

Critiques of Luxury by Obscure Men of Letters in the French Enlightenment; A Prize Contest Held by the Academy of Besançon in 1782.

Toshimi Morimura

The debate over luxury that began in France in the 1730s with Melon's *Essai politique sur le commerce* interested intellectuals for more than a half a century. In addition to many publications discussing this problem, six academies, including the Académie française, adopted the critique of luxury as a theme of their prize contests. At that time, for many obscure writers aspiring to win fame, winning an academy prize might open the door to the Republic of Letters. This paper considers the transformation of the luxury debate in the late 18th century, and examines the significance of these contests by analyzing the works entered in the contest held by the Academy of Besançon in 1782, on the theme “Luxury Destroys Manners and Empires”.

After the 1760s, authors who supported luxury began to distinguish between “beneficent luxury” and “harmful luxury” which they denounced. “Harmful luxury” was said to result from excessive inequality in the distribution of wealth that derived from political factors, such as an abusive system of public finance and exclusive privileges. This kind of luxury was criticized as a symbol of plutocracy controlled by financiers in cooperation with court aristocrats. On the other hand, “beneficent luxury” referred a state of affairs in which the benefits of industry, refinement in the arts, and economic development were enjoyed widely throughout the nation. Contestants for the Besançon prize addressed traditional criticisms, the conscious refutation of arguments in defense of luxury that were presented after the 1730s, and the critique of “harmful luxury”, however, denying the possible existence of “beneficent luxury”. As a result, the works entered in this contest reveal the way in which various arguments of the luxury controversy were diffused and appropriated in Pre-Revolutionary France.