

**Europe at Home. Family and Material Culture, 1500-1800**[Originally published under the title *Vita di casa. Abitare, mangiare, vestire nell'Europa moderna* (Laterza; Rome/Bari, 1999); translated by Allan Cameron]

**Review Number:**

352

**Publish date:**

Sunday, 1 June, 2003

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**ISBN:**

300085427X

**Date of Publication:**

2002

**Price:**

£19.95

**Pages:**

324pp.

**Publisher:**

Yale University Press

**Place of Publication:**

New Haven, CT

**Reviewer:**

Anton Schuurman

I do not know whether the Italian title of this book (*Vita di casa*) is an allusion to Mario Praz and his autobiography *La casa della vita* (Milan, 1958), but it would be fitting. In that book Mario Praz guides the reader through his Roman house and tells his life during the tour. Moreover, Mario Praz is the author of *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964). As its title suggests, this book is about the domestic interior in Europe and tried to tell the story with the help of 400 drawings, pictures and other visual material. It was also one of the first to do so. It was in fact the forerunner of and inspiration for Peter Thornton's influential *Authentic Decor. The Domestic Interior, 1620-1920* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1984), which has become the general reference book for the European development of house plans, furnishings, and their arrangements.

As these books show, the domestic interior has long been the domain of art historians. It is only in the last three decades that social and cultural historians have entered this field. Raffaella Sarti belongs to this latter group of scholars. In her book, she tries to give a description of the diversity and development of the material culture of the household in Europe during the *ancien régime*. She makes it clear that she wanted to write a book for a general audience, but she also wanted to provide the professional with a scholarly instrument.

In the introduction, Sarti explains her spatial and chronological boundaries (Europe across the *ancien régime* period). Next, she states that of the three functions of a household - reproduction, consumption and production - the latter receives almost no attention, reproduction only slightly more, but the emphasis is clearly on consumption. The originality of the book exists in the combination of historical demography (specifically family history), history of material culture, and women's history. Alongside this, she not only studies material objects from their economic point of view, but also in their symbolic and cultural contexts.

The book is well structured, as are its different chapters. In the first chapter, she defines her two main concepts, house and family, which appear to be far more complex than one would first imagine. She also explores how the different religions and states within Europe viewed marriage and the family. The second chapter covers marriage, from its outset to its ending and the material implications that went with it. Just as weddings caused the exchange and circulation of goods, so did the endpoints of marriage, when people died (and other people inherited), or when people got old and had to transmit their property. The third chapter examines how individuals lived together - in what houses and in what kind of family formations and sizes. The fourth and fifth chapters are the centre of the book, and are respectively about the home itself and its material objects, and about food. The sixth chapter pays attention to clothing. The final chapter has two topics; firstly, the role of women in relation to consumption; and secondly, changing relations between the family members, which Sarti links in part with the developing distinction between public and private spheres.

In all these chapters Sarti uncovers trends, but at the same time cautions the reader that things are more complex, that they are diverse, and the developments she depicts are not always linear. To help the reader see the larger picture in this complexity, she makes use of some central contrasts: male/female; city/countryside; nobility/farmers; rich/poor; Northern Europe/Southern Europe (and to a far lesser extent considers also the Balkans and Russia); Protestants/Catholics (and sometimes Jews and Orthodox Christians). Always, however, she reminds the reader that reality is not as schematic as these contrasts suggest and gives a much richer picture, which is still comprehensible and meaningful.

This approach produces a rich book from which we can learn a great deal. I found Chapter two extremely stimulating because of its explanation of the role of material goods in setting up a marriage. Her exploration of the role of the dowry is illuminating; historians have mostly said a lot about inheritance but far less about dowry. From the fact that in the eighteenth century there was a tendency to incorporate dowries permanently, Sarti concludes that the new family unit had become more important than the lineage whence the woman originally came. The book is also strong in the consistent attention it pays to differences according to gender. It is exactly to this topic that the concluding chapter returns. Sarti rightly asks for more research in this area. However, much inventiveness will be needed because the sources are scarce that inform us about the role of women *vis-à-vis* consumption according to social classes, region and period.

So I would recommend *Europe at Home* to everyone who wants to get a well-informed and well-organised view of the diversity in the daily life of families in the early modern period. But does this mean that this book has no flaws and leaves one completely satisfied? I have four main remarks/criticisms. Firstly, there is no direct relationship between the choice of the research area and the research questions asked of it. Furthermore, in her concentration on consumption, Sarti pays almost no attention to the production sphere. The geographic and social emphases of the book rely too much on the countryside and the nobility, just as she pays greater attention to the characteristics of diversity in domestic life, rather than to the dynamics of change affecting the form and content of the material culture of the household.

Sarti has written a book on the material culture of the household in Europe, and she explains why she limits herself to Europe and does not include, for example, the English colonies. However, the questions she asks are not really influenced by this research area, other than that she wants to have the best possible coverage of Europe. She is mostly interested in diversity (especially according to gender, religion and wealth) and far less in explaining the formulation of those differences. However, when one studies demography and material culture at the European level, one would expect a discussion of the possible relationship between Hajnal's so-called European marriage pattern (which she mentions on page 51) and differences in the level of living

standards between eastern and western Europe. In his 1965 essay 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective' (in D. V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley, eds, *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* [London; Edward Arnold], pp. 101-43) Hajnal argued that since around 1500 women in eastern Europe have been marrying at a much younger age than women in western Europe; and that almost all eastern European women eventually married, while in western Europe a substantial number never marry at all. This suggests that in eastern Europe, Malthus' preventive check does not work. E. A. Wrigley has shown that in regions where only the positive check is active in adapting population size and economic resources, the standard of living will be lower than in regions where the preventive check also operates. So it would have been interesting to see whether this expected connection could be shown to exist or not.

The same can be said for Jan de Vries' concept of the 'Industrious Revolution'. De Vries claims that in western Europe from the sixteenth century onwards, people began to work more during the year. They did so because they wanted to raise their income in order that they could buy more market goods. But is this a concept that is valid for the whole of Europe? In other words, are demographic behaviour and lifestyle directly related to each other; moreover, are demographic behaviour, economic institutions and lifestyle related?

Certainly, Sarti is less interested in general economic questions throughout the book. In contrast with, for example, Norman Pounds' book *Hearth and Home: A History of Material Culture* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) - a book that is listed in Sarti's bibliography - she pays almost no attention to the general agrarian and Malthusian character of the early modern economy. Before the Industrial Revolution, the economy was an organic economy, as E.A. Wrigley calls it in his *Continuity and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). The implication is that economic growth opportunities were narrowly linked to the agricultural sector, a sector that was providing not only food, but also the raw materials for industry. Sarti mentions this when she explains that the use of materials for houses or objects in this period is often dependent on the regional availability of materials (because of the high transport costs, and the limited means of storing goods). However, she fails to mention that this sort of economy can only grow 0.5 per cent per annum in the long run. Apart from some favoured regions - such as the Netherlands, Flanders, England, Northern Italy, and the Île de France - most regions across the *ancien régime* era had difficulties in establishing a good standard of living. It is only because of the Industrial Revolution and the new food crops introduced into Europe from the New World that this Malthusian trap was overcome, and even then only in the short term.

An important point reiterated in Sarti's book is that the position of women changed across time, due to the development of a growing distinction between public and private spheres. The private sphere becomes more and more the domain of women and is particularly identified with the home. However, this story could have been told better had Sarti systematically paid attention not only to the household as a unit of reproduction and consumption but also one of production. It would have given her the chance to discuss the possible links between production and consumption; for example, Sarti says nothing about the role of women as shopkeepers, nor about the ways in which proto-industrialisation might have influenced the taste for marketed goods within farm households.

Related to this question, it seems to me that Sarti also does not pay enough attention to the households of the middle classes in villages and towns. Nevertheless, in much of the literature on early modern material culture it is exactly this so-called 'middling sort' that is held responsible for many of the changes in domestic material culture. Sarti also pays insufficient attention to the objects that play a large role in these changes - objects related to tea and coffee consumption, for example. In his book on the *Refinement of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), Richard Bushman has a lot to say about these commodities, as does Carole Shammas throughout her work on the pre-industrial consumer. Despite her concern with the cultural aspects of material culture, Sarti is also less interested in the possession and use of books and paintings.

And so to my last point of criticism of *Europe at Home*: Sarti makes little effort to explain the dynamics of change in the material culture she studies. This is partly due to her choice of Europe as the focus of the book, but also partly because she looks at trends mostly *within* the family. A social history of the material culture

of the household would have laid greater emphasis upon the use of the objects and other possessions, such as houses themselves, in society as such. But, to return to my first criticism, a social history would not have started with the choice of the region - Europe - but with the choice of the theme or social group. For the nobility, Europe is indeed perhaps the relevant 'space' or territory in which to study it (although Sarti has nothing to say about the role of Versailles and its decline, for example). However, for the merchant classes, a more appropriate 'space' would have been the urban colonial world; while for the rural population, one's viewpoint is very much dependent upon whether it is Russian peasants or Frisian farmers who are the object of study.

In conclusion, I would suggest that Sarti's book is a good starting point for someone who wants to become better informed generally about the development and diversity of the material culture of the household in Europe. It is best in its anthropological and gender approaches to the subject, but for the social and economic implications of the household, families and their material culture, and importance of the topic for European historical development in general, one should turn to other books.

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