

An Eighteenth-Century Toybox

Bertrand's Toyshop in Bath: Luxury Retailing 1685–1765

By Vanessa Brett.

Oblong, 2014. 364 pages.

230 B/W and colored illustrations. Hardcover. \$89.00.

Review by Christine Mitchell.

Vanessa Brett begins her volume with the note that what she describes therein is “a hitherto unresearched view of England’s most fashionable resort during the first half of the eighteenth century.” Through her relationships with members of the Silver Society, Brett had the good fortune to have access to business and banking records from the city of Bath and, thus, the opportunity to discover the story of one of the town’s leading retailers, Paul Bertrand and his second wife, Mary Deards Bertrand. Their business was concerned not only with selling “toys” but also with providing banking services to the wealthy and important visitors and residents of the town. Brett’s book tells the unknown story.

Brett has put in much time and effort to delve into the lives and bank accounts of the Bertrands, who owned a shop that catered to the rich and famous. While not all of the clients’ names are familiar to us in the twenty-first century, scholars of the period will recognize some customers of the toyshop. The city’s gentry, such as Ralph Allen, John Nash, and Richard Wood—the acknowledged “creators of modern” Bath—as well as visiting royalty—Princess Amelia, second daughter of George II; Prince William of Orange; and Frederick, Prince of

Wales—and the town’s hoi polloi are among those listed in Bertrand’s bank accounts. As the owner of a fine toyshop, Bertrand knew essentially everyone who was important to know. (Alas, although Jane Austen and Bath are commonly linked, the author was not born until after Paul Bertrand was dead and the shop sold. Thus, she was never a customer.)

One of Brett’s first tasks is to explain the term toyshop, since its meaning differs from what we mean today. Perhaps we might say that it is a distinction in degree or scope, rather than in kind. For the denizens of eighteenth-century England, a toy was “a small and desirable luxury item.” Thus, the modern phrase “the only difference between men and boys is the size of their toys” might come to mind. Bertrand’s shop, and others like it, stocked a great variety of trinkets, jewelry, and household items that well-to-do aristocrats and visitors sought out when in Bath. Among the goods Brett catalogs are rings, jewels, and watches; gaming accoutrements, such as cards, dice, and counters; stationery and writing instruments; flowers, vases, bowls, and other goods for the home. Ah, let us not forget the ever-popular music and snuff boxes, which Bertrand sold to men and women alike. Everyone who was anyone in Bath passed by and into Bertrand’s Toyshop from 1730 to 1747.

The book is divided into four parts: Part I, background on Paul and Mary Deards Bertrand and their place in Bath society; Part II, the daily and seasonal life of the town and visitors to Bath; Part III, a very brief accounting of the Bertrands’ life after selling the toyshop; and Part IV, Paul Bertrand’s bank account. Nearly every page is illustrated by maps and pictures of Bath, the people who were there, and/or the toys and trinkets sold in the shop. Quite often, Brett includes excerpts from diaries, letters, bills of sale, and even poetry, such as “Bertrand’s Shop at Bath” by Richard Percival. These inclusions add substantially to the realism and interest of the volume, demonstrating the author’s claim that

“fuzzy glimpses” of the past are illuminated by real images.

Perhaps the most significant part of the book for true historians and collectors is Part IV, Bertrand’s accounts. As previously mentioned, Bertrand was a “banker,” in addition to being a seller of luxury goods; however, just as we need to define “toys,” so we must define “banker” from an eighteenth-century perspective. According to the *OED*, Thomas Blount’s *Law Dictionary* (1670–71) offered the following definition: “persons, Goldsmiths and others, by taking or borrowing great sums of money, and lending out the same again . . . , have gained and acquired to themselves the reputation and name of Bankers.” Thus, it is clear that Bertrand, in the course of his business, kept accounts for customers to buy, sell, and otherwise negotiate financial dealings for his goods and services.

Approximately one-third of Brett’s book encompasses a catalog of Paul Bertrand’s goods and accounts, with photographs of the items and records of transactions between Bertrand and nearly 900 clients. The author takes great pains to emphasize the uniqueness of her publication, stating that her research unexpectedly uncovered these records in the course of a “narrow” exploration of the lives of Bertrand and his second wife. The resulting volume reveals the history of Bath, its inhabitants and visitors, in a distinctive and clearly documented way.

Bertrand’s Toyshop in Bath is not for casual reading, but for aficionados of eighteenth-century British history and those who are interested in luxury items just prior to Jane Austen’s time, it is a rich and colorful resource.

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