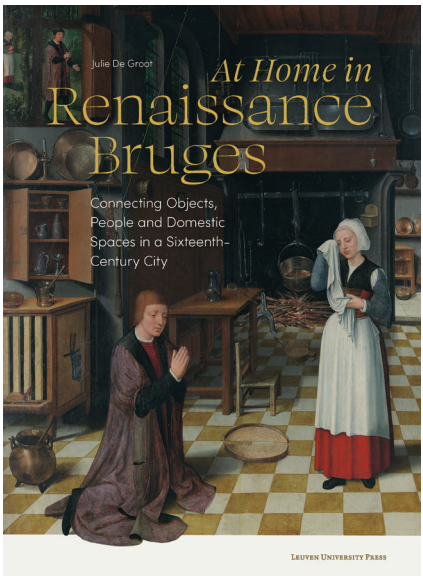
Review

Julie De Groot, *At Home in Renaissance Bruges. Connecting Objects, People and Domestic Spaces in a Sixteenth-Century City*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2022, 320 pp. ISBN 9789462703179.



The idea of 'at home' has become one of the most productive frameworks in the study of early modern history and art history. In the 2025 exhibition entitled *At Home in the Seventeenth Century*, the Rijksmuseum guided its visitors to experience domestic life in the seventeenth century through nine time slices across a day, each situated in a separate hall. Almost twenty years earlier, in 2006, the exhibition *At Home in Renaissance Italy* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, along with its accompanying catalogue by Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, established a new research agenda. This research has since evolved beyond object-oriented, art historical approaches towards more archive-intensive methods within the broader context of historical scholarship. However, this 'at home' framework has singled out a remarkably small number of places: Renaissance Italy and the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Julie De Groot's book follows the archival trend, and takes this approach, for the first time, to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Bruges.

This book draws on inventories as its primary source and focuses on objects found in domestic environments, linking it to the inventory-based consumption studies of English households and the so-called 'Antwerp School' around Bruno Blondé, which, as its name suggests, has primarily concentrated on Antwerp across the centuries. Despite the focus on the city and its golden age in the volume edited by Andrew Brown and Jan Dumolyn, the interiors of the city's houses remain unexamined.

In this book, De Groot presents the first systematic account of how the residents of this once great trading city furnished and used their domestic spaces and the objects within them. Her stated aim is to 'reassess the crucial importance of domestic space in

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reproducing cultural identities, forging power relations, defining social status and organising economic activities' (30). The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, the author examines three types of domestic space. These include the shop and workshop of shopkeepers, the merchant's *contoor* (office), and, more generally, the kitchen, dining room, *salette*, and sleeping chambers. The second part focuses on objects, namely paintings, textiles and furniture, within their original domestic settings. From this layered study of spaces and objects in context, De Groot formulates the central claim that rooms in Bruges houses were specialised socially, rather than functionally. It means rooms were not defined by their practical utility or exclusive usage, but rather by their accessibility – who might enter and at what time. The kitchen, for instance, was open to the household's 'everyday conviviality' (124), whereas the dining room and *salette* were reserved for selected guests at designated times. De Groot thus nuances the often-cited yet contested dichotomy of public and private spaces in domestic interiors and shows that the boundary was social and temporal rather than architectural, though the temporal half of that claim is inferred from the social rather than demonstrated.[1]

These findings are based on an impressive corpus of primary sources: a total of 502 post-mortem and confiscation inventories from Bruges, drawn from five archival series across six sample periods between 1438 and 1600. Together with Inneke Baatsen and Isis Sturtewagen, the author assembled these into a database. Although only slightly more than half (53 percent) preserve a room-by-room layout, the sheer scale of the corpus still makes this book an essential contribution to scholarship. De Groot employs 'a combined object- and space-based approach' (31) in her analysis. The method can best be described as a *sequential reading* (my characterisation) of inventories: within a given room, objects are not merely analysed statistically as a whole, but rather examined sequentially, since the order of objects serves as a proxy for their spatial position inside the room. The book's most valuable methodological contribution is what might be called *assemblage reading*, which focuses on 'the textual assemblages of objects in inventories to deduce cultures of use' (128). Individual objects are interpreted through the cluster of objects to which they belong. A book by Seneca in a *contoor*, for instance, becomes part of a merchant's material self-portrait when placed next to a Latin bible, a portrait of his wife, and other items (89).

These methods have yielded findings that no aggregate, statistical inventory analysis could have reached. Among the forty-four burghers who worked from home, tools and stocks were confined to the shop and workshops, thus delineating a material boundary between commercial and domestic uses of space. The guild regulations reinforced this distinction by demanding transparency that work must be done in open view so that 'niemande secretelic wercken en mach' (73). In contrast to the practice in Antwerp, where religious panels were primarily displayed as decorative pieces, in Bruges residents placed these panels on cupboards adjacent to candlesticks. De Groot interprets this arrangement as 'domestic altars' (160). A simple count of objects alone would not reveal the demarcation

1 John Loughman and John Michael Montias, *Public and Private Spaces. Works of Art in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Houses* (Zwolle 2000); Mark Overton, Jane Whittle, Darron Dean, and Andrew Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London 2004).

of commercial from domestic spaces nor the devotional use of paintings. Both findings are enabled by the sequential and assemblage readings, which can be readily applied to other locations and time periods.

Domestic space features prominently in the book's subtitle and is theorised in the introduction, yet the spatial theory does not extend into the chapters where domestic space is largely reduced to room names listed in inventories. De Groot acknowledges this reduction citing the rarity of floor plans for the studied period and sets aside access analyses because such techniques 'do not do justice to the actual experienced reality' (17). The spatial claims are therefore entirely dependent on the nomenclature employed by the appraisers and the sequences of their movement through the house. The book itself shows that room names are not always clear. Double labels such as *camere ofte cuekene* show ambiguity, as the author admits that 'the difficulty appraisers could have in defining a room' (43). As I have argued in the context of seventeenth-century Amsterdam, where inventory databases can be read together with surviving floor plans, a room's relative location inside the house reveals information that names alone cannot.[2] For instance, rooms labelled *beste kamer*, *binnenhaert* and *binnenkamer* can all denote the same room behind the entrance space, so that an aggregation based solely on the room names can mislead the findings. The author references Luc Devliegher's work, which includes surviving houses with floor plans. Reading the inventory data against those extant floor plans, when possible, is an obvious next step.

Overall, this book is indispensable for historians of material culture and domesticity, as it provides a northern counterpart to studies of Renaissance Italy. Its methods would be of interest to urban and economic historians while its rich sources will stimulate new research questions among historians of the Low Countries. Moreover, combining object-based and spatial analysis might inspire art historians to reconstruct the domestic interiors from which these objects have long since been separated. Although the book might prove challenging as readings for bachelor and master students, the source section in the introduction demonstrates source criticism exemplarily and could be assigned independently.

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2 Weixuan Li, 'Spatial Reading of Inventories. A New Approach to Reconstructing Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam Interiors', *Histories* 5 (2025/1), https://doi.org/10.3390/histories5010013 (Accessed on 12 October 2026).