

Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant, eds., with assistance from Harriet McKay *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance* V&A Publications, London; 2006. 304 pp., 200 color and 55 black and white illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, hard cover. £45. ISBN-10 1851774920

This large book is one outcome of the Centre for the Study of the Domestic Interior (CSDI), a five-year collaboration (2001-2006), funded by the British government via the Arts and Humanities Research Council, between the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Royal College of Art and the Bedford Centre for the History of Women at Royal Holloway, University of London. The CSDI website describes its aim:

to develop new histories of the home, its contents and its representation [and] research into the changing appearance and layout of the rooms in a range of buildings, from tenements to palaces, the objects that furnished those rooms, the ways rooms and objects were depicted, the manner in which people used them, and how they thought about them.

In their introduction to *Imagined Interiors*, the editors emphasise an impressive lineage for the CSDI – not only are its “complementary approaches to material culture” drawn from “the greatest museum of art and design” and “a world-leading art and design institution and university” but, furthermore, the “Centre was designed to be greater than the sum of its parts” (pp. 10-11). Quite a billing to live up to! Other outcomes from the project include another V&A publication, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, which accompanied an exhibition at the museum; *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*, drawn from a 2004 conference at the Huntington Library; *Publishing the Modern Home, 1880-1950*, a special issue of *The Journal of Design History*, and a textual and visual online database of representation of the Western domestic interior from 1400 to the present.¹ At the close of the Centre, it seems timely to consider how *Imagined Interiors* contribute to meeting its aims.

A strength of the book is the way it, and its accompanying database, contributes to scholarship a collection of images and some useful commentaries upon them. Almost without exception, the chapters offer worthwhile, pleasurable and useful groups of images, notwithstanding the varying quality of the articles, some of which are extremely short. A wide range of images is offered from elite homes, and the luxury objects made for them, to depictions of the cottages of the poor (pp. 154-155), from the hilarious Mr Pooter (p. 201) to Bronzino’s striking ‘Portrait of a Young Man’ (p. 28). Without such extensive illustration, the arguments put forward would be compromised and thus the publisher is to be congratulated for providing such a generous allowance of images per word. The chapters which make the best use of visual material include that by Francesca Berry. The art historical chapters are characterised by a satisfying and revealing dual focus, on both the images shown and the interiors depicted. Tim Benton’s compellingly detailed analysis of representations of Modernist architectural interiors brings a sophisticated and authoritative understanding of what is at stake in the decision to represent the Modern interior in an architectural plan or a presentation

drawing, a black and white photograph devoid of people, or a colour illustration with inhabitants: 'the insistence on the plan certainly contributed to Modernism's reputation for dehumanizing the domestic'. (p. 223-4)

The book is organised chronologically, with overlapping parts covering the periods 1400-1750 ('Developing a Domestic Culture', 1650-1900 ('The Interior Defined') and 1850 to the present ('Displaying the Modern Home'). The claims made for each period - that domestic culture 'developed' between 1400-1750, and that the interior was 'defined' from 1650-1900 - are contentious and the discussion of this arrangement in the introduction is inconclusive. Yet, questions of chronology are some of the most interesting to be thrown up by this book. The chapters in Part 1 are full of exciting claims for the novelty of a range of cultural phenomena, such as printing, during a period which has formed our present day in a range of ways. And while John Loughman, in his chapter on Dutch paintings of domestic interiors, cites the claim made by two economic historians that five million such images were made during the seventeenth century, in her opening chapter for Part 2, Hannah Greig points out that an abundance of images of the domestic interior in Europe in the earlier period was not matched in Britain so that British images of interiors were relatively scarce until the eighteenth century. Greig thus sets the scene for her analysis of the development during the eighteenth century of "the most fully developed press in Europe" boosted by the growth of newspaper publishing (p. 102). The book as a whole, however, promotes a dynamic picture of continual development both of image-making and publishing and in furnishing and decoration.

A book with this many contributors is bound to contain a range of competing views but the editors and authors might have strengthened their account if they had cross-referenced one another's contributions. For example, Jane Hamlett describes domestic advice literature as 'a new way of imagining the home' after 1850 (p. 184) when in fact the treatment of domestic advice literature throughout the book, and therefore throughout the periods addressed in the book, undermines such a claim to novelty (p. 31 ff; p. 65; p. 68; p. 89; p. 100; p. 259). Further, the fact that the book's three parts treat overlapping periods makes for a sometimes disconcerting read, so that two page spreads discussing the second half of the nineteenth century (pp. 184-187) are directly followed by a section introducing the period from 1850 onwards.

The three parts of the book are further divided into chapters interspersed with page spreads each dealing with a diverse range of media and genre from inventories to retail catalogues via paintings and advice literature. The concision demanded of the two-page format also, unfortunately, has the effect of curtailing the discussions so that this reader, at least, was left wanting more. This is not a judgment on the quality of the writing - on the contrary, the short format throws into relief the interesting and useful nature of these miniature essays so that richer, more extensive analysis is desired. A page spread on the interiority of eighteenth-century French furniture (pp. 130-1) is a case in point, needing more space to develop its

subtle connections to the book's core concerns of imagination and representation.

Returning to the Centre's declared aims, we can see that this book has achieved 'a new history of the home, its contents and representation', by providing interdisciplinary discussions encompassing developments in painting, printing, domestic advice, the representation of domestic interiors, the development of new types of household goods and the furniture and furnishings needed to accompany them. In the opening chapter, on fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy, Flora Dennis impressively discusses many of these histories simultaneously, showing how such concurrent developments were mutually constitutive. Similarly, in his chapter on displaying designs for the domestic interior, Jeremy Aynsley operates a dual focus, usefully illuminating the fact that from 1920 two important factors determined the depiction of the domestic interior: avant-garde design ideals and commercial publishing practices. (p. 205) While Dennis's contribution remains coherent notwithstanding its multiple foci, Catherine Richardson's chapter demonstrates the impetus to accessibility characteristic of interdisciplinary writing, by generously addressing a reader with no knowledge of theatre history or narrative technique. Richardson supplies basic explanations for common literary terms such as 'metonymy' which would be redundant in writing for a specialist readership. (p. 63) This chapter's contribution to the book is as a reminder of the emotional significance that the domestic interior and its constituent parts have had in cultural representations.

The question of how this book contributes to knowledge of how people used the rooms and objects depicted in the representations discussed demands a more complex response, however. The sheer number of authors for *Imagined Interiors* (the contents page lists 31) dictates that a coherent method might be an unreasonable expectation. In acknowledging their debt to Mario Praz, the editors cite Hugh Honour's characterisation of his interests: "not interior decoration but the ruminations and memories, the visions and the fancies prompted by paintings of interiors" (p. 11). Aynsley and Grant go on to quote Peter Thornton's interest, not in the "images themselves" but rather in what it is they tell us about "the decoration and arrangement of the domestic interior..." (p. 11). *Imagined Interiors* is distinguished by a desire to "explore the images and texts it discusses, not so much for what they tell us about the interior they represent, but for what that representation is designed to convey" (p. 12). Consistent, explicit and focal analysis of these visual and textual source materials as constructed cultural artefacts is a fruitful way to access the richness of imagined interiors for historical understanding, as I have shown elsewhere.² The most successful chapters in this book maintain a dual perspective on the representation and the interiors represented and avoid a tendency to look *through* representations to what they tell us of the domestic interior, rather than *at* the representations themselves.

¹ Marta Ajmar and Flora Dennis, eds., *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, London: V&A Publications, 2006; John Styles and Amanda Vickery, eds., *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*, New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2006, and Jeremy Aynsley and Francesca Berry, eds., *Publishing the Modern Home, 1880-1950*, a special issue of *The Journal of Design History*, vol. 18 (2005) <http://jdh.oxfordjournals.org/content/vol18/issue1/index.dtl> The database is available online via the Centre's website, <http://www.rca.ac.uk/csdi/>

² Grace Lees-Maffei, 'Studying advice: historiography, methodology, commentary, bibliography', in Lees-Maffei, ed., *Domestic Design Advice*, a special issue of *The Journal of Design History*, vol. 16 (2003), pp. 1-14.