COMME IL (EN) FAUT

Balzac’s notion of distinction, which in many ways anticipates Bourdieu’s, provides the necessary framework for the analyses of the novels that follow and will help piece together the links between the fashion trend and the broader social commentary that the shawl’s story illustrates in the texts examined here. Famous for his proto-Darwinian classification of social species, Balzac, in one of his short stories about Parisian life, lays out a crucial distinction between two types of Parisiennes that wittily turns on the absence or

presence of a pronoun. *La femme comme il faut*,⁷ the proper lady, the kind you marry, according to the Parisian flâneur, connoisseur of women, and fictional narrator Emile Blondet, is distinguished from the *femme comme il en faut*, or the kind of woman you want to have, the kind you sleep with, by her style:

La distinction particulière aux femmes bien élevées se trahit surtout par la manière dont elle tient le châle ou la mante croisés sur sa poitrine. Elle vous a, tout en marchant, un petit air digne et serein, comme les madones de Raphaël dans leurs cadres . . . Le chapeau, d'une simplicité remarquable, a des rubans frais. Peut-être y aura-t-il des fleurs, mais les plus habiles de ces femmes n'ont que de nœuds. La plume veut la voiture, les fleurs attirent trop le regard. Là-dessous vous voyez la figure fraîche et reposée d'une femme sûre d'elle-même sans fatuité, qui ne regarde rien et voit tout, dont la vanité, blasée par une continuelle satisfaction, répand sur sa physionomie une indifférence qui pique la curiosité. Elle sait qu'on l'étudie, elle sait que presque tous, même les femmes, se retournent pour la revoir. Aussi traverse-t-elle Paris comme un fil de la Vierge, blanche et pure . . . (*Autre étude de femme* 68).

In Balzac's universe, the *femme comme il en faut*, by contrast, can only imitate the proper lady, and she most certainly cannot deceive the true Parisian, whose discerning eye will immediately spot the "les agrafes mal cachées, des cordons qui montrent leur laci d'un blanc roux au dos de la robe par une fente entrebâillée, des souliers éraillés, des rubans de chapeau repassés, une robe trop bouffante, une tournure trop gommée" (*Autre étude* 69). The key concept here—articulated in this exemplary discourse uttered by Balzac's hypercritical male protagonist, and reinvented in recent times by Bourdieu as a crucial critical term in the study of social evolution and patterns—is that of distinction. Bourdieu concludes that taste is purely a social construction; Balzac, it could be argued, makes the same point when he describes the vestimentary and furnishing codes of his great social novels. Distinction, for Bourdieu, as for Balzac's Blondet, is another word for taste. And taste, as both Balzac and Bourdieu would have it, is a barometer not only of social standing, but also of social meaning. In post-Revolutionary France, which saw the effacement of the official language of dress, the need for distinction was paramount to maintaining social hierarchy. As Catherine Nesci points out in her study of women in Balzac, women shouldered the burden of "restoring" distinction to the new society: "C'est donc à l'être féminin que revient la lourde et double tâche de sauver la nouvelle société de la contingence de ses origines honteuses: il lui faut plaire pour enfanter et pour représenter. Comment peut-

on à la fois se montrer et attiser le désir, et obéir aux convenances sociales qui imposent à la femme le silence et la pudeur?" (81) One response to this paradox is the modern figure of the *femme comme il faut*, who through her virtuosity manages to be both respectable and fashionable. Balzac's *femme comme il faut* is twice sacralized in Blondet's discourse: first she is likened to Raphael's Madonnas; and second, her promenade through Paris is as delicate and fragile as the "fil de la Vierge," spun by the Virgin Mary herself. The *femme comme il faut* thus leaves a trail of saintliness in her wake even as she turns every head.⁸ For Balzac, "good" taste is apparently a moral characteristic.

A clear illustration of the antithesis between the *femme comme il faut* and the *femme comme il en faut* is to be found in Balzac's early short novel *Ferragus*, written in 1833. We first observe the heroine Madame Jules through the eyes of her jealous admirer, Auguste de Maulincourt, as she alights from a carriage in a seedy street and enters into an unseemly apartment house. "A huit heures et demie du soir . . . dans . . . la rue Soly, la plus étroite et la moins praticable de toutes les rues de Paris . . . Elle dans cette crotte, à cette heure!" (*Ferragus* 37). After her mysterious detour, Madame Jules returns to the right side of the tracks, still trailed by Auguste, who observes as she enters a flower shop in the rue Richelieu and purchases an imminently appropriate hair ornament for that evening's soirée—*des marabouts*. Nothing could be more proper, the text tells us, than the white plumage of the exotic marabout: "— Madame, rien ne va mieux aux brunes [. . .] les marabouts prêtent à leur toilette un flou qui leur manque. Madame la duchesse de Langeais dit que cela donne à une femme quelque chose de vague, d'ossianique, et de très comme il faut" (*Fer.* 41). Later, when Madame Jules arrives at the ball where Auguste will begin his investigation into his idol's secret life, we discover the effect of her toilette: "vêtue de blanc, simple et noble, coiffée précisément avec ces marabouts que le jeune baron lui avait vu choisir dans le magasin de fleurs" (*Fer.* 47). The simplicity of her dress is equated with nobility, and the emphasis on simplicity is further developed by the uniformity of color—white—which symbolically reinforces her virtue. Finally, this simplicity is mirrored in the text by the brevity of the description itself: the value of *comme il faut* seems to be organized at least in part around the principle of "less is more."

Juxtapose this brief, but meaningful description with the lengthy introduction to Madame Jules's apparent foil, Ida Gruget, who arrives shortly after the evening of the ball at the Desmarests's residence and accuses Clémence in the presence of her husband of having unseemly *rapports* with a certain Ferragus. Just as it was incongruous, indeed scandalous, to find Clémence in the rue Soly,

so it is inconsonant to find Ida in the Desmarets's drawing room. But in contrast to the single sentence he allots to the physical description of Madame Jules, Balzac devotes a full two-and-a-half pages to the description of Ida—even before she opens her mouth to repeat verbally what we have already deduced visually about her style. Ida is the exemplary Parisian *grisette*.⁹ Lovable though she may be, Ida is the picture of impropriety—because of her sudden intrusion into the Jules's drawing room, because of her inappropriate attire that indicates her low social status, and because of what she has come to say:

La jeune femme qui se trouvait en présence de monsieur and madame Jules avait le pied si découvert dans sa chaussure qu'à peine voyait-on une légère ligne noire entre le tapis et son bas blanc. Cette chaussure, dont la caricature parisienne rend si bien le trait, est une grâce particulière à la grisette parisienne; mais elle se trahit encore mieux aux yeux de l'observateur par le soin avec lequel ses vêtements adhèrent à ses formes, qu'ils dessinent nettement. Aussi l'inconnue était-elle, pour ne pas perdre l'expression pittoresque créée par le soldat français, ficelée dans une robe verte, à guimpe, qui laissait deviner la beauté de son corsage, alors parfaitement visible; car son châle de cachemire Ternaux, tombant à terre, n'était plus retenu que par les deux bouts qu'elle gardait entortillés à demi dans ses poignets (*Fer*. 104–5).

What distinguishes Ida from Madame Jules is excess, in contrast to the “noble simplicity” of Madame Jules, an abundance of garish detail, which in turn signals a lack of decorum. The indecorous manner in which Ida wears her many adornments marks her lack of propriety, in contrast to the uniform respectability of Madame Jules's attire, organized and crowned by the white marabous. These marabous, the genuine article, we are led to assume from the chic address of the florist, are a vestimentary sign for *comme il faut* and (Oriental) luxury all at once. And naturally, they have their counterpart in the costume of the *grisette*—the “châle de cachemire Ternaux.”

Recall Balzac-Blondet's method of determining a woman's social standing: the *femme comme il faut* is superior to the *femme comme il en faut* by simple virtue of “la manière dont elle tient le châle ou la mante croisés sur la poitrine” (*Autre étude* 68). Ida's shawl is thus doubly inappropriate. First, she wears it like an open curtain at a bedroom window. Gaping and trailing on the floor, the shawl leaves little to the imagination. Ida's way of wearing her shawl stands in direct contrast to Balzac's decorously draped proper lady. But Ida's shawl also reveals a more subtle indication of her inferior social status. Hers is a shawl of “cachemire Ternaux,” as we know, inauthentic, a French copy of

the genuine article, mass-produced and of lesser quality than the original and therefore significantly less expensive.

When we compare their ornaments, the opposition of Madame Jules and Ida Gruget emerges as a contrast of authenticity (unique) and imitation (mass-produced). In *Ferragus*, this opposition is clouded as the text's and characters' secrets are revealed (Ferragus proves to be Mme Jules's father, tarnishing her respectability and bringing her much closer socially to Ida), thus raising an essential question that haunts nineteenth-century novels of society: what happens when the *femme comme il en faut* begins to have access to the fashion signs of the *femme comme il faut*? One result is that the social and perhaps "moral" hierarchies are obscured. The codes of distinction begin to break down and with them social lines begin to blur. The hierarchy produced and maintained by distinction is undone by the impulse toward imitation. This phenomenon also opens up onto a crucial ideological obsession of the nineteenth century illustrated by the cashmere plots in the novels analyzed here—the anxiety over authenticity and its link to increasing social mobility.¹⁰

Like *Ferragus*, both *La Cousine Bette* and *L'Éducation sentimentale* are constructed around a recurrent pairing of female characters (wives and mistresses, *femmes comme il faut* and *comme il en faut*), and a dynamics of opposition, imitation, and exchange between these two apparent poles consequently drive both novels. In Balzac's novel, against the virtuous and socially superior Hulot women (Adeline and Hortense—mother and daughter) are pitted a series of foils. The rapacious bourgeoisie Valérie Marneffe (a courtesan in disguise), a series of figures from the Parisian *demi-monde*, and the vengeful Bette (Adeline's cousin), who passes freely among these social realms, serve as rivals to the Hulot *femmes comme il faut*. In Flaubert's novel, we also find a complex series of rivalries: Marie Arnoux, the virtuous married bourgeois lady, is alternately opposed Madame Dambreuse, the nouveau-riche wife of a former aristocrat, and Rosanette Bron, the low-level courtesan involved with both Jacques Arnoux, Madame Arnoux's husband, and Frédéric Moreau, Madame Arnoux's besotted admirer. Balzac's Bette and Flaubert's Rosanette are both loose variations on the working-class *grisette*—Bette because she works in the industry of *passementerie*, embroidering uniforms for the army and the national guard, and Rosanette, who began her social climb within the Parisian *demi-monde* to the rank of *lorette* as a silk-weaver.¹¹

Both novels involve complex, if oblique, political plots. While Balzac's novel is less overtly political than Flaubert's, critics have pointed out that both novels may be read as political allegories.¹² While *La Cousine Bette* exposes the

social degradation that results from the corruption and materialism of the July Monarchy, *L'Éducation sentimentale* recounts the violent birth of the Second Empire through the blind eyes of a self-interested protagonist. Both novels present important commentaries on the dramatic shifts in social hierarchies that were occurring in mid-nineteenth-century Paris through their panoramic views of society, which stage the disquieting indeterminacy of social position in an emerging modern world. At stake in the conflicts of both novels is social (in)stability, brought into focus through narratives around the paired (and gendered) values of virtue and honor, and the paired (and gendered) spaces of the domestic and the political. In both novels, it is the decorative, the ornamental—indeed, the feminine—cashmere shawl that serves in part to weave these narrative threads together.

3. SOCIAL AND SARTORIAL IMPOSTURE IN *LA COUSINE BETTE*

Published in 1846 and set during the July Monarchy, Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* explicitly takes up the analysis of a society in flux through the prism of a single family that has complex relations with elements from all social levels. An Alsatian peasant, Bette was brought to Paris during the First Empire to accompany her more fortunate and beautiful cousin Adeline, who, many years before, had married the Baron Hulot, a wealthy and titled soldier of Napoléon's army. When the novel begins, in 1838, Napoléon is already long gone, the Baron's former imperial splendor is faded and most of his fortune squandered on courtesans, and Adeline's daughter, Hortense, in spite of her stunning beauty, is dowry-less and thus cannot find a husband. Bette is driven to deceive and to destroy her family by a single passion—envy—which she has been cultivating since childhood with the aim of exacting revenge against her kinder cousin by reversing their social positions. Both the broader social context of the novel (the portayal of a decaying Empire society and the rise of an entrepreneurial bourgeois class) and the individual circumstances that generate the novel's plot (Bette's envy of Adeline, which motivates her to conspire to ruin the family financially, morally, and even physically) find a symbolic representation in the yellow cashmere shawl that circulates throughout the novel.

To Bette, Adeline's cashmere shawl, a wedding gift from the baron, which has since made its way into her daughter Hortense's trousseau, represents everything the "poor relation" has been denied, materially and emotionally. From the outset of the novel, "ce précieux tissu" is the one object for

which Bette is willing to compromise her secrets. The young and eligible Hortense promises her mother's *cachemire* on the condition that Bette prove that she has a lover. Bette's desire to one-up Adeline is set into motion as she divulges information that will eventually—and ironically—lead to *Hortense's* marriage with the mysterious lover Bette herself has been hiding. The shawl, and what it represents, is more valuable than Wenceslas, the young, handsome, and impoverished artist that Bette has been keeping for herself.

La cousine Bette, en proie depuis son arrivée à Paris à l'admiration des cachemires, avait été fascinée par l'idée de posséder ce cachemire jaune donné par le baron à sa femme, en 1808, et qui, selon l'usage de quelques familles, avait passé de la mère à la fille en 1830.

Depuis dix ans, le châle s'était bien usé; mais ce précieux tissu, toujours serré dans une boîte de santal, semblait comme le mobilier de la baronne, toujours neuf à la vieille fille. (*La Cousine Bette* 68)

Bette's "fascination" is linked to an uncharacteristic fashion lust but, more important, it is tied to her desire for power and her recognition of the shawl's value in the vestimentary language that is the currency of the social world to which she aspires. "Possession" is the key term here, as it is "l'idée de *posséder*" that drives Bette to relinquish her own most treasured possession, her secret attachment to the Polish sculptor, in exchange for another, more material possession—the shawl. On the social and familial margins, she is the quintessential "have-not" rivaling the Hulot "haves," and she thus represents on the invisible political level of the text the "perceived" indeterminate social threat posed by the urban underclass.¹³ Possession of the shawl potentially demarginalizes Bette, as we shall see.

Adeline's yellow cashmere shawl is a polyvalent sign. First, it signifies imperial luxury, now faded, but still glorious to Bette. That the shawl, a cultural sign of the Orient, may also hint at a residual trace of imperialist fantasies resurrected in 1840s France is affirmed by an important colonial subtext in this novel. This plot, which risks the honor of the Hulot family, involves the conspiracy by several government officials to defraud the French government in one of its burgeoning and exploitative enterprises in Algeria, the new colony. The Algerian debacle is the public social scandal compromising the concept of honor that is duplicated on the private level of family, both with Hulot's unredeemed philandering (he promises the cook that she will become the next baroness once his wife dies in the final pages of the novel) and with Adeline Hulot's eventual capitulation to the craven Crevel's propositions. The blemishes to public honor and private virtue are interwoven through the

theme of fraud. Bette is deeply implicated in this deceit, defrauding her cousins of both wealth and honor by luring the baron into the embrace of a prostitute in respectable woman's clothing. The shawl is linked to Bette's "imperialist" fantasy of conquest, and Bette's acquisition of the shawl symbolically figures the masking of social identity that will allow her nearly to vanquish the family.¹⁴

Second, in the textual economy of *La Cousine Bette*, the shawl represents marital bliss, as it was a gift from the baron to his wife when they were first married, and has now become their daughter's trousseau treasure. One aspect of Bette's social lust is certainly to shed her spinster status. The shawl is still "new" ("toujours neuf") to the "old" maid ("la vieille fille"), thus suggesting that by its acquisition, Bette will appear more marriageable. Bette is indeed endlessly characterized as an old maid, as opposed to her beautiful cousin who, although a peasant, defied all odds by marrying into the aristocracy, albeit the hybrid aristocracy created by Napoleon. The cashmere shawl for Bette is clearly an emblem of social ascendancy, indeed of distinction, to return to Bourdieu's idiom.

Finally, and related to its social symbolism, the shawl is a sign of fashionability, for, in spite of its being the worse for wear, it is still chic, and possessing it may well afford Bette access into worlds from which she has heretofore been excluded. It is thus a sort of social skeleton key. And indeed, Bette's eventual acquisition of the shawl marks her rise to power in the novel and her entry into fashionability, just as its loss marks Adeline's and Hortense's downfall.

Described as a spider in the center of her web, the vengeful seamstress sets out to take or to destroy what is Adeline's, and after some time, she succeeds in sabotaging Hortense's marriage, luring both Wenceslas and the Baron Hulot into erotic relations with her protégée and instrument Valérie, channeling what is left of the Hulot fortune into her own pocket, and convincing her unsuspecting cousin that she, Bette, should be married to the Baron's older brother, the Maréchal Hulot. In her moment of glory, "[a]insi restaurée, toujours en cachemire jaune, Bette eût été méconnaissable à qui l'eût revue après ces trois années" (CB 201). The exchange of the shawl in the opening scene of the novel was but the first step then in a series of orchestrated maneuvers that Bette had hoped would ultimately lead to the reversal of status and fortunes of these rival cousins who are also social and moral opposites. The centrality of the shawl in this opening scene (which parallels Crevel's propositioning of Adeline Hulot in exchange for her daughter's dowry) and its punctuation of the novel at key moments express the essential

theme of social imposture in *La Cousine Bette*, just as its initial exchange models the various forms of circulation so vital to this novel's representation of an emerging economy of commodities and mass production.

4. CIRCULATION AND SUBSTITUTION IN *L'ÉDUCATION SENTIMENTALE*

Like Balzac, Flaubert uses a shawl simultaneously to structure his novel and to indicate the blurring of social boundaries that is one of its central themes. Both novels present strikingly similar structures in this regard: both contain liminal shawl scenes that offer keys to reading and both novels reintroduce the shawl plot at their mid-points to mark the climactic moment of social and sartorial imposture on which hinge their plots.

The cashmere shawl is no less significant in Flaubert's 1869 novel, the majority of which is also set in 1840s Paris. When in the opening scene of *L'Éducation sentimentale* Frédéric Moreau rescues Marie Arnoux's "châle à bandes violettes" from falling into the muddy waters of the Seine, he is performing (in typically Flaubertian parodic form) what fashion history reveals to be a heroic gesture indeed, given the enormous popularity and value, both economic and symbolic, of the *cachemire* in nineteenth-century France. In fact, the *Journal des Dames et des Modes* recounts a more daring, real-life feat of fashion valor when in 1833 "a young man who dived into the Seine to save a drowning woman, deposited her on shore, then swam back to the middle of the river to rescue her Cashmere shawl" (Werther 8). Like the personified shawl of the fashion magazine, Marie Arnoux's shawl is invested with untold value. For Frédéric, before even speaking to his unknown beloved, her shawl becomes the repository for his fantasies of intimacy: "[e]lle avait dû, bien des fois, au milieu de la mer, durant les soirs humides, en envelopper sa taille, s'en couvrir les pieds, dormir dedans!" (*L'Éducation sentimentale* 24). Madame Arnoux's *cachemire* is metonymic, inspiring Frédéric's erotic fantasies as well as his act of bravado. It is also a source of textual inspiration, for no sooner has Frédéric saved the shawl from destruction than it is resurrected a second time, obliquely, in the harpist's "romance orientale où il était question de poignards, de fleurs et d'étoiles" (*ES* 24). The shawl then is established from the outset as the fetish object for Frédéric's sexual fantasies about Madame Arnoux and it is symbolically linked to the textual representation of the Orient, obsessively related in the nineteenth-century French male imagination to the hyper-feminized, super-eroticized space of the harem.

L'Éducation sentimentale offers a pivotal shawl scene, and since Flaubert's 1869 novel places the Revolution of 1848 at its invisible center, the shawl plot may be read as a metaphor in domestic miniature for the wider social upheavals of the novel. As in *La Cousine Bette*, in *L'Éducation sentimentale*, the detail of the shawl serves to interweave the gendered spaces of private and public, domestic and political.

Jacques Arnoux, a middle-class dealer in art reproductions, among a series of other kitsch objects all related to the emerging industries of mass production in nineteenth-century France, is torn between his wife Marie and his mistress Rosanette.¹⁵ Rosanette nags him relentlessly for a *cachemire*, desiring it for its value in the wardrobe of a coquette as well as for the status it confers on its bearer—status of wealth and of propriety, as we have seen. An extremely costly gift, for Arnoux to offer it would signify his financial commitment to the courtesan. In fact, the *cachemire* is equivalent in Rosanette's mind to Arnoux's investment profits, which he had also promised her, a comparison that designates the shawl as a form of currency: "Il lui avait promis un quart de ses bénéfices dans les fameuses mines de kaolin: aucun bénéfice ne se montrait, pas plus que le cachemire dont il la leurrait depuis six mois" (ES 188). Arnoux finally does give Rosanette the *cachemire*, and this object is then further invested with textual significance, as it now becomes both the vital plot link between Marie Arnoux and Rosanette and the sign of illicit lust in the text. Subsequent to Arnoux's gift, Madame Arnoux goes "chez le Persan" to have her own shawl repaired and is mistaken by the shopkeeper for the "other" Madame Arnoux, to whom a similar shawl had been recently expedited, but which hadn't yet been paid for. The receipt for Rosanette's *cachemire* confirms Madame Arnoux's worst suspicions about her husband's infidelity. Aghast, she retreats with the bill, only to confront her husband with his infidelity in the presence of her admirer, Frédéric, who himself is soon to enter the triangle when he also becomes Rosanette's lover. The cashmere shawl then is the vehicle of substitution, or exchange—mistress for wife, *femme comme il en faut* for *femme comme il faut*. Beneath the ubiquitous "cashmere fever" of nineteenth-century France clearly lies the commodification of women. Rosanette can be bought with a shawl, and the fateful moment of confusion, indeed substitution, occurs in the commercial space of a shop.

The shawl plot weaves together several layers of transaction, but nowhere in the novel is the conflation of woman and object more apparent than in the symbolic death scene of Madame Arnoux at the "vente aux enchères" at the end of the novel, historically situated on December 1, 1851, the eve of the

coup of Louis-Napoléon. Much has been written about the importance of this scene as the final stage in Frédéric's *éducation*, the metaphorical denuding of the ideal of modesty, and in particular, the crass purchase of the famous *coffret* by Madame Dambreuse, now Frédéric's fiancée, which had alternately belonged to Marie Arnoux and to Rosanette.¹⁶ It should come as no surprise that in the advertisement for the auction, the following items once belonging to Marie Arnoux are now up for auction: ". . . batterie de cuisine, linge de corps et de table, chemises, dentelles, jupons, pantalons, cachemires français et de l'Inde, piano d'Erard, deux bahuts de chêne Renaissance, miroir de Venise, poteries de Chine et du Japon" (ES 498). Interspersed with items of the most personal intimacy (*linge de corps, chemises, etc.*) and those reflecting high resale value because of their pedigree (*piano d'Erard, etc.*), Madame Arnoux's *cachemires* bridge the gap between intimate garment and collectible object. The authentic cashmeres (*de l'Inde*) and their reproductions (*français*) represent the poles in the cashmere hierarchy, and their commingling on the auction block subtly suggests the social chaos this novel portrays. But the mention of the *cachemires* also both recalls the earlier scene of the discovered bill of sale denouncing Arnoux's infidelity and linking through substitution Marie Arnoux and Rosanette, just as it anticipates the convergence of Rosanette and Madame Dambreuse through the circulating *coffret*.¹⁷

In this scene of bald commerce we find present all three principal female protagonists (Marie only metonymically), and it is here that Flaubert revives the opposition Balzac announced in his early texts in a new confrontation between Rosanette and Madame Dambreuse. Rosanette arrives for the sale gussied up "en gilet de satin blanc à boutons de perles, avec une robe de falbalas, étroitement gantée, l'air vainqueur;" Madame Dambreuse "l'avait reconnue; et, pendant une minute, elles se considérèrent de haut en bas, scrupuleusement, afin de découvrir le défaut, la tare—l'une enviant peut-être la jeunesse de l'autre, et celle-ci dépitée par l'extrême bon ton, la simplicité aristocratique de sa rivale" (ES 502–03). The overt opposition between the two women is written as one of style: Rosanette plays *la femme comme il en faut* to Madame Dambreuse's *femme comme il faut*. Madame Dambreuse may well project aristocracy, but she is also an imposter of sorts, and every bit the golddigger that is Rosanette. She is, we learn, "tout simplement, une demoiselle Boutron, la fille d'un préfet" (ES 267). Neither emerges victorious in the end, as Frédéric dumps them both, leaving them to their catfight and making them equals in rejection. Most significant, however, is the reduction of Madame Arnoux, the icon of respectability, to her material accessories, and that "ses reliques"

(including her *cachemires*) have entered the public sphere of commerce for purchase by the likes of Rosanette and Madame Dambreuse.

Both *La Cousine Bette* and *L'Éducation sentimentale* reveal the power of costume and material possessions to stage social belonging. And in their satirical representation of the frenzied acquisition of the accoutrements of social standing, both novels make a searing critique of the obsessive materialism that shadows the dramatic social and political upheavals of the day.

5. CONCLUSION

In February 1870 on the Paris vaudeville stage, playwright Eugène Labiche presented a comedy in one act entitled *Le Cachemire X.B.T.* The play is set entirely within the confines of a Parisian boutique called “Le Castor Laborieux” (The Busy Beaver), specializing in the commerce of cashmere. Labiche’s lightweight comedy stages several layers of social and domestic strife through a scene of commercial success gone awry. The two merchants Rotranger and Lobligeois are mocked by their shopworkers, cuckolded by their wives, and are at each other’s throats over the failure of their business, each blaming the other for the flagging sales of the once luxury item, the *cachemire*. The ugliest shawl in the shop becomes the centerpiece of the swirling disputes of the play. Because of its unsaleability, the shopgirl acquires it, only for it to be sold under her nose to a rare customer, a young dandy lawyer who claims to be searching for a birthday present for his mother but who seems rather more interested in seducing the shopkeeper’s flirty wife. After paying an outrageous sum for a phony “cachemire des Indes,” the young lawyer shortly returns, prodded on by his horrified mother and threatens a lawsuit for having been defrauded: “c’est un cachemire d’Amiens que vous m’avez livré . . . Je ne pense pas que le département de la Somme fasse partie de l’Indoustan” (*Le Cachemire* 452). One commercial transaction begets another, however, (“les affaires sont les affaires!”), and all is made square when the shopkeeper’s lubricious wife exchanges kisses for the bill of sale.

Labiche’s play reiterates what we recognize as a common nineteenth-century plot involving a cuckolded husband and the purchase of a woman with a luxury garment. But by staging his play in a shop, he also makes baldly explicit the connection between sexual commerce and business transactions, the link between lust and *luxe* that was perhaps only implicit in earlier texts. Furthermore, his 1870 production dramatizes the cultural *dénouement* of one of the great luxury items of the nineteenth century. Once the *sine qua non*

of every proper Parisian lady's wardrobe, the *cachemire* was now within the grasp of every shopgirl. No longer unique, imported, hand-woven garments signifying social distinction, by the 1870s cashmere shawls had fully entered mass-production in France, and were thus both infinitely reproducible and affordable. The sinking business of The Busy Beaver really has little to do with the commercial ineptitude of the bumbling buffoons behind the counter. It has rather everything to do with the social intersection that transpires in the public/private space of the shop. For here, lowly shopgirl, petit bourgeois, rising bourgeois professional, and his Maman with her "grande dame" affectations meet, interact, and exchange both money and kisses, effecting a leveling out of social distinction that is repeatedly represented in the symbolic drama of the cashmere shawl.

As mass production made the imitation of cashmere shawls possible in France, and as more and more women were able to afford them, the *cachemire* lost its luster. The anxiety over social "authenticity," which no doubt masks nineteenth-century anxieties over political legitimacy, is beautifully illustrated in the debates that raged in fashion journals over the authenticity of a lady's *cachemire*.¹⁸ Balzac's virtuous aristocratic heroines are threatened with replacement by *demi-mondaines* and phony bourgeois, a scenario that proposes the fragility of categories such as distinction; in *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Madame Arnoux's relationship of substitutability with Rosanette demonstrates a latent reversibility of the respectable Parisienne and the *demi-mondaine*; and finally, in the character of Odette courtesan becomes wife, *la femme comme il en faut* becomes *la femme comme il faut* in Proust's fin de siècle, reinventing Balzac's seminal metaphor of Paris as the *grande courtisane* and bracketing the pronoun [en] of his witticism (*Fer*. 35).

By the time we reach Proust, the *cachemire* has indeed entirely lost its value. In the first volume of the *Recherche*, cashmere goes underground. Relegated to indoor status, it no longer serves its important social function and Marcel's father wears it to soothe his aching head: "il était encore devant nous, grand, dans sa robe de nuit blanche sous le cachemire de l'Inde violet et rose qu'il nouait autour de sa tête depuis qu'il avait des névralgies . . ." (*Swann* 36). And *Le Temps retrouvé* finishes the job, designating the once hot commodity "le cachemire d'autrefois," a sign of outmoded fashion, which had now been replaced by "le satin et la mousseline de soie" (724). By the end of the *Recherche*, Odette de Crécy (Mme de Forcheville) has been reformed as aristocratic—very few characters remember her dubious origins. But perhaps more surprising than Odette's rise to high society is the ascendancy of the

ultimate bourgeois, Madame Verdurin. For the triumph of Madame Verdurin reverses Balzac's original exclusion of the *bourgeoise* from the categories of *femmes* he had laid out in his *études*. Balzac had judged that

Quant à la bourgeoise, il est impossible de la confondre avec la femme comme il faut; elle la fait admirablement ressortir, elle explique le charme que vous a jeté votre inconnue. La bourgeoise est affairée, sort par tous les temps, trotte, va, vient, regarde, ne sait pas si elle entrera, si elle n'entrera pas dans un magasin . . . la bourgeoise entend très bien les pléonasmes de toilette. (*Autre étude* 69–70)

No one in Proust's universe is more verbose than Madame Verdurin, either in real speech or in the metaphorical language of clothes. Proust replaces one elaborate system of distinction with another, however, for the crucial subtext of his intensely private yet equally intensely social novel is surely that taste, snobbery, and the shifting patterns of distinction of a dying world emerge on the other side of a century intact but with a new wardrobe—a new set of distinctions.

In this article I have examined the apparent opposition and potential reversibility of social poles *within* two landmark French novels of the mid-nineteenth century by focusing on a single overdetermined object. By reading cashmere though, I also want to suggest a larger movement that potentially spans the century—a movement that advances from opposition to reversibility, thus expressing the gradual loss of distinction between such categories as Balzac laid out in his *Autre étude de femme*.¹⁹ Reading cashmere in *La Cousine Bette* and *L'Éducation sentimentale* reveals how Balzac's initial distinction is represented in details of dress in nineteenth-century French novels, as well as how this opposition evolves, or perhaps erodes, in literary representations over the course of the century. This shift reflects the growing fluidity of social boundaries in nineteenth-century France. In particular, my focus has been on a single material detail—and specifically, the ways in which that object is invested with and stripped of representational value in nineteenth-century French novels and society, and what these shifts have to teach us about the underlying transformations in social hierarchies.

The circulation of the cashmere shawl in Balzac's and Flaubert's novels presents a pointed commentary on nineteenth-century views on social decline. Studying its circulation both focuses that social commentary and provides a vital key to reading the structures and themes of the novels themselves. The shifting cultural dynamics of opposition, imitation, and exchange reveal themselves in these novels in a quintessentially modern way—through the

code of consumer culture, which in turn recites a chapter in the social history of the nineteenth century. The cashmere shawl and its social history should be read as an allegory within the realm of fashion for the shifting social landscape of nineteenth-century Paris. The hierarchy among shawls and the concern over a shawl's authenticity or its quality as a reproduction mirror the social hierarchy among women in nineteenth-century France and women's interest in establishing their status among the "legitimate," that is, the respectable, class. But the rise and fall of such a cultural artifact also offers important insights into the actualization of feminine identities in modern French society. For while social and political anxieties clearly underlie the story of cashmere, perhaps more significant still is the threat presented to the discerning *male* by the sartorial imposture of "inappropriate" women that the changing status of cashmere permits. For while the cashmere shawl was a vital accessory in the wardrobe of a lady of distinction, it was the proper lady herself, the *femme comme il faut* who served as the necessary accessory for the socially successful man. And as Swann painfully illustrates, social ostracism awaits the man who cannot discern or who willingly ignores the distinction inherent in Balzac's little pronoun.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank my colleague Kathleen Hart and Dr. Lawrence Porter for their thorough and thoughtful readings of this article.

2. With its Napoleonic origins, already the cashmere shawl falls into the possession of the "noblesse d'Empire." But, as Sarah Maza argues, for Balzac, this was nonetheless a legitimate aristocracy, for "he believed that social hierarchy—though not necessarily of a traditional sort—was a natural and desirable source of order and stability" (23). What is coded as "aristocracy" in many of Balzac's novels is in fact this other aristocracy, created by Napoléon. Camille Laparra develops the notion of the "two aristocracies" of pre-July Monarchy France as represented in Balzac's work.

3. For a complete discussion, see Monique Lévi-Strauss.

4. Nathalie Aubert proposes in fact that *La Cousine Bette* illustrates the emergence of women as a social class: "Si la subversion, à la veille de 1848 est féminine, c'est parce que ce sont les femmes du peuple qui émergent après le triomphe total, mais de brève durée, de la petite bourgeoisie" (136).

5. Jukka Gronow summarizes Bourdieu's social theory of distinction explaining that for Bourdieu, "the taste of the ruling class is always the legitimate taste of a society. But in his opinion this legitimate taste is not genuine good taste: in fact, there could not possibly be any genuine good taste. Legitimate taste pretends to be the universally valid and disinterested good taste, whereas in reality it is nothing more than the taste of one particular class, the ruling class" (11).

6. In his seminal article, sociologist Georg Simmel defines fashion through this paradox: "Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation; it leads the individual upon the road which all travel, it furnishes a general condition, which resolves the conduct of every individual into a mere example. At the same time it satisfies in no less degree the need of differentiation, the tendency towards dissimilarity, the desire for change and contrast, on the one hand by a constant change of contents, which gives to the fashion of today an individual stamp as opposed to that of yesterday and of to-morrow, on the other hand because fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them. Thus fashion represents nothing more than one of the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change" (543).

7. By the time Balzac is writing, the expression "*comme il faut*" is already a cliché linked to social discourse. In his recently published doctoral dissertation, written in 1948, *La mode en 1830*, Algirdas Greimas describes the linguistic connection between fashion and the social: "Les expressions déjà anciennes 'il est de bonne compagnie', 'il est du bon genre', 'il est de bon ton' font directement allusion au caractère social de la mode. Il en est de même de la qualification de *comme il faut*, qui, partie d'un jugement à caractère moral et surtout social, devient une expression à la mode et qui, après une période d'usure, tendra à désigner communément un certain type d'élégance et d'appartenance sociale assez mal déterminé qui dominera plus tard la société de la monarchie de Juillet" (11–12).

8. This "sacralization" is not without irony, however, for Blondet has also asserted that the "*femme comme il faut*" is a modern invention, a pale imitation itself of the "grande dame" who has disappeared from French society. Michel Butor explains: "On assiste, à travers une immense série de personnages, à la dégradation de la 'grande dame' en 'femme comme il faut', ce qui va d'ailleurs produire une fermentation féminine extraordinaire. La femme comme il faut est encore plus mystérieuse que la grande dame. Cette expression 'comme il faut' implique toute une façade à préserver. Comme elle n'a plus le même pouvoir que la grande dame, cette préservation devient à la fois plus nécessaire et plus difficile" (77).

9. Jennifer Jones explains that according to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* of 1835 the term "griset" first signified an article of clothing made of cheap grey cloth and worn by common women. But the term entered into popular usage and came to mean a young woman of little means, and more specifically, a flirty young working girl, and particularly those "young shop girls . . . who tended the counter and stitched the elaborate creations of the marchandes de modes" (29).

10. Again, Walter Benjamin proves useful, this time for his discussion of "aura" and its loss in the age of "mechanical reproduction." While Benjamin's context was different (he was writing about photography), his theory may be applied to the drama of cashmere: "The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. . . . In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus—namely, its authenticity—is interfered with. . . . The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that

is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object" ("Work" 221). Nancy L. Green makes the coexistence of art and industry in the emerging garment business in nineteenth-century France the subject of her very thorough article. In it, she cites Benjamin's concept of "aura" and argues that "both uniqueness and reproducibility have shaped the trade, ultimately forming two distinct branches within it, *haute couture* and ready-to wear" (723). This problem of compatibility, which she situates towards the end of the century, is arguably already present in the debates over cashmere shawls in the earlier part of the century.

11. Rosanette, of Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale*, also claims to have been a shopgirl, which links her to the social class of the grisette. Like Frédéric, we know little more of her history but that she has ascended the ranks of the Parisian demi-monde out of squalor. Perhaps more salient, Rosanette's origins in the Lyon silk-weaving industry mark her as emanating from the dangerous working class (cf. note 13). As for Bette, had she been pretty, she probably would have been a grisette. That both women are linked to the activity of weaving and/or sewing merits mention. Bette's line of business, Balzac tells us, is gold and silver embroidery, and it "comprenait les épauettes, les dragonnes, les aiguillettes, enfin cette immense quantité de choses brillantes qui scintillaient sur les riches uniformes de l'armée française et sur les habits civils" (CB 48). Bette's involvement and indeed her great skill in this world (she was known as the finest workwoman in the Pons's shop) place her in a position of control over the social "language" of the world to which she only marginally belongs. As Sarah Maza argues, since uniforms and costume more broadly are the essential social markers of this world, Bette's mastery of this important social sign system suggests that she exercises a degree of power within that realm. It is Bette who orchestrates Valérie Marneffe's infiltration of the Hulot marriages primarily through a manipulation of fashion in the careful disguising of the courtesan as a proper lady. Equally significant, if not as evident, is Rosanette's connection to the textile business. The daughter of silk-weavers, her mother sold her into prostitution at the age of fifteen. Her early tie to textiles and to the production of luxury goods ironically prepares her ascension to the position of consumer (and consumed). While less diabolical than Bette, Rosanette occupies a similar space, figuring both social and sartorial imposture.

12. See, for example, in reference to *La Cousine Bette*, Peter Hulme and Nathalie Aubert, and in reference to *L'Education sentimentale*, among others, Michel Crouzet.

13. Hulme addresses this theme at some length, asserting that the primary axis of interpretation of the novel is the trope of "civilisation and barbarism. These terms entered the political debate in response to the incident that Marx would later refer to as marking the beginning of class conflict in France: the 1831 Lyons silk riots . . ." He goes on to quote a contemporary journalist who, focusing on the vocabulary of possession, writes: "The uprising at Lyons has brought to light a grave secret, the civil strife that is taking place in society between the possessing class and the class that does not possess . . ." (56).

14. It is curious that Bette is repeatedly assimilated to Napoléon both in the novel's insistence on her "imperialist" thirst for power and in the adjective frequently used to describe her character—Corsican.

15. For a very suggestive discussion of Arnoux's relationship to kitsch, see Frolich: "[...] tout en étant un formidable consommateur d'objets kitsch, Arnoux est d'abord, dans ce Paris capitale du XIXe siècle flaubertien, un fabricant d'objets d'art et de kitsch. En effet, au moment de son incontestable succès, il 'fabrique' et vend tout ce qui relève du savoir-vivre de son époque; c'est lui qui octroie à la classe bourgeoise les objets qui meublent ses intérieurs; c'est son commerce qui 'donne le ton' socio-esthétique. C'est lui qui est la Mode: son commerce d'objets marque de son cachet particulier l'esprit bourgeois de son temps" (65).

16. See, in particular, George Zaragoza. The author does some very fine readings of this key scene, but it should be noted that he incorrectly places it at "ce premier décembre 1848," an error that empties out the political punch of Flaubert's juxtaposition of the scene of the "vente aux enchères" and the imminent coup d'état of Louis-Napoléon of December 2, 1851. Surely Flaubert wished to connect the humiliation and desecration of the idealized Marie Arnoux with the failed Republic.

17. This scene also offers an ironic intertextual inversion of the famous opening scene of Alexandre Dumas fils's 1848 novel *La Dame aux camélias*. This novel opens with the scandalous auctioning of the courtesan Marguerite Gautier's effects, among them *cachemires*, and present for purchase and ogling are both high society women and prostitutes.

18. One such illustration is reproduced from an 1846 issue of *L'Illustration* on page 94 of Monique Levi-Strauss's *Cachemires parisiens 1810–1880*.

19. My larger project, of which this article is a piece, will explore women, fashion, and social mobility in nineteenth-century France through an analysis of certain key objects from the flourishing material culture of the nineteenth century.

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