

The Italian Renaissance Interior, 1400-1600

Citation: Peter Thornton (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991, \$1 25.00)

*reviewed by Patricia LaPointe
(Lady Alisoun Fortescue of Maplehurst)*

I USED TO THINK that museum curators became exasperated with Scadians who study paintings and drawings as illustrations of period artifacts rather than as works of art or artifacts in their own right. It is heartening to see this work where the distinguished Curator of Sir John Sloane's Museum in London examines the history of furniture and interior design through the use of period paintings and drawings. There is little doubt that the focus is completely on the details when you read this caption for an illustration in the chapter on chests. The illustration is a woodcut from the Malermi Bible which depicts Judith with the severed head of Holofernes.

Holofernes was sleeping in his splendid tent on a bed alongside which stood this chest (a table with his armour stands nearby) but brave Judith has just cut off his head. Note the handles at each end.

Thornton presents four aspects of the interior. First is the room itself, from floor to ceiling. This is perhaps the weakest aspect of the book, because the room itself is usually the least detailed aspect of paintings from this period. It is surprising that Thornton ignores surviving examples of architecture in this section (actually throughout the book). I would supplement his presentation of chimney pieces with a visit to the Hyde Collection and to The Cloisters, and would study intarsia wall panels firsthand at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And I would certainly tour the great number of surviving palazzi in Italy. Despite these limitations, this section contains useful material, such as how impannate (linen covered frames used as window screens) are constructed.

The most extensive scholarship in the book is the section on furnishings. Beds are presented in greatest detail, followed by seats, chests, tables and kitchen equipment. Scattered through the book are a series of plates from Bartolomeo Scappi's *opera* (this opera is best translated as work, and does not pertain to music)



which provide detail down to the level of the forks and knives that a noble's kitchen might possess.

The third section of the book discusses architectural planning and highlights the Renaissance design of an orderly progression from public to private space. This enables the reader to connect the rooms and furnishings studied in isolation in the previous sections into a coherent vision of the villas and palazzi as living spaces. This material is really an overview of a subject that should be studied in greater depth from other sources.

In the final section of the book, Thornton gives thought to the different people who influenced the design and use of the Renaissance interior, the architects, patrons and household staff.

This book has provided numerous answers to such diverse problems as how to paint a chest, how to upholster a close stool, and how to furnish a scholar's study. It also has solved textile problems for me because soft furnishings are also presented. I have come to use this as the first resource for questions of garb, jewelry and feast gear, because there are people and all sorts of things in the paintings illustrated. It is the first reference book I pick up and usually the last one I put down. If only it had handles at each end. ■