

Julie De Groot, *At Home in Renaissance Bruges. Connecting Objects, People and Domestic Spaces in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022, 288 pp., ISBN 9789462703179).

Much scholarship on sixteenth-century material culture in the Netherlands focuses on the cosmopolitan metropolis of Antwerp and, more specifically, its wealthy entrepreneurs. Julie De Groot's choice to study Bruges's non-elite households is, therefore, a much welcome – and much needed – addition to the research on domestic objects and domesticity in the 1500s, even more so as the study is available both in paperback and as an open-access e-book. As the author convincingly argues, Bruges offers an interesting case study because it illustrates a 'gradual transition [...] from an international metropolis to a sizeable provincial centre' (9). Likewise, by concentrating on the neither wealthy nor poor 'middling sort', and on shopkeepers and artisans in particular, *At Home in Renaissance Bruges* provides information on the material fabric of ordinary burghers' lives in the turbulent sixteenth century. Within that socioeconomic and demographic framework, De Groot seeks to explore the dynamic relationship between people, spaces, and objects, promising to reconstruct period 'values and attitudes towards home and public life' (10). To understand the process of the fashioning of one's identity, De Groot explains, one must consider the particulars of both their public and domestic lives. The study is firmly based on quantitative and qualitative archival research, and the author's precise explanation of the types of consulted inventories, as well as their limitations, will make it particularly useful to early-stage doctoral students.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, De Groot focuses on the organisation of domestic spaces, trying to reconstruct the lived experiences of early modern homes. By meticulously analyzing the furnishings of specific rooms, De Groot nuances our understanding of the layout of sixteenth-century households, providing new insights into which rooms were used to produce and sell goods, and which were reserved for convivial and family activities. De Groot's analysis challenges the common assumption that premodern homes were spaces with very fluid boundaries between the private and the public spaces and provides convincing evidence for 'the existence of an exclusively commercial environment inside the house and of the existence (or at least a certain awareness) of the specificity of private domestic space' (77), at least among the 'middling sort', on which she focuses. Furthermore, De Groot supports her conclusions by including guilds' regulations of trade and thus situates domestic spaces within the broader context of urban life. The detailed linguistic and functional analysis of names

used for rooms and objects in inventories provides helpful clarification of the often-confusing language of period documents. In the second part, De Groot shifts her attention to objects that filled previously analyzed rooms: paintings, textiles, and furniture, paying attention to their simultaneous practical and decorative functions in households of different affluence. In one of the more interesting sections, the author correlates the practices of safeguarding valuable goods such as expensive textiles with specific kinds of trunks, which once again proves her ability to read primary sources against the grain. The section on paintings, albeit marred by certain confusion between cloth and canvas supports, convincingly argues for the greater interest of Bruges's patrons in devotional imagery than among Antwerp collectors. This conclusion, in turn, supports the importance of moving beyond the city at the Scheldt in the analysis of the art market in the sixteenth-century Low Countries.

But despite stellar archival research, thanks to which De Groot's study will undoubtedly remain an important resource for scholars, the book is underwhelming. Based on a dissertation, it remains one: the author painstakingly cites generations of scholars of material culture and domesticity, establishing her knowledge of the field in a tedious manner that is essential in a dissertation but not necessary in a book. This information is not always relevant either, as when the author discusses Roger Ekirch's now-controversial hypothesis of 'segmented sleep' in the context of Bruges's sleeping rooms. The book's formulaic structure has further stalled new and original conclusions that could have been derived from the quantitative research presented here. In the end, the reader is left with a handful of facts, methodological frameworks, and unresolved problems. For instance, sections of Part 2 end quite literally with a series of questions about the art market, status and comfort associated with types of beds, and customer preference for specific textiles and their colors. One would expect to see those questions at the beginning of chapters, with archival and secondary research mobilized to pursue possible answers, but the book rarely offers such a line of reasoning.

On the other hand, and somewhat counterintuitively, there are also significant gaps in secondary research. For example, in the chapter 'Devotion on Display? Paintings in Domestic Interiors', the author claims: 'In historiography, and especially for the southern Low Countries in the late medieval and early modern period, research has focused mainly on how many paintings certain social groups were willing or able to acquire [...] and where, how and from whom they could buy these goods. Yet we are still in the dark as to *why* these images were bought or passed on from generation to generation [...] how they were appropriated and used by citizens of all sorts and how displaying certain images related to social and cultural practices' (131). This is simply incorrect, as scholars such as Claudia Goldstein, Todd Richardson, and Mark Meadow, to name just a few, have written extensively on paintings and other domestic objects in the context of convivial and religious activities in

early modern households, as well as their role in professional self-fashioning. While some of this research dates to the early 2000s, the absence of more recent sources suggests once again the book's reliance on doctoral research that has not been sufficiently updated, as very few essays and books published after 2015 are included in the bibliography. The second major issue with the book's apparatus is the absence of an index, which makes the paperback, otherwise handsomely published, difficult to use.

In conclusion, while De Groot's book offers solid information on the ownership and distribution of objects across sixteenth-century Bruges households and is valuable for its shift of attention to 'middling groups', it fails to deliver on its promise to approach 'objects as non-textual forms of communication [which] allowed for them to serve as ideal proxies for questioning social and cultural practices' (33). We learn little about those practices and people's interactions with furnishings, while the book's dry structure and often imprecise, confusing language leave the reader with more questions than answers. Still, we can hope that *At Home in Renaissance Bruges* will contribute to an increased interest in smaller urban centers of the sixteenth-century Low Countries, expanding our knowledge of everyday domestic practices beyond Antwerp.

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