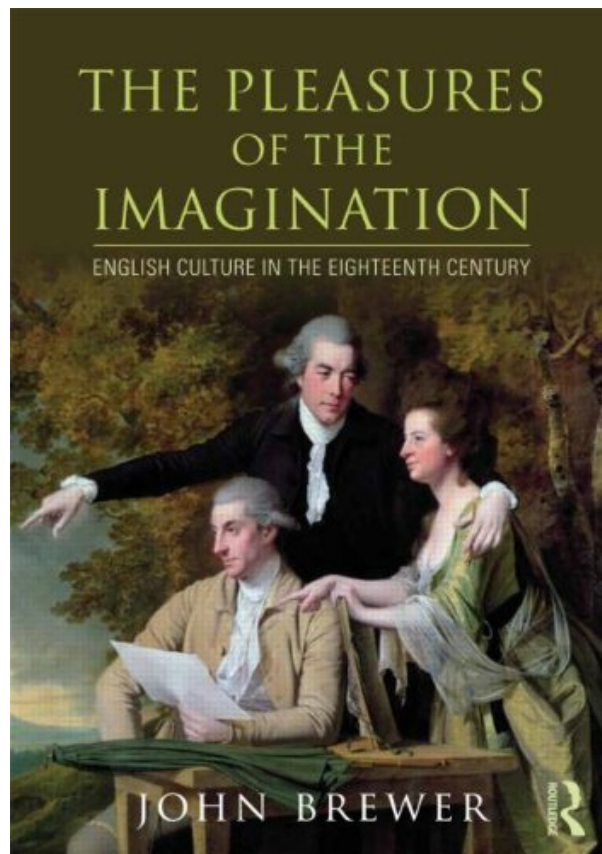
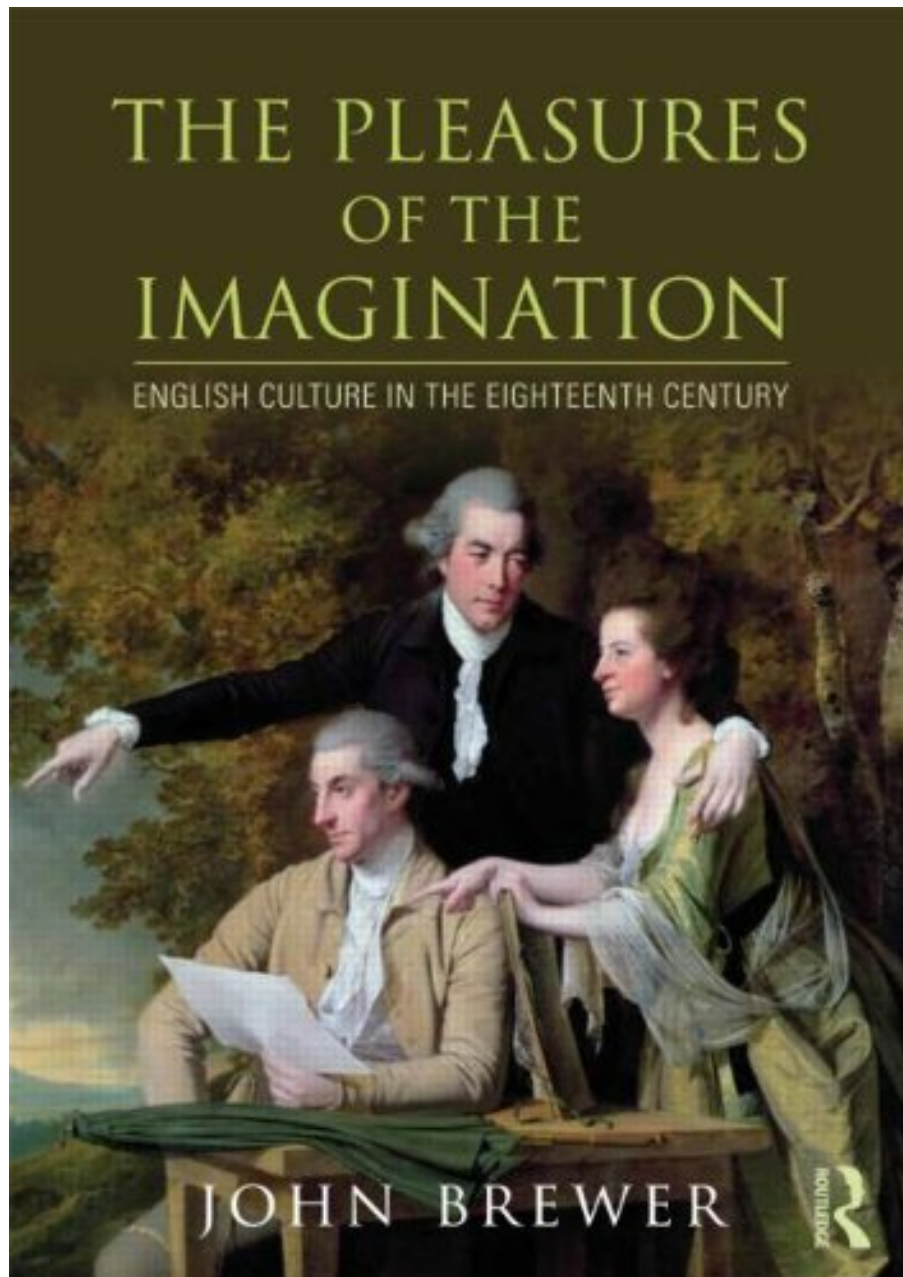


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The Pleasures of the Imagination examines the birth and development of English "high culture" in the eighteenth century. It charts the growth of a literary and artistic world fostered by publishers, theatrical and musical impresarios, picture dealers and auctioneers, and presented to the public in coffee-houses, concert halls, libraries, theatres and pleasure gardens. In 1660, there were few professional authors, musicians and painters, no public concert series, galleries, newspaper critics or reviews. By the dawn of the nineteenth century they were all apart of the cultural life of the nation.

John Brewer's enthralling book explains how this happened and recreates the world in which the great works of English eighteenth-century art were made. Its purpose is to show how literature, painting, music and the theatre were communicated to a public increasingly avid for them. It explores the alleys and garrets of Grub Street, rummages the shelves of bookshops and libraries, peers through printsellers' shop windows and into artists' studios, and slips behind the scenes at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. It takes us out of Gay and Boswell's London to visit the debating clubs, poetry circles, ballrooms, concert halls, music festivals, theatres and assemblies that made the culture of English provincial towns, and shows us how the national landscape became one of Britain's greatest cultural treasures. It reveals to us a picture of English artistic and literary life in the eighteenth century less familiar, but more surprising, more various and more convincing than any we have seen before.

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Most helpful customer reviews

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Lavish synopsis of the marriage between mercantilism and art

By Cyrus Bozorgmehr

This book is indeed a masterpiece. The eighteenth century was unquestionably a period in which the arts

thrived in Britain, but high culture was nothing new to Europe, particularly in the wake of the Renaissance and Rococo. What made this period and indeed this book special was the exodus of culture from the court to the street. This is Brewer's principal theme; the marriage of mercantilism and mass cultural appeal. The arts had always been the plaything of the monarch and the aristocracy and the artists reliant on them for patronage. Beyond church and court there were few examples to be found, excepting anomalies such as Elizabethan theatre. The reasons for its explosion were manifold as Brewer elaborates. Literacy rates were on the up, a phenomenon that was intertwined with increasing urbanisation, more schools opened their doors, and cities were the ideal breeding ground for literacy in an age of increasing public works. Although Almanacks and religious pamphlets were still the staple fare, the 'Grub Street' publishing industry was flourishing, and although, as the name suggests, impecunious authors and unscrupulous publishers were very much in evidence, a wider readership was fuelling the flowering industry. Libraries were a phenomenon of the eighteenth century, for while print works were increasingly widespread books were expensive. The advent of the library with an annual fee less than the price of a single volume in one swoop fanned the fire of literary appreciation. Brewer delves also into the painting world: the London of Hogarth that was so familiar to the common man and the foundation and patronage of the Royal Academy. Again the new commercialism is drawn as a major growth factor, for merchants and the wealthy bourgeois became the new patrons, eager to commemorate their financial glory. Garrick and Drury Lane; the world of the stage is the other focus of Brewer's attentions who uses the three principal arts to chart the explosion not of high, but popular culture in the climate of an industrialising and mercantile Britain on the verge of Empire. His hands on approach to the period leaves the reader with a sense of a very real age and a very real London brought alive through Brewer's warm, empathic portrait and spectacular illustrations. His final section deviates from his depiction of the age through the principal art forms. Almost apologetically in a book that so lovingly brings that London alive, he provides a survey of provincial Britain and the permeation of culture into the shires. By comparing and contrasting tastes and events we are left with a more robust picture, that of Britain as a whole.

The book is magisterially written, dripping with fascinating anecdotes, and bringing into play figures great and small of Hogarth and Johnson's London. Laced with almost an illustration per two pages also reflecting all angles of the cultural scene, this book is the unmissable history both of eighteenth century culture, and changing social values in a changing age. Unmissable

13 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

John Brewer's Pleasures of the Imagination

By dwdavison@aol.com

From the first page to the last, John Brewer's recent study of the eighteenth century English culture is itself a "pleasure of the imagination". Offering a synoptic interpretation of the lettered -- and unlettered -- culture of Enlightenment England, Brewer invites his readers to the Turk's Head Inn, where the Great Cham of literature, Samuel Johnson, presided over his philosophic family, including such luminaries as Edmund Burke, James Boswell and Oliver Goldsmith. In addition, Brewer exposes us to the shrewd politics and repartee behind the scenes of the Drury Lane playhouse -- where the renowned actor and theater manager, David Garrick, modified the plays of Shakespeare in order to popularize "the Bard" for the average Londoner, hoping to maintain the interest of a crude, but critical, audience. Brewer ranges freely between contemporary memoirs and philosophical tracts -- describing not only the pomp and pretence of the intellectual elite, such as the epicurean dilitantes (who praised the phallus and spurned the Christian sacraments), but also the painters, musicians, and rustic "sages" (both male and female), whose studied affectations combined with their genuine sentiments make their biographical accounts so enjoyable. Brewer's format is redolent of Simon Schama, and is as witty and entertaining to read. The illustrations are admirably selected, and help to make the narrative even more dynamic. Considering the excessive drivel that passes for social history nowadays, it's so refreshinig to read a scholar who is not only intimately familiar with the literature of the era, but himself a gifted prose stylist.

15 of 19 people found the following review helpful.

Commerce and Culture in 18th Century England

By Chanandler Bong

In this unusual approach to cultural history, John Brewer seeks to explain how "practical and technical improvements and commercial practices of the modern world" led to "the rise of fine arts and of social refinement" in 18th century England. The successful result is a work that emphasizes processes of cultural dissemination, such as nascent exhibiting societies for the visual arts and the increasingly dynamic publishing and bookselling trades. Likewise, individual creators of culture are studied not as "isolated geniuses," but rather to determine their role in shaping cultural institutions.

Brewer's first chapter thoroughly grounds his argument in the 17th century, which is impressive in a work primarily concerned with the 18th century. Before the execution of Charles I, English high culture was firmly ensconced in the court; however, the events of the next century gradually moved the center of culture from the court to the city. Cromwell's Puritan regime de-emphasized the visual arts; Charles II was too financially poor and his court too morally corrupt to support a cultural revival; William and Mary lacked both the strong desire for a court atmosphere and an ornate palace in which to create one. The Georges sporadically supported culture, but they did so beyond the confines of the court: by this time the coffee houses and clubs of London had irreversibly filled the cultural vacuum left by the decline of the court.

The chapters that follow examine the relationships among commerce, cultural pursuits, and social and moral values. These intersections of private and public, and the idea of "politeness" they generated, serve to unify Brewer's discussions of print, paint, and performance culture. For example, in the realm of print, commercial changes such as the end of perpetual copyright and declining pre-publication censorship, coupled with rising literacy, created a larger reading audience and a larger, more affordable selection of available books. The resulting shift from intensive to extensive reading is symptomatic of a new form of cultural consumption, one often imagined to originate much more recently.

Brewer concludes by using the contrasts among London, the provincial cities, and the countryside to derive the new role of Nature in English culture. The advent of tourism seemed to value nature for its distance from commercial culture, yet tourist destinations were never the most wild areas: tourists sought the boundaries between culture and nature, places where they could see sites resembling familiar landscape paintings. At the same time, tourism indirectly spread the very culture it nominally aimed to escape. Improving roads and communications provided channels through which culture, as well as tourists, traveled.

Pleasures of the Imagination convincingly portrays the effects of commercial and social changes in 18th century England upon the cultural environment. Brewer's argument and evidence both merit close reading and confound attempts to present such a brief summary as this. Finally, the book is quite approachable, with well-flowing prose and countless illustrations.

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