Susanna Burghartz’s recent research on global frameworks, connections and early modern material culture has focussed in part on visual culture, images and the new methodologies brought by digitisation projects. Among these are the narratives and engravings of the New World explored during the sixteenth century by Theodor de Bry. This has stimulated me to turn to a later connection between Europe and the New World: the production with enslaved labour of sugar to be consumed in rapidly growing quantities in Europe and especially Britain. My object is another type of engraved image: a trade card or illustrated advertisement.
R. Brunsden’s trade card depicts the wares and processes of a tea dealer, grocer and oilman who sold not just the colonial beverages, but all other articles in the grocery and oil way. This would have included the sugar loaves depicted in the shop sign. The trade card design is also in the fashionable rococo style of the mid eighteenth century, the sugar loaves connecting with the chinoiserie of a fabled and exoticized China. Tea cannisters with several qualities of tea are depicted, a coffee container, sugar loaves, and the stages of the refining process for the chocolate maker. The words emphasised ‘superfine’, ‘all sorts’, ‘other articles of grocery’ and ‘reasonable rates’, and above all processes of making chocolate were depicted. This engraved advertising medium provided the striking and seductive visual appeal of an exotic cornucopia of the world’s luxury foods and beverages from Mexico and the Caribbean, the Middle East and China, along with an image of an inhouse or at least local chocolate maker. This visual advertising reached its pinnacle in
these mid eighteenth-century rococo designs depicting products and making, and were much used across the luxury and grocery trades.

Three wider-world commodities, tea from China, coffee from the Middle East, then transplanted by Europeans to the East Indies and the Caribbean, and chocolate (cacao) from Mexico, came to be consumed very differently from in their original homelands, and by the eighteenth century had entered widely into European foodways. Initially these were exotic luxury beverages associated with China and the Indies; they acted on the body as stimulants. What bound all three together for Europeans was another highly addictive colonial grocery, sugar. Chocolate entered Spain as a hot drink, sweetened with cane sugar and flavoured with vanilla or cinnamon. Coffee drinking spread through Europe via coffee houses from the mid seventeenth century, and tea had become an everyday beverage across the social classes of the Dutch and the British by the mid eighteenth century. All three bitter beverages were sweetened with sugar by the 1680s, embedding sugar’s place as a sweetener in European diets.

The sugar loaves indicate the refined sugar product that came to be distributed, advertised and retailed by grocers, tea dealers and confectioners. The sugar was produced by the seventeenth century mainly in the New World in labour intensive plantations and capital-intensive processing mills whose owners had complete control of
the gang-labour work processes carried out by African enslaved peoples. The semi-processed sugar was then further refined in sugar houses and distilleries both in the Caribbean and in a number of European ports and capital cities to produce the various grades of refined sugar, and the treacle, molasses and rum that so many Europeans and settlers of European origin in the Atlantic world consumed. Treacle added to the cooked oats at the base of diets of the labouring poor in the north of the country added to calories, and the navy introduced rum rations for sailors rising from half a pint a day in 1751 to a pint in the late eighteenth century. Britain became the key player in the production and consumption of sugar from the later seventeenth century. From the 1680s the English Caribbean produced as much sugar as Portugal’s Brazil, and much more than the French islands. The production of British West Indies sugar rose by 80 per cent 1740-69. Britain took a third of Europe’s consumption in first half of the eighteenth century; her per capita consumption was eight times that of the French. British net sugar imports over the first three quarters of the eighteenth century grew by 449.8 per cent and sugar consumption per capita grew by 253.9 per cent; French sugar consumption per capita grew only 110 per cent. Sugar and molasses made up two thirds of British grocery imports in 1700, and English sugar consumption per head rose from 6.5 lb. c. 1710 to 23.2 lbs. per head in early 1770s. This rapidly rising sugar consumption was entwined with the rapid growth of slave trading, and from the 1670s Britain and its dependencies carried half the enslaved peoples that arrived in the Americas; they supplied their own plantations as well as some of those of their rivals. By the eighteenth century the major factor extending the British market for sugar was Britain’s other leading colonial grocery, tea and the practice of drinking sweetened tea. The British sugar and tea trades and the slave trade came to dominate over European competitors by the eighteenth century.

The sugar trade was not controlled by monopolistic companies, and cargoes were bought directly by sugar factors and specialist wholesale grocers, to be resold to all manner of retailing grocers across the country. By the mid eighteenth century a quarter of all shops were grocers who competed for shares of the tea, coffee, sugar, tobacco and spices. But there was a clear link between the rapid growth of sugar imports and East India Company tea imports in the first half of the eighteenth century. The East India Company fostered a tea taste associated with sugar; sugar consumed in this way became ‘virtuous’ as opposed to the extravagance of sugar decorations. Grocers as well as tea dealers (and there were 62,000 such dealers by 1750) sold tea and sugar together, provided often in small quantities such as an ounce of tea and a small pinch of sugar taken from sugar loaves with nippers. Large numbers of sugar varieties and qualities were available across the country. As early as 1686 Whiston’s
price current listed 18 grades of sugar priced from 45s. per cwt. for the finest to 8.25s. for molasses. The Leigh family of Stoneleigh Abbey near to what is now Warwick University bought five different types of sugar between 1650-80, six different types 1710-38 and between 1768-92, eight different types. A specialist grocer, Alexander Chorley of Manchester stocked ten different types of sugar in the mid eighteenth century. Workhouses in the area, by the 1770s, bought loaf sugar as well as the treacle and brown sugar they had long provided for their inmates. The English poor spent 10 per cent of their household budgets on sugar and tea. Sugar types were frequently identified by place names from the Caribbean, and British and other European refineries signifying quality and price.

Sidney Mintz, many decades ago analysed the cultural processes by which sugar was embedded in European and especially British foodways. An exotic commodity which first entered the social life of the powerful, became a type of ‘kingly’ luxury for commoners. Rituals of social connection embedded sweetened tea and sweet condiments consumed in the material culture of the tea equipage, including sugar boxes and bowls and sugar nippers and tong. For the poor an ounce of tea and a nip of sugar provided the hot beverage that stimulated and energised what they drew from poor bland diets.
Consider the results of the rapid entrenchment into British diets of two wider world luxury foodstuffs that were both stimulants and addictive. Craving was added to desire to provide the key incentive to Jan de Vries’s ‘industrious revolution’.\(^{18}\) Sugar and tea consumption anticipated the desire for new textiles and dress. Sugar production over the eighteenth century was the lead commodity relying on plantation agriculture that brought 12.5 million enslaved peoples to the New World between 1560 and 1860. Capital intensive refining processes further impacted capital markets, metal resources, technologies and skills both in the Caribbean and in Europe’s and especially Britain’s port cities and their hinterlands. The sugar trade and the slave trade that provided the plantation labour force was the foundation stone of the Atlantic trading system. This, in turn generated the dynamic export growth that shifted the growth of national output at a crucial point.\(^{19}\) That Atlantic system was not separate from but connected with Britain’s and Europe’s Asian trade, for sugar and tea consumption grew together.

If we return to R. Brunsden’s trade card we see how seductively these exotic colonial groceries were advertised to their new European consumers. These trade cards were themselves small works of art, a gift to clients of eighteenth-century shops and services. Some were expensively commissioned; others drawn from printmakers’ templates, and they became collectables, especially among the British; the best-known now are the Banks and Heal Collection in the British Museum, and the John Johnson Collection in the Bodleian.\(^{20}\) Many are now digitised, allowing comparisons across trades and time, and between London and the provinces.\(^ {21}\) Such collections of continental trade cards are rare, but the Waddesdon Manor collection of seventeenth and eighteenth-century French and some other European trade cards was digitised, analysed historically and art historically and researched in an early digitisation project led by Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford.\(^ {22}\)

Among these cards is that of Géry Dupont, Grocer and Confectioner, c. 1770-1790 (n.d.) Engraved by Jean Joseph Durig (1750-1816). Waddesdon Manor Trade Card Collection. Acc.no.3686.3.4.11.

Empfohlene Zitierweise/Suggested citation

Abstract

A trade card or advertisement of a grocer’s shop depicts three sugar loaves, a common image on the shop signs of eighteenth-century English grocers. ‘Sweet industriousness’ brings the retailing and consumption of sugar and hot exotic beverages in Europe together with the enslaved labour that produced that sugar in the New World. Two wider world luxury foodstuffs, sugar and tea, that were both stimulants and addictive were rapidly embedded in European and especially, British diets. Craving was added to desire to provide the key incentive to Jan de Vries’s ‘industrious revolution’, that change in widespread household behaviour that enabled wider economic transformation. Sugar and tea anticipated the desire for new textiles and dress. Slave traders, plantation owners and sugar merchants joined East India Company merchants to bring huge quantities of these exotic groceries to Britain and other parts of Europe, where ubiquitous grocers distributed them and cultivated their taste in seductive advertising.
17 Mintz: Sweetness and power, pp. 95, 115, 173.
19 Solow: Capitalism and slavery, pp. 72ff.
23 https://waddesdon.org.uk/the-collection/item/?id=16037 [19.03.2021], Trade Card and possible Label of Géry Dupon, Grocer and Confectioner, Valenciennes, France, Accession no. 3686.3.4.11.