FROM ARTIST'S HOUSE MUSEUM TO THE EVERYDAY

Helen Hills with Alice E. Sanger

Abstract

This essay traces the prevalent practices and habits of house museum visiting and curation to the emergence of the practice of visiting artists' homes and the development of the institution of the house museum in 19th-century Britain amongst rich famous male artists and middle-class visitors. It argues that the specific historical circumstances of the rise of both the practice of visiting artists' houses and the growth of house museums continue to haunt the institution, presentation and interpretation of house museums to a remarkable degree.

Keywords: home, everyday, architecture and gender, architecture and social class, Victorian culture, museology, Kettle's Yard, John Clare Cottage, Mackintosh House, Francis Bacon studio, shrine, pilgrimage
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Biographical note

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Banner image: Detail from a view of the studio at the Barbara Hepworth gallery in St Ives, Cornwall. (Photo: Ed Clews / Alamy Stock Photo)

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The Strange Spell of the House Museum

The houses of famous people, particularly of writers and artists, cast a strange spell on the cultural imagination of the educated and well-heeled, especially in western Europe, USA, Australia, and Canada. Hallowed, rather like saints' shrines (Fig. ii.1), they are deemed worthy of cultural pilgrimage to 'discover' some aspect of the artist, otherwise occluded. And scholarship and the curation of house museums play their part in this by conflating artist or writer, house, and oeuvre – as if in a necessary continuum that can be magically accessed by the present-day visitor. The celebration of the singular mythic genius as explanator of the artwork remains perhaps nowhere more alive and well than in the house museum – particularly house museums dedicated to visual artists and their attendant scholarship, which generally lack the more critical edge and greater sociological awareness that mark studies and presentations of the house museums of writers. This essay challenges the persistent conflation between artist's house, artist's work, and artist's house museum and relates it to the specific historical origins and development of this curious institution.

In Britain the house museum developed first and foremost for famous writers and, while the presentation of those museums still tends to be that of the 'hero house', relevant scholarship is more critical than for their visual artists counterparts (Young, 2019; Watson, 2010 & 2020). Indeed, with regard to visual artists' house museums, the celebratory narrative still holds sway in both curation and scholarship.

There are many reasons for this: familiarity with art remains an upper-middle class preserve; history of art is rarely taught in state schools; and visual art has a financial value which disproportionately benefits vested interests, the rich, the powerful, investors, collectors, auction houses, and museums (Bourdieu, Darbel & Schnapper, 1997). Yet the specific historical circumstances of the emergence of this museum type, and of the visual artist's house museum in particular, have much to answer for in this regard.

Eager interest in visiting houses once inhabited by writers, painters, sculptors, and architects is not matched in relation to former dwellings of mathematicians, scientists, engineers, politicians, or even musicians. There are more house museums in Britain dedicated to writers and artists than to any other group; and the motives of visitors appear to differ for this group, too. Visitors to Newton's house do not aim to understand better the discovery of gravity, but the notion that one might catch a flicker of the creative spark in the homes of artists and writers seems widespread.

Figure ii.1: Relic of the grille through which St Clare received Mass at San Damiano, Basilica of Santa Chiara, Assisi. (Courtesy of the Basilica di Santa Chiara, Assisi / photo: Helen Hills).

Despite frequent justifications of artists' house museums as 'art historical treasures' ('a mother lode of historical evidence' (Corn, 2005, p.12)), artists' and writers' houses tend to be presented as enchanted places that offer visitors direct access to the artist's life and 'presence' of creativity, bypassing study and hard work (e.g. Bailey, 2019) (Fig. ii.2). Nicola McLeod's (2020) analysis of TripAdvisor reviews of four well-known British and American literary homes shows that a 'sense of being in proximity to the creative process itself' is an important motive. The study or studio in which the famous writing, painting, or sculpture actually took place holds a special allure.

Figure ii.2: Advertising poster for Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, house of Jim Ede, the collector, and Helen Ede (Courtesy Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge / Photo: Helen Hills).

A striking lacuna in the scholarship on visual artists' house museums is critical engagement with the history of this curious museum type: a history which emerges as essential to understanding standard presentation and default modes of visiting of those museums today. This essay surveys the scene and relates key historiographical and curatorial habits to the emergence and rise of the house museum, particularly the institution of the visual artist's house museum in 19th-century Britain. Visiting writers' homes began in the 18th century, but the fashion of visiting the homes of visual artists was a later 19th-century development.[1] The legacies of those origins continue to play out across the field. Indeed, the hegemonic socio-political assumptions and upper-middle-class cultural anxieties of 19th-century England go a long way to explain the dominant cultural paradigms of this peculiar institution today.

Figure ii.3: John Clare Cottage, Helpston. Sculpture of John Clare in courtyard. (Courtesy John Clare Trust / Photo: Helen Hills)

One key aspect of this is 'the saintly shrine', which we delineate first, before identifying characteristics of artists' house museums (many of which are shared with saintly shrines). Finally, we trace the historical emergence of the house museum, particularly of visual artists, which helps account for those key characteristics, including the 'saintly' emphasis.

The saintly shrine

Artist's and writer's houses occupy a peculiar role as hybrids of shrines of saints and their relics and distinction markers for the educated and literate, now fortified by film and televised visits (Fig. ii.3).[2] Tourism to celebrity artists' homes shares with religious pilgrimages a ritualized journey in search of holy relics, authenticity, a flight from the mundane, hope for some sort of physical and spiritual connection with a venerated individual, enlightening insight into an exemplary life, and even some sort of redemptive experience. Indeed, it is reckoned that search for esteem and self actualization top tourists' motives (Fig. ii.4).[3]

The artist's house museum boasting the artist's possessions resembles saints' shrines with their holy relics in Christianity since Late Antiquity and occupies a culturally analogous position to them. Saints' relics

1 This differs from the long-standing practice of patrons' visits to artists' homes and studios, a point to which we return below. On the early history of visiting artists' homes see Hubertus Günther's essay 'Artist's residences since the Renaissance 1470-1800' in Brandlhuber & Buhrs (2013), pp.16–29.

2 The rise of tourism to film locations and the haunts of fictive characters, such as Harry Potter, is a significant, related and relatively recent development.

3 See Philip Pearce (2021). On tourism, see also MacCannell (1976); Urry (1990 & 2002); Graburn (2001).

Figure ii.4: John Clare Cottage, Helpston. A visitor in search of self-actualization and esteem? (Courtesy John Clare Trust / Photo: Helen Hills)

Figure ii.5: Reliquary of St Clare, Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro, Naples. (By permission of the Deputazione del Tesoro, Naples / Photo: © Marina Cotugno)

– things left behind by saints, including their bodies– occupied an ambiguous position at the crossroads of the mundane and the divine.[4]

The relic is at once historical, bearing the *gesta* (deeds) of the saint, but it is also celestial, representing someone glorified, invisible, and eternally alive, already justified in Heaven (Fig. ii.5).

It is this ability to occupy both directions, simultaneously forward and back, heaven and earth, and (unlike Christ) to be still unequivocably embodied, that give saints' relics their mercurial power and authority. Moreover, relics are frequently regarded not merely as prompts to holiness, but as the saints themselves, already living with God in the incorrupt and glorified bodies that ordinary mortals achieve only at the end of time. At the end of the world the saint's body will rise and be glorified; in the meantime, the saint continues to live and to work through the relic. Crucially, the cult of relics emphasizes the body as the *locus* of the sacred: by extension, the sacred place is the *place of the body*. Indeed, the cult of relics in late antique and medieval piety located the holy in place: '*hic locus est*' (this is the place): the holy has its place and is in place, and is held in place (it cannot be accessed elsewhere; relics regularly refuse to move if they are not happy to be translated).

Like saints' shrines, house museums depend heavily on biographical narrative to provide 'intimate' glimpses of 'private lives'. The house stands in metonymically for the life. An artist's house museum is usually also part of a campaign towards securing the reputation of its erstwhile inhabitant. And in this the death of the artist is central to secure 'immortality' through the continuing existence of his/her house. Hence the artist's house museum at once mourns and disavows the writer's death. The death of the artist is at once insisted on and strangely denied in these museums: 'Death completes the birth of the poet to posterity' (Watson, 2020, p.23).

If the artist actually died in the house, this is presented as significant, an instance of something both 'private', 'intimate', and belonging indelibly to the house.

4 On the cult of relics, see especially Brown (1981); Dinzelbacher & Bauer (1990); Walker Bynum (1989), p.163; (1995); Dinzelbacher & Bauer (1990); Belting (1994), esp. p.xxi; Geary (1994), pp.12–6; 180–202; Bozóky (1996), pp.267–80; Joblin (1999), pp.123–41; Schmitt (1999), pp.145–68; Boesch Gajano (2005), pp.105–8; Scorza Barcellona (2005), pp.52–61; Armstrong (2021).

Hence a brochure declares that the Walt Whitman House 'provides an intimate glimpse into […] the poet's life […] through […] original letters, personal belongings, the bed in which he died, and the death notice that was nailed to the front door' (cited by Trubek, 2011, p.16). The couch on which Emily Brontë died features prominently in the Haworth Parsonage. This emphasis on the location of the artist's death as justification of the museum itself – after all, there is nothing more authentic than death – is shared with the celebration of saints. The locus where a saint died – that is, when they began their heavenly life – is a sanctified place.[5]

Nicola Watson argues that Dorothy Wordsworth's shoes, Henrik Ibsen's top hat, Charlotte Brontë's wedding bonnet, and Emily Dickinson's white dress present writing as textile that preserves the most intimate and indexical form of its wearer, and survives as witness to it (2020, p.20) (Fig. ii.6). This is akin to the *brandea* of saints. Following the sale of Francis Bacon's 'painting gloves', Jonathan Jones (2016) has pointed out how artist's belongings are treated like saintly relics: 'we revere not only artists but also their relics'. Watson (2020) has noted the ways in which visitors bring special objects to house museums and sometimes remove parts as they leave. These are practices shared with those who venerate saints, visit shrines, kiss and touch relics, and leave ex-voti behind.

House museums often treat the house like the saintly shrine. Paradoxically, the house emerges as a depositary and distillation both of what marked the artist out as extraordinary and of the most everyday and incidental in the artist's life and work (Fig. ii.7).

At once extraordinary and mundane, the artist's house and relics embody, like the saintly relic, the distillation of *virtus*, the presence of the auratic. Yet house museums, unlike saints' shrines, tend to be afflicted also by an insistent historicism, an earnest endeavour to deny the shrine, or at least to present it 'in its historical context'. This introduces a tension with regards to temporality. On the one hand, the relation of house, inhabitant, and artwork is posited as euchronic, that is a single privileged moment, conceived as originatory, with the implication that the rest of time extends in linear sequence to the present (Didi-Huberman, 2003). (Fig. ii.8).

Along with this comes much emphasis on material authenticity, a 'scholarly' emphasis on 'period' furniture and evocations of a past era. Simultaneously, the artist's world is presented in idealist terms as still alive and

Figure ii.6: John Clare Cottage, Helpston. Showcase with relics. (Courtesy John Clare Trust / Photo: Helen Hills)

Figure ii.7: Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. The most mundane aspects of life attract house museum visitors. (Courtesy Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge / Photo: Helen Hills)

5 The death of the artist of course also secures the value of visual artworks, by ensuring their number is now limited.

Figure ii.8: John Clare Cottage, Helpston. The information board transforms the attempt to evoke the authentic cottage garden into a didactic encounter. Drawing attention like this to the 'cottage garden' destroys it. (Courtesy John Clare Trust /Photo: Helen Hills)

Figure ii.9: John Clare Cottage, Helpston. Emphasis on material authenticity and attempt to conjure poverty. (Courtesy John Clare Trust /Photo: Helen Hills)

present. It is the – implicit but unacknowledged – tension between these material and idealist modalities and between euchronic and anachronic temporalities that lies at the heart of the house museum and that ostensibly opens the possibility of a privileged encounter to visitors in a revelatory unveiling (Fig. ii.9).

Despite the usual insistence on authenticity (documents, show cases, original furniture), the artist's house museum is inevitably never quite how or where the artist actually lived. One of the saddest aspects of house museums is how little attention is paid to 'place' more widely drawn than mere property and possessions (Compare Figs ii.17 & ii.18). Indeed, location and place matter far less than accumulations of material relics. Hence some of the most iconic studios have been entirely dismantled and reconstructed in entirely different locations. Francis Bacon's studio, for instance, was translated in 1998 in its chaotic entirety from South Kensington, London to Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, and 'preserved as a holy – or unholy – sanctum' (Jones, 2008).[6]

Over 7,000 items, including books, magazines, canvases, pages, paint splattered walls, door and ceilings, congealed brushes, and half emptied oil paint tubes were catalogued and relocated with scrupulous attention to their abandoned disarray (Fig. ii.10). The move to Dublin was partly justified by Bacon's birth in Dublin in 1909 – as if somehow the essence of the artist was being returned 'home' in what he had left in his studio– a miraculous translation indeed – a sort of 20th-century version of the flying Holy House of Loreto. Bacon's studio has become a sort of revered artwork: 'Bacon joked', wrote the journalist Jonathan Jones (2008), 'that the daubs of paint he splashed on its walls were his only abstract works; now the studio has become his only installation'. Yet, it is more than mere installation: it is shrine, supposedly indexical of the artist's most intimate and creative impulses. While there is irony in the painstaking reconstruction of what was – ostensibly – carelessly discarded in distraction, part of the compulsion of the studio is precisely its feverishly messy, urgently inhabited quality – what Jones describes as a 'terrifyingly claustrophobic interior' – as if one is getting a glimpse inside the artist's very mind.

For Jones (2008), Bacon's studio is a 'pungent archive of a life lived in the magic space between mind and bodily act–the life of an artist'. His studio is seen as at once a redolently 'pungent' archive, a magic space, and a life – all, magickly, concertinaed together. Indeed, as Nicola Watson observes in relation to the writer's

6 On Bacon's studio, see Campbell (2000) pp.38–51; and for a celebratory, exhaustive study, see Cappock (2005).

Figure ii.10: The dismantled, translated, and reconstructed Francis Bacon studio. (Collection & image © Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2024)

house museum, it 'may be seen not so much as staging the scene of writing, but as staging scenes of reality which disavow the medium of the book, erasing it in favor of a fantasy of immediate intimacy with the author' (2010, p.21).

Historiography of the Artist's House Museum

Much existing scholarship on the artist's house museum depends on a series of interlinked assumptions: that artists' houses are qualitatively different from non-artists' houses; that they are innately worthy of study in their own right; that they are invaluable to an understanding of the artist, indeed, crucial to interpreting their work (Fuss, 1998 & 2004). Thus Everett (2021), despite claiming a Deleuzian schema, nevertheless posits the relationship between garden, palace or home and inhabitant-creator as one of identity. Hence Giverny is seen as personifying 'gentleness incarnate'.

Decades of scholarship and significant shifts in art history have robustly challenged the notion of the great genius artist and simple biographical narrative as sufficient explanator of artworks.[7] Yet in the world of house museums, that approach is alive and well and apparently gaining ground (Young, 2019, pp.17–19). Many of these studies reduce the artist and their work simply to what is readily projected onto what chances to remain of their house, and vice versa.

Harald Hendrix draws a distinction between house museums that were instituted by the artist-occupant and those established posthumously by supporters and fans (2008, p.8, pp.15–18). However, this distinction offers little critical insight into their discursive construction or cultural significance. Indeed, it is typical of the mechanistic taxonomizing that passes as

7 The most significant include, Battersby (1989); Clark (1985); Didi-Huberman (2008); Pollock and Parker (1991).

scholarship in the field.

Most texts on artists' houses are non-scholarly. The fundamental claim that galvanises these publications is that each house has a unique story to tell. Yet, as Nicola Watson has pointed out, the presentation of each house tends to the formulaic (2020, p.5). Sumptuously illustrated coffee table books, such as Francesca Premoli-Droulers' *Writers' Houses* (1995) and J.D. McClatchy's *American Writers at Home* (2005) (both with photographs by Erica Lennard) seductively present supposedly privileged glimpses of corners, desks, beds, and views from windows of glamorized homes to offer apparently intimate, almost secret, insights into a life. Yet these are of course highly mediated and carefully staged presentations.

Such moves are at work in even the most perceptive scholarship. Diana Fuss' *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (2004) draws carefully on authors' writing to suggest significant connections and inspirations located in their homes. While there is much that is illuminating and sensitive in this study, it steps uncritically into the fantasy of the dwelling as supplying privileged access to the 'life' of the author, even to their 'experience'.

Hence Fuss claims:

> A writer's domestic interior opens a window onto both author and text, reminding us that what we may first perceive to be the timeless and universal truth of writing cannot be so neatly extricated from the complex particularities of its spatial and material origin'.

While the emphasis on particularity and on the precise spatial and material conditions of an artist or writer's circumstances are useful, the 'spatial and material origins' on which she chooses to focus are excessively narrowly drawn (basically the house) and tend to exclude wider economic, political, and social issues, unless they are perceived as being congruent with the house and life. Fuss elides much in claiming that the interior 'opens a window' – itself not coincidentally at once metaphor and literal material component of a house – as if the opening of such a window necessarily provides unmediated access to 'both author and text', and as if it illuminates both simultaneously and equally. Further, the assumption that Fuss claims to be challenging – that 'we' believe 'timeless and universal truths of writing'– is not much more than a convenient straw man.

The 'reputation of house museums in contemporary culture is deathly, dubious, or quaint, to put it kindly', suggests Linda Young (2019, p.15).

There is even something of a vogue in recent years for approaches which mock house museums and the practice of visiting them. Liz Workman's *Dr Johnson's Doorknob – And other Significant Parts of Great Men's Houses* (2007) takes up a cudgel against both the masculinizing myths of genius and the insidious, apparently innocent, displacement or projection of these myths onto banal objects in their houses. Anne Trubek's *A Skeptic's Guide to Writers' Houses* (2011) investigates the 'irrational allure of writer's houses', running critically counter to the romanticizing gazing in rapt awe at a writer's chair. While we remain sceptical of approaches that elide house and former occupant, we do not share the tone of derision. One important trope in the scholarship on house museums is a search for and evocation of access to the 'intimate'. A typical manifestation of this is Nuala Hancock's *Charleston and Monks' House: The Intimate House Museums of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (2012), which reads the houses in question as providing access to emotions and intimate domestic experience of the protagonists, largely disregarding the degree to which these houses were highly stylized and carefully crafted presentations of self and home. We wish to take seriously the search for the intimate, even while sceptical about the claims to its recovery, unified location, or any simple designation of 'public' or 'private'.

In *Flaubert's Parrot* Julian Barnes asks, 'Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone?'. Yet even those who deliberately eschew studying 'major' artists, and who reject the notions of coherent lives and coherent oeuvres – and hence find any notion of coherence between the two entirely unpersuasive – may find that museum houses hold a strange compulsion.

Artists' homes are frequently imagined, depicted, fashioned, and presented as 'palaces of art', works of art in their own right.[8] Maria Golovteeva characterizes the Villa Khnopff, home of Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921), a figure much glorified in Belgian Symbolist art, thus: 'his house corresponded with the fin-de-siècle idea of an artist's home in itself reproducing a work of art' (2022, p.229). Indeed, photographs of Villa Khnopff were frequently published in contemporary journals, as not only a living space, but a place of work, of art collecting and production. Artists' houses which were designed by their artist-inhabitants, such as the Mackintosh house – since 1981 an integral part of the Hunterian Art Gallery

8 For example, Brandlhuber and Buhrs's (2013) anthology is entitled, *In the Temple of the Self: The Artist's Residence as a Total Work of Art*.

Figure ii.11: Studio drawing room at the (reconstructed) Mackintosh House, Hunterian Museum, Glasgow. (Photo: Hemis / Alamy Stock Photo).

in Glasgow – hold a particularly compelling appeal for those who would collapse biography and artwork. Indeed, that interior was staged by the Mackintoshes as a showplace for their work (Fig. ii.11).

Nicola Watson has recently energised what remains a largely uncritical and sleepy field by proposing that writer's and artist's house museums are a significant cultural form, primarily designed to 'effect' a figure of the author (2020, p.4). The writer's house museum, she argues, serves to construct a 'writer' by evoking a writer's life and work through objects strategically positioned in a pseudo-domestic space (p.11). (Fig. ii.12). These objects conjure precisely that which is not there through supposedly materializing the writer's effects, whereas it is 'the writer' that is the effect of these materializations. Hence a sleight of hand underpins these museums. The writer's house museum, argues Watson, is a paratextual approach to text: what the house museum represents and stages depends on a notion of the author as the embodied origin of their works and the house as the materialization of at once the writer's presence and absence. Such house museums are peculiarly 'dedicated to displaying what is not there, although it was once there – the author'

Figure ii.12: Kettle's Yard, Cambridge: house of Jim Ede, the collector, and Helen Ede. The presentation of the house seeks to secure simultaneously both the materiality and the immateriality of the artist. (Courtesy Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge / Photo: Helen Hills)

(p.11). For it is absence that the artist museum most strongly requires, permitting – indeed inviting – a projection of the visitor's yearnings into its suggestive spaces. Such house museums deliberately broker an affective encounter between reader and author. Watson argues that the writer's house is best considered as a discursive and narrative construct that serves to produce this figure 'through the presentation and design of his / her belongings, as "effects" within quasi-domestic space' (2020, p.4). Hence both the materiality and the immateriality of author or artist are simultaneously established through the construction of this conjuring place, most often conceived in national and even nationalistic terms.

The Gender of House Museums

Overwhelmingly, house museums celebrate famous men, as if their work and success were conjured from within, and – perhaps to emphasise their supposed meritoriousness – as if they were more or less isolated from the world. This is the double reactionary whammy of the institutions of museum and home. The 'home', Charlotte Perkins Gilman declared in 1903, is 'an ancient and repressive institution, ill-suited to the needs of modern social progress in general and women specifically':

> The woman who does her own work is not usually a writer and has little time for reading. Moreover, her difficulties, though great, are not of the sort that confound the mistress of servants. The housewife is held to her work by duty and by love; also by necessity. She cannot 'better herself' by leaving; and indeed, without grave loss and pain, she cannot leave at all. So the housewife struggles on, too busy to complain; and accomplishes, under this threefold bond of duty, love, and necessity far more than can be expected of a comparatively free agent. (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1903).

Few house museums exist where the principal resident was a woman and had children. The best known is the residence in Hartford maintained in honour of Harriet Beecher Stowe. It stands next to the Mark Twain house and receives one-fifth of the visitors that Twain receives (Trubek, 2011, p.7). In part the paucity of house museums dedicated to women is symptomatic of the difficulties women faced in achieving fame or fortune.

But – more significantly – the institution of the artist's museum house is itself gendered. Indeed, the emergence of mass visits to these institutions was from the off steeped in a form of romanticizing gendering. Virginia Woolf pointed out that the display of Thomas Carlyle's cosy domesticity and well-furnished writing suppressed the cockroach reality of Jane Carlyle's housework (1932, p.23). The act of visiting such homes might be seen as driven by sentimental nostalgia and as celebrating a misogynistic institution, what Mary Douglas calls 'the tyranny of home' (1991, p.287).

Artists often did work from home and thus the conflation of house and work is understandable. But the burden of the overlap between home and workplace falls particularly heavily on women, whether as artists, spouses, or servants in terms of household responsibilities, childcare, extra work generated by maintaining a studio, and negotiating the use and boundaries of domestic space (Anderson, 1996; Flisbäck & Lindström, 2013). The unequal gendered division of the rewards and work of social representation, cultural reproduction, and childcare are at the heart of these issues, as Lara Perry (2017) and many others have shown.[9]

The domestic house is itself a machine for reproducing patriarchy, hierarchy, and the subordination of women.[10] The imbrications of domestic architecture, gendered identities and sexualities are complex even before adding a working studio to the mix. Much architectural history has interrogated the relationships between architecture and gender, but these currents have barely filtered through into the artist's house museum curation or scholarship.

The writers' house is the paradigmatic house museum in Britain. They led the way historically and remain dominant. Linda Young reckons that writers' houses represent about 60% of British house museums, with visual artists at less than 10% (2019, p.2). The most recently established house museums are also dominated by writers: Dylan Thomas (2003), John Clare (2005), Agatha Christie (2010), Thomas Hardy (2010) Elizabeth Gaskell (2014) (2019, p.2), which indicates, argues Young, 'a determined investment in the idea that great writers should be represented in domestic situations' (2019, p.7)

House museums tend to conjure the illusion that the (long dead) resident has momentarily left the room soon to return to resume unfinished work (Fig. ii.13). The cliché is everywhere found of the occupant who 'has just walked out', suggesting that part of the appeal in making such visits is to slip into a deliriously wilful

9 See also Dimitrakaki (2013).

10 See Wigley (1992); Hills (2003); Borden, Penner & Rendell (2000).

Figure ii.13: 'Just popped out': smocks at the studio. Barbara Hepworth Gallery, St Ives, Cornwall. (Photo: Ed Clews / Alamy Stock Photo)

enchantment (Fig. ii.14). Indeed, the artist's house museum is often set up to suggest that the author is still living there: pen, paper, and ink on a desk, teacups on a side table, an open newspaper, palette and brushes just waiting to be taken up again. A strange temporality is invented: at once then and now, always and never – a magical temporality which also, as it were, permits the visitor to slip in and out of the dead artist's shoes.

Any such encounter that the house supposedly offers would never have been permitted during the lifetime of its now celebrated inhabitant. It is as if visitors want to be deceived. The house museum offers an illusion of an imaginary continuity between one life and another. Nicola Watson observes, 'all these ways of (re)housing the writer consistently speak of the reader's need to make and find the writer "at home" – disregarding the fact that the writer is dead and that in life would not be "at home" to the general public' (2020, p.11).

Hence the museum denies what permits it to exist. The artist's death sanctifies the house but is presented as if temporarily suspended. House museums stage that absent body with a particular insistence on the artist's chair, the artist's desk, the artist's bed. House museums, Nicola Watson argues, 'assert the ongoing "aliveness" of the writer by locating him or her in a specific domestic time and space' (2020, p.11).

Crucially, museum houses tend to be presented as discrete from the world, sanctuaries where the artist was 'free' to 'express' themself. Economic conditions, social constraints and worldly privilege are rarely explored with much conviction.

Period furniture is acquired to convey 'authenticity', as if a specific temporality is historically truthful (which it is not), and as if material artefact is its guarantor. With ostensible scholarly scrupulousness, the Jane Austen House in Chawton, Hampshire, acknowledges that the small table in the sitting room *may or may not be the one* on which Austen actually wrote. Thus this little table elegantly diverts potentially pressing political questions into mere historicist accoutrement – under the guise of avowed scruple. Rather than engage with or effectively represent the class conditions of labour and leisure that enabled Austen to write, the provision of this table – *which might or not be the actual one* – implies that it was specific items of furniture – in this case, a table rather than a desk – that made Austen's writing possible and that sufficiently evoke specific

Figure ii.14: Kettle's Yard, Cambridge: house of Jim Ede, the collector, and Helen Ede. The museum fetishizes the lived-in home, while its extensions and presentation resemble ever more the 'White Cube' museum. (Courtesy Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge / Photo: Helen Hills)

Figure ii.15: John Clare Cottage, Helpston: attempts to evoke poverty do not ring true. (Courtesy John Clare Trust /Photo: Helen Hills);

material conditions. This amounts to showcasing a skillet to account for labour relations in a kitchen, or a bed to discuss gendered power relations or sexuality. Items of furniture – whether daintily presented as authentic or not – are routinely deployed as supposedly effective witnesses to specific and complex socio-economic conditions.

Such attempts at 'authenticity' or 'reconstruction' more often than not betray larger historical truths. Attempts to depict John Clare's house in Helpston, for instance, as if it were still inhabited by a large family of poverty-stricken landless labourers falter from the minute one enters the fragrant rooms or touches the high quality oak handrails that health and safety requires on the stairs, from levels of cleanliness unknowable in impoverished households without running water, to the fact that Clare's house was less than half the size of the current museum. Attempts to stage poverty – a stained cloth, hanging supposedly to dry – are betrayed by inattention to detail: it is suspended on an impossibly shiny new washing line (Fig. ii.15).

Visitors to Clare's cottage are invited to try on neatly ironed laundered smocks in pristine condition as if this clothing might magically endow modern middle-class visitors with insight into the lives of dispossessed peasants (Fig. ii.16).

Even more dismayingly, visitors are encouraged to take a walk 'through the landscape that Clare knew', thereby trampling Clare's own passionate conviction of the wrongness of privatization of land by enclosure. And the betrayal of the principles of the man the house purports to celebrate is intensified in the failure to draw attention to the lifeless sterility of the industrialized farmland that surrounds the cottage (Fig. ii.17). It ignores the ecological damage done over the years by the privatized large-scale farming that Clare opposed and disregards his prescient treasuring of

Figure ii.16: John Clare Cottage, Helpston. Smocks for visitors to dress up as peasants. (Courtesy John Clare Trust / Photo: Helen Hills)

Figure ii.17: Sterile and private: the consequences of enclosure that Clare dreaded and hated are horribly exposed in the industrially farmed fields immediately behind John Clare's Cottage, Helpston. (Courtesy John Clare Trust / Photo: Helen Hills).

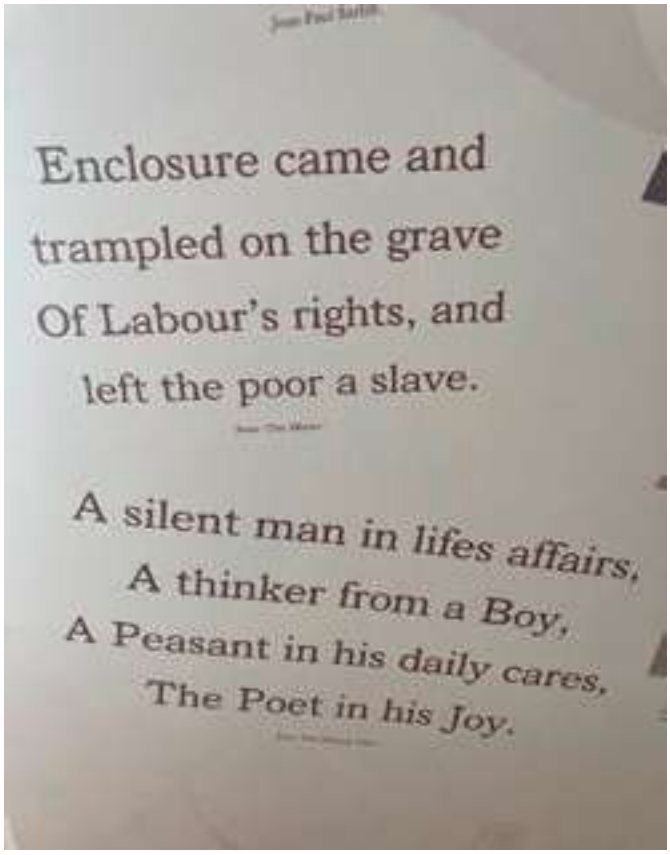

Figure ii.18: John Clare Cottage, Helpston. Clare's poetic protests against enclosure are reproduced in the museum. (Courtesy John Clare Trust /Photo: Helen Hills)

common lands, nature, wildness, and wet (Fig. ii.18).

The artist's house museum stages a fantasy, one replayed as authentic reconstruction. In short, house museums depend on and usually insist on the singularity and peculiarity of artists and their works, and the 'home' as haven, more or less impervious to critical analytical approaches, ignoring sociological issues and troublesome politics, and uninterested in thoughtful critique of the institution itself. Contentious political issues tend to be banished along with the woodworm.

The Emergence of the Hero House Museum

Museums as institutions tend to be conservative; and house museums tend to be the most conservative of all, not simply uncritical, but overflowing with contradictions. Much of this flows – more or less continuously and largely unchallenged – from their origins.

In Britain, houses of writers were the first to emerge as desirable places to visit and to become museumized and they remain the dominant type of house museums. Linda Young reckons writers' houses represent ca.60% of house museums in Britain, while visual artists' houses stand at less than 10% (2019, p.1). This indicates not only that literary fame was and is regarded highly

in Britain, but the interlacing of the development of museums with nationalism – language being indelibly associated with the nation – and fine writing a marker of its genius. The practice of visiting artist's houses and the cult of the author or writer is of long-standing – Stratford-on-Avon was firmly established well before the end of the 18th century as a key destination for fans of Shakespeare – but the celebration of the home of the creative artist really gained hold in 19th-centry Britain – the height of 19th-century male national hero worship. Indeed, the artist house-museum had an active role to play in developing and sustaining this ideology.

The practice of open studios of affluent, well-connected, successful, male Victorian artists is directly related to the cult of the artist's house museum and continues to inform visiting and curatorial habits.

The first British house museums – Sir Walter Scott's house at Abbotsford and architect Sir John Soane's house in London, both established by the artists themselves in the first decades of the 19th century; Shakespeare's Birthplace in 1847; and Robert Burns' Birthplace in 1881 (Young 2019, p.19) – in many ways established the form for the house museum that remains 'firmly located within the sociology of upper middle-class culture' (p.3). Despite a myriad indications to the contrary, the 'home' was presented as representing a 'truth' of private life that ordinary visitors could grasp, as well as monuments to their male hero occupants, whose classical collections were displayed idiosyncratically, advertising their erudition, and beautifying and dramatizing their houses for the public eye.

Scott encouraged fans to visit him at his Gothick fantasy house in the Scottish borders, Abbotsford. After his death in 1832, visitors were allowed into his study, where his desk, chair, and writing implements were displayed as if he still worked there. Gradually the rest of the house was opened to the public and admission fees (as opposed to tipping the housekeeper), a marker of formal museumization, began in the 1870s (Young, 2019, p.5). Sir John Soane's Museum was bequeathed to the nation in 1837. Soane regarded his house as a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and stipulated in his will that the layout and furnishings must remain unchanged (Knox, 2009, p.15). Despite the fact that there was no collection to materialize the soul of the hero, Shakespeare's Birthplace was the third house museum in Britain (1847) (Fox, 1997, pp.23–7). Its name evoked the Christian Nativity and the house was immediately referred to in sacred language as shrine, temple, and place of pilgrimage (Thomas, 2012). Promoted by a committee of gentlemen 'on behalf of the nation', it drew together in a powerful concoction, notions that language, high culture, nationhood, successful masculinity, and the sacred were universal, unified, and unifying. An epigram on the flyleaf of William Howitt's *Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets* (2nd edn., 1847) encapsulates this: 'An indissoluble sign of their existence has stamped itself on the abodes of all distinguished men, a sign which places all kindred spirits in community with them'.

This hero's house museum type began to consolidate in the 1880s in the heady days of the British Empire. And the practice of visiting these houses was part of a new assertion of cultural hegemony of the rapidly expanding, self-regarding and increasingly wealthy middle-middle and upper middle classes (Young, 2019).

The Artist at Home: Orchestrated Glimpses

The artist's house as museum was partly a consequence of artists' strategic self-promotion from early modern times on, the capacity to cash in on new market opportunities to gain higher social and economic status. Successful artists have long been – and had to be – brilliant self-promoters and entrepreneurs. The mythologizing of artists' lives and places of work was part of this.

Early modern artists' studios tended to be private spaces, associated with conceptualizing and design, rather than with the manual work of art making, which took place in the workshop (Cole & Pardo, 2005, p.3, p.18). But over time the studio became the place of labour, a transformation that 'made the artmaking carried out there newly appreciable as a public kind of act' (p.23). This space theatricalized the artist's work, a consequence, Cole and Pardo argue, of art writing, including biographies based on antique models, which 'turned the arcane things artists did into *gesta*, deeds worthy of commemoration' (p.24, p.25).

Just as scholars' studies were microcosms, places where anything and everything might be on display, 'soon there was nothing that the artist's rooms could not contain. The place of painting and sculpture was now simultaneously a domestic space and a stage, an anatomy theater and a laboratory, a kitchen and a monastic cell.' (Cole & Pardo, 2005, p.25) (Fig. ii.19).

Paying visits to artists and their studios has a long tradition, but before the mid-19th century, such visits were largely reserved to aristocrats, princes, patrons, and fellow artists. In 19th century Britain two concomitant developments fed directly into the establishment of artists'/ writers' house museums: the cult of the artist – dependent on a notion of the exceptional genius author/ artist – who was also deemed hard-working, productive, and respectable –

Figure ii.19: Dining room at Brantwood House (home of John Ruskin), Coniston Lake District. The dining room is an immaculate stage set from which performers are absent. (Photo: Simon Staply / Alamy Stock Photo)

combined with a new fashionability of visiting artist's homes, especially amongst the well-heeled middle classes.

Gaining pace, then, in the 19th century, the practice of visiting the homes of living artists was enmeshed with nationalism, colonialism, industrialization, the rise of the railways, the development of commercial tourism, mass readership (and attendant commercial interests), and the surge in the art market. Convulsive changes of industrialization, colonialism, and capitalism generated anxieties about controlling or 'recovering' national history (Mandler, 1997, p.3). The rising status of a certain sort of Victorian artists was allied to contemporaneous rise in the popularity of biography, itself linked to cultural nationalism. Heroicization in meritocratic terms of individual 'great men' permitted the vaulting of contentious issues including exploitation of labour and resources at home and abroad. Artists were part of a 'progressive' adaptive elite, able to exploit the opportunities of colonialism and industrialization that they could get their hands on, and some were able to turn the combination of nationalism and anxieties about rapid social change to their own advantage.

While it is too complex to explore here, the significance of the culture industry – mass culture's subjection to the organizational principles and values of industrial capitalism – in this should not be underestimated.[11] Dirty profits from empire, commerce, and industry were rinsed in cultural capital and fuelled a booming art market. In order to show off their supposed cultural sophistication, knowledge, skills, and refined taste as connoisseurs, artists had to admit visitors to their studios and homes. That willingness to admit spectators and colleagues is an indication of their ambition and confidence, as well as their hunger for economic and publicly visible cultural capital.

The cult of the artist and the practice of visiting artists' houses assumed a particular fashionability in voguish rich districts of London and Paris/France (Esner, 2018, pp.15–30). It was closely linked to a romanticizing cult of the genius artist, highly respectable, successful, rich and well-connected men. The great and the good included very few women: the Brontës of Haworth Parsonage remain well-known exceptions.

Emphasis on artists as subjects, suggests Julie Codell, forged a new role for them as 'representatives of Englishness and creators of a national culture in their art and in their lives' (2000, p.284). Hence cultural tourism helped turn filthy profit into lustrous sophistication. The fascination for artists and their scrutiny as 'public property' sprang in part from a tension between their recent material success as a class that elevated them to a new national profile, and stereotypes of them as degenerate and bohemian (p.284; the most celebrated claim that artists were free spirits was John Ruskin's *A Joy Forever* (1857)).

Seeking out the homes of the famous was early supported by publications, including Howitt's (1847) already mentioned. Successful artists and their elegant homes were regularly featured in magazines, gazetteers, and guidebooks. Most of the artists who attracted such attention were men who were also abundantly rich – often from gargantuan profits of industry and empire – and who had built themselves lavish homes in fashionable neighbourhoods.

Early on, publications celebrating artists' houses, such as Frederick Fairholt's *Homes, Works and Shrines of English Artists with Specimens of their Style* (London, 1873), were illustrated with wood engravings, but it was photography that lent charisma to these 'peeps' into ostensibly private lives and homes. Photographs of artists at home enlivened popular series in magazines, lending a supposed modernity, informality, and privileged access. Series of 'peeps' of artists and studios appeared in *Strand* and *Art Journal* in London, in *L'Illustration* in Paris, and other magazines across Europe (Wat, 2013). These 19th-century British magazine articles combined attention to artists and their private lives with an emergent interest in photography, ostensibly offering an unmediated snapshot of an artist's life. For instance, 'Artists at Home', a series published in 1884, issued in six installments, consisted of four photo-engravings, after photographs by J.P. Mayall,

11 Adorno and Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944).

Figure ii.20: The artist Samuel Cousins pictured in his sitting room. One of a group of portraits by the photographer Joseph Parkin Mayall first published in the magazine series 'Artists at Home', 1844. (Photo: Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo)

depicting artists usually in their studios, accompanied by short biographies written by F.G. Stephens of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Of the 24 artists in 'Artists at Home', all were men, and all but one were Royal Academicians. It was all most respectable (Fig. ii.20). Most of the artists featured were upper class men and many were very rich indeed, such as John Everett Millais. The only women included in similar publications of the period were Kate Greenaway, Helen Allingham, Henrietta Rae, Rosa Bonheur, and Elizabeth Thompson (Codell, 2000, p.291).

Photojournalism of this type directly fed into the presentation of the artist's/writer's house museum as affording a sort of informal, intimate access to the artist (Emery, 2012). Despite their apparently casual tone and supposedly intimate snapshot glimpses, these articles were highly contrived and aimed at securing respectability, institutional validation, and national celebrity for these artists (Dakers, 2019, pp.311–31). Featured artists were usually presented as worldly wise, well-travelled, and as connoisseurs with significant art collections. In any case, the combination of social respectability, powerful networks, self-promotion, and celebration of supposed individual male genius free to 'express' itself in a purpose-built studio, untainted by contact with the outside world, are all themes which continue to reverberate in many artist museums and in much of the scholarship to this day.

Emphasis on their hard work, 'productivity', and the commercial success of their art sought to counter notions of decadence. In a period when the average annual income was below £100, many of these artists were grabbing over £5000, the equivalent of the annual income of a high court judge (Dakers, 1999, p.3). Artists struck manly heroic poses in front of their own artworks in highly contrived images: Samuel Cousins RA, for instance, poses grandly in his sitting room, surrounded by prints of his own works on the walls (Fig. ii.20). An early review in *The Art Journal* observed, 'these plates do not show us the artist really at home; or at least they show them only as they are at home to the photographer … the owner of the studio has

posed himself gracefully at the right point' (Milk, 2009). The whole thing was carefully orchestrated by the artists with the photographer a willing accomplice.

Thus W. Meynell's 'Artists' Houses', published in *The Magazine of Art* in 1882, included Alma Tadema's North Gate home in Regent's Park in London, while Helen Zimmern's 'Artists' Homes' in the same magazine (1885) presents 'Mr Pettie's at Hampstead' (p.91). Brief accounts of each house and artist are laced with romanticizing wonder at the exotic world of 'the artist', a creature quite unlike ordinary folk, untouched by vulgar ambition, concern about money or status. Accompanying texts scrabble to identify something special that pertains to the strange and wonderful 'world of the artist', making much out of little:

> Mounting the steps […] suspicion strikes us that this house may have, after all, other than a commonplace tenant, for the sides of the portico are decorated with a dado of stamped leather – a decorative idea that probably would only have occurred to an artist (Zimmern, 1885, p.91)

These artists promoted themselves as 'cultural legislators' and painted enormous canvases which trafficked in 'great ideas' (Dakers, 1999, p.2). Meanwhile, these 'glimpses into the lives and homes of the household names of art' played a major role in promoting their work (p.3). Aspects of the artist's appearance and personality might be commented on, too.

Artists exerted a particular fascination and were much scrutinized, studied, and biographised. Artistic excitable sensibilities and highly strung emotions were endorsed, almost became fashionable, provided they were housed in the male breast (Battersby, 1989). Magazines touting the great contemporary (male) artist in the studio seem to have commanded a good deal of middle-class interest, insofar as this can be adjudged. That gay male artists featured significantly amongst the most famous artists and most celebrated self-styled London homes of these publications and open studios surely added an extra frisson to the peeps behind the scenes (Hatt, 2007, pp.105-128). Laurel Brake (2000) has suggested that a notable strand of 'gay discourse' marks the discussions of artists' homes as featured in *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture*.

A voyeuristic pleasure delighted in the intersection between what was supposedly public and what was ostensibly private, a chance to 'peep' into the intimate, usually obscured, aspects of domestic life of a significant socio-cultural elite. The photographs and accompanying short biographies present the artists and their studio homes in highly artificial habitus as if naturalised, as exotic and exceptional, rather than as highly privileged men, actively promoting their own social networks. As such they are complicit in artists' own claims to high social status, celebration, and fame as ostensible inevitable consequence of their individual exceptional merits (Murray, 2022).

Despite all this gendered and classed exclusivity, their art is presented as part of a 'culture' supposedly shared by all (Codell 2000, p.286). In 1856, defending the mania for artists' biographies, *The Art Journal* referred to artists as 'public property', to 'the sanctity' of their homes, and the 'solitude' of their studies (Codell, 2001, pp.1-35). Arresting is the absence of pause at the contradictory nature of these characterisations. Indeed, the whole charade depended on those very contradictions. Artists were seen as national heroes and icons, exceptional figures inspired by genius, successful meritocrats worthy of imitation, and as depositaries of what was best of the nation and times. Bourgeois publications tended to feature artists with an emphasis on their market success, class position, and evident domesticity and this also helped defray anxieties about assumed Bohemianism and degeneracy that might have damaged their reputation and market potential.

In turn, artists' self-promotion propelled and drew on the cult of the artist in terms of masculinity, nationalism, and high social class from the late 19th century until the end of World War One. The photos and 'peeps' formed part of the fabrication and naturalisation of a highly exclusionary image of the nation, since the famous artist was deemed to represent the nation and express something quintessentially 'English' or 'British', just as artworks were categorised in terms of national schools. In turn, racializing and class specific notions about nationalism informed which sort of artists were deemed worthy of this particular selection and celebration. The biographical discourse of 'brother artists', combined with proclaimed national unity and shared common culture, amounts to a masculinist racializing nationalism, albeit in the best possible taste.

Show Sundays as Origins of House Museum Visiting

The practice of visiting artists' houses on 'Show Sundays' was crucial to the Victorian cult of eminent artists and, like the magazine 'peeps', was generally associated with the Royal Academy. On 'Show Sundays' the public could visit artists' studios to view work about to be sent to the Academy for the opening a few weeks later of the annual Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy (Dakers, 1999, p.18). They provided an excuse to inspect artists' homes and even occasionally

catch sight of the artists themselves in their domestic environment. In many ways, 'Show Sundays' established the parameters of visiting artists' homes today.

These open days emerged most markedly in Holland Park, a prestigious area of London, home to prominent and rich artists, including George Frederick Watts and Frederic Leighton (Dakers, 1999, p.25). These artists were rich mentors of the aristocracy and exercised enormous clout in relation to social, patronage and cultural networks and behaviour of the rich and powerful. Before the rise of the super-rich Victorian celebrity artists, artists generally lived in modest houses, with not much more than an enlarged studio window to let in extra light to mark its use as a studio. But the glorious 19th-century celebrated artists were far more architecturally ambitious and ostentatious. Their Holland Park houses were designed by leading architects, including Philip Webb, George Aitchison, Richard Norman Shaw, and J.J. Stevenson (p.3). Those houses commissioned for artists in Holland Park now sell for multimillions of pounds: even better than visiting an artists' house is owning one.

The rise of the artists' house as place of pilgrimage and special fascination bears close relationship to the stately home and to an urge amongst the powerful to ensure that 'culture' and 'heritage' are presented as best shaped by the rich and powerful.[12] The middle classes, however, found artists' houses more accessible than the 'Grand Manner' of the great country estates. A growing critique saw aristocratic homes as 'drably conservative', as resisting modernity and progress, while artists' houses were presented as modern, progressive, and driven by hard work and merit rather than merely bloodlines (Mandler, 1997, p.3, p.17). The 19th-century aristocracy 'appeared to have abdicated its cultural role in favour of philistine […] projects of religious uplift and agricultural improvement' (p.17). Certainly, after World War One there was less willingness to accept aristocratic leadership. Part of the middle-class fascination with artists' homes, as presented in 19th-century magazines, beside their wealth and success, lay in their new technologies, modern studio fittings, quixotic interior décor, and carefully displayed art collections.

Artists' houses are often seen in passive terms, more or less as 'containers': indices of shifting socio-economic status of the artist, places of comfort and convenience for their owners, repositories of fashionable taste in art and architecture. But they were more actively productive than that. Julie Codell suggests that the home studio 'crossed boundaries by masculinizing the home, usually identified with Victorian femininity' (2000, p.295). While this may be true, in architectural theory from Renaissance times, the studiolo or study was gendered male, identified with intellectual activity and the 'keeping of accounts' by the male head of household in a house otherwise registered as a female and feminizing domain (Wigley, 1992, see below). If the studio and the work undertaken there was masculinized in the otherwise feminized domestic space, something analogous in terms of social class can also be identified in interpretations of the studio. In 19th-century Britain 'the studio appeared to 'restore' the idealized cottage industry that appealed to Victorian nostalgia for a presumed pre-industrial unity of work and life' (Codell, 2000, p.295). The presentation of the studio as a privileged place, innocent of alienation, outside the market's tawdry touch, a place of integrity and truth is perpetuated in many house museums today.

Ideological assumptions about male artists and genius – which were marked tendencies in the emergence of the middle-class practice of visiting artists' house-studios – tended to produce reductive readings of such houses. Hence for years Margaret Macdonald Macintosh's contribution to the Mackintosh house design was overlooked and attributed to her husband, Charles Rennie Mackintosh.[13]

In recent years scholars have investigated 19th-century artists' homes in relation to female friendship networks and emergent feminist communities.[14] In any case, it is vital to engage the notion of the artist's house as encompassing far more than one stellar inhabitant. Children, spouses, extended family, caretakers and cleaners, au pairs and servants were also involved, though usually presented as a distraction or playing a minor role.

The Paradox of Auratic Intimacy

The artist's house museum depends, in various ways, on a notion of the auratic. Rituals of house museums are haunted by the cult of the saint, a paradoxical form of supposed intimacy secured through contact with a material relic, usually something humble and quotidian. Visitors are particularly fascinated – perhaps even more than by elements related to the extraordinary achievements of the artist's work –- by the most

12 A useful critique is provided by Peter Mandler (1997).

13 On the critical reception of MacDonald and Mackintosh see Helland (1994) who argues that the process of casting Mackintosh as a modern artist and architect involved shifting the responsibility for their decorative projects to MacDonald.

14 See Rose (2016).

quotidian aspects of the house and artist's existence– aspects of everyday life with which the visitor is already familiar. Thus although the desk of a writer might be a special focus and even fetishized, far more banal objects may receive undue attention: the bathroom, the kitchen, the favourite tea cup.

Is this symptomatic of the cult of the artist in a culture that celebrates the individual artist-genius as a form of modern-day saint? Is it a manifestation of a yearning for identification by assuming the place of that figure? Perhaps this is a means of imagining oneself as the celebrated figure by simple displacement of activities already familiar to the visitor but now transposed: their favourite cup, sharing the view from their study window, imagining lying in their bed. What compels the heady desire to take their place?

As noted above, rapidly changing conditions of the art market prompted a re-emphasis in late 19th-century Britain on outmoded concepts like creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery – qualities which were located, not so much in the artworks, but at once in the artist and his house. In a prophetic essay written in 1935, Walter Benjamin argues that the processes of reproduction threatened the auratic quality of the artwork: 'Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be' (Benjamin, [1935] 1963, p.3).

Arguably it was partly this perceived loss that activated a (reactionary) emphasis on the unique irreplaceability and authority of the artist' house, even as staged in photographs and as reproduced in the house museum. Benjamin names that which is lost in the age of mechanical production 'the aura' of the work of art (p.4). The 'aura' is 'the unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be' (p.5). It is the nostalgic yearning for the auratic and a literalistic approach to the auratic, that treats the place where the artwork was supposedly most authentically itself – the home of the artist where it was made – as auratic place – that propels the house museum and visitors to it.

However, while the unique existence of the work of art determined its history, the longing for restoration of authenticity and authority that precisely bypasses the artwork guarantees the disregard of that history. Something of the paradox of intimacy and melancholic unattainability of the photograph and the former home, the punctum of the teacup on the writing desk by the window.

Benjamin argues that 'the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly […] is just as ardent as their bent towards overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction' ([1935] 1963, p.5). Insofar as the house museum is an ersatz substitute, or representation of the lived-in house, the artworks are bypassed and the masses perform their rituals in a place which betrays them. The mechanical reproduction of the artwork has served to enhance the aura of the artist and that which purportedly attaches least reproducibility to him or her.

Largely absent from the artist's house museum are actual . They are mostly safely ensconced in art galleries and museums elsewhere. Instead, reproductions hang on the walls. It is as if the visitor is searching for the auratic effect of the artwork in the circumstances of its making – now denuded of the specificity of its history and politics – indeed of everything apart from the most literal – and commodifiable – domestic setting. This it is not just an apolitical practice, but an anti-political practice.

The visit to the saint's shrine was undertaken to activate *virtus*, that connection between the earthly body remains and heavenly presence that was made possible through the relic. The artist's house museum is its very obverse. No body, no saint, only the promise of *virtus* in the mystification of the auratic in objects. Ah yes, and a few reproductions.

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