

## Chapter Two



Albrecht Dürer, *St. Jerome in His Study* (1514)

## Intimacy and Privacy

*And yet it is precisely in these Nordic, apparently gloomy surroundings that Stimmung, the sense of intimacy, was first born.*

—MARIO PRAZ

AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY  
OF INTERIOR DECORATION

Consider the room which Albrecht Dürer illustrated in his famous engraving *St. Jerome in His Study*. The great Renaissance artist followed the convention of his time and showed the early Christian scholar not in a fifth-century setting—nor in Bethlehem, where he really lived—but in a study whose furnishings were typical of Dürer's Nuremberg at the beginning of the sixteenth century. We see an old man bent over his writing in the corner of a room. Light enters through a large leaded-glass window in an arched opening. A low bench stands against the wall under the window. Some tasseled cushions have been placed on it; upholstered seating, in which the cushion was an integral part of the seat, did not appear until a hundred years later. The wooden table is a medieval design—the top is separate from the underframe, and by removing a couple of pegs the whole thing can be easily disassembled when not in use. A back-stool, the precursor of the side chair, is next to the table.

The tabletop is bare except for a crucifix, an inkpot, and a writing stand, but personal possessions are in evidence elsewhere. A pair of slippers has been pushed under the bench. 15

The haphazard placement of several valuable folios on the bench is not a sign of sloppiness—bookcases have not yet been invented. A holder for paper notes is fixed to the rear wall, which also supports a penknife and a pair of scissors. Above them is a shelf with candlesticks. Some prayer beads and a straw brush hang from hooks; the little cupboard probably contains food. A stoup filled with holy water stands in a niche in the wall. An amazing gourd suspended from the ceiling is the only purely decorative object in the room. Except for the allegorical objects—a pilgrim's hat, a skull, and an hourglass—there is not much here that startles us, except, of course, the saint's tame lion, dozing in the foreground. The rest of the domestic objects are familiar; indeed, we feel that we could easily sit down on the empty back-stool and feel at home in this functional, but not austere, study.

The study in which I am writing is a similar size. Since it is on an upper floor, the roof slopes down sharply to meet the low walls, and if I reach up I can easily touch the angled ceiling, which is wood and resembles the underside of an overturned boat. A window faces west. In the morning, when I usually work, it allows a pale light to reflect off the white walls and the cedar ceiling onto the gray dhurrie that lies on the floor. Although the room resembles a Parisian attic, I do not see any roofs, chimney pots, or television aerials outside; instead I look out on an orchard, a line of poplar trees, and beyond them the beginning of the Adirondack Mountains. This view—it is not grand enough to be called a prospect—is English in its tamed domesticity.

I am sitting in a creaky old swivel-type wooden armchair of the sort that used to be found in newspaper offices; it has a battered foam cushion. When I use the telephone, I tilt back and feel like Pat O'Brien in *The Front Page*. Since the chair is on casters, I can roll around and reach the books, magazines, papers, pencils, and paperclips that surround me. Everything necessary is close to hand, as in any well-organized

workplace, whether it is a writer's room or the cockpit of a jumbo jet. Of course, the kind of organization required to write a book is not the same as is needed to fly a plane. Although some writers find comfort in a neatly organized desk, my own is covered three-deep with a jumble of half-opened books, encyclopedias, dictionaries, magazines, sheets of paper, and newspaper clippings. Finding something in this precarious pile is like playing pick-up-sticks. As the work progresses, the pile grows taller and the open space on which I write shrinks further. Even so, there is comfort in this confusion; only when a chapter is finished, and my desk is once again immaculately empty, do I feel a sense of unease. Like a blank page, a neat desk can intimidate.

Hominess is not neatness. Otherwise everyone would live in replicas of the kinds of sterile and impersonal homes that appear in interior-design and architectural magazines. What these spotless rooms lack, or what crafty photographers have carefully removed, is any evidence of human occupation. In spite of the artfully placed vases and casually arranged art books, the imprint of their inhabitants is missing. These pristine interiors fascinate and repel me. Can people really live without clutter? How do they stop the Sunday papers from spreading over the living room? How do they manage without toothpaste tubes and half-used soap bars in their bathrooms? Where do they hide the detritus of their everyday lives?

Many personal mementos, photographs and objects—reliquaries of family, friends, and career—fill my study. A small gouache of a young man—myself—seated in a Formentera doorway. A sepia-colored photograph of a German zeppelin hovering over Boston on the way to Lakehurst. A photograph of my own house under construction. A Gujarati wall hanging. A framed note from a Famous Man. A corkboard, with messages, telephone numbers, visiting cards, yellowing unanswered letters and forgotten bills. A black sweater, some books, and a leather briefcase are lying on the daybed which

stands on the other side of the room. My writing desk is an old one. Although it is not a particularly valuable antique, its elegance recalls a time when letter writing was a leisurely art, carefully performed with pen and ink and blotter. I feel a little ashamed as I scrawl untidy notes on legal pads of cheap yellow paper. On the desk, in addition to the mess of books and papers, are a heavy brass padlock used as a paperweight, a tin can full of pencils, a cast-iron Sioux Indian-head bookend, and a silver snuffbox with the likeness of George II on its cover. Did it once belong to my grandfather? I cannot remember. The plastic cigarette box next to it must have—in addition to the prewar Polish marque, it carries his initials.

Personal possessions, a chair, a desk—a place to write. Not much has changed in over four hundred years. Or has it? Dürer's subject was a hermit, so it was natural to show him working alone, but it was unusual for someone in the sixteenth century to have his own room. It was more than a hundred years later that rooms to which the individual could retreat from public view came into being—they were called "privacies." So, although the title of the engraving refers to this as a "study," it was really a room with many uses, all of them public. In spite of the calm that is present in this masterly picture, the type of quiet and seclusion that we normally associate with a writer's workplace would have been impossible. Houses were full of people, much more so than today, and privacy was unknown. Moreover, rooms did not have specialized functions; at noon, the writing stand was put away and the householders sat around the table and had their meal. In the evening the table was taken apart and the long bench became a settee. At night, what now served as a living room was turned into a bedroom. There is no bed visible in this particular engraving, but in other versions Dürer showed the scholar writing on a small lectern, and using his bed as a seat. If we could sit down on one of the back-stools

it would not be long before we would begin to fidget. The seat cushion does offer some padding against the hard, flat wood, but this is not a chair to relax in.

Dürer's room contains a few tools—an hourglass, a pair of scissors, and a quill pen—but no machines or mechanical devices. Although glass manufacturing had progressed far enough that the large windows were a useful source of light during the day, after nightfall the candles were brought down from the shelf. Writing became impossible, or at least uncomfortable. Heating was primitive. Houses in the sixteenth century had a fireplace or cookstove only in the main room, and no heating in the rest of the house. In winter, this room with its heavy masonry walls and stone floor was extremely cold. Voluminous clothing, such as Jerome wore, was not a requisite of fashion but a thermal necessity, and the old scholar's hunched posture was an indication not only of piety but also of chilliness.

I too am bent over my writing, not in front of a writing stand but before the amber phosphor screen of a word processor. Instead of the scratching of a quill on parchment, I can hear faint clicks, and occasional purring sounds as words are transferred from my own mind to the machine, and from the machine's memory to the plastic disks on which they are recorded. This machine, which, we are led to believe, will revolutionize the way we live, has already affected literature—it has restored quiet to the act of writing. One thing noticeably missing in old pictures of people writing are wastepaper baskets; paper was much too valuable to be thrown away, and a writer had to edit in his head. In that sense we have come full circle, for the word processor has done away with the crumpling of paper. Instead, I press a button, the screen flickers, and the deed is done; the unwanted words disappear into an electronic shredder. It has a calming effect.

So, in fact, a great deal *has* changed in the home. Some of the changes are obvious—the advances in heating and lighting

that are due to new technology. Our sitting furniture has become much more sophisticated, better adapted to relaxation. Other changes are more subtle—the way that rooms are used, or how much privacy is afforded by them. Is my study more comfortable? The obvious answer is yes, but if we were to ask Dürer, we might be surprised by his reply. To begin with, he would not understand the question. “What exactly do you mean by comfortable?” he might respond in puzzled curiosity.

The word “comfortable” did not originally refer to enjoyment or contentment. Its Latin root was *confortare*—to strengthen or console—and this remained its meaning for centuries. We use it this way when we say “He was a comfort to his mother in her old age.” It was in this sense that it was used in theology: the “Comforter” was the Holy Spirit. Along the way, “comfort” also acquired a legal meaning: in the sixteenth century a “comforter” was someone who aided or abetted a crime. This idea of support was eventually broadened to include people and things that afforded a measure of satisfaction, and “comfortable” came to mean tolerable or sufficient—one spoke of a bed of comfortable width, although not yet of a comfortable bed. This continues to be the meaning of the expression “a comfortable income”—ample but not luxurious. Succeeding generations expanded this idea of convenience, and eventually “comfortable” acquired its sense of physical well-being and enjoyment, but not until the eighteenth century, long after Dürer’s death. Sir Walter Scott was one of the first novelists to use it this new way when he wrote, “Let it freeze without, we are comfortable within.” Later meanings of the word were almost exclusively concerned with contentment, often of a thermal variety: “comforter” in secular Victorian England no longer referred to the Redeemer, but to a long woolen scarf; today it describes a quilted bed coverlet.

Words are important. Language is not just a medium, like

a water pipe, it is a reflection of how we think. We use words not only to describe objects but also to express ideas, and the introduction of words into the language marks the simultaneous introduction of ideas into the consciousness. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “Giving names to objects consists in moving immediate, unreflected, perhaps ignored events on to the plane of reflection and of the objective mind.”<sup>1</sup> Take a word like “weekend,” which originated at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike the medieval “weekday” that distinguished the days that one worked from the Lord’s Day, the profane “weekend”—which originally described the period when shops and businesses were closed—came to reflect a way of life organized around the active pursuit of leisure. The English word, and the English idea, has entered many languages in unchanged form (*le weekend, el weekend, das weekend*). Another example. Our grandparents inserted paper rolls into their player pianos. As far as they were concerned, the piano and the piano roll formed part of the same machine. We, on the other hand, draw a distinction between the machine and the instructions that we give it. We call the machine hardware, and to describe the instructions we have invented a new word, “software.” This is more than jargon; the word represents a different way of thinking about technology. Its addition to the language marks an important moment.\*

The appearance of the word “comfort” in the context of domestic well-being is similarly of more than lexicographic interest. There are other words in the English language with this meaning—“cozy,” for instance—but they are of later origin. The first use of “comfort” to signify a level of domestic

\* The first use of the word “software” was in 1963 (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), although at that time it was used only by computer engineers. Its entry into the vernacular, and into the public’s consciousness, occurred more than a decade later, when inexpensive home computers made their appearance.

amenity is not documented until the eighteenth century. How to explain this tardy arrival? It is said that the Canadian Inuit have many words to describe a wide variety of types of snow. Like sailors, who have an extended vocabulary to describe the weather, they need to differentiate between new snow and old, hard-packed and loose, and so on. We have no such need, and we call it all "snow." On the other hand, cross-country skiers, who do need to distinguish between different snow conditions, do so by referring to the different colors of ski wax: they speak of purple snow or blue snow. These are not exactly new words, but they do represent an attempt to refine the language to meet a special need. In a similar way, people began to use "comfort" in a different way because they needed a special word to articulate an idea which previously had either not existed or had not required expression.

Let us start this examination of comfort by trying to understand what happened in Europe in the eighteenth century, and why people suddenly found that they needed a special word to describe a particular attribute of the interiors of their homes. To do this it is necessary to look first at an earlier period—the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages are an opaque period of history that is open to many interpretations. As a French scholar has written, "The Renaissance viewed medieval society as scholastic and static, the Reformation saw it as hierarchical and corrupt, and the Age of Enlightenment considered it to have been irrational and superstitious."<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth-century Romantics, who idealized the Middle Ages, described them as the antithesis of the Industrial Revolution. Writers and artists like Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin popularized the image of the Middle Ages as an unmechanical, rustic arcadia. This latest revision has greatly influenced our own view of the Middle Ages, and has given rise to the idea that medieval

society was both untechnological, and uninterested in technology.

This notion is altogether mistaken. The Middle Ages not only produced illuminated books, but also eyeglasses, not only the cathedral, but also the coal mine. Revolutionary changes occurred in both primary industry and manufacturing. The first recorded instance of mass production—of horse-shoes—occurred during the Middle Ages. Between the tenth and the thirteenth century, a technological boom produced the mechanical clock, the suction pump, the horizontal loom, the waterwheel, the windmill, and even, on both shores of the English Channel, the tidal mill. Agricultural innovations formed the economic foundation for all this technical activity. The deep plow and the idea of crop rotation increased productivity as much as fourfold, so that agricultural yields in the thirteenth century would not be surpassed for another five hundred years.<sup>3</sup> Far from being a technological Black Hole, the Middle Ages marked the authentic beginning of industrialization in Europe. The period's influence was felt until at least the eighteenth century in all aspects of everyday life, including attitudes toward the home.

Any discussion about domestic life during this period must include an important caveat: it cannot refer to most of the population, who were poor. Writing about the decline of the Middle Ages, the historian J. H. Huizinga described a world of sharp contrasts, where health, wealth, and good fortune (that old toast) were enjoyed as much for their rarity as for their advantages. "We, at the present day, can hardly understand the keenness with which a fur coat, a good fire on the hearth, a soft bed, a glass of wine, were formerly enjoyed."<sup>4</sup> He also made the point that medieval popular art, which we appreciate for its simple beauty, was prized by its makers even more for its splendor and pomp. Its overdecorated sumptuousness, which we often overlook, is evidence of what was needed to make an impression on a public whose sensibilities

were dulled by the wretched conditions under which they lived. The extravagant pageants and religious festivals which characterized that time can be understood not only as a celebration, but also as an antidote to the miseries of everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

The poor were extremely badly housed. They were without water or sanitation, with almost no furniture and few possessions, a situation which, in Europe at least, continued until the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> In the towns, their houses were so small that family life was compromised; these tiny one-room hovels were little more than shelters for sleeping. There was room only for the infants—the older children were separated from their parents and sent to work as apprentices or servants. The result of these deprivations, according to some historians, was that concepts such as “home” and “family” did not exist for these miserable souls.<sup>7</sup> To speak of comfort and discomfort under such circumstances is absurd; this was bare existence.

If the poor did not share in medieval prosperity, there was a different class of persons who did: the town-dwellers. The free town was among the most important, and most original, of all the medieval innovations. Windmills and waterwheels could have been invented by other societies, and were, but the free town, which stood apart from the predominantly feudal countryside, was uniquely European. Its inhabitants—the *francs bourgeois*, the *burghers*, the *borghese*, and the *burgesses*—would create a new urban civilization.<sup>8</sup> The word “bourgeois” first occurred in France in the early eleventh century.<sup>9</sup> It described the merchants and tradesmen who lived in walled towns, governed themselves through elected councils, and in most cases owed allegiance directly to the king (who established the free town) instead of to a lord. These “cityzens” (the idea of national citizenship came much later) were distinct from the rest of society, which was either feudal, ecclesiastical, or agricultural. This meant that at the same

time as the vassals were being dragged off to some local war, the bourgeois in the towns had a considerable measure of independence and were able to benefit from the economic prosperity. What places the bourgeois in the center of any discussion of domestic comfort is that unlike the aristocrat, who lived in a fortified castle, or the cleric, who lived in a monastery, or the serf, who lived in a hovel, the bourgeois lived in a house. Our examination of the home begins here.

The typical bourgeois townhouse of the fourteenth century combined living and work. Building plots had restricted street frontages, since the fortified medieval town was by necessity densely constructed. These long narrow buildings usually consisted of two floors over an undercroft, or basement, which was used for storage. The main floor of the house, or at least that part that faced the street, was a shop or—if the owner was an artisan—a work area. The living quarters were not, as we would expect, a series of rooms; instead, they consisted of a single large chamber—the hall—which was open up to the rafters. People cooked, ate, entertained, and slept in this space. Nevertheless, the interiors of restored medieval houses always look empty. The large rooms have only a few pieces of furniture, a tapestry on the wall, a stool beside the large fireplace. This minimalism is not a modern affectation; medieval homes were sparsely furnished. What furniture there was was uncomplicated. Chests served as both storage and seats. The less affluent sometimes used a chest (*truhe*) as a kind of bed—the clothes inside serving as a soft mattress. Benches, stools and demountable trestle tables were common. The beds were also collapsible, although by the end of the Middle Ages more important personages slept in large permanent beds, which usually stood in a corner. Beds also served as seats, for people sat, sprawled, and squatted wherever they could, on chests, stools, cushions, steps, and often the floor. If contemporary paintings are anything to judge by, medieval posture was a casual affair.

One place where people did not often sit was in chairs. The Pharaonic Egyptians had used chairs, and the ancient Greeks refined them to elegant and comfortable perfection in the fifth century B.C. The Romans introduced them to Europe, but after the collapse of their empire—during the so-called Dark Ages—the chair was forgotten. Its reappearance is difficult to pinpoint, but by the fifteenth century, chairs started to be used again. But what a different chair! The Greek *klismos* had had a low, concave backrest that was shaped to the human body, and splayed legs that allowed the sitter to lean back. The comfortable posture of a lounging Greek, with his arm bent casually over the low chair back and his legs crossed, is recognizably modern. No such position was possible in a medieval chair, which had a hard, flat seat and a tall, straight back whose function was more decorative than ergonomic. During the Middle Ages, chairs—even the boxlike armchairs—were not intended to be comfortable; they were symbols of authority. You had to be important to sit down in a chair—unimportant people sat on benches. As one historian put it, if you were entitled to a chair you sat up in it: nobody ever sat *back*.<sup>10</sup>

One reason for the simplicity, and the scarcity, of medieval furniture was the way in which people used their homes. In the Middle Ages people didn't so much live in their houses as camp in them. The nobility owned many residences, and traveled frequently. When they did so, they rolled up the tapestries, packed the chests, took apart the beds, and moved their household with them. This explains why so much medieval furniture is portable or demountable. The French and Italian words for furniture—*mobilier* and *mobilieria*—mean “the movables.”<sup>11</sup>

The town bourgeois were less mobile, but they too needed movable furniture, although for a different reason. The medieval home was a public, not a private place. The hall was in constant use, for cooking, for eating, for entertaining guests,

for transacting business, as well as nightly for sleeping. These different functions were accommodated by moving the furniture around as required. There was no “dining table,” just a table which was used for preparing food, eating, counting money, and, in a pinch, for sleeping. Since the number of diners varied, the number of tables, and chairs, had to increase and decrease to accommodate them. At night, the tables were put away and the beds were brought out. As a result, there was no attempt to form permanent arrangements. Paintings of medieval interiors reflect an improvisation in the haphazard placement of the furniture, which was simply put around the edges of the room when not in use. Except for the armchair, and later the bed, one has the impression that little importance was attached to the individual pieces of furniture; they were treated more as equipment than as prized personal possessions.

Medieval interiors, with their stained-glass windows, pew-like benches, and Gothic tracery, always betray their ecclesiastical origins. The monastic orders were the multinational corporations of that time—they not only were the source of scientific and technological innovation but also influenced other aspects of medieval life, including music, writing, art, and medicine. Similarly, they affected the design of secular furniture, much of which originated in religious surroundings: the chest for storing vestments, the refectory table, the reading lectern, the stall. The first recorded drawers were used for filing church documents.<sup>12</sup> However, since the life-style of the monks was to be ascetic, there was no reason for them to apply their prodigious inventive energy to making life more pleasurable, and most of their furniture was intentionally severe.<sup>13</sup> Straight-backed pews focused the mind on higher matters (and kept the sitter awake), and hard benches (which can still be found in Oxford colleges) discouraged dawdling at the refectory table.

What is unexpected about medieval houses, however, is

not the lack of furniture (the emptiness of modern architecture has accustomed us to that) but the crush and hubbub of life within them. These houses were not necessarily large—except compared to the hovels of the poor—but they were full of people. This was partly because, in the absence of restaurants, bars, and hotels, they served as public meeting places for entertaining and transacting business, but also because the household itself was large. In addition to the immediate family it included employees, servants, apprentices, friends, and protégés—households of up to twenty-five persons were not uncommon. Since all these people lived in one or at most two rooms, privacy was unknown.\* Anyone who has been in the military, or in a boarding school, can imagine what it must have been like. Only exceptional people—hermits or scholars (like St. Jerome)—could shut themselves up alone. Even sleeping was a communal business. Not only were there usually many beds in a room—the will of Richard Toky, a London grocer who died in 1391, indicates that he had four beds and a cradle in his hall—there were usually many people in each bed.<sup>14</sup> This explains the size of medieval beds; ten feet square was normal. The Great Bed of Ware was so large that “Four couples might cosily lie side by side, And thus without touching each other abide.”<sup>15</sup> How did people achieve intimacy under such conditions? It appears that they did not. Medieval paintings frequently show a couple in bed or bath, and nearby in the same room friends or servants in untroubled, and apparently unembarrassed, conversation.<sup>16</sup>

We should not, however, jump to the conclusion that medieval domestic life was primitive. Bathing, for instance, was fashionable. Here the monasteries also played a role, for not only were they centers of piety, they were also centers of

\* The concept of privacy is also absent in many non-Western cultures, notably Japan. Lacking an indigenous word to describe this quality, the Japanese have adopted an English one—*praihashii*.

cleanliness. Hygiene was important to the efficiency-minded Cistercian order, for example, St. Bernard, their founder, had spelled it all out in the Rule, an operating manual that dealt not only with religious matters, but also with the mundane. The purpose of the tonsure, for instance, was not symbolic; monks' heads were shaved to control lice. The Rule described work schedules in detail as well as the layout of the buildings, which followed a standardized plan, like businessmen's hotels today. It has been said that a blind monk could enter any of the more than seven hundred Cistercian monasteries and not get lost.<sup>17</sup> Each complex included a *lavatorium*, or bathhouse, fitted with wooden tubs and with facilities for heating the water; small basins with constantly running cold water for hand-washing before and after meals were outside the refectory. The *misericord*, where dying monks were ritually bathed, was situated beside the infirmary, while the *reredorter*, a wing containing latrines, was built next to the dormitory (the *dorter*). The wastewaters from these facilities were carried away in covered-over streams, in effect underground sewers.<sup>18</sup>

Most bourgeois houses in England were provided with household drainage and underground cesspits (although not with sewers). There are many examples of fifteenth-century houses (not only palaces and castles) which had so-called “garderobes” or privies on the upper floor, and chutes leading down to the basement.<sup>19</sup> These were periodically cleaned out, and while the town slept, the “night soil” would be transported to the countryside, to be used as fertilizer. More often, garderobes and privies emptied directly into rivers and streams, which resulted in the contamination of well water and frequent outbreaks of cholera. It was the same type of scientific ignorance, not dirtiness, that accounted for the inability of people in the fourteenth century to resist the Black Death—they did not understand that its principal carriers were rats and fleas.

Lacking the Rule, the laity were not as observant of hygiene



as the monks, but there is evidence that they too paid attention to cleanliness. A fourteenth-century manual, *Ménagère de Paris*, counseled the housewife, "The entrance to your home, that is the parlor and the entrances whereby people come in to speak within the house, must be swept early in the morning and kept clean, and the stools, benches and cushions dusted and shaken."<sup>20</sup> The floor of the hall was strewn with straw in winter, and with herbs and flowers in the summer. This charming practice had a practical purpose, both to keep the floor warm and to maintain an appearance, and an odor, of cleanliness. Washstands and tubs were widely used, although there were no bathrooms. Only in the monasteries, or in exceptional buildings such as Westminster Palace, was there a room devoted exclusively to bathing; most tubs, like the rest of the furnishings, were portable.<sup>21</sup> The bathtubs, which were wooden, were often large, and communal bathing was common. Bathing was a social ritual in the Middle Ages, as it is in some oriental cultures today. It was often a part of festivities such as marriages and banquets, and it was accompanied by conversation, music, food, drink, and, inevitably, lovemaking.<sup>22</sup>

Medieval table manners were elaborate. Etiquette was taken seriously, and our custom of giving precedence to guests, or offering them second helpings, originated in the Middle Ages. Washing the hands before eating was another medieval politeness which has survived to the present day. Washing the hands before, after, and during the meal was necessary in the Middle Ages, because although soup spoons were used, forks were not, and people ate largely with their fingers; as in India or Saudi Arabia today, this did not imply indelicacy. Food was served on large platters, cut into smaller portions, and placed on trenchers, large slices of bread that—like Mexican tortillas or Indian chapatis—served as edible plates. The popular image of eating in the Middle Ages is one of homely

meals where the food was plentiful but not very sophisticated; quite to the contrary, we would be struck by the diversity of medieval dishes. The growth of cities encouraged the exchange of commodities such as German beer, French and Italian wine, Spanish sugar, Polish salt, Russian honey, and, for the wealthy, spices from the East. Medieval food was far from bland; cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and pepper were combined with local herbs such as parsley, mint, garlic, and thyme.<sup>23</sup> There is a good deal of documentation about court banquets, which were extravagant and consisted of many courses served in carefully orchestrated sequence. Much of the variety was the result of eating game as well as domestic animals, and regal menus sometimes sound like lists of an animal protection fund: peacocks, egrets, herons, bitterns, and eagles. Such exotica catch the eye, but even the humbler bourgeois ate well. Here are the ingredients for "farced chycken," a common dish described by Chaucer: a baked chicken stuffed with lentils, cherries, cheese, ale, and oats and garnished with a sauce of "pandemayne" (fine white bread) crumbs, herbs, and salt mixed with "Romeney" (a malmsey wine).<sup>24</sup>

So what are we to make of the home in the Middle Ages? Walter Scott, after describing the interior of a twelfth-century castle in *Ivanhoe*, warned the reader, "Magnificence there was, with some rude attempt at taste; but of comfort there was little, and, being unknown, it was unmissed."<sup>25</sup> According to the twentieth-century architectural historian Siegfried Giedion, "From today's point of view, the Middle Ages had no comfort at all."<sup>26</sup> Even Lewis Mumford, who admired this period, concluded that "the medieval house had scarcely an inkling of . . . comfort."<sup>27</sup> These judgments are true, but should not be misinterpreted. People in the Middle Ages did not altogether lack comfort, as I have tried to show. Their homes were neither rustic nor crude, nor should we imagine that the persons inhabiting them did so without pleasure. But what

comfort there was never explicit. What our medieval ancestors did lack was the awareness of comfort as an objective *idea*.

If we were to sit down at a medieval meal we would complain about the hard bench. But the medieval diner was less concerned with how she or he sat than with *where* he or she sat. To be placed "above the salt" was an honor reserved only for a distinguished few. To sit in the wrong place, or next to the wrong person, was a serious gaffe. Manners dictated not only where and next to whom the members of the five social classes sat, but even what they could eat.<sup>28</sup> We sometimes complain about our own regimented society, but order and ritual governed medieval life to an extent which we would find intolerable. People lived by the bell. The day was divided into eight periods, and the ringing of the matins or nones bells not only signified the time for prayers within the monastery but also regulated work and commerce in the town. There was no all-night shopping; markets opened and closed according to strict times. In the city of London, you could not buy foreign cheese before nones (mid-afternoon) or meat after vespers (sunset).<sup>29</sup> When mechanical clocks were invented, these rules were refined, and fish could not be sold before ten o'clock in the morning, nor wine or ale before six o'clock. Disobedience was punished by imprisonment.

Rules also governed how people dressed. The prime function of medieval dress was to communicate status, and formal regulations described exactly how the different social classes should dress. An important baron was permitted to buy more new sets of clothes per year than a simple knight; a wealthy merchant was grudgingly allowed the same vanities as a nobleman of the lowest rank, although ermine was always reserved for the aristocracy.<sup>30</sup> Some could wear brocade, others colored silk and embroidered fabrics. Even certain colors were privileged. Headgear was ubiquitous, and hats were rarely removed. Important people wore them while eating, sleeping,

and even bathing. This was not necessarily uncomfortable, unless you were a bishop wearing a tall miter all through dinner, but it does indicate the importance that this obsessively ordered society placed on public expression and on formality, and the secondary role that it willingly assigned to personal comfort. This was especially so at the end of the Middle Ages, when conventions of dress became exaggerated to a ridiculous extent.<sup>31</sup> Women wore the *hennin*, a tall conical headpiece with a trailing veil. Men wore *poulaines*—bizarre shoes with extremely long, pointed toes—and tunics with trailing sleeves and doublets resembling miniskirts. All who could afford it ornamented their clothes with tiny bells, colored ribbons, and precious stones. A well-dressed squire resembled Michael Jackson in a rhinestone-covered nightclub costume.

It is possible to describe how medieval people ate, dressed, and lived, but none of it makes much sense if we do not also make an effort to understand how they thought. That is difficult, for if ever the expression "a world of contrasts" applied, it was during the Middle Ages. Religiosity and avarice, delicacy and cruelty, luxury and squalor, asceticism and eroticism existed side by side. Our own more or less consistent world pales by comparison. Imagine a medieval scholar. After a morning of quiet devotion in a cathedral (which itself was a weird combination of *sanctum sanctorum* and bestiary), he could attend a public execution in which punishments of extreme cruelty would be carried out according to a pedantic etiquette. If he was like most people it would not be an occasion for ribaldry, but for shedding a tear as the condemned man or woman (before being dismembered) delivered a homily to the crowd. Life "bore the mixed smell of blood and of roses."<sup>32</sup> Our idea of the Middle Ages is often based on music and religious art, which give a false impression of medieval sensibilities. Celebrations, for instance, were an astonishing mixture of good and bad taste. The same scholar, invited to

a court dinner, would wash his hands in perfumed water and exchange genteel courtesies with his neighbor or take part in a madrigal. At the same time he would guffaw at dwarfs jumping out of a huge baked *entremet* (pie), and have dishes brought to him by servitors mounted on horseback. In trying to explain the apparent incompatibility between the extreme indecency of certain customs and the modesty of behavior imposed by courtesy, Huizinga suggests that the Middle Ages consisted of two superimposed layers of civilization—one, primitive and pre-Christian, the other, more recent, courtly and religious.<sup>33</sup> These two layers were frequently in conflict, and what seem to us to be inconsistent emotions are the not always successful attempts to reconcile a cruel reality with the ideal harmony that both chivalry and religion demanded. The excitable medieval mind was constantly oscillating between these opposite poles.

The combination of the primitive and the refined was reflected in the medieval home. Rooms hung with richly decorated tapestries were poorly heated, luxuriously dressed gentlemen and ladies sat on plain benches and stools, courtiers who might spend fifteen minutes in elaborate greeting slept three to a bed and were unmindful of personal intimacy. Why did they not simply improve their living conditions? Technical skill and ingenuity were not lacking. Part of the explanation is that people in the Middle Ages thought differently about the subject of function, especially when it came to their domestic surroundings. For us, the function of a thing has to do with its utility (the function of a chair is to be sat on, for example), and we separate this from its other attributes, such as beauty, age, or style; in medieval life there were no such distinctions. Every object had a meaning and a place in life that was as much a part of its function as its immediate purpose, and these two were inseparable. Since there was no such thing as "pure function" it was difficult for the medieval mind to consider functional improvements; that would have

meant tampering with reality itself. Colors had meanings, events had meanings, names had meanings—nothing was accidental.\* Partly this was superstition, and partly a belief in a divinely ordered universe. Utilitarian objects such as benches and stools, since they lacked meanings, were scarcely given any thought.

There was also little differentiation between utility and ceremony. Simple functions, like washing the hands, acquired ceremonial forms, and ceremonies like breaking bread were performed unself-consciously as a natural part of life. The emphasis that the Middle Ages placed on ceremony underlines what John Lukacs has called the external character of medieval civilization.<sup>34</sup> What mattered then was the external world, and one's place in it. Life was a public affair, and just as one did not have a strongly developed self-consciousness, one did not have a room of one's own. It was the medieval mind, not the absence of comfortable chairs or central heating, that explains the austerity of the medieval home. It is not so much that in the Middle Ages comfort was unknown, as Walter Scott would have it, but rather that it was not needed.

John Lukacs points out that words such as "self-confidence," "self-esteem," "melancholy," and "sentimental" appeared in English or French in their modern senses only two or three hundred years ago. Their use marked the emergence of something new in the human consciousness: the appearance of the internal world of the individual, of the self, and of the family. The significance of the evolution of domestic comfort can only be appreciated in this context. It is much

\* Medieval houses, like church bells, swords, and cannons, were personified by being given proper names. This custom has continued up to the twentieth century—Adolf Hitler called his country house Eagle's Nest, Winston Churchill, with characteristic English self-depreciation, Cosy Pig—but as houses have become invested with economic rather than emotional value, names have given way to numbers.

more than a simple search for physical well-being; it begins in the appreciation of the house as a setting for an emerging interior life. In Lukacs's words, "as the self-consciousness of medieval people was spare, the interiors of their houses were bare, including the halls of nobles and of kings. The interior furniture of houses appeared together with the interior furniture of minds."<sup>35</sup>

After the end of the Middle Ages and until the seventeenth century, the conditions of domestic life changed slowly.<sup>36</sup> Houses were larger and more sturdily built than those of earlier times—stone replaced wood, for instance—but their lack of physical amenities persisted. There were some minor improvements: glass, which had previously been expensive, became less so, and began to be used in windows in place of oiled paper, although openable windows remained a rarity.<sup>37</sup> The mantled fireplace and chimney (which had been invented as early as the eleventh century) gained a wider acceptance, and most habitable rooms were equipped with a fireplace. Unfortunately, fireplaces were not well designed—the flues were too large and the hearths too deep—and for hundreds of years rooms were both smoky and poorly heated, a situation which was remedied only in the eighteenth century. Stoves of glazed earthenware were developed in Germany, but spread slowly to the rest of Europe, and although they were introduced to France in the sixteenth century, they took more than two hundred years to achieve popularity.<sup>38</sup> Lighting also continued to be crude. Until the coming of gaslight in the early 1800s, there was no efficient way of providing illumination at night. Candles and oil lamps were expensive and not widely used; after nightfall most people went to bed.<sup>39</sup>

As far as bathing was concerned, there was a regression from medieval standards. Public baths (which, like hospitals, had been copied from Islamic culture, thanks to returning

Crusaders) had been built in large numbers in most European cities during the Middle Ages. However, after degenerating into brothels in the early 1500s, they were banned, and did not reemerge until the eighteenth century.<sup>40</sup> Since private bathrooms were nonexistent, personal hygiene suffered. Moreover, water supply was becoming a problem. As cities like Paris and London grew larger and denser, the medieval wells became polluted, and people had to rely increasingly on public fountains in the street—there were twenty-three such fountains in Paris in 1643.<sup>41</sup> Water consumption, always a good indicator of hygiene, declined. The effort required to carry water to the home, and especially to the upper floors, severely restricted its use, and bathing, which had been common in the Middle Ages, fell out of fashion.

Sanitation remained primitive, not much better than in the Middle Ages. Some efforts were made to improve the situation, and beginning in the sixteenth century, a Parisian city ordinance required that all houses be equipped with a privy emptying into a cesspool built beneath the courtyard.<sup>42</sup> A common privy was located on the ground floor, and sometimes on an upper level, off the staircase.<sup>43</sup> Considering that thirty or forty persons were living in the building, two or three toilet seats were hardly a luxury. Chamber pots were popular. As there were no sewers and no wastewater pipes, their contents, like all dirty water, were disposed of in a haphazard fashion, which on the upper floors meant directly out of a window and into the street.\*

\* The English slang for toilet—"loo"—is said to have been derived from this practice. An eighteenth-century Edinburgh custom was to shout "Gardylloo" before throwing slops into the street; this was a mispronunciation of the earlier French warning "*Garde à l'eau!*" although why Scotsmen should have chosen to cry this warning in a foreign tongue is unclear. There is another, less convoluted explanation: French eighteenth-century architectural drawings frequently identified the room containing the privy as *petits lieux* or just *lieu*, which in English became "loo."

Physical amenities improved slowly, yet other changes were taking place—not changes in technology but changes in manners and attitudes. The foremost city of Europe was Paris, and we have detailed records of the types of houses that were built there during the seventeenth century.<sup>44</sup> A typical bourgeois house stood on the original medieval plot, but it consisted of four or five floors rather than two—which reflected the price and availability of land in the center of this rapidly growing city. The house was arranged around an internal courtyard. The lowest floors housed a commercial space and stables as well as the living quarters of the proprietor and his family, servants, and employees. This was still a medieval house in the composition of the household and the variety of activities that took place within it. The main room was called the *salle*—a large space similar to the hall and used for dining, entertaining, and receiving visitors. Cooking was no longer done on the central hearth but in a separate room reserved for that purpose. Since cooking smells were considered unpleasant by that otherwise malodorous society, the kitchen was not adjacent to the *salle*, but was usually located some distance away on the other side of the courtyard. Although some people still slept in the *salle* on collapsible beds, there was a new room, which was often used exclusively for sleeping—the *chambre*. There were also secondary rooms which were connected to the bedchamber: the *garde-robe* (not to be confused with the English privy, this room was a wardrobe or dressing room), and the *cabinet* (storeroom). These names can be misleading, however, for both the *garde-robe* and the *cabinet* were windowed rooms that were large enough to be used for sleeping and often contained a fireplace.

The typical Parisian bourgeois house contained more than one family; it was more like an apartment building. The upper floors consisted of *chambres* with adjoining *garde-robes* and *cabinets* that were rented to tenants. But these quarters were not planned as separate apartments. The tenant rented as

many rooms as he needed, or could afford, often on more than one floor. The rooms were large; the bedchamber was at least twenty-five feet square, and the *garde-robe* and the *cabinet* were about the size of a modern bedroom. Since these accommodations were never provided with a *salle* or a kitchen—the fireplace in the bedchamber was large enough to cook in—the life of the family continued to take place in one room. Nevertheless, a desire for a greater measure of privacy was evidenced by the separation of the masters from their servants, who, together with the small children, usually had beds in the smaller adjacent rooms.

The existence of rented accommodations underlines a change that had occurred since the Middle Ages: many people no longer lived and worked in the same building. Although most shopkeepers, merchants, and artisans still lived “over the store,” there was a growing number of bourgeois—builders, lawyers, notaries, civil servants—for whom the home was exclusively a residence. The result of this separation was that—as far as the outside world was concerned—the house was becoming a more *private* place. Together with this privatization of the home arose a growing sense of intimacy, of identifying the house exclusively with family life.

Within the home, however, personal privacy remained relatively unimportant. Salomon de Brosse, who was appointed royal architect to Henry IV in 1608 and who designed the Palais de Luxembourg, lived with his wife and seven children, and an unrecorded number of servants, in two adjoining rooms.<sup>45</sup> These rooms were not only crowded with people, they were full of furniture: vertical cupboards, dressers, sideboards, buffets, and commodes. This was the age of literacy, and people also needed writing tables—secretaries and bureaus—as well as bookcases. Four-poster beds became popular—de Brosse owned four of them—and they usually had side curtains, which afforded a greater measure of warmth, as well as some privacy, to their occupants.

The modern fascination with furniture begins in the seventeenth century. Furniture was no longer simply equipment but was thought of as a valuable possession, and began to be a part of the decoration of the room. It was usually made of walnut instead of oak, or (if it was more expensive) of ebony—in French, a cabinetmaker is still called an *ébéniste*. Seating had become more elaborate. The back-stool, which had been invented in the late sixteenth century (to accommodate women's wide skirts), evolved into the side chair, which was usually padded and upholstered. The straight-backed chair, which had survived the Middle Ages, was being replaced by chairs which were angled and shaped to better accommodate the body. There was a greater variety of furniture than in the past, but it was not yet assigned to specialized rooms and it continued to be unimaginatively arranged.

There was something about these seventeenth-century interiors that precluded a true feeling of intimacy, however. Medieval emptiness had been filled with chairs, commodes, and canopied beds, but in an almost thoughtless way. These crowded rooms were not really furnished. It is as if the owners had gone on a shopping spree and the next day discovered that there was not enough space for all their impulsive purchases. This was the result of the sort of bourgeois nervousness that Abraham Bosse satirized in his engravings, which depict people who are always, to some extent, acting, and for whom the house is above all a setting for social theater. Sandwiched as they were between the aristocracy and the lower classes, the French bourgeoisie was always striving to conform, to distance itself from the latter and achieve the standing of the former.

The nobility and the richest bourgeois lived in much larger individual townhouses, called *hôtels*, which were grander and more luxuriously appointed—what we would call mansions. They varied in size from the Hôtel de Liancourt (designed in

part by de Brosse), which had five connected pavilions grouped around two large courts, to smaller structures with as few as twelve rooms. They too were beginning to express a growing desire for privacy. They were hidden behind the houses of the commoners and did not present an impressive exterior appearance; their gardens and courts were invisible from the street. Inside, however, everything was planned for show. After crossing an imposing courtyard, a visitor to the Hôtel Lambert, home of Jean-Baptiste Lambert de Thorigny, president of the Cour des Comptes, ascended a grand staircase, passed through an oval vestibule, and reached an antechamber. This was merely a waiting room, that, as in the past, continued to be used as both reception room and the servants' bedroom. The bedchamber of Monsieur le Président was beyond. There were no corridors in these houses—each room was connected directly to its neighbor—and architects prided themselves on aligning all the doors *enfilade*, so that there was an unobstructed view from one end of the house to the other. The priority given to appearances, instead of to privacy, is evident; all traffic, servants as well as guests, passed through every room to get to the next.

Just as privacy was ignored, so also was sanitation. Privies were considered plebian. Eminent personages such as Jean-Baptiste Lambert de Thorigny did not go to the toilet—the toilet came to them. The “close stool” was a box with a padded lid which servants brought into the room as the aristocratic need dictated. The close stools were not left long in the room, however, for as a nineteenth-century historian reminds us, this was a *meuble odorant*.<sup>46</sup> During Louis XIV's reign there were almost three hundred such stools in the palace of Versailles, although this may not have been enough, for, as the Duchess of Orléans noted in her diary, “There is one dirty thing at Court I shall never get used to: the people stationed in the galleries in front of our rooms piss into all

the corners.<sup>47</sup> More fastidious Parisians were driven to the public gardens of the Tuileries, where they alighted from their coaches and relieved themselves under the yews.<sup>48</sup>

There were no bathrooms in the Hôtel Lambert. For one thing, frequent bathing was not considered necessary, for another, the idea of a room dedicated exclusively to bathing would have puzzled seventeenth-century Parisians. Not because space was insufficient in these large homes, but because the idea of associating any specialized functions with individual rooms had not yet occurred to them. There were no dining rooms, for instance. Tables were demountable, and people ate in different parts of the house—in the *salle*, in the *antichambre* or in the *chambre*—depending on their mood, or on the number of guests.<sup>49</sup> The *chambre*, which contained a bed (but only one), continued to be the place where people met socially. As in the smaller bourgeois houses, the servants and maids slept in the adjoining *cabinets* and *garde-robes*.

During the seventeenth century there were minor changes in the internal arrangement of the *hôtel* which indicated a growing awareness of intimacy. The *cabinet*, previously used only by the valet, was sometimes converted into a more intimate room for private activities such as writing. In the Hôtel Lambert there was such a room beyond the president's bedroom; it was decorated by the painter Le Sueur according to the theme of Love, and was known as the *cabinet de l'Amour*.<sup>\*</sup> An alcove within which the bed was located was sometimes built within the large, impersonal *chambre*. This was almost a separate bedroom, but not quite. The credit for that discovery belongs to the Marquise de Rambouillet. She had come to Paris from Rome, and after suffering through

\* Was this room used for seduction, as its name implies? Probably. The forced closeness of the bourgeois family was absent among the nobility; married couples habitually lived, and slept, apart. Madame la Présidente had her own equally extensive apartment, on the floor above her husband's.

the cold winter in her huge and badly heated *chambre*, in 1630 she converted her *garde-robe* into a small private bedroom.<sup>50</sup> The first use of the term *salle à manger* (dining room) occurred in 1634, but the replacement of the multipurpose *salle* by a series of specialized rooms for dining, entertaining, and conversation had to await the following century.<sup>51</sup>

These *hôtels* were wonderfully ornamented with frescoed ceilings and painted, paneled, and mirrored walls. The ceiling of Lambert's room consisted of three panels by Le Sueur depicting the legend of Jupiter. But there was hardly a sense of hominess in these houses. There was much beautiful furniture, but it appeared uncomfortably forlorn pushed against the walls of huge rooms unrelieved by any nooks or crannies. Although rooms were decorated according to different classical themes—Love, the Muses, Hercules—they lacked the atmosphere of domesticity that is the result of human activity.

What was missing in these interiors was what Mario Praz, in an idiosyncratic essay on the philosophy of interior decoration, called *Stimmung*—the sense of intimacy that is created by a room and its furnishings.<sup>52</sup> *Stimmung* is a characteristic of interiors that has less to do with functionality than with the way that the room conveys the character of its owner—the way that it mirrors his soul, as Praz poetically put it. According to Praz, *Stimmung* occurred first in northern Europe. It was already present in the sixteenth century when Dürer engraved *St. Jerome in His Study*. It is visible in the careful way that he depicted the various objects in the saint's cluttered room, and in the light that simultaneously warms the old man at his desk and introduces the external, natural world into the interior one. Strangely, the domesticated lion only emphasizes the intimacy of the scene. Compare this to a slightly earlier painting of the same subject by an Italian, Antonello da Messina. The elements are similar to those in Dürer's engraving—books, a lectern, a pair of slippers—and there is a lion, although located in the background. These are

also painted in a highly detailed way—Antonello had studied in the Netherlands, and introduced the Flemish technique to Italy—but the effect is different. St. Jerome sits, or rather poses, in an improbably theatrical setting, framed by the proscenium of a large vaulted opening. There is no sense of intimacy at all. There is beauty in the elegance of the architectural elements, but their predominance, and the formality of the surroundings, creates an air of artificiality. The interior tells us nothing about this man; indeed, we do not really believe that this awkward little platform of a room even belongs to him, or he to it.

To find interiors that exhibited *Stimmung* in seventeenth-century Europe it is necessary to look northward. We have a well-documented example of a Norwegian family that lived in the town of Kristiania (now Oslo) at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>53</sup> At that time, Norway was a dependency of Denmark, and Kristiania was a small town with a population of fewer than five thousand souls (it had been destroyed by fire in 1624); it was hardly an important place. Provincial Kristiania was a little “behind the times,” and the home of Frederik Jacobsen Brun and his wife Marthe Christiansdatter would have been typical of the way that small-town European bourgeois lived during the early seventeenth century.

Brun was a bookbinder, and he worked at home. A two-story half-timbered building contained the bindery, a stable, a barn, a hayloft, and many storerooms grouped around a courtyard. The dwelling itself faced the street. The Bruns had bought the house as newlyweds and had enlarged it by adding a second floor. The original structure consisted of a large room flanked by a small kitchen and a single adjacent room. The new extension was more ambitious: it included two rooms on either side of a larger *selskapssal* (party room). The house, which was the size of a small modern bungalow (about fifteen hundred square feet) and would have been a tight squeeze for the Bruns and their eight children, actually housed fifteen

persons; in addition to the Brun family, there were three employees and two servants.

The Brun home is an example of what Philippe Ariès called a “big house,” which was the way that the prosperous bourgeois lived not just in the seventeenth but also in the sixteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>54</sup> A chief characteristic of a big house was its public character. Like its medieval antecedent, it was the setting for all aspects of life—business, entertainment, and work. It was always full of relatives, guests, clients, friends, and acquaintances. Although there were many habitable rooms in the Brun home, Frederik and Marthe did not have a “master bedroom”—they slept in the large downstairs room, together with the three youngest children, in one large four-poster bed. The five eldest children—a thirteen-year-old son who worked as an apprentice, a nineteen-year-old son who was sickly and did not work, two young daughters, and a twenty-one-year-old daughter who was engaged to be married—slept in two beds in one room, over the kitchen. The two maidservants slept in the room downstairs, probably so that Marthe could keep an eye on them—they were country girls for whose upbringing, and virtue, the Bruns would have been responsible. Two of the male employees had a bed in the second upstairs room. The third employee, a young apprentice, slept in the workshop, since it was his responsibility to get up early and start the fire.

Following medieval tradition, most daytime activities took place in the large main room. A table with four chairs was in the center of the room; the rest of the furniture was placed around the walls. In addition to the large bed, there were eight chairs, the father’s high-backed armchair, a second armchair for visitors, a cupboard, and two chests. When guests came, chairs were placed in the bay window, which became an improvised conversation nook. The kitchen contained a large hearth and a small table with stools. There was no cupboard; the copper and pewter utensils hung on the wall.



The so-called party room was sparsely furnished with a few chairs; like the nineteenth-century parlor, it stood empty most of the time and was used only for special occasions such as holidays and celebrations. The other rooms contained beds, chests for clothes, and little else. There was no bathroom. People washed in the courtyard, or took weekly baths in the kitchen.\*

The household awoke at dawn. Breakfast was an improvised affair and taken individually. Brun and his employees went next door to work in the shop. Marthe and the maids fetched water (there was an old well in the courtyard, but most of the water came from a public pump in the street), did minor laundry (major clothes washing occurred twice yearly in the nearby Aker River), and performed other chores. Food preparation occupied much time. Like most town-dwellers, the Bruns owned a small meadow outside the town where they grew hay (for their mare) and vegetables, which explains why a large amount of space in the house was devoted to food storage. Interestingly, they sometimes used a small barn in their meadow for overnight sleeping—an early version of the “summer cottage.” Noon lunch at the Bruns was the main meal of the day and was shared by all fifteen persons. In the evening, only the immediate family ate together—the younger children and the apprentices ate in the kitchen. The day finished early, and people went to bed soon after dusk.

How did the Bruns heat their house during the long Norwegian winter? The hearths in the kitchen and in the work-

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\* Throughout Europe the days of the week are named after pre-Christian deities, Wednesday after Wodin, Thursday after Thor, and so on. The unique exception occurs in the Scandinavian languages, in which Saturday, or *Lördag*, is named after a human activity—it is the “day for bathing”—indicating the importance that was attached to this practice. My colleague Norbert Schoenauer was kind enough to draw this to my attention.

shop would hardly have sufficed; in any case, because of their location they did not contribute much warmth to the other rooms. When the house was extended, stoves were installed in some of the rooms (their exact location is unclear, but there was probably one in the hall, and a second in one of the upstairs rooms). The stoves were an innovation—the Bruns were the “first on their street” to use them—and they would have made a large difference in the thermal comfort of the house, not the least because, unlike the hearths, they did not fill the room with smoke. However, since many of the rooms would have remained unheated, and all rooms had at least two exterior walls, even with stoves the house must have been on the chilly side. Like all houses, this one had no internal corridors; if you wanted to go upstairs or to the workshop, you did so in the fresh air. A winter visit to the privy, which was next to the stable, must have been a rushed affair.

The Bruns lived and worked in the same premises, and most of their activities took place in one or two rooms, but this household was no longer medieval. There was more furniture, although not as much as in a Parisian home. The use of stoves not only provided more convenience and comfort, it also allowed the house to be subdivided into many more rooms than would have been possible earlier. Although the main room resembled the hall, specialized functions were beginning to be assigned to other rooms such as the kitchen and the sleeping rooms.

More important than the technical innovations were the changes in domestic arrangements. The parents still shared their bed with the infants, but the older children no longer slept in the same room. One can imagine Frederik and Marthe, after having sent the children upstairs to bed, sitting in the main room alone. The house is quiet, the day’s work is done, and in the light of a candle they talk. A simple scene, and yet a revolution in human relations is taking place. The husband and wife have begun to think of themselves—perhaps for the

first time—as a *couple*. Even their wedding night, twenty years before, would have been a public event, celebrated with boisterous, and medieval, informality. The opportunities to experience intimacy were rare and it was in such modest, bourgeois dwellings that family life began to acquire a private dimension. The importance of this event, which is encapsulated in the Brun household but which was taking place all over northern and central Europe, cannot be exaggerated. Before the idea of the home as the seat of family life could enter the human consciousness, it required the experience of both privacy and intimacy, neither of which had been possible in the medieval hall.

The appearance of intimacy in the home was also the result of another important change that was taking place within the family: the presence of children. The medieval idea of the family was different from our own in many ways, especially in its unsentimental attitude toward childhood. Not only did the children of the poor work; in all families, children were sent away from home once they reached the age of seven. Children from bourgeois families were apprenticed to artisans, while those from the higher class served in noble households as pages. In both cases, they were expected to work as well as to learn; the servitors at medieval banquets were the sons of noble families, not paid domestics. (The French word *garçon*, which means both young boy and café waiter, recalls this practice.) The function of this apprenticeship, whether to a trade or at court, fulfilled the role of education. This situation started to change in the sixteenth century when formal schooling, which had previously been exclusively religious, was extended and replaced apprenticeship, at least among the bourgeois.<sup>55</sup> Two of the Brun girls (nine and eleven years old) went to school. Although schooling was not long—the thirteen-year-old boy who worked as an apprentice to his father had already completed his education—it nevertheless meant that children spent much more time at home than in

the past. Parents could, for the first time in centuries, watch their children growing up.

The presence of children of many ages also produced a change of manners that is evident in the Bruns's sleeping arrangements. It would have been easy, and desirable, to separate the young people according to sex, but instead it was the servants and employees who had their own rooms. Even the son who was an apprentice slept with his sisters, not with his coworkers. The point was not discrimination—the bedrooms were identical—but the separation of the family members from the others. The isolation of the servants appears almost haphazard—later it would take architectural form, as servants were assigned the basement or the garret—and it was not complete, since the entire household still ate at least one meal together, but it did reinforce the growing self-awareness of the family.

Comfort in the physical sense was still awaiting the eighteenth century and the improvement of such technologies as water supply and heating, as well as refinements to the internal subdivision of the home. But the transition from the public, feudal household to the private, family home was under way. The growing sense of domestic intimacy was a human invention as much as any technical device. Indeed, it may have been more important, for it affected not only our physical surroundings, but our consciousness as well.