Listening to objects: an ecological approach to the decorative arts

Erin J. Campbell

Introduction

Inspired by recent work on ecology and the environment, this study proposes an intervention in the way that scholars encounter, understand, and study what has come to be called the decorative arts in the discipline of art history.[1] The laboratory and evidence base for this essay are the people, objects, and spaces of the early modern European home 1400-1700.[2]

The discipline of art history is at a crossroads in the study of the object, as attested to by the most recent international art history congress sponsored by the Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art (CIHA), entitled *The Challenge of the Object* (2012). Specifically with respect to the decorative arts, in the author's own field of early modern European art, despite the keen interest in furniture, textiles, ceramics, metal-ware, glassware, and other so-called decorative objects, there is a continuing divide in art historical scholarship between those who study art and those who

[2] For recent work by the author in this area of study, see Erin J. Campbell, Stephanie R. Miller, and Elizabeth Carroll Consavari, eds, *The Early Modern Domestic Interior: People, Objects, Domesticities*, Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2013; Erin J. Campbell, 'Art and Family Viewers in the Seventeenth-Century Bolognese Domestic,' in Campbell, Miller, and Carroll Consavari, *Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior*, 107-123; Erin J. Campbell, '"Old Wives" and Art in Early Modern Bologna,' in Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler, eds, *To Have and To Hold: Marriage in Premodern Europe 1200-1700*, Toronto: The Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2012, 257-278; Erin J. Campbell, 'Prophets, Saints, and Matriarchs: Portraits of Old Women in Early Modern Italy,' *Renaissance Quarterly* 63:3, Fall 2010, 807-849; Erin J. Campbell, 'Balancing Act: Displaying Imported Porcelain in Eighteenth-Century Venice,' in Michael Yonan and Alden Cavanaugh, eds, *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, Ashgate: Burlington, VT, 2010, 107-118; Erin J. Campbell, 'Good Housekeeping: Objects and Agency within the Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior,' in G. Ulrich Grossmann and Petra Krutisch, eds, *The Challenge of the Object,* Congress Proceedings, Nuremberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2013, 45-48.

study the decorative arts.[3] Such a separation between so-called high art and the decorative arts in the field of scholarship is mirrored in many modern museums, in which early modern painting and sculpture are rarely displayed together with the furnishings that once surrounded them, such as, for example, the recent exhibition of Renaissance portraits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which only focused on the paintings and sculpture.[4]

Underlying this divide in modern museums is the distinction between craft and art that begins with the advent of writing about art in the European Renaissance.[5] Despite the long history of separation between art and craft, high art and decorative art in our scholarship, this study argues that art historians need constantly to interrogate the categories to which the discipline consigns its objects of study, adopting what Mimi Hellman has called the 'unease of classification.'[6] By studying and experiencing art and decorative art in isolation from each other, an isolation supported by major museums and the modernist art historical discourses that have grown up to support this separation, scholarship obscures the fluid, mobile, and interpenetrating nature of these spheres.[7]

In considering new paradigms for the study of early modern furniture, textiles, ceramics, and other so-called decorative objects that recognize the inter-relatedness of art and decorative arts, and abandoning 'fantasies of boundary marking, mastery and definitive explanation,'[8] this study proposes what it calls an ecological approach. This is to be distinguished from E. H. Gombrich's concept of

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[3] See, for example, the distinctions made between art and 'furniture, costume, jewelry, and other finery' in Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York, NY: Zone Books, 2010, 17.

[4] Keith Christiansen and Stefan Weppelmann, eds, *The Renaissance Portrait from Donatello to Bellini*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012.

[5] For succinct surveys of this historical division see the following useful studies: Isabelle Frank, *The Theory of Decorative Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, 1-18; Paul Greenhalgh, 'The History of Craft,' in Peter Dormer, ed., *The Culture of Craft*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997, 26-30; Élizabeth Lavezzi, 'The *Éncyclopédie* and the Idea of the Decorative Arts,' *Art History* 28: 2, April 2005, 174-199. For a provocative study of the cross-cultural dimensions of this classification system, see Kimi Coaldrake, 'Fine Arts vs. Decorative Arts: The Categorization of Japanese Arts at the International Expositions in Vienna (1873), Paris (1878) and Chicago (1893),' *Japan Forum* 25.2, 2013, 174-190.

[6] Mimi Hellman, 'Object Lessons: French Decorative Art as a Model for Interdisciplinarity,' in Julia V. Douthwaite and Mary Vidal, eds, *The Interdisciplinary Century: Tensions and Convergences in Eighteenth-Century Art, History and Literature*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005, 76.

[7] See, for example, Martina Droth's point of departure which interrogates the division between sculpture and decorative art. Droth advocates 'taking a more direct approach to the works themselves, one which, rather than priortising the historical or circumstantial, pays attention to the visual and the material.' Martina Droth, 'Introduction,' in Martina Droth, ed., *Taking Shape: Finding Sculpture in the Decorative Arts*, Leeds: The Henry Moore Institute; Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008, 8.

[8] Hellman, 'Object Lessons,' 76.

the ecology of images, an idea developed by Gombrich to convey that changes in artistic style are responses to specific social environments and 'to the functions assigned to the visual image by a given society.'[9] The present study shares with Gombrich the sense that the arts can be compared to organisms since both respond in unpredictable ways to specific environments. Gombrich was particularly inspired by the concept 'ecological niche' because it emphasized the 'constant interaction' between species of plants and animals and their environment.[10] He embraced the concept of 'ecological niche' because it avoided 'rigid social determinism.' As he explains: 'the study of ecology has alerted us to the many forms of interaction between the organism and its environment which render the outcome quite unpredictable.'[11] However, in contrast to Gombrich's focus on style, this study explores the constant interaction between art and decorative art, spaces, and people within the domestic environment. Instead of using art historical methods to analyse style, patronage, authenticity, technique or production, this essay examines the decorative arts through an experiential and environmental lens by drawing on phenomenological approaches to the object as well as theories of vital materialism, object agency and human/non-human intra-activity in the work of Tim Ingold, Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, Karen Barad, and others.[12] Such an approach is complementary to methods focused on the cultural study of the decorative arts, and especially work by Mimi Hellman, Katie Scott, Mary Sheriff, Charissa Bremer-David, Martina Droth and other scholars of the French eighteenth-century interior who view furnishings as social performance.[13] It shares ground with the growing interest in affect and the sensorium, as well as the spatial turn, the materialist turn, the performative turn, the anthropological turn and what has most

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[9] E.H. Gombrich, *The Uses of Images: Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication*, London: Phaidon Press, 1999, 48.

[10] Gombrich, *Uses of Images*, 10.

[11] Gombrich, *Uses of Images*, 48.

[12] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010; Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011; Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Alfred Gell's work on the agency of objects is also worth noting. However, for the purposes of the present study Gell's work is less relevant than the authors noted above, because he did not explore the agency of non-humans but instead sought to discover human agency imbedded within objects. For an insightful discussion of the differences between Alfred Gell and Bruno Latour's approaches to agency see Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005, 11-14. For Gell's theory of objects and agency, see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

[13] See most recently: Droth, *Taking Shape*. See also, Campbell, 'Balancing Act,' 107-118; Mimi Hellman, 'Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth Century France,' *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 32: 4, 1999, 415-445.

recently been called the posthuman turn.[14] Moreover, as Ruth Phillips' recent
explorations of objects as subjects have shown, it is also in dialogue with on-going
work on indigenous epistemologies.[15] It thus forms part of a growing awareness by
art historians of the relational and interdependent nature of people, objects, and
spaces. Such an approach will help art historians transcend the historical division of
high art and decorative art, allowing the discipline to see and experience its objects
of study in new ways.[16]

The decorative arts and the early modern domestic interior

To begin the task of fostering an ecological approach to the decorative arts, this
study focuses on just one environment: the early modern home. This environment
has been chosen because the development of the decorative arts and the
development of the home are inextricably tied together in early modern Europe.[17]
By studying the decorative arts as part of an environment, it is possible to observe
the dynamics of an ecology – that is, the intertwining of the human and non-human,
the material and the social, and, especially for the purposes of this study, of the art
object and the so-called decorative object. Supporting an ecological approach to the
decorative arts in the domestic interior are modern and early modern writings that

[14] For some of these developments, see Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins, eds, *The Object
Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New
Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham and London: Duke University Press,
2010; François Quiviger, *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art*, London: Reaktion, 2010;
Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*,
London and New York: Verso, 1989; Michael J. Deer, ed., *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at
the Edge of Place*, London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2011; Mariët Westermann, ed.,
Anthropologies of Art, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005; Melissa Gregg
and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds, *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham and London: Duke
University Press, 2010.
[15] See, most recently, Ruth Phillip's session at the CIHA congress in Nuremberg in 2012, 'The
Object as Subject'. The papers are published in Grossmann and Krutisch, *The Challenge of the
Object*.
[16] Throughout this article I have used interchangeably the terms 'object' and 'thing.' Scholars
who deliberately use the term 'thing' rather than 'object' do so to reject the 'objectification'
inherent in the term 'object,' which reflects the Kantian distinction between the thing as
passive object and subject of human perception and the thing as an entirely autonomous
subject, thereby challenging the normative subject/object dichotomy. In art historical
scholarship it is still more common to use the term 'object' while continuing to explore,
interrogate, and problematize the ontology of objects. Thus, I continue to use the term
'object' as a term that allows for the exploration of a myriad of human - non-human
relationships. For a recent, succinct discussion of the use of the term 'thing' and a
justification of the term 'object' see Penny Harvey, Eleanor Conlin Casella, et al., eds, *Objects
and Materials: A Routledge Companion*, London and New York: Routledge, 2014, 3-4.
[17] See, for example, James R. Lindow, *The Renaissance Palace in Florence: Magnificence and
Splendour in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007; Marta Ajmar-Wollheim
and Flora Dennis, eds, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, London: V&A Publications, 2006;
Richard Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy 1300-1600*, Baltimore and
London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, 212-255.

evoke the home as a small world and microcosm of the universe. Gaston Bachelard, for example, in *The Poetics of Space* calls the home 'our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.'[18] Home, Akiko Busch writes in *Geography of Home*, comprises a host of 'interior systems' - a 'network' of 'habits, beliefs, and values.'[19] Mary Douglas, in 'The Idea of a Home,' characterises the home as a moral economy designed to ensure the perpetuation of the family.[20] Daniel Miller argues in *The Comfort of Things*, that home is in fact a 'little cosmology,' an 'order of things, values and relationships' expressed by the household material culture.[21] Such cultural imaginaries of the home as an ethical system, a moral economy, and a miniature world have their roots in early modern Europe. Early modern writers on the home referred to it as an 'economy,' a 'small city' and a microcosm of the universe.[22] Such modern and historical ideas about the home as a small world are an invitation to consider the people, objects, and spaces of the domestic interior as an integrated environment.

       In particular, to approach the decorative arts within the home as forming part of an integrated environment of people, things, and spaces, this study builds on scholarship concerned with the role of objects and space in social processes. The early modern Italian domestic interior is an expanding area of inquiry. Scholars have shed light on the socio-cultural implications of specific categories of domestic furnishings and objects, broadened the range of objects under our purview, and enriched our understanding of the complex and layered social functions and meanings of domestic objects.[23] Nevertheless, typically such scholarship

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[18] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas, New York: Orion Press, 1964, 4.

[19] Akiko Busch, *Geography of Home: Writings on Where We Live*, New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, 163.

[20] Mary Douglas, 'The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,' *Social Research,* 58: 1, Spring 1991, 297.

[21] Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008, 294.

[22] Giacomo Lanteri, *Della economica*, Venice: Vincenzo Valgrisi, 1560, 159. As Lanteri writes: 'Fa stima, che questa nostra casa ad ambidue noi & alla nostra famiglia commune, sia una picciola città (che così la possiamo chiamare per comparatione)...'. For a study of early modern concepts of the home as microcosm of universal order, see Daniela Frigo, *Il padre di famiglia: Governo della casa e governo civile nella tradizione dell' 'economica' tra cinque e seicento*, Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1985.

[23] Marta Ajmar, 'Toys for Girls: Objects, Women and Memory in the Renaissance Household,' in Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley, eds, *Material Memories*, Oxford: 1999, 75-89; Marta Ajmar-Wollheim, Flora Dennis, and Ann Matchette, eds, *Approaching the Italian Renaissance interior: sources, methodologies, debates*, Malden, Massachusetts and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007; Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*; Anne Barriault, *Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany: Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes*, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1994; Cristelle Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Andrea Bayer, ed., *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008; Patricia Fortini Brown, *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice: Art, Architecture and the Family*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004; Elizabeth Cohen and Thomas Cohen, 'Open and Shut: The Social Meaning of the Cinquecento Roman House,' *Studies in the*

contextualises objects within the spaces of the home as part of the social history of the family, domestic consumption, or patronage without examining space and materiality themselves as creative forces and powerful social agents, and without asking what we mean by 'the social.'[24] Although scholars of the domestic interior have demonstrated the importance of attending to the layering of meaning within domestic spaces, such research tends to focus on paintings.[25] To move beyond an implicit sense of space as a mere container of meaning, and objects as somehow adding meaning, and to interrogate the interplay amongst art, decorative art, architectural space, and the family, the ecological approach draws on early modern sources for the home as well as research in both the social sciences and humanities concerned with the social experience of materiality and space, to re-conceptualize the domestic interior in terms of meshwork in which the spatial, the material and the social are woven together.

'Remembering' the home environment: historical sources and research tools

To craft a new ecological approach to the early modern domestic interior that transcends the historical divide in our scholarship between art and decorative art, scholars must engage with the past as a temporal environment that exists only in the imagination. The home spaces studied by scholars have been reconfigured, the people are long dead, and the objects are dispersed. Ingold encourages historians to view the study of environments long gone as an act of remembrance. 'Remembering,' Ingold contends, 'is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past.'[26] Remembering means listening to historical sources for the intertwining of the material and the social: for an environment, like music, is

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Decorative Arts, Fall-Winter 2001-2002, 61-84; Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art*; Lindow, *The Renaissance Palace in Florence*; John Kent Lydecker, 'The Domestic Setting of the Arts in Renaissance Florence,' unpublished Ph.D. diss., The John Hopkins University, 1987; Jacqueline Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999; Jacqueline Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008; Monika Schmitter, 'The *Quadro da Portego* in Sixteenth-Century Venetian Art,' *Renaissance Quarterly* 64: 3, Fall 2011, 693-751; Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997; Peter Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior, 1400-1600*, New York: Harry N Abrams, 1991; Paola Tinagli, 'Womanly Virtues in Quattrocento Florentine Marriage Furnishings,' in Letizia Panizza, ed., *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, Oxford: Legenda, 2000, 265-284.

[24] Good examples include Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*; Brown, *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice*; Lindow, *The Renaissance Palace in Florence*; Raffaella Sarti, *Europe at Home: Family and Material Culture 1500-1800*, translated by Allan Cameron, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

[25] Luke Syson, 'Representing Domestic Interiors,' in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, 86- 101; Schmitter, 'The *Quadro da Portego*.'

[26] Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 189.

present only through its performance.[27]

      While Ingold's thoughts are evocative, actually answering how art historians might engage perceptually with past environments, what traditional sources would be used, what new sources might be needed, and how to approach the sources of historical information in both accepted and novel ways, is one of the tasks of the ecological approach. Essential to the project of engaging perceptually with the home environment are a variety of traditional historical sources, including physical evidence, literary descriptions, diaries, letters, account books, household inventories, probate inventories, wills, and prescriptive writings on the home. The second part of this essay demonstrates how to apply this new approach using three examples of these types of sources: a painting, a literary description, and an object. In particular, the ecological approach values prints, paintings, sculptures, terracotta plaques, pictures on birth trays and *cassoni*, and other pictorial sources for such sources capture the experience of the historical home as an integrated environment. Attesting to the value of pictures for both factual information and socio-cultural knowledge about class, gender, family, spirituality, and ideology, are research resources such as the AHRC *Domestic Interiors Database* in the UK and related publications, which give equal attention to visual and textual representations of the domestic interior.[28]

      Moreover, the development and refinement of relevant digital technologies can support fresh approaches to traditional sources and facilitate observation and analysis of the ecological dimension of the domestic interior. To understand fully the complex interrelatedness of the social, the spatial, and the material in the early modern domestic interior it is necessary to map multiple pathways of people and objects through time and space. Historical visualisations of past home environments, such as the so-called period room, are typically hampered by their inability to integrate objects, people, space and time simultaneously.[29] Period rooms simplify the elements of people, time, and space to present factual detail about historical furnishings. Certain types of digital knowledge visualisation open up the potential for investigating and visualising the home as a meshwork of people,

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[27] Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 197.

[28] For the Domestic Interiors Database see http://www.rca.ac.uk/Default.aspx?ContentID=502924&CategoryID=36764, and the related publication: Jeremy Ainsley and Charlotte Grant, eds, *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance*, London: V&A Publications; New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 2006. For additional studies of representations of interiors in both art and literature see Frances Borzello, *The Domestic Interior in Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2006; and Julia Prewett Brown, *The Bourgeois Interior*, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008.

[29] For recent studies of some of the challenges involved in creating and displaying period rooms, see Adriana Turpin, 'Objectifying the Domestic Interior: Domestic Furnishings and the Historical Interpretation of the Italian Renaissance Interior,' in Campbell, Miller, and Carroll Consavari, *The Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior*, 207-225; Susan Wegner, 'Recreating the Italian Domestic Interior: A Case Study of One Museum's Approach to the Period Room,' in Campbell, Miller, and Carroll Consavari, *The Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior*, 227-243.

objects, and spaces in time.[30] Catherine Richardson and Tara Hamling's recent project 'Ways of Seeing the English Domestic Interior, 1500-1700: the case of decorative textiles,' investigated the atmospheric and experiential qualities of early modern English domestic space using computer visualization techniques and eye-tracking technology.[31] GIS (Geographical Information Systems) can provide a spatially referenced database that allows researchers to explore change geographically and temporally. Historical GIS refers to approaches to historical research involving GIS, while Humanities GIS extends the use of these tools to other areas of humanistic research, such as literary studies and film studies. Quantitative data are already well explored in Historical GIS. Humanists, however, are developing new ways to incorporate qualitative data, which can include textual descriptions, images, photographs, maps, sound, and video.[32] The ability of GIS to integrate qualitative data from a range of historical sources facilitates the investigation of the home as a spatio-temporal 'homescape'. GIS can be used to answer questions about the flow of people and objects in spaces, to investigate the conception of the home as an ecological system. GIS has three basic roles: it provides a spatially referenced database; it allows the visualization of data; and it allows the analysis of data. A spatially referenced database for the home allows scholars to ask what is at a specific location, where certain features are found, and what are near these features. In addition, it allows the integration of information from disparate sources, such as inventories, diaries, descriptions, visual images, architecture, etc., which will be brought together and interrelated through the use of location.

      One example of the potential of GIS to support the investigation of the home as an environment is offered by Michael Anderson's use of small-scale GIS to analyse the phenomenological effects created by the arrangement of domestic spaces in a sample of sixty-five Pompeian houses.[33] Arguing for the close connection between social life and space, Anderson's goal was to study how inhabitants moved through space in the home, focusing on the relative visibility of spaces. As Anderson contends: 'Each social interchange that takes place within the spaces created by a house is patterned by spaces and their phenomenology.'[34] Instead of the large-scale spatial information on the scale of cities and continents that is typical for GIS projects, Anderson used small-scale GIS and introduced maps

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[30] David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M. Harris, eds, *The Spatial Humanities: GIS and the Future of Humanities Scholarship*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010; Ian Gregory and Paul S. Ell, *Historical GIS: Technologies, Methodologies, and Scholarship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Chris Johanson, et al., 'Teaching Digital Humanities Through Digital Cultural Mapping,' in Brett Hirsch, ed., *Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practices, Principles and Politics*, U.S. & U.K.: Open Book Publishers, 2012, 121-149.

[31] For this project, see: http://www.kent.ac.uk/mems/domestic%20interior.htm.l

[32] For examples, see Anne Burdick, et al. *Digital Humanities*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012; Gregory and Ell, *Historical GIS*; Johanson, 'Teaching Digital Humanities.'

[33] Michael Anderson, 'Mapping the Domestic Landscape: GIS, Visibility, and the Pompeian House,' in F. Niccolucci, and S. Hermon, eds *Beyond the Artifact - Digital Interpretations of the Past*, Proceedings of CAA2004, Prato 13-17 April 2004, Archaeolingua, Budapest, 183-189.

[34] Anderson, 'Mapping the Domestic Landscape,' 183.

of the home into the system by digitizing sixty-five house plans. GIS allowed him to factor time and movement into his study of visibility to create a visibility map of the home that characterized 'the experience of an actor moving through architecture.'[35] By using GIS to map the shifting viewpoints within the spaces of the home, Anderson's research has produced unexpected insights into domestic space. For example, spaces in the Pompeian home formerly thought to be the most private were shown to be the areas of greatest visual focus. Moreover, rooms that had been decorated with exquisite frescoes and therefore assumed to be for the purposes of élite display, were shown to be visually and pragmatically remote, so that any audience would be very restricted. Through these findings, GIS enabled Anderson to present a far more detailed and functional account of the Pompeian house than previous scholarship.

The social, the material, and space

The rest of this study will introduce the core concepts that are integral to the ecological approach and demonstrate their utility through several examples. First, however, it is necessary to define what this study means by the social, the material, and space.

i. The social

The proposed ecological framework builds on Latour's concept that the social itself is an ongoing, mobile, chaotic, and contingent process of binding together what constitutes society.[36] For Latour, the so-called social structure is replaced by the idea of social associations and assemblages. As Latour argues in *Reassembling the Social*, 'I am going to define the social not as a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling'[37] - the study of which he calls the 'sociology of associations'.[38] From this perspective, the decorative arts of the home form part of the concatenations of people and things that through their associations do not simply reflect the social world of the home, they *are* the social world of the home. The goal is not to assign intentionality to domestic objects, but to recognize that things without intentions comprise our social worlds. Social practices 'are carried forward by things…which hold together and stand in for the common understanding of human actors.'[39] In other words, 'non-human actants' bring 'intentionalities together'.[40] Latour's ideas

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[35] Anderson, 'Mapping the Domestic Landscape,' 186.

[36] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 4-7. Latour writes: 'I am going to define the social not as a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling' (7). See also Anne Taufel Wessells, 'Book Review: Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory by Bruno Latour,' *International Public Management Journal*, 10: 3, 2007, 351-56.

[37] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 7.

[38] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 9. He notes that he wishes he could call this form of sociology 'associology.'

[39] Wessells, 'Book Review: Reassembling the Social,' 355.

[40] Wessells, 'Book Review: Reassembling the Social,' 355.

encourage researchers to approach the decorative arts as social agents that through their associations with other objects and humans form what Latour refers to as 'the many entanglements of humans and non-humans.'[41] At the same time, the definition of the social as association and assemblage undermines the notion of so-called material culture as forming a domain separate from living culture. To underscore the importance of objects as actors in social life, Latour points out the absurdity of talking about '"material culture,"' which suggests that objects are 'simply connected to *one another* so as to form an homogeneous layer'. This, he suggests, is just as absurd as imagining, a 'configuration' in which people are 'linked to one another by nothing else than social ties.' Indeed, as Latour argues, 'Objects are never assembled together to form some other realm anyhow'. In fact, critiquing the limited role accorded objects in Marxism, as well as the theories of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman, Latour makes a case for the 'multiplicity' of objects' effects, arguing that the activity of objects 'is no doubt much more varied, their influence more ubiquitous, their effect much more ambiguous, their presence much more distributed than these narrow repertoires.'[42]

ii. The material

Although Latour's ideas help to interrogate the role of the decorative arts in constituting the social world of home, Ingold's concept of meshwork allows scholars of the decorative arts to approach their objects of study from a phenomenological and environmental perspective, adding the elements of experience and affect. Above all, Ingold's concept of meshwork draws our attention to how the materials of the decorative arts themselves are living parts of an environment. Ingold argues that whereas the defining feature of objects in Latour's 'network' is their role as discrete and bounded parts of an 'assemblage of bits and pieces,'[43] by contrast, the defining feature of objects in the meshwork is their role in 'the interplay of forces' that make up the 'tangle of threads and pathways' of the meshwork.[44] In this view, objects form part of the action which 'emerges from the interplay of forces conducted along the lines of the meshwork.'[45] While Latour's theories accord materiality a constitutive role in the social – it is an actant in the network – the meshwork recognizes that 'for things to interact they must be immersed in a kind of force field set up by the currents of the media that surround them.'[46] As Ingold argues in a chapter in *Being Alive* entitled 'Materials Against Materiality,' the growing literature in anthropology and archaeology on materiality has little to say about actual materials - 'the stuff that things are made of'.[47] Ingold asks observers of an environment to perceive the seeming bounded containment of objects as an illusion. In fact, he argues, the human and non-human 'swim in an ocean of

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[41] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 84.
[42] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 84-85.
[43] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 92.
[44] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 92.
[45] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 64.
[46] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 93.
[47] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 20.

materials.'[48] Objects and humans exist in a state of 'flux in which materials of the
most diverse kinds, through processes of admixture and distillation, of coagulation
and dispersal, and of evaporation and precipitation, undergo continual generation
and transformation.'[49] Everything exists and is 'borne along...within this current of
materials.'[50]

iii. Space

The ecological approach to the decorative arts considers space as part of the
meshwork of an environment rather than as an abstract or separate quality. Space
in this model is not conceived as a neutral stage or container for social activity.
Instead, people, things, and space are mutually constituted.[51] Space and objects in
this model are fluid: they form part of 'a path of flow, like the riverbed or the veins
and capillaries of the body.'[52] Such ideas about space build on Henri Lefebvre's
concept of 'archi-textures,' in which space has density and texture, comparable to a
spider's web.[53] Helen Hills' interpretation of early modern convent interiors as
comprising interiors within interiors is also helpful for conceptualising space as
textured.[54] For Hills, convent interiors are 'multi-layered' with 'systems of
boundaries and borders whose inter-relationships were inherently ambiguous and
ambivalent.'[55] Hills argues that interior spaces are permeable, so that hard and fast
distinctions between exterior and interior cannot be made.[56] Space, within this
framework, is intensive rather than extensive – it is dense and tangled, at once
chaotic and controlled.[57] From this perspective, the decorative arts are not merely
objects in space, but join in the material flows and processes of an environment. In
motion through the activity of light, air, sound vibrations, and human interaction,
domestic objects form lines of possibility - they are of the space. Just as the sense of
a sharp separation between landscape and sky is an illusion - an artificial distinction
- so the space of the home environment needs to be conceived as inseparable from
the human and non-human elements in that environment. As Ingold argues: 'There
could be no life in a world where medium and substances do not mix, or where the
earth is locked inside - and the sky locked out - of a solid sphere. Wherever there is
life and habitation, the interfacial separation of substance and medium is disrupted

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[48] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 24.

[49] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 24.

[50] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 24.

[51] For a succinct summary of the emergence of this paradigmatic shift in the understanding
of space and its implications see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 223-224.

[52] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 86.

[53] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 84-85; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald
Nicholson-Smith, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991, 117-118.

[54] Helen Hills, 'The Housing of Institutional Architecture: Searching for a Domestic Holy in
Post-Tridentine Italian Convents,' in Sandra Cavallo and Silvia Evangelisti, eds, *Domestic
Institutional Interiors in Early Modern Europe*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009,
126.

[55] Hills, 'Housing of Institutional Architecture,' 127.

[56] Hills, 'Housing of Institutional Architecture,' 122-127.

[57] Hills, 'Housing of Institutional Architecture,' 141.

to give way to mutual permeability and binding.'[58] We live <u>in</u> the world, Ingold contends: 'We *inhabit* our environment: we are part of it; and through this practice of habitation it becomes part of us too.'[59] Similarly, the decorative arts 'inhabit' the home environment - they are of the environment. As opposed to closed, objective forms, the decorative arts are open to the world of the home. Time, light, heat, cold, dampness, seasonal change, sound, all form the 'weather-world' of the home with which the decorative arts live out their lives.[60] Space then, in the ecological approach to the decorative arts, is one part of an interconnected series of parts of an environment.

Core concepts

Building on these approaches to the social, the material, and space, the ecological approach consists of the following core concepts:

i. Environment
The home environment is the surroundings in which family members operate. Key to an understanding of the home as an environment is to see objects, spaces, and people as having a symbiotic relationship. Movement is at the heart of this model. Home is therefore not static, like a period room in a museum. The home is a place in which the human and non-human are in constant flux. The ontology of people and things is thus interdependent. Ingold tells us 'to perceive the environment is not to look back on the things to be found in it, or to discern their congealed shapes and layouts, but to join with them in the material flows and movements contributing to their – and our – ongoing formation.'[61] Everything takes place in an environment, what Timothy Morton describes as 'a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite centre or edge.'[62] Morton asks: 'At what point do we stop,' when we seek to draw 'a line between *environment* and *non-environment*'?[63]

ii. Ecology
The concept of ecology develops further the idea of movement and flux by similarly emphasising inter-relatedness and movement. As Jane Bennett writes, an ecology is defined by flow, movement, and inter-activity: it is 'an interconnected series of parts, but it is not a fixed order of parts, for the order is always being reworked in accordance with a certain "freedom of choice" exercised by its actants.'[64] To adopt an ecological sensibility, is to put the emphasis on horizontal rather than hierarchical

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[58] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 120.

[59] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 95.

[60] 'Weather-world' is Ingold's phrase. He uses it to characterise what it is like to inhabit the open: 'it is not to be stranded on the outer surface of the earth but to be caught up in the substantial flows and aerial fluxes of what I call the *weather-world*.' See Ingold, *Being Alive*, 96.

[61] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 88.

[62] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 8.

[63] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 10.

[64] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 97.

relationships between people, things, and spaces.[65] Ecological thought, according to Morton, is 'thinking of interconnectedness.'[66] Thinking ecologically, Morton explains, is 'a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings - animal, vegetable, or mineral.'[67] Morton underscores that 'When we start looking, we find the ecological thought everywhere.'[68] To reframe the home and its decorative arts in ecological terms, is to stay open to possibilities, to engage in questioning about categories and relationships between people and things, the human and non-human, art and decorative art. As Morton asserts, 'Thinking the ecological thought is difficult: it involves becoming open, radically open - open forever, without the possibility of closing again.'[69]

iii. Meshwork

The metaphor of meshwork gives further substance to the concept of the home as an environment and an ecology in which the human and non-human are interdependent. Meshwork foregrounds texture, atmosphere and affect. To approach the decorative arts of the home from the perspective of meshwork is to emphasise interconnection within the domestic environment. Writing about the 'mesh', Morton defines it as the condition of interconnectedness: '"the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things."'[70] The mesh, he insists 'consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences.'[71] Morton urges readers to 'think stockings and graphic design, metals and fabrics.'[72] In the mesh, there is no background or foreground, no centre or edge, since 'Each point of the mesh is both the center and the edge of a system of points.'[73] Nothing within this 'vast mesh of interconnection,'[74] Morton argues, 'is complete in itself.'[75]

Ingold uses the term meshwork to characterise the environment, which he describes as a 'domain of entanglement.' It is 'a tangle of interlaced trails, continually ravelling here and unravelling there.'[76] The environment as meshwork is 'entangled lines of life, growth, movement.'[77] Ingold distinguishes the meshwork from Latour's powerful concept of the 'network.' In Latour's metaphor of network, objects are connected with human agents and both are vital actants as well as mediators that constitute the social. Making a pun on the acronym for Latour's Actor Network Theory, ANT, to Latour's 'ants', Ingold posits 'the spider', thereby

[65] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10.
[66] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 7.
[67] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 7.
[68] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 7.
[69] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 8.
[70] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 28.
[71] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 30.
[72] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 28.
[73] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 28-29.
[74] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 38.
[75] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 33.
[76] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 71.
[77] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 63.

transforming Latour's network in which there is merely a connection between things, into a web-work, which Ingold defines as a living tangle of threads and pathways.[78] Ingold argues: 'behind the conventional image of a network of interacting entities, [there is] what I call the *meshwork* of entangled lines of life, growth and movement. This is the world we inhabit.'[79] Latour's concept of the 'network' becomes the 'web-work' through such essential elements as perception, movement, and 'habitation'. The meshwork, Ingold contends, is 'not a network of interconnected points, but a meshwork of interwoven lines.'[80]

iv. Assemblage

A dynamic part of the meshwork – contributing to its vitality - is the 'congregational agency' which accrues from assemblages of objects and materials. Assemblages, Bennett explains, 'are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements.'[81] As an 'open-ended collective,'[82] assemblages have 'emergent properties' that are 'capable of independent variation' and new sets of relationships are always possible.[83] The decorative arts within such groupings increase their agency by being interwoven with other objects and materials, so that the whole is greater than the parts.

v. Vital materiality

The concept of living matter views matter as joining people and objects in a shared materiality that minimizes the difference between subjects and objects.[84] As Bennett argues, 'a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers ... can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations.'[85]

vi. Distributive agency

The concept of distributive agency underscores that agency is shared in assemblages comprised of the human and non-human. With distributive agency, objects and people are joined 'horizontally' rather than 'vertically'. Distributive agency levels

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[78] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 91-92.

[79] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 63.

[80] Ingold, *Being Alive*, 63. Compare also archaeologist Ian Hodder's concept of 'entanglement,' which builds on Latour's ideas of relationality while also responding to what Hodder sees as 'insufficient attention to the ways in which humans and things in their physical connectedness to each other...entrap each other.' Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships Between Humans and Things*, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 93. For Hodder, entanglements are 'specific flows of matter, energy and information' (105). Building on Ingold's work, archaeologist Carl Knappett uses the concept of 'meshwork' to interpret Aegean Bronze Age culture. See Carl Knappett, 'Networks of Objects, Meshworks of Things,' in Tim Ingold, ed., *Redrawing Anthropology: Materials, Movements, Lines*, Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT.: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2011, 45-63.

[81] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23.

[82] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 24.

[83] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 35.

[84] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

[85] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

the playing field of social action between the human and the non-human, and for our purposes herein, between high art and decorative art. As Bennett notes: 'A lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors, and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonoms but as vital materialities.'[86] Distributive agency recognizes that the social arises from the intertwining and interdependency of materialities both human and non-human.

vii. Matter as social performance

Building on the concept of matter as alive, and also enriched by notions of assemblage and distributive agency, is the approach to matter as social performance developed by Karen Barad. This complex idea reminds scholars not to essentialize matter. It asserts that the meaning of matter, starting at the molecular level, is relational, arising out of inter-relations in the meshwork. Barad, exploring 'the dynamic and contingent materialization of space, time and bodies,' encourages us to understand matter not in terms of the 'property of things,' but as constituted by 'a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations.'[87] In this conception of matter, 'Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity,' but ensues from what Barad calls 'intra-activity' or the 'changing possibilities' of space-time-matter relationships, so that agency, and the agency of matter in particular, is 'an enactment, not something that someone or something has.'[88]

The early modern domestic interior: meshwork and assemblage

To demonstrate the value of the above concepts for the study of the decorative arts of the home, the final part of this essay will focus on two closely related core concepts: meshwork and assemblage. The sixteenth-century Venetian depiction of a biblical wedding, *Marriage Feast at Cana*, by an anonymous painter after a work by Tintoretto, which records the setting, objects, and class of people typical of a contemporary Venetian patrician wedding (Figure 1),[89] provides evidence for the concept of 'meshwork.' The ceramics, glassware, metal-ware, table-carpets, table-cloths, serviettes, cutlery, *acquaio* (wall-fountain), table, benches, credenza, banners, and musical instruments depicted in this image are not simply discrete objects acting as social connectors in a network, but create along with embodied human agents and space the environment itself. Approaching this image as a document or 'remembrance' of an environment heightens our awareness of space-time-matter interconnections, in which the human and non-human are perpetually entangled

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[86] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 21.

[87] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 224.

[88] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 235.

[89] For a discussion of this image in the context of sixteenth-century Venetian dining and élite marriage celebrations, see Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, 244-45, and cat. no. 50 (p. 355), which attributes the painting to 'After Tintoretto, Greco-Venetian artist, (Michele Damaskinos?),' and dates it to c. 1561-70 (80 x 118 cm; tempera and oil on wood panel; in the Museo Correr, Musei Civici Veneziani). The painting is after Tintoretto's *Marriage Feast at Cana*, in S. Maria della Salute, Venice, Italy.

and in motion. As a record of the 'weather-world' of the home, referring back to
Ingold's phrase, the image alerts the researcher to atmospheric effects of both
natural light and light from the candles - placed near the ceiling in wall-mounted
holders - as it changes over the day and as it is filtered by the density of air,
mediated by the heat from bodies, and moderated by the coolness radiating from
the polished floors. Sounds, as well, form part of the homescape, so that the sound
of water from the washing of hands at the *acquaio*, the tempo and melody of the
music - created by the musicians represented on the left of the image - the lilt of
human voices in conversation, of varying registers and speeds, and the clang of
serving-ware and clatter of silverware mediate all engagements with time and
space. The image also substantiates that the senses are central to the experience of
the home as a miniature world. Not only is the environment comprised of people
and things, but also of the aromas of food, drink, perfumes, and sweat, the feel on
the skin of breezes wafting through, the visual pleasures of brightly coloured,
patterned clothing of diverse cut and fabric, the bright white of tablecloths, the glint
of brass, the glossy sheen of porcelain, and the richness of polished wood, all of
which are mediated by the perceiver, whose response is calibrated by a myriad of
embodied and social factors, including age, gender, race, and class.

      An essential part of such a meshwork, and contributing to its vitality, is the
'congregational agency' which accrues from assemblages of objects. Such groupings
of objects increase their agency by being interwoven with other material agencies, so
that the whole is greater than the parts. All the members of an assemblage have
emergent properties, and are capable of independent variation. In an assemblage,
new sets of relationships are always possible.[90] One key site to observe the
dynamics of the assemblage are fireplaces. The fireplace, as Mimi Hellman has
argued, 'was a key element of the well-appointed interior', and addressed both
family members and guests 'through multiple modes of signification - visual,
material, spatial, social, and even somatic.'[91] It is, to paraphrase Bachelard, 'the little
sun' of the 'little universe' of home, generating vital symbolic and somatic heat.[92] It
can be compared to Bachelard's evocation of the 'evening lamp on the family table'
that he writes is 'the centre of a world'.[93] 'In fact,' Bachelard continues, 'the lamp-
lighted table is a little world in itself'.[94] Hellman relates that in the homes of the élite
in eighteenth-century France, 'the fireplace was probably the most densely
articulated zone in any type of social space.'[95] Hellman's description of objects that
congregate around this significant symbolic-sensual site within the home, where

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[90] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 35. 'An assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the
materialities that constitute it.' Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 34.
[91] Mimi Hellman, 'The Decorated Flame: Firedogs and the Tensions of the Hearth,' in Droth,
Taking Shape, 180.
[92] Bachelard is here quoting Cyrano de Bergerac describing an apple and an apple seed, in
which the apple is the 'little universe' and the seed the 'little sun of this little world.'
Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 151.
[93] Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 171.
[94] Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 171.
[95] Hellman, 'The Decorated Flame,' 180.

both heat and light are provided, signal the potential for human and non-human intra-activity:

> Firedogs were accompanied by tools such as shovels, pincers, tongs, bellows, and hearth brushes; firebacks incorporated figurative motifs or coats of arms; panels or mirrors sometimes covered the mouth of the fireplace when it was not in use. The greatest decorative diversity was found on the mantelpiece, which featured objects such as clocks, candlesticks, bouquets of real or artificial flowers, and porcelain vessels or figurines.[96]

All of the objects listed by Hellman evoke lines of possibility: shovels, pincers, tongs, bellows, and hearth brushes were embellished with a range of symbolic, classical, or heraldic allusions, which would be brought into play separately or through a sequence of activities that brought human and non-human together in the dance of fire-making. Clocks and flowers both could register time passing. Porcelain vessels and figurines can be picked up, passed around, and re-arranged to create new assemblages. Moreover, increasing the congregational agency of these items was their capacity to be 'doubled by reflection in the mirror behind them.'[97]

Figure 1 After Tintoretto (Michele Damaskinos?), *Marriage Feast at Cana*, ca. 1561-70. Tempera and oil on wood panel, 80 x 118 cm. Venice: Museo Correr, Musei Civici Veneziani. Photo credit: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.

Vying with the fireplace as an important source of assemblage and congregational agency are the ubiquitous *credenze* that graced the early modern

[96] Hellman, 'The Decorated Flame,' 180.
[97] Hellman, 'The Decorated Flame,' 180.

home. Ranging from simple tables draped in cloth with tiered shelves for the display of precious ceramics and metal-ware, such as the one depicted on the right

Figure 2 Credenza, ca. 1550-1599. Walnut wood, 115 x 254 x 71 cm. Bologna: Museo Civico d'Arte Industriale e Quadreria Davia Bargellini. Photo credit: courtesy of Museo Civico d'Arte Industriale e Quadreria Davia Bargellini.

in the *Marriage Feast at Cana* (Figure 1), to elaborately carved walnut side-boards with drawers and cupboards and plate-racks, such as the example from the Museo Civico d'Arte Industriale e Quadreria Davia Bargellini in Bologna, illustrated in Figure 2, these valuable sites of social interaction and exchange served as stages for carving, arranging, and serving food, as well as sites for the display of precious vessels.[98] Objects also clustered around them, like filings around a magnet, attesting

[98] For a discussion of the evolution of *credenze* in Italy, see Peter Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior*, 205-209, 220-222. For the textiles, ceramics, and metalware that might be associated with *credenze* and dining, see Marta Ajmar-Wollheim, 'Sociability,' in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, 210-214; Allen J. Grieco, 'Meals,' in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, 244-253; and Reino Liefkes, 'Tableware,' in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, 254-265. For a study of the majolica owned by Alfonso II d'Este intended for such display, see Carmen Ravanelli Guidotti, 'Le "credenze" nuziali di Alfonso II d'Este,' in Marina Cogotti and June di Schino, eds, *Magnificenze a tavola: Le arti del banchetto rinascimentale*, Rome: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2012, 55-66. For the *credenza* in the Museo Civio d'Arte Industriale e Quadreria Davia Bargellini, Bologna, Italy, illustrated in Figure 2, see Graziano Manni, *Mobili Antichi in*

to the power of the assemblage, including terracotta plaques, paintings, wine-servers, linens, tapestries, and benches. So much more than mere furniture, *credenze* operated as a kind of micro-ecology within a macro-ecology, in which the assemblage of various kinds of objects and materials was rich with possibilities for both material and social interaction, all of which was unpredictable and filled with movement and life, like an organism. Approached as an assemblage, art and decorative art are subsumed within the whole, hierarchies of the object recede, and all is relational.

One source of evidence for the power of the *credenza*-assemblage are sixteenth-century descriptions of interiors, such as the Bolognese literary giant Giulio Cesare Croce's seventy-page *ekphrasis* in the vernacular of Il Tuscolano (1582),[99] a villa in the countryside near Bologna modelled on Cicero's Tusculan villa, about four kilometres from the Porta Galliera. It was built in 1561 by two brothers, Giovanni Battista and Francesco Ramondini, and sold in 1566 to Monsignor Giovanni Battista Campeggi, Bolognese nobleman and Bishop of Majorca (1507-1583), who was a member of an eminent senatorial family.[100] As Nadja Aksamija has shown, Croce's text - which deserves more attention by scholars of the early modern domestic interior - formed part of numerous neo-Latin and vernacular letters and poems written in praise of the villa between 1567-1582 by Campeggi, his nephew Giovanni Galeazzo (Giangaleazzo) Rossi, and many other *letterati*.[101] The commemoration of villas in poetry and letters was inspired by antique precedents, such as Pliny the Younger's villa letters, and was very popular in sixteenth-century Italy. These writings were often composed by patrons or their architects.[102] In the case of Campeggi's Il Tuscolano, Aksamija argues that the outpouring of writings on the villa were a deliberate strategy 'to immortalize Campeggi as the new, Christian Cicero.'[103]

The writings on Campeggi's Il Tuscolano - including 23 different poems by 14 different authors - were in the form of panegyrics, *ekphrases*, and letters.[104] Croce's poem is one of the longest texts and one of the few works which were published. The text could potentially be dismissed as a purely literary exercise divorced from the actual physical reality of the villa itself because, significantly, it is

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Emilia-Romagna, Modena: Artioli, 1993, 47. The *credenza* is dated to c. 1550-99. It is made of walnut wood, and its dimensions are 115 x 254 x 71 cm.

[99] Giulio Cesare Croce, *Descrittione del nobil palazzo posto nel conta di Bologna detto Tusculano del molto Illustre, et Reverendiss. Monsignore, Il Sig. Gio Battista Campeggi Vescovo di Maiorca*, Bologna: Gio. Rossi, 1582.

[100] The villa was destroyed in 1820. For the history of the villa and its destruction, see Nadja Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry in the Making of a Christian Cicero: Giovanni Battista Campeggi's Tuscolano and the Literary Culture of the Villa in Counter-Reformation Bologna,' *Villa I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 13, 2010, 128-130; Giancarlo Roversi, 'Il Tuscolano: Vicende e splendori di una villa scomparsa,' *Stenna Storica Bolognese*, Anno 14, dopo 1956, 1-48.

[101] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 130.

[102] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 131.

[103] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 130.

[104] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 135.

known that some of the authors who wrote tributes had never seen the villa.[105] However, despite its genesis in the Ciceronian self-fashioning of the patron, Croce's poem is remarkable in its ability to re-create the spatial and material experience of the villa as an environment. Such is its perceived accuracy that Croce's text is the major source for the reconstruction of the appearance of the villa.[106] Aksamija somewhat ruefully observes that Croce 'stops in every room to dwell on what seems like every mantelpiece, painting, dish, utensil, and piece of furniture.'[107] Bemoaning the fact that he is too interested in the details of furnishings to provide the names of artists who produced the artworks, she is, nevertheless, impressed by Croce's attention to orienting the viewer spatially. Despite referring to the poem as 'tedious and inventory-like at times,' Aksamija praises it as 'an invaluable source of information on the Tuscolano's spatial layout and the variety of objects and furnishings with which Campeggi had adorned its interior.'[108] Croce's 'literary double' of Il Tuscolano,[109] which carefully plots the visitor's movements through the villa - even mimicking in the tri-partite format of the poem the tri-partite structure of the villa[110] - would offer an interesting test case for Anderson's methodology discussed above in the section on GIS.[111] The visibility map produced by his use of small-scale GIS could be generated using the ground plan of Il Tuscolano, and then correlated with Croce's description of the visitor's movement through the villa to see how they compare.

Given the poem's keen attention to objects in space and to the visitor's unfolding experience of the space over time, the text offers outstanding evidence for how the interior is experienced as an environment. Using language that captures the affective dimension, such as 'stupendous,' 'astonishing,' 'comfortable,' and 'marvellous,' Croce devotes the longest descriptions not to artworks, but to describing the effect on the viewer of beds, bedding, benches, vases, leather hangings, white linen tablecloths, and other furnishings. Contributing to the evocation of an environment, in addition to describing the effects of the furnishings on the senses, Croce includes descriptions of the qualities of space, as well as light effects, which he registers as seeming to come from the stars and the heavens.[112] Significantly, his most extensive descriptions are of the various *credenze* in the villa. Through these descriptions, the idea of the *credenza* as an assemblage with emergent possibilities and the potential for new sets of relationships are conveyed. For

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[105] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 134.

[106] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 135, note 23.

[107] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 150.

[108] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 151-152.

[109] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 150.

[110] Aksamija, 'Architecture and Poetry,' 151. In its focus on orienting the viewer in space, Croce's poem could be compared to Torquato Tasso's description of the villa in his dialogue *Il padre di famiglia* (1580s). Torquato Tasso, 'Il padre di famiglia/The Father of the Family' in *Tasso's Dialogues*, translated with introduction and notes by Carnes Lord and Dain A. Trafton, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982, 43-149. The dialogue dates to the 1580s (Tasso, 'Il padre di famiglia,' 6).

[111] Anderson, 'Mapping the Domestic Landscape,' 183-189.

[112] Croce, *Descrittione*, 65.

example, Croce describes a large *credenza* that is located in one of the large
receptions rooms (*sala*). In his description, he evokes both the parts and whole,
conveying both the overall sensory impression using adjectives such as 'beautiful'
and 'polished' ('polito effetto') while also identifying an interwoven array of
materials and objects, including wood, leather of red, leather coverings, shelves, a
wine holder,[113] as well as tablecloths, serviettes, drawers, and flanking benches.[114]

In the description of another *credenza*, located within another *sala* - perhaps
the most impressive passage in the entire book - Croce evokes the sense that the
credenza is assembled ('apparecchiare') as a kind of command performance for the
needs of the household.[115] The *credenza* is presented as a living assemblage of
diverse objects and materials in this passage, which underscores what is lost when a
piece of furniture is extracted from its living environment and studied like a dead
bug under a microscope. Croce's description provides evidence of the micro-
environment of the *credenza*-world comprised of numerous objects and materials at
the ready for interaction, such as the adorning tablecloth that 'touches the ground' at

[113] 'Un credezon di noce grande, & bello / Coperto del corame sopra detto, / La scaffa
accommodata sopra quello, / Con la bottigliaria bene in affetto / Coperta del medesimo in
quel drapello, / Che viene à far molto polito effetto, / Vi è dodici carieghe insieme unite, / Di
cuoio rosso, & franze ben guarnite."

[114] 'Banchette con l'appoggio anco altrettante, / Et doi, à qui stan sopra due cassette; / Nelle
qual son le robbe tutte quante, / Quando in ordin la tavola si mette, / Come mantili da tenere
da vante, / Tovaglie, tovaglioli, & salviette, / Ch 'in opra pongon poi con leggiadria, /
Quando apparecchian la bottigliaria.' Croce, *Descrittione*, 16.

[115] 'Quando la gran credenza apparecchiare / Voglion, ci vanno gl'infrascritte cose, / Che
senza star à farsele prestare, / Sempre à i bisgoni lor quà son riposte. / Pria una bella tovaglia,
che di pare / Può star di quante Aragne mai compose, / Candida, gentilissima, & sottile, /
Ch'in ogni parte tien del signorile.

Questa serve pel primo adornamento, / Et tocca terra per ogni cantone; / Poi sopra
quella un gran bacil d'argento / Per più rara bellezza vi si pone, / Che tien scolpito la
bell'arma drento / Del suo Reverendissimo patrone, / D'alto rilevo con la Mitra sopra, / Che
veder non si può la più degn'opra.

Un bel bronzo d'argento, che'l bacile / Accompagna, e sei tazze, & due saliere / Molto
ben lavorate, & del simile / La panatierra ancor si può vedere, / E del proprio metallo, alto,
& gentile / Due bussole ci son, ch'al mio parere; / Perche di dir il ver sempre mi cale, / Nell
una il pepe stà, nell'altra il sale. /

Dodici ancora d'argento, & dorati / Cuchiai vi sono con le sue forcine, / Altri sei pur
d'argento lavorati, / Con sei forcine appresso belle, & fine, / Et undici coltelli assai pregiati /
Col manico d'argento, e à dirlo al fine / Vi è la forchetta grande per trinciare / Quando pasto,
ò banchetto si suol fare. /

Nella sua coltelliera stanno quelli, / Secondo che bisogna accommodati, / Poi altro
tanto numer di coltelli, / Co'l manico d'avorio, & poi dorati, / Tre ordini di piatti molto belli, /
Quai di stagno battuto son formati, / Grandi, mezani, & piccioli, ch'ardito / Son di dire, che'l
suo numero è infinito.

Altri piatti di stagno pur battuto / Con l'orlo d'oro belli à paragone; / I quali di
servire han per statuto, / Quando imbandiscon le confettione, / Con altre cose, ch' à dirle à
minuto / Mai non verrei alla conclusione; / Però della credenza il fin qui sia, / Et ragioniam
della bottiglieria. (25-27)

every corner, and is 'spotless' ('candida'), 'extremely delicate' ('gentilissima'), and 'fine' ('delicato'), the large silver basin engraved with the arms of the patron, another kind of vessel referred to as a 'bronze' ('bronzo') but seemingly made of silver ('d'argento'), six cups, two salt cellars ('very well wrought'), two boxes ('Due bussole') one for salt and one for pepper, numerous types of forks, knives, and spoons made of gold and silver, with handles made of various materials, including ivory, gold, and silver, and plates of infinite number made of beaten tin in three sizes, arranged in three rows, as well as plates of beaten tin with borders of gold. Not just diverse materials, such as gold, silver, ivory, and tin are part of the assemblage but also different modes of treating objects, such as gilding and silvering, as well as various ways of fashioning objects, such as 'highly wrought,' 'beaten,' and 'very well worked.' Adjectives that appeal to the senses, such as 'beautiful,' 'delicate,' and 'very fine' come to the fore in this description. The close attention to the numbers of items, such as 'twelve gilded and silvered spoons', 'eleven knives,' 'six cups,' and 'three rows of plates' which are 'large, medium and small' and seem 'infinite in number' evokes both the diversity and abundance of this micro-environment and its potential for interaction.[116]

Conclusion

In conclusion, by crafting an ecological approach to the decorative arts comprised of these inter-meshed concepts: environment, ecology, meshwork, assemblage, vital materiality, distributive agency, and the social performance of matter, this study hopes to have provided a horizontal, non-hierarchical lens that allows scholars of the decorative arts to see and experience the inter-relatedness of their objects, spaces, and people. Returning to the painting *Marriage Feast at Cana* (Figure 1), and reflecting on the domestic environment it represents, is it possible to see the interdependency of agencies? The decorative arts are here in force: furnishings, ceramics, linens, jewellery, tiles, paintings, sculpture, prints, textiles. Such things within the home are intertwined and inseparable from the human. Ingold characterizes both the social life represented in such paintings and music as representing unfolding patterns of resonance.[117] Is it possible to use such images as a lens or microscope or amplifying device that allows researchers to see and hear the relational nature of the domestic ecology?[118] If scholars would simply look, and listen to what the objects are trying to say?

Finally, this exhortation to 'look' and 'listen' to our objects is not a plea for abandoning historical inquiry for phenomenology. Rather, the ecological approach proposed herein complements other disciplinary lenses, such as the study of authorship, connoisseurship, style, patronage, periodization, and historiography. Yet, as well as providing another lens, the ecological approach also re-negotiates the

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[116] See Croce, 25-26 (note 99, above).

[117] Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 197.

[118] See Ingold's analysis of Pieter Bruegel, *The Harvesters* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) for an example of how one might approach painting to discern such patterns of resonance. Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 201-207.

status of the so-called decorative arts within the discipline of art history, releasing them from the lower tier of a hierarchy of value still deeply entrenched in the institutions of our discipline. In all of the examples discussed above - *The Marriage Feast at Cana*, the fireplace, the *credenza* and dishes in the Museo Civico d'Arte, and Croce's poem on Il Tuscolano - a significant element of the human experience of objects would be lost without the finely-tuned lens of the ecological approach. Historical inquiry necessarily starts with our experience of the object within an environment. The ecological approach asks us to attend to past environments: it offers a methodology that will sharpen our senses and allow us to ask better questions.

Erin J. Campbell is Associate Professor of Early Modern European Art at the University of Victoria, Canada. She is editor and contributing author of *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations* (2006), co-editor and contributing author of *The Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior: People, Objects, Domesticities* (2013), and author of *Old Women and Art in the Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior*, forthcoming with Ashgate Publishing.

erinjc@uvic.ca; erinjcam@gmail.com