

# Why We Hate Cheap Things

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## Why We Hate Cheap Things

The School of Life

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I

Why We Hate  
Cheap Things

We don't think we hate cheap things, but we frequently behave as if we do. Consider the pineapple. Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) was the first European to be delighted by the physical grandeur and vibrant sweetness of the pineapple, which is native to South America but had reached the Caribbean by the time he arrived there. The first time Europeans encountered pineapples was in November 1493, in a Carib village on the island of Guadeloupe. Columbus's crew spotted the fruit next to a pot of stewing human limbs. The outside reminded them of a pine cone; the interior pulp of an apple.

However, pineapples proved difficult to transport and costly to cultivate. For a long time only royalty could afford to eat them. Russia's Catherine the Great was a huge fan, as was England's Charles II. A single fruit in the seventeenth century sold for today's equivalent of £5,000. The pineapple was such a status symbol that, if they could obtain one, people would keep it for display until it rotted and fell apart. In the mid-eighteenth century, at the height of the pineapple craze, whole aristocratic evenings were structured around the ritual display of these fruits. Poems were written in their honour. Savouring a tiny sliver could be the high point of a year.



The South Towers of St Paul's Cathedral, built 1711.



The Dunmore Pineapple, built 1761.

Christopher Wren had no hesitation in topping the South Towers of St Paul's with this evidently divine fruit. The pineapple was so exciting and so loved that John Murray, the 4th Earl of Dunmore, built a temple on his Scottish estate in its honour.

Then, at the end of the nineteenth century, two things changed. Large-scale commercial pineapple plantations were established in Hawaii, and there were huge advances in steamship technology. Consequently, production and transport costs plummeted and, unwittingly, transformed the psychology of pineapple eating. Today, you can buy a pineapple for around £1.50. The fruit still tastes the same. But now the pineapple is one of the world's least glamorous fruits. It is rarely served at smart dinner parties and it would never be carved on the top of a major civic building.

The pineapple itself has not changed; only our attitude to it has. Contemplation of the history of the pineapple suggests a curious overlap between love and economics: when we have to pay a lot for something nice, we appreciate it to the full. Yet as its price in the market falls, passion has a habit of fading away. If the object has no merit to begin with, a high price won't do anything

for it, but if it has real virtue and yet a low price, it is in danger of falling into grievous neglect.

It's a pattern that we see recurring in a range of areas: for example, with the sight of clouds from above. In 1927, a hitherto-unknown air-mail pilot called Charles Lindbergh (1902–1974) became the first man to complete a solo crossing of the Atlantic in his fragile plane, *The Spirit of St Louis*.

For hours, Lindbergh flew in the most arduous conditions, braving wind, rain and storms. He saw clouds passing below him and distant thunder claps on the horizon. It was one of the profoundest moments of his life. He was awestruck and felt he was becoming, for a time, almost god-like. For much of the twentieth century, his experience remained rare and extremely costly. There was never any danger that the human value of crossing an ocean by air would be overlooked.

This lasted until the arrival of the Boeing 747 and the cheap plane ticket in the summer of 1970. The jumbo jet fundamentally changed the economics of flying. The experience of gazing down at clouds and seeing the world spread out below stopped being (as it had been



Charles Lindbergh with the plane in which he made the first solo crossing of the Atlantic.

for Lindbergh) a life-changing encounter; it started to feel commonplace and even a little boring. It became peculiar to wax lyrical about taking the red-eye to JFK or to mention a spectacular column of clouds that one had spotted shortly after the arrival of the chicken lunch. A trip that would have mesmerised Leonardo da Vinci or John Constable was now passed over in silence.

The view from the plane window underwent an economic miracle that led to a psychological catastrophe: its cost dropped and it ceased to matter, although its real value hadn't changed.

Consider also the bath. For centuries, having a hot bath all to yourself at home was a remarkable, highly prized experience, out of reach to all except a very few at the pinnacle of society. It required the assistance of several attendants to heat the water and fill the tub, fend off draughts, hold the towels, and proffer the soap. It was a special occasion – like a coronation or a victory in battle – worthy of being recorded in a grand work of art. It would be an experience to ponder and remember, to reflect upon and discuss with your friends. One would dwell for days on the wonder of immersing the body in a warm, buoyant liquid.



Jean-Baptiste Joseph Pater, *The Bath*, 1730–1736

Before the advent of indoor plumbing, having a bath was a rare privilege even for the elite.