

At Home

If we were to ponder for even a moment upon the ostensibly commonplace expression used daily: "I'm at home.... I feel at home...", we might realise that it evokes one of the greatest values of life. After all, "to be at home" signifies not only to reside in one's home. It also denotes to be oneself, in harmony with oneself and all that surrounds us. Moreover, it signifies an extremely precious feeling of inner peace, an accord with the world and a spiritual equilibrium.

In European painting – and probably only in that particular realm – this emotion was expressed in images. In this case, the homes are not imaginary but, as a rule, close to the life of the period. Characteristically, paintings depicting interiors in which "one feels at home" remain the domain of Netherlandish, German and Scandinavian art. The reasons are probably numerous: the cold that compels to seek a warm refuge, the burgher culture that envisages the home as a haven, the longing for privacy with a distinctly delineated boundary between that which is one's own and that which is alien, the need to possess space that is ours and subjected to us, and, predominantly, the yearning for a safe refuge in a world of our own, safe, well-ordered, devoid of the haphazardness of fate, predictable and closed against external threats.

The first to introduce the interiors of homes were the Low Countries paintings of the fifteenth century, making it possible to take a look into the prosperous and neat chambers in which Mary feeds the Infant, with all the *spiritualia* concealed *sub metaforis corporalium*. There are no signs of sanctity, but ordinary, sturdy outfitting – fireplaces, benches, pillows, candlesticks and mirrors endowed with religious significance. This secular-sacral space is closed to the forces of evil: in the Merode altarpiece St. Joseph in his carpenter's workshop sets traps for mice – the embodiment of diabolical forces. The order of the homestead is a reflection of a higher, divine order.

The chamber in which Giovanni Arnolfini ceremoniously stretches out his left hand towards the pregnant wife is thoroughly secular but also full of hidden meanings. The Arnolfini couple celebrate the portrayed ceremony in the privacy of their home, conceived as a site suitable for nuptials. The painting by Jan van Eyck is endlessly interpreted anew. The indubitable fact is that together with the painter-witness of the event; we have been permitted not only to take part in an important act but also to share the intimacy of the bedroom of a married couple, a sphere of the most protected privacy.

Paintings presenting home interiors create a specific relation between the depicted world and the spectator. We are looking at something that is not on view. Seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of interiors place us in the ambiguous role of invisible voyeurs. We are not guests but neither do we trespass. Our unnoticed presen-

ce does not leave behind any traces on the immaculately glistening floors in the pedantic interiors depicted by Pieter de Hoogh and other masters of Dutch *interieurs*. Our intrusion into this world of ideal burgher order obviously goes unnoticed by the women absorbed in their simple household chores. Even the little dogs accompanying them do not detect the presence of a stranger. Nothing disturbs the tranquillity. Nonetheless, we find ourselves in a strangers' home. Are we invited, or not? Are we stealing a look, or becoming involved in a game played with the spectator by the painted image of privacy? After all, this spotlessness, industriousness and affluence of the home are demonstrated for our sake. We are supposed to look and admire. It is art that entitles and invites us to gaze at something which in reality is inaccessible to the sight of an outsider.

Another sort of apprehension is created by the images of home interiors popular in German Romantic art and the Biedermeier culture. It was introduced by the motif of the window, through which a solitary figure, shown from the interior, looks out. For long, this particular motif has been perceived as an image condensing the tension and dilemmas characteristic for the epoch, constructed upon a fundamental juxtaposition between "here" and "there", and based on the contrast between distance and proximity. The window is a border of the conceptions of life and the world. The inhabited interior, the world created by man, opens up to the great universe of Nature. It also offers an opportunity to seek a haven against the outer world in peaceful daily life, and a likelihood of tackling its challenges and dangers. The orderliness and matter-of-factness of the interior are contrasted with a hazy and conjectural landscape, the concrete – with imagination. The window is a threshold but also a barrier. It divides the domesticated, intimate and familiar refuge from distant, unknown and alien space. It confronts secure enclosure and openness brimming with uncertainty. We reside "here" – at home, in a sheltered haven, but at the same time our gaze is drawn to "there" – those worlds full of mystery and unrest.





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1. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior with Easel and Punch Bowl*, no date
2. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior with Woman Seen from Behind*, 1903-1904
3. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior. With Piano and Woman in Black*, 1901
4. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior with a Reading Lady*, no date
5. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Bedroom*, 1890
6. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *A Woman Reading by a Window*, no date
7. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior with Young Man Reading*, 1898
8. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *The Tall Windows*, 1913
- Vilhelm Hammershøi, *In the Bedroom*, 1896

At the turn of the nineteenth century, a period of growing crises of the heretofore principles of creativity and of approaching artistic revolts and revolutions, art was not conducive for paintings focused on the peace and quiet of home life. The exceptions were the representatives of *Intimisme* from the circle of the Parisian Nabists, hedonistically fond of bourgeois wellbeing. Another isolated and thus unique exception is the *oeuvre* of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershoi, until recently forgotten, who remained perfectly indifferent to the transformations of contemporary art. In willingly cultivated isolation he created a totally independent and imitable art, private and enclosed in a world of its own.

This is to a great measure a women's world, secluded within the home, with a frequent recurrence of the identical motifs of an inhabited interior, empty or with a solitary figure. Both the address and the model are known: the artist portrayed his own flat in an old Copenhagen town house and his wife, with whom spent his whole life with no children. Nonetheless, the imagery appears to be suspended outside a definite time and place. Although in successive paintings we recognise familiar, meticulously rendered details: empty grey walls, white varnished doors, sparse and simple pieces of furniture – the overall impression is that of something closer to a melancholic vision than a concrete interior. Hammershoi built the unusual ambience of his paintings by almost totally depriving them of colour and submerging them in pearly greys, faded beiges and browns contrasted with black and white.

These neat and simple rooms prove to be even more intriguing when we compare them with the interiors of the epoch, which seemed to closely enfold the residents and were full of colourful wallpaper, plush drapes, carpets, soft upholstered sofas, armchairs, chaises longues, pillows, jardinières and bric-a-brac... Instead of profuse decorations we are dealing with ascetic moderation, which harmonises with the painterly form, reduced almost to an architectural drawing. Even the view from the window does not disturb the immaculate, geometric order, and shows identical windows on an opposite wall in a cramped courtyard. The pale sunlight on the floor, seeping through the window bars, has been captured within the rigour of a perspectivistic diagram. Nevertheless, paradoxically, these are not interiors lacking "a woman's touch". Sometimes, there appears in them the unassuming figure of the lady of the house, always dressed in black and turned towards us with her back. In these seemingly cold and impersonal rooms we feel her calm and warm feminine presence, though we never see her face.

Similarly as in the Dutch *interieurs*, in the Hammershoi canvases our role as spectators remains unclear. Captivated, we are nonetheless embarrassed by this admittance to the privacy of a home that is both "being at home" and "for each other", never merely for show. But once again, it is art that offers us the key to a stranger's home, which, fortunately, remains unaffected by our presence.



Vilhelm Hammershoi, *Interior*, 1898