



# The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century

By John Brewer

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## **The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century** By John Brewer

*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 suprising, more various and more convincing than any we have seen before.

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### Editorial Review

From Library Journal

"[I]n the late seventeenth century high culture moved out of the narrow confines of the court and into diverse spaces in London....The city [became] not only the center of culture but one of its key subjects." Brewer (*The Sinews of Power*, Knopf, 1989) has written a nearly flawless study of a key period in English literary and artistic culture. A plethora of illustrations, both written and visual, support his thesis. The 18th-century British republic of letters was shaped by the deliberate efforts of its artists and writers to define aesthetic criteria and standards of good taste in their fields, wresting control from the collector/connoisseur, to whom "the artist was of far less consequence than the subject of his portraits." Brewer discusses a host of significant topics, such as the evolution of the book trade and the establishment of the Royal Academy of Art. An intellectual feast of the first order to be savored by amateur and professional alike; enthusiastically recommended. David Keymer, California State Univ., Stanislaus  
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From [Booklist](#)

Marvell and Herrick wrote elegant verse for a leisured aristocracy; their poetic heirs--Pope and Thomson--wrote best-sellers for profit-hungry publishers. In that shift, historian John Brewer limns a radical metamorphosis in British culture. Through this metamorphosis, creative talents--writers, painters, dramatists, and musicians--were freed from dependence upon court patronage only to find that attracting an audience large enough to support themselves often meant compromising artistic integrity. Brewer's achievement in this study lies in showing how the newly defined "fine arts" flourished by dramatizing and exploiting the tensions within the emerging world of urban commerce. Thus booksellers who turned a nice profit on literature fostering gentility and refinement also made good money marketing books romanticizing barbarism and decrying civilized effeminacy. Theater managers who attracted large audiences for the timeless mastery of Shakespeare could also fill the house for the gossipy satires of Gay. And shrewd art dealers got ahead by offering both uplifting foreign classics and Britain's own raw grotesqueries. Brewer delights the reader with revealing glimpses of giants--Pope, Johnson, Handel, and Hogarth--but he keeps his focus on the broad economic and social transformations affecting the hack as well as the genius. A remarkable feat of scholarship, this volume will quickly establish itself as an indispensable reference. *Bryce Christensen*

From Kirkus Reviews

In encyclopedic detail and with Johnsonian style and gusto, Brewer expatiates on the cultural development of a Public--reading, listening, and viewing--and the rise of Taste. Historian Brewer follows his work on the politics and government of the same period in Britain, *The Sinews of Power* (1989), with a reassessment of British culture as it moved out of the aristocratic Renaissance and rakish Restoration, and evolved into a culture driven in part by an extraordinarily mercantile middle class. Brewer demonstrates how London emerged as the center of a boom in literature, music, and art--admittedly from mercenary forces. Grub Street produced Pope and Johnson; the urban landscape inspired Hogarth and Rowlandson; Handel and Haydn found financial independence in oratorios and public concerts; and David Garrick combined the roles of actor-manager and neoclassical interpreter of Shakespeare. Brewer is equally interested in the consumers of this expanding culture. His glosses of the bookselling trade, the mercurial London theater, and art auctions and exhibitions are supported by firsthand accounts, such as those of Anna Larpent, an intellectual lady of leisure and taste, and Ozias Humphry, a miniaturist who never quite succeeded in the art business. With this refinement of taste, though, a cultural divide emerged between connoisseurs and dilettantes, amateurs and professionals, London and the provinces. Brewer, however, shows how the provinces not only absorbed

culture from London but distributed it more evenly as well. Outside the home counties, he unearths lesser-known but interesting figures: Thomas Bewick, a successful Newcastle engraver; Anna Seward, the Lichfield bluestocking and contentious associate of Johnson; and John Marsh, a Chichester gentleman with a passion for amateur music. Only a book as rich, diverse, and allusive as Brewer's could do justice to the phenomenal cultural expansion of 18th-century England. (240 b&w illustrations, 8 pages color illustrations, not seen) -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

## **Users Review**

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