CHAPTER 1


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Introduction

In 1735, a popular play called The Toy-Shop premiered in London. Its author, Robert Dodsley, had previously worked as a footman and was thus familiar with the capital's stylish set. He used ‘toys’—then fashionable trinkets for adults—including a telescope, spectacles, and scales as moralising metaphors. For example, when a young gentleman asks Dodsley’s toyman about the precision of scales for making “statical Experiments”, the shopkeeper convinces his listener that moral knowledge is of far greater importance than the scientific:

Toyman: I have try’d them myself in some uncommon Subjects, and have prov’d their Goodness. I have taken a large Handful of Great Men’s Promises, and put into one End; and lo! the Breath of a Fly in the other has kicked up the Beam. […] I have found by Experience […] that the Pride and Vanity of any Man are in exact Proportion to his Ignorance; that a Grain of Good-nature will preponderate against an Ounce of Wit; a Heart full of Virtue, against a Head full of Learning […].

Gentleman: Well, this is a Branch of Staticks, which I must own, I had but little Thought of entering into. However I begin to be persuaded, that to know the true Specifick Gravity of this Kind of Subjects, is of infinitely more importance than that of any other Bodies in the Universe.¹

A modern audience might be somewhat surprised to find instruments included among fashionable ‘toys’ such as feather fans and agate snuffboxes, but they were constant companions to all manner of retail goods in early modern London. Globes, microscopes, pocket-sized mathematical and drawing tools, the occasional magic lantern or camera obscura, and especially vision

aids were widely sold alongside other stylish and luxurious wares. Spectacles were almost as common across all types of retail shops as were last-minute purchases like playing cards and lottery tickets.

Small fashionable instruments—and diversified luxury shops as points of sale for instruments—have received comparatively little attention in the history of science and technology. This probably stems from factors including the unrepresentative makeup of most surviving collections, and a certain prejudice against actors and technologies which might not today be deemed scientific and against shopkeepers assumed not to have made their own stock. However, small fashionable as well as workaday instruments accounted for a large proportion of the production and sales in early modern London (as in many other cities and towns). Furthermore, there were myriad socio-economic interconnections between the different types of instrument makers and sellers—whether diversified and fashionable, or specialized and ‘scientific’. The fruitful trade in instruments in the early modern capital can therefore not be fully understood without reintegrating fashionable and diversified commerce into the narrative.

**Instruments in an Early Modern Metropolis**

Instrument making first arrived in England from the Low Countries in the middle of the 1500s. As the number of local practitioners grew, its main focus became London—itself experiencing great geographic, demographic, and economic growth over the course of the early modern period. From about the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, London hosted more instrument makers and sellers than did any other location in the world, and its makers became the most esteemed in Europe alongside a small number of French artisans. This was at least in part because of comparatively light regulation by the government and livery companies and because of the existence of a well-developed consumer culture with diverse sources of demand.2

The products of this trade were not known as ‘scientific’, since the term ‘science’ did not take on its modern usage until the later 1800s. Enlightenment figures instead pursued subjects such as ‘natural philosophy’ and ‘experimental

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