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"Representations of Domestic Space in Medieval Italian Painting" paper delivered at The Fordham Medieval Conference: The Family in the Middle Ages

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Views with a Room: Representations of Domestic Space in Medieval Italian Painting

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In the late Middle Ages, Italy underwent a period of tremendous urbanization, characterized in part by the widespread construction of private houses for a large segment of the population, including nobles, merchants and artisans. This corresponds to documented trends of smaller urban family sizes - due in part to the division of groups of brothers into distinct residential units, each with his own house.

The development of private space within the house and a mentality which recognized and even preferred privacy, along with an increase in physical comfort, were innovations of the later Middle Ages, and developed along with the preference for private houses. In the medieval city, space was still precious, and in many ways greater privacy was a sign of greater prosperity and prestige. The needs of a successful public figure had to be balanced. Public accessibility was a sign of a man's *dignitas*. Greater privacy a sign of his wealth. Private domestic spaces were designed to cater to both needs. The street level loggia allowed a man to present himself in public, while still occupying private space. The chapel, the counting house, and later the study allowed a successful individual to retreat. For women, whose public activities were more circumscribed, the kitchen, workrooms and *salone*, were the public realm. The bedroom became the inner sanctum.

The number of bedrooms within houses increased and these rooms could often be sealed

off, or even locked from the inside with key or bolt. Boccaccio described the levels of privacy one could find in a house of the time, portraying a jealous husband who says "so you must take care to bolt the door to the street, the door to the stairway, and the door to the bedroom."

The increase in private space was complemented by a surge in the production of household goods to fill the new domestic rooms, created by new ranks of urban artisans and sold or traded by the new merchant class. While palaces and castles of the nobility remained the primary destinations for luxury goods and the most likely setting for secular art, bourgeois consumption also became a major element in the urban economy. Medieval houses can be found in many Italian towns - Cortona, Perugia, Viterbo, Todi, and Gubbio among others. The best preserved interiors, however, with evidence of the elegance of some of these dwellings, is the Palazzo Davanzati in Florence, built by the Divizzi family in the mid-14th century.

A remarkable record of the process of planning and building exists for the roughly contemporary house of Francesco di Marco Datini of Prato, begun in 1358 while Francesco was living in Avignon. Work was supervised by a cautious neighbor who took no steps before consulting his friend. These discussions are preserved in Francesco's correspondence. Even after he returned to Prato, Francesco kept records, and while away on business insisted that daily reports of work be sent to him. These too, survive.

The rooms have been changed, but an inventory of 1405 described the ground floor as having had "an office, a small cellar, a guest room with two beds, and the loggia della corte", which was not frescoed, but painted green." All the downstairs rooms had vaulted ceilings, some of them painted, and brick floors, carefully polished and waxed. Upstairs, was a *salagrande* -- probably in the center, with the other rooms leading out of it. Other rooms on this floor were the master bedroom, two guest-rooms, an upstairs kitchen, the upstairs loggia, and a

small room called "Francesco's office" but which appears to have been used for a storeroom. His real office was in the warehouse opposite. Although there were many servants, there were no servants' rooms. They slept wherever was convenient. A pillared loggia, immediately beneath the tiled roof of the top story, was used as an additional living room in hot weather, and also for airing furs and woolens, beating carpets and blankets, and drying linens. A representation of this type of loggia can be seen in the *Good Government* fresco in Siena.

The house had small windows with heavy wooden shutters opening inwards on hinges, mostly what were called *finestre impannate*, made of oiled linen or cotton on wooden frames; they opened outward and could be drawn up, like blinds. This type is illustrated in a miniature of the *Annunciation* from the 1480s by Attavante (now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

Datini's correspondence doesn't mention latrines, but both the chief guestroom and the hall had an *iscranna forata*, or commode. For washing there were "two basins for washing feet and one round "barber's basin" in the kitchen. There was a well behind the house.

While exceptional in the care and funds he lavished on his house, Datini and his obsession with his personal abode represents a side of medieval life that is often overlooked. The rise of a middle-class, in towns all over Italy allowed men of humble origin (like Datini) to achieve what was previously available only to the hereditary nobility - that is, a room or house of one's own.

Domestic spaces and domestic furnishings soon became common features in many types of visual imagery, including religious and historical narrative, devotional imagery, allegorical painting and scenes of secular life. Smaller family sizes also encouraged greater appreciation of young children who are more frequently represented in art - usually, but not always, as the infants Mary, John the Baptist or Jesus, now often seen cradled in a comfortable domestic

setting.

Artists frequently took liberties with reality - simplifying or exaggerating for effect, conforming to literary or historic models, repeating artistic *topoi*. However, Italian art of the 14th through 15th centuries demonstrates a growing concern for naturalism, or as James Stubblebine has called it, "the Rise of Vernacular Art." That is, the depiction of real places and objects in recognizable spatial and dimensional relationships. Though "the Art of Describing" never attains the primacy of purpose for Italian artists as it does in Northern Europe, nonetheless, for a period of about 150 years beginning around 1300, much of the reality and aspirations of home life in Italy, especially among the upper classes, can be reconstructed, especially when visual imagery is paired with architectural, archaeological and documentary evidence.

Paintings provide evidence for the appearance of private spaces in late medieval Italy. A number of artists, especially those of Tuscany, painted interiors that reflect late medieval architectural and decorative arrangements and are very much in the spirit of their fellow Tuscan, Datini. Surviving medieval houses exhibit a wide variety of house types, room sizes and shapes, and fenestration patterns. The paintings help to interpret these spaces, and to furnish them in our mind's eye. At the very least we learn what were considered the standard features of private rooms. At best we earn a glimpse of private life in medieval cities - usually considered those quintessential places of communal living and public ritual.

In the 14th century, five or six rooms were sufficient to house a well-to-do family, and the biggest houses, such as that of Datini, did not have more than 13 or 14 rooms. Simpler urban houses routinely had four or six rooms; two per floor in a two or three story row-house. 15th-century palaces had many more rooms, as in the house of the Florentine Da Uzzaro brothers (on the Via de' Bardi), which had nine rooms on the ground floor, ten on the first and eleven on the

second floor. It also had loggias.

Many medieval houses were broken into apartments for family members, or for the sons still living beneath a father's roof. Separate chambers, suites, or palace wings were often prepared for women, especially among the nobility, where marriage of dynasties required special attention to the needs of the bride. Literary and documentary sources provide scattered information. For example, the 13th-century Florentine mystic Umiliana de' Cerchi gave herself to charity and the care of the poor, turning against her wealthy family. She secluded herself in one part of the family palazzo and refused to have any contact with them. In Boccaccio's tales, too, we learn of husbands and wives frequently living in separate parts of a house. The traffic to and from their private chambers is naturally the subject of many of the *Decameron* tales.

Based on a thoroughly unscientific survey, the most frequently represented domestic interior in 14th-century Italian painting is the bedroom. Couples are occasionally shown together, as in a Neapolitan illustration of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and in the enigmatic 14th-century fresco in the town hall of San Gimignano, attributed to Memmo di Filipuccio. Men's sleeping areas are rarely depicted, and then usually in scenes of historic royalty or illustrating dreams and visions. These chambers are simple, and dominated by a large bed and surrounding chests as in Pietro Lorenzetti's *Dream of Sobach* and Sano di Pietro's depiction of the *Dream of The Deacon Justinian*.

Most common is the lady's chamber, shown in a large number of images of the Birth of the Virgin, and the Birth of St. John the Baptist. The Virgin and Baptist birth scenes allowed the painters to dwell on details of architecture and furnishings as both scenes are represented as taking place in affluent homes. Sleeping areas for children beyond the infant stage are ignored.

The reasons for this distribution are several. Men are easily depicted presiding in many

settings, including the loggia and from the early 15th century on, the *studiolo*, or private study. They are frequently shown in scenes of action. Women, on the other hand, have few domains where they play central roles. The bedroom, particularly when turned over to the act and ritual of childbirth, is first among these. Except in rare instances, children seem to have had little or no space of their own. When infants and toddlers, they shared women's space.

In larger houses, older children could have a room or rooms to themselves, but more often children, like servants, slept on the edge. Literally that could mean on the edge of a bed, reclining on benches or chests surrounding the master's or mistress's *lettiera*, or on the edge of other spaces such as adults' bedrooms, balconies and mezzanines, hallways, kitchens and *salone*. Catherine of Siena, daughter of a dyer and twenty-fourth child in a family of twenty-five, had her own bed at least by the age of fourteen. Sleeping in one's own bed did not always mean sleeping alone, since several beds could be fitted into one bedroom. Pietro Lorenzetti's *Charity of Saint Nicholas of Bari* show three sisters sharing a bed with their poor father asleep atop an adjacent chest. In Massacio's rendition of the scene, however, it is the father who is asleep upon a narrow bed while his daughters sleep leaning against a chest.

Because it is the scene most directly related to family life, I would like to consider birth scenes in some detail, to see what they can tell us of domestic spaces. Their prevalence also informs us of an ideal, or at least preferred, depiction of women in the home. A 13th-century Sienese altarpiece shows a typical Nativity in the Byzantine style - there is no intimacy, no interior space. One of the earliest scenes of a woman's bedroom is Giotto's *Birth of the Virgin* painted in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, in 1305-06. The scene takes place in a bare room and Saint Anne lies in a simple bed separated from the rest of the space by curtains suspended from a wooden framework with rings running on rods. Unlike many later depictions of nativities in

more affluent settings, no chests or other pieces of furniture are visible in this view. While it is certainly true that Giotto's interest throughout the Chapel frescoes is in figural composition and the emotional gestures that link them, architecture does play an important part in structuring the scenes and conveying information. The simplicity of this setting is likely to reflect the relatively simple accommodations still common among most urban classes in the early 14th century.

In a *Birth of the Baptist.*, c. 1340, by the Master of the Life of St. John the Baptist, (in the National Gallery of Art), we see a more elaborate setting for a birth. Here a large bed fills the room. Next to it is a bench that also serves for storage, an important piece of furniture in the medieval household. In such chests were kept linens and other valuables and the mistress of the house kept strict charge over these. The dominance of the bed in this scene is probably not just artistic emphasis. In the 14th century large fixed beds became important elements in the bourgeois household, often overwhelming the spaces in which they were set. Increasingly they are mentioned in estate inventories.

The walls are covered with a rich pattern, intended to be read as expensive silk or cheaper fresco. Such decoration was common practice throughout the 14th century, and has much earlier roots in public and religious architecture, too. In many cases it is likely that real wall hangings covered the frescoes in the winter months to help warm the otherwise chilly rooms.

Rich silken wall hangings can be seen in the Pope's bedchamber in *S. Francis Appears to Pope Gregory IX in a Dream* on the walls of the upper basilica at Assisi, painted c. 1300. Similar hangings are depicted in the nearby *Confirmation of the Rule* scene. Wall hangings also provide a sumptuous backdrop for feasting as can be seen in a miniature depiction of the *Marriage Feast at Cana*, from an Angevin Bible made in Naples c. 1355 and a depiction of *Herod's Feast*, c. 1365 (now in the Metropolitan Museum).

A miniature by Giovanni dei Grassi depicting the *Birth of the Virgin*, (now in the Biblioteca Naz. in Florence), from c. 1388-95, which is in a manuscript made for Giangaleazzo Visconti, presumably depicts a level of domestic opulence familiar at the court. Rich wall hangings, bed curtains and covers as well as an inlaid or painted coffered ceiling (possibly vaulted) and a curved headboard all attest to this. Note the herring-bone brick floor pattern.

The less expensive and more durable painted wall decorations are known from a few surviving examples, the best are in the Palazzo Davanzati in Florence, but others are known from Palazzo Forti and the Palazzo Pellegrini-Bissoni in Verona. Painted representations of these frescoed walls can be seen in depictions of the Life of the Virgin in the Cathedral of Atri, dating from the 3rd quarter of the 15th century.

Giusto de'Menabuoi's *Birth of the Virgin*, c. 1370, in the Cathedral Baptistery of Padua, is set in a spacious bedroom. Though a large *lettiera* type bed dominates the space, the artist envisions a room large enough to accommodate at least thirteen adults in addition to Saint Anne, who is shown sitting in bed. The room is divided into at least two sections by two arches which span the space. The sleeping area, in the foreground, is curtained off. We should assume that the fourth wall, through which we view the scene, may have had large windows, since no others are visible. Above the doorway into the room are a series of four Gothic bifora windows, perhaps indicating a mezzanine area in which servants may have slept. The room has a flat wood ceiling with major beams supported on wall brackets. Such a ceiling can still be seen in the Sala dei Pappagalli of the Palazzo Davanzati, which was probably used as a dining room. A similar painted ceiling survives in the Palazzo ??? in Verona. The paneling of walls with wood, as is shown here, became increasingly popular, so that by the 15th century it had virtually replaced the frescoed wall in the houses of the well-to-do. In most cases, however, this paneling has been lost

in later remodeling of Renaissance *palazzi*. Bedrooms of this size, though not common in most medieval houses, can be found in the Palazzo Davanzati on the first and second floors.

Salimbeni's *Birth of The Baptist* of 1416 (Oratory of S. Giovanni, Urbino) creates a space very similar to that depicted by Giusto de'Menabuoi. A large bed surrounded by locked chests dominates the room, which is divided into two by two arches. The decorated flat wood ceiling of the sleeping area, the vaults of the adjacent antechamber (perhaps where servants slept) and the rich furnishing all distinguish the house, and therefore John the Baptist's family, as one of distinction.

In Pietro Lorenzetti's *Nativity of the Virgin*, probably from the 1340s, (Siena, Duomo Museum) and Paolo Di Giovanni Fei's *Nativity of the Virgin* of the 1380s. (Siena, Pinacoteca), a similar room is depicted, but in these versions the viewer is situated in the antechamber separated from Saint Anne's sleeping area by two arches. Both of these rooms are vaulted in a manner more frequently associated with 15th century domestic architecture.

The Atri frescoes show a bedroom similar in size to that painted by Giusto de'Menabuoi about a century earlier, though now a fireplace is included, and there are views through windows to the countryside. The Atri *Annunciation* fresco also show a dining area which doubles as a work area, and an adjacent chapel. The floors in all the rooms are covered with a rich tile design. While most houses did not have private chapels, many had wall shrines or tabernacles like those at the Palazzo Davanzati.

Built-in wall fireplaces became increasingly common in Italy in the 14th century, though many houses still did not have them, and even in wealthy households they were seldom found in bedrooms. By the mid-1340's fireplaces seem to have been common enough in some parts of Italy to be included in the building specifications for a private *palazzo*. The detailed

specifications for the building of the Palazzo Sansedoni in Siena drawn up in 1340 between the patron and the builders specify a number of chimneys and wall fireplaces, at least two for every floor. At the Palazzo Davanzati there are fireplaces in the dining room and the *salone*, as well as the kitchen.

Sienese painters, however, don't depict fireplaces until Giovanni di Paolo (active from 1417 to 1482) includes them in his scenes of the *Birth of St. John the Baptist* and in his scene of *Saint Catherine Beseeching Christ to Resuscitate Her Mother*, painted c. 1449, (and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art). Pietro di Giovanni di Ambrogio shows a fireplace in his *Birth of S. Nicola di Bari* (now in Basel) of c. 1430-1440. A fireplace appears in Sassetta's *Birth of the Virgin*, of the 1430's, now in Asciano. Here, a servant is seen warming the baby's swaddling clothes in front of a fire. This is repeated in Carpaccio's depiction of 1504-08 (now in Bergamo), where the servant and the fire are in adjacent room. Most other fireplaces are seen in depictions of *salone* or workrooms, as in Paolo Ucello's *Profanation of the Host* or in the kitchen, as in a scene from the *Contrasto di Carnescale a la quaresima* (Florence, c. 1495).

Datini's Prato house had two stone fireplaces. These were the greatest luxuries in the house. They were provided with fire-dogs, tongs, shovel, and bellows. The only other warmth available for the family were the warming-pans used at night (*il prete*), that are still used today, and little earthenware jars containing red hot charcoal, called *scaldini*.

Though women performed many tasks in the home, it is in the role of mothers that they are depicted in art, and of contemporary settings, it is the bedroom, or birth room, such as those we have seen, in which we view them the most.

Painters were not the only ones aware of a woman's place in the home. Saint Bernardino of Siena, who had many scathing things to say about the wantonness of modern women, made

clear that the ideal woman of the 14th and 15th centuries were very active - often overseeing house and business. "She takes care of the granary and keeps it clean, she takes care of the oil-jars...she sees to the salted meat...she sees to the spinning and the weaving. She sells the bran, and with the proceeds gets the sheets out of pawn. She looks after the wine barrels, and notes whether they have broken hoops or if one of them is leaking. She sees to the whole house.'

Nonetheless, it is as mothers at home that women are represented in the art of the time.

This isn't unexpected, for as Bernardino also wrote: "When she is pregnant she has the labor of the pregnancy; she has that of giving birth to her children and of caring for them and bringing them up, and she has also that of caring for her husband, when he is ill; she has the burden of the whole house to bear...All this labor is the woman's alone, while the man goes off singing...

Perhaps the many Nativity paintings make the same point, As Bernardino continues, "See to it husband, that you help her to bear her burdens."