



Constructing the Feminine Interior

Prof. Dr. Norberto Gramaccini, Institute of Art History, University of Bern

A cultural history of the interior that investigates both continuity and change in the representation of the inhabited interior is intimated in the words of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). The “difficulties of viewing” such pictures, Benjamin states, lie in the fact that the creation and inhabitation of domestic places discloses “on the one hand, ancient, perhaps eternal [urzeitgeschichtliche] motifs”, and is on the other hand a manifestation of the “state of existence [Daseinszustand]” of a certain period. Benjamin's dialectic of the ancient and the contemporary plays a role in the present study on paintings from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. In contrast to conventional interior portraits, these pictures represent not real spaces but artistic fictions; they correspond to what Benjamin (1955) called “Habitation [Wohnen] in its most extreme form”. Within this genre, the female-occupied interior is of prime importance. The key figure is the woman posing in the center of the sitting room, and the interior is her stage. Just as the interior setting depicts not a historical reality but rather an artistic fiction, the woman in the room is not a specific, living person, but rather – as this project argues – a projection created through the perspective of the male viewer. The true agent in the decorated and inhabited spaces painted by Jan Vermeer (1632–1675), François Boucher (1703–1770) and James Tissot (1836–1902) is the absent male householder, whose expectations determine the character of the feminized apartment. Thus the same norms structuring the male-coded “outside” also penetrate the “inside”, and the artistic interior can either reinforce or contradict these norms.

The growing need to aestheticize the interior was caused in part by contemporary political, social, and psychological crises, and in part by the continued relevance of the ancient Oikos ideology, which regulates the relationship between inside and outside through gender roles. According to Xenophon (*Oikonomikos*) and Aristotle (*Politics*), the domus (f) is dependent on the regnum (m) of the householder or oikodespotes, and it is the wife's duty to manage household matters. The very same dichotomy is echoed in the conception of “sex characteristics” (Hausen 1976), in Columella (*De re rustica*) and other texts. Plutarch (*Conjugalia praecepta*) names the turtle as an attribute of women because both always carry their houses with them. Transgressions of the boundary between these spheres, or the intrusion of domestic influences into the public world were not tolerated within this system. Although the Oikos tradition is well understood by scholars in many fields, and art historians have recognized its significance for analyzing various types of visual representations including those of domestic interiors, this scholarship consists primarily of localized studies and there are many issues that remain unexplored. There does not



The Interior Art, Space, and Performance

Early Modern to Postmodern

exist an overview of the material, visual, and ideological constructions of interiors and interiority within the Western tradition from a gendered perspective, and this project aims to fill this gap.

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