

Notes on the first Symposium:

**Approaching the Domestic Interior 1400 to the Present  
Victoria and Albert Museum, 5 December, 2001**

Invited speakers were chosen to represent and interrogate different approaches to the Domestic Interior from within their own academic disciplines. The day was structured to facilitate debate and exchange, and proved a successful model for future events.

In the first session two curators spoke. Lesley Hoskins (The Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture) explained MoDA's mission to facilitate public engagement with the collection for the purposes of education and enjoyment. The focus is on appearance, but use underpins appearance. The permanent exhibition: 'Exploring the Interior 1930-60' intends to access interiors through the idea of choice. People make choices but are constrained by money, work, and availability, but are also guided by social patterns and cultural practices eg. Advertising, domestic literature.

David Dewing described the Geffrye Museum's brief to display the changing nature of the urban middle class interior over the past 400 years, stressing that whilst the displays are informed by research, room displays are representative not real. Their key challenge is the fact that 'real' rooms rarely represent a single historical moment: how can one represent the transience of historical rooms?

Katie Scott (History of Art, Courtauld Institute) suggested that art history and the study of the domestic interior have little in common, that the domestic interior poses a problem for art historians because it does not often have a single artist or identifiable intentionality. The idea of the 'Domestic' is also a problem. Architectural historians have, on the other hand, developed a complex language for the articulation and distribution of space. Scott stressed the distinction between 'the interior' and 'the domestic interior', suggesting that the idea of the domestic relates to the family as framed by bourgeois ideology; the interior is not naturally a refuge.

Taking the example of 17C Dutch paintings, Scott pointed out that they are not straightforward representations; the information they yield is not direct, the representation is often in excess of reality. The idea of domestic space is elaborated for the sake of narrative. Ideas of interior and exterior do not have to coincide with a particular space, for example gardens and bowers make equations to privacy, secrecy, and interior spaces.

Matthew Johnson (Archaeology, Durham) described Archaeology as being dominated in its approach to the domestic interior by pre-history. We cannot assume anything about, for example, social emulation or the public/private split. In earlier periods we can't even assume that people were coming back daily or weekly to a place. The distinction between ritual and domestic space cannot be assumed, is even unlikely.

Johnson outlined a shift in Archaeology towards seeing material culture as active. Drawing attention to the fact that recent studies in material culture have not used Archaeology, Johnson offered Archaeology as *the* study of material objects in spaces, able to, for example, produce many excavations of dwelling places of the labouring poor. The Domestic interior will have different meanings depending on who is moving around, different social groups, genders and classes move through space in different ways. Our knowledge is fragmented, conditioned by who is viewing, who is telling.

The first discussion session raised questions about:

Domestic spaces as sites of labour; working in a space does not destroy attachment to domesticity, which can be emotional or psychological.

The historical specificity of the term 'Domestic' occupying a high period in the 19C.

The way we live now is 'post-domestic', 'domesticity' already smacks of nostalgia. How might we think about the post-domestic?

The need to consider divestment as well as investment – what has been taken out of the interior across historical periods.

Geographical space - how does the European domestic interior move to the US, Caribbean and India? Interiors from elsewhere are worth considering as they will render the familiar strange. What was rejected and exported back to Europe in these interiors?

How does the past use the past? The vast majority of people negotiate spaces that are the creation of another era, yet the domestic interior is a principal site of 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> C self-fashioning.

Alison Light suggested that fiction offers a useful counter to architectural diagrams as it enacts time and can relate movement through a space.

Peter Mandler suggested that the real challenge is to avoid dropping into conventional poses that privilege one type of material or people.

Daniel Miller (Anthropology, UCL) discussed the value of social scientists studying the material culture of the domestic interior. He talked about a key concern of his recent research: divestment. How do people use moving house to think about the narratives of their own life? Divestment is not necessarily negative. Can we explore the notion of 'self'? How do people construct different ideas of how they might be? An Anthropological approach should not study the house per se; it has to be about society.

Alison Light (Literature, UCL) suggested that literature is useful because a kind of interiority is expressed and learnt in major cultural forms such as the novel, film and television. She talked of literature as the history of a structure of thinking, suggesting that the novel has shaped meanings attached to the domestic interior, and pointing out that the rise of the domestic novel coincides with the rise of the notion of domesticity.

Using examples from Austen, Dickens and Woolf, she expanded on the links between the interior and interiority. In Austen, for example, the right domestic interior reflects your interior. Dickens represents the moral force and vigour of the interior. Light asked is the fantasy of domesticity a mobilising one? Is there a politics of the home? and drew attention to the absence of 'politics' as a term in the centre's brochure.

Paul Glennie (Cultural Geography, University of Bristol) talked about recent interest in consumption and fashion, the fact that studies of the geographical patterns of consumption have focused on 'public' spaces, tending to ignore the domestic apart from North American geographers with connections to anthropologists, eg. Daniel Rosin. Glennie drew attention to the significance of Judith Butler's work on performance, raising the possibility of focussing on goods and consumption as space defining performances. His conclusion was that the domestic environment receives attention indirectly through geography.

In the second discussion session Penelope Corfield summarised 3 key issues:

Dynamic relationship of people to space

Dynamic relationship of people to goods – invested and divested

Dynamic relationship of people to houses

and asked: how much can you peg on one example to talk of a generic notion of the domestic? How do you move from the individual to cultural norms?

Alison Light suggested that if you read enough models you can see shifts over time, that there are real shifts, and that unreliability of memory is also consistently representative – what people forget can be consistent. Danny Miller thought that there is greater homogeneity around discourse than practice. Questioned about the role of a novel or poem as a representation of 'reality', Alison Light responded that the novel can tell you about fantasies, fears, longings – acted out through the form of literary language – but that one must pay attention to the operation of language. Carolyn Sargentson suggested that the History of Dress would be a useful discipline to help us to understand how people moved through spaces.

In the final discussion, Carolyn Sargentson pointed out the dangers of a tendency to see objects as evidence in themselves, stressing that they are just as much a matter of interpretation as a painting or a plan. Peter Mandler saw the diversity of disciplinary approaches as both an opportunity and a problem, proposing 'Co-disciplinarity' as a better term. He felt that we need to steer clear of individual interdisciplinarity, and instead construct a new subject that will never become a discipline.

Overall the day was extremely stimulating, provoked fruitful debate, and suggested that the Centre for the Study of the Domestic Interior has an important part to play in bringing together diverse approaches and knowledge from a range of academic and curatorial methodologies and practices. Some of the key concerns which emerged were the importance of learning from and awareness of different disciplines, rather than everyone trying to follow single methodology and/or objects of inquiry; the need to assemble different kinds of expertise, to bring different knowledge and objects of enquiry together without creating banality or reducing value of expertise. An emphasis on process and the need to register change emerged through many of the papers and discussion periods. Domestic interiors are not static, but change over time. Archaeology offers one model of how to recover use through material evidence, so does research into patterns of behavior and imaginative representations of the lived interior. The recovery of process illuminates objects. There was a marked interest in the importance of context in the construction of meaning. Problems arise when we isolate images, texts or objects; interpretation is hampered by processes of extraction. We need to treat the materiality of representations and to recognise that representations are themselves historically determined; we need to avoid treating art objects, texts or images as transparent. There is also a role for the imagination; we need to avoid reducing images and texts to the status of evidence. Issues of visibility and availability of evidence arose. We need to find material and evidence across classes. Research into non-elite interiors is essential, but often difficult given the nature of surviving material, especially in a collection like the V&A, with its focus on high-design objects.