BLANKETS DON'T CHIP EASILY

You could argue that the rise of Western civilization can be correlated with the thickness and complexity of the mattresses on which we sleep. What was once a straw pallet—and before that, the floor—has today become a creation swathed in pseudo-science and luxury-speak: witness memory foam, hand-crafted pocketed springs and "hand-teased fillings of real Shetland Isle wool, European horsetail, cashmere and mohair".

It is a metaphor, as well as an actual illustration, of how cushioned we have made ourselves from the raw harshness of primitive life.

In that case, it is surely a sign of a society’s decadence when it starts to afford cushioning to inanimate objects that do not need it. In the early 21st century you can have so many things delivered to your door; and so many of them are ridiculously overpackaged.

A glass vase, bottles of wine or works of art do need to be packaged carefully in case they get damaged in transit.

But in the world of mail order a pack of Legos is fragile, and is sent inside a box crammed with polystyrene peanuts that spill all over the house as soon as you open it. I have recently taken delivery of some blankets and cushions, and they arrived in a cardboard box the size of a rabbit hutch, the spare volume of which was filled with pockets made of double-layer plastic filled with air. Fun, yes, for 11-year-olds to stamp on and pop, but hardly essential for the safe transportation of soft items in a van to my house.

Similarly a jacket I’d ordered arrived in a cardboard box that was padded out with meters of crumpled-up brown paper. And last summer I ordered some fabric bunting in a festive moment (remember those?): it would have fitted easily into an A4-sized envelope, but arrived in a cardboard box big enough for a pair of adult wellies, duly padded out with a square meter of those plastic air pockets.

Clothing and soft furnishings do not need to be in a cardboard box, and they certainly don’t need protection against rattling around when they are inside one. They do not need padding because they are padding. King James knew this and wore thickly padded clothing because he feared being assassinated like his father, Lord Darnley. The clothes worn under medieval armor were padded, so is a fencing jacket. Bullet-proof vests, though they may be reinforced with other materials, are basically a matrix of textile. All of these are designed to protect human life; the fabric itself is not in danger. It’s time for mail-order businesses to use their brains when it comes to packaging. Otherwise, on the cushioning-as-cultural-marker scale, it looks like we’re doomed.

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